

THE



NIGHT'S
DAWN

PETER F. HAMILTON

TRIOLOGY

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PETER F. HAMILTON

ASPECT®



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ISBN 0-7595-6005-6

This book was previously published in six parts in mass market paperback by Warner Books.

First eBook edition: December 2000

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This edition is published by arrangement with Macmillan U.K.

ISBN 0-7595-6033-1

A mass market edition of this book was published in two parts in 1997 by Warner Books.

First eBook edition: November 2000

Visit our Web site at www.iPublish.com

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Part 1: Emergence

1

Space outside the attack cruiser *Beezling* tore open in five places. For a moment anyone looking into the expanding rents would have received a true glimpse into empty infinity. The pseudofabric structure of the wormholes was a photonic dead zone, a darkness so profound it seemed to be spilling out to contaminate the real universe. Then ships were suddenly streaking up out of the gaping termini, accelerating away at six gees, twisting round on interception trajectories. They were different from the spherical Garissan naval craft which they had tracked between the stars, graceful, streamlined teardrop shapes. Larger and dangerously powerful. Alive.

Nestled snugly in the armoured and sealed command capsule at the heart of the *Beezling*, Captain Kyle Prager was shocked out of a simple astrogration review by a datavised proximity alert from the flight computer. His neural nanonics relayed information from the ship's external sensor clusters directly into his brain. Out here in the great emptiness of interstellar space starlight wasn't powerful enough to provide an optical-band return. He was relying on the infrared signature alone, arching smears of pinkness which the discrimination programs struggled to resolve. Radar pulses were fuzzed and hashed by the ships' electronic-warfare pods.

The combat programs stored in the memory clusters of his neural nanonics went into primary mode. He datavised a quick sequence of instructions into the flight computer, desperate for more information. Trajectories from the five newcomers were computed, appearing as scarlet vector lines curving through space to line up ominously on the *Beezling* and her two escort frigates. They were still accel-

erating, yet there was no reaction-drive exhaust plume. Kyle Prager's heart sank. "Voidhawks," he said. On the couch next to him, Tane Ogilie, the *Beezling's* patterning-node officer, groaned in dismay. "How did they know?"

"Confederation Navy Intelligence is good," Kyle Prager retorted. "They knew we'd try a direct retaliation. They must have monitored our naval traffic and followed us." In his mind a black pressure was building. He could almost sense the antimatter-confinement chambers inside the *Beezling*, twinkling like devilish red stars all around him.

Antimatter was the one anathema which was universal throughout the Confederation. No matter what planet or asteroid settlement you were brought up on, they all condemned it.

The penalty if a Confederation Navy ship caught them was an immediate death sentence for the captain, and a one-way ticket on a drop capsule to a penal planet for everyone else on board.

There was no choice, of course, the *Beezling* needed the fantastic delta-V reserve which only antimatter provided, far superior to the usual fusion drives of Adamist starships. The Omutan Defence Force ships would be equipped with antimatter drives. They have it because we have it; we have it because they have it. One of the oldest, and feeblest, arguments history had produced.

Kyle Prager's shoulder muscles relaxed, an involuntary submission. He'd known and accepted the risk, or at least told himself and the admirals he did.

It would be quick and painless, and under ordinary circumstances the crew would survive. But he had orders from the Garissan Admiralty. Nobody was to be allowed access to the Alchemist which the *Beezling* was carrying; and certainly not the Edenists crewing the voidhawks: their bitek science was powerful enough already.

"A distortion field has locked onto us," Tane Ogilie reported. His voice was strained, high. "We can't jump clear."

For a brief moment Kyle Prager wondered what it would be like to command a voidhawk, the effortless power and total superiority. It was almost a feeling of envy.

Three of the intercepting ships were curving round to chase the *Beezling*, while the frigates, *Chengho* and *Gombari*, only rated one pursuer each.

Mother Mary, with that formation they must know what we're carrying.

He formed the scuttle code in his mind, reviewing the procedure before datavisising it into the flight computer. It was simple enough, shutting down the safeguards in the main drive's antimatter-confinement chambers, engulfing nearby space with a nova-blast of light and hard radiation.

I could wait until the voidhawks rendezvoused, take them with us. But the crews are only doing their job.

The flimsy infrared image of the three pursuit craft suddenly increased dramatically, brightening, expanding. Eight wavering petals of energy opened outwards from each of them, the sharp, glaring tips moving swiftly away from the centre. Analysis programs cut in; flight vector projections materialized, linking all twenty-four projectiles to the *Beezling* with looped laserlike threads of light. The exhaust plumes were hugely radioactive. Acceleration was hitting forty gees. Antimatter propulsion.

"Combat wasp launch," Tane Ogilie shouted hoarsely.

"They're not voidhawks," Kyle Prager said with grim fury. "They're fucking blackhawks. Omuta's hired blackhawks!" He datavisised an evasion manoeuvre order into the flight computer, frantically activating the *Beezling's* defence procedures. He'd been almost criminally negligent in not identifying the hostiles as soon as they emerged. He checked his neural nanonics; elapsed time since their emergence was seven seconds. Was that really all? Even so, his response had been woefully sloppy in an arena where milliseconds was the most precious currency. They would pay for that, maybe with their lives.

An acceleration warning blared through the *Beezling*—audio, optical, and datavise. His crew would be strapped in, but Mother Mary alone knew what the civilians they carried were doing.

The ship's acceleration built smoothly, and he felt the nanonic membrane supplements in his body hardening, supporting his internal organs against the gee force, pre-

venting them from being pushed through his spine, ensuring an undiminished blood supply to his brain, forestalling blackout. *Beezling* shuddered violently as its own volley of combat wasps launched. Acceleration reached eight gees, and carried on building.

In the *Beezling*'s forward crew module, Dr Alkad Mzu had been reviewing the ship's status as it flew towards their next jump coordinate at one and a half gees. Neural nanonics processed the raw data to provide a composite of the starship's external sensor images, along with flight vector projections. The picture unfurled behind her retinas, scintillating ghost shadows until she closed her eyelids. *Chengho* and *Gombari* showed as intense streaks of blue-white light, the glare from their drive exhausts overwhelming the background starfield.

It was a tight formation. *Chengho* was two thousand kilometres away, *Gombari* just over three thousand. Alkad knew it took superb astrogation for ships to emerge within five thousand kilometres of each other after a jump of ten light-years. Garissa had spent a lot of money on equipping its navy with the best hardware available.

Money which could have been better spent at the university, or on supporting the national medical service. Garissa wasn't a particularly rich world. And as to where the Department of Defence had acquired such large amounts of antimatter, Alkad had studiously avoided asking.

"It will be about thirty minutes before the next jump," Peter Adul said.

Alkad cancelled the datavise. The sensor visualization of the ships faded from her perception, replaced by the spartan grey-green composite of the cabin walls. Peter was standing in the open oval hatch, wearing a dark turquoise ship-suit, padded on all the joints to protect him from bruising knocks in free fall. He smiled invitingly at her. She could see the worry behind the bright, lively eyes.

Peter was thirty-five, a metre eighty tall, with skin actually darker than her own deep ebony. He worked in the university mathematics department, and they had been engaged for eighteen months. Never the outgoing boister-

ous type, but quietly supportive. One person who genuinely didn't seem to mind the fact that she was brighter than him—and they were rare enough. Even the prospect of her being for ever damned as the Alchemist's creator left him unperturbed. He had actually accompanied her to the ultra-secure navy asteroid base to help with the device's mathematics.

"I thought we could spend them together," he said.

She grinned back up at him and slipped out of the restraint net as he sat on the edge of her acceleration cushioning beside her. "Thanks. Navy types don't mind being cooped up by themselves during realignment. But it certainly gets to me." Various hums and buzzes from the ship's environmental systems invaded the cabin, crewmembers talking softly at their stations, vague words echoing along the cramped companionways. *Beezling* had been assembled specifically to deploy the Alchemist device, its design concentrating on durability and performance; crew comforts had come a long way down the navy's priority list.

Alkad swung her legs over the side of the cushioning ledge, feet *pulled* down to the decking by the strong gravity, and leaned against him, thankful for the warmth of the contact, his just being there.

His arm went round her shoulders. "What is it about the prospect of incipient mortality which gets the hormones flowing?"

She smiled and pressed harder into his side. "What is it in the male make-up that simply being awake gets your hormones going?"

"That's a no?"

"That's a no," she said firmly. "There's no door, and we'd do ourselves an injury in this gravity. Besides, there will be plenty of time once we get back."

"Yes." If we do. But he didn't say that out loud.

That was when the acceleration warning sounded. Even then it took them a second to react, breaking through the initial moment of shock.

"Get back on the cushioning," Peter yelled as the gee force leapt upwards. Alkad attempted to swing her legs

back up on the ledge. They were made of uranium, impossibly heavy. Muscles and tendons grated horribly as she strained against the weight.

Come on. It's easy. It's only your legs. Dear Mother, how many times have you lifted your legs? Come on!

Neural-nanonic nerve-impulse overrides bullied her thigh muscles. She got one leg back on the cushioning. By that time the acceleration had reached seven gees. She was stuck with her left leg on the floor, foot slipping along the decking as the enormous weight of her thigh pushed down, forcing her knee joint open.

The two opposing swarms of combat wasps engaged; attacking and defending drones splitting open, each releasing a barrage of submunitions. Space seethed with directed energy beams. Electronic warfare pulses popped and burned up and down the electromagnetic spectrum, trying to deflect, goad, confuse, harass. A second later it was the turn of the missiles. Solid kinetic bullets bloomed like antique shotgun blasts. All it took was the slightest graze, at those closing velocities both projectile and target alike detonated into billowing plumes of plasma. Fusion explosions followed, intense flares of blue-white starfire flinging off violet coronae. Antimatter added its vehemence to the fray, producing even larger explosions amid the ionic maelstrom.

The nebula which blazed between the *Beezling* and her attackers was roughly lenticular, and over three hundred kilometres broad, choked with dense cyclonic concentrations, spewing tremendous cataracts of fire from its edges. No sensor in existence could penetrate such chaos.

Beezling lurched round violently, drive deflector coils working at maximum pitch, taking advantage of the momentary blind spot to change course. A second volley of combat wasps shot out of their bays around the attack cruiser's lower hull, just in time to meet a new salvo fired from the blackhawks.

Peter had barely managed to roll off the acceleration couch where he was sitting, landing hard on the floor of Alkad's cabin, when the terrible acceleration began. He watched helplessly as Alkad's left leg slowly gave way

under the crushing gee force; her whimpering filling him with futile guilt. The composite deck was trying to ram its way up through his back. His neck was agony. Half of the stars he could see were pain spots, the rest were a datavised nonsense. The flight computer had reduced the external combat arena to neat ordered graphics which buffeted against priority metabolic warnings. He couldn't even focus his thoughts on them. There were more important things to worry about, like how the hell was he going to force his chest up so he could breathe again?

Suddenly the gravity field shifted. He left the decking behind, and slammed into the cabin wall. His teeth were punched clean through his lip; he heard his nose break with an ugly *crunch*. Hot blood squirted into his mouth, frightening him. No wound could possibly heal in this environment. He would very probably bleed to death if this went on much longer.

Then gravity righted again, squeezing him back against the decking. He screamed in shock and pain. The datavised visualization from the flight computer had collapsed into an eerily calm moire pattern of red, green, and blue lines. Darkness was encroaching around the edges.

The second clash of combat wasps took place over a wider front. Sensors and processors on both sides were overloaded and confused by the vivid nebula and its wild energy efflux. New explosions were splattered against the background of destruction. Some of the attacking combat wasps pierced the defensive cordon. A third volley of defenders left the *Beezling*.

Six thousand kilometres away, another nuclear-fuelled nebula burst into existence as the *Chengho* fought off its solitary hunter's swarm of combat wasps. The *Gombari* wasn't so fortunate. Its antimatter-confinement chambers were shattered by the incoming weapons. *Beezling's* sensor filters engaged instantly as an ephemeral star ignited. Kyle Prager lost his datavised visualization across half of the universe. He never saw the blackhawk which attacked the frigate wrenching open a wormhole interstice and vanish within, fleeing the lethal sleet of radiation its attack had liberated.

The combat wasp closing on *Beezling* at forty-six gees analysed the formation of the robot defenders approaching it. Missiles and ECM pods raced away, fighting a fluid battle of evasion and deception for over a tenth of a second. Then the attacker was through, a single defender left between it and the starship, moving to intercept, but slowly, the defender had only just left its launch cradle, accelerating at barely twenty gees.

Situation displays flipped into Kyle Prager's mind. The blackhawks' positions, their trajectories. Combat wasp performance. Likely reserves. He reviewed them, mind augmented by the tactics program, and made his decision, committing half of his remaining combat wasps to offensive duties.

Beezling rang like a bell as they launched.

At a hundred and fifty kilometres from its prey, the incoming combat wasp's guidance processors computed it wouldn't quite reach the starship before it was intercepted. It ran through the available options, making its choice.

At a hundred and twenty kilometres away it loaded a deactivation sequence into the hardware of the seven antimatter-confine chambers it was carrying.

At ninety-five kilometres away the magnetic field of the first confinement chamber snapped off. Forty-six gravities took over. The frozen pellet of antimatter was smashed into the rear wall. Long before contact was actually made the magnetic field of the second confinement chamber was switched off. All seven shut down over a period of a hundred picoseconds, producing a specifically shaped blast wave.

At eighty-eight kilometres away, the antimatter pellets had annihilated an equal mass of matter, resulting in a titanic energy release. The spear of plasma which formed was a thousand times hotter than the core of a star, hurtling towards the *Beezling* at relativistic velocities.

Sensor clusters and thermo-dump panels vaporized immediately as the stream of disassociated ions slammed into the *Beezling*. Molecular-binding force generators laboured to maintain the silicon hull's integrity, a struggle they were always destined to lose against such ferocity. Break-

through occurred in a dozen different places at once. Plasma surged in, playing over the complex, delicate systems like a blowtorch over snow crystals.

The luckless *Beezling* suffered a further blow from fate. One of the plasma streams hit a deuterium tank, searing its way through the foam insulation and titanium shell. The cryogenic liquid reverted to its natural gaseous state under immense pressure, ripping the tank open, and blasting fragments in every direction. An eight-metre section of the hull buckled upwards, and a volcanic geyser of deuterium haemorrhaged out towards the stars past shredded fingers of silicon.

Combat wasp explosions were still flooding surrounding space with torrents of light and elementary particles. But the *Beezling* was an inert hulk at the centre of a dissipating halo, her hull fissured, reaction drive off, spinning like a broken bird.

The three attacking blackhawk captains observed the last volley of *Beezling's* combat wasps lock on to their own ships and race vengefully across the gulf. Thousands of kilometres away, their colleague scored a debilitating strike on the *Chengho*. And the *Beezling's* combat wasps had halved the separation distance.

Energy patterning cells applied a terrible stress against the fabric of space, and the blackhawks slipped into the gaping wormholes which opened, contracting the interstices behind them. The *Beezling's* combat wasps lost track of their targets; on-board processors began to scan round and round in an increasingly futile attempt to re-acquire the missing signatures as the drones rushed further and further away from the disabled warship.

The return of consciousness wasn't quite as welcome as it should have been, even though it meant that Dr Alkad Mzu was still alive. Her left leg was a source of nauseous pain. She could remember hearing the bones snapping as her knee hinged fully open. Then came the twists of a shifting gravity field, far more effective than any torturer. Her neural nanonics had damped down the worst of the pain,

but the *Beezling*'s final convulsion had brought a blessed oblivion.

How in Mother Mary's name did we survive that?

She thought she had been prepared for the inherent risk of the mission failing, for death to claim her. Her work at the university back on Garissa made her all too aware of the energy levels required to push a starship through a ZTT jump, and what would happen should an instability occur in the patterning nodes. It never seemed to bother the navy crew, or rather they were better at hiding it. She knew also that there was a small chance they would be intercepted by Omutan naval craft once the *Beezling* emerged above their target star. But even that wouldn't be so bad, the end should a combat wasp break through *Beezling*'s defensive shield would probably be instantaneous. She even acknowledged that the Alchemist might malfunction. But this . . . Hunted down out here, unprepared physically or mentally, and then to survive, however tenuously. How could the good Mother Mary be so callous? Unless perhaps even She feared the Alchemist?

Residual graphics seemed to swirl obstinately among the ailing thoughts of her consciousness. Vector lines intersected their original jump coordinate thirty-seven thousand kilometres ahead. Omuta was a small, unremarkable star directly in front of the coordinate. Two more jumps, and they would have been in the system's Oort cloud, the sparse halo of ice-dust clouds and slumbering comets which marked the boundary of interstellar space. They were approaching from galactic north, well outside the plane of the ecliptic, trying to avoid detection.

She had helped plan the mission profile, offering her comments to a room full of senior navy staff who were visibly nervous in her presence. It was a syndrome which had affected more and more people in the secret military station as her work progressed.

Alkad had given the Confederation something new to fear, something which surpassed even the destructive power of antimatter. A star slayer. And that prospect was as humbling as it was terrifying. She had resigned herself that after the war billions of planet dwellers would look up at

the naked stars, waiting for the twinkling light which had been Omuta to vanish from the night sky. Then they would remember her name, and curse her to hell.

All because I was too stupid to learn from past mistakes. Just like all the other dreaming fools throughout history, wrapped up with seductive, clean equations, their simplistic, isolated elegance, giving no thought to the messy, bloody, *physical* application that was their ultimate reality. As if we didn't have enough weapons already. But that's human nature, we've always got to go one better, to increase the terror another notch. And for what?

Three hundred and eighty-seven Dorados: large asteroids with a nearly pure metal content. They were orbiting a red-dwarf sun twenty light-years away from Garissa, twenty-nine light-years from Omuta. Scoutships from both inhabited systems had stumbled across them virtually simultaneously. Who had actually been first would never now be known. Both governments had claimed them: the wealth contained in the lonely metal chunks would be a heady boost for the planet whose companies could mine and refine such plentiful ore.

At first it had been a squabble, a collection of *incidents*. Prospecting and survey ships dispatched to the Dorados had been attacked by "pirates." And, as always, the conflict had escalated. It ceased to be the ships, and started to become their home asteroid ports. Then nearby industrial stations had proved tempting targets. The Confederation Assembly's attempt to mediate had come to nothing.

Both sides had called in their registered naval reserves, and started to hire the independent traders, with their fast, well-equipped ships capable of deploying combat wasps. Finally, last month, Omuta had used an antimatter bomb against an industrial asteroid settlement in the Garissa system. Fifty-six thousand people had been killed when the biosphere chamber ruptured, spewing them out into space. Those who survived, another eighteen thousand with their mashed fluid-clogged lungs, decompressed capillaries, and dissevered skin, had strained the planet's medical facilities close to breaking point. Over seven hundred had been sent to the university's medical school, which had beds for

three hundred. Alkad had witnessed the chaos and pain first hand, heard the gurgling screams that never ended.

So now it was retaliation time. Because, as everybody knew, the next stage would be planetary bombardment. And Alkad Mzu had been surprised to find her nationalistic jingoism supplanting the academic aloofness which had ruled her life to date. Her *world* was being threatened.

The only credible defence was to hit Omuta first, and hit it hard. Her precious hypothetical equations had been grasped at by the navy, which rushed to turn them into functional hardware.

"I wish I could stop you from feeling so much guilt," Peter had said. That was the day they had left the planet, the two of them waiting in the officers' mess of a navy spaceport while their shuttle was prepared.

"Wouldn't you feel guilty?" she asked irritably. She didn't want to talk, but she didn't want to be silent either.

"Yes. But not as much as you. You're taking the blame for the entire conflict. You shouldn't do that. Both of us, all of us, everyone on the planet, we're all being propelled by fate."

"How many despots and warlords have said that down the centuries, I wonder?" she retorted.

His face managed to be sad and sympathetic at the same time.

Alkad relented, and took his hand. "But thank you for coming with me, anyway. I don't think I could stand the navy people by myself."

"It will be all right, you know," he said softly. "The government isn't going to release any details, least of all the name of the inventor."

"I'll be able to walk straight back into the job, you mean?" she asked. There was too much bitterness in her voice. "As if nothing had happened?" She knew it wouldn't happen that way. Intelligence agencies from half the governments in the Confederation would find out who she was, if they hadn't already. Her fate wouldn't be decided by any cabinet minister on politically insignificant Garissa.

"Maybe not nothing," he said. "But the university will

still be there. The students. That's what you and I live for, isn't it? The real reason we're here, protecting all that."

"Yes," she said, as if uttering the word made it fact. She looked out of the window. They were close to the equator here, Garissa's sun bleaching the sky to a featureless white glare. "It's October back there now. The campus will be knee deep in featherseeds. I always used to think that stuff was a bloody great nuisance. Whoever had the idea of founding an African-ethnic colony on a world that's three-quarters temperate zones?"

"Now that's a tired old myth, that we have to be limited to tropical hellholes. It's our society which counts. In any case, I like the winters. And you'd bitch if it was as hot as this place the whole year round."

"You're right." She gave a brittle laugh.

He sighed, studying her face. "It's their star we're aiming for, Alkad, not Omuta itself. They'll have a chance. A good chance."

"There are seventy-five million people on that planet. There will be no light, no warmth."

"The Confederation will help. Hell, when the Great Dispersal was at its peak, Earth was deporting over ten million people a week."

"Those old colony-transport ships have gone now."

"Earth's Govcentral is still kicking out a good million a week even now; and there are thousands of military transports. It can be done."

She nodded mutely, knowing it was all hopeless. The Confederation couldn't even get two minor governments to agree to a peace formula when we both wanted it. What chance has the Assembly got trying to coordinate grudgingly donated resources from eight hundred and sixty disparate inhabited star systems?

The sunlight pouring through the mess window deepened to a sickly red and started to fade. Alkad wondered woozily if the Alchemist was already at work on it. But then the stimulant programs steadied her thoughts, and she realized she was in free fall, her cabin illuminated by a weak pink-tinged emergency light. People were floating around her. *Beezling's* crew, murmuring in quiet worried

tones. Something warm and damp brushed against her cheek, sticking. She brought her hand up instinctively. A swarm of dark motes swam across her field of view, glistening in the light. Blood!

"Peter?" She thought she was shouting his name, but her voice seemed very faint. "Peter!"

"Easy, easy." That was a crew-member. Menzul? He was holding her arms, preventing her from bouncing around the confined space.

She caught sight of Peter. Two more crew were hovering over him. His entire face was encased by a medical nanonic package which looked like a sheet of thick green polythene.

"Oh, merciful Mary!"

"He's OK," Menzul said quickly. "He'll be all right. The nanonic package can cope."

"What happened?"

"A squadron of blackhawks caught us. An antimatter blast breached the hull. Screwed us pretty good."

"What about the Alchemist?"

Menzul shrugged loosely. "In one piece. Not that it matters much now."

"Why?" Even as she asked she didn't want to know.

"The hull breach wrecked thirty per cent of our jump nodes. We're a navy ship, we can jump with ten per cent knocked out. But thirty . . . Looks like we're stuck out here; seven light-years from the nearest inhabited star system."

At that moment they were precisely thirty-six and a half light-years from their G3 home star, Garissa. If they had trained the *Beezling's* remaining optical sensors on the faint diamond of light far behind, and if those sensors possessed sufficient resolution, then in thirty-six years, six months, and two days they would have seen a brief surge in the apparent magnitude as Omuta's mercenary ships dropped fifteen antimatter planet-buster bombs on their home world. Each one had a megatonnage blast equivalent to the asteroid impact which wiped out the dinosaurs on Earth. Garissa's atmosphere was ruined beyond redemp-

tion. Superstorms arose which would rage for millennia to come. By themselves, they weren't fatal. On Earth, the shielded arcologies had sheltered people from their heat-wrecked climate for five and a half centuries. But unlike an asteroid impact, where the energy release was purely thermal, the planet-busters each emitted the same amount of radiation as a small solar flare. Within eight hours, the rampaging storms had spread the nuclear fallout right across the planet, rendering it completely uninhabitable. Total sterilization took a further two months.

2

The Ly-cilph home planet was located in a galaxy far removed from the one which would ultimately host the human Confederation. Strictly speaking it wasn't a planet at all, but a moon, one of twenty-nine orbiting a gas supergiant, a formidable orb two hundred thousand kilometres in diameter, itself a failed brown-dwarf star. After its accretion had finished it lacked enough mass for fusion ignition; but none the less its inexorable gravitational contraction generated a massive thermal output. What was ostensibly its nightside fluoresced near the bottom end of the visible spectrum, producing a weary emberlike glow which fluctuated in continental-sized patterns as the dense turbulent clouds raged in never ending cyclones. Across the dayside, where lemon-shaded rays from the K4 primary sun fell, the storm bands shone a lambent salmon-pink.

There were five major moons, with the Ly-cilph planet the fourth out from the cloud tops, and the only one with an atmosphere. The remaining twenty-four satellites were all barren rocks: captured asteroids, junk left over from the solar system's formation, all of them less than seven hundred kilometres in diameter. They ranged from a baked rock ball skimming one thousand kilometres above the clouds, from which the metal ores had boiled away like a comet's volatiles, up to a glaciated planetoid in a retrograde orbit five and a half million kilometres out.

Local space was hazardous in the extreme. A vast magnetosphere confined and channelled the supergiant's prodigious outpouring of charged particles, producing a lethal radiation belt. Radio emission was a ceaseless white-noise howl. The three large moons orbiting below the Ly-cilph homeworld were all inside the radiation belt, and completely

sterile. The innermost of the three was chained to the ionosphere with a colossal flux tube, along which titanic energies sizzled. It also trailed a plasma torus around its orbital path, the densest ring of particles inside the magnetosphere's comprehensive embrace. Instant death to living tissue.

The tidal-locked Ly-cilph world coasted along seventy thousand kilometres above the tenuous outer fringes of the magnetosphere, beyond the reach of the worst radiation. Occasional palpitations within the flux lines would bombard the upper atmosphere with protons and electrons, sending squalls of solar-bright borealis lights slithering and twisting silently across the rusty sky.

Atmospheric composition was an oxygen-nitrogen mix, with various sulphurous compounds, and an inordinately high water-vapour level. Mist, fog, and stacked cloud layers were the norm. Proximity to the infrared glow of the supergiant gave it a perpetual tropical climate, with the warm, wet air of the nearside constantly on the move, rushing around to the farside where it cooled, radiating its thermal load away into space, and then returning via storms which traversed the poles. Weather was a drab constant, always blowing, always raining, the strength of the gusts and downpours dictated by the orbital location. Night fell in one place, at one time. On the farside, when supergiant and planet were in an inferior conjunction, and the hellish red cloudscape eclipsed the nearside's brief glimpse of the sun.

It was a cycle which was broken only once every nine years, when a new force was applied to the timeless equation. A four-moon conjunction, which brought chaos and devastation to the surface with storms of biblical ferocity.

The warmth and the light had incubated life on this world, as they had on countless billions throughout the universe. There had been no seas, no oceans when the first migratory interstellar germ fell onto the pristine planet, rooting its way into the mucky stain of chemicals infecting the bubbling muddy waters. Tidal forces had left a smooth surface, breaking down mountains, grinding away at the steppes left over from the time of formation. Lakes, rivers, and flood plains covered the land, steaming and being rained on. There was no free oxygen back then, it was all combined with carbon.

A solid stratum of white cloud ensured the infrared radiation found it hard to escape, even in the centre of the farside. Temperatures were intolerably high.

The first life, as always, was algae, a tough slime which spread through the water, seeping down rivers and streams to contaminate the lakes, hurried through the air by the tireless convection currents. It altered and adapted over geological eras, slowly learning to utilize the two contrasting light sources as an additional energy supply. Success, when it came, was swift, mere millennia. Oxygen poured forth. Carbon was digested. The temperature fell. The rain quickened, thinning the clouds, clearing the sky. Evolution began once more.

For millions of years, the planet's governing nine-year cycle was of no importance. Storms and hurricanes were an irrelevance to single-cell amoebas floating sluggishly through the lakes and rivers, nor did they matter to the primitive lichens which were creeping over the rocks. But the cells adrift in the water gradually began to form cooperative colonies, and specialization occurred. Jelly-like worms appeared in the lakes, brainless, instinct-driven and metabolically inefficient, little more than mobile lichen. But it was a start. Birth and death began to replace fission as the premier method of reproduction. Mutations crept in, sometimes producing improvements, more often resulting in inviability. Failed strains were rapidly culled by merciless nature. Divergence appeared, the dawn of a million species; DNA strands lengthened, a chemical record of progress and blind alleys. Crawling creatures emerged onto the lakesides, only to be scalded by the harsh chemicals making up the atmosphere. Yet they persisted.

Life was a steady progression, following a pattern which was as standard as circumstances would allow. There were no such things as ice ages to alter the direction which this world's creatures were taking, no instabilities causing profound climate changes. Only the nine-yearly storms, appearing without fail, which became the dominant influence. The new animals' breeding cycles were structured around it, plant growth was restricted by it.

The planet matured into a jungle world, a landscape of

swamps and lush verdancy, where giant ferns covered the surface from pole to pole, and were themselves webbed and choked with tenacious creepers reaching for the clear sky. Floating weeds turned the smaller lakes into vast marshlands. Elaborate ruff flowers vied for the attention of insects and birds, seed pods with skirts of hardened petals flew like kites through the air. Wood was non-existent, of course, wood required decades of uninterrupted growth to form.

Two wildly different flora genealogies sprang up, with the terminator as an unbreachable dividing line, and battleground. Farside plants adapted to the sun's yellow light: they were capable of tolerating the long nights accompanying conjunction, the cooler temperatures. Nearside was the province of red light, falling without end: its black-leaved plants were taller, stronger, more vigorous, yet they were unable to conquer farside. Night killed them, yellow light alone was insufficient to drive their demanding photosynthesis, and the scattered refraction of red light by the thick atmosphere never carried far enough, haunting the land for a couple of hundred kilometres beyond the terminator.

The animals were more adaptive, ranging freely across farside and nearside. Dinosaur-analogues never appeared, they were too big, requiring too much time to grow. Apart from bird-analogues, lizard creatures with membranous wings, most animals were smallish, reflecting their aquatic heritage. All were cold-blooded, at home in the muddy streams and weed-clogged pools. They retained that ancestral trait out of pure necessity. For that was where their eggs were laid, buried deep and safe in the mud of the lakebeds, hidden away from the worst ravages of the storm. That was how all life survived while the winds scoured the world, as seeds and eggs and spores, ready to surge forth when stability returned in a few short weeks.

On such an inimical world life can evolve in one of two ways. There are the defeated, littered on countless planets across the cosmos, weak, anaemic creatures huddled in their dead-end sanctuaries, a little protective niche in the local ecology, never rising above a rudimentary level, their very lack of sophistication providing them with the means of continuation. Or there are the triumphant, the creatures

which refuse to be beaten, which fight tooth and nail and claw and tentacle against their adversity; those for which circumstances act as an evolutionary spur. The dividing line is thin; it might even be that a devastating storm every eight years could bring genetic ruination. But nine years . . . nine proved enough time to ensure survival, allowing the denizens to rise to the challenge rather than sink back into their ubiquitous mires.

The Ly-cilph claimed such a victory. A mere eight hundred million years after life had begun on their world they had reached their pinnacle of evolution. They became transcendent entities.

Their nine-year cycle starts in a fish form, hatching from the black egg-clusters concealed below the mud. Billions of free-floating slugs emerge, two centimetres long, and are eaten by faster, meaner predators as they gorge themselves on the abundant sludge of decayed vegetation putrefying in the water. They grow and change over three years, losing their tails, developing a snail-like skirt. They cling to the bottom of their lakes, an ovoid body ninety centimetres high, with ten tentacles rising up from the crown. The tentacles are smooth, sixty centimetres long, devoid of suckers, but with a sharp curved horn on the tip; and they're fast, exploding like a nest of enraged pythons to snatch their ignorant prey swimming overhead.

When their full size has been reached they slide up out of the water to range through the planetwide jungle. Gills adapt to breathe the harsh musky air, tentacle muscles strengthen to support the drooping limbs away from the water's cosy buoyancy. And they eat, rummaging through the matted undergrowth with insistent horns to find the black, wizened nutlike nodes that have been lying there neglected since the storm. The nodes are made up of cells saturated with chemical memory tracers, memories containing information, the knowledge accumulated by the Ly-cilph race throughout time. They bring understanding, an instant leap to sentience, and trigger the telepathic centre of their brains. Now they have risen above a simple animal level of existence they have much to converse about.

The knowledge is mainly of a philosophical nature, al-

though mathematics is highly developed; what they know is what they have observed and speculated upon, and added to with each generation. Farside night acts as a magnet as they gather to observe the stars. Eyes and minds linked by telepathy, acting as a gigantic multi-segment telescope. There is no technology, no economy. Their culture is not orientated towards the mechanical or materialistic; their knowledge is their wealth. The data-processing capacity of their linked minds far exceeds that of any electronic computer system, and their perception is not limited to the meagre electromagnetic wavelengths of the optical bands.

Once awoken, they learn. It is their purpose. They have so little time in their corporeal form, and the universe they find themselves in, the splendour of the gas supergiant and its multifarious satellites, is large. Nature has ordained them as gatherers of knowledge. If life has a purpose, they speculate, then it must be a journey to complete understanding. In that respect intellect and nature have come to a smooth concordance.

In the ninth year after their hatching, the four large innermost moons line up once more. The distortion they cause in the supergiant's magnetosphere acts like an extension to the flux tube. The agitated particles of the ionosphere which use it as a conduit up to the first moon's plasma torus now find themselves rising higher, up to the second moon, then the third, higher still, fountaining out of the magnetosphere altogether. The Ly-cilph world swings round into their path.

It is not a tight directed beam; up at the mushrooming crown the protons and electrons and neutrons have none of the energy they possessed when the roiling flux lines flung them past the first moon. But as always it is the sheer scale of events within the gas supergiant's domain which proves so overwhelming.

The Ly-cilph world takes ten hours to traverse through the invisible cloud of ions loitering outside the flux lines. In that time, the energy which floods into the atmosphere is more than sufficient to destroy the equilibrium of the slowly circulating convection currents.

The deluge arrives at the end of the planet's one and only mating season. The Ly-cilph and their non-sentient cousins

have produced their eggs and secreted them into the lakebeds. Plants have flowered and scattered their seeds across the landscape. Now there is only the prospect of death.

When the first titanic bursts of azure lightning break overhead, the Ly-cilph stop their analysing and deliberations, and begin to impart all they know into the empty cells of the nodes which have grown out of their skin like warts around the base of their tentacles.

The winds howl, voicing the planet's torment. Gusts are strong enough to break the metre-thick stems of the fern trees. Once one goes it starts a domino effect in the jungle. Destruction spreads out in vast ripples, looking like bomb blasts from above. Clouds are torn apart by the violence, reduced to cotton tufts spinning frantically in the grip of small, ferocious whirlwinds. Micro-typhoons plunge back and forth, accelerating the obliteration of the jungle.

All the while the Ly-cilph remain steadfast, their adhesive skirts anchoring them to the ground as the air around them fills with broken fronds and shredded leaves. The nodes, now saturated with their precious heritage, drop off like ripe fruit. They will lie hidden amongst the grass and roots for another three years.

Nearside is ablaze with potent lightstorms. High above the tattered clouds, the aurora borealis forms a veil across the sky, a garish mother-of-pearl haze riddled with thousands of long, lurid scintillations, like giant shooting stars. Beyond that, the conjunction is joined, three moons sliding into alignment, bathed in an eerie trillion-amp phosphorescence. An epicentre to one of the gas supergiant's planet-swallowing cyclones.

The particle jet has reached its zenith. The flux tube's rain of energy penetrates the tormented lower atmosphere. It is embraced by the Ly-cilph. Their minds consume the power, using it to metamorphose once again. The nodes brought them sentience, the supergiant's surplus energy brings them transcendence. They leave the chrysalis of the flesh behind, shooting up the stream of particles at lightspeed, spacefree and eternal.

The liberated minds swarm above their abandoned world

for several days, watching the storms abate, the clouds reform, the old convection currents return to their familiar courses. The Ly-cilph have achieved incorporeality, but their perspective, shaped by the formative material existence, remains unchanged. As before, they deem the purpose of their life is experience, perhaps eventually to be followed by understanding. The difference is that they are no longer restricted to a single world and brief glimpses of the stars; now the entire universe is laid out before them, they wish to know it all.

They begin to drift away from the odd planet which birthed them, tentatively at first, then with greater boldness, dispersing like an expanding wave of eager ghosts. One day they will return to this point, all the generations of Ly-cilph that ever lived. It will not happen while the primary star still burns; they will travel until they meet the boundary of the universe as it contracts once more, following the galactic superclusters as they fall into the reborn dark mass at the centre, the cosmic egg regathering all it has lost. Then they will be back, congregating around the black star husk, sharing the knowledge they have brought, searching through it for that elusive ultimate understanding. And after understanding they will know what lies beyond, and with that a hope of a further switch to yet another level of existence. Possibly the Ly-cilph will be the only entities to survive the present universe's final reconfiguration.

But until then they are content to observe and learn. Their very nature precludes them from taking part in the myriad dramas of life and matter unfolding before their ethereal senses.

Or so they believe.

3

Iasius had come back to Saturn to die.

Three hundred and fifty thousand kilometres above the gas giant's wan beige cloudscape the wormhole terminus expanded, and the voidhawk slipped out into real space. Sensors mounted on the strategic-defence satellites patrolling the gas giant's designated starship emergence zone found the infrared glow straight away, as radar waves tickled the hull. *Iasius* hailed the nearest habitat with its affinity, and identified itself. The satellite sensors slid their focus away, resuming their vigil.

Captain and crew borrowed the bitek starship's paramount senses to observe the glorious ringed planet outside, whilst all the time their minds wept with the knowledge of what was to come. They were flying above the gas giant's sunlit hemisphere, a nearly full crescent showing. The rings were spread out ahead and two degrees below them, seemingly solid, yet stirring, as if a gritty gas had been trapped between two panes of glass. Starlight twinkled through. Such majestic beauty seemed to deny their terrible reason for returning.

Iasius's affinity touched their minds. **Feel no sorrow**, the bitek starship said silently. **I do not. What is, is. You have helped to fill my life. For that I thank you.**

Alone in her cabin, Captain Athene felt her mental tears become real. She was as tall as any woman of the hundred families, whose geneticists had concentrated on enhancing sturdiness so their descendants could comfortably spend a lifetime coping with the arduous conditions of spaceflight. Her carefully formatted evolution had given her a long, handsome face, now heavily wrinkled, and rich auburn hair which had lost its youthful sheen to a lustrous silver. In her

immaculate ocean-blue ship-tunic she projected a regal quality of assurance, which always elicited total confidence from her crews. But now her composure had vanished, expressive violet eyes reflecting the utter anguish welling up inside.

No, Athene, please don't.

I can't help it, her mind cried back. It's so unfair. We should go together, we should be allowed.

There was an eldritch caress down her spine, more tender than any human lover could ever bestow. She had felt that same touch on every day of all her hundred and eight years. Her only true love. None of her three husbands received as much emotional devotion as *Iasius*, nor, she admitted with something approaching sacrilege, had her eight children, and three of them she had carried in her own womb. But other Edenists understood and sympathized; with their communal affinity there was no hiding emotions or truth. The birthbond between the voidhawks and their captains was strong enough to survive anything the universe could possibly throw at them. Except death, the most private section of her mind whispered.

It is my time, *Iasius* said simply. There was an overtone of contentment within the silent voice. If the voidhawk had had lungs, Athene thought it would have sighed at that moment.

I know, she said wistfully. It had been increasingly obvious during the last few weeks. The once omnipotent energy patterning cells were now struggling to open a wormhole interstice. Where over half a century ago there had been a feeling that a single swallow manoeuvre could span the galaxy, the pair of them now experienced a muted sense of relief if a planned fifteen light-year swallow was accomplished only a light-month short of the required coordinate. Damn the geneticists. Is parity so much to ask for? she demanded.

One day perhaps they will make ship and captain live as long as each other. But this which we have now, I feel a rightness to it. Someone has to mother our children. You will be as good a mother as you have been a captain. I know this.

The sudden burst of self-satisfied conviction in the men-

tal voice made her grin. Sticky lashes batted some of the moisture away. **Raising ten children at my age. Goodness!**

You will do well. They will prosper. I am happy.

I love you, *Iasius*. If I was allowed to have my life again, I would never change a second of it.

I would.

You would? she asked, startled.

Yes. I would spend one day as a human. To see what it was like.

Believe me, both the pleasures and the pain are greatly exaggerated.

Iasius chuckled. Optically sensitive cells protruding like blisters from its hull located the Romulus habitat, and the starship felt for its mass with a tiny ripple in the spacial distortion field its energy patterning cells were generating. The habitat's solidity registered in its consciousness, a substantial mote orbiting the outside edge of the F-ring. Substantial but hollow, a bitek polyp cylinder forty-five kilometres long, ten wide; it was one of the two original voidhawk bases germinated by the hundred families back in 2225. There were two hundred and sixty-eight similar habitats orbiting Saturn now, along with their subsidiary industrial stations, their numbers tangible evidence of just how important the bitek starships had become to the whole Edenist economy.

The starship sent power flashing through its patterning cells, focusing energy towards infinity, the loci distorting space outside the hull, but never enough to open a wormhole interstice. They rode the distortion wave towards the habitat like a surfer racing for the beach, quickly accelerating to three gees. A secondary manipulation of the distortion field generated a counter-acceleration force for the benefit of the crew, providing them an apparent acceleration of one gee. A smooth and comfortable ride, unmatched by Adamist starships with their fusion drives.

Athene knew she would never be quite so comfortable if she ever took a trip in a voidhawk again. With *Iasius* she could always feel the nothingness of the vacuum flowing by; a sensation she equated with being in a rowing-boat on

some country river, and letting her hand trail through the calm water. Passengers never received that feeling. Passengers were meat.

Go on, she told the starship. **Call for them.**

All right.

She smiled for both of them at the eagerness in the tone.

Iasius called. Opening its affinity full, projecting a wordless shout of joy and sorrow over a spherical zone thirty astronomical units in radius. Calling for mates.

Like all voidhawks, *Iasius* was a creature of deep space, unable to operate close to the confines of a strong gravity field. It had a lenticular shape, measuring one hundred and ten metres in diameter, thirty metres deep at the centre. The hull was a tough polyp, midnight blue in colour, its outer layer gradually boiling away in the vacuum, replaced by new cells growing up from the mitosis layer. Internally, twenty per cent of its mass was given over to specialist organs—nutrient reserve bladders, heart pumps supplying the vast capillary network, and neuron cells—all packaged together neatly within a cylindrical chamber at the centre of the body. The remaining eighty per cent of its bulk was made up from a solid honeycomb of energy patterning cells which generated the spatial distortion field it used for both propulsion modes. It was those cells which were decaying in ever larger quantities. Like human neurons they were unable to regenerate effectively, which dictated the starship's life expectancy. Voidhawks rarely saw out more than a hundred and ten years.

Both the upper and lower hull surfaces had a wide circular groove halfway out from the middle, which the mechanical systems were slotted into. The lower hull groove was fitted mainly with cradles for cargo-pods, the circle of folded titanium struts interrupted only by a few sealed ancillary systems modules. Crew quarters nestled in the upper hull groove, a chrome-silver toroid equipped with lounges, cabins, a small hangar for the atmospheric flyer, fusion generators, fuel, life-support units. Human essentials.

Athene walked around the toroid's central corridor one last time. Her current husband, Sinon, accompanied her as she performed her final sacrosanct duty: initiating the chil-

dren who would grow up to be the captains of the next generation. There were ten of them, zygotes, Athene's ova fertilized with sperm from her three husbands and two dear lovers. They had been waiting in zero-tau from the moment of conception, protected from entropy, ready for this day.

Sinon had provided the sperm for only one child. But walking beside her, he found he held no resentment. He was from the original hundred families; several of his ancestors had been captains, as well as two of his half-siblings; for just one of his own children to be given the privilege was honour enough.

The corridor had a hexagonal cross-section, its surface made out of a smooth pale-green composite that glowed from within. Athene and Sinon walked at the head of the silent procession of the seven-strong crew, air whirring softly from overhead grilles the only sound. They came to a section of the corridor where the composite strip of the lower wall angle merged seamlessly with the hull, revealing an oval patch of the dark blue polyp. Athene stopped before it.

This egg I name *Oenone*, *Iasius* said.

The polyp bulged up at the centre, its apex thinning as it rose, becoming translucent. Red rawness showed beneath it, the crest of a stem as thick as a human leg which stretched right down into the core of the starship's body. The tumescent apex split open, dribbling a thick gelatinous goo onto the corridor floor. Inside, the sphincter muscle at the top of the red stem dilated, looking remarkably similar to a waiting toothless mouth. The dark tube inside palpitated slowly.

Athene held up the bitek sustentator, a sphere five centimetres in diameter, flesh-purple, maintained at body temperature. According to the data core on the zero-tau pod it had been kept in, the zygote inside was female; it was also the one Sinon had fathered. She bent down and pushed it gently into the waiting orifice.

This child I name *Syrinx*.

The little sustentator globe was ingested with a quiet wet slurp. The sphincter lips closed, and the stem sank back down out of sight. Sinon patted her shoulder, and they gave each other a proud smile.

They will flourish together, *Iasius* said proudly.

Yes.

Athene walked on. There were another four zygotes left to initiate, and Romulus was growing larger outside.

The Saturn habitats were keening their regret at *Iasius*'s call. Voidhawks throughout the solar system answered with pride and camaraderie; those that weren't outbound with cargo abandoned their flights to flock around Romulus in anticipation.

Iasius curved gently round the non-rotational dock at the northern endcap. With her eyes closed, Athene let the affinity bond image from the voidhawk's sensor blisters expand into her mind with superhuman clarity. Her visual reference of the habitat altered as the endcap loomed large beyond the rim of the starship's hull. She saw the vast expanse of finely textured red-brown polyp as an approaching cliff face; one with four concentrically arrayed ledges, as if ripples had raced out from the axis in some distant time, only to be frozen as they peaked.

The voidhawk chased after the second ledge, two kilometres out from the axis, swooping round to match the habitat's rotation. Adamist reaction-drive spaceships didn't have anything like the manoeuvrability necessary to land on the ledges, and they were reserved for voidhawks alone.

Iasius shot in over the edge, seeming to hover above the long rank of mushroomlike docking pedestals which protruded from the floor, before choosing a vacant one. For all its bulk, it alighted with the delicate grace of a hummingbird.

Athene and Sinon felt the gravity fade down to half a gee as the distortion field dissipated. She watched the big flat-tired crew bus rolling slowly towards the bitek starship, elephant-snout airlock tube held upwards.

Come along, Sinon urged, his mind dark with emotion. He touched her elbow, seeing all too plainly the wish to remain during the last flight.

She nodded her head reluctantly. "You're right," she said out loud.

I'm sorry that doesn't make it any easier.

She gave him a tired smile and allowed him to lead her

out of the lounge. The bus had arrived at the rim of the voidhawk. Its airlock tube lengthened, sliding over the upper hull surface to reach the crew toroid.

Sinon diverted his attention away from his wife to the flock of voidhawks matching pace with the ledge. There were over seventy waiting, latecomers rising into view as they left their crews behind on the other ledges. The emotional backwash from the waiting bitek starships was impossible to filter out, and he could feel his own blood singing in response.

It wasn't until he and Athene reached the passage to the airlock that he noticed an irregularity in the flock. *Iasius* obligingly focused on the starship in question.

That's a blackhawk! Sinon exclaimed.

Amidst the classic lens shapes it seemed oddly asymmetric, drawing the eye. A flattened teardrop, slightly asymmetric, with the upper hull's dorsal bulge fatter than that on the lower hull; from what he supposed was prow to stern it measured an easy hundred and thirty metres; the blue polyp hull was mottled with a tattered purple web pattern.

The larger size and various unorthodox configurations which set the blackhawks apart, their divergence from the voidhawk norm (some called it evolution), came about because of their captains' requirement for greater power. Actually, improved combat performance was what they were after, Sinon thought acrimoniously. The price for that agility usually came in the form of a shorter lifespan.

That is the *Udat*, *Iasius* said equably. **It is fast and powerful. A worthy aspirant.**

There's your answer, then, Athene said, using affinity's singular-engagement mode so the rest of the crew were excluded from the exchange. She had a gleam in her eye as they paused by the airlock's inner hatch.

Sinon pulled a sour face, then shrugged and walked off down the tube to the bus, giving her the final moment alone with her ship.

There was a hum in the corridor she had never heard before, a resonance coming from *Iasius*'s excitement. When she put her fingers to the sleek composite wall there was nothing, no tremor or vibration. Perhaps it was only in her

mind. She turned and looked back into the toroid, the familiar confined corridors and lounges. Their whole world.

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

I will love you always.

The crew bus trundled back over the ledge towards the cliff of polyp, nuzzling up to a metal airlock set into the base. *Iasius* laughed uproariously across the communal affinity band; it could feel the ten eggs inside its body, glowing with vitality, their urgency to be born. Without warning it streaked away from the pedestal, straight towards the waiting flock of its cousins. They scattered in delighted alarm.

This time there was no counter-acceleration force required for the crew toroid, no protection for fragile humans. No artificial safety limits. *Iasius* curved sharply, pulling an easy nine gees, then flattened its trajectory to fly between the endcap and the giant metal arm of the counter-rotating dock. Weak pearl-white sunlight fell on the hull as it moved out of the ledge's shadow. Saturn lay ahead, the razor-sharp line of the rings bisecting it cleanly. The bitek starship headed in for the planet-swathing streamers of ice crystals and primitive molecules at twelve gees, stray dust-motes and particles brushed smoothly aside by the distortion field's bow wave. Enthusiastic voidhawks raced after it, looking more and more like a stippled comet's tail as they emerged into the light.

In the crew quarters, metal was buckling under its new and enormous weight. Empty lounges and corridors were filled with drawn-out creaking sounds, composite furniture was splintering, collapsing onto the floor, each fresh fragment hitting with the force of a hammer blow, leaving a deep indentation. The cabins and galley were awash with water that squirted from broken pipes, strange ripples quivered across the surface as *Iasius* performed minute course adjustments.

Iasius entered the rings, optical-band perception degrading rapidly as the blizzard raging outside the hull thickened. It curved round again, bending its path in the direction which the ring particles orbited, but always at an angle, al-

ways heading inwards towards the massive presence of the gas giant. It was a glorious game, dodging the larger chunks, the dagger fragments of ice which glittered so coldly, the frosted boulders, sable-black chunks of near-pure carbon. The bitek starship soared around them all, spiralling, diving, swooping in huge loops, heedless of the stress, of the toll its frenzy extracted from the precious patterning cells. Energy was free, coursing through the ring. Cosmic radiation, the planet's undulating magnetic flux, the doughty gusts of solar wind; *Iasius* swept it all in with the distortion field, concentrating it into an abundant coherent stream which the patterning cells absorbed and redirected.

By the time it reached the Encke division the power surplus was enough to energize the first egg. *Iasius* let out a shrill cry of triumph. The other voidhawks responded. They had followed tenaciously, striving to match the giddy helter-skelter route *Iasius* had flown, boring down the passage it had broken through the ring mass, desperately deflecting the whirling particles tossed about by its wake. The leader of the flock kept changing, none could equal the speed, nor match the carefree audacity; often they were caught out by the savage turns, overshooting, blundering about in a squall of undisturbed particles. It was a test of skill as well as power. Even luck played a part. Luck was a trait worth inheriting.

When *Iasius* called the first time, *Hyale* was the closest, a mere two hundred kilometres behind. It surged forward, and *Iasius* relented, slowing fractionally, holding a straight course. They rendezvoused, *Hyale* sliding in to hold position ten metres away, their hulls overlapping perfectly. Ring particles skidded round them like snow from a ski blade.

Hyale began to impart its compositional pattern through their affinity bond, a software DNA flowing into *Iasius* with a sense of near orgasmic glory. *Iasius* incorporated the *Hyale*'s structural format into the vast energy squirt it discharged into the first egg.

The egg, *Acetes*, awoke in a blaze of wonder and exhilaration. Alive with racing currents of power, every cell charged with rapture and purpose and the urge to burst into immediate growth.

Iasius filled space with its glee.

Acetes found itself propelled out into the naked vacuum. Shattered fragments of *Iasius*'s hull were spinning away, a dark red hole set in midnight blue receding at a bewildering speed.

Free! the egg sang. **I'm free!**

A huge dark bulk hung above it. Forces it could sense but couldn't understand were slowing its wild tumbling. The universe seemed to be composed entirely of tiny splinters of matter pervaded by glowing energy bands. Voidhawks flashed past at frightening velocities.

Yes, you are free, *Hyale* said. I bid you welcome to life.

What is this place? What am I? Why can't I move like you? *Acetes* struggled to make sense of the scraps of knowledge fluttering around its racing mind, *Iasius*'s final gift.

Patience, *Hyale* counselled. You will grow, you will learn. The data you possess will be integrated in time.

Acetes cautiously opened its affinity sensitivity to cover the whole of Saturn's environment, and received a chorus of greetings from the habitats, an even greater wave of acknowledgement from individual adult Edenists, excited trills from children; and then its own kind offered encouragement, infant voidhawks nesting within the rings.

Its tumbling halted, it hung below *Hyale*'s lower hull, looking round with raw senses. *Hyale* began to alter their trajectory, moving the egg into a stable circular orbit around the gas giant where it would spend the next eighteen years growing to full size.

Iasius plunged on towards the cloudscape, ploughing a dark telltale furrow through the rings for any entity watching with the right kind of senses. Its flight produced enough power to energize two more eggs, *Briseis* and *Epopheus*, while it was still in the A-ring. *Hesperus* emerged while it was passing through the Cassini division. *Graeae*, *Ixion*, *Laocoön* and *Merope* all awoke in the B-ring, to be borne away by the voidhawks whose compositional patterns they had been given.

Udat caught up with *Iasius* near the inner edge of the B-ring. It had been a long, arduous flight, straining even the blackhawk's power reserves, testing manoeuvrability as seldom before. But now *Iasius* was calling for a mate again,

and *Udat* glided across the gap until their distortion fields merged and the hulls almost touched. It sent *Iasius* its own compositional pattern through the affinity bond, swept away by a fervent gratification.

I thank you, *Iasius* said at the end. I feel this one will be something special. There is a greatness to it.

The egg cannoned up from its ovary, sending out a cascade of polyp flakes, and *Udat* was left to exert its distortion field to brake the intrigued, eager infant as *Iasius* departed. The puzzled blackhawk had no chance to ask what it had meant by that last enigmatic statement.

I welcome you to life, *Udat* said formally, when it had finally stopped the seven-metre globe from spinning.

Thank you, *Oenone* replied. Where are we going now? To a higher orbit. This one is too close to the planet.

Oh! A pause as it probed round with immature senses, its giddy thoughts quietening down. **What is a planet?**

The last egg was *Priam*, ejected well below the meagre lip of the B-ring. Those voidhawks remaining in the flight, now down to some thirty strong, peeled away from *Iasius*. They were already dangerously close to the cloudscape which dominated a third of the sky; gravity was exerting its malign influence on local space, gnawing at the fringes of their distortion fields, impairing the propulsive efficiency.

Iasius continued to descend, its lower, faster orbit carrying it ahead of the others. Its distortion field began to falter, finally overwhelmed by the intensity of the gravitational effect five hundred kilometres above the gas giant.

The terminator rose ahead, a black occlusion devouring the silently meandering clouds. Faint phosphene speckles swam through the eddies and peaks, weaving in and out of the thicker ammonia-laden braids, their light ebbing and kindling in hesitant patterns. *Iasius* shot into the penumbra, darkness expanding around it like an elemental force. Saturn had ceased to be a planet, an astronomical object, it was becoming hugely solid. The bitek starship curved down at an ever increasing angle. Ahead of it was a single fiery streak, growing brighter in its optical sensors. The darkside equator, that frozen remote wasteland, was redolent with sublime grandeur.

Ring particles were falling alongside *Iasius*, a thick, dark rain, captured by the gossamer fingers of the ionosphere, a treacherously insistent caress which robbed them of speed, of altitude. And, ultimately, existence.

When they had been lured down to the fringes of the ionosphere, icy gusts of hydrogen molecules burnt around them, emitting banners of spectral flame. They dipped rapidly as atmospheric resistance built, first glowing like embers, then crowned by incandescent light; sunsparks, stretching a hundred-kilometre contrail behind them. Their billion-year flight ended swiftly in a violent spectacle: a dazzling concussion which flung out a shower of twinkling debris, quickly extinguished. All that remained was a tenuous trail of black soot which was swept up by the howling cyclones.

Iasius reached the extremity of the ionosphere. The light of the dying ring particles was hot on its lower hull. A tremulous glow appeared around its rim. Polyp began to char and flake away, orange flecks bulleting off into the distance. The bitek starship began to lose peripheral senses as its specialist receptor cells grew warm. Denser layers of hydrogen pummelled the hull. The descent curve began to get bumpy, vexatious supersonic winds were beginning to bite. *Iasius* flipped over. The abrupt turn had disastrous consequences on its avian glide; with the hull's blunt underside smashing head on into the hydrogen, the starship was suddenly subjected to a huge deceleration force. Dangerous quantities of flame blossomed right across the hull as broad swaths of polyp ablated. *Iasius* started to tumble helplessly down towards the scorching river of light.

The retinue of voidhawks watched solemnly from their safe orbit a thousand kilometres above, singing their silent hymn of mourning. After they had honoured *Iasius*'s passing with a single orbit they extended their distortion fields, and launched themselves back towards Romulus.

The human captains of the voidhawks involved with the mating flight and the *Iasius*'s crew had passed the time of the flight in a circular hall reserved for that one purpose. It reminded Athene of some of the medieval churches she had

visited during her rare trips to Earth, the same vaulted ceiling and elaborate pillars, the intimidating air of reverence, though here the polyp walls were a clean snow-white, and instead of an altar there was a fountain bubbling out of an antique marble Venus.

She stood at the head of her crew, the image of Saturn's searing equator lingering in her mind. A last gentle emanation of peacefulness as the plasma sheath wrapped *Iasius* in its terminal embrace.

It was over.

The captains stopped by one at a time to extend their congratulations, their minds touching hers, bestowing a fragile compassion and understanding. Never, ever a commiseration; these gatherings were supposed to be a reaffirmation of life, celebrating the birth of the eggs. And *Iasius* had energized all ten; some voidhawks went to meet the equator with several eggs remaining.

Yes, they were right to toast *Iasius*.

He's coming over, look, Sinon said. There was a mild tone of resentment in the thought.

Athene raised her eyes from the captain of the *Pelion*, and observed Meyer making his way through the crowd towards her. The *Udat's* captain was a broad-shouldered man in his late thirties, black hair cut back close to his skull. In contrast to the silky blue ceremonial ship-tunics of the voidhawk captains he wore a functional grey-green ship's one-piece and matching boots. He nodded curtly in response to the formal greetings he received.

If you can't say anything nice, Athene told Sinon, using singular-engagement mode, **don't say anything at all**. She didn't want anything to spoil the wake; besides she felt a certain sympathy for someone so obviously out of place as Meyer was. Nor would it do the hundred families any harm to introduce some diversity into their stock. She kept that thought tightly locked at the core of her mind, knowing full well how this bunch of traditionalists would react to such heresy.

Meyer stood before her, and inclined his head in a swift bow. He was a good five centimetres shorter than her, and she was one of the smaller Edenists in the hall.

Captain— she began. She cleared her throat. No fool like an old one; his affinity bond was with *Udat* alone. A unique neuron symbiont meshed with his medulla, providing him with a secure link to its clone-analogue in the *Udat*, nothing like the hereditary Edenist communal affinity. “Captain Meyer, my compliments to your ship. It was an excellent flight.”

“Thank you for saying so, Captain. It was an honour to take part. You must be proud all the eggs were energized.”

“Yes.” She lifted her glass of white wine in salute. “So what brings you to Saturn?”

“Trade.” He glanced round stiffly at the other Edenists. “I was delivering a cargo of electronics from Kulu.”

Athene felt like laughing out loud, his freshness was just the tonic she needed. She put her arm through his, ignoring the startled looks it caused, and drew him away from the rest of the crew. “Come on, you’re not comfortable with them. And I’m too old to be bothered by how many navy flight code violation warrants are hanging over your head. *Iasius* and I left all that behind us a long time ago.”

“You used to be in the Confederation Navy?”

“Yes. Most of us put in a shift. We Edenists have a strong sense of duty sequenced into us.”

He grinned into his glass. “You must have been a formidable team, that was some mating flight.”

“History now. What about you? I want to hear all about life on the knife edge. The gung-ho adventures of an independent trader, the shady deals, the wild flights. Are you fabulously wealthy? I have several granddaughters I wouldn’t mind getting rid of.”

Meyer laughed. “You have no grandchildren. You’re too young.”

“Nonsense. Stop being so gallant. Some of the girls are older than you.” She enjoyed drawing him out, listening to his stories, his difficulties in making the repayments to the bank for the loan he’d taken to buy *Udat*, his anger at the shipping cartels. He provided a welcome anodyne to the black fissure of emptiness which had opened in her heart, the one that would never close.

And when he left, when the wake was over, the thanks

given, she lay on her new bed in her new house and found ten young stars burning brightly at the back of her mind. *Iasius* had been right after all, hope was eternal.

For the next eighteen years *Oenone* floated passively within the B-ring where *Udat* had left it. The particles flowing around it were occasionally deluged with bursts of static, interacting with the gas giant's magnetosphere to stir the dust grains into aberrant patterns, looking like the spokes of a massive wheel. But for most of the time they obeyed the simpler laws of orbital mechanics, and whirled obediently around their gravitonic master without deviation. *Oenone* didn't care, both states were equally nourishing.

As soon as the blackhawk departed, the egg began to ingest the tides of mass and energy which washed over its shell. Elongating at first, then slowly bloating into two bulbs over the course of the first five months. One of these flattened out into the familiar voidhawk lens shape, the other remained globular, squatting at the centre of what would ultimately evolve into the bitek starship's lower hull. It extruded fine strands of organic conductor, which acted as an induction mechanism, picking up a strong electrical current from the magnetosphere to power the digestive organs inside. Ice grains and carbon dust, along with a host of other minerals, were sucked into pores dotting the shell and converted into thick protein-rich fluids to supply the multiplying cells within the main hull.

At the core of the nutrient-production globe, the zygote called *Syrinx* began to gestate inside a womb-analogue organ, supported by a cluster of haematopoiesis organs.

Human and voidhawk grew in union for a year, developing the bond that was unique even among Edenists. The memory fragments which had come from *Iasius*, the navigation and flight instincts it had imparted at the birth, became a common heritage. Throughout their lives they would always know exactly where the other was; flight trajectories and swallow manoeuvres were a joint intuitive choice.

Volscen arrived a year to the day after *Iasius*'s last flight, rendezvousing with the fledgeling voidhawk egg as it orbited contentedly amid the ring. *Oenone*'s nutrient-produc-

tion globe disgorged the womb-analogue and its related organs in a neat package, which the *Volscen's* crew retrieved.

Athene was waiting just inside the airlock as they brought the organ package on board. It was about the size of a human torso, a dark crinkled shell sprayed with rays of frost where liquids had frozen during its brief exposure to space. They started to melt as soon as it came into contact with the *Volscen's* atmosphere, leaving little viscous puddles on the green composite decking.

Athene could sense the infant's mind inside, quietly cheerful, with a hint of expectancy. She searched through the background whispers of the affinity band for the insect-sentience of the package's controlling bitek processor, and ordered it to open.

It split apart into five segments like a fruit; fluids and mucus spilled out. At the centre was a milk-coloured sac connected to the organs with thick ropy cords, pulsing rhythmically. The infant was a dark shadow, stirring in agitation as the unaccustomed light shone on her. There was a gurgling sound as the package voided its amniotic fluid across the floor, and the sac began to deflate. The membrane peeled back.

Is she all right? *Oenone* asked anxiously. The mental tone reminded Athene of a wide-eyed ten-year-old.

She's just perfect, *Sinon* said gently.

Syrinx smiled up at the expectant adults peering down at her, and kicked her feet in the air.

Athene couldn't help but smile back down at the placid infant. It's all so much easier this way, she thought, at a year old they are much better able to cope with the transition; and there's no blood, no pain, almost as though we weren't meant to have them ourselves.

Breathe, Athene told the baby girl.

Syrinx spluttered on the gummy mass in her mouth and spat it out. With her affinity sensitivity opened to the full, Athene could feel the passage of the coolish air down into the baby's lungs. It was strange and uncomfortable, and the lights and colours were frightening after the pastel dream images of the rings which she was used to. *Syrinx* began to cry.

Crooning sympathy both mentally and verbally Athene unplugged the bitek umbilical from her navel, and lifted the baby out of the sac's slippery folds. Sinon hovered around her with a towel to wipe the girl down, radiating pride and concern. *Volscen's* crew began to clear up the pulpy mess of the package, ready to dump it out of the airlock. Bouncing Syrinx on her arm, Athene moved down the corridor towards the lounge that was serving as a temporary nursery.

She's hungry, *Oenone* said. A thought which was vigorously echoed by Syrinx.

Stop fussing, Athene said. **She'll be fed once we've dressed her. And we've got another six to pick up yet. She's going to have to learn to take her turn.**

Syrinx let out a plaintive mental wail of protest.

"Oh, you are going to be a bonny handful, aren't you?"

She was, but then so were all of her nine siblings as well. The house Athene had taken was a circular one, consisting of a single-storey ring of rooms surrounding a central courtyard. Its walls were polyp, and its curved roof was a single sheet of transparent composite which could be opaqued as required. It had been grown to order by a retired captain two hundred years previously when arches and curves were the fashion, and there wasn't a flat surface anywhere.

The valley it sat in was typical of Romulus's interior, with low, rolling sides, lush tropical vegetation, a stream feeding a series of lakes. Small, colourful birds glided through the branches of the old vine-webbed trees, and the air was rich with the scent of the flower cascades. It resembled a wilderness paradise, conjuring up images of the pre-industrial Amazon forests, but like all the Edenist habitats every square centimetre was meticulously planned and maintained.

Syrinx and her brothers and sisters had the run of it as soon as they learnt to toddle. Nothing harmful could happen to children (or anybody else) with the habitat personality watching the entire interior the whole of the time. Athene and Sinon had help, of course, both human nursery workers and the housechimps, monkey-derived bitek servitors. But even so, it was exhausting work.

As she grew up it was obvious that Syrinx had inherited her mother's auburn hair and slightly oriental jade eyes; from her father she got her height and reach. Neither parent claimed responsibility for her impetuosity. Sinon was terribly careful not to display any public favouritism, though the whole brood soon learnt to their creative advantage that he could never say no or stay cross with his daughter for long.

When she was five years old the whispers in her sleep began. It was Romulus who was responsible for her education, not *Oenone*. The habitat personality acted as her teacher, directing a steady stream of information into her sleeping brain; the process was interactive, allowing the habitat to quiz her silently and repeat anything which hadn't been fully assimilated the first time. She learnt about the difference between Edenists and Adamists, those humans who had the affinity gene and those who didn't, the "originals", whose DNA was geneered but not expanded. The flood of knowledge sparked an equally impressive curiosity. Romulus didn't mind, it had infinite patience with all its half-million strong population.

This difference seems silly to me, she confided to *Oenone* one night as she lay in her bed. The Adamists could all have affinity if they wanted to. It must be horrible to be so alone in your head. I couldn't live without you.

If people don't want to do something, you shouldn't force them, *Oenone* replied.

For a moment they shared the vista of the rings. That night *Oenone* was orbiting high above the dayside of the saffron gas giant planet; it loomed through the misty particle drifts, a two-thirds crescent which always held her entranced. Sometimes she seemed to spend the whole night watching the colossal cloud armies at war.

It's still silly of them, she insisted.

One day we will visit Adamist worlds, then we'll understand.

I wish we could go now. I wish you were big enough.

Soon, Syrinx.

For ever.

I'm thirty-five metres broad now. The particles have been thick this month. Just another thirteen years.

Double for ever, the six-year-old replied brokenly.

Edenism was supposed to be a completely egalitarian society. Everybody had a share in its financial, technical, and industrial resources, everybody (thanks to affinity) had a voice in the consensus which was their government. But in all the Saturn habitats the voidhawk captains formed a distinct stratum of their own, fortune's favourites. There was no animosity from the other children, neither the habitat personality nor the adults would tolerate that, and animosity couldn't be hidden with communal affinity. But there was a certain amount of manoeuvring; after all, the captains would one day choose their own crews from the people they could get on with. The inevitable childhood groups which formed did so around the cub captains.

By the time she was eight, Syrinx was the best swimmer out of all her siblings, her long spidery limbs giving her an unbeatable advantage over the others in the water. The group of children she led spent most of their time playing around the streams and lakes of the valley, either swimming or building rafts and canoes. This was around the time they discovered how to fox Romulus's constant surveillance, misusing affinity to generate loitering phantasms in the sensor cells which covered every exposed polyp surface.

When they were nine years old she challenged her brother Thetis to an evasion race as a way of testing their new-found powers. Both teams of children set off on their precarious rafts, gliding down the stream out of the valley. Syrinx and her juvenile cohorts made it all the way down to the big salt-water reservoir which ringed the base of the southern end-cap. That was where their punts became useless in the hundred-metre depth; and so there they drifted in happy conspiracy until the axial light-tube dimmed before responding to the increasingly frantic affinity calls from their parents.

You shouldn't have done it, *Oenone* chided solemnly that evening. You didn't have any life jackets.

But it was fun. And we had a real zing of a ride back in

the Hydro Department officer's boat. It was so fast, there was spray and wind and everything.

I'm going to speak to Romulus about your moral responsibility traits. I don't think they integrated properly. Athene and Sinon were very worried, you know.

You knew I was all right; so Mother must have known as well.

There is such a thing as propriety.

I know. I'm sorry, really. I'll be nice to Mother and Father tomorrow, promise. She rolled over onto her back, pulling the duvet a little tighter. The ceiling was transparent, and she could just make out the dim silverish moon-glow of the habitat's light-tube through the clouds. I imagined it was you I was riding on, not just a stupid raft.

Did you?

Yes. There was that unique flash of oneness as their thoughts kissed at every level of consciousness.

You're just trying to gain my sympathy, *Oenone* accused.

Course I am. That's what makes me me. Am I really horrible, do you think?

I think I will be glad when you're older, and more responsible.

I'm sorry. No more raft rides. Honest. She giggled. It was still heaps of fun, though.

Sinon died when the children were eleven; he was a hundred and sixty-eight. Syrinx cried for days, even though he had done his best to prepare the children. "I'll always remain with you," he told the dejected group when they gathered round his bed. Syrinx and Pomona had picked fresh angel-trumpets from the garden to be put into vases beside the bed. "We have continuity, us Edenists. I'll be a part of the habitat personality, I'll see what you're all up to, and we can talk whenever you want. So don't be sad, and don't be frightened. Death isn't something to be afraid of, not for us." And I want to watch you grow up and start your captaincy, he told Syrinx privately. You're going to be the best captain ever, Sly-minx, you see. She gave him a tentative smile, and then hugged his frail form, feeling the hot,

sweaty skin, and hearing in her mind his inner wince as he shifted his position.

That night she and *Oenone* listened to his memories as they fled his decaying brain, a bewildering discharge of images and smells and emotional triggers. That was when she first found out about the nagging worry he held about *Oenone*, the tiny shred of doubt which persisted about the voidhawk's unusual co-parent. His concern hanging in the darkened bedroom like one of the phantasms she bamboozled the habitat receptor cells with.

See, Sly-minx, I told you I'd never desert you. Not you.

She smiled into the empty air as his distinctive mental tone sounded in her head. Nobody else ever called her that, only Daddy. There was a curious background burble, as if a thousand people were all holding whispered conversations somewhere far behind him.

But the next morning, the sight of his body wrapped in a white shroud being carried out of the house to be buried in the habitat's arbour was too much for her, and the tears began.

"How long will he live for in the habitat multiplicity?" she asked Athene after the short burial ceremony.

"As long as he wants," Athene said slowly. She never lied to any of the children, but there were times when she wished she wasn't so damn noble. "Most people retain their integrity for about a couple of centuries within the multiplicity, then they just gradually blend in to the overall habitat personality. So even then they don't vanish completely. But at that, it's a lot better than any heavenly salvation which Adamist religions offer their followers."

Tell me about religion, Syrinx asked the habitat personality later that day. She was sitting at the bottom of the garden, watching fast bronze-coloured fish sliding through the big stone-lined lily pond.

It is an organized form of deity worship, usually originating in primitive cultures. Most religions perceive God as male, because they all have their roots in a time prior to female emancipation—which serves to illustrate how contrived they are.

But people still follow them today?

A majority of Adamists retain their faith, yes. There are several religions current in their culture, notably the Christian and Muslim sects. Both convey the belief that holy prophets walked the Earth at some time in the past, and both promise a form of eternal salvation for those who adhere to the teachings of said prophets.

Oh. Why don't Edenists believe, then?

Our culture proscribes nothing providing it doesn't harm the majority. You may, if you wish, practise the worship of any god. The major reason no Edenist chooses this action is that we have extremely stable personalities. We can look at the whole concept of God and spirituality from a vantage point built on logic and physics. Under such an intensive scientific scrutiny, religion always fails. Our knowledge of quantum cosmology is now sufficiently advanced to eliminate the notion of God altogether. The universe is an entirely natural phenomenon, if extraordinarily complex. It was not created by an external act of will.

So we don't have souls?

The concept of soul is as flawed as that of religion. Pagan priests preyed on people's fear of death by promising them there was an afterlife in which they would be rewarded if they lived a good life. Therefore belief in your soul is also an individual choice. However, as Edenists have continuation through becoming part of a habitat personality, no Edenists have required this particular aspect of faith. Edenists know their existence does not end with physical death. We have, to some extent, superseded religion thanks to the mechanics of our culture.

But what about you? Do you have a soul?

No. My mentality is, after all, the summation of individual Edenists. Nor was I ever one of God's creatures. I am entirely artificial.

But you're alive.

Yes.

So if there were souls, you'd have one.

I concede your argument. Do you think there are souls?

Not really. It seems a bit silly. But I can see how Adamists believe in it so easily. If I didn't have the option of transferring my memories into a habitat, I'd want to believe I had a soul, too.

An excellent observation. It was the memory transfer ability which resulted in the mass excommunication of Christian Edenists by Pope Eleanor in 2090. When our founder Wing-Tsit Chong became the first human to transfer his memories into a habitat neural stratum, the Pope denounced his action as sacrilegious, an attempt to avoid divine judgement. Subsequently the affinity gene was declared to be a violation of divine heritage; the Vatican was afraid it placed too great a temptation before the devout. An Islamic proclamation was issued along similar lines a year later, proscribing the faithful from having the gene sequenced into their children. It was the start of the divergence between Edenist and Adamist culture, and also effectively ended Adamist use of bitek. Without affinity control, bitek organisms have little practical use.

But you said there are lots of different religions; how can there be many gods? There can't be more than one Creator, surely? That's a contradiction.

A good point. Several of the largest wars Earth has known have been fought over this issue. All religions claim theirs is the true faith. In actuality, any religion is dependent solely on the strength of conviction in its followers.

Syrinx gave up, and rested her head in her hands as she watched the fish scuttle under the big pink water lilies. It all sounded highly unlikely to her.

What about you? she asked *Oenone*. **Are you religious?**

I don't see the need to pray to an unseen deity for anything. I know what I am. I know why I am. You humans seem to delight in building your own complications.

Syrinx stood up, smoothing down her black mourning dress. The fish dived for deep cover at the sudden movement. **Thanks a bunch.**

I love you, *Oenone* said. **I'm sorry you're upset over Sinon. He made you happy. That's good.**

I won't cry any more, she told herself, Daddy's there whenever I want to talk to him. There, that must mean I've got a properly integrated personality. So that's all right.

If only it didn't hurt so much deep inside her chest, about where her heart was.

By the time she reached fifteen, her education was concentrating on subjects necessary for captaining a ship. Engineering and power systems, Confederation space law, astrogration, bitek life-support organs, mechanics, fluid behaviours, superconductivity, thermodynamics, fusion physics. She and *Oenone* listened to long lectures on the abilities and limits of voidhawks. There were practical lessons too, how to use spacesuits, practising fidgety repairs in low gravity, and acclimatization trips to the voidhawk ledges outside. Running through shipboard routines.

She was perfectly at home in free fall. Floating balance was geneered into all Edenists, and the hundred families went further with their manipulation, toughening and thickening internal membranes to withstand high-gee acceleration. Edenists were loath to use nanonic-supplement boosting unless there was no alternative.

By her mid-teens she was losing her puppy fat (not that she'd ever had much to start with) and beginning to acquire her definitive adult features. The carefully modified genes of her ancestors had bestowed her with a long face that had slightly sunken cheeks, emphasizing strong bones, and a wide mouth which could deliver a dazzling smile whenever she chose. She was as tall as most of her brothers, and her figure was filling out to her complete satisfaction. At this time she had grown her hair halfway down her back, knowing she would never have the opportunity again: when she started operational flying it would have to be cut short. Long hair was at best a nuisance and at worst a hazard in a starship.

When she was seventeen she had a month-long *affaire* with Aulie, who was forty-four, which made it doomed from the start, which made it *so* romantic. She enjoyed her time with Aulie unashamedly, as much for the mild censure and gossip it generated among her friends and family as the new

styles of euphoria she experienced under his knowledgeable tuition. Now he was someone who *really* knew how to exploit free fall.

Teenage Edenist sexuality was one of the most talked about and envied legends among their Adamist counterparts. Edenists didn't need to worry about disease, not with their immunology systems; and affinity ensured that there were no problems of jealousy, or even possessive domination. Honest lust was nothing to be ashamed of, it was a natural aspect of teenage hormones on the boil, and there was also ample room for genuine one-to-one attraction. So given that even trainee captains only had five hours of practical engineering and technology lessons each day, and by their mid-teens Edenists needed at most six hours' sleep per night, the rest of the time was spent pursuing orgasmic release in a manner which would have impressed even the Romans.

Then her eighteenth birthday came around. Syrinx almost couldn't bring herself to leave the house that morning. Athene had worn her usual cheerful face, emotions hidden beyond even the most sensitive prying. But Syrinx knew exactly how much the sight of all ten children preparing to go hurt her. She had hung back after the formal breakfast, but Athene had shooed her out of the kitchen with a brief kiss. "It's the price we all pay," she said. "And believe me, it's worth it."

Syrinx and her siblings suited up and walked out onto the innermost ledge of the northern endcap, progressing with long lopes in the quarter gravity. There were a lot of people milling around outside the airlocks, service personnel, the crews of voidhawks currently perched on pedestals. All of them were eagerly awaiting the arrival of the newest voidhawks. The swirl of expectancy from them and other Edenists in the habitat caught her by surprise, but at least it helped quell her own nerves.

I'm the one that should be nervous, *Oenone* protested.

Why? All this comes naturally to you.

Ha!

Are you ready?

We could wait a little longer, see if I grow some more.

You haven't grown for two months. And you're quite big enough already.

Yes, *Syrinx*, the starship said, so meekly that she had to smile.

Come on, remember I was apprehensive with Hazat. That turned out to be fantastic.

I hardly think you can compare sex with spaceflight. And I wouldn't call that apprehension, more like impatience. There was a tone of pique in the mental voice.

Syrinx put her hands on her hips. **Get on with it.**

Oenone had been steadily absorbing electricity from the nutrient-production globe for the last month; with its growth phase finally complete the demand on the induction pick-off cables by the globe's organs had fallen off sharply, allowing the starship to begin the long powering-up process of its patterning cells. Now the energy levels were high enough to initiate a distortion field, which would enable it to suck power directly out of space. If it didn't get the distortion field right the cells would power down, and a rescue mission would have to be launched. In the past such missions hadn't always been a hundred per cent successful.

With *Syrinx*'s pride and encouragement bolstering its mind, *Oenone* started to separate from the nutrient-producing globe. Fibrous tubes tore along their stress lines. Warm fluids squirted into space, acting like crude rocket engines, adding to the pressure on the remaining tubes. Organic conductors snapped and sealed, their ends whipping back and forth in the expanding cloud of vaporized fluid. The final tube broke, and the globe lurched away like a punctured balloon.

See? Easy, *Syrinx* said. The two of them were remembering together, reviewing the miragelike memories of a voidhawk called *Iasius*. To generate a distortion field you just had to trigger the initial energy flash through the patterning cells like *so*. Energy began to flow inside the labyrinthine honeycomb of patterning cells, compressing, the density building towards infinity in mere nanoseconds.

The distortion field flared outwards, billowing wildly.

Steady, *Syrinx* instructed gently. The field's fluctuations began to damp down. It changed shape, becoming more sta-

ble, twisting the radiation of local space into a viable stream. The patterning cells began to absorb it. There was a heavenly sensation of satisfaction gusting out to the stars.

Yes! We did it. They embraced mentally. Congratulations were flung at them from Edenists and voidhawks alike. Syrinx searched round to see that all her siblings and their craft had generated stable distortion fields. As if Athene's children would fail!

Together *Oenone* and Syrinx began to experiment, changing the shape of the field, altering its strength. The voidhawk began to move, rising up out of the rings, into clear space, seeing the stars unencumbered for the first time. Syrinx thought she could feel the wind blowing in her face, ruffling her hair. She was some ancient mariner standing on the wooden deck of her sailing ship, speeding across an endless ocean.

Three hours later *Oenone* slipped into the gap between Romulus's northern endcap and the counter-rotating dock. It began to curve round, racing after the ledge.

Syrinx saw it expand from nowhere out of the spinning starfield. **I can see you!** It had been so long.

And I you, *Oenone* replied lovingly.

She jumped for joy, legs sending her flying three metres above the ledge.

Careful, *Oenone* said.

Syrinx just laughed.

It slid in over the edge, and hovered above the pedestal closest to her. When it settled she began to glide-run towards it, whooping exuberantly, arms windmilling for balance. *Oenone's* smooth midnight-blue hull was marbled by a fine purple web.

4

The Ruin Ring formed a slim dense halo three kilometres thick, seventy kilometres broad, orbiting five hundred and eighty thousand kilometres above the gas giant Mirchusko. Its albedo was dismayingly low; most of the constituent particles were a dowdy grey. A haze of small particles could be found up to a hundred kilometres outside the main band in the ecliptic plane; dust mainly, flung out from collisions between larger particles. Such meagre dimensions made the Ruin Ring totally insignificant on a purely astronomical scale. However, the effect it had on the course of human events was profound. Its existence alone managed to bring the richest kingdom in history to the verge of political chaos, as well as posing the Confederation's scientific community the greatest mystery it had ever known, one which remained unsolved a hundred and ninety years after its discovery.

It could so easily have gone unnoticed by the Royal Kulu Navy scoutship *Ethlyn*, which investigated the system in 2420. But system survey missions are too expensive to mount for the crew to skimp on detail even though it is obvious there is no terracompatible planet orbiting the star, and naval captains are chosen for their conscientious nature.

The robot probe which *Ethlyn* fired into orbit around Mirchusko performed standard reconnaissance fly-bys of the seven moons above a hundred and fifty kilometres in diameter (anything smaller was classed as an asteroid), then moved on to analyse the two rings encircling the gas giant. There was nothing extraordinary or even interesting about the innermost: twenty thousand kilometres broad, orbiting three hundred and seventy thousand kilometres out, the usual conglomeration of ice and carbon and rocky dust. But the outer ring had some strange spectrographic lines, and it

occupied an unusually high orbit. *Ethlyn's* planetary science officer raised the probe's orbit for a closer look.

When the achromatic pictures relayed from the probe's optical sensors began to resolve, all activity on board the *Ethlyn* came to an abrupt halt as the crew abandoned their routine to assess the scene. The ring which had the mass of a modestly sized moon was composed entirely of shattered xenoc habitats. *Ethlyn* immediately deployed every robot probe in its inventory to search the rest of the system, with depressingly negative results. There were no other habitats, no survivors. Subsequent searches by the small fleet of Kulu research ships which followed also produced a resounding blank. Neither could any trace of the xenoc race's homeworld be found. They hadn't originated on any planet in the Ruin Ring's system, nor had they come from any of the surrounding stars. Their origin and death were a complete enigma.

The builders of the wrecked habitats were called the Laymil, though even the name wasn't discovered for another sixty-seven years. It might seem that the sheer quantity of remnants would provide archaeologists and xenoc investigators with a superabundance of research material. But the destruction of the estimated seventy thousand plus habitats had been ferocious, and it had happened two thousand four hundred years previously. After the initial near-simultaneous detonation a cascade of secondary collisions had begun, a chain reaction lasting for decades, with gravel and boulders pulverizing large shell sections, setting off another round of collisions. Explosive decompression tore apart the living cells of plants and animals, leaving already badly eviscerated corpses to be decimated still further by the punishing sleet of jagged fragments. And even after a relative calm fell a century later, there was the relentless chafing of the vacuum, boiling surface molecules away one by one until only phantom-thin outlines of the original shape were left.

In another thousand years the decay would have precluded almost any investigation into the Laymil. As it was, the retrieval of useful artefacts was a dangerous, frustrating, and generally poorly rewarded task. The Laymil research

project, based in Tranquillity, a custom-grown bitek habitat orbiting seven thousand kilometres above the Ruin Ring, depended on scavengers to do the dirty work.

The scavengers who ventured into the Ruin Ring were driven by a variety of reasons; some (mostly the younger ones) thought it was adventurous, some did it because they had no choice, for some it was a last resort gamble. But all of them kept going in the hope of that one elusive Big Find. Intact Laymil artefacts raised huge prices on the collector's market: there was a limited and diminishing source of unique alien *objets*, and museums and private collectors were desperate to obtain them.

There existed no prospecting technology which could sift through the Ruin Ring particles and identify the gems amid the dross; scavengers had to don their spacesuits and get out there amid the hurtling shell splinters and go through it all one piece at a time, using hands and eyeballs. Most of them earned enough from what they found to keep going. Some were better at it than others. Luck, they called it. They were the ones who found a couple of the more intriguing pieces each year, items which would tide them over in high style for months at a time. Some were exceptionally lucky, returning time and again with pieces the collectors and research project simply had to have. And some were suspiciously lucky.

If pressed, Joshua Calvert would have to admit membership of the second category, though it would be a self-deprecating acknowledgement. He had pulled six decent pieces out of the Ring in the last eight months; a pair of reasonably intact plants, a couple of circuit boards (fragile but OK), half of a rodentlike animal, and the big one, an intact egg, seven centimetres high. Altogether they had brought in three-quarters of a million fuseodollars (the Edenist currency, used as a base currency by the Confederation as a whole). For most scavengers that would have been enough to retire on. Back in Tranquillity people were shaking their heads and wondering why he kept returning to the Ring. Joshua was twenty-one, and that much money could keep him in a satisfactorily high-rolling style for life.

They wondered because they couldn't feel the intense need burning in him, surging down every vein like a living current, animating each cell. If they had known about that tidal-force drive they might have had an inkling of the unquiet nature lurking predator-fashion behind his endearing grin and boyish looks. He wanted one hell of a lot more than three-quarters of a million. In fact it was going to take nearer five million before he was anywhere near satisfied.

Living in a high-rolling style wasn't even an option as far as he was concerned. A life spent doing nothing but keeping a careful eye on your monthly budget, everything you did limited by the dividends of prudent investments? That sounded like living death to him, suspended inanimation, strictly loser's territory.

Joshua knew just how much more to life there could be. His body was perfectly adapted to handle free fall, a combination of useful physiological traits geneered into his family by wanderlust ancestors long distant. But it was just a consort to his mind, which was hardwired into the most riotous human trait, the hunger for new frontiers. He had spent his early childhood listening to his father telling and retelling stories of his own captaincy: the smuggling flights, outsmarting Confederation Navy squadrons, the fights, hiring out as mercenary warriors to governments and corporations with a grudge, of travelling the universe at will, strange planets, fanciful xenocs, willing women in ports scattered across the colonized galaxy. There wasn't a planet or moon or asteroid settlement in the Confederation they hadn't explored and populated with fanciful societies before the old man finally found the combination of drugs and alcohol which could penetrate the beleaguered defences of his enhanced organs. Every night since he was four years old Joshua had dreamed that life for himself. The life Marcus Calvert had blown, condemning his son to sit out his own existence in a habitat on the edge of nowhere. Unless . . .

Five million Edenist fuseodollars, the price of repairing his father's starship—although admittedly it might even cost more, the shape old *Lady Mac* was in after so many years of neglect. Of leaving bloody boring backward Tranquillity. Of having a real life, free and independent.

Scavenging offered him a realistic way, an alternative to indenturing his soul to the banks. That money was out here in the Ruin Ring, waiting for him to pick it up. He could feel the Laymil artefacts calling to him, a gentle insistent prickling at the back of his conscious mind.

Some called it luck.

Joshua didn't call it anything. But he knew nine times out of ten when he was going to strike. And this time was it. He had been in the Ring for nine days now, nudging cautiously through the unending grey blizzard gusting outside the spaceplane's windscreen, looking at shell fragments and discarding them. Moving on. The Laymil habitats were remarkably similar to Tranquillity and the Edenist habitats, biologically engineered polyp cylinders, although at fifty kilometres long and twenty in diameter they were fatter than the human designs. Proof that technological solutions were the same the universe over. Proof that the Laymil were, at that level at least, a perfectly ordinary spacefaring race. And giving absolutely no hint of the reason behind their abrupt end. All their wondrous habitats had been destroyed within the period of a few hours. There were only two possible explanations for that: mass suicide, or a weapon. Neither option sat comfortably in the mind; they opened up too many dark speculations, especially among the scavengers who immersed themselves in the Ruin Ring, constantly surrounding themselves with the physical reality of that terrifying unknowable day over two and a half thousand years ago. A third option was the favourite speculation of scavengers. Joshua had never thought of one.

Eighty metres ahead of him was a habitat shell section, one of the larger ones; roughly oval, two hundred and fifty metres at its widest. It was spinning slowly about its long axis, taking seventeen hours to complete each revolution. One side was the biscuit-coloured outer crust, a tough envelope of silicon similar to Adamist starship hulls. The xenoc researchers back in Tranquillity couldn't work out whether or not it was secreted by the habitat's internal polyp layers; if so then Laymil biological engineering was even more advanced than Edenism's bitek. Stacked above the silicon were various strata of polyp, forty-five metres thick, dulled

and darkened by vacuum exposure. Sitting on top of the polyp was a seam of soil six metres deep, frozen and fused into a concrete-hard clay. Whatever vegetation had once grown here had been ripped away when the habitat split open, grass and trees torn out by the roots as typhoons spun and roared for a few brief seconds on their way to oblivion. Every square centimetre of surface was pockmarked by tiny impact craters from the millennia-long bombardment of Ring gravel and dust.

Joshua studied it thoughtfully through the gritty mist of particles blurring its outlines. In the three years he had been scavenging he'd seen hundreds of shell fragments just like it, barren and inert. But this one had something, he knew it.

He switched his retinal implants to their highest resolution, narrowed the focus, and scanned the soil surface back and forth. His neural nanonics built up a cartographic image pixel by pixel.

There were foundations sticking up out of the soil. The Laymil used a rigidly geometric architecture for their buildings, all flat planes and right angles. No one had ever found a curving wall. This outline was no different, but if the floor-plan was anything to go by it was larger than any of the domestic residences he had explored.

Joshua cancelled the cartographic image, and datavised an instruction into the spaceplane's flight computer. Reaction-control-thruster clusters in the tail squeezed out hot streams of ions, and the sleek craft began to nose in towards the foundations. He slipped out of the pilot's seat where he'd been strapped for the last five hours, and stretched elaborately before making his way out of the cockpit into the main cabin.

When the spaceplane was being employed in its designed role of a starship's ground to orbit shuttle the cabin was fitted with fifteen seats. Now he was using it purely to ferry himself between Tranquillity and the Ruin Ring, he had stripped them out, utilizing the space for a jury-rigged free-fall shower, a galley, and an anti-atrophy gym unit. Even with a geneered physique he needed some form of exercise; muscles wouldn't waste away in free fall, but they would weaken.

He started to take off his ship's one-piece. His body was slim and well muscled, the chest slightly broader than average, pointers to the thickened internal membranes, and a metabolism which refused to let him bloat no matter how much he ate or drank. His family's geneering had concentrated purely on the practicalities of free-fall adaptation, so he was left with a face that was rather too angular, the jaw too prominent, to be classically handsome, and mouse-brown hair which he kept longer than he ought to for flying. His retinal implants were the same colour as the original irises: blue-grey.

Once he was naked he used the tube to pee in before putting on his spacesuit, managing to avoid any painful knocks while he pulled the suit equipment from various lockers. The cabin was only six metres long, and there were too many awkward corners in too little space. Every movement seemed to set something moving, food wrappers he'd misplaced flapping about like giant silver butterflies and crumbs imitating bee swarms. When he got back to port he would have to have a serious cleaning session, the spaceplane's life-support filters really weren't designed to cope with so much crap.

In its inactive state the Lunar State Industrial Institute (SII) programmable amorphous silicon spacesuit consisted of a thick collar seven centimetres high with an integral respirator tube, and a black football-sized globe attached to the bottom. Joshua slipped the collar round his neck, and bit the end of the tube, chewing his lips round until it was comfortable. When he was ready he let go of the handhold, making sure he wasn't touching anything, and datavisied an activation code into the suit's control processor.

The SII spacesuit had been the astronautics industry standard since before Joshua was born. Developed by the Confederation's only pure Communist nation, it was produced in the Lunar city factories and under licence by nearly every industrialized star system. It insulated human skin perfectly against the hostile vacuum, permitted sweat transpiration, and protected the wearer from reasonably high radiation levels. It also gave complete freedom of motion.

The globe began to change shape, turning to oil and flow-

ing over him, clinging to his skin like a tacky rubber glove. He closed his eyes as it slithered over his head. Optical sensors studding the collar section datavised an image directly into his neural nanonics.

The armour which went on top of his new shiny-black skin was a dull monobonded-carbon exoskeleton with a built-in cold-gas manoeuvring pack, capable of withstanding virtually any kinetic impact the Ruin Ring would shoot at him. The SII suit wouldn't puncture, no matter what struck him, but it would transmit any physical knock. He ran both suit and armour checklists again while he clipped tools to his belt. Both fully functional.

When he emerged into the Ruin Ring the first thing he did was datavise a codelock order to the outer hatch. The airlock chamber was unprotected against particle bombardment, and there were some relatively delicate systems inside. It was a thousand to one chance, but five or six scavengers disappeared in the Ring each year. He knew some scavengers and even starship crews who had grown blasé about procedures, always moaning at Confederation Astronautics Board operational safety requirements. More losers, probably with a deep death-wish.

He didn't have to worry about the rest of the spaceplane. With its wings retracted, it was a streamlined fifteen-metre needle, designed to take up as little room in a starship's hangar as possible. Its carbotanium fuselage was tough, but for working the Ruin Ring he had coated it with a thick layer of cream-coloured foam. There were several dozen long score lines etched into it, as well as some small blackened craters.

Joshua orientated himself to face the shell section, and fired the manoeuvring pack's gas jets. The spaceplane began to shrink behind him. Out here in deep space the sleek shape seemed completely incongruous, but it had been the only craft he could use. Seven additional reaction-mass tanks and five high-capacity electron-matrix cells were strapped around the tail, also covered in foam, looking like some kind of bizarre cancerous growths.

The detritus of the Ruin Ring drifted unhurriedly around him, a slow-tempo snowstorm, averaging two or three parti-

cles per cubic metre. Most of it was soil and polyp, brittle, petrified chips. They brushed against the armour, some bouncing off, some fragmenting.

There were other objects too, twisted scraps of metal, ice crystals, smooth rounded pebbles, lengths of cabling gradually flexing. None of them had any colour; the F3 star was one-point-seven-billion kilometres away, too distant to produce anything other than a pallid monochrome even with the sensors' amplification. Mirchusko was just visible, a bleached, weary, green bulk, misted over like a dawn sun behind a band of cloud.

Whenever Joshua went EVA it was always the absolute quiet which got to him. In the spaceplane there was never any silence; the hums and whines of the life support, sudden *snaps* from the thruster-nozzle linings as they expanded and contracted, gurgles from the makeshift water lines. They were constant reassuring companions. But out here there was nothing. The suit skin clogged his ears, muffling even the sound of his own breathing. If he concentrated he could just make out his heartbeat, waves breaking on a very distant shore. He had to battle against the sense of smothering, the universe contracting.

There was something drifting in amongst the particles, a long feather-shape. He shifted the suit sensors' focus, glad of the diversion. It was a complete bough from a tree, about five metres away on his left. The forked branches were the palest grey, tapering down to small twigs laden with long triangular leaves; the end which had broken away from the trunk was barbed with narrow blades of wood.

Joshua datavised an order into the manoeuvring pack, and curved round to catch the bough. When he reached it he closed his gauntleted hand around the middle. It was like trying to grasp a sculpture of sun-baked sand. The wood crumbled below his fingers, dissociating into minute flakes. Tremors ran along the branches, shaking the origami leaves as if they were in a breeze. He caught himself listening for the dry rustle, then he was suddenly in the heart of an expanding cloud of ash. He watched it for a long regretful moment before unclipping the slim sampler box from his belt in a reflex action, and swatting a few of the flakes.

The gas jets fired, agitating the cloud, and he emerged into a clearer section of space. The shell section was twenty metres away. For a disconcerting moment it looked like solid ground, and he was falling towards it. He shut down the collar sensor input for half a second, redefining his visual orientation in his mind. When the image came back, the shell section was a vertical cliff face, and he was flying towards it horizontally. Much better.

The soil was in shadow, although no part of the shell section was truly black, there was too much scattered light from Mirchusko for that. He could clearly see the foundations now, walls of black glass, snapped off a metre above the frozen quagmire of lustreless soil. The largest room had some kind of mosaic flooring, and a quarter of the small tiles were still in place. He halted seven metres from the darkened shell surface, and slid sideways. When he switched on the armour suit's lights, white spot beams picked out an elaborate pattern of green, scarlet, and mauve tiles. From where he was it looked almost like a giant eight-taloned claw. Rivulets of water had solidified over it. They sparkled in the twin beams.

Joshua assigned the image a file code, storing it in an empty neural nanonic memory cell. The mosaic would bring in about thirty thousand fuseodollars, he guessed, if he could chip the hundreds of tiles out without breaking them. Unlikely. And the water, or whatever, would have to be scraped or evaporated away first. Risky. Even if he did work out a suitable method, it would probably take at least a week. That couldn't have been the siren call he'd heard with his mind.

The gas jets burped again.

He began to build up a picture of the edifice as he glided over the stumpy walls: it was definitely a public building of some description. The room with the tile floor was probably a reception hall; there were five equally spaced gaps in one wall which suggested entrance doors. Corridors led off from the other three walls, each with ten small rooms on either side. There was a T-junction at the end of each of them, more corridors, more side rooms. Offices? There was no way of telling, nothing had been left when the building took

flight, whirling off into space. But if it were a human building, he would call them offices.

Like most scavengers, Joshua thought he knew the Laymil well enough to build up a working image. In his mind they weren't so much different from humans. Weird shape, trisymmetric: three arms, three legs, three stumpy serpentlike sensor heads, standing slightly shorter than a man. Strange biochemistry: there were three sexes, one female egg-carrier, two male sperm-carriers. But essentially human in basic motivation; they ate and shitted, and had kids, and built machines, and put together a technological civilization, probably even cursed their boss and went for a drink after work. All perfectly normal until that one day when they encountered something they couldn't handle. Something which either had the power to destroy them in a couple of hours, or make them destroy themselves.

Joshua shivered inside the perfectly regulated environment of the SII suit. Too much time in the Ruin Ring could do that, set a man to brooding. So call the cramped square rooms offices, and think what happens in human offices. Over-paid intransigent bureaucrats endlessly shuffling data.

Central data-storage system!

Joshua halted his aimless meander around the serrated foundations and flew in close to the nearest office. Low, craggy black walls marked out a square five metres to a side. He got to within two metres of the floor and stopped, hanging parallel to it. Gas from the manoeuvring jets coaxed little twisters of dust from the network of fine fissures lacing the rumpled polyp surface.

He started at a corner, switching the sensors to cover an area of half a square metre, then fired the jets to carry him sideways. His neural nanonics monitored the inertial guidance module in a peripheral mode, allowing him to give his full attention to the ancient polyp as the search navigation program carried him backwards and forwards across the floor, each sweep overlapping the last by five centimetres.

He had to keep reminding himself of scale, otherwise he might have been flying an atmosphere craft over a desert of leaden sand. Deep dry valleys were actually impact

scratches, sludgy oases marked where mud particles had hit, kinetic energy melting them, only to re-freeze immediately.

A circular hole one centimetre in diameter. Expanded to fill half his vision. Metal glinted within, a spiral ramp leading down. Bolt hole. He found another one; this time the bolt was still inside, sheared off. Two more, both with snapped bolts. Then he found it. A hole four centimetres across. Frayed cable ends inside waved at him like seaweed fronds. The optical fibres were unmistakable, different tolerances to the Kulu Corporation standard he was used to but apart from that they could have been human made. A buried communication net, which must logically be linked with the central data-storage system. But where?

Joshua smiled around the respirator tube. The entrance hall gave access to every other part of the building, why not the maintenance ducts? It fell into place without even having to think. So obvious. Destiny, or something close. Laughter and excitement were vibrating his nerves. This was it, the Big Strike. His ticket out into the real universe. Back in Tranquillity, in the clubs and scavenger pubs, they would talk in envious respectful tones about Joshua and his strike for decades. He'd made it!

The datavised order he shot into the manoeuvring pack sent him backing away from the office's floor. His suit sensors clicked down the magnification scale, jumping his vision field back to normal in a lurching sequence of snapshots. The pack rotated him ninety degrees, pointing him at the mosaic, and he raced towards it, pale white ribbons of gas gushing from the jet nozzles.

That was when he saw it. An infrared blob swelling out of the Ruin Ring. Impossible, but there it was. Another scavenger. And there was no way it could be a coincidence.

His initial surprise was replaced by a burst of dangerous anger. They must have tracked him here. It wouldn't have been particularly difficult, now he thought about it. All you needed was an orbit twenty kilometres above the Ring plane, where you could watch for the infrared signature of reaction drives as scavenger craft matched orbits with their chosen shell sections. You would need military-grade sensors, though, to see through all the gunk in the Ring. Which

implied some pretty cold-blooded planning on someone's part. Someone determined in a way Joshua had never been. Someone who wouldn't shrink from eliminating the scavenger whose craft they intercepted.

The anger was beginning to give way to something colder.

Just how many scavengers had failed to return in the last few years?

He focused the collar sensors on the still-growing craft, and upped the magnification. Pink smear enveloped by brighter pink mist of the reaction-drive exhaust. But there was a rough outline. The standard twenty-metre-long hexagonal grid of an inter-orbit cargo tug, with a spherical life-support module on one end, tanks and power cells filling the rear cargo cradles, nesting round the reaction drive.

No two scavenger craft were the same. They were put together from whatever was available at the time, whatever components were cheapest. It helped with identification. Everyone knew their friends' ships, and Joshua recognized this one. The *Madeeir*, owned by Sam Neeves and Octal Sipika. Both of them were a lot older than him; they'd been scavengers for decades, one of the few two-man teams working the Ruin Ring.

Sam Neeves: a ruddy-faced jovial man, sixty-five years old now, with fluid retention adding considerable bulk to his torso due to the time he spent in free fall. His body wasn't geneered for long-term zero-gee exposure like Joshua's, he had to go in for a lot of internal nanonic supplements to compensate for the creeping atrophy. Joshua could remember pleasant evenings spent with Sam, back around the time he started out scavenging, eagerly listening to the older man's tips and tall stories. And more recently the admiration, being treated almost like a protégé made good. The not quite polite questions of how come he came up trumps so often. So many finds in such a short time. Exactly how much were they worth? If anyone else had tried prying like that he would have told them to piss off. But not Sam. You couldn't treat good old Sam like that.

Good old fucking Sam.

The *Madeeir* had matched velocities with the shell sec-

tion. Its main reaction drive shut down, shimmering vapour veil dissipating. The image began to clarify, details filling in. There were small bursts of topaz flame from its thruster clusters, edging it in closer. It was already three hundred metres behind the spaceplane.

Joshua's manoeuvring pack fired, halting him above the mosaic, still in the shell's umbra.

His neural nanonics reported a localized communication-frequency carrier wave switching on, and he just managed to datavise a response prohibition order into his suit transponder beacon as the interrogation code was transmitted. They obviously couldn't see him just yet, but it wouldn't take long for their sensors to pinpoint his suit's infrared signature, not now they had shut down their reaction drive. He rotated so that his manoeuvring pack's thermo-dump fins were pointing at the shell, away from the *Madeeir*, then considered his options. A dash for the spaceplane? That would be heading towards them, making it even easier for their sensors. Hide round the back of the shell section? It would be putting off the inevitable, the suit's regenerator gills could scrub carbon dioxide from his breath for another ten days before its power cells needed recharging, but Sam and Octal would hunt him down eventually, they knew he couldn't afford to stray far from the spaceplane. Thank Christ the airlock was shut and codelocked; it would take time for them to break in however powerful their cutting equipment was.

"Joshua, old son, is that you?" Sam's datavise was muzzy with interference, ghostly whines and crackling caused by the static which crawled through the particles. "Your transponder doesn't respond. Are you in trouble? Joshua? It's Sam. Are you OK?"

They wanted a location fix, they still hadn't seen him. But it wouldn't be long. He had to hide, get out of their sensor range, then he could decide what to do. He switched the suit sensors back to the mosaic floor behind him. The dendrite tendrils of ice cast occasional pinpoint sparkles as they reflected the *Madeeir*'s reaction-control-thruster flames. A coherent-microwave emission washed over him; radar wasn't much use in the Ruin Ring, the particles acted like old-fashioned chaff. To use a scanner which only had the remotest

chance of spotting him showed just how serious they were. And for the first time in his life he felt real fear. It concentrated the mind to a fantastic degree.

“Joshua? Come on, Joshua, this is Sam. Where are you?”

The ribbons of frozen water spread across the tiles resembled a river tributary network. Joshua hurriedly accessed the visual file of his approach from his neural nanonics, studying the exact pattern. The grubby ice was thickest in one of the corners, a zone of peaks and clefts interspaced by valleys of impenetrable shadow. He cautiously ordered the manoeuvring pack to push him towards that corner, using the smallest gas release possible, always keeping the thermo-dump fins away from the *Madeeir*.

“Joshua, you’re worrying us. Are you OK? Can we assist?”

The *Madeeir* was only a hundred metres away from the spaceplane now. Flames speared out from its thruster clusters, stabilizing its position. Joshua reached the rugged crystalline stalagmites rearing up a couple of metres from the floor. He was convinced he was right; the water had surged up here, escaping its pipes or tubing or whatever had carried it through subterranean depths. He grabbed one of the stalagmites, the armour’s gauntlet slipping round alarmingly on the iron-hard ice until he killed his momentum.

Crawling around the tapering cones hunting for some kind of break in the shell was hard work, and slow. He had to brace himself firmly each time he moved a hand or leg. Even with the sensors’ photonic reception increased to full sensitivity the floor obstinately refused to resolve. He was having to feel his way round, metre by metre, using the inertial guidance display to navigate to the centre, logically where the break should be. If there was one. If it led somewhere. If, if, if . . .

It took three agonizing minutes, expecting Sam’s exuberant mocking laughter and the unbearable searing heat of a laser to lash out at any second, before he found a crevice deeper than his arm could reach. He explored the rim with his hands, letting his neural nanonics assemble a comprehensible picture from the tactile impressions. The visualization that materialized in his mind showed him a gash which

was barely three metres long, forty centimetres wide, but definitely extending below the floor level. A way in, but too small for him to use.

His imagination was gibbering with images of the pursuit Sam and Octal were putting together behind him. Bubbling up from that strange core of conviction was the knowledge that he didn't have time to wriggle about looking for a wider gap. This was it, his one chance.

He levered himself back down to the widest part of the gash, and wedged himself securely between the puckered furrows of ice, then took the thermal inducer from his belt. It was a dark orange cylinder, twenty centimetres long, sculpted to fit neatly into his gauntleted hand. All scavengers used one: with its adjustable induction field it was a perfect tool for liberating items frozen into ice, or vacuum-welded to shell sections.

Joshua could feel his heart racing as he datavised the field profile he wanted into the inducer's processor, and ordered his neural nanonics to override his pacemaker, nulling the adrenalin's effect. He lined the thermal inducer up on the centre of the gap, took a deep breath, tensed his muscles, and initiated the program he'd loaded in his neural nanonics.

His armour suit's lights flooded the little glaciated valley with an intense white glare. He could see dark formless phantoms lurking within the murky ice. Pressure ridges that formed sheer planes refracted rainbow fans of light back at the collar sensors. A gash that sank deep into the shell section's interior, a depth hidden beyond even that intrusive light's ability to expose.

The thermal inducer switched on simultaneously with the lights, fluorescing a metre-wide shaft of ice into a hazy red tube. At the power level he used it turned from solid to liquid to gas in less than two seconds. A thick pillar of steam howled past him, blasting lumps of solid matter out into the Ruin Ring. He fought to keep his hold on the ice as the edge of the stream grazed the armour suit.

"See you, Joshua," Sam's datavise echoed round his brain, laughing derisively.

The thermal inducer snapped off. A second later the rush of steam had abated enough to show him the tunnel it had

cut, slick walls reflecting the suit's light like rippled chrome. It ended ten metres down in a polyp cave. Joshua spun round his centre of gravity, fists hammering into the still bubbling ice, clawing desperately for traction on the slippery surface as he dived head-first down the tunnel.

Madeeir's laser struck the ice as his boots disappeared below the floor. Stalagmites blew apart instantly under the violent energy input, ice vaporized across an area three metres wide. A mushroom cloud of livid steam boiled up into space, carrying with it a wavefront of semi-solid debris. The laser shone like a shaft of red sunlight at its centre.

"Got the little shit!" Sam Neeves' triumphant exclamation rang in the ether.

The laser blinked out. Slush splattered against the spaceplane's foam-encased fuselage. A second later it reached the *Madeeir*, pattering weakly against the alithium struts. Reaction-control thrusters flamed momentarily, holding its position steady.

Once the storm of vapour had dwindled away, *Madeeir* refocused its sensor suite on the vibrating shell section. There was no ice left among the building's foundations, the scouring had plucked the tiles free as well, even some of the low-lying walls had been razed by the blast-wave of steam. A roughly circular patch of the polyp floor glowed a dull vermilion. The sheer power of the laser saved Joshua. The soles of his armour suit had been caught in the initial blaze of photons, melting the mono-bonded-carbon boots, boring into the tough black membrane of the SII suit underneath. Even the miraculous Lunar technology couldn't withstand that assault. His skin had charred, broiling the meat, singeing bone.

But the steam which had erupted so violently absorbed a great deal of the laser's power. The seething gas also distorted the beam, and it didn't just surge outwards, it also slammed down through the tunnel, punching at any blockage.

Joshua hurtled out of the gash in the polyp cave's roof, cannoning into the floor, bouncing, arms flailing helplessly. He was almost unconscious from the pain in his feet, the analgesic block his neural nanonics had erected in his cortex

was faltering under the nerve impulse overload. Blood was spraying out of his soles from the arteries which hadn't been cauterized by the heat. The SII suit redistributed its molecules, flowing around the roasted feet, sealing the broken blood vessels. He hit the cave roof, recoiling. His neural nanonic circuits were visualizing a physiological schematic of his body, an écorché figure with feet flashing urgent red. Neatly tabulated information that was neither sound nor vision was pulsing into his consciousness, telling him the extent of the wounds. He really didn't want to know, the gruesome details were acting like an emetic.

Steam was still gushing into the cave, building in pressure. He could actually hear the gale screeching its affliction. Caustic probes of red light stabbed down through the gash in the ceiling, fluctuating erratically. He hit the polyp again, jarring his arm. The knocks and spinning and pain were too much; he vomited. The SII suit immediately vented the acidic fluid as his stomach spasmed. He cried out in anguish as the sour juices sloshed round in his mouth, rationality fading away. His neural nanonics recognized what was happening and damped down all external nerve inputs, ordered the suit processor to feed him a draught of cool, clear oxygen, then fired the manoeuvring pack jets at full power to stop his madcap oscillations.

The suspension couldn't have lasted more than ten seconds. When he took notice of the sensor visualization again the red light illuminating the cave had been extinguished, and the steam was rushing back out of the gap, currents tugging him gently back up towards it again. He reached out an arm to steady himself against the ceiling. His fingers closed automatically around a metal conduit pinned to the polyp.

Joshua did a fast double take, then began to scan the suit collar sensors round the cave. There were no ends in sight. It wasn't a cave, it was a passage, slightly curved. The conduit was one of twenty running along the ceiling. They had all broken open below the gash, a familiar feathery fan of ragged photonic cables protruded.

His neural nanonics were clamouring for attention, medical data insistent against his synapses. He reviewed it quickly, quashing the return of the nausea. His soles had

burnt down to the bone. There were several options stored in the neural nanonics' medical program. He chose the simplest: shut-off for nerves below the knees, infusing a dose of antibiotics from the armour's emergency pack, and shunting a mild tranquillizer program into primary mode to calm his inflamed thoughts.

While he waited for the drugs to start working he took a more measured assessment of the passage. The polyp had ruptured in several places, water and a syrupy fluid had spouted in, freezing over the walls in long streaks, turning the passage into a winterland grotto. They were boiling now, crusty surface temporarily turned back to a liquid by the retreating steam, frothing like bad beer. When he shone the suit's lights into the rents he could see tubes running parallel to the passage; water ducts, nutrient arteries, sewage ducts—whatever, they were the habitat's utilities. Edenist habitats were riddled with similar channels.

He summoned up the inertial guidance display, and integrated the passage into the data construct of the shell section. If the curve was reasonably constant, one end would emerge from the section's edge after thirty metres. He started to move up the other way, watching the conduits. He didn't have anywhere else to go.

The passage branched, then branched again. One junction had five passages. Ice clogged a lot of the walls, bulging outward in smooth mounds. In several places it was virtually impassable. Once he had to use the thermal inducer again. The conduits were often buried under frosted waves. The destruction had been as great down here as it had everywhere else in the habitat. That should have warned him.

The hemispherical chamber might have held the central storage system for the offices above; there was no way of telling now. The conduits which had led him loyally this far all snaked in through an open archway, then split at the apex three metres over his head, running down the curving walls like silver ribs. There had been a great deal of electronic equipment in here at one time: slate-grey columns, a metre or so high, with radiator fins running down the outside, the equivalent of human processor-module stacks. Some of them were visible, badly vacuum eroded now, their fragile

complex innards mashed beyond salvation, battered ends sticking out of the rubble. Nearly half of the ceiling had collapsed, and the resulting pile of polyp slivers had agglutinated in an alarmingly concave wall, as though the avalanche had halted half-way through. If gravity was ever reapplied here, the whole lot would come crashing down. Whatever force had rampaged through the chamber when the habitat broke apart had left total devastation in its wake.

Maybe it was deliberate, he mused, because it's certainly very thorough. Maybe they didn't want any records to survive?

The manoeuvring pack rotated him, allowing him to perform a complete survey. Over by the archway, a tongue of that viscous brownish fluid had crept in, stealing along the wall until the temperature drop congealed it into a translucent solid. A regular outline was just visible below the gritty surface.

He sailed over, trying to ignore the debilitating effect his maimed feet were having on the rest of his body. He had developed a splitting headache despite the tranquillizer program, and he'd caught his limbs trembling several times as he drifted along the passage. The neural nanonics had reported his core temperature dropping one degree. He suspected a form of mild shock was tightening its malicious grip. When he got back to the spaceplane he was going to have to use the medical nanonic packages to stabilize himself straight away. That brought a grin. When! He'd almost forgotten about Sam and Octal.

He was right about the frozen liquid, though. Up close, with the suit lights on full, he could make out the definite shape of one of the grey electronics pillars. It was in there waiting for him; waiting patiently for over two and a half thousand years, since the time Jesus was nailed to the cross on a primitive, ignorant Earth, immaculately preserved in grubby ice against the insidious decay so prevalent in the Ruin Ring. Every circuit chip, every memory crystal, just waiting for that first current of electrons to reawaken them. His Strike!

Now all he had to do was get it back to Tranquillity.

* * *

The communication band was devoid of human data traffic as he perched on the lip of the passage, and all his suit communication block could pick up was the usual background pop and fizz of Mirchusko's emissions. He'd experienced a strange kind of joy just seeing the Ruin Ring again after retracing his course down the passage. Hope had dwindled to that extent. But now he felt a stubborn determination rising up against the tranquillizer program muffling his mind.

It was impossible to see his spaceplane or the *Madeeir* from where he was, the passage lip was fourteen metres below the soil seam, a maggot hole in a sheer cliff face. Looking down he could see the ochre silicon envelope thirty-five metres below. And he still didn't like to think of the force it would take to snap something that thick the way he snapped biscuits.

This part of the shell surface was exposed to the sunlight, a pale lemon radiance, alive with flickering ever-changing shadows cast by the unceasing swarm of Ring particles. His inertial-guidance unit was projecting a course vector into his mind, a warm orange tube stretching out to vanishing point somewhere in the Ring ahead of him. He datavised the trajectory into the manoeuvring pack, and its jets pulsed, pushing him gently away from the passage, slipping silently down the imaginary tube.

He waited until he was a kilometre and a half from the cover of the shell section before changing direction, then headed out at a steep angle to his previous course, facing into the sun, nozzles firing continually, building velocity. What he was actually doing was raising his orbital altitude in respect to Mirchusko. A higher altitude would give him a longer orbital period. When he halted he was still in the same inclination as the *Madeeir* and the shell section, but five kilometres higher. In their lower, faster orbit, the ship and shell section began to overhaul him.

He couldn't even see them any more. Five kilometres of particles was as effective a shield as the output from a military electronic-warfare pod. The neural nanonics kept flashing up a graphic overlay for him, a small red circle around the shell section, his one tenuous link with salvation. He had

never been so far from the spaceplane before, never been so achingly alone.

His armour suit's communication block began to pick up first scraps of datavised exchanges between Sam and Octal, unintelligible bursts of digital code with a curious echo effect. He was glad of the diversion, using his neural nanonics to try and decrypt the signals. His universe seemed to fill with numbers, galactic constellations of colourless digits, all twisting elusively as he loaded tracer program after tracer program, searching for a pattern.

“. . . no chance. It's built for landing security, no telling what'll . . . on a planet. A thermal inducer would just anneal the . . .” That was Octal's datavise, emitted from a suit block. It made sense, he was the younger, fifty-two; Sam would be sitting comfortably back in the *Madeeir* directing his junior to recover what they could from the spaceplane.

Joshua felt a shiver run down his ribcage. The cold of the gas giant's environment was reaching in through the SII suit to close around him.

Sam's datavise: “. . . the tail where the tanks . . . anything large would have to be . . .”

Octal's datavise: “. . . there now. I can see some kind of cradle he's . . . can't be for . . .”

They faded in and out, chattering, snarling at each other. Sam seemed certain that Joshua had picked something up. He listened to it in a waking daze as the *Madeeir* drifted past. Slowly, it was all happening in time stretched thin.

A lump of clear ice coasted past, as broad as his hand. There was a turquoise and orange fish inside, three eyes around a triangular beaklike mouth, staring ahead, as if it was somehow aware of its surroundings, swimming along its eternal migration path. He watched it dwindle away, too numb to try and collect it—gone for ever now.

He had virtually fallen asleep when the inertial-guidance program warned him he was now falling behind the *Madeeir*. The manoeuvring-pack jets began to fire in a long, elaborate pattern, reducing his velocity and altitude again, sending him curving down behind the *Madeeir*.

Sam's datavise: “. . . response from the flight computer . . . photonic interface point . . .”

Octal's datavise: "... fission blade won't work, the fucking hatch is monobonded carbon, I'm telling you . . . Why don't you listen, asshole . . ."

Sam's datavise: "... little shit . . . find his body . . . chew on his bones . . ."

The manoeuvring pack took Joshua behind the *Madeeir*, the ship a fuzzed pink outline a kilometre ahead of him. He could catch an intermittent view of it through the swirl of particles. Then he lowered his orbit again, a few hundred metres this time, and orbital mechanics reeled him in towards it with painful slowness.

His approach was conducted solely within its blind spot, a cone extending backwards from its reaction drive. All he had to do was keep the bulk of the engine bay between himself and the sensors protruding from the life-support module, and he would remain undetected, especially in the clutter of the Ruin Ring. He also had the advantage that they thought he was dead. They wouldn't be looking, not for anything as small as a suit.

The last hundred metres were the worst. A quick burst of speed, rushing headlong into the twin pits of the reaction-drive nozzles. If they started up now . . .

Joshua slid between the two fat bell-shapes, and anchored himself on the maze of thrust-distribution struts. The rockets were similar in principle to the engines in his spaceplane, though he didn't know the marque. A working fluid (usually a hydrocarbon) was pumped into an energizer chamber where it was heated to about seventy-five thousand degrees Kelvin by a colossal discharge from the power cells. It was a simple system, with few moving parts, little to go wrong, and cheap to maintain. Scavengers didn't need anything more, the delta-V you needed to travel between Tranquillity and the Ruin Ring was small. Joshua couldn't think of anyone who used a fusion drive.

He began to move around the gimbals, going hand over hand, careful not to jar his feet against anything. The power leads were easy to find, superconductor cables as thick as his arm. He fished round his belt for the fission knife. The ten-centimetre blade glowed a spectral yellow, unusually

bright in the shade-soaked engine bay. It made short work of the cables.

Another quick climb brought him up against the hulking tanks. They were covered by a quilt of nultherm insulation blanket. He settled himself at the bottom of one tank, and stripped a patch of the insulation away. The tank itself was a smooth dull silver, merging seamlessly into the turbopump casing at its base. He jammed the thermal inducer into a support-strut joint, squirted on some epoxy to make sure it wouldn't slip, and datavised a series of orders into its processor.

Ten minutes later, the processor switched on the thermal-induction field. Joshua had programmed it to produce a narrow beam, ten centimetres wide, three metres long. Three-quarters of it was actually projected inside the tank, where it started to vaporize the hydrocarbon liquid. Frenzied currents churned, carrying more fluid into the field. Pressure built swiftly, rising to dangerous levels.

The metal shell of the tank wasn't quite so susceptible to the field. Its molecular structure retained cohesion for almost twenty seconds before the sheer quantity of heat concentrated into such a small area disrupted the valency bonds. The metal turned malleable and began to bulge outwards, impelled by the irresistible pressure mounting inside the tank.

In the *Madeeir's* cramped cabin, Sam Neeves widened his eyes in horror as datavised alarms shrilled in his brain. Complex ship schematics unfurled across his consciousness, fuel sections a frantic red. Emergency safety programs sent a torrent of binary pulses into the engine bay. None of it made any difference to the rising pressure.

They were contingencies for malfunctions, he realized. This was something else, the tank was being subjected to a tremendous energy input. The trouble was external. Deliberate.

"Joshua!" he roared in helpless fury.

After operating for twenty-five seconds at maximum expenditure the thermal inducer's electron matrix was ex-

hausted. The field shut down. But the damage had been done.

The protuberance swelling from the tank was glowing a brilliant coral-pink. Its apex burst open. A fountain of boiling gas streaked out, playing across the engine bay. Thermal blankets took flight, whirling away; composite structures and delicate electronics modules melted, sending out spumes of incendiary droplets. *Madeeir* lurched forward, slewing slowly around its long axis as the rocketlike thrust of the erupting tank shoved against the hull.

“Holy shit,” Sam Neeves spat. “Octal! Octal, for Christ’s sake get back here!”

“What’s happening?”

“It’s Joshua, he’s fucked us. Get back here. The reaction control can’t keep her stable.”

Even as he said it the guidance data pouring into his mind showed the thruster clusters losing the battle to hold the ship level. He tried to activate the main drive, the only engines with the strength to compensate for the rogue impulse of the ruptured fuel tank. Dead.

A neural nanonic medical monitor program overrode his pacemaker, calming his frightened heart. Adrenalin buzzed in his head.

Sensors and control linkages from the engine bay were failing at an unbelievable rate. Large areas of the schematic in his mind were an ominous black. The shell section loomed large in the forward sensors.

Joshua watched from behind the relative safety of a boulder three hundred metres away. The *Madeeir* was starting to tumble like the universe’s largest drumstick. Sparkly gas spewed out of one end, tracing a wavering arc through space.

“We’re going to hit!” Sam Neeves datavised.

The *Madeeir* had already wobbled past the spaceplane, giving Joshua a nasty moment. Now it was careering towards the shell section. He held his breath.

It should have hit, he thought, it really should. But the rotation it had picked up saved it. *Madeeir* flipped over the edge of the polyp cliff as if it was on pivots, its life-support module no more than five metres from the surface. At that

speed it would have been split open as though it was made of glass.

Joshua sighed as the gritty tension contracting every tendon drained away. They deserved death, but it would just have to wait now. He had other priorities. Like making sure he lived. At the back of his mind there was a phantom throbbing from his feet. His neural nanonics were reporting his blood was laced with toxins, probably some contamination from the burned flesh, too.

Madeeir raced onwards, deeper into the Ruin Ring. Already two hundred metres beyond the shell section. The plume of gas was visibly weaker.

A small pearl-white mote curved over the edge of the shell section, chasing after the ship. Octal, desperate not to be stranded alone with a spaceplane he couldn't open. If he'd stopped to think, he might have sabotaged Joshua's craft.

Be thankful for small mercies, Joshua told himself.

The manoeuvring pack lifted him from his hiding place behind the boulder. Its gas reserve was down to five per cent. Just enough to get back to the spaceplane. Although he would have found a way even if it was empty. Somehow. Today he was fortune's child.

5

Like a fool Quinn Dexter had been waiting for the jolt, a blink of cold emptiness which would tell him the voyage had actually taken place. It hadn't happened, of course. The crewman had tugged him into the coffin-sized zero-tau pod, one of thousands arranged in a three-dimensional lattice within the colonist-carrier starship's vast life-support capsule. Unfamiliar with free fall, and hating the disorientating giddiness every motion brought, Quinn had meekly allowed himself to be shoved about like he was so much cargo. The cortical-suppressor collar pinching his neck made any thoughts of escape a pitiful fantasy.

Right up until the moment the pod cover had hinged smoothly over him he refused to believe it was happening, clinging to the notion that Banneth would pull strings and get him off. Banneth was plugged into Govcentral's State of Canada administration as deep as a high magus in a virgin. One word, one nod of her head, and he would be free once more. But no. It hadn't happened. Quinn, it seemed, wasn't important enough. There were hundreds of eager waster boys and girls in the Edmonton arcology who even now would be vying to replace him, hungry for Banneth's attention, her bed and her smile, a place in the Light Bringer sect's hierarchy. Youths with verve, with more style than Quinn. Youths who would strut rather than sweat when they were carrying Banneth's cargo of weird persona-sequester nanonics into Edmonton. Who wouldn't be dumb enough to try and run when the police stopped them at the vac train station.

Even the police had thought Quinn was crazy for doing that, laughing as they hauled his twitching stunned body back to Edmonton's Justice Hall. The carton had self-de-

structed, of course, an internecine energy flare reducing the nanonics to indecipherable clusters of crumbling molecules. The police couldn't prove he was carrying anything illegal. But the charge of resisting arrest was good enough for the magistrate to slap an Involuntary Transport order on him.

Quinn had even tried giving the sect's sign to the crewman, the inverted cross, fingers squeezing so tight his knuckles had whitened. *Help me!* But the man hadn't noticed, or understood. Did they even have Light Brother sects out amongst the stars?

The pod cover closed.

Banneth didn't care about him, Quinn realized bitterly. God's Brother, after the loyalty he'd shown her! The atrocious sex she had demanded from him. "My little Sunchild," she had crooned as he penetrated and was penetrated. The pain he had pridefully endured at his initiation to become a sergeant acolyte. The weary hours spent on the most trivial sect business. Helping to recruit his own friends, betraying them to Banneth. Even his silence after he was arrested; the beating the police had given him. None of it meant shit to Banneth. He didn't mean shit to Banneth. That was wrong.

After years bumming round as an ordinary waster kid, it had taken the sect to show him what he really was, an animal, pure and simple. What they'd done to him, what they'd made him do to others, it was liberation, freeing the serpent beast which lurked in the soul of every man. Knowing his true self was glorious. Knowing that he had the power to do what he wanted to others, simply because he chose to. It was a magnificent way to live.

It made the lower ranks obey, out of fear, out of respect, out of adoration. He was more than their chapter leader, he was their saviour. As Banneth was his.

But now Banneth had abandoned him, because Banneth thought him weak. Or perhaps because Banneth knew his true strength, the conviction he had in himself. There were few in the sect who were as committed to worshipping the Night as Quinn. Had she come to see him as a threat?

Yes. That was more likely. The true reason. Everyone feared him, his purity. And by God's Brother they were right to do so.

The pod cover opened.

"I'll get you," Quinn Dexter whispered through clenched teeth. "Whatever it takes, I'm coming after you." He could see it then: Banneth violated with her own persona-sequester nanonics, the glittery black filaments worming their way through her cortex, infiltrating naked synapses with obscene eagerness. And Quinn would have the command codes, reducing mighty Banneth to a puppet made of flesh. But aware. Always aware of what she was being made to do. Yes!

"Oh, yeah?" a coarse voice sneered. "Well, cop this, pal."

Quinn felt a red-hot needle jab up his spine pressing in hard. He yelped more with shock than pain, his back convulsing frantically, pushing him out of the pod.

The laughing crewman grabbed him before he hit the mesh bulkhead three metres in front of the pod. It wasn't the same man that had put Quinn into the pod seconds before. Days before. Weeks . . .

God's Brother, Quinn thought, how long has it been? He gripped the mesh with sweaty fingers, pressing his forehead against the cool metal. They were still in free fall. His stomach oscillating like jelly.

"You going to put up a fight, Ivet?" the crewman asked.

Quinn shook his head weakly. "No." His arms were trembling at the memory of the pain. God's Brother, but it had hurt. He was frightened the neural blitz had damaged his implants. That would have been the final irony, to have got this far only for them to be broken. The two nanonic clusters the sect had given him were the best, high quality and very expensive. Both of them had passed undetected in the standard body scan the police had given him back on Earth. They had to, possessing the bioelectric pattern-mimic cluster would have qualified him for immediate passage to a penal planet.

Being entrusted with it was another token of the sect's faith in him, in his abilities. Copying someone's bioelectric pattern so he could use their credit disk inevitably meant having to dispose of them afterwards. Weaker members might shirk from the task. Not Quinn. He'd used it on over seventeen victims in the last five months.

A quick status check revealed both the nanonic clusters

were still functional. God's Brother hadn't deserted him, not entirely.

"Smart boy. Come on, then." The crewman grabbed Quinn's shoulder, and began to swim along the mesh with nonchalant flips of his free hand.

Most of the pods they passed were empty. Quinn could see the outlines of more pods on the other side of the mesh. The light was dim, casting long grey shadows. Looking round him he knew how a fly must feel crawling about inside an air-conditioning duct.

After the life-support module, there were a couple of long tubular corridors. Crewmen and colonists floated past. One family was clustered around a wailing four-year-old girl who clung to a grab hoop with a death-grip. Nothing her parents could say would make her let go.

They went through an airlock into a long cylindrical compartment with several hundred seats, nearly all of them occupied. Spaceplane, Quinn realized. He had left Earth on the Brazilian orbital tower, a ten-hour journey crammed into a lift capsule with twenty-five other Involuntary Transportees. It suddenly struck him he didn't even know where he was now, nothing had been said about his destination during his fifty-second hearing in front of the magistrate.

"Where are we?" he asked the crewman. "What planet?"

The crewman gave him a funny look. "Lalonde. Why, didn't they tell you?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, you could have copped a worse one, believe me. Lalonde is EuroChristian-ethnic, opened up about thirty years ago. I think there's a Tyrathca settlement, but it's mainly humans. You'll do all right. But take my advice, don't get the Ivet supervisor pissed at you."

"Right." He was afraid to ask what a Tyrathca was. Some kind of xenoc, presumably. He shuddered at that, he who had never ventured out of the arcologies or vac-train stations back on Earth. Now they were expecting him to live under open skies with talking animals. God's Brother!

The crewman hauled Quinn down to the rear of the spaceplane, then took his collar off and told him to find a spare seat. There was a group of about twenty people sitting in the

last section, most of them lads barely out of their teens, all with the same slate-grey one-piece jump suit he'd been issued with. IVT was printed in bright scarlet letters on their sleeves. Waster kids. Quinn could recognize them, it was like looking into a mirror which reflected the past. Him a year ago, before he joined the Light Brothers, before his life meant something.

Quinn approached them, fingers arranged casually in the inverted cross sign. Nobody responded. Ah well. He strapped himself in next to a man with a pale face and short-cropped ginger hair.

"Jackson Gael," his neighbour said.

Quinn nodded numbly and muttered his own name. Jackson Gael looked about nineteen or twenty, with the kind of lean body and contemptuous air that marked him down as a street soldier, tough and uncomplicated. Quinn wondered idly what he had done to be transported.

The PA came on, and the pilot announced they would be undocking in three minutes. A chorus of whoops and cheers came from the colonists in the front seats. Someone started playing a mini-synth, the jolly tune grating on Quinn's nerves.

"Balls," Jackson Gael said. "Look at 'em, they want to go down there. They actually believe in that New Frontier crap the development company has peddled them. And we've got to spend the rest of our lives with these dickheads."

"Not me," Quinn said automatically.

"Yeah?" Jackson grinned. "If you're rich how come you didn't bribe the captain, have him drop you off at Kulu or New California?"

"I'm not rich. But I'm not staying."

"Yeah, right. After you finish your work-time you're gonna make it as some hotshot merchant. I believe you. Me, I'm gonna keep my head down. See if I can't get assigned to a farm for my work-time." He winked. "Some good-looking daughters in this batch. Lonely for them out there in their little wilderness homesteads. People like you and me, they start looking at us in a better light after a while. And if you ain't noticed yet, there ain't many Ivet fems."

Quinn stared at him blankly. "Work-time?"

“Yeah, work-time. Your sentence, man. Why, you think they were going to turn us loose once we hit the planet?”

“They didn’t tell me anything,” Quinn said. He could feel the despair opening up inside him, a black gulf. Only now was he beginning to realize how ignorant of the universe outside the arcology he truly was.

“Man, you must’ve pissed someone off bad,” Jackson said. “You get dumped on by a politico?”

“No.” Not a politician, somebody far worse, and infinitely subtler. He watched the last colonist family emerge from the airlock, it was the one with the terrified four-year-old girl. Her arms were wrapped tightly round her father’s neck and she was still crying. “So what do we do for work-time?”

“Well, once we get down there, you, me, and the other Ivets start doing ten years’ hard labour. See, the Lalonde Development Company paid for our passage from Earth, and now they want a return on that investment. So we spend the prime of our life shovelling shit for these colonists. Community maintenance, they call it. But basically we’re a convict gang, Quinn, that’s what we are; we build roads, clear trees, dig latrines. You name it, every crappy job the colonists need doing, we do it for them. Work where we’re told, eat what we’re given, wear what we’re given, all for fifteen Lalonde francs a month, which is about five fuseodollars’ worth. Welcome to pioneer paradise, Quinn.”

The McBoeing BDA-9008 spaceplane was a no-frills machine designed for operations on stage one agrarian planets; remote basic colonies where spare parts were limited, and maintenance crews were made up of wash-outs and inexperienced youngsters working their first contract. It was a sturdy delta shape built in a New Californian asteroid settlement, seventy-five metres long, with a wingspan of sixty metres; there were no ports for the passengers, just a single curving transparent strip for the pilot. A fuselage of thermal-resistant boron-beryllium alloy glinted a dull oyster in the sharp light of the F-type star a hundred and thirty-two million kilometres away.

Faint jets of dusty gas spirited out of the airlock chamber

as the seal disengaged. Docking latches withdrew into the bulk of the starship, leaving the spaceplane floating free.

The pilot fired the reaction-control thrusters, moving away from the seamless curve of the huge starship's hull. From a distance the McBoeing resembled a moth retreating from a football. When they were five hundred metres apart, a second, longer, burn from the thrusters sent the spaceplane curving down towards the waiting planet.

Lalonde was a world which barely qualified as terracompatible. With a small axial tilt and uncomfortable proximity to its bright primary, the planet's climate was predominantly hot and humid, a perennial tropical summer. Out of its six continents only Amarisk in the southern hemisphere had been opened for settlement by the development company. Humans couldn't venture into the equatorial zone without temperature-regulated suits. The one, northern, polar continent, Wyman, was subject to severe storms as the hot and cool air fronts clashed around its edges all year long. Shrivelled ice-caps covered less than a fifth of the area normal for terracompatible planets.

The spaceplane sliced cleanly down through the atmosphere, its leading edges glowing a dull cerise. Ocean rolled past below it, a placid azure expanse dotted with volcanic island chains and tiny coral atolls. Pristine clouds boiled across nearly half of the visible surface, generated by the relentless heat. Barely a day went by anywhere on Lalonde without some form of rain. It was one of the reasons the development company had managed to attract funding; the regular heat and moisture was an ideal climate for certain types of plants, rewarding the farmer colonists with vigorous growth and high yields.

By the time the McBoeing dropped to subsonic velocity it had fallen below the vast cloudband sweeping in towards Amarisk's western coast. The continent ahead covered over eight million square kilometres, stretching from the flood plains of the western coast to a long range of fold mountains in the east. Under the midday sun it glared a brilliant emerald, jungle country, broken by huge steppes in the south where the temperature dropped towards subtropical.

Beneath the spaceplane the sea was stained with mud, a

grubby brown blemish extending for seventy to eighty kilometres out from the boggy shore. It marked the mouth of the Juliffe, a river whose main course stretched just under two thousand kilometres inland, way into the foothills guarding the eastern coast. The river's tributary network was extensive enough to rival Earth's Amazon. For that reason alone, the development company had chosen its southern bank as the site of the planet's capital (and sole) city, Durringham.

The McBoeing passed low over the coastal swamps, lowering its undercarriage, bullet-shaped nose lining up on the runway thirty kilometres ahead. Lalonde's only spaceport was situated five kilometres outside Durringham, a clearing hacked out of the jungle containing a single prefabricated metal grid runway, a flight-control centre, and ten hangars made from sun-bleached ezytak panels.

The spaceplane touched down with tyres squealing, greasy smoke shooting up as the flight computer applied the brakes. The nose lowered, and it rolled to a halt, then started to taxi back towards the hangars.

An alien world. A new beginning. Gerald Skibbow emerged from the stuffy atmosphere of the spaceplane's cabin, looking about with reverence. Just seeing the solid picket of raw jungle bubbling around the spaceport's perimeter he knew he'd done the right thing coming here. He hugged his wife, Loren, as they started down the stairs.

"Damn, will you look at that! Trees, real bloody trees. Millions of them. Trillions of them! A whole bloody world of them." He breathed in deep. It wasn't quite what he'd expected. The air here was solid enough to cut with a knife, and sweat was erupting all over his olive-green jump suit. There was a smell, vaguely sulphurous, of something rotting. But by damn it was natural air; air that wasn't laced with seven centuries of industrial pollutants. And that's what really counted. Lalonde was dreamland made real, unspoilt, a world on which the kids could make anything come true just by working at it.

Marie was following him down the stairs, her pretty face registering a slight sulk, nose all crinkled up at the scent of the jungle. Even that didn't bother him; she was seventeen,

nothing in life was right when you were seventeen. Give her two years, she'd grow out of it.

His eldest daughter, Paula, who was nineteen, was staring round appreciatively. Her new husband, Frank Kava, stood beside her with his arm protectively round her shoulder, smiling at the vista. The two of them sharing the moment of realization, making it special. Now Frank had what it took, a perfect son-in-law. He wasn't afraid of hard work. Any homestead with Frank as a partner was bound to prosper.

The apron in front of the hangar was made from compacted rock chips, with puddles everywhere. Six harried Lalonde Development Company officers were collecting the passengers' registration cards at the bottom of the steps, running them through processor blocks. Once the data was verified, each immigrant was handed a Lalonde citizenship card and an LDC credit disk with their Govcentral funds converted to Lalonde francs, a closed currency, no good anywhere else in the Confederation. Gerald had known that would happen; he had a Jovian Bank credit disk stashed in an inner pocket, carrying three and a half thousand fuseodollars. He nodded thanks as he received his new card and disk, and the officer directed him towards the cavernous hangar.

"You'd think they'd be a bit better organized," Loren muttered, cheeks puffed against the heat. It had taken fifteen minutes' queueing before they got their new cards.

"Want to go back already?" Gerald teased. He was holding up his citizenship card, grinning at it.

"No, you wouldn't come with me." The eyes smiled, but the tone lacked conviction.

Gerald didn't notice.

In the hangar they joined the waiting passengers from an earlier spaceplane flight, where the LDC officer collectively labelled them Transient Group Seven. A manager from the Land Allocation Office told them there was a boat scheduled to take them upriver to their allocated settlement land in two days. They would be sleeping in a transients' dormitory in Durringham until it departed. And they'd have to walk into town, though she promised a bus for the smaller children.

"Dad!" Marie hissed through her teeth as the groans rose from the crowd.

“What? You haven’t got legs? You spent half the time at your day club in the gym.”

“That was muscle toning,” she said. “Not forced labour in a sauna.”

“Get used to it.”

Marie almost started to answer back, but caught the look in his eye. She exchanged a slightly worried glance with her mother, then shrugged acceptance. “OK.”

“What about our gear?” someone asked the manager.

“The Ivets will unload it from the spaceplane,” she said. “We’ve got a lorry ready to take it into town, it’ll go straight onto the boat with you.”

After the colonists started their march into town a couple of the spaceport ground crew marshalled Quinn and the other Involuntary Transportees into a work party. So his first experience of Lalonde was spending two hours lugging sealed composite containers out of a spaceplane’s cargo hold, and stacking them on lorries. It was heavy work, and the Ivets stripped down to their shorts; it didn’t seem to make a lot of difference to Quinn, sweat appeared to have consolidated into a permanent layer on his skin. One of the ground crew told them that Lalonde’s gravity was fractionally less than Earth standard; he couldn’t feel that, either.

About quarter of an hour into the job he noticed the ground crew had all slunk back into the shade of the hangar. Nobody was bothering with the Ivets.

Two more McBoeing BDA-9008s landed, bringing another batch of colonists down from the orbiting starship. One spaceplane took off, ferrying LDC personnel up to the empty berths; they were going home, their contract time expired. He stopped to watch the big dark delta-shape soar into the sky, dwindling away to the east. The sight laced his thoughts with vicious envy. And still nobody was paying him any attention. He could run, here and now, away into that awesome expanse of untamed land beyond the perimeter. But the spaceport was the place where he wanted to run *to*, and he could well imagine how the homesteaders would treat fugitive Ivets. He might have been stupid enough to be Transported, but he wasn’t that naïve. Cursing softly under his breath, he hauled another composite box full of carpen-

try tools out of the McBoeing's hold and carried it over to the lorry.

By the time the Ivets finished the unloading and began their long trudge into Durringham the clouds from the west had arrived bringing a warm, persistent rain. Quinn wasn't surprised to find his grey jump suit turned out not to be waterproof.

The Lalonde Immigration Registration Department manager's office was in an administration block grafted onto the spaceport's flight-control centre. A long rectangular flat roof structure of ezytak panels clipped onto a metal frame. It had been assembled twenty-five years previously when the first colonists arrived, and its austere fittings were showing their age. Lalonde didn't even rate programmed-silicon constructs for its administration buildings, Darcy thought bleakly; at least the Lunar-built structures had some concessions to comfortable living. If ever a colony project was funded on the cheap, it was Lalonde. But the office did have air-conditioning, powered from solar cells. The temperature was appreciably lower than outside, though the humidity remained constant.

He sat on the settee working his way through the registration cards which the latest batch of arrivals had handed over in exchange for their citizenship and LDC credit disks. The starship had brought five and a half thousand people from Earth; five and a half thousand losers, dreamers, and criminals let loose to wreck another planet in the name of noble destiny. After sixty years in the Edenist Intelligence agency, Darcy couldn't think of Adamists in any other terms. And they claim they're the normal ones, he thought wryly, give me ungodly freakishness every time.

He entered another card's memory into his processor block, glancing briefly at the hologram. A fairly handsome twenty-year-old man, face composed, eyes haunted with fear and hatred. Quinn Dexter, an Involuntary Transportee. The processor block balanced on his lap didn't respond to the name.

The card was tossed onto the growing pile. Darcy picked up another.

“Something you never told me,” Nico Frihagen said from behind his desk. “Who are you people looking for?”

Darcy looked up. Nico Frihagen was Lalonde’s Immigration Registrar, a grand title for what was essentially a clerk working in the Governor’s Civil Administration Division. He was in his late fifties, dourly Slavic in appearance, with rolling jowls and limp receding hair. Darcy suspected his ancestors had had very little to do with geneeering. The slobbish civil servant was drinking beer from a tube, an offworld brand, no doubt pilfered from some unsuspecting arrival’s farmsteading gear. Spaceport staff had a nice racket going ripping off the new colonists. Nico Frihagen was an essential segment of the scam; a list of belongings was included on the colonists’ registration cards.

That readiness to jam his nose in the trough made the registrar an ideal contact for the Edenist operatives. For a straight five hundred fuseodollars a month, Darcy and his partner, Lori, ran through the new immigrants’ identification without having to access the colony’s civic data store.

Details on the immigrants were sparse, the Lalonde Development Company didn’t really care who settled the planet as long as they paid their passage and land registration fee. The company wouldn’t declare a dividend for another century yet, when the population had grown above a hundred million and an industrial economy was rising to replace the agrarian beginnings. Planets were always very long term investments. But Darcy and Lori kept ploughing through the data. Routine procedure. Besides, someone might get careless.

“Why do you want to know? Has somebody been showing an interest?” Lori asked, sitting at the other end of the settee from Darcy. A seventy-three-year-old woman with plain auburn hair and a round face, she looked about half of Nico Frihagen’s age. Like Darcy she lacked the distinctive height of most Edenists, which made both of them ideal for deep cover work.

“No.” Nico Frihagen gestured with the beer tube. “But you’ve been doing this for three years now, hell probably for three years before that for all I know. It’s not just the money, that doesn’t mean much to you people. No, it’s the time you

spend. That's got to mean you're searching for someone important."

"Not really," Lori said. "It's a type of person we're after, not a specific individual."

Good enough, Darcy told her silently.

Let's hope he's satisfied with it, she replied.

Nico Frihagen took a swig of beer. "What type?"

Darcy held up his personal processor block. "The profile is loaded in here, available on a need to know basis. Do you think you need to know, Nico?"

"No. I just wondered. There have been rumours, that's all."

"What sort of rumours, Nico?"

Nico Frihagen gazed out of the office's window, watching an Ivet team unloading a McBoeing BDA-9008. "Upriver. Some settlers vanished, a couple of homesteads up in Schuster County. The sheriffs couldn't find any trace of them, no sign of a struggle, no bodies; just empty houses."

Where the heck is Schuster County? Lori asked.

Darcy queried the bitek processor in his block; a map of the Juliffe's tributary basin bloomed in his mind. Schuster County glowed a soft amber, a sprawling area, roughly rectangular, clinging to the side of the Quallheim River, one of the hundreds of tributaries. **Like Nico said, way upriver. Over a thousand kilometres; it's an area they're just opening up for settlement.**

It could be some kind of big animal. A kroclion, or even something the ecological analysis crew didn't find.

Maybe. Darcy couldn't bring himself to believe that. "So what was the rumour about it, Nico? What are people saying?"

"Not much, not many people know. The Governor wanted it kept quiet, he was worried about stirring up trouble with the Tyrathca farmers, there's a group of them on the other side of the savannah which borders Schuster County. He thought they'd get the blame, so the county sheriff hasn't made an official report. The homesteads have been listed as abandoned."

"When did this happen?" Lori asked.

"Couple of weeks back."

Not much to go on, Lori said.

It's remote enough. The kind of area he'd go to.

I concede that. But what would he want with some hick farmers?

Insufficient data.

Are we going to go and check?

Check what? That the homesteads are empty? We can't go gallivanting off into the jungle over a couple of families who have broken their settlement contract. Goodness, if you stuck me out there in the middle of nowhere, I'd want to run away.

I still say it's odd. If they had been ordinary malcontents, the local sheriff would have known about it.

Yes. But even if we did go, it would take us two or three weeks to reach Schuster County. That means the trail would be well over a month old and cold. How good are you at tracking trails like that through a jungle?

We could take Abraham and Catlin out of zero-tau, use them to scout the area.

Darcy weighed up the options. Abraham and Catlin, their eagles, had enhanced senses, but even so sending them off without even a reasonable idea of where their quarry might be was pointless. They could spend half a year covering Schuster County alone. If they had more operatives he might have sanctioned it, but not with just the two of them. Covering Lalonde's immigrants was a long shot, acting on one piece of dubious information nearly forty years old: that Laton had bought a copy of the original ecological assessment team's report. Chasing off into the hinterlands was completely out of the question.

No, he said reluctantly. **We'll keep them for when we have a definite scent. But there's a voidhawk due from Jospool in a month, I'll ask the captain for a complete survey of Schuster County.**

OK, you're the boss.

He sent the mental image of a grin. They had worked together for too long for rank to be anything other than nominal between them.

"Thanks for mentioning this," Darcy told Nico Frihagen.

"It was useful?"

“Could be. We’ll certainly show our appreciation.”

“Thank you.” Nico Frihagen smiled thinly and took another gulp of beer.

He is a disgusting oaf, Lori said.

“We’d be even more grateful if you let us know of any more disappearances,” Darcy said.

Nico Frihagen cocked his beer tube in his direction. “Do my best.”

Darcy picked up another registration card. The name Marie Skibbow was printed along the top; an attractive teenage girl smiled rebelliously at him from her hologram. Her parents were in for a few years of hell, he decided. Outside the grimy window, thick grey clouds were massing on the western horizon.

The road linking Durringham to the spaceport was a broad strip of pinkish rock chippings slicing straight through the thick jungle. Father Horst Elwes marched towards the capital as best he could with his swelling feet rubbing what felt suspiciously like blisters on both heels. He kept a cautionary eye on the clouds accumulating above the gently waving treetops, hoping the rain would hold off until he made it to the transients’ dormitory.

Thin spires of steam drifted out of the chippings around his feet. The narrow gorge between the trees seemed to act as a lens for the sun, and the heat was awesome. A carpet of bushy grass was besieging the edge of the road. Vegetation on Lalonde certainly was vigorous. Birdsong filled the air, a resonant chittering. That would be the chikrows, he thought, reviewing the didactic memory of local conditions which the Church had given him before he left Earth. About the size of a terran pheasant, with bright scarlet plumage. Eatable, but not recommended, the artificial memory informed him.

There wasn’t much traffic on the road. Battered lorries rumbling to and from the spaceport, carrying wooden crates and ancient-looking composite cargo-pods, some loaded up with homesteading gear. The spaceport crews riding power bikes with broad, deep-tread tyres, tooting their horns as they sped past, the men shouting at the girls. Several horse-

drawn carts trundled by. Horst stared with unashamed delight at the big creatures. He'd never visited his arcology's zoo back on Earth. How strange that the first time he should meet them was on a planet over three hundred light-years from their birthworld. And how could they stand the heat with such thick coats?

There were five hundred members in Group Seven, of which he was included. They had all started off down the road in a tightly packed group following the LDC officer, chattering brightly. Now, after a couple of kilometres, they had become well spread out, and subdued. Horst was close to the rear. His joints were already creaking in protest, and the need for a drink was rising sharply. Yet the air was so moist. Most of the men had shrugged out of their jump suit tops and T-shirts, tying the arms around their waist. So too had several of the women. He noticed that all the locals on power bikes were in shorts and thin shirts; so was the LDC officer leading them, come to that.

He stopped, surprised by the amount of blood pounding away in his cheeks, and gave the seal catch at his neck a full ninety-degree twist. The front of his jump suit split open to reveal his thin powder-blue T-shirt, stained a shade deeper by sweat. The lightweight silk-smooth garment might be ideal for shipboard use, and even in an arcology, but for dealing with raw nature it was ridiculous. Somebody must have got their communication channels fouled up. Surely colonists hadn't been arriving dressed like this for twenty-five years?

A little girl, about ten or eleven years old, was looking up at him. She had that miniature angel's face of all young children, with straight shoulder-length white-blonde hair, gathered into two pony-tails by small red cords. He was surprised to see she was wearing sturdy ankle-length hiker boots, along with baggy yellow shorts and a small white cotton top. A wide-brimmed green felt hat was tilted back sharply. Horst found himself smiling down at her automatically.

"Hello, there. Shouldn't you have got on the bus back at the spaceport?" he asked.

Her face screwed up in indignation. "I'm not a baby!"

"I never said you were. But you could have fooled the development company officer into giving you that lift. I would have done it, if I had the chance."

Her eyes darted to the white crucifix on his T-shirt sleeve. "But you're a priest."

"Father Horst Elwes, *your* priest, if you are in Group Seven."

"Yes, I am. But claiming a lift would have been dishonest," she persisted.

"It would have been sensible. And I'm sure Jesus would understand."

She grinned at that, which made the day seem even brighter to Horst.

"You're nothing like Father Varhoos back home."

"Is that good?"

"Oh, yes." She nodded vigorously.

"Where's your family?"

"There's only me and Mother." The girl pointed to a woman who was walking towards them. She was in her mid-thirties, a strong face with the same fair hair as her daughter. Her robust figure made Horst sigh for what could never be. Not that the Unified Christian Church forbade its priests from marrying, far from it, but even in his prime, twenty years ago, he had been curved in most directions. Now he was what his kinder colleagues described as cuddly, and that was after treating every calorie like an invading virus.

Her name was Ruth Hilton, she told him briskly, and her daughter was Jay. There was no mention of a husband or boyfriend. The three of them started walking down the road together.

"It's nice to see someone was thinking along practical lines," Horst said. "A fine band of pioneers we turned out to be." Ruth was also dressed for the heat, with shorts, cloth hat, and a sleeveless vest; her boots were larger versions of Jay's. She was carrying a well-loaded rucksack; and her broad leather belt had several devices clipped on to it. Horst didn't recognize any of them.

"This is a tropical planet, Father. Didn't the Church give you a generalist didactic memory of Lalonde before you left?" Ruth asked.

“Yes. But I hardly expected to be undertaking a route march the minute we arrived. By my personal timetable, it’s only been fifteen hours since I left the arcology abbey.”

“This is a stage one colony,” Ruth said, without any sympathy. “You think they’re going to have the time or the inclination to wet-nurse five thousand arcology dwellers who have never seen the open sky before? Do me a favour!”

“I still think we might have been given some warning. Perhaps a chance to change into more appropriate clothing.”

“You should have carried it with you in the zero-tau pod. That’s what I did. There’s an allowance for up to twenty kilos of personal luggage in the passage contract.”

“The Church paid for my passage.” Horst answered carefully. He could see Ruth had what it took to survive in this new, demanding world; but she would have to learn to soften her somewhat mercenary attitude or he could imagine himself trying to calm a lynch mob. He forbade a grin. Now that would be a true test of my ability.

“Know what your problem is, Father?” Ruth asked. “Too much faith.”

Quite the contrary, Horst thought, I have nowhere near enough. Which is why I’m here in the remotest part of the human dominion, where I can do little or no harm. Though the bishop was far too kind to put it like that.

“What do you intend doing when we reach our destination?” he asked. “Farming? Fishing in the Juliffe, perhaps?”

“Not likely! We’ll be self-sufficient, of course, I brought enough seeds for that. But I’m a qualified didactic assessor.” She grinned roguishly. “I’m going to be the village schoolmarm. Probably the county schoolmarm, seeing the scraploose way this place is put together. I’ve got a laser imprinter and every educational course you can think of stored in here.” She patted the rucksack. “Jay and I are going to be able to write our own ticket with that. You wouldn’t believe the things you’re going to need to know once we’re dumped in the middle of nowhere.”

“I expect you’re right,” he said without much enthusiasm. Were all the other colonists experiencing the subtle feeling of doubt now they were facing the daunting physical reality of Lalonde? He looked round at the people nearest to him.

They were all plodding along lethargically. A gorgeous teenage girl trudged past, face down, lips set in grim misery. Her jump suit top was tied round her waist; she was wearing a tangerine scoop-neck T-shirt underneath, revealing plenty of smooth skin that was coated in sweat and dust. A silent martyr, Horst decided; he had seen the type often enough when he put in a stint at his arcology's refuge. None of the males nearby paid her the slightest attention.

"You bet I am," Ruth boomed irrepressibly. "Take shoes, now. You probably brought two or three pairs, right?"

"Two pairs of boots, yes."

"Smart. But they're not going to last five years in the jungle, no matter what fancy composite they're made out of. After that you make your own. And for that you come to me for a course in cobbling."

"I see. You have thought this out, haven't you?"

"Wouldn't be here if I hadn't."

Jay smiled up at her mother with complete adoration.

"Isn't an imprinter rather heavy to be lugging about?" Horst asked curiously.

Ruth guffawed loudly, and ran the back of her hand across her brow in a theatrical motion. "Sure is. But it's valuable, especially the newest technical courses, stuff this planet's never heard of. I'm not about to leave that in the hands of the spaceport crew. No way, no how."

A chill of alarm slithered through Horst. "You don't think . . ."

"I'm bloody sure they are. It's what I'd do."

"Why didn't you say something back there?" he demanded in exasperation. "I have reading primer books in my container, medicines, communion wine. Some of us could have remained with it for security."

"Listen, Father, I'm not aiming to be mayor of this group, I'll leave that to some hulking macho male, thank you. And I can't see myself being applauded for standing up in front of that manager woman and saying we should stay behind to stop her friends from stealing our gear. Would you have done that, you with your goodwill to all men?"

"Not publicly, no," Horst said. "But there are ways."

"Well, start thinking of them, because those precious con-

tainers of ours are going to be left piled up in a warehouse in town for the next couple of days before we set sail. And we're going to need what's inside them, and I really do mean *need*; because anyone who thinks that all it takes to survive out there is determination and honest toil is in for the shock of their pampered lives."

"Do you always have to be right about absolutely everything?"

"Listen, you're here to look after our souls, Father. You'll be good at that, I can see, you're the caring type. Deep down, anyway. But keeping my soul connected to my body, that's all down to me. And I intend to do the best job I can."

"All right," he said. "It might be a good idea for me to speak with some of our group this evening. Perhaps we could organize some kind of watch at the warehouse."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea to see if we can acquire replacements for anything that's gone walkabout, as well. There's bound to be other groups' gear stored with ours, it shouldn't be too difficult."

"Alternatively, we could go to the Sheriff's office, and ask them to find anything that's been stolen from us," Horst said forcibly.

Ruth laughed out loud.

They walked on in silence for several minutes.

"Ruth?" he asked eventually. "Why have you come here?"

She exchanged a mournful glance with Jay, the two of them suddenly vulnerable. "I'm running away," she said. "Aren't you?"

Durringham had been founded in 2582, a couple of (Earth) years after the Confederation inspection team had confirmed the results of the land venture company's ecological analysis crew, agreeing that Lalonde had no biota exceptionally hazardous to humans—a certificate which was vital for any planet seeking to attract colonists. The hiatus was due to the venture company (which had bought the settlement rights from the scoutship which discovered the planet) attracting partners, and turning itself into the Lalonde Development Company. With enough financial backing to establish a

working spaceport and provide a minimal level of civil administration, as well as securing an agreement with the Edenists to germinate a bitek habitat above Murora, the system's largest gas giant, the task of attracting colonists began in earnest.

After reviewing the predominantly South-East Asian catchment profiles and intended culture-base of other stage one colony planets in the same sector as Lalonde, the LDC board decided to concentrate on EuroChristian-ethnic stock to give themselves an adequate immigrant pool. They wrote a broadly democratic constitution which would come into effect over a century, with the LDC turning over local civil administration functions to elected councils, and ultimately the governorship to a congress and president at the end of the first hundred years. Theory had it that when the process was complete Lalonde would have developed a burgeoning industrial/technological society, with the LDC as the largest across-the-board shareholder in the planet's commercial enterprises. That was when the real profits would start to roll in.

At the start of the preliminary stage, cargo starships delivered thirty-five dumpers into low orbit: squat, conical, atmospheric-entry craft, packed full of heavy machinery, supplies, fuel, ground vehicles, and the prefabricated sections of runway. The dumpers were aerobraked below orbital velocity, and one by one began their long fiery descent curve towards the jungle below. They rode the beacon signals down to land beside the Juliffe's southern bank, spread out in a line fifteen kilometres long.

Each dumper was thirty metres high, fifteen metres across its base, weighing three hundred and fifty tonnes fully loaded. Small fins around the base steered them with reasonable accuracy through the atmosphere until they were seven hundred metres above the ground, by which time they had slowed to subsonic speed. A cluster of eight giant parachutes lowered them for the final few hundred metres, bringing them to a landing which resembled a controlled crash to the small flight-control team watching from a safe distance. They were designed for a one-way trip; where they landed, they stayed.

Construction crews followed them down in small VTOL spaceplanes, and began unloading. When the dumpers had been emptied they formed environment-proof accommodation for the crews' families and offices for the governor's civil administration staff.

The jungle surrounding the dumpers was levelled first, a chop and burn policy producing a wide swath of desolated foliage and charred animals; the spaceport clearing followed. After the runway grids were assembled, a second wave of workers arrived in the McBoeings, along with more equipment. This time they had to build their own accommodation, using the profusion of logs the earlier crews had left scattered across the ground. Rings of crude wooden cabins sprang up around all of the dumpers, looking as if they were rafts floating on a sea of mud. Stripped of its scrub cover, subject to continual heavy plant traffic and Lalonde's daily rains, the rich black loam was reduced to a fetid-smelling sludge which was over half a metre thick in places. The rock crushers worked continuously throughout the planet's twenty-six-hour day, but they could never supply enough chippings to stabilize the expanding city's quagmire roads.

The view from the scuffed and algae-splattered window of Ralph Hiltch's office, on the third floor of the dumper which housed the Kulu Embassy, showed him the sun-soaked timber-plank roofs of Durringham spread out across the gently undulating land next to the river. The conglomeration was devoid of any methodical street pattern. Durringham hadn't been laid down with logical forethought, it had erupted like a tumour. He was sure even Earth's eighteenth-century cities had more charm than this. Lalonde was his fourth offworld assignment, and he had never seen anything more primitive. The weather-stained hulls of the dumpers rose above the shanty-town precincts like arcane temples, linked to the ramshackle buildings with a monstrous spider web of sable-black power cables slung between tall poles. The dumpers' integral fusion generators provided ninety per cent of the planet's electrical power, and Durringham was completely dependent on their output.

By virtue of the Royal Kulu Bank taking a two per cent stake in the LDC, Kulu's Foreign Office had acquired the

dumper for its staff as soon as the start-up phase of colonization was over, ousting the Governor's Aboriginal Fruit Classification Division in the process. Ralph Hiltch was grateful for the political arm-twisting manoeuvre of twenty years ago; it allowed him to claim an air-conditioned office, and a tiny two-room apartment next door. As the Commercial Attaché he was entitled to a bigger apartment in the embassy's residential block outside, but his actual position as Head of Station for the Kulu External Security Agency operation on Lalonde meant he needed the kind of secure quarters which the old dumper with its carbotanium structure could provide. Besides, like everything else in Durringham, the residential block was made of wood, and leaked something rotten.

He watched the near-solid cliff of silver-grey rain sweeping in from the ocean, obscuring the narrow verdant line peeping above the rooftops to the south which marked the boundary of the jungle. It was the third downpour of the day. One of the five screens on the wall opposite his desk showed a real-time weather-satellite image of Amarisk and the ocean to the west, both covered by spiral arms of cloud. To his wearily experienced eye the rain would last for a good hour and a half.

Ralph eased himself back in his chair and regarded the man sitting nervously on the other side of his desk. Maki Gruter tried not to shift about under the stare. He was a twenty-eight-year-old grade three manager working for the Governor's Transport Office, dressed in fawn shorts and a jade shirt, his lemon-yellow cagoule hanging off the back of his chair. Like almost everyone else in Lalonde's civil administration he was for sale; they universally regarded this backwoods posting as an opportunity to rip off both the LDC and the colonists. Ralph had recruited Maki Gruter two and a half years ago, a month after he himself had arrived. It wasn't so much an entrapment exercise as simply making a selection from a host of eager volunteers. There were times, Ralph reflected sagely, when he would like to see an official who wouldn't sell out for just a sniff of the ubiquitous Edenist fuseodollar. Once his duty tour on Lalonde was fin-

ished in another three years he would have to go through innumerable refresher courses. Subversion was so easy here.

In fact there were times when he questioned the whole point of the ESA mounting an operation on what was basically a jungle populated by psychological Neanderthals. But Lalonde was only twenty-two light-years from the Principality of Ombey, the Kulu Kingdom's newest dominion star system, itself only just out of stage-two development. The ruling Saldana dynasty wanted to make sure that Lalonde didn't mature along hostile lines. Ralph and his colleagues were assigned to watch the colony's political evolution, occasionally offering covert assistance to aspirants with coincident policies; money, or black data on opposing candidates, it didn't make any difference in the end. The formative years of a colony's independence set the political agenda for centuries to come, so the ESA did its best to make sure the first elected leaders were ideologically benign as regards the Kingdom. Placemen, basically.

It made sense if you took the long-term consequences into account; a few million pounds spent now as opposed to the billions any form of naval action would cost once Lalonde had a techno-economy capable of building military starships. And God knows, Ralph thought, the Saldanas approached every problem from that angle—with their life-expectancy long term was the only term they understood.

Ralph smiled pleasantly at Maki Gruter. "Anyone of any interest in this batch?"

"Not that I can see," the civil servant said. "All Earth nationals. Usual Ivet types, waster kids dumb enough to get caught. No political exiles, or at least, none listed." Behind his head, the screen displaying the vectors of Lalonde's miserly orbital traffic showed another spaceplane docking with the vast colonist-carrier starship.

"Fine. I'll have it checked, of course," Ralph said expectantly.

"Oh, right." Maki Gruter's mouth twitched in a half-embarrassed grin. He pulled out a processor block and datavised the files over.

Ralph observed the information flood into his neural nanonics, assigning it to spare storage cells. Tracer pro-

grams ran through the fifty-five hundred names, comparing them to his primary list, the most troublesome of Earth's political agitators known to the ESA. There was no match-up. Later he would datavise the files into a processor block, running a comparison with the huge catalogue of recidivist names, facial images, and in some cases DNA prints which the ESA had trawled from right across the Confederation.

He glanced out through the window again to see a group of the new arrivals slogging along the mushy road which led down the side of the square of grass and straggly roses which passed for the embassy gardens. The rain had arrived, drenching them in seconds. Women, children, and men with their hair beaten down, jump suits clinging to their bodies like a dark, crinkled, lizard hide, all looking thoroughly wretched. There might have been tears on their faces, but he couldn't tell with the rain. And they still had another three kilometres to go before they reached the transients' dormitories down by the river.

"Christ, look at them," he murmured. "And they're supposed to be this planet's hope for the future. They can't even organize a walk from the spaceport properly, none of them thought to take waterproofs."

"Have you ever been to Earth?" Maki Gruter asked.

Ralph turned away from the window, surprised by the younger man's question. Maki was normally keen to simply collect the money and run. "No."

"I have. That planet is one giant hive queen for misbegotten. Our noble past. Compared to that, what this planet offers in the way of a future doesn't look so bad."

"Yeah, maybe." Ralph opened a drawer and took out his Jovian Bank credit disk.

"There's someone else going upriver with this batch of colonists," Maki said. "My office had to arrange a berth for him, that's how I know."

Ralph stopped in the act of authorizing the usual three-hundred-fuseodollar payment. "Who's that?"

"A marshal from the Sheriff's Office. Don't know his name, but he's being sent up to Schuster County to scout round."

Ralph listened to Maki Gruter explain about the missing

homestead families, his mind running over the implications. Somebody in the Governor's Office must consider it important, he thought, there were only five marshals on the planet: combat specialists with nanonic-boosted metabolisms, and well armed. Colony Governors deployed them to sort out severe problems, like bandits and potential revolts, problems that had to be eliminated fast.

Another of Ralph's briefs was to watch for pirate activity in the Lalonde system. Prosperous Kulu with its large merchant fleet was engaged in a constant battle with mercenary vessels. Undisciplined, under-policed colony planets with woefully deficient communications were an ideal market for stolen cargoes, and most of the immigrants were at least bright enough to bring a credit disk primed with fuseodollars. The contraband was invariably sold deep in the hinterlands, where dreams soured within weeks when it became clear just how tough it was to survive outside the enclosed comfort of an arcology, and nobody was going to question where sophisticated power hardware and medical packages came from.

Perhaps those families had questioned the source of their windfall?

"Thanks for telling me," he said, and upped the payment to five hundred fuseodollars.

Maki Gruter smiled in gratitude as his credit disk registered the financial bonus. "My pleasure."

Jenny Harris came in a minute after the transport manager left. A thirty-year-old ESA lieutenant, on her second off-world mission. She had a flat face, her nose slightly crooked, with short dark ginger hair, and a slim figure which belied her strength. Ralph had found her a competent officer in the two years she'd been on Lalonde, if a little bit too rigorous in applying agency procedure to every situation.

She listened attentively as Ralph repeated what Maki Gruter had told him.

"I haven't heard any word on unexplained hardware appearing upriver," she said. "Just the usual black-market activity, selling off the gear which the spaceport crews lift from new colonists."

"What assets have we got up in the Schuster area?"

“Few,” she said reluctantly. “We mainly rely on our contacts in the Sheriff’s Office for reports on contraband, and the boat crews fill in a bit more of the picture. Communication is the problem, naturally. We can give our upriver assets communication blocks, but the Confederation Navy satellites would spot any transmissions even if they were prime encrypted.”

“OK,” Ralph nodded. It was an old argument, urgency against exposure risk. At this stage of its development nothing on Lalonde was considered urgent. “Do we have anyone going upriver?”

Jenny Harris paused as her neural nanonics reviewed schedules. “Yes. Captain Lambourne is due to take a new colonist group upriver in a couple of days, they’re settling land just past Schuster itself. She’s a good courier, I use her to collect reports from our in situ assets.”

“Right, ask her to find out what she can, about the missing families and whether or not there’s been any unexplained equipment appearing up there. In the meantime I’ll contact Solanki, see if he’s heard anything about it.” Kelven Solanki worked at the small Confederation Navy office in Durringham. Confederation Navy policy was that even the humblest of colony worlds was entitled to the same degree of protection as any of the developed planets, and the office was supposed to be visible proof of that. To underline the fact, Lalonde received a twice-yearly visit by a frigate from the 7th Fleet, based at Roherheim, forty-two light-years away. Between visits, a flock of ELINT sensor satellites watched over the star system, reporting their observations directly to the navy office.

Like Ralph and the ESA, their secondary role was to keep an eye out for pirate activity.

Ralph had introduced himself to Lieutenant-Commander Solanki soon after he arrived. The Saldanas were strong supporters of the Confederation, so cooperation as far as locating pirate activity was concerned was a sensible arrangement. He got on reasonably well with the commander, partly due to the navy’s mess, which served arguably the best meals in the city, and neither of them made any mention of Ralph’s other duties.

“Good idea,” Jenny Harris said. “I’ll meet with Lambourne tonight, and brief her on what we want. She’ll want paying,” she added in a cautionary tone.

Ralph requested Lambourne’s file from his neural nanonics, shaking his head ruefully when he saw how much the woman cost them. He could guess how much she would ask for this fact-finding mission upriver. “OK, I’ll authorize it. Try and keep her under a thousand, please.”

“Do my best.”

“Once you’ve dealt with her, I want you to activate an asset in the Governor’s office, find out why the Honourable Colin Rexrew thinks it’s necessary to send a marshal to investigate some missing farmers no one has ever heard of before.”

After Jenny Harris left he datavised the list of new arrivals into his processor block for analysis, then sat back and thought about how much to tell Commander Solanki. With a bit of luck he could drag out the meeting and get himself invited to dinner at the mess.

6

Twenty-two thousand kilometres ahead of *Oenone*, the tiny blue ion-manoeuving jets of the Adamist starship *Dymasio* were consumed by the interstellar night. Syrinx watched through the voidhawk's optical senses as the intense pinprick of light dwindled away to nothing. Directional vectors swirled away at the back of her mind, an unconscious calculation performed in conjunction with *Oenone*'s spacial instinct. The *Dymasio* had lined up on the Honeck star system eight light-years away, the alignment checked out perfectly.

I think this is it, she told Thetis. *Graeae*, her brother's voidhawk, was drifting a thousand kilometres to one side of *Oenone*; the two voidhawks had their distortion fields reduced to a minimum. They were operating in full stealth mode, with minimal energy expenditure. There wasn't even any gravity in the crew toroid. The crew hadn't eaten any hot meals, there had been no waste dumps, all of them peeing and crapping into sanitary bags, and there was definitely no hot water. Blanket webs of heat-duct cables had been laid over *Oenone*'s hull and crew toroid alike, then smothered by a thick light-absorbent insulation foam. All the starship's waste heat was siphoned off by the blankets and radiated away through a single dump panel, always orientated away from their prey. Holes had been left for *Oenone*'s sensor blisters, but that was all. *Oenone* kept complaining that the covering itched, which was ridiculous, but Syrinx held her peace—for now.

I agree, Thetis replied.

Syrinx felt a shiver of trepidation mingling with a release of pent-up tension. They had been following the *Dymasio* for seventeen days, keeping twenty to thirty thousand kilometres behind as it zigzagged between uninhabited star sys-

tems on a totally random course designed to spot and shake off any possible pursuer. A chase of that nature was demanding and difficult, putting a strain on even Edenist psyches, let alone the twenty-strong Adamist naval marine squad they were carrying. Seeing the way their hard-pressed captain, Larry Kouritz, had maintained discipline throughout the mission had sparked a rare respect. And there weren't many Adamists who rated that.

With the final coordinate insertion manoeuvres complete, she could imagine the *Dymasio* retracting its sensors and thermo-dump panels, configuring itself for the jump, charging its patterning nodes with energy. **Ready?** she asked *Oenone*.

I'm always ready, the voidhawk replied tartly.

Yes, she would be very glad when this mission was over.

It had been Thetis who persuaded her to sign on with the Confederation Navy for a seven-year tour, Thetis with his strong sense of duty and commitment, goaded by a wilful zest. Syrinx had always intended to put in a naval stint, Athene had often told her rumbustious children of her service days, painting an enticing picture of gallantry and camaraderie. She just hadn't anticipated it to be quite so soon, three years after she and *Oenone* started flying.

With their power and agility, voidhawks were an essential component of the Confederation Navy, employed by Fleet admirals as ideal interception craft. After being fitted out with both offensive and defensive combat systems and an extensive array of electronic sensors, then undergoing a three-month procedural-training course, *Oenone* and *Graeae* had been assigned to the 4th Fleet, operating from the Japanese Imperium capital Oshanko.

Although the Confederation Navy was a dedicated supra-national organization, voidhawks always had Edenist crews. Syrinx had kept her original crew: Cacus, the life-support engineer; Edwin, in charge of the toroid's mechanical and electrical systems; Oxley, who piloted both the multifunction service vehicle and the atmospheric ion-field flyer; Tula, the ship's generalist and medical officer. And Ruben, the fusion-generator technician, who had become Syrinx's

lover a month after he came aboard, and at a hundred and twenty-five was exactly a century older than her.

It was like Aulie all over again, an aspect which made her feel incredibly girlish and carefree, almost an antithesis of her responsibilities as captain. They slept together when ship's schedules permitted, and spent all their shore leave ranging across whichever planet, habitat, or asteroid settlement they were visiting. Although well into middle age, Ruben, like all Edenists, was still more than capable physically, so their sex life was pretty reasonable; and they both shared a delight in exploring the different cultures flourishing within the Confederation, marvelling in their sheer variety. Through Ruben, and his seemingly inexhaustible patience, she had learned to be far more tolerant of Adamists and their idiosyncrasies. Which was another reason for accepting the Confederation Navy commission.

Then there was also that familiar miscreant thrill to be had from the way everyone regarded their relationship as mildly scandalous. Given their life expectancy, large age gaps were common among Edenist partners, but a hundred years was pushing the limits of propriety. Only Athene didn't make the mistake of objecting, she knew Syrinx far too well for that. In any case, the relationship wasn't that serious; Ruben was convenient, uncomplicated, and fun.

The final crew-member was Chi, who had been posted to *Oenone* by the navy to be their weapons officer. He was a career Confederation Navy man, as far as any Edenist could be in an organization which demanded staff officers renounce their national citizenship (hardly practical for Edenists).

Oenone and *Graeae* had spent four years of patrolling uninhabited star systems, providing occasional random escorts for merchant ships in the hope of engaging pirates, exercised with the Fleet on full-system defence attacks, taken part in a marine assault on an industrial station suspected of building antimatter combat wasps, and making innumerable goodwill calls at ports throughout the 4th Fleet's sector. For the last eight months the Admiralty had assigned them to an independent interception duty, under the command of the Confederation Naval Intelligence Service. This was the third

chase flight the CNIS had sent them on: the first ship had been empty when they reached it; the second, a blackhawk, managed to elude them with its longer swallow range, much to Syrinx's extreme chagrin. But the *Dymasio* was undeniably guilty; the CNIS had suspected it of carrying antimatter for some time, and this flight proved it. Now the ship was preparing to enter an inhabited system to make contact with an asteroid separatist group. This time they would make their arrest. This time! *Oenone*'s cabin atmosphere seemed compressed by the prospect.

Even Eileen Carouch, the CNIS lieutenant who was liaising with them, had picked up on the Edenists' expectancy. She was strapped into the couch next to Syrinx, a middle-aged woman with a bland, unmemorable face, the kind Syrinx supposed was ideal for an active agent. But the personality behind it was resolute and resourceful; discovering the *Dymasio*'s hoarded cache was proof of that.

Right now she had her eyes tight closed, accessing the datavised information *Oenone* was providing through bitek processors interfaced with their hardware equivalents, allowing all the Adamists to see what was going on.

"*Dymasio*'s ready to jump," Syrinx said.

"Thank heavens for that. My nerves can't stand much more of this."

Syrinx felt a grin on her lips. She always found a slight edge of tension in her dealings with Adamists on an individual basis; them and their emotions locked inside impenetrable bone, you never knew quite what they felt, which was difficult for the empathic Edenists to handle. But Eileen had turned out to be amazingly blunt with her opinions. Syrinx quite enjoyed her company.

The *Dymasio* vanished. Syrinx felt the sharp kink in space as the ship's patterning nodes warped the fabric of reality around her hull; to *Oenone* the distortion was like a flare. One that was totally quantifiable. The voidhawk instinctively knew the emergence-point coordinate.

Let's go! Syrinx broadcast loudly.

Power flooded through the voidhawk's patterning cells. An interstice was torn open. They plunged into the expanding wormhole. Syrinx could feel *Graeae* generating its own

wormhole away to one side, then the interstice closed behind them, sealing them in timeless oblivion. Imagination, twinned with genuine voidhawk sensorium input, provided a giddy rushing sensation for the couple of heartbeats it took to traverse the wormhole. A terminus opened at some indeterminable distance, a different texture of negation, seemingly curving round them. Starlight began to pour in, bending into a filigree of slender blue-white lines around the hull. *Oenone* shot out into space. Stars became hard diamond points again.

The event horizon had evaporated from the *Dymasio*'s hull, depositing the starship five light-days out from Honeck's sun. Its sensor clusters and thermo-dump panels emerged from the hull with the timidity of a hibernating creature venturing out into a spring day. As with all Adamist starships, it took time to check its location, and scan local space for stray comets or rock fragments. That crucial time lapse allowed the tremendous spacial flaws accompanying the opening of the voidhawks' terminuses to remain undetected.

Ignorant of his invisible followers, the *Dymasio*'s captain activated the starship's main fusion drive, heading towards the next jump coordinate.

"It's moving again," Syrinx said. "Preparing to go insystem. Do you want to interdict?" The thought of antimatter being carried into an inhabited system disturbed her.

"What's the new destination?" Eileen Carouch asked.

Syrinx consulted the system's almanac stored in *Oenone*'s memory cells. "It looks like Kirchol, the outer gas giant."

"Any settlements in orbit?" She hadn't quite grasped how to pull information from *Oenone* the way she could from hardware memory cores.

"None listed."

"It has to be heading for a rendezvous, then. Don't interdict it, follow it in."

"Let it into an inhabited system?"

"Sure. Look, if it was just the antimatter we wanted, we could have boarded any time in the last three months. That's how long we've known the stuff was on board. *Dymasio* has visited seven inhabited star systems since we started moni-

toring it, without threatening any of them. Now my agent confirms the captain has found a buyer with these separatist hotheads, and I want them. This way we can wrap up both supplier and destination. We could even come out of it with the location of the antimatter-production station. Commendations all round, so just be patient.”

“OK.” **Did you catch all that?** Syrinx asked Thetis.

Certainly did. And she’s quite right.

I know, but . . . She broadcast a complex emotional harmonic of eagerness and frustration.

Bear with it, little sister. Mental laughter. Thetis always knew how to tweak her. *Graeae* had been born before *Oenone*, but there was a marked comparison in size; with a hull diameter of a hundred and fifteen metres *Oenone* was the largest of all *Iasius*’s children. And it wasn’t until puberty’s growth hormones came into effect that Thetis out-matched her in physical tussles. But they had always been the closest, always competing against each other.

I’ve never met anyone more unsuitable for a captaincy, Ruben chided. No composure, all teenage recklessness, that’s your fault, young lady. I’m jumping ship when this is over, bugger what the contract says.

She laughed out loud, quickly turning it into a cough for Eileen’s benefit. Even though she was used to the degree of honesty which affinity fostered, Ruben always astounded her with his intimate knowledge of her emotional composition. **You don’t complain about my other teenage attributes,** she shot back, complete with a very graphic image.

Oh, lady, you just wait till we’re off duty.

I’ll hold you to that.

The prospect almost made the tense waiting worthwhile.

Because of the need for a more precise trajectory when jumping towards a planet than for an interstellar jump, *Dymasio* spent a good fifty minutes re-aligning its course with considerable accuracy. Once its new orbital vector intersected Kirchol, the starship reconfigured itself for a jump.

Weapons status check, please, Syrinx demanded when the light from *Dymasio*’s dive flame began to fade.

Combat wasps and proximity defence systems online, Chi replied.

OK, everybody, alert status one. We don't know how many hostiles there are going to be around Kirchol, so we'll proceed with extreme caution. The admiral wants this ship interdicted, not destroyed, but if we're outnumbered we let loose the combat wasps and retreat. Let's just hope this is the nest.

She caught an indistinct mental grumble: **It can't possibly be another decoy jump. Please.** From the tiredness of the tone she guessed it was Oxley, who was actually older than Ruben, a hundred and fifty. Sinon had recommended him when she was assembling her first crew. He had stayed on mostly out of loyalty to her when she signed on with the navy. More cause for guilt.

Dymasio jumped.

Kirchol was a muddy brown globe three hundred and seventy thousand kilometres below *Oenone's* hull, attendant moons glimmering dimly in the exhausted sunlight. The gas giant had nothing like the majesty of Saturn, it was too drab, too listless. Even the stormbands lacked ferocity.

Dymasio and the two voidhawks had emerged above the south pole; insignificant on such a scale, one dull speck, and two coal-black motes, falling with imperceptible slowness as the gravity field tugged at them.

Syrinx opened her mind to Chi, combining *Oenone's* perceptual awareness with the weapons officer's knowledge of their combat wasps' performance capabilities. Her nerves stretching over a huge volume of space, making a far-off body tremble in reaction.

The *Dymasio* started to transmit a simple radio code, beaming it down towards the gas giant. Given their position, there would be no overspill falling on the populated inner system, Syrinx realized, no chance of being detected even in a few hours when the radio waves finally bridged the gulf.

An answering pulse flashed out from something in orbit around Kirchol, well outside *Oenone's* mass-detection range. The source point began to move, vaulting out of its orbit at five gees. *Oenone* couldn't detect any infrared trace, and there was no reaction-drive exhaust. The radio signal cut out.

A blackhawk. The thought leapt between the Edenists on both voidhawks, a shared frisson of glee.

It's mine, Syrinx told Thetis on singular-engagement mode. She hadn't forgotten how the last blackhawk had given them the slip. It rankled still.

Oh, come on, he protested.

Mine, she repeated coolly. **You get all the glory nabbing that actual antimatter. What more do you want?**

The next blackhawk we come across is mine.

Of course, she cooed.

Thetis retreated, his subconscious grousing away. But he knew better than try and argue with his sister when she was in that mood.

We're going after it? *Oenone* demanded.

We certainly are, she reassured it.

Good, I didn't like losing that last one. I could have matched its swallow.

No, you couldn't. That was nineteen light-years. You'd damage your patterning cells trying to emulate that. Fifteen light-years is our limit.

Oenone didn't answer, but she could sense the resentment in its mind. She had almost been tempted to try the larger than usual swallow, but fear of injuring the voidhawk held her back. That and the prospect of stranding the rest of the crew in deep space.

I would never harm you or the crew, *Oenone* said gently.

I know. But it was annoying, wasn't it?

Very!

The blackhawk rose up out of the ecliptic plane in a long, graceful curve. Even when it slowed to rendezvous with the *Dymasio* the two waiting voidhawks couldn't discern its shape or size. They were thirty thousand kilometres away, too far for optical resolution, and the slightest use of the distortion effect to probe it would have given them away.

Both target craft used their radios when they were five thousand kilometres apart, a steady stream of encrypted data. It made tracking absurdly easy, *Oenone's* passive electronic sensor array triangulating them to half a metre. Syrinx

waited until they were only two thousand kilometres apart, then issued the order to interdict.

HOLD YOUR LOCATION, *Oenone* bellowed across the affinity band. It detected a mental flinch from the blackhawk. **CANCEL YOUR ACCELERATION, DO NOT ATTEMPT TO INITIATE A SWALLOW. STAND BY FOR RENDEZVOUS AND BOARDING.**

Gravity surged back into the crew toroid, building with uncomfortable speed. *Oenone* and *Graeae* streaked in towards their prey at eight gees. *Oenone* was capable of generating a counter-acceleration force of three gees around the crew toroid, which still left *Syrinx* subject to a harsh five gees. Her toughened internal membranes could just about take the strain, but she worried that the blackhawk would try to run. Their crews nearly always used nanonic supplements, enabling them to withstand much higher acceleration. If it developed into a straight chase, *Oenone's* crew were going to suffer, especially Ruben and Oxley.

She needn't have worried. After *Oenone's* affinity shout, the blackhawk folded in its distortion field. But she was keenly aware of the sullen anger colouring its thoughts, presumably echoing those of its captain. There was a name, too, or rather an insistence of identity: *Vermuden*.

Graeae was broadcasting a radio message at the *Dymasio*, the same demand to maintain position. In the Adamist starship's case, enforcement was a more practical option. The voidhawk reached out with its distortion field, disrupting the quantum state of space around the *Dymasio's* hull; if it tried to jump away now, the interference would produce instabilities in its patterning nodes, with spectacularly lethal results as the desynchronized energy loci imploded.

Oenone and *Graeae* drew apart as they closed on their respective targets. The *Vermuden* was a sharp profile in *Syrinx's* mind now, a flattish onion shape one hundred and five metres in diameter, its central spire tapering to a needle-sharp point sixty metres above the hull rim. There was no crew toroid, instead three silvery mechanical capsules were fixed equidistantly around the upper hull; one was a life-support cabin large enough for about five or six people, another was a hangar for a small spaceplane, the third was its

cargo hold. Energy currents simmered below its hull, spectral iridescent whirls that suggested extreme agitation.

“Captain Kouritz, you and your squad to the airlock, please,” Syrinx said when they began to slow for rendezvous. “Be advised, the blackhawk’s cabin space is approximately four hundred cubic metres.”

Vermuden hung in space three hundred kilometres away, a dusky crescent, slightly ginger in colour. She could feel Chi locking the proximity defence lasers onto the blackhawk, a mix of electronic and bitek senses providing the focus.

“I’ll go with them,” Eileen Carouch said. She tapped her restraint-strap release catch.

“Make sure the *Vermuden*’s captain is brought straight back here,” Syrinx said. “I’ll send one of my people with you to fly *Vermuden* back to Fleet headquarters.” Without its captain, the blackhawk would have to obey an Edenist.

Oenone flipped over as it approached *Vermuden*, inverting itself so that it seemed to be descending vertically towards the blackhawk’s upper hull. An airlock tube extended out from the crew toroid. The marine squad waited in the chamber behind it, fully armoured, weapons powered up. Gravity throughout the toroid had returned to a welcome Earth standard.

Syrinx ordered the *Vermuden*’s captain to extend the blackhawk’s airlock.

The *Dymasio* exploded.

Its captain, faced with the total certainty of a personality debrief followed by a Confederation Navy firing squad, decided his crew and ship were a worthwhile price to pay for taking *Graeae* with him. He waited until the voidhawk was a scant kilometre away, beginning its docking manoeuvres, then turned off the antimatter-confinement chambers.

Five hundred grams of antimatter rushed to embrace an equal mass of ordinary matter.

From *Oenone*’s position, two thousand kilometres away, the elemental energy wavefront split the universe in two. On one side the stars burnt with their usual untroubled tranquillity; opposite that infinity vanished, replaced by a solid flat plane of raging photons.

Syrinx felt the light searing into *Oenone*, scorching optical-receptor cells into crisps. Affinity acted like a conductor for purple-white light, allowing it to shine straight into her own mind, a torrent of photons that threatened to engulf her sanity. In amongst the glare were fissures of darkness, fluttering around like tiny birds caught by a gale. They called out to her as they passed, mental cries, sometimes words, sometimes visions of people and places, sometimes smells—phantasm tastes, a touch, the laughter, music, heat, chill, wetness. Minds transferring into *Oenone*'s neural cells. But broken, incomplete. Flawed.

Thetis! Syrinx cried.

She couldn't find him, not amid such turmoil. And the light had become a pervasive pain. She howled in anguish and hatred.

Vermuden's distortion field distended, strengthened, applying stress against the perpetual structure of reality. An interstice yawned wide.

Chi fired the gamma lasers. But the beams raked emptiness. The interstice was already closing.

Less than two seconds after the *Dymasio* exploded, a blast wave of particles arrived to assault *Oenone*'s hull, supplementing the corrosive electromagnetic radiation already striking against the foam. The voidhawk looked past the immediate chaos, observing *Vermuden*'s wormhole forming, a tunnel through empty dimensions. Size and determinant length defined by the blackhawk's energy input. *Oenone* knew the terminus coordinate exactly, twenty-one light-years away, the blackhawk's utter limit.

This time! *Oenone* thought tempestuously. Energy blazed through its own patterning cells.

No! Syrinx shouted, shocked out of her grief.

There is a way, I know how. Trust me.

She waited helplessly as the interstice engulfed them, some treacherous aspect of her subconscious granting the voidhawk permission, urging them on towards retribution. Worry faded when she saw the wormhole was only thirteen light-years long. As its terminus began to open, she felt the patterning cells activate again. Realization was instantaneous, and she laughed with vengeful fury.

Told you so, *Oenone* said smugly.

The desperate twenty-one light-year swallow had stretched *Vermuden's* energy loading capacity virtually to breaking point. It could sense its captain prone on his acceleration couch, muscles locked solid, back arched, the exertion twinned. The wormhole's pseudofabric slithered round the hull, not a physical pressure, but tangible none the less. Finally, up ahead, the terminus manifested. Starlight traced strange shapes as it filtered through.

Vermuden popped out into the clean vacuum of normal space, mind radiating vivid relief.

Well done, its captain said. *Vermuden* felt arm and chest muscles slacken, an indrawn breath.

Powerful laserlight illuminated its hull, washing out its optical receptor cells in a pink dazzle. A lens-shaped mass a hundred and fifteen metres in diameter hung eighty metres off its central spire in the direction of Betelgeuse's demonic red gleam.

"What the fuck . . . How?" the captain yelled.

This is just the targeting laser, *Oenone* said. **If I sense any flux change in your patterning cells I'll switch to the gamma lasers and slice you in half. Now extend your airlock. I have some people on board keen to meet you.**

"I didn't know voidhawks could do that," Eileen Carouch said a couple of hours later. *Vermuden's* captain, Henry Siclari, and the blackhawk's other two crewmen, were in *Oenone's* brig; and the navy prize crew, headed by Cacus, were familiarizing themselves with the blackhawk's systems. Cacus reckoned they would be able to take the ship back to Oshanko in a day. "Sequential swallows?" Syrx said. "Nothing to stop them, you just need a voidhawk with an acute spacial sense." **Like you.**

I love you, *Oenone* replied, unabashed by the alternate praise and admonitions the Edenists had been bombarding it with since the manoeuvre.

Got an answer to everything, haven't you? she said. But the humour wasn't there.

Thetis. His broad, smiling face covered in boyish freck-

les, the uncombed sandy hair, the lanky, slightly awkward body. All the hours together spent roving around Romulus.

He was a part of her identity in the same way as *Oenone*. Soulsibling, so much had been shared. And now he was gone. Torn away from her, torn out of her, the voyages together, frustrations and achievements.

I mourn for him too, *Oenone* whispered into her mind, its thoughts drenched with regret.

Thank you. And Graeae's eggs have been lost as well. What a terrible, filthy thing to do. I hate Adamists.

No, That is beneath us. See, Eileen and the marines share our loss. It is not Adamists. Only individuals. Always individuals. Even Edenists have our failures, do we not?

Yes. We do, she said, because it was true enough. But there was still that fraction of her mind which remained vacant, the vanished smile.

Athene knew something was shockingly wrong as soon as *Oenone* emerged above Saturn. She was in the garden lounge, feeding two-month-old Clymene from a bitek mammary orb when the cold premonition closed about her. It made her clutch at her second great-great-grandchild for fear of the future and what it held. The infant wailed in protest at the loss of the nipple and the tightness of her grip. She hurriedly handed Clymene back to her great-grandson, who tried to calm the baby girl with mental coos of reassurance. Then Syrinx's alarmingly dulled mind touched Athene, and the awful knowledge was revealed in full.

Is there nothing of him left? she asked softly.

Some, Syrinx said. **But so little, I'm sorry, Mother.**

A single thought would be enough for me.

As *Oenone* neared Romulus it gave up the thought fragments it had stored to the habitat personality. A precious intangible residue of life, the sole legacy of Thetis and his crew.

Athene's past friends, lovers, and husbands emerged from the multiplicity of Romulus's personality to offer support and encouragement, cushioning the blow as best they could. **We will do what we can,** they assured her. She could feel

the tremulous remnants of her son being slowly woven into a more cohesive whole, and drew a brief measure of comfort from that.

Although no stranger to death, Athene found this be-reavement particularly difficult. Always at the back of her mind was the belief that the voidhawks and their captains were somehow immortal, or at least immune to such wasteful calamity. A foolish, almost childish belief, because they were the children she prized the most. Her last link with *Iasius*, their offspring.

Half an hour later, dressed in a plain jet-black ship-tunic, Athene stood in the spaceport reception lounge, a proud, solitary figure, the lines on her face betraying every one of her hundred and thirty-five years as they never had before. She looked out over the ledge as *Oenone* and its anxious escort of two voidhawks from the Saturn defence squadron crept out of the darkness. *Oenone* sank onto a vacant pedestal with a very human mindsigh of relief. Feed tubes in the pedestal stirred like blind stumpy tentacles, searching for the female orifices on the voidhawk's underside; various sphincter muscles expanded and gripped, producing tight seals. *Oenone* gulped down the nutrient fluid which Romulus synthesized, filling its internal bladders, quenching the thirst which leached vitality from every cell. They hadn't stayed at Oshanko any longer than it took to hand Henry Siclari and his crew over to the Fleet port authorities, and allow Edenist bonding-adjustment specialists to assume command of *Vermuden*. After that Syrinx had insisted on coming direct to Saturn.

Athene looked out at the big voidhawk with real concern rising.

Oenone was in a sorry state: hull foam scorched and flaking, toroid thermo-dump panels melted, electronic sensor systems reduced to rivulets of congealed slag, the sensor blisters that had faced the *Dymasio* roasted, their cells dead.

I'm all right, *Oenone* told her. It's mostly the mechanical systems that were damaged. And the biotechnicians can graft new sensor blisters into me. I'm never going to complain about being covered in foam again, it added humbly.

When Syrinx came through the airlock her cheeks had become almost hollow, her hair was hanging limp over her skull, and she walked as though she had been condemned. Athene felt the tears come at last, and put her arms round her woebegone daughter, soothing the drained thoughts with an empathic compassion, the maternal balm.

It's not your fault.

If I hadn't . . .

Don't, Athene ordered sternly. You owe Thetis and Graeae this much, not to sink into pointless remorse. You're stronger than that, much stronger.

Yes, Mother.

He did what he wanted to. He did what was right. Tell me how many millions of lives would have been lost if that antimatter had been used against a naked planetary surface?

A lot, Syrinx said numbly.

And he saved them. My son. Because of him, they will live, and have children, and laugh.

But it hurts!

That's because we're human, more so than Adamists can ever be. Our empathy means we can never hide from what we feel, and that's good. But you must always walk the balance, Syrinx; the balance is the penalty of being human: the danger of allowing yourself to feel. For this we walk a narrow path high above rocky ground. On one side we have the descent into animalism, on the other a godhead delusion. Both pulling at us, both tempting. But without these forces tugging at your psyche, stirring it into conflict, you can never love. They awaken us, you see, these warring sides, they arouse our passion. So learn from this wretched episode, learn to be proud of Thetis and what he accomplished, use it to counter the grief. It is hard, I know; for captains more than anyone. We are the ones who truly open our souls to another entity, we feel the deepest, and suffer the most. And knowing that, knowing what you would endure in life, I still chose to bring you into existence, because there is so much joy to be had from the living.

The circular house snug in arms of its gentle valley hadn't changed, still a frantic noisy vortex of excited children, slightly weary adults, and harassed bitek housechimps. Syrinx might never have been away. With eighteen children, and, so far, forty-two grandchildren, eleven great-grandchildren, and the two newest fourth-generation additions, Athene headed a family that never gave her a moment's rest. Ninety per cent of the adults were involved with spaceflight in one field or another, which meant long absences were the norm. But when they came back, it was the house and Athene they always visited first, staying or passing through as the fancy took them.

"Athene's boarding-house, bordello, and playpen," the old ex-captain had called it on more than one occasion.

The younger children were delighted to see Syrinx, whooping as they gathered round her, demanding kisses and stories of the planets she'd visited, while the adults offered subdued condolences. Being with them, knowing and feeling the heartache being shared, lifted the load. Slightly.

After the evening meal Syrinx went back to her old room, asking to be left alone for a few hours. Ruben and Athene acceded, retreating to the white iron chairs on the patio and conversing on the singular-engagement mode, sober faces betraying their worry.

She lay back on the bed, staring through the transparent roof at the lazy winding valleys beyond the dimming axial light-tube. In the seven years since *Oenone* reached maturity the trees had grown and bushes fattened, expanding the green-on-green patterns of her childhood.

She could feel *Oenone* out on the ledge, hull being cleaned of foam, mobile gantry arms in position, giving technicians full access to the battered crew toroid. Now it had completed its nutrient digestion its mindtone was returning to normal. It was enjoying being the centre of attention, busy conversing with the ledge crews over aspects of the repairs. Two biotechnicians were squatting over a ruined sensor blister with portable probes, taking samples.

Daddy?

I'm here, Sly-minx. I told you I always would be.

Thank you. I never doubted. How is he?

Happy.

A little of the dread lifted from her heart. Is he ready?

Yes. But there was so much missing from recent years. We have integrated what we can. The core of identity is viable but it lacks substance. He remains a child, perhaps the part of him you loved the most.

Can I talk to him yet?

You may.

She was standing barefoot on thick, cool grass beside a broad stream, the axial light-tube shining like a thread of captured sunlight overhead. There were tall trees around her, bowing under the weight of vines hanging between their branches, and long cascades of flowers fell to the floor, some of them trailing in the clear water. Butterflies flapped lazily through the still air, contending with bees for perches on the flowers, birds cheeped all around.

It was the clearing where she had spent so many days as a girl, just past the bottom of the lawn. Looking down she saw she was wearing a simple cotton summer dress with a tiny blue and white check. Long loose hair swirled around skinny hips. Her body was thirteen years old; and she knew why even as she heard the children shouting and laughing. Young enough to be regarded as part of childhood's conspiracy, old enough to be revered, to hold herself aloof and not be resented for it.

They burst into the clearing, six ten-year-old boys, in shorts and T-shirts, bare chested and in swimming trunks, smiling and laughing, strong limbs flashing in the warm light.

"Syrinx!" He was in their middle, sandy hair askew, grinning up at her.

"Hello, Thetis," she said.

"Are you coming with us?" he asked breathlessly.

A raft of rough silicon sheets, foamed aluminium I-beams, and empty plastic drink tanks—familiar enough to bring tears to her eyes—was lying on the bank, half in the water.

"I can't, Thetis. I just came to make sure you're all right."

"Course I'm all right!" He tried to do a cartwheel on the grass, but toppled over and fell into a laughing heap. "We're going all the way down to the salt-water reservoir. It'll be

fun, we've not told anyone, and the personality won't see us. We could meet anything down there, pirates or monsters. And we might find some treasure. I'll bring it back, and I'll be the most famous captain in all of the habitat." He scrambled to his feet again, eyes shining. "*Please* come, Syrinx. Please?"

"Another time, I promise."

There were shouts from the other boys as the raft was pushed into the fast-flowing stream. It bobbed about at alarming angles for a few seconds before gradually righting itself. The boys started to pile on.

Thetis's head swivelled between Syrinx and the raft, desperately torn. "Promise? Really promise?"

"I do." She reached out and held his head between her hands, and kissed him lightly on his brow.

"Syrinx!" He squirmed in agitation, colouring as the other boys launched into a flurry of catcalls.

"Here," she said, and took off a slim silver necklace with an intricately carved pale jade stone the size of a grape. "Wear this, it'll be like I'm there with you. And next time I visit, you can tell me all about it."

"Right!" And he ran for the raft, splashing through the shallows as he fumbled to fasten the chain round his neck. "Don't forget, come back. You promised."

How far will he go? she asked Sinon as a soaking Thetis was hauled over the edge of the raft by a couple of his friends.

As far as he wishes.

And how long will it last?

As long as he wants.

Daddy!

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be flippant. Probably about ten or fifteen years. You see, even childhood will ultimately pale. Games that defy adults and friends that mean the whole world are all very well, but a major part of what a ten-year-old is, is the wish to be old; his actions are a shadow of what he sees as adult behaviour. There is an old saying, that the boy is the father of the man. So when he has had his fill of adventure and realizes he will never be that man, that he is a sterile child,

his identity will fade out of the multiplicity into the overall personality. Like all of us will eventually, Sly-minx, even you.

You mean he will lose hope.

No. Death is the loss of hope, everything else is merely despair.

The children were paddling now, getting the hang of the raft. Thetis was sitting at the front shouting orders, in his element. He looked round, smiled and waved. Syrinx raised a hand.

Adamists lose hope, she said. The *Dymasio's* captain lost all hope. That's why he did what he did.

Adamists are incomplete. We know we will continue after the body dies; in some way, some fraction of us will linger for hundreds of millennia. For myself, I cannot even contemplate abandoning the multiplicity segment of the personality, not with you and my other children and grandchildren to watch over. Perhaps in ten or fifteen generations, when I can conjure up no sense of attachment, then I may seek full unity with the habitat personality, and transfer my allegiance to all Edenists. But it will be a very long time.

Adamists have their religions. I thought their gods gave them hope.

They do, to the very devout. But consider the disadvantage under which the ordinary Adamist labours. The mythical kingdom, that is all their heaven can ever be, beyond ever knowing. In the end, such belief is very hard for poor sinful mortals to retain. Our afterlife, however, is tangible, real. For us it is not a question of faith, we have fact.

Unless you are Thetis.

Even he survives.

Some of him, a stunted existence. Floating down a river that will never end.

Loved, treasured, welcomed, eternal.

The raft disappeared round a bend, a clump of willows blocking it from sight. High-pitched voices drifted through the air. Syrinx let her hand drop. "I will visit you again, big brother," she told the empty gurgling stream. "Again and

again, every time I come back. I will make you look forward to my visits and the stories I bring, I will give you something to hope for. Promise.”

In her room she looked up at the darkened indistinct landscape far above. The axial light-tube had been reduced to a lunar presence masked by the evening's first rain-clouds.

Syrinx closed her mind to the other Edenists, closed it to the voidhawks flying outside, closed it to the habitat personality. Only *Oenone* remained. Beloved who would understand, because they were one.

Emerging from the jumble of doubt and misery was the tenuous wish that the Adamists were right after all, and there was such a thing as God, and an afterlife, and souls. That way Thetis wouldn't be lost. Not for ever.

It was such a tiny sliver of hope.

Oenone's thoughts rubbed against hers, soothing and sympathetic.

If there is a God, and if somewhere my brother's soul is intact, please look after him. He will be so alone.

7

Over a thousand tributaries contributed towards the Juliffe's rapacious flow, a wrinkled network of rivers and streams gathering in the rainfall over an area of one and a half million square kilometres. They emptied themselves into the main course at full volume throughout the whole two hundred and ninety-five days of Lalonde's year, bringing with them immense amounts of silt, rotting vegetation, and broken trees. The turbulence and power of the huge flow was such that the water along the last five hundred kilometres turned the same colour and thickness as milky coffee. By the time it reached the coast the river's width had swollen to over seventeen kilometres; and the sheer weight of water backed up for two thousand kilometres behind it was awesome. At the mouth it looked as though one sea was bleeding into another.

For the final hundred-kilometre stretch, the banks on the northern side were non-existent; marshland extended up to a hundred and fifty kilometres into the countryside. Named the Hultain Marsh after the first reckless ecological assessment team member to venture a few brief kilometres inside its fringes, it proved an inhospitable zone of reeds and algae and sharp-toothed lizard-analogue animals of varying sizes. No human explorer ever managed to traverse it; the ecological evaluators contented themselves with Hultain's sketchy report and the satellite survey pictures. When the wind blew from the north, it carried a powerful smell of corruption over the river into Durringham. To the city's residents the Hultain Marsh had virtually assumed the quality of myth, a repository of bad luck and ghoulish creatures.

The land on the Juliffe's southern side, however, rose up to twelve metres above the surging brown waters. Sprawling

aloof along the bank, Durringham was relatively safe from the most potent of the Juliffe's spring floods. Poised between spaceport and water, the city was the key to colonizing the entire river basin.

The Juliffe provided the Lalonde Development Company with the greatest conceivable natural roadway into Amarisk's interior. With its tributaries extending into every valley in the centre of the landmass, there was no need to hack out and maintain expensive tracks in the jungle. Abundant wood provided the raw material for boat hulls, the simplest and cheapest form of travel possible. So shipbuilding swiftly became the capital's principal industry, with nearly a quarter of its population dependent on the success of the shipyards.

Captains under contract to the LDC would take newly arrived colonist groups upriver, and bring down the surplus produce from the established farms to be sold in the city. There were several hundred boats docking and sailing every day. The port with its jetties and warehouses and fishmarkets and shipyards grew until it stretched the entire length of the city. It was also the logical place to site the transients' dormitories.

Jay Hilton thought the dormitory was tremendously exciting. It was so different from anything in her life to date. A simple angled roof of ezytak panels eighty metres long, supported by a framework of metal girders. There were no walls, the LDC officer said they would have made it too hot inside. There was a concrete floor, and row after row of hard wooden cots. She had slept in a sleeping-bag the first night, right at the centre of the dormitory with the rest of Group Seven's kids. It had taken her an age to fall asleep, people kept talking, and the river made great swooshing noises as it flowed past the embankment. And she didn't think she would ever get used to the humidity, her clothes hadn't been completely dry since she got off the spaceplane.

During the day the dormitory thronged with people, and the alleyways between the cots were great for chases and other games. Life underneath its rattling roof was very easy-going; nothing was organized for the kids, so they were free to please themselves how they chose. She had spent the sec-

ond day getting to know the other kids in Group Seven. In the morning they ran riot among the adults, then after lunch they had all made their way down to the riverside to watch the boats. Jay had loved it. The whole port area looked like something out of a historical AV programme, a slice of the Earth's Middle Ages preserved on a far planet. Everything was made of wood, and the boats were so beautiful, with their big paddles on each side, and tall iron stacks that sent out long plumes of grey-white smoke.

Twice during the day the sky had clouded over, and rain had fallen like a solid sheet. The kids had all retreated under the dormitory roof, watching spellbound as the grey veil obscured the Juliffe, and huge lightning bolts crashed overhead.

She had never imagined the wild was so wild. But her mother wasn't worried, so she wasn't. Sitting down and just watching had never been such fun before. She couldn't think how wonderful it was going to be actually travelling on a river-boat. From a starship one day to a paddle-steamer the next! Life was glorious.

The food they had been served was strange, the aboriginal fruit was all odd shapes with a mildly spicy flavouring, but at least there wasn't any vat meat like they had at the arcology. After the high tea the staff served for the kids in the big canteen at one end of the dormitory, she went back to the riverside to see if she could spot any aboriginal animals. She remembered the vennial, something like a cross between a lizard and a monkey. It featured prominently in the didactic memory which the LDC immigration advisory team at the orbital-tower base-station had imprinted before she left Earth. In the mirage floating round inside her skull it looked kind of cute. She was secretly hoping she'd be able to have one as a pet once they reached their allotted land upriver.

The embankment was a solid wall of bitek polyp, a dull apricot in colour, preventing any more of the rich black soil from being chewed away by the frighteningly large river. It was thrilling to see so much bitek being used; Jay had never met an Edenist, although back at the arcology Father Varhoos had warned the congregation about them and their soulless technology of perverted life. But using the polyp

here was a good idea, the kernels were cheap, and the coral didn't need constant repairs the way concrete would. She couldn't see the harm. The whole universe was being turned upside-down this week.

She slid right down the sloping wall to the water itself, and started walking, hoping to see a xenoc fish. The water here was almost clear. Wavelets lapping on the polyp sent up sprays that showered her bare legs; she was still wearing the shorts and blouse that her mother had made her carry in the zero-tau pod. A lot of the other colonists in Group Seven had spent the morning chasing after their gear in one of the warehouses, trying to find more practical clothes.

Everyone had been envious and admiring of her and mother yesterday. That felt good. So much better than the way people back in the arcology regarded them. She pushed that thought away hurriedly.

Her boots splashed through the shallows, the water droplets slithering off the shiny coating. There were a lot of big pipe outlets venting into the river, along with the drainage gullies which were like medium-sized streams, so she had to be careful as she dodged under the pipes not to get splattered by the discharges. Up ahead was one of the circular harbours, six hundred metres in diameter, also made out of polyp; a refuge where the larger boats could dock in calmer waters. The harbours were spaced every kilometre or so along the embankment, with clusters of warehouses and timber mills springing up on the ground behind them. In between the harbours were rows of wooden jetties sticking out into the river, which the smaller traders and fishing boats used.

The sky was growing darker again. But it wasn't rain, the sun was low in the west. And she was getting very tired, the day here was awfully long.

She ducked under a jetty, hand stroking the black timber pillars. Mayo wood, her eidetic memory said, one of the hardest woods found in the Confederation. The tree had big scarlet flowers. She rapped her knuckles against it experimentally. It really was hard, like a metal, or stone.

Out on the river one of the big paddle-boats was sailing past, churning up a big wake of frothy water as its bows

drove against the current. Colonists were lined up along the rails, and they all seemed to be looking at her. She grinned and waved at them.

Group Seven was sailing tomorrow. The *real* adventure. She stared wistfully after the boat as it slipped away upriver.

That was when she saw the thing caught around a support pillar of the next jetty. A dirty yellow-pink lump, about a metre long. There was more of it underwater, she could tell from the way it bobbed about. With a whoop, she raced forwards, feet kicking up fans of water. It was a xenoc fish, or amphibian, or something. Trapped and waiting for her to inspect it. Names and shapes whirled through her mind, the didactic memory on full recall, trying to match up with what she was seeing.

Maybe it's something new, she thought. Maybe they'll name it after me. I'll be famous!

She was five metres away, and still running as hard as she could, when she saw the head. It was someone in the water, someone without any clothes on. Face down! The shock threw her rhythm, and her feet skidded from under her. She yelled as her knee hit the rough, unyielding polyp. She felt a hot pain as she grazed the side of her leg. She finished up flat against the embankment, legs half in the water, feeling numb all over and sick inside. Blood started to well up in the graze. She bit her lip, eyes watering as she watched it, fighting not to cry.

A wave lifted the corpse in the river, knocking it against the support pillar again. Through sticky tears Jay saw that it was a man, all swollen up. His head turned towards her. There was a long purple weal along one cheek. He had no eyes, only empty holes where they should be. His flesh was rippling. Jay blinked. Long white worms with a million legs were feeding on the battered flesh. One oozed out of his half-open mouth like a slender anaemic tongue, its tip waving around slowly as though it was tasting the air.

She threw her head back and screamed.

The rain which came after the sun sank from the sky an hour later that evening was a big help to Quinn Dexter. Between them, Lalonde's three moons conspired to cast a bright spec-

tral phosphorescence on the night-time city: people could see their way quite clearly down the slushy streets, but with the thick clouds scudding overhead the light level was drastically reduced. Durringham didn't have street lighting; individual pubs would floodlight the street outside their entrance, and the bigger cabins had porch lights, but outside their pools of radiance there was only a faint backscatter of photons. In amongst the large industrial buildings of the port where Quinn lurked there wasn't even that, only gloom and impenetrable shadows.

He had slipped away from the transients' dormitory after the evening meal, finding himself a concealing gap between a couple of single-storey outbuildings tacked on to the end of a long warehouse. Jackson Gael was crouched down behind some barrels on the other side of the path. Behind him was the high blank wall of a mill, slatted wooden planks rearing up like a cliff face.

There wouldn't be many people wandering around this part of the port at night, and those that did would probably be colonists waiting for a boat upriver. There was another transients' dormitory two hundred metres to the north. Quinn had decided that colonists would make the best targets.

The sheriffs would pay more attention to a city resident being mugged than some new arrival who nobody cared about. Colonists were human cattle to the LDC; and if the dopey bastards hadn't worked that out for themselves, then more fool them. But Jackson had been right about one thing, the colonists were better off than him. Ivets were the lowest of the low.

They had discovered that yesterday evening. When they finally arrived at the dormitory they were immediately detailed to unload the lorries they had just loaded at the spaceport. After they finished stacking Group Seven's gear in a harbourside warehouse a group of them had wandered off into town. They didn't have any money, but that didn't matter, they deserved a break. That was when they found the grey Ivet jump suit with its scarlet letters acted like a flashing beacon: *Shit on me*. They hadn't got more than a few hundred metres out of the port before they turned tail and

hurried back to the dormitory. They'd been spat on, shouted at, jeered by children, had stones flung at them, and finally someone had let a xenoc animal charge at them. That had frightened Quinn the most, though he didn't show it to the others. The creature was like a cat scaled up to dog size; it had jet-black scales and a wedge-shaped head, with a lot of sharp needle teeth in its gaping mouth. The mud didn't slow it down appreciably as it ran at them, and several Ivets had skidded onto their knees as the group panicked and ran away.

Worst of all were the sounds the thing made, like a drawn-out whine; but there were words in the cry, strangely twisted by the xenoc gullet, human words. "City scum," and "Kid fuckers," and others that were distorted beyond recognition, yet all carrying the same message. The *thing* hated them, echoing its master who had laughed as its huge jaws snapped at their running legs.

Back in the dormitory, Quinn had sat down and started to think for the first time since the police stunned him back on Earth. He had to get off this planet which even God's Brother would reject. To do that he needed information. He needed to know how the local set-up worked, how to get himself an edge. All the other Ivets would dream about leaving, some must have made attempts to escape in the past. The biggest mistake he could make would be rushing it. And dressed in his signpost jump-suit, he wouldn't even be able to scout around.

He had caught Jackson Gael's eye, and flicked his head at the velvet walls of night encircling the dormitory. The two of them slipped out unnoticed, and didn't return till dawn.

Now he waited crouched against the warehouse wall, stripped down to his shorts, nerves burning with excitement at the prospect of repeating last night's spree. Rain was drumming on the rooftops and splashing into the puddles and mud of the path, kicking up a loud din. More water was gurgling down the drainage gully at the side of the warehouse. His skin and hair were soaked. At least the drops were warm.

The man in the canary-yellow cagoule was almost level with the little gap between the outhouses before Quinn

heard him. He was squelching through the mud, muttering and humming under his breath. Quinn peered out round the corner. His left eye had been boosted by a nanonic cluster, giving him infrared vision. It was his first implant, and he'd used it for exactly the same purpose back at the arcology: to give him an edge in the dark. One thing Banneth had taught him was never fight until you've already won.

The retinal implant showed him a ghostly red figure weaving unsteadily from side to side. Rain showed as a gritty pale pink mist, the buildings were claret-coloured crags.

Quinn waited until the man had passed the gap before he moved. He slid out onto the path, the length of wood gripped tightly in his hand. And still the man was unaware of him, rain and blackness providing perfect cover. He took three paces, raised the improvised club, then slammed it down at the base of the man's neck. The cagoule's fabric tore under the impact. Quinn felt the blow reverberate all the way back up to his elbows, jarring his joints. God's Brother! He didn't want the man dead, not yet.

His victim gave a single grunt of pain, and collapsed forwards into the mud.

"Jackson!" Quinn called. "God's Brother, where are you? I can't shift him by myself. Get a move on."

"Quinn? Christ, I can't see a bloody thing."

He looked round, seeing Jackson emerge from behind the barrels. His skin shone a strong burgundy in the infrared spectrum, arteries and veins near the surface showing up as brighter scarlet lines.

"Over here. Walk forward three steps, then turn left." He guided Jackson up to the body, enjoying the sense of power. Jackson would follow his leadership, and the others would fall into line.

Together they dragged their victim into the outhouse—Quinn guessed it had been some kind of office, abandoned years ago now. Four bare wooden slat walls and a roof that leaked. Tapers of slime ran down the walls, fungal growths blooming from the cracks. There was a strong citric scent in the air. Overhead the clouds were drifting away inland. Beriana, the second moon, came out, shining a wan lemon light

onto the city, and a few meagre beams filtered through the skylight. They were enough for Jackson to see by.

Both of them went over to the pile of clothes they had left heaped on a broken composite cargo-pod. Quinn watched Jackson towelling himself dry. The lad had a strong body, broad shoulders.

“Forget it, Quinn,” Jackson said in a neutral voice, but one that carried in the silence following the rain. “I don’t turn on to that. Strictly het, OK?” It came out like a challenge.

“Hey, don’t lose cool,” Quinn said. “I got my eye on someone, and it ain’t you.” He wasn’t entirely sure he could whip the lanky lad from a straight start. Besides he needed Jackson. For now.

He started to pull on the clothes which belonged to one of last night’s victims, a green short-sleeved shirt and baggy blue shorts, waterproof boots which were only fractionally too large. Three pairs of socks stopped them from rubbing blisters. He was strongly tempted to take those boots upriver, he didn’t like to think what would happen to his feet in the lightweight Ivet-issue shoes.

“Right, let’s see what we’ve got,” he said. They stripped the cagoule from the unconscious man. He groaned weakly. His shorts were soiled, and a ribbon of piss ran out of the cagoule.

Definitely a new colonist, Quinn decided, as he wrinkled his nose up at the smell. The clothes were new, the boots were new, he was clean shaven; and he had the slightly overweight appearance of an arcology dweller. Locals were nearly always lean, and most sported longish hair and thick beards.

His belt carried a fission-blade knife, a miniature thermal inducer, and a personal MF flek-player block.

Quinn unclipped the knife and the inducer. “We’ll take those with us upriver. They’ll come in useful.”

“We’ll be searched,” Jackson said. “Anything you like, we’ll be searched.”

“So? We stash them in the colonists’ gear. We’ll be the ones that load it onto the boat, we’ll be the ones that unload it at the other end.”

“Right.”

Quinn thought he heard a grudging respect in the lad’s voice. He started frisking the man’s pockets, hoping the dampness in the fabric wasn’t piss. There was a citizenship card naming their victim as Jerry Baker, a credit disk of Lalonde francs, then he hit the jackpot. “God’s Brother!” He held up a Jovian Bank credit disk, holographic silver on one side, royal purple on the other. “Will you look at this. Mr Pioneer here wasn’t going to take any chances in the hinterlands. He must have been planning on buying his way out of any trouble he hit upriver. Not so dumb after all. Just his bad luck he ran into us.”

“Can you use it?” Jackson asked urgently.

Quinn turned Jerry Baker’s head over. A soft liquid moan emerged from his lips at the motion. His eyelids were fluttering, a bead of blood ran out of his mouth; his breathing was erratic. “Shut up,” Quinn said absently. “Shit, I hit him too hard. Let’s see.” He pressed his right thumb against Jerry Baker’s, and engaged his second implant. The danger was that with Jerry Baker’s nervous system fucked up from the blow, the bioelectric pattern of his cells which activated the credit disk might be scrambled.

When the nanonic signalled the pattern had been recorded, he held up the Jovian Bank credit disk and touched his thumb to the centre. Green figures lit up on the silver side.

Jackson Gael let out a fast triumphant hoot, and slapped Quinn on the back. Quinn had been right: Jerry Baker had come to Lalonde prepared to buy himself out of fifteen hundred fuseodollars’ worth of trouble.

They both stood up.

“Hell, we don’t even have to go upriver now,” Jackson said. “We can set up in town. Christ, we can live like kings.”

“Don’t be bloody stupid. This is only going to be good until he’s reported missing, which will be tomorrow morning.” His toe nudged the inert form on the wet floor.

“So change it into something; gold, diamonds, bales of cloth.”

Quinn gave the grinning lad a sharp look, wondering if he’d misjudged him after all. “This isn’t our town, we don’t

know who's safe, who to grease. Whoever changed that much money would know it was bent, they'd give our descriptions to the sheriffs first chance they got. They probably wouldn't want us upsetting their own operations."

"So what do we do with it, then?"

"We change some of it. These local francs have a cash issue as well as disks. So we spend heavily, and the locals will love giving a pair of dumb-arse colonists their toy francs as change instead of real money. Then we buy a few goodies we can take upriver that will make life a lot easier, like a decent weapon or two. After that . . ." He brought the disk up to his face. "It goes into the mud. We don't leave any evidence, OK?"

Jackson pulled a face, but nodded regretfully. "OK, Quinn. I guess I hadn't thought it through."

Baker moaned again, the wavery sound of a man trapped in a bad dream.

Quinn kicked him absently. "Don't worry about it. Now first help me put Jerry Baker into the drainage gully outside where he'll wash down into the river. Then we'll find somewhere where we can spend his fuseodollars in style." He started looking round for the wooden club to silence Baker and his moaning once and for all.

After visiting a couple of pubs, the place they wound up at was called Donovan's. It was several kilometres away from the port district, safely distant from any Group Seven members who might be having a last night in the big city. In any case, it wasn't the sort of place that the staunchly family types of Group Seven sought out.

Like most of Durringham's buildings, it was single storey, with walls of thick black wood. Stone piles raised it a metre above the ground, and there was a veranda right along the front, with drinkers slouched over the railing, glass tankards of beer in their hands, watching the newcomers with hazed eyes. The road outside had a thick layer of stone chippings spread over it. For once Quinn's boots didn't sink in up to his ankles.

Their clothes marked them down as colonists, machine-made synthetic fabric; locals were dressed in loom-woven

cloth, shirts and shorts hand sewn, solid boots that came up to the top of their calves, caked in mud. But nobody shouted a challenge as they walked up the steps. Quinn felt almost home for the first time since he'd stepped off the space-plane. These were people he understood, hard workers who pleased themselves any damn way they chose after dark. They heard the xenoc animals even before they went through the open doors. It was that same eerie whine of the thing which had chased them yesterday evening, only this time there were five or six of them all doing it at the same time. He exchanged a fast glance with Jackson, then they were inside.

The bar was a single plank of wood running along one side of the main bar, a metre wide, fifteen metres long. People were lined up along it, two deep, the six barmaids hard pushed to cope.

Quinn waited until he reached the bar, and held up the Jovian Bank disk. "You take this?"

The girl barely glanced at it. "Yeah."

"Great, two beers."

She started pulling them from the cask.

"It's my last night here before I sail upriver. Do you know where I can maybe get a bit of sport? Don't want to waste it."

"In the back." She didn't look up.

"Gee, thanks. Have one yourself."

"A brightlime, thanks." She put his half-litre tankards down in the puddles on the bar. "Six fuseodollars."

Which Quinn reckoned was three times what the drinks should cost, unless a brightlime was more expensive than Norfolk Tears. Yes, the locals knew how to treat transient colonists. He activated the credit disk, shunting the money to her bar account block.

The vicious black catlike animals were called sayce, the local dog-analogue, with a degree more intelligence than Earth's canines. Quinn and Jackson saw them as soon as they pushed aside the rug hanging across the doorway and elbowed their way into Donovan's rear room. It was a baiting arena; three tiers of benches ringing a single pit dug into the floor and lined with cut stone, five metres in diameter,

three deep. Bright spotlights were strung up on the rafters, casting a white glare on the proceedings. Every centimetre of bench space was taken. Men and women with flushed red faces, cheering and shouting, soaked in sweat. It was hot in the room, hotter than the spaceport clearing at midday. Big cages were lined up along the back wall, sayce prowling about inside, highly agitated, some of them butting the bars of that ubiquitous black wood, emitting their anguished whine.

Quinn felt a grin rising. Now this was more like it!

They found a bench and squirmed on. Quinn asked the man he was next to who was taking the money.

It turned out the bookie was called Baxter, a thin oriental with a nasty scar leading from the corner of his left eye down below his grubby red T-shirt neck.

"Pay out only in Lalonde francs," he said gruffly.

A man mountain with a black beard stood at Baxter's side, and gave Quinn a cannibal look.

"Fine by me," Quinn said amicably. He put a hundred fuseodollars on the favourite.

The fights were impressive, fast, violent, gory, and short. The owners would stand on opposite sides of the pit, holding back their animals, shouting orders into the flat triangular ears. When the sayce had reached a fever pitch of anger they were shoved into the pit. Streamlined black bodies clashed in a snarl of six-clawed paws and snapping jaws, muscle bands like steel pistons bunching and stretching the shiny skin. Losing a leg didn't even slow them down. Quinn saw them tear off legs, jaws, rip out eyes, rake underbellies. The pit floor became slippery with blood, fluid, and sausage-string entrails. A crushed skull usually ended it, the losing sayce being repeatedly smashed against the stone wall until bone splintered and the brain was torn. Their blood was surprisingly red.

Quinn lost money on the first three fights, then picked up a wad of six hundred francs on the fourth, equivalent to a hundred and fifty fuseodollars. He handed a third of the plastic notes to Jackson, and put another two hundred fuseodollars on the next fight.

After seven fights he was eight hundred fuseodollars

down, with two and a half thousand Lalonde francs in his pocket.

"I know her," Jackson said as the next two sayce were being goaded on the side of the pit by their owners. One of them was an old bull, his skin a cross web of scars. That was the one Quinn had put his money on. Always trust in proven survivors.

"Who?"

"Girl over there. She's from Group Seven."

Quinn followed his gaze. The girl was a teenager, very attractive, with longish dark hair falling down over her shoulders. She was wearing a sleeveless singlet with a scoop neck; it looked new, the fabric was shiny, definitely synthetic. Her face was burning with astonishment and excitement, the taste of forbidden fruit, sweetest of all. She was sitting between two brothers, twins, about thirty years old, with sandy blond hair, just beginning to thin. They were dressed in shirts of checked cotton, crudely cut. Both of them had the kind of thick brown skin that came from working outdoors.

"Are you sure?" With the glare of the lights it was difficult for him to tell.

"I'm sure. I couldn't forget those tits. I think she's called Mary, Mandy, something like that."

The sayce were shoved into the pit, and the crowd roared. The two powerful vulpine bodies locked together, spinning madly, teeth and claws slicing through the air.

"I suppose she's entitled to be here," Quinn said. He was annoyed, he didn't need complications like the girl. "I'm going to have a word with Baxter. Make sure she doesn't see you, we don't want her to know we were here."

Jackson gave him a thumbs up and took another gulp from his tankard.

Baxter was standing on the ramp leading from the pit to the cages, head flicking from side to side as he followed the battling beasts. He acknowledged Quinn with a terse nod.

A spume of blood flew out of the pit, splattering the people on the lowest benches. One of the sayce was screeching. Quinn thought it was calling, "Help."

"You done all right tonight," Baxter said. "Break even, beginner's luck. I let you place bigger bets, you want."

“No, I need the money. I’m going upriver soon.”

“You build nice home for family, good luck.”

“I need more than luck up there. Suppose I bump into one of those?” He flicked a finger at the pit. The old bull had its jaws around the younger sayce’s throat, it was slamming its head against the side of the pit, oblivious to the deep gouges the other’s claws were raking down its flanks.

“Sayce not like living near river,” Baxter said. “Air too wet. You be all right.”

“A sayce or one of its cousins. I could do with something with a bit of punch, something that’ll stop it dead.”

“You bring plenty gear from Earth.”

“Can’t bring everything we need, the company doesn’t let us. And I want some recreational items as well. I thought maybe I could pick it all up in town. I thought maybe you might know who I needed to see.”

“You think too much.”

“I also pay a lot.”

Down in the pit a sayce’s head virtually exploded as it was slammed against the wall for the last time. Pulpy gobs of brain sleeted down.

Quinn smiled when he saw the old bull raise its head to its cheering owner and let out a gurgling high-pitched bleat: “Yessss!”

“You owe me another thousand francs,” he told Baxter. “You can keep half of it as a finder’s fee.”

Baxter’s voice dropped an octave. “Come back here, ten minutes; I show you man who can help.”

“Gotcha.”

The old bull sayce was sniffing round the floor of the pit when Quinn got back to Jackson. A blue tongue started to lick up the rich gore sloshing about on the stone.

Jackson watched the spectacle glumly. “She’s gone. She left with the twins after the fight. Christ, putting out like that, and she’s only been here a day.”

“Yeah? Well, just remember she’s going to be trapped on a river cruise with you for a fortnight. You can work your angle then.”

He brightened. “Right.”

“I think I got us what we need. Although God’s Brother

knows what kind of weapons they sell in this dump. Cross-bows, I should think.”

Jackson turned to face him. “I still think we should stay here. What do you hope to do upriver, take over the settlement?”

“If I have to. Jerry Baker isn’t going to be the only one who brought a Jovian Bank disk with him. If we get enough of them, we can buy ourselves off this shit heap.”

“Christ, you really think so? We can get off? All the way off?”

“Yeah. But it’s going to take a big pile of hard cash, that means we’ve got to separate a lot of colonists from their disks.” He fixed the lad with the kind of stare Banneth used when she interviewed new recruits. “Are you up to that, Jackson? I’ve got to have people who are going to back me the whole way. I ain’t got space for anyone who farts out at the first sign of trouble.”

“I’m with you. All the way. Christ, Quinn, you know that, I proved that last night and tonight.”

There was a note of desperation creeping into the voice. Jackson was insisting on having a part of what Quinn offered. The ground rules were laid out.

So let the game start, Quinn thought. The greatest game of all, the one God’s Brother plays for all eternity. The vengeance game. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go see what Baxter’s got for us.”

Horst Elwes checked the metabolic function read-out on his medical block’s display screen, then glanced down at the sleeping figure of Jay Hilton. The girl was curled up inside a sleeping-bag, her facial features relaxed into serenity. He had cleaned the nasty graze on her leg, given her an antibiotic, and wrapped the leg in a sheath of epithelium membrane. The tough protective tissue would help accelerate natural dermal regeneration.

It was a pity the membrane could only be used once. Horst was beginning to wonder if he had stocked enough in his medical case. According to his didactic medical course, damaged human skin could rot away if it was constantly ex-

posed to high humidity. And humidity didn't come any higher than around the Juliffe.

He plucked the sensor pad from Jay's neck, and put it back in the medical block's slot.

Ruth Hilton gave him an expectant stare. "Well?"

"I've given her a sedative. She'll sleep for a solid ten hours now. It might be a good idea for you to be at her side when she wakes up."

"Of course I'll be here," she snapped.

Horst nodded. Ruth had shown nothing but concern and sympathy when the sobbing girl had stumbled back into the dormitory, never letting a hint of weakness show. She had held Jay's hand all the time while Horst disinfected the graze, and the sheriff asked his questions. Only now did the worry spill out.

"Sorry," Ruth said.

Horst gave her a reassuring smile, and picked up the medical block. It was larger than a standard processor block, a rectangle thirty-five centimetres long, twenty-five wide and three thick, with several ancillary sensor units, and a memory loaded with the symptoms and treatment of every known human illness. And that was as much a worry as the epithelium membrane; Group Seven was going to be completely dependent on him and the block for their general health for years to come. The responsibility was already starting to gnaw at his thoughts. His brief spell in the arcology refuge had shown him how little use theoretical medicine was in the face of real injuries. He had swiftly picked up enough about first aid to be of some practical use to the hard-pressed medics, but anything more serious than cuts and fractures could well prove fatal upriver.

At least the block had been left in his pod; several other items had gone missing between the spaceport and the warehouse. Damn, but why did Ruth have to be right about that? And the sheriffs hadn't shown any interest when he reported the missing drugs. Again, just like she said.

He sighed and rested his hand on her shoulder as she sat on the edge of the cot, stroking Jay's hair.

"She's a lot tougher than me," he said. "She'll be all right. At that age, horror fades very quickly. And we'll be going

upriver straight away. Getting out of the area where it happened is going to help a lot.”

“Thank you, Horst.”

“Do you have any geneering in your heritage?”

“Yes, some. We’re not Saldanas, but one of my ancestors was comfortably off, God bless him, we had a few basic enhancements about six or seven generations ago. Why?”

“I was thinking of infection. There is a kind of fungal spore here which can live in human blood. But if your family had even a modest improvement to your immune system there won’t be any problem.”

He stood and straightened his back, wincing at the twinges along his spine. It was quiet in the dormitory; the lights were off in the centre where the rest of Group Seven’s children had been settled down for the night. Bee-sized insects with large grey wings were swarming round the long light panels that had been left on. He and Ruth had been left alone by the other colonists after the sheriff departed to examine the body in the river. He could see some kind of meeting underway in the canteen, most of the adults were there. The Ivets formed a close-knit huddle in a corner at the other end, all of them looking sullen. And frightened, Horst could tell. Waster kids who had probably never even seen an open sky before, never mind primeval jungle. They had stayed in the dormitory all day. Horst knew he should make an effort to get to know them, help build a bridge between them and the genuine colonists, unite the community. After all, they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. Somehow he couldn’t find the energy.

Tomorrow, he promised himself. We’ll all be on the ship for a fortnight, that’ll give me ample opportunity.

“I ought to be at the meeting,” he said. From where he was he could see two people standing up for a shouting match.

“Let ’em talk,” Ruth grunted. “It keeps them out of mischief. They won’t get anything sorted until after the settlement supervisor shows up.”

“He should have been here this morning. We need advice on how to establish our homes. We don’t even know the location we’ve been assigned.”

“We’ll find out soon enough; and the supervisor will have the whole river trip to lecture us. I expect he’s out prowling the town tonight. I can’t blame him, stuck with us for the next eighteen months. Poor sod.”

“Must you always think the worst of people?”

“It’s what I’d do. But that isn’t what worries me right now.”

Horst sneaked another look at the meeting. They were taking a vote, hands raised in the air. He sat down on the cot facing Ruth. “What does worry you?”

“The murder.”

“We don’t know it was a murder.”

“Get real. The body was stripped. What else could it be?”

“He could have been drunk.” Because God knows a drink is what I need just looking at that river.

“Drunk and taking a swim? In the Juliffe? Come on, Horst!”

“The autopsy should tell us if . . .” He trailed off under Ruth’s gaze. “No, I don’t suppose there will be one, will there?”

“No. He must have been dumped in the river. The sheriff told me that two colonists from Group Three were reported missing by their wives this morning. Pete Cox and Alun Reuther. I’ll give you ten to one that body is one of them.”

“Probably,” Horst admitted. “I suppose it’s shocking that urban crime is rife here. Somehow you don’t imagine such a thing on a stage one colony world. Then again, Lalonde isn’t quite what I imagined. But we’ll be leaving it all behind shortly. Our own community will be too small for such things, we will all know each other.”

Ruth rubbed at her eyes, her expression haunted. “Horst, you’re not thinking. Why was the body stripped?”

“I don’t know. For the clothes, I suppose, and the boots.”

“Right. Now what sort of mugger is going to kill for a pair of boots? Actually kill two people in cold blood. God, the people here are poor, I’m not denying it, but they’re not that desperate.”

“Who then?”

She looked pointedly over his shoulder. Horst turned

round. "The Ivets? That's rather prejudiced, isn't it?" he asked reproachfully.

"You've seen the way they're treated in the town, and we don't treat them any better. They can't move outside the port district without getting beaten up. Not with their jump suits on, and they don't have anything else to wear. So who is more likely to want ordinary clothes? Who isn't going to care what they have to do to get them? And whoever did murder that man did it inside the port, uncomfortably close to this dormitory."

"You don't think it was one of ours?" he exclaimed.

"Let's say, I'm praying it wasn't. But with the way our luck is turning out, I wouldn't count on it."

Diranol, Lalonde's smallest, outermost moon, was the only one of the planet's three natural satellites left in the night sky, a nine-hundred-kilometre globe of rock with a red ochre regolith, half a million kilometres distant. It hovered above the eastern horizon, painting Durringham in a timid rose-pink fluorescence when the power bike skidded to a halt just outside the skirt of light leaking from the big transients' dormitory. Marie Skibbow loosened her grip on Furgus. The ride through the darkened city had been sensational, drawing out every second, filling it with glee and excitement. The walls slashing past, sensed rather than seen, the headlight beam revealing ruts and mud patches on the road almost as soon as they hit them, wind whipping her hair about, eyes stung by the slipstream. Taunting danger with every turn of the wheel, and beating it, *living*.

"Here we go, your stop," Furgus said.

"Right." She swung her leg over the saddle, and stood beside him. Now the weariness swept through her, a frozen wave of depression that hung poised high above, waiting to crash down at the prospect of the future and what it held.

"You're the best, Marie." He kissed her, one hand fondling her right breast through the singlet's fabric. Then he was gone, red tail light sinking into the blackness.

Her shoulders drooped as she made her way into the dormitory. Most of the cots were full, people were snoring, coughing, tossing about. She wanted to turn and run, back to

Furgus and Hamish, back to the dark fulfilment of the last few hours. Her brain was still fizzing from the experiences, the naked savagery of the sayce-baiting, and the jubilant crowd in Donovan's, blood heat inflaming her senses. Then the delicious indecency of the twins' quiet cabin on the other side of town, with their straining bodies pounding against her first singly then both at once. That crazy bike ride in the vermilion moonlight. Marie wanted every night to be the same, without end.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Her father was standing in front of her, mouth all squeezed up that way it did when he was really angry. And for once she didn't care.

"Out," she said.

"Out where?"

"Enjoying myself. Exactly what you think I shouldn't do."

He slapped her on the cheek, the sound echoing from the high roof. "Don't you be so bloody impudent, girl. I asked you a question. What have you been doing?"

Marie glared at him, feeling the heat grow in her stinging cheek, refusing to rub it. "What's next, *Daddy*? Will you take your belt to me? Or are you just going to use your fists?"

Gerald Skibbow's jaw dropped. People on the nearby cots were turning over, peering at them blearily.

"Do you know how late it is? What have you been up to?" he hissed.

"Are you quite sure you want a truthful answer to that, *Daddy*? *Quite* sure?"

"You despicable little vixen. Your mother's been fretting over you all night. Doesn't that even bother you?"

Marie curled her lip up. "What tragedy could possibly happen to me in this paradise you've brought us to?"

For a moment she thought he was going to strike her again.

"There have been two murders in the port this week," he said.

"Yeah? That doesn't surprise me."

“Get into bed,” Gerald said through clenched teeth. “We’ll discuss this in the morning.”

“Discuss it?” she asked archly. “You mean I get an equal say?”

“For fuck’s sake, can it, Skibbow,” someone shouted. “We want to get some sleep here.”

Under the impotent stare of her father, Marie pulled her shoes off and sauntered over to her cot.

Quinn was still dozing in his sleeping-bag, struggling against the effects of the rough beer he had drunk in Donovan’s, when someone gripped the side of his cot and yanked it through ninety degrees. His arms and legs thrashed about in the sleeping-bag as he tumbled onto the floor, but there was no way he could prevent the fall. His hip smacked into the concrete first, jarring his pelvis badly, then his jaw landed. Quinn yelled out in surprise and pain.

“Get up, Ivet,” a voice shouted.

A man was standing over him, grinning down evilly. He was in his early forties, tall and well built, with a shock of black hair and a full beard. The brown leather skin of his face and arms was scarred with a lunar relief of pocks and the tiny red lines of broken capillaries. His clothes were all natural fabric, a thick red and black check cotton shirt with the arms torn off, green denim trousers, lace-up boots that came up to his knees, and a belt which carried various powered gadgets and a vicious-looking ninety-centimetre steel machete. A silver crucifix on a slim chain glinted at the base of his neck.

He laughed in a bass roar as Quinn groaned at the hot pain in his throbbing hip. Which was too much. Quinn grappled with the seal catch at the top of the bag. He was going to make the bastard *pay*. The seal opened. His hands came out, and he kicked his legs, trying to shake off the constricting fabric. Somewhere around the edges of his perception the other Ivets were shouting in alarm and jumping over the cots. A huge damp jaw closed around his right hand, *completely* around, sharp teeth pinching the thin skin of his wrist, their tips grating between his tendons. Shock froze him for a horrific second. It was a dog, a hound, a fucking

hellhound. Even a sayce would have thought twice before taking it on. The thing must have stood a metre high. It had short grizzled grey fur, a blunt hammerhead muzzle, jowls of black rubber, wet with gooey saliva. Big liquid eyes were fixed on him. It was growling softly. Quinn could feel the vibration all the way along his arm. He waited numbly, expecting the jaws to close, the mauling to begin. But the eyes just kept staring at him.

“My name is Powel Manani,” said the bearded man. “And our glorious leader, Governor Colin Rexrew, has appointed me as Group Seven’s settlement supervisor. That means, Ivets, I own you: body, and soul. And just to make my position absolutely clear from the start: I don’t like Ivets. I think this world would be a better place without putrid pieces of crap like you screwing it up. But the LDC board has decided to lumber us with you, so I am going to make bloody sure every franc’s worth of your passage fee is squeezed out of you before your work-time is up. So when I say lick shit, you lick; you eat what I give you to eat; and you wear what I give you to wear. And because you are lazy bastards by nature, there is going to be no such thing as a day off for the next ten years.”

He squatted down beside Quinn and beamed broadly. “What’s your name, dickhead?”

“Quinn Dexter . . . sir.”

Powel’s eyebrows lifted in appreciation. “Well done. You’re a smart one, Quinn. You learn quick.”

“Thank you, sir.” The dog’s tongue was pressing against his fingers, sliding up and down his knuckles. It felt utterly disgusting. He had never heard of an animal being trained so perfectly before.

“Smartarses are troublemakers, Quinn. Are you going to be a troublemaker for me?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you going to get up in the mornings in future, Quinn?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine. We understand each other, then.” Powel stood up. The dog released Quinn’s hand, and backed off a pace.

Quinn held his hand up: it glistened from all the saliva;

there were red marks like a tattooed bracelet around his wrist, and two drops of blood welled up.

Powel patted the dog's head fondly. "This is my friend, Vorix. He and I are affinity bonded, which means I can quite literally smell out any scams you dickheads cook up. So don't even try to pull any fast ones, because I know them all. If I find you doing anything I don't like, it will be Vorix who deals with you. And it won't be your hand he bites off next time, he'll be dining on your balls. Do I make myself clear?"

The Ivets mumbled their answer, heads bowed, avoiding Powel's eye.

"I'm glad none of us are suffering any illusions about the other. Now then, your instructions for the day. I will not repeat them. Group Seven is going upriver on three ships: the *Swithland*, the *Nassier*, and the *Hycel*. They are currently docked in harbour three, and they're sailing in four hours. So that is the time you have to get the colonists' gear loaded. Any pods that aren't loaded, I will have you carry on your backs the whole way to the landing site upriver. Do not expect me to act as your permanent nursemaid, get yourselves organized and get on with it. You will be travelling with me and Vorix on the *Swithland*. Now move!"

Vorix barked, jowls peeled back from his teeth. Powel watched Quinn skitter backwards like a crab, then pick himself up and chase off after the other Ivets. He knew Quinn was going to be trouble, after helping to start five settlements he could read the Ivets' thoughts like a personality debrief. The youth was highly resentful, and smart with it. He was more than a waster kid, probably got tied in with some underground organization before he was transported. Powel toyed with the idea of simply leaving him behind when the *Swithland* sailed, let the Durringham sheriffs deal with him. But the Land Allocation Office would know what he'd done, and it would be entered in his file, which had too many incidents already. "Bugger," he muttered under his breath. The Ivets were all outside the dormitory, heading along the path to the warehouse. And it looked like they were gathering round Quinn, waiting for him to start directing them. Oh well, if it came to it, Quinn would just have to have an accident in the jungle.

Horst Elwes had been watching the episode with a number of Group Seven's members, and now he stepped up to Powel. The supervisor's dog turned its neck to look at him. Lord, but it was a brute. Lalonde was becoming a sore test for him indeed. "Was it necessary to be quite so unpleasant to those boys?" he asked Powel Manani.

Powel looked him up and down, eyes catching on the white crucifix. "Yes. If you want the blunt truth, Father. That's the way I always deal with them. They have to know who's in charge from the word go. Believe me, they respect toughness."

"They would also respond to kindness."

"Fine, well you show them plenty of it, Father. And just to prove there's no ill feeling, I'll give them time off to attend mass."

Horst had to quicken his pace to keep up. "Your dog," he said cautiously.

"What about him?"

"You say you are bonded with affinity?"

"That's right."

"Are you an Edenist, then?"

Vorix made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snicker.

"No, Father," Powel said. "I'm simply practical. And if I had a fuseodollar for every new-landed priest who asked me that I would be a millionaire. I need Vorix upriver; I need him to hunt, to scout, to keep the Ivets in line. Neuron symbionts give me control over him. I use them because they are cheap and they work. The same as all the other settlement supervisors, and half of the county sheriffs as well. It's only the major Earth-based religions which maintain people's prejudice against bitek. But on worlds like Lalonde we can't afford your prissy theological debates. We use what we have to, when we have to. And if you want to survive long enough to fill Group Seven's second generation with your noble bigotry over a single chromosome which makes people a blasphemy, then you'll do the same. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a settlement expedition to sort out." He brushed past, heading for the harbour.

Gerald Skibbow and the other members of Group Seven

followed after him, several of them giving shamefaced glances to the startled priest. Gerald watched Rai Molvi gathering up his nerve to speak. Molvi had made a lot of noise at the meeting last night, he seemed to fancy himself as a leader of men. There had been plenty of suggestions that they form an official committee, elect a spokesperson. It would help the group interface with the authorities, Rai Molvi said. Gerald privately gave him six months before he was running back to Durringham with his tail between his legs. The man was an obvious lawyer type, didn't have what it took to be a farmer.

"You were supposed to be here yesterday to brief us," Rai Molvi said.

"Quite right," Powel said without breaking stride. "I apologize. If you would like to make an official complaint about me, the Land Allocation Office which issues my contract is in a dumper down on the western edge of town. It's only six kilometres."

"No, we weren't going to complain," Rai Molvi said quickly. "But we do need to establish certain facts to prepare ourselves. It would have been helpful had you attended."

"Attended what?"

"Last night's council meeting."

"What council?"

"Group Seven's council."

Powel took a breath. He never did understand why half of the colonists came to Lalonde in the first place. The LDC must employ some pretty amazing advertising techniques back on Earth, he thought. "What was it the council wanted to know?"

"Well . . . where are we going, for a start?"

"Upriver." Powel stretched out the pause long enough to make the other man uncomfortable. "A place called Schuster County, on the Quallheim tributary. Although I'm sure that if you have somewhere else in mind the river-boat captain will be happy to take you there instead."

Rai Molvi reddened.

Gerald pushed his way to the front as they all moved out from under the dormitory's creaking roof. Powel had turned, making for the circular harbour two hundred metres away,

Vorix padding along eagerly behind him. There were several paddle-boats pulled up at the wooden quays inside the artificial lagoon. The bright red specks of scavenging chikrows swirled overhead. The sight with its sense of purpose and adventure was unbeatable, quickening his blood.

“Is there anything we need to know about the paddle-boats?” he asked.

“Not really,” Powel said. “They carry about a hundred and fifty people each, and it’ll take us about a fortnight to reach the Quallheim. Your meals are provided as part of your transit fee, and I’ll be giving talks on the more practical aspects of jungle lore and setting up your home. So just find yourself a bunk, and enjoy the trip, for you won’t ever have another like it. After we make landfall the real work begins.”

Gerald nodded his thanks and turned back to the dormitory. Let the others pester the man with irrelevant questions, he would get the family packed and onto the *Swithland* straight away. A long river trip would be just what Marie needed to calm her down.

The *Swithland* followed a standard design for the larger paddle-boats operating on the Juliffe. She had a broad, shallow hull made of mayope planks, measuring sixty metres from prow to stern and twenty metres broad. With the water flowing by a mere metre and a half below the deck she could almost have been mistaken for a well-crafted raft had it not been for her superstructure, which resembled a large rectangular barn. Her odd blend of ancient and modern technologies was yet another indicator of Lalonde’s development status. Two paddles midway down the hull because they were far simpler to manufacture and maintain than the more efficient screws. Electric motors because the industrial machinery to assemble them was cheaper than the equivalent necessary to produce a steam generator and turbine unit. But then electric motors required a power source, which was a solid-state thermal-exchange furnace imported from Oshanko. Such costly imports would only be tolerated while the number of paddle-boats made the generator and turbine factory uneconomical. When their numbers increased the

governing economic equations would change in tandem, quite probably sweeping them away entirely to be replaced with another equally improbable mismatch craft. Such was the way of progress on Lalonde.

The *Swithland* herself was only seventeen years old, and good for another fifty or sixty at least. Her captain, Rosemary Lambourne, had taken out a mortgage with the LDC that her grandchildren would be paying off. As far as she was concerned, that was a bargain. Seventeen years of watching hapless colonists sailing upriver to their dream's ruin convinced her she had done the right thing. Her colonist shipment contract with the Governor's Transport Office was a solid income, guaranteed for the next twenty years, and everything she brought downriver for Durringham's growing merchant community was pure profit, earning hard fuseodollars.

Life on the river was the best, she could hardly remember her existence back on Earth, working in a Govcentral design bureau to improve vac-train carriages. That was somebody else's existence.

A quarter of an hour before they were due to cast off, Rosemary stood on the open bridge, which took up the forward quarter of the superstructure's top deck. Powel Manani had joined her after he had led his horse up the gangplank, tethering it on the aft deck; now the two of them watched the colonists embarking. Children and adults alike shuffled round. The children were mostly gathered round the horse, patting and stroking it gently. Shoulder-bags and larger cases were strewn about over the dark planking. The sound of several heated arguments drifted up to the top deck. Nobody had thought to count how many people were coming on board. Now the boat was overladen, and latecomers were reluctant to find another berth on one of the other ships.

"You got your Ivets organized well," she told the supervisor. "I don't think I've ever seen the gear stowed so professionally before. They finished over an hour ago. The harbour-master ought to nab them from you and put them to work as stevedores."

"Humm," Powel said. Vorix, who was lying on the deck behind them, gave an uneasy growl.

Rosemary grinned at that. Sometimes she wasn't sure who was bonded to who.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"Someone, actually. They've got themselves a leader. He's going to be trouble, Rosemary. I know he is."

"You'll keep them in line. Hell, you've supered five settlements, and all of them wound up viable. If you can't do it nobody can."

"Thanks. You run a pretty tight ship yourself."

"Keep an eye out for yourself this time, Powel. There's people gone missing up in Schuster County recently. Rumour has it the Governor's none too happy."

"Yeah?"

"The *Hycel* is carrying a marshal upriver. Going to have a scout round."

"I wonder if there's a bounty for finding them? The Governor doesn't like homesteaders ducking out of their settlement contract, it sets a bad example. Everyone would come and live in Durringham otherwise."

"From what I hear, they want to find out what happened to them, not where they are."

"Oh?"

"They just vanished. No sign of a fight. Left all their gear and animals behind."

"Fine, well, I'll keep alert." He took a broad-rimmed hat out of the pack at his feet. It was yellow-green in colour, much stained. "Are we sharing a bunk this trip, Roses?"

"No chance." She leant further over the rail to scan the foredeck for her four children, who along with two stokers were her only other crew. "I've got me a brand-new Ivet as my second stoker. Barry MacArple, he's nineteen, real talented mechanic on both sides of the sheets. I think it shocks my eldest boy. That is, when he actually stops boffing the colonists' daughters himself."

"Fine."

Vorix let out a plaintive whine, and dropped his head onto his forepaws.

"When are you back in Schuster County next?" Powel asked.

"A couple of months, maybe three. I'm taking a group up

to Colane County on the Dibowa tributary next time out. After that I'll be up in your area. Want me to visit?"

He settled the hat on his head, working out agendas and timescales in his mind. "No, it's too soon. This bunch won't have exhausted their gear by then. Make it nine or ten months, let them feel a little deprivation, we'll be able to flog them a bar of soap for fifty fuseodollars by then."

"That's a date."

They shook on it, and turned back to watch the quarrelling colonists below.

Swithland cast off more or less on time. Rosemary's eldest boy, Karl, a strapping fifteen-year-old, ran along the deck shouting orders to the colonists who were helping with the cables. A cheer went up from the passengers as the paddles started turning and they moved away from the quay.

Rosemary was in the bridge herself. The harbour didn't have much spare water anyway, and *Swithland* was sluggish with a hold full of logs for the furnace, the colonists, their gear, and enough food to last them three weeks. She steered past the end of the quay and out into the centre of the artificial lagoon. The furnace was burning furiously, twin stacks sending out a high plume of grey-blue smoke. Standing on the prow, Karl gave her a smiling thumbs-up. He's going to break a lot of female hearts, that one, she thought proudly.

For once there wasn't a rain-cloud to be seen, and the forward-sweep mass-detector showed her a clean channel. Rosemary gave the horn a single toot, and pushed both paddle-control levers forward, moving out of the harbour and onto her beloved untamed river that stretched away into the unknown. How could life possibly be better than this?

For the first hundred kilometres the colonists of Group Seven could only agree with her. This was the oldest inhabited section of Amarisk outside Durringham, settled almost twenty-five years previously. The jungle had been cleared in great swaths, making way for fields, groves, and grazing land. As they stood on the side of the deck they could see herds of animals roaming free over the broad pastures, picking teams working the groves and plantations, their piles of

wicker baskets full of fruit or nuts. Villages formed a continual chain along the southern bank, the rural idyll; sturdy, brightly painted wooden cottages set in the centre of large gardens that were alive with flowers, lines of tall, verdant trees providing a leafy shade. The lanes between the trunks were planted with thick grasses, shining a brilliant emerald in the intense sunlight. Out here, where people could spread without constraint, there wasn't the foot and wheel traffic to pound the damp soil into the kind of permanent repellent mud which made up Durringham's roads. Horses plodded along, pulling wains loaded with bounties of hay and barley. Windmills formed a row of regular pinnacles along the skyline, their sails turning lazily in the persistent wind. Long jetties struck out into the choppy ochre water of the Juliffe, two or three to each village. They had constant visitors in the form of small paddle-driven barges eager for the farms' produce. Children sat on the end of the jetties dangling rods and lines into the water, waving at the eternal procession of boats speeding by. In the morning small sailing boats cast off to fish the river, and the *Swithland* would cruise sedately through the flotilla of canvas triangles thrumming in the fresh breeze.

In the evening, when the sky flared into deep orange around the western horizon, and the stars came out overhead, bonfires would be lit in the village greens. Leaning on the deck rail that first night as the fires appeared, Gerald Skibbow was reduced to an inarticulate longing. The black water reflected long tapers of orange light from the bonfires, and he could hear gusty snatches of songs as the villagers gathered round for their communal meal.

"I never thought it could be this perfect," he told Loren.

She smiled as his arm circled her. "It does look pretty, doesn't it. Something out of a fairy story."

"It can be ours, this sort of life. It's waiting up there at the end of the river. In ten years' time we'll be dancing round a bonfire while the boats go by."

"And the new colonists will look at us and dream!"

"We'll have our house built, like a palace made from wood. That's what you'll live in, Loren, a miniature palace that the King of Kulu himself will envy. And you'll have a

garden full of vegetables and flowers; and I'll be out in the grove, or tending the herds. Paula and Marie will live nearby, and the grandchildren will run both of us off our feet."

Loren hugged him tightly. He lifted his head and let out a bellow of joy. "God, how could we have wasted so many years on Earth? This is where we all belong, all of us Loren. We should throw away our arcologies and our starships, and live like the Lord intended. We really should."

Ruth and Jay stood together beside the taffrail and watched the sun sink below the horizon, crowning the vast river with an aura of purple-gold light for one sublime magical minute.

"Listen, Mummy, they're singing," Jay said. Her face was a picture of serenity. The horrid corpse of yesterday was long forgotten; she had found utter contentment with the big beige-coloured horse hitched up to the port railing. Those huge black eyes were so soft and loving, and the feel of its wet nose on her palm when she fed it a sweet was ticklish and wonderful. She couldn't believe something so huge was so gentle. Mr Manani had already said he would let her walk it round the deck each morning for exercise and teach her how to groom it. The *Swithland* was paradise come early. "What are they singing?"

"It sounds like a hymn," Ruth said. For the first time since they had landed she was beginning to feel as though she'd made the right decision. The villages certainly looked attractive, and well organized. Knowing that it was possible to succeed was half the battle. It would be tougher further from the capital, but not impossible. "I can't say I blame them."

The wind had died down, sending flames from the bonfires shooting straight up into the starry night, but the aroma of cooking food stole over the water to the *Swithland* and her two sister craft. The scent of freshly baked bread and thick spicy stews played hell with Quinn's stomach. The Ivets had been given cold meat and a fruit that looked like an orange, except it had a purple-bluish coloured skin and tasted salty. All the colonists had eaten a hot meal. Bastards. But the Ivets were starting to turn to him, that was something. He sat on the deck at the front of the superstructure,

looking out to the north, away from all those fucking medieval hovels the colonists were wetting themselves over. The north was dark, he liked that. Darkness had many forms, physical and mental, and it conquered all in the end. The sect had taught him that, darkness was strength, and those that embrace the dark will always triumph.

Quinn's lips moved soundlessly. "After darkness comes the Bringer of Light. And He shall reward those that followed His path into the void of Night. For they are true unto themselves and the nature of man, which is beast. They shall sit upon His hand, and cast down those who dress in the falsehood of Our Lord and His brother."

A hand touched Quinn's shoulder, and the fat priest smiled down at him. "I'm holding a service on the aft deck in a few minutes. We are going to bless our venture. You would be very welcome to attend."

"No, thank you, Father," Quinn said levelly.

Horst gave him a sad smile. "I understand. But the Lord's door is always open for you." He walked on towards the aft deck.

"Your Lord," Quinn whispered to his departing back. "Not mine."

Jackson Gael saw the girl from Donovan's slouched against the port rail just aft of the paddle, head resting on her hands. She was wearing a crumpled Oxford-blue shirt tucked into black rugby shorts, white pumps on her feet, no socks. At first he thought she was gazing out over the river, then he caught sight of the personal MF block clipped to her belt, the silver lenses in her eyes. Her foot was tapping out a rhythm on the decking.

He shrugged out of the top of his grey jump suit, tying the arms round his waist so she wouldn't see the damning scarlet letters. There was no appreciable drop in temperature as the humid air flowed over his skin. Had there ever been a single molecule of cool air on this planet?

He tapped her on the shoulder. "Hi."

A spasm of annoyance crossed her face. Blind mirror irises turned in his direction as her hand fumbled with the little block's controls. The silver vanished to show dark, expressive eyes. "Yeah?"

“Was that a local broadcast?”

“Here? You’ve got to be kidding. The reason we’re on a boat is because this planet hasn’t invented the wheel yet.”

Jackson laughed. “You’re right there. So what were you vising?”

“*Life Kinetic*. That’s Jezzibella’s latest album.”

“Hey, I rate Jezzibella.”

Her sulk lifted for a moment. “Course you do. She turns males to jelly. Shows us fems what we can all do if we want. She makes herself succeed.”

“I saw her live, once.”

“God. You did? When?”

“She played my arcology a year ago. Five nights in the stadium, sold out.”

“Any good?”

“Supreme.” He spread his arms exuberantly. “Nothing like an ordinary Mood Fantasy band, it’s almost straight sex, but she went on for hours. She just sets your whole body on fire, what she does with the dancers. They reckoned her AV broadcast pillars were using illegal sense-activant codes. Who gives a shit? You would have loved it.”

Marie Skibbow’s pout returned. “I’ll never know now, will I? Not on this bloody retarded planet.”

“Didn’t you want to come here?”

“No.”

The hot resentment in her voice surprised him. The colonists had seemed such a dopey bunch, every one of them wrapped up in the prospect of all that rustic charm crap spread out along the riverbank. It hadn’t occurred to him that they were anything other than unified in their goal. Marie might be a valuable ally.

He saw the captain’s son, Karl, making his way down the side of the superstructure. The boy was wearing a pair of white canvas shorts, and rubber-soled plimsolls. *Swithland* was riding some choppy water, but Karl’s balance was uncanny, he could anticipate the slightest degree of pitch.

“There you are,” he said to Marie. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you, I thought you’d be at the service the priest’s giving.”

“I’m not helping to bless this trip,” she said smartly.

Karl grinned broadly, his teeth showing a gleam in the deepening twilight. He was a head shorter than Jackson, which put him a few centimetres below Marie's height, and his torso was muscled like a medical text illustration. His family must have had plenty of geneering, he was too perfect. Jackson watched in growing bewilderment as he held his hand out expectantly to the girl.

"Are you ready to go?" Karl asked. "My cabin's up forward, just below the bridge."

Marie accepted the boy's hand. "Sure."

Jackson was given a lurid wink from Karl as he led Marie down the deck. They disappeared into the superstructure, and Jackson was sure he heard Marie giggle. He couldn't believe it. She preferred Karl? The boy was five years younger than him! His fists clenched in anger. It was being an Ivet, he *knew* it was. The little bitch!

Karl's cabin was a compact compartment overlooking the prow, definitely a teenager's room. A couple of processor blocks lay on the desk, along with some micro-tool units and a half-dismantled electronics stack from one of the bridge systems. There were holograms on the wall showing starfields and planets; clothes, shoes, and towels were scattered about on the deck planks. It had about ten times as much space as the cabin the Skibbows and Kavas were forced to share.

The door shut behind Marie, muting the sound of the congregation gathered on the aft deck. Karl immediately kicked off his plimsolls, and unlatched a broad bunk which had been folded flat against the wall.

He's only fifteen years old, Marie thought, but he has got a tremendous body, and that smile . . . God, I shouldn't have allowed him to smooth talk me in here, never mind be thinking of bedding him. Which only made her feel even randier.

The congregation started to sing a hymn, their voices bringing a rich enthusiasm to the slow melody. She thought of her father out there, his eager-to-make-amends expression this morning, telling her how the river trip would show her the wholesome satisfaction to be earned from the quieter side of life and honest labours. So please, darling, try to understand Lalonde is our future now, and a fine future at that.

Marie unbuttoned her shirt under Karl's triumphant gaze, then started on her shorts.

The settlements along the Juliffe changed subtly after the third day. The *Swithland* passed the end of the Hultain Marsh, and villages began to appear on the distant northern bank. They lacked the trimness of the earlier buildings, there were fewer animals and cultivated fields; less jungle had been cleared, and the trees standing so close to the cabins looked far more imposing.

The river branched, but the *Swithland* sailed on purposefully down the main channel. The water traffic began to fall off. These villages were still hard at work to tame the land, they couldn't afford the time it took to make sailing boats. Big barges were chugging down the river, loaded mainly with mayope timber cut by new settlements to sell to the shipyards in the city. But by the end of the first week even the barges were left behind. It simply wasn't economical to carry timber to the capital over such a distance.

There were tributary forks every hour now. The Juliffe was narrower, down to a couple of kilometres, its fast waters almost clear. Sometimes they would sail for five or six hours without seeing a village.

Horst felt the mood on board turning, and prayed that the despondency would end once they made landfall. The devil makes work for idle hands, and it had never been truer than out here. Once they were busy building their village and preparing the land Group Seven would have no time for brooding. But the second week seemed to last for ever, and the daily rains had returned with a vengeance. People were muttering about why they had to travel quite this far from the city for their allocated land.

The jungle had become an oppressive presence on either side, hemming them in, trees and undergrowth packed so tightly that the riverbanks created a solid barricade of leaves extending right down to the water. Foltwine, a tenacious freshwater aquatic plant, was a progressive nuisance. Its long, brown ribbonlike fronds grew just below the surface right across the width of the river. Rosemary avoided the larger clumps with ease, but strands would inevitably wrap

themselves around the paddles. The *Swithland* made frequent stops while Karl and his younger sister clambered over them, cutting the tough slippery fronds free with the radiant yellow blades of fission knives.

Thirteen days after they departed from Durringham they had left the Juliffe itself behind and started to sail along the Quallheim tributary. It was three hundred metres wide, fast flowing, with vine-swamped trees thirty metres high forming a stockade on both banks. Away to the south, the colonists could just make out the purple and grey peaks of a distant mountain range. They stared in wonder at the snow-caps shining brightly in the sun; ice seemed to belong to an alien planet, not native to Lalonde.

In the early morning of the fourteenth day after leaving Durringham, a village crept into view as they edged their way up the river, the first they had seen for thirty-six hours. It was set in a semicircular clearing, a bite into the jungle nearly a kilometre deep. Felled trees lay everywhere. Thin towers of smoke rose from a few fire pits. The shacks were crude parodies of the cottages belonging to villages downriver; lashed-up frames with walls and roofs made from panels of woven palm fronds. There was a single jetty that looked terribly unsafe, with three hollowed-out log canoes tied up to it. A small stream trickling through the middle of the clearing into the river was an open sewer. Goats were tied to stakes, foraging in the short grass. Emaciated chickens scratched around in the mud and sawdust. The inhabitants stood about listlessly and watched the *Swithland* go past with numb, hooded eyes. Most of them were wearing shorts and boots, their skin a deep brown, whether from the sun or dirt it was hard to say. Even the apparently eternal chattering of the jungle creatures was hushed.

"Welcome to the town of Schuster," Rosemary said with some irony. She was standing on the bridge, one eye permanently on the forward-sweep mass-detector, watching out for foltwine and submerged snags.

Group Seven's council and Powel Manani were ranged around the bridge behind her, grateful to be in the shade.

"This is it?" Rai Molvi asked, aghast.

"The county capital, yeah," Powel said. "They've been going for about a year now."

"Don't worry," Rosemary said. "The land you've been allocated is another twelve kilometres upriver. You won't have to have much contact with them. No bad thing, too, if you ask me. I've seen communities like this before, they infect their neighbours. Better you have a fresh start."

Rai Molvi nodded briefly, not trusting himself to speak.

The three rivercraft sailed on slowly, leaving behind the shanty town and its torpid inhabitants. The colonists gathered on *Swithland's* aft deck watched them disappear as the boat rounded a bend in the river, silent and contemplative.

Horst made the sign of the cross, muttering an invocation. Perhaps a requiem would be more appropriate, he thought.

Jay Hilton turned to her mother. "Will we have to live like that, Mummy?"

"No," she said firmly. "Never."

Two hours later, with the river down to a hundred and fifty metre width, Rosemary watched the digits on the inertial-guidance block flick round to match the coordinates the Land Allocation Office had given her. Karl stood on the prow as the *Swithland* crept along at a walking pace, his keen eyes searching the impenetrable green barrier of vegetation along the southern bank. The jungle was steaming softly from the rain of an hour earlier, white tendrils wafting out of the treetops, then spiralling away into the burning azure sky. Small, colourful birds darted about between the branches, shrieking brazenly.

Karl suddenly jumped up and waved to his mother, pointing at the bank. Rosemary saw the tarnished silver pillar with its hexagonal sign on top. It was stuck in the soil five metres above the water. Vines with big purple flowers had already climbed halfway up it.

She gave the horn a triumphant hoot. "End of the line," she sang out. "This is Aberdale. Last stop."

"All right," Powel said, holding up his hands for silence. He was standing on a barrel to address the assembled colonists on the foredeck. "You've seen what can be done with a little bit of determination and hard work, and you've also seen how easy it is to fail. Which road you go down is

entirely up to you. I'm here to help you for eighteen months, which is the period your future will be settled in. That's the make or break time. Now, tell me, are you going to make a go of it?"

He received a throaty cheer, and smiled round. "Fine. Our first job is going to be building a jetty so that Captain Lambourne and the other two river-boats can dock. That way we can unload your gear properly, without getting it wet. Now a jetty is an important part of any village on this river. It tells a visitor straight away what sort of community you want to carve out for yourselves. You'll notice our good captain wasn't too eager to stop at Schuster. Not surprising, is it? A good jetty is one that the boats are always going to stop at, even out here. It's a statement that you want to take part in what the planet has to offer. It says you want to trade and grow rich. It says that there are opportunities here for clever captains. It makes you a part of civilization. So I think it would be a good idea if we start off as we mean to go on, and build ourselves a solid decent jetty that's going to last out your grandchildren. That's what I think. Am I right?"

The chorus of "Yes!" was deafening.

He clapped his hands together, and hopped down off the barrel. "Quinn?" He beckoned to the lad, who was in the group of quiet Ivets standing in the shade of the superstructure.

Quinn trotted forward. "Yes, sir?"

The respectful tone didn't fool Powel for a second. "The captain is holding station against the current for now. But it's costing her power, so we have to secure the *Swithland* if we want her to stay for any length of time. I want you to ferry a cable out to the shore, and tie it onto a tree large enough to take the strain. Think you can manage that?"

Quinn looked from Powel to the mass of dark green vegetation on the bank then back to Powel. "How do I get over there?"

"Swim, boy! And don't try telling me you can't. It's only thirty-five metres."

Karl came over, uncoiling a rope. "Once you've secured it, we'll haul the *Swithland* into the shallows, and rig a

proper mooring,” the boy said. “Everyone else can wade ashore from there.”

“Great,” Quinn said sourly. He took his shoes off, then started to shrug out of his jump suit. Vorix nosed around the two shoes, sniffing eagerly.

Quinn left his shorts on, and sat on the decking to put his shoes back on. “Can Vorix come with me, please?” he asked.

The dog looked round, long tongue hanging out of the side of its big jaw.

“What the hell do you want him with you for?” Powel asked.

Quinn gestured to the jungle with its barrage of animal sounds. “To take care of any wild sayce.”

“Get in the water, Quinn, and stop whingeing. There aren’t any wild sayce around here.” Powel watched as the lad eased himself over the side of the deck and into the river. Jackson Gael lay flat on the deck, and handed the rope down.

Quinn started swimming for the shore with a powerful sidestroke, dragging the rope behind him.

“The kroclions ate all the sayce,” Powel yelled after him; then, laughing heartily, went aft to get the jetty-building team organized.

8

Tranquillity: a polyp cylinder with hemispherical endcaps, its shell the colour of fired unglazed clay, sixty-five kilometres long, seventeen kilometres in diameter, the largest of all bitek habitats ever to be germinated within the Confederation. It was drab and uninviting in appearance, and difficult to see from a distance; what little sunlight eventually reached it from the F3 primary one-point-seven billion kilometres away seemed to be repulsed, preferring to flow around the curving shell rather than strike the surface. It was the only human settlement in the star system, orbiting seven thousand kilometres above the Ruin Ring. The shattered remnants of those very remote xenoc cousins were its sole companions. A permanent reminder that for all its size and power, it was terribly mortal. Lonely, isolated, and politically impotent, there should be few people who would choose to live in such a place.

And yet . . .

Starships and scavenger vessels on an approach trajectory could discern a stippled haze of light hovering around the endcap orientated to galactic north. A cluster of industrial stations floated in attendance. Owned by some of the largest astroengineering companies in the Confederation, they were permanently busy serving the constant stream of starships arriving and departing. Cargo tugs, fuel tankers, personnel carriers, and multipurpose service vehicles shuttled around them, their reaction drives pulsing out a smog of hot blue ions.

A three-kilometre spindle connected Tranquillity's northern endcap to a non-rotating spaceport: a disc of metal girders, four and a half kilometres in diameter, with a confusing jumble of support facilities, tanks, and docking bays arrayed

across its surface, resembling a gigantic metal cobweb that had snagged a swarm of fantastic cybernetic insects. It was as busy as any Edenist habitat, with Adamist starships loading and unloading their cargoes, taking on fuel, embarking passengers.

Behind the tarnished silver-white disc, three circular ledges stood out proud from the endcap: havens for the bitek starships which came and went with quick, graceful agility. Their geometrical diversity fascinated the entire spaceport, and most of the habitat's population; observation lounges overlooking the ledges were popular among the young and not-so-young. Mirchusko was where the blackhawks mated and died and gestated. Tranquillity offered itself as one of their few legitimate home bases. Their eggs could be bought here, changing hands for upwards of twenty million fuseodollars and absolutely no questions.

Around the rim of the endcap hundreds of organic conductor cables stretched out into space; subject to constant dust abrasion and particle impact, they were extruded on a permanent basis by specialist glands to compensate for the near-daily breakages. The habitat's rotation kept the cables perfectly straight, radiating away from the shell like the leaden-grey spokes of some cosmic bicycle wheel. They sliced through the flux lines of Mirchusko's prodigious magnetosphere, generating a gigantic electrical current which powered the biological processes of Tranquillity's mitosis layer as well as the axial light-tube and the domestic demands of its inhabitants. Tranquillity ingested thousands of tonnes of asteroidal minerals each year to regenerate its own polyp structure and invigorate the biosphere, but chemical reactions alone could never produce a fraction of the energy it needed to nurture its human occupants.

Beyond the endcap and the induction cables, exactly halfway down the cylinder, there was a city, home to over three million people: a band of starscrapers wrapped around the median equator, five-hundred-metre-long towers projecting out of the shell, studded with long, curving transparencies that radiated warm yellow light out into space. The view from the luxurious apartments inside was breath-

taking; stars alternated with the storm-wracked gas giant and its little empire of rings and moons, eternal yet ever-changing as the cylinder rotated to provide an Earth-standard gravity at the base of the towers. Here, Adamists were granted the sight which was every Edenist's birthright.

Small wonder, then, that Tranquillity, with its liberal banking laws, low income tax, the availability of black-hawks to charter, and an impartial habitat-personality which policed the interior to ensure a crime-free environment (essential for the peace of mind of the millionaires and billionaires who resided within), had prospered, becoming one of the Confederation's premier independent trading and finance centres.

But it hadn't been designed as a tax haven, not at first; that came later, born out of desperate necessity. Tranquillity was germinated in 2428, on the order of the then Crown Prince of Kulu, Michael Saldana, as a modified version of an Edenist habitat, with a number of unique attributes the Prince himself requested. He intended it to act as a base from which the cream of Kulu's xenoc specialists could study the Laymil, and determine what fate had befallen them. It was an action which brought down the considerable wrath of his entire family.

Kulu was a Christian-ethnic culture, and very devout. The King of Kulu was the principal guardian of that faith throughout the kingdom; and because of bitek's synonymous association with Edenists, Adamists (especially good Christian ones) had virtually abandoned that particular branch of technology. Possibly Prince Michael could have got away with bringing Tranquillity into existence; a self-sustaining bitek habitat was a logical solution for an isolated academic research project, and astute propaganda could have smoothed over the scandal. Royalty is no stranger to controversy, if anything it adds to its mystique, especially when relatively harmless.

But the whitewash option never arose; having germinated the habitat, Prince Michael went and compounded his original "crime" (in the eyes of the Church, and more importantly the Privy Council) by having neuron symbionts

implanted enabling him to establish an affinity bond with the young Tranquillity.

His final act of defiance, condemned as heretical by Kulu's conclave of bishops, came in 2432, the year his father, King James, died. Michael had a modified affinity gene spliced into his first son, Maurice, so that he too might commune with the kingdom's newest, and most unusual, subject.

Both were excommunicated (Maurice was a three-month-old embryo residing in an exowomb at the time). Michael abdicated before his coronation in favour of his brother, Prince Lukas. And father and son were unceremoniously exiled to Tranquillity, which was granted to them in perpetuity as a duchy.

One of the most ambitious xenoc research projects ever mounted, the unravelling of an entire species from its chromosomes to whatever pinnacles of culture it achieved, virtually collapsed overnight as its royal treasury funds were withdrawn and staff recalled.

And as for Michael: from being the rightful monarch of the seven wealthiest star systems in the Confederation, he became the de facto owner of a half-grown bitek habitat. From commanding a navy of seven hundred warships, the third most powerful military force in existence, he had at his disposal five ex-navy transports, all over twenty-five years old. From having the absolute power of life and death over a population of one and three-quarter billion loyal human subjects, he became an administrator of seventeen thousand abandoned, shit-listed technicians and their families, resentful at their circumstances. From being First Lord of the Treasury dealing in trillion-pound budgets, he was left to write a tax-haven constitution in the hope of attracting the idle rich so he could live off their surplus.

For time evermore, Michael Saldana was known as the Lord of Ruin.

"I am bid three hundred thousand fuseodollars for this excellent plant. Really, ladies and gentlemen, this is a remarkable specimen. There are over five intact leaves, and it is of a type never seen before, completely unclassified." The

plant sat in a glass vacuum bubble on the auctioneer's table: a dusty grey stalk, sprouting five long drooping fern-like leaves with frayed edges. The audience gazed at it in unappreciative silence. "Come along now, that protuberance at the top may well be a flower bud. Its cloning will be such a simple matter, and the genome patent will remain exclusively in your hands, an incalculable font of wealth."

Someone datavised another ten thousand fuseodollars.

Joshua Calvert didn't try to see who. This crowd were experts, facial expressions like poker players running downer programs. And they were all here today, packing the room, there wasn't a spare chair to be had. People stood four deep around the walls, spilling down the aisles; the casuals, billionaires looking for a spark of excitement, the serious collectors, consortium bidders, even some industrial company reps hoping for technological templates.

Here because of me.

Barrington Grier's outfit wasn't the largest auction house in Tranquillity, and it dealt in art as much as Laymil artefacts, but it was a tight, polished operation. And Barrington Grier had treated a nineteen-year-old Joshua Calvert who had just returned from his first scavenging flight as an equal, as a professional. With respect. He had used the house ever since.

The bidding room was on the fiftieth floor of the StMary's starscraper, its polyp walls overlaid by dark oak panelling, with velvet burgundy curtains on either side of the entrance arches and thick royal-blue carpets. Elaborate crystal lights cast a bright glow on the proceedings. Joshua could almost imagine himself in some Victorian London establishment. Barrington Grier had told him once that was the effect he wanted, quiet and dignified, fostering an atmosphere of confidence. The broad window behind the auctioneer spoilt the period effect somewhat; stars spun lazily outside, while Falsia, Mirchusko's sixth moon, slowly traversed the panorama, a sliver of aquamarine.

"Three hundred and fifty thousand, once."

Falsia was eclipsed by the auctioneer's chest.

"Three hundred and fifty thousand, twice."

The antique wooden gavel was raised. Falsia reappeared, peeping out over the man's shoulder.

"Final time."

There was a smack as the gavel came down. "Sold to Ms Melissa Strandberg."

The room buzzed with voices as the glass bubble was carried away, excitement and nervousness throttling the air. In his second-row seat, with his nerves alight, Joshua felt it build around him, and shifted round uncomfortably, careful not to knock his legs against those of his neighbours. His feet were still painful if he applied pressure too quickly. Medical nanonic packages had swallowed both legs up to his knees, looking like strange green-leather boots, five sizes too large. The packages had a spongy texture, and he felt as though he was bouncing as he walked.

Three auctioneer's assistants carried a new bubble over to the table, it was a metre and a half high, with a dull gold crown of thermo-dump fins on top, keeping the internal temperature below freezing. A faint patina of condensation misted the glass. The voices in the room chopped off dead.

Joshua caught sight of Barrington Grier standing at the side of the stage, a middle-aged man with chubby red cheeks and a ginger moustache. He wore a sober navy-blue suit with baggy trousers and neck-sealed jacket with flared arms, the faintest of orange lines glowing on the satin material in a spiral pattern. He caught Joshua's eye, and gave him a wink.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the final item of the day, lot 127. I think I can safely say that it is unique in my experience; a module stack of Laymil circuitry which has been preserved in ice since the cataclysm. We have identified both processor chips, and a considerable number of solid-state crystal memories inside. All of them in pristine condition. In this one cylinder there are more than five times the number of crystals we have recovered since the discovery of the Ruin Ring itself. I will leave it to you to imagine the sheer wealth of information stored within. This is undoubtedly the greatest find since the first intact Laymil body, over a century ago. And it is my great privilege to

open the bidding at the reserve price of two million Edenist fuseodollars.”

Joshua had been bracing himself, but there wasn't even a murmur of protest from the crowd.

The bids came in fast and furious, rising in units of fifty thousand fuseodollars. The background level of conversation crept up again. Heads were swivelling around, bidders trying to make eye contact with their opponents, gauge the level of determination.

Joshua gritted his teeth together as the bids rose through four million. Come on, keep going. Four million three hundred thousand. The answer could be stored in there, why the Laymil did it. Four and a half. You'll solve the biggest problem facing science since we cracked the lightspeed barrier. Four million eight hundred thousand. You'll be famous, they'll name the discovery after you, not me. Come on, you bastards. Bid!

“Five million,” the auctioneer announced calmly.

Joshua sank back into the chair, a little whimper of relief leaking from his throat. Looking down he saw his fists were clenched, palms sweating.

I've done it. I can start repairing *Lady Mac*, get a crew together. The replacement patterning nodes will have to come from the Sol system. Say a month if I charter a blackhawk to collect them. She could be spaceworthy within ten weeks. Jesus!

He brought his attention back to the auctioneer just as the bidding went through six million. For a second he thought he'd misheard, but no, there was Barrington Grier grinning at him as if he was running wacko stimulant programs through his neural nanonics.

Seven million.

Joshua listened in a waking trance. He could afford more than a simple node replacement and repair job now. *Lady Mac* could have a complete refit, the best systems, no expense spared, new fusion generators, maybe a new spaceplane, no, better than that, an ion-field flyer from Kulu or New California. Yes!

“Seven million, four hundred and fifty thousand for the

first time.” The auctioneer looked round expectantly, gavel engulfed by his meaty fist.

Rich. I’m fucking rich!

“Twice.”

Joshua closed his eyes.

“For the last time, seven million, four hundred and fifty thousand. Anybody?”

The smack the gavel made was as loud as the big bang. The start of a whole new existence for Joshua Calvert. Independent starship owner captain.

A deep chime sounded. Joshua’s eyes snapped open. Everyone had gone silent, staring at the small omnidirectional AV projector on the desk in front of the auctioneer, a slim crystal pillar one metre high. Curlicues of abstract colour swam below the surface. If anything, Barrington Grier’s grin had become even wider.

“Tranquillity reserves the right of last bid on lot 127.” A mellow male voice sounded throughout the auction room.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake—” An angry voice to Joshua’s left. The winning bidder? He hadn’t caught the name.

The auction room descended into a bedlam of shouting.

Barrington Grier was giving him a manic thumbs-up. The three assistants started to carry the bubble and its precious—seven and a half million!—contents out into the wings.

Joshua waited as the room cleared; a noisy crush of people jostling and gossiping, Tranquillity’s right to reserve the last bid their only topic for discussion.

He didn’t care, last bid meant the agreed price plus an extra five per cent. The pillar of electronics would go to the Laymil research team now, analysed by the most experienced xenoc experts in the Confederation. He felt quite good about that, virtuous, maybe it was right they should have it.

Michael Saldana had reassembled as much of the team as he could after those first few traumatic years of exile, building it up in tandem with Tranquillity’s new economy and rapidly increasing financial strength. There were currently around seven thousand specialists working on the problem, including several xenoc members of the Confederation, providing a welcome alternative viewpoint when it came to interpreting the more baroque artefacts.

Michael had died in 2513, and Maurice had assumed the title of Lord of Ruin with pride, continuing his father's labours. As far as he was concerned, uncovering the reason behind the Laymil cataclysm was Tranquillity's sole reason for existence. And he pursued it vigorously until his own death nine years ago in 2601.

Since then, the project had gone on apparently unabated. Tranquillity said Maurice's heir, the third Lord of Ruin, was running things as before, but chose not to seek a high public profile. There had been a flurry of rumours at the time, saying that the habitat personality had taken over completely, that the Kulu Kingdom was trying to reclaim the habitat, that the Edenists were going to incorporate it into their culture (earlier rumour said Michael stole the habitat seed from Edenists), throwing out the Adamists. They had all come to nothing. Right from the start the habitat personality had acted as both the civil service and police force, using its servitors to preserve order, so nothing changed, taxes were still two per cent, the blackhawks continued their mating flights, commercial enterprise was encouraged, creative finance tolerated. As long as the status quo was maintained, who cared exactly which kind of neurones were running the show, human or bitek?

Joshua felt a hand come down hard on his shoulder as he shuffled towards the exit, the weight pressed through his left leg. "Ouch."

"Joshua, my friend, my very rich friend. This is the day, hey? The day you made it." Barrington Grier beamed rapturously at him. "So what are you going to do with it all? Women? Fancy living?" His eyes lacked focus, he was definitely running a stimulant program. And he was entitled, the auction house was in line for a three per cent cut of the sale price.

Joshua smiled back, almost sheepish. "No, I'm going back into space. See a bit of the Confederation for myself, that kind of thing, the old wanderlust."

"Ah, if I had my youth back I would do the same thing. The good life, it ties you down, and it's a waste, especially for someone your age. Party till you puke every night, I mean what's the point of it all in the end? You should use the

money to get out there and accomplish something. Glad to see you've got some sense. So, are you going to buy a black-hawk egg?"

"No, I'm taking the *Lady Mac* back out."

Barrington Grier pursed his lips in rueful admiration. "I remember when your father arrived here. You take after him, some. Same effect on the women, from what I hear."

Joshua raised a wicked smile.

"Come on," Barrington Grier said. "I'll buy you a drink, in fact I'll buy you a whole meal."

"Tomorrow maybe, Barrington, tonight I'm going to party till I puke."

The lakehouse belonged to Dominique's father, who said it used to belong to Michael Saldana, that it was his home in the days before the starscrapers had matured to their full size. It was a series of looping chambers sunk into the side of a cliff above a lake up near the northern endcap. The walls looked as though they had been wind-carved. Inside the decor was simplistic and expensive, a holiday and entertainment *pied-à-terre*, not a home; artwork of various eras had been blended perfectly, and big plants from several planets flourished in the corners, chosen for their striking contrasts.

Outside the broad glass window-doors overlooking the huge lake, Tranquillity's axial light-tube was dimming towards its usual iridescent twilight. Inside, the party was just beginning to warm up. The eight-piece band was playing twenty-third-century ragas, processor blocks were loaded with *outré* stimulant programs, and the caterers were assembling a seafood buffet of freshly imported Atlantis delicacies.

Joshua lay back on a long couch to one side of the main lounge, dressed in a pair of baggy grey-blue trousers and a green Chinese jacket, receiving and dispensing greetings to strangers and acquaintances alike. Dominique's set were all young, and carefree, and very rich even by Tranquillity's standards. And they certainly knew how to party. He thought he could see the solid raw polyp walls vibrating from the sound they kicked up on the temporary dance-floor.

He took another sip of Norfolk Tears; the clear, light liquid ran down his throat like the lightest chilled wine, punching his gut like boiling whisky. It was glorious. Five hundred fuseodollars a bottle. Jesus!

"Joshua! I just heard. Congratulations." It was Dominique's father, Parris Vasilkovsky, pumping his hand. He had a round face, with a curly beret of glossy silver-grey hair. There were very few lines on his skin, a sure sign of a geneering heritage; he must have been at least ninety. "One of us idle rich now, eh? God, I can hardly remember what it was like right back at the beginning. Let me tell you, the first ten million is always the most difficult. After that . . . no problem."

"Thanks." People had been congratulating him all evening. He was the party's star attraction. The day's novelty. Since his mother had remarried a vice-president of the Brandstad Bank he had dwelt on the fringes of the plutocrat set which occupied the heart of Tranquillity. They were free enough with their hospitality, especially the daughters who liked to think of themselves as bohemian; and his scavenging flights made him notorious enough to enjoy both their patronage and bodies. But he had always been an observer. Until now.

"Dominique tells me you're going into the cargo business," Parris Vasilkovsky said.

"That's right. I'm going to refit *Lady Mac*, Dad's old ship, take her out again."

"Going to undercut me?" Parris Vasilkovsky owned over two hundred and fifty starships, ranging from small clippers up to ten-thousand-tonne bulk freighters, even some colonist-carrier ships. It was the seventh largest private merchant fleet in the Confederation.

Joshua looked him straight in the eye without smiling. "Yes."

Parris nodded, suddenly serious. He had started with nothing seventy years ago. "You'll do all right, Joshua. Come down to the apartment one night before you go, have dinner as my guest. I mean it."

"I'll do that."

"Great." A thick white eyebrow was raised knowingly.

“Dominique will be there. You could do a lot worse, she’s one hell of a girl. A little fancy free, but tough underneath.”

“Er, yes.” Joshua managed a weak smile. Parris Vasilkovsky: matchmaker! And I’m considered suitable for that family? Jesus!

I wonder what he’d think if he knew what his little darling daughter was doing last night? Although knowing this lot, he’d probably want to join in.

Joshua caught sight of Zoe, another sometimes girlfriend, who was on the other side of the room, her sleeveless white gown creating a sharp contrast with her midnight-black skin. She met his eye and smiled, wiggling her glass. He recognized one of the other teenage girls in the group she was with, smaller than her, with short blonde hair, wearing a sea-blue sarong skirt and loose matching blouse. Pretty freckled face, a thinnish nose with a slight downward curve at the end, and deep blue eyes. He had met her once or twice before, a quick hello, friend of a friend. His neural nanonics located her visual image in a file and produced the name: Ione.

Dominique was striding through the throng towards him. He took another gulp of Norfolk Tears in reflex. People seemed to teleport out of her way for fear of heavy bruising should her swaying hips catch them a glancing blow. Dominique was twenty-six, almost as tall as him; sports mad, she had cultivated a splendidly athletic figure, straight blonde hair falling halfway down her back. She was wearing a small purple bikini halter and a split skirt of some shimmering silver fabric.

“Hi, Josh.” She plonked herself down on the edge of the couch, and plucked his glass from unresisting fingers, taking a swift sip for herself. “Look what I ran up for us.” She held up a processor block. “Twenty-five possibles, all we can manage, taking your poor feet into account. Should be fun. We’ll start working through them tonight.”

Shadowy images flickered over the surface of the block.

“Fine,” Joshua said automatically. He hadn’t got a clue what she was talking about.

She patted his thigh, and bounced to her feet. “Don’t go away, I’m going to do my rounds here, then I’ll be back to collect you later.”

“Er, yes.” What else was there to say? He still wasn’t sure who had seduced who the day after he returned from the Ruin Ring, but he’d spent every night since then in Dominique’s big bed, and a lot of the daytime, too. She had the same kind of sexual stamina as Jezzibella, boisterous and frighteningly energetic.

He glanced down at the processor block, datavising a file-title request. It was a program that analysed all the possible free-fall sexual positions where bounceback didn’t use the male’s feet. The block’s screen was showing two humanoid simulacrum running through contortional permutations.

“Hello.”

Joshua tipped the processor block screen side down with an incredibly guilty start, datavising a shutdown instruction, and codelocked the file.

Ione was standing next to the couch, head cocked to one side, smiling innocently.

“Er, hello, Ione.”

The smile widened. “You remembered my name.”

“Hard to forget a girl like you.”

She sat in the imprint Dominique had left in the cushions. There was something quirky about her, a suggestion of hidden depth. He experienced that same uncanny thrill he had when he was on the trail of a Laymil artefact, not quite arousal, but close.

“I’m afraid I forgot what you do, though,” he said.

“Same as everyone else in here, a rich heiress.”

“Not quite everybody.”

“No?” Her mouth flickered in an uncertain smile.

“No, there’s me, you see. I didn’t inherit anything.” Joshua let his eyes linger on the outline of her figure below the light blouse. She was nicely proportioned, skin silk-smooth and sun kissed. He wondered what she would look like naked. Very nice, he decided.

“Apart from your ship, the *Lady Macbeth*.”

“Now it’s my turn to say: you remembered.”

She laughed. “No. It’s what everyone is talking about. That and your find. Do you know what’s in those Laymil memory crystals?”

“No idea. I just find them, I don’t understand them.”

“Do you ever wonder why they did it? Kill themselves like that? There must have been millions of them, children, babies. I can’t believe it was suicide the way everyone says.”

“You try not to think about it when you’re out in the Ruin Ring. There are just too many ghosts out there. Have you ever been in it?”

She shook her head.

“It’s spooky, Ione. Really, people laugh, but sometimes they’ll creep in on you out of the shadows if you don’t keep your guard up. And there are a lot of shadows out there; sometimes I think it isn’t made of anything else.”

“Is that why you’re leaving?”

“Not really. The Ruin Ring was a means to me, a way to get the money for *Lady Mac*. I’ve always planned on leaving.”

“Is Tranquillity that bad?”

“No. It’s more of a pride thing. I want to see *Lady Mac* spaceworthy again. She got damaged quite badly in the rescue attempt. My father barely made it back to Tranquillity alive. The old girl deserves another chance. I could never bring myself to sell her. That’s why I started scavenging, despite the risks. I just wish my father could have stayed around to see me succeed.”

“A rescue mission?” She sucked in her lower lip, intrigued. It was an endearing action, making her look even younger.

Dominique was nowhere to be seen, and the music was almost painfully loud now, the band just hitting their stride. Ione was clearly hooked on the story, on him. They could find a bedroom and spend a couple of hours screwing each other’s brains out. And it was only early evening, this party wouldn’t wind down for another five or six hours yet, he could still be back in time for his night with Dominique.

Jesus! What a way to celebrate.

“It’s a long story,” he said, gesturing round. “Let’s find somewhere quieter.”

She nodded eagerly. “I know a place.”

The trip on the tube carriage wasn’t quite what Joshua had in mind. There were plenty of spare bedrooms at the lake-

house which he could codelock. But Ione had been surprisingly adamant, that elusive hint of steel in her personality surfacing as she said: "My apartment is the quietest in Tranquillity, you can tell me everything there, and we'll never be overheard." She paused, eyes teasing. "Or interrupted."

That settled it.

They took the carriage from the little underground station which served all the residences around the lake. The tube trains were a mechanical system, like the lifts in the starscrapers, which were all installed after Tranquillity reached its full size. Bitek was a powerful technology, but even it had limits on the services it could provide; internal transport lay outside the geneticists' ability. The tubes formed a grid network throughout the cylinder, providing access to all sections of the interior. Carriages were independent, taking passengers to whichever station they wanted, a system orchestrated by the habitat personality, which was spliced into processor blocks in every station. There was no private transport in Tranquillity, and everyone from billionaires to the lowest-paid spaceport handler used the tubes to get around.

Joshua and Ione got into a waiting ten-seater carriage, sitting opposite each other. It started off straight away under Ione's command, accelerating smoothly. Joshua offered her a sip from the fresh bottle of Norfolk Tears he'd liberated from Parris Vasilkovsky's bar, and started to tell her about the rescue mission, eyes tracing the line of her legs under the flimsy sarong.

There had been a research starship in orbit around a gas giant, he said, it had suffered a life-support blow-out. His father had got the twenty-five-strong crew out, straining the *Lady Macbeth's* own life support dangerously close to capacity. And because several of the injured research crew needed treatment urgently they jumped while they were still inside the gas giant's gravity field, which wrecked some of *Lady Macbeth's* energy-patterning nodes, which in turn put a massive strain on the remaining nodes when the next jump was made. The starship managed the jump into Tranquillity's system, a distance of eight light-years, ruining forty per cent of her remaining nodes in the process.

“He was lucky to make it,” Joshua said. “The nodes have a built-in compensation factor in case a few fail, but that distance was really tempting fate.”

“I can see why you’re so proud of him.”

“Yes, well . . .” He shrugged.

The carriage slowed its madcap dash down the length of the habitat, and pulled to a halt. The door slid open. Joshua didn’t recognize the station: it was small, barely large enough to hold the length of the carriage, a featureless white bubble of polyp. Broad strips of electrophorescent cells in the ceiling gave off a strong light; a semicircular muscle membrane door was set in the wall at the back of the narrow platform. Certainly not a starscraper lobby.

The carriage door closed, and the grey cylinder slipped noiselessly into the tunnel on its magnetic track. Currents of dry air flapped Ione’s sarong as it vanished from sight.

Joshua felt unaccountably chilly. “Where are we?” he asked.

Ione gave him a bright smile. “Home.”

Hidden depths. The chill persisted obstinately.

The muscle membrane door opened like a pair of stone curtains being drawn apart, and Joshua gaped at the apartment inside, bad vibes forgotten.

Starscraper apartments were luxurious even without money for elaborate furnishings; given time the polyp would grow into the shapes of any furniture you wanted, but this . . .

It was split level, a wide oblong reception area with an iron rail running along one side opposite the door, overlooking a lounge four metres below. A staircase set in the middle of the railings extended out for three metres, then split into two symmetrically opposed loops that wound down to the lower floor. Every wall was marbled. Up in the reception area it was green and cream; on both sides of the lounge it was purple and ruby; at the back of the lounge it was hazel and sapphire; the stairs were snow white. Recessed alcoves were spaced equidistantly around the whole reception area, bordered in fluted sable-black columns. One of them framed an ancient orange spacesuit, the lettering Russian Cyrillic. The furniture was heavy and ornate, rose-

wood and teak, polished to a gleam, carved with beautiful intaglio designs, rich with age, the work of master craftsmen from centuries past. A thick living apricot-coloured moss absorbed every footfall.

Joshua walked over to the top of the stairs without a word, trying to take it all in. The wall ahead of him, some thirty metres long and ten high, was a single window. It showed him a seabed.

Tranquillity had a circumfluous salt-water reservoir at its southern end, like all Edenist habitats. In keeping with the size of the habitat, it was some eight kilometres wide, and two hundred metres deep at the centre; more sea than lake. Both coastlines were a mix of sandy coves and high cliffs. An archipelago of islands and atolls ran all the way around it.

Joshua realized the apartment must be at the foot of one of the coastal cliffs. He could see sand stretching into dark blue distance, half-buried boulders smothered beneath crustaceans, long ribbons of red and green fronds waving idly. Shoals of small colourful fish were darting about; caught in the vast spill of light from the window they looked like jewelled ornaments. He thought he saw something large and dark swimming around the boundary of light.

The breath came out of him in an amazed rush. "How did you get this place?"

There was no immediate answer.

He turned to see Ione standing behind him, eyes closed, head tilted back slightly, as if in deep contemplation. She took a deep breath, and slowly opened her eyes to show the deepest ocean-blue irises, an enigmatic smile on her lips. "It's the one Tranquillity assigned me," she said simply.

"I never knew there were any here that you could ask for. And these furnishings—"

Her smile turned mischievous. And she was suddenly all little girlish again. It was her hair, he thought, all the girls he knew in Tranquillity had long, perfectly arranged hair. With her short, shaggy style she looked almost elfin, and supremely sexy.

"I told you I was an heiress," she said.

"Yes, but *this* . . ."

“You like it?”

“I’m afraid of it. I think I’ve been scavenging in the wrong place.”

“Come on.” She held out her hand.

He took her proffered fingers in a light grip. “Where are we going?”

“To get what you came for.”

“What’s that?”

She grinned, pulling him away from the stairs, along the reception area to the wall at the end. Another muscle membrane in one of the alcoves parted.

“Me,” she said.

It was a bedroom, circular, with a curving window band looking into the sea, its polyp ceiling hidden by drapes of dark red fabric. In the middle of the floor was a crater filled with perfectly clear jelly and covered by a thin rubbery sheet, silk pillows lining the rim. And Ione was standing very close. They kissed. He could feel her shiver slightly as his arms went round her. Heat began to seep into his body.

“Do you know why I wanted you?” she said.

“No.” He was kissing her throat, hands sliding across her blouse to cup her breasts.

“I’ve watched you,” Ione whispered.

“Er—” Joshua broke off fondling her breasts, and stared at her, the dreamy expression.

“You and all those beautiful rich girls. You’re an excellent lover, Joshua. Did you know that?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Jesus. She’s watched me? When? The night before last had been pretty wild, but he didn’t remember anyone else joining them. Although knowing Dominique it was highly possible. Hell, but I must have been smashed out of my skull.

Ione tugged at his jacket’s sash, opening the front. “You wait for the girls to climax, you want them to enjoy it. You make them enjoy it.” She kissed his sternum, tongue licking the ridges of his pectoral muscles. “That’s very rare, very bold.”

Her words and deeds were acting like the devil’s own stimulant program, sending a sparkling phantom fire shooting down his nerves to invade his groin and send his heart

racing. He felt his cock growing incredibly hard as his breathing turned harsh.

Ione's blouse came open easily under his impatient hands, and he pushed it off her shoulders. Her breasts were high and nicely rounded, with large areolae only a shade darker than her tan. He sucked on a nipple, fingers tracing the sleek muscle tone of her abdomen, eliciting indrawn hisses. Hands clutched and clawed at the back of his neck. He heard his name being called, the delight in her voice.

They fell onto the bed together, the jelly-substance under the sheet undulating wildly. The two of them rode the turbulent waves which their own threshing limbs whipped up.

Entering her was sheer perfection. She was delectably responsive, and strong, sinuous. He had to use his neural nanonics to restrain his body, making sure he remained in control. His secret glee. That way he could wait despite her furious pleading shouts. Wait as she strained and twisted sensually against him. Wait, and provoke, and prolong . . . Until the orgasm convulsed her, and a jubilant screech burst out of her mouth. Then he cancelled the artificial prohibitions, allowing his body to spend itself in frenzied bliss, gloating at her wide-eyed incredulity as his semen surged into her in a long exultant consummation.

They watched each other in silence as the bed slowly calmed. There was a moment's silent contemplation, then they were both grinning lazily. "Was I as good as all the others, Joshua?"

He nodded fervently.

"Good enough to make you stay in Tranquillity, knowing I'm available whenever you want?"

"Er—" He rolled onto his side, disquieted by the gleam in her eye. "That's unfair, and you know it."

She giggled. "Yes."

Looking at her, sprawled out on her back, with her arms flung above her head, perspiration slowly drying, he wondered why it should be that girls were always so much more alluring just after they'd had sex. So blatantly rampant, probably. "Are you going to ask me to stay, slap down an ultimatum? You or the *Lady Mac*?"

“Not stay, no.” She rolled over onto her side. “But I have other demands.”

The second time, Ione insisted on straddling him. It was easier on his feet, and that way he was able to play with her breasts for the whole time she rode him to their twinned climax. For their third encounter, he arranged the cushions into a pile to support her as she went down on all fours, then mounted her from behind.

After the fifth time Joshua really didn't care that he'd missed the party. Dominique would probably have found herself someone else for the night, too.

“When will you leave?” Ione asked.

“It'll take a couple of months to make *Lady Mac* space-worthy again, maybe three. I placed an order for the patterning nodes right after the auction. A lot depends on how long it takes to deliver them.”

“You know Sam Neeves and Octal Sipika haven't returned yet?”

“I know,” he said grimly. He had told his story a dozen times a day since he docked, especially among the other scavengers and spaceport crews. The word was out now. He knew they would deny it, maybe even say he attacked them. And he had no proof, it was their word against his. But it was his version which had been told first, his version which was accepted, which carried all the weight. Ultimately, he had money on his side as well now. Tranquillity didn't have a death penalty, but he had filed a charge of attempted murder with the personality as soon as he'd docked; they ought to get twenty years. The personality certainly hadn't challenged his story, which gave his confidence a healthy boost.

“Well, make sure you don't do anything stupid when they do turn up,” Ione said. “Leave it to the serjeants.”

Tranquillity's serjeants were an addition to the usual habitat servitor genealogy, hulking exoskeleton-clad humanoids that served as a police force.

“Yes,” he groused. An unpleasant thought intruded. “You do believe it was them who attacked me, don't you?”

Her cheeks dimpled as she smiled. “Oh, yes, we checked as best we could. There have been eight scavengers lost in the past five years. In six cases, Neeves and Sipika were out

in the Ring at the same time, and in each instance they auctioned a larger than usual number of Laymil artefacts after they docked."

Despite the warm weight of her pressing down on him, that eerie chill returned. It was the casual way she said it, the supreme confidence in her tone. "Who checked, Ione? Who's we?"

She giggled again. "Oh, Joshua! Haven't you worked it out yet? Perhaps I was wrong about you, although I admit you have been distracted with other matters since we arrived."

"Worked what out?"

"Me. Who I am, of course."

The intimation of disaster rose through him like a tidal wave. "No," he said hoarsely. "I don't know."

She smiled, and raised herself on her elbows, head held ten centimetres above his, taunting. "I'm the Lord of Ruin."

He laughed, a sort of nervous choke which trailed off. "Jesus, you mean it."

"Absolutely." She rubbed her nose against his. "Look at my nose, Joshua."

He did. It was a thin nose, with a down-turned end. The Saldana nose, that famous trademark which the Kulu royal family had kept through every genetic modification for the last ten generations. Some said the characteristic had deliberately been turned into a dominant gene by the geneticists.

What she said was true, he knew it was. Intuition yammered in his mind, as strong as the day he found the Laymil electronics. "Oh shit."

She kissed him, and sat back, arms folded in her lap, looking smug.

"But why?" he asked.

"Why what?"

"Jesus!" His arms waved about in exasperated agitation. "Why not let people know you're running things? Show them who you are. Why . . . why carry on with this charade of the research project? And your father's dead; who's been looking after you for the last eight years? And why me? What did you mean, being wrong about me?"

"Which order do you want them in? Actually, they're all

connected, but I'll start at the beginning for you. I'm an eighteen-year-old girl, Joshua. I'm also a Saldana, or at least I have their genetic super-heritage, which means I'll live for damn near two centuries, my IQ is way above normal, and I've got the same kind of internal strengthening you have, among other improvements. Oh, we're a breed above, us Saldanas. Just right to rule you common mortals."

"So why don't you? Why spend your time skulking around parties picking up people like me to screw?"

"It's an image thing which makes me a shrinking violet for the moment. Maybe you don't realize just how much authority the habitat personality has in Tranquillity. It is omnipotent, Joshua, it runs the whole shebang, there is no need for a court, for civil servants, it enforces the constitution with perfect impartiality. It provides the most stable political environment in the Confederation outside Edenism and the Kulu Kingdom. That's why it is such a successful haven; not just a tax haven either, but economically and financially. You'll always be safe living in Tranquillity. You can't corrupt it, you can't bribe it, you can't get it to change its laws even through logical argument. *You* can't. I can. It takes orders from me, and only me, the Lord of Ruin. That's the way grandfather Michael wanted it, one ruler, dedicated to one job: government. My father had a lot of children by quite a number of women, and they all had the affinity gene, but they all left to become Edenists. All but me, because I was gestated in a womb-analogue set-up similar to the void-hawks and their captains. We're bonded, you see, little me and a sixty-five-kilometre-long coral-armoured beastie, mind-mated for life."

"Then come forward publicly, let people know you exist. We've been living on rumours for eight years."

"And that was the best thing for you. Like I said, I'm eighteen. Would you trust me to run a nation of three million people? To make alterations to the constitution, tinker with the investment laws, put up the price of the He3 the starships use, which *Lady Macbeth* uses? That's what I can do, change anything I want. You see, unlike Kulu with its court politics, and the Edenists with their communal consensus, I have no one to guide me, or more importantly, to restrain

me. What I say goes, and anyone who argues is flung out of an airlock. That's the law, my law."

"Trust," he said, realizing. "Nobody would trust you. Everything works smoothly because we thought the habitat personality was carrying on your father's policies."

"That's right. No billionaire like Parris Vasilkovsky, who has spent seventy years building up his commercial empire, is going to deposit his entire fortune in a nation which has a dizzy teenage girl as absolute ruler. I mean, he's only got to look at the way his daughter behaves, and she's a lot older than I am."

Joshua grinned. "Point taken." He remembered the crack about watching; of course Ione would be able to receive Tranquillity's sensory images through her affinity bond, she could watch anything and anybody she wanted. A slight flush warmed his face. "So that's why you keep on wasting money on the Laymil research project, so people will think it's business as usual. Not that I'm complaining. Jesus! That last bid right you've got, seven and a half million fuseodollars." His smile faded at the expression of disapproval registering on her face.

"You couldn't be further from the truth, Joshua. I consider research into the Laymil to be the single most important issue in my life."

"Oh, come on! I've spent years grubbing round in the Ruin Ring. Sure, it's a mystery. Why did they do it? But don't you see, it doesn't matter. Not to the degree which the research team pursue it. The Laymil are xenocs, for Christ's sake, who cares how weird their psychology was, or that they found some fruitcake death-cult religion."

Ione exhaled, shaking her head in consternation. "Some people refuse to see the problem, I accept that, but I never thought you'd be one of them."

"Refuse to see what problem?"

"It's like that sometimes, something so big, so frightening, staring you right in the face, and you just block it out. Planet dwellers live in earthquake zones and on the side of volcanoes, yet they can't see anything crazy about it, how stupid they're being. The reason is all important, Joshua, vi-

tally important. Why do you think my grandfather did what he did?"

"I haven't got a clue. I thought that was supposed to be the universe's second greatest mystery."

"No, Joshua, no mystery. Michael Saldana established the Laymil research project because he thought it was his duty, not just to the kingdom but to all humanity. He could see just how long a project it would be. That's why he alienated his family and endured the wrath of the Christian Church to grow Tranquillity. So that there would always be someone who shared the need, and had the resources to continue the research. He could have ordered Kulu's xenoc-research institutions to perform the investigation. But how long would that have lasted? His reign, certainly. Maurice's reign, too. Possibly even for that of Maurice's eldest son. But he was worried sick that wouldn't be long enough. It's such a colossal task; you know that more than most. Even the Kings of Kulu couldn't keep a project like this going on a priority budget for more than two or three centuries. He had to be free of his heritage and obligations in order to ensure the most important undertaking in human history wasn't allowed to waste away and die."

Joshua gazed at her levelly, remembering the didactic course he had taken on affinity and Edenist culture. "You talk to him, don't you? Your grandfather. He transferred his memories into the habitat personality, and they leaked into you when you were in the womb-analogue. That's why you spout all this crap. He's contaminated you, Ione."

For a moment Ione looked hurt, then she summoned up a rueful smile. "Wrong again, Joshua. Neither Michael nor Maurice transferred their memories during death. The Saldanas are pretty devout Christians; my Kulu cousins are supposed to rule by divine right, remember?"

"Michael Saldana was excommunicated."

"By the Bishop of Nova Kong, never by the Pope in Rome. It was politics, that's all. His punishment, dished out by the Kulu court. He shocked the family to its odiously complacent core by growing Tranquillity. The whole basis of their sovereignty is that they simply cannot be bribed or corrupted, their wealth and privileges make it totally impos-

sible. They are the ultimate straight arrows, dedicated to service, because they have every physical and material whim catered for. There isn't anything else for them to do but rule. And I have to admit they make quite a good job of it; Kulu is wealthy, strong, independent, with the highest socioeconomic index outside Edenism. The Saldanas and their century-long development projects did that for the Kingdom, a leadership which genuinely considers that its nation's interests are paramount. That's remarkable, bordering on unique. And they are revered for it, there are gods who receive less adulation than the Saldanas. Yet Michael considered an intellectual problem sufficient grounds to lay all that aside. Small wonder the family were terrified, not to mention furious with him. He showed it was possible to suborn a mighty Saldana, to turn their attention from parochial matters. That's why the bishop did what he was ordered to do. But my grandfather remained a Christian until the day he died. And I am too."

"Sorry." Joshua leant over and rummaged round in his pile of clothes until he found the small pear-shaped bottle of Norfolk Tears. He took a swig. "You take some getting used to, Ione."

"I know. Now imagine your reaction magnified three million times. There'd be riots."

Joshua passed her the bottle. It was tipped up daintily, a few drops of the precious imported liquor sliding down past her lips. He admired the way the skin pulled taut over her abdomen as her head went back, the breasts pushed forward. He let a hand slide up the side of her ribs, questing innocently. The initial shock of her identity was fading like a stolen daydream, he wanted the reassurance she was still the same ratty teenager who had turned him on so badly back at the party.

"So if it's not prenatal ideological indoctrination, what convinces you that the research project is worthwhile?" he asked.

Ione lowered the bottle, marshalling her thoughts. Joshua, among his many other faults, could be depressingly cynical. "Proximity. Like I said, Tranquillity and I are bonded. I see what it sees. And the Ruin Ring is always there, just below

us. Seventy thousand habitats, not so different from Tranquillity, pulverized into gravel. And it was suicide, Joshua. The research team believes that the living cells in the Laymil habitats underwent some kind of spasm, cracking the outer silicon shell. They would have to be ordered to do it, compelled, probably. I doubt I could get Tranquillity to do it just by asking nicely.”

I might, Tranquillity said silently in her mind. **But you would have to give me a very good reason.**

To save me from a fate worse than death?

That would do it.

Name one.

That is something only you can decide.

She grinned and had another nip from the bottle. It was an amazing drink. She could feel its warmth seeping through her. And Joshua’s lower torso was cradled between her thighs. The insidious combination was becoming highly arousing.

He was giving her a curious look.

“Tranquillity says it’s not very likely,” she told him.

“Oh.” He took the bottle back. “But this constant awareness of the Ruin Ring is still a kind of unnatural motivation. Tranquillity worries about it, so you do.”

“It’s more of a gentle reminder, like a crucifix reminds us of what Christ suffered, and why. It means I don’t suffer a lack of faith in the work the research team does. I know we have to find the reason.”

“Why, though? Why do you and your father, and your grandfather, all consider it so important?”

“Because the Laymil were ordinary.” That got through to him, she saw. A frown crinkled his brow below the sticky strands of tawny hair. “Oh, they have a substantially different body chemistry, and three sexes, and monster bodies, but their minds worked along reasonably similar lines to ours. That makes them understandable. It also makes us dangerously similar. And because they were at least equal to us, if not more advanced, technologically. Whatever it was they came up against is something that one day we are also going to encounter. If we know what it is, we can prepare ourselves, maybe even defend ourselves. Provided we have

some warning. That's what Michael realized, his revelation. So you see, he never really did abandon his duty and commitment to Kulu. It's just that this was the only possible way he could hope to safeguard the Kingdom in the ultra-long-term. However unconventional, it had to be done."

"And is it being done? Is your precious team any closer to finding out what happened?"

"Not really. Sometimes I get afraid that we are too late, that too much has been lost. We know so much about the Laymil physically, but so little about their culture. That's why we nabbed your electronics. That much stored data might be the breakthrough we need. We wouldn't need much, just a pointer. There's only two real options."

"Which are?"

"They discovered something that made them do it. Their scientists uncovered some fundamental physical truth or law; or a priest group stumbled across an unbearable theological revelation, that death cult you mentioned. The second option is even worse: that something discovered them, something so fearsome that they felt racial death was a preferable alternative to submission. If it was the second, then that menace is still out there, and it's only a matter of time until we encounter it."

"Which do you think it was?"

She squeezed her legs just that fraction tighter against him, welcoming the comfort his physical presence bestowed. As always when she thought about it, the brooding seemed to sap a portion of her will. Racial pride aside, the Laymil were very advanced, and strong . . . "I tend to think it was the second, an external threat. Mainly because of the question over the Laymil's origin. They didn't evolve on any planet in this star system. Nor did they come from any local star. And from the spacecraft fragments we've found we're pretty sure they didn't have our ZTT technology, which leaves a multi-generation interstellar ark as the most likely option. But that's the kind of ship you only use to colonize nearby stars, within fifteen or twenty light-years. And in any case, why travel across interstellar space just to build habitats to live in? There's no need to leave your original star system if that's all you're going to do. No, I think they

came a very long way through ordinary space, for a very real reason. They were fleeing. Like the Tyrathca abandoned their homeworld when its star blew up into a red supergiant.”

“But this nemesis still found them.”

“Yes.”

“Has anyone found remnants of an ark ship?”

“No. If the Laymil did travel to Mirchusko in a slower-than-light ship then they must have arrived around seven to eight thousand years ago. To build up a population base of seventy thousand habitats from one, or even ten ships, would take at least three thousand years. Apparently the Laymil didn’t have quite our fecundity when it comes to reproduction. Such an ark ship would have been very old by the time it reached Mirchusko. It was probably abandoned. If it was in the same orbit as the habitats when they were destroyed, then the secondary collisions would have broken it apart.”

“Pity.”

She bent over to kiss him, enjoying the way his hands tightened around her waist. The hazy blue-shadow images she had poached from Tranquillity’s sensitive cells, the private cries she had eavesdropped through the affinity bond, had been borne out. Joshua was the most dynamic lover she had ever known. Gentle and domineering; it was a lethal combination. If only he wasn’t quite so ruthlessly mechanical about it. A little too much of his pleasure had come from seeing her lose all control. But then that was Joshua, unwilling to share; the life he led—the endless casual sex offered by Dominique and her set, and the false sense of independence incurred from scavenging—left him too hardened for that. Joshua didn’t trust people.

“That just leaves me,” he said. His breath was hot on her face. “Why me, Ione?”

“Because you’re not quite normal.”

“What?”

The intimacy shattered.

Ione tried not to laugh. “How many big strikes have you had this year, Joshua?”

“It’s been a reasonable year,” he said evasively.

"It's been a stupendous year, Joshua. Counting the electronics stack, you found nine artefacts, which netted you a total of over eight million fuseodollars. No other scavenger has ever earned that much in one year in the hundred and eighty years since Tranquillity was germinated. In fact, no other scavenger has ever earned that much, period. I checked. Someone earned six hundred thousand fuseodollars in 2532 for finding an intact Laymil corpse, and she retired straight away. You are either *amazingly* lucky, Joshua, or . . ." She trailed off, leaving the suggestion hanging tantalizingly in the air.

"Or what?" There was no humour in his tone.

"I think you are psychic."

It was the flash of guilt which convinced her she was right. Later, she made Tranquillity replay the moment countless times, the image from its optically sensitive cells in the mock-marble walls providing her a perfectly focused close up of the flattish planes which made up his face. For a brief second after she said it, Joshua looked fearful and frightened. He rallied beautifully, of course, sneering, laughing.

"Bollocks!" he cried.

"How do you explain it, then? Because believe me, it hasn't gone unnoticed amongst your fellow scavengers, and I don't just mean Messrs Neeves and Sipika."

"You said it: amazingly lucky. It's sheer probability. If I went out into the Ruin Ring again, I wouldn't find a single strike for the next fifty years."

She stroked a single finger along the smooth skin of his chin. He didn't have any stubble, facial hair was another free fall irritant geneering had disposed of. "Bet you would."

He folded his arms behind his head and grinned up at her. "We'll never know now, will we?"

"No."

"And that's what made me irresistible to you? My X-ray sight?"

"Sort of. It would be useful."

"Just: useful?"

"Yes."

"Why, what did you expect me to do for you?"

"Make me pregnant."

This time the fright took longer to fade. "What?" He looked almost panic stricken.

"Make me pregnant. Psychic intuition would be a very useful trait for the next Lord of Ruin to have."

"I'm not psychic," he said petulantly.

"So you say. But even if you're not, you would still make a more than satisfactory genetic donor to any child. And I do have a paramount duty to provide the habitat with an heir."

"Careful, you're almost getting romantic."

"You wouldn't be tied down by any parental responsibilities, if that's what bothers you. The zygote would be placed in zero-tau until I'm reaching the end of my life. Tranquillity and the servitor housechimps will bring it up."

"Fine way to treat a kid."

She sat up straight, stretching, and ran her hands up her belly, toying with her breasts. You couldn't be any more unfair to a male, especially when he was naked and trapped below you. "Why? Do you think I turned out badly? Point to the flaw, Joshua."

Joshua reddened. "Jesus."

"Will you do it?" Ione picked up the nearly empty liquor bottle. "If I don't turn you on, there is a clinic in the StAnne starscraper which can perform an in-vitro fertilization." She carefully let a single drop of Norfolk Tears fall onto her erect nipple. It stayed there, glistening softly, and she moved the bottle to her other breast. "You just have to say no, Joshua. Can you do that? Say no. Tell me you've had your fill of me. Go on."

His mouth closed around her left breast, teeth biting almost painfully, and he started sucking.

What do you think? Ione asked Tranquillity hours later, when Joshua had finally sated himself with her. He was sleeping on the bed, ripples of aquamarine light played across him, filtering in through the window. High above the water, the axial light-tube was bringing a bright dawn to the habitat's parkland.

I think the blood supply to your brain got cut off when you were in the womb-analogue organ. The damage is obviously irreparable.

What's wrong with him?

He lies continually, he sponges off his friends, he steals whenever he thinks it won't be noticed, he has used stimulant programs illegal on most Confederation worlds, he shows no respect to the girls he has sexual relations with, he even tried to avoid paying his income tax last year, claiming repairs to his spacecraft were legitimate expenses.

But he found all those artefacts.

I admit that is somewhat puzzling.

Do you think he attacked Neeves and Sipika?

No. Joshua was not in the Ruin Ring when those other scavengers disappeared.

So he must be psychic.

I cannot logically refute the hypothesis. But I don't believe it.

You, acting on a hunch!

Where you are concerned, I act on my feelings. Ione, you grew inside me, I nurtured you. How could I not feel for you?

She smiled dreamily at the ceiling. Well, I do think he's psychic. There's certainly something different about him. He has this sort of radiance, it animates him more than any other person I know.

I haven't seen it.

It's not something you can see.

Even assuming you are correct about him being psychic, why would your child retain the trait? It's not exactly something sequenced into any known gene.

Magic passes down through families the same way as red hair and green eyes.

This isn't an argument I'm going to win, is it?

No. Sorry.

Very well. Would you like me to book you an appointment in the StAnne clinic's administration processor?

What for?

An in-vitro fertilization.

No, the child will be conceived naturally. But I will need the clinic later to take the zygote out and prepare it for storage.

Is there a specific reason for doing it this way? In vitro would be much simpler.

Maybe, but Joshua really is superb in bed. It'll be a lot more fun this way.

Humans!

9

The hot rain falling on Durringham had started shortly after daybreak on Wednesday; it was now noon on Thursday and there had been no let-up. The satellite pictures showed there was at least another five hours' worth of cloud waiting over the ocean. Even the inhabitants, normally unperturbed by mere thunderstorms, had deserted the streets. Scummy water swirled round the stone supports of raised wooden buildings, seeping up through the floorboards. More worryingly, there had been several mudslides on the north-east side of the city. Durringham's civic engineers (all eight of them) were alarmed that an avalanche effect would sweep whole districts into the Juliffe.

Lalonde's Governor, Colin Rexrew, received their datavised report phlegmatically. He couldn't honestly say the prospect of losing half of the capital was an idea which roused any great regret. Pity it wasn't more.

At sixty years old he had reached the penultimate position in his chosen profession. Born in Earth's O'Neill Halo, he had started working for the astroengineering giant Miconia Industrial straight after university, qualifying with a degree in business finance, then diversified into subsidiary management, a highly specialized profession, making sure semi-independent divisions retained their corporate identity even though they were hundreds of light-years from Earth. The company's widespread offices meant he was shunted around the Confederation's inhabited systems in three-year shifts, slowly building an impressive portfolio of experience and qualifications, always putting his personal life second to the company.

Miconia Industrial had taken a ten per cent stake in the Lalonde Development Company, the third largest single in-

vestor. And Colin Rexrew had been appointed Governor two years ago. He had another eight years of office to run, after which he'd be in line for a seat on Miconia's board. He would be sixty-eight by then, but some geneering in his heritage gave him a life expectancy of around a hundred and twenty. At sixty-eight he would be just hitting his peak. With a successful governorship under his belt, his chances of nabbing the board seat were good verging on excellent.

Although, as he now knew to his cost, success on Lalonde was a slippery concept to define. After twenty-five years of investment by the LDC, Lalonde wasn't even twenty per cent self-financing. He was beginning to think that if the planet was still here in eight years' time he would have accomplished the impossible.

His office took up the entire third storey of a dumper on the eastern edge of the city. The furniture itself was all made by local carpenters from mayope wood, Lalonde's one really useful resource. He had inherited it from his predecessor, and it was a trifle sturdy for his taste. The thick bright jade carpet of kilian hair had come from Mulbekh, and the computer systems were from Kulu. A glass-fronted drinks cabinet was well stocked, with a good third of the bottles in the chiller containing local wines, which he was acquiring a palate for. Curving windows gave him a view out over the cultivated rural areas beyond the suburb, a sight far more pleasing than the backward mundane city itself. But today even the neat white clapboard houses were afflicted by the downpour, appearing dowdy and beleaguered, the usually green fields covered by vast pools of water. Distressed animals crowded onto the island mounds, bleating pathetically.

Colin sat behind his desk, ignoring the datawork flashing urgently on his screens to watch the deluge through the window. Like everyone on Lalonde he wore shorts, although his were tailored in the London arcology; his pale blue jacket was slung over one of the conference chairs, and the conditioner failed to stop sweat stains from appearing under the arms of his pale lemon silk shirt.

There was no such thing as a gym on the whole planet, and he could never bring himself to jog from his official

residence to the office in the morning, so he was starting to put on weight at a disappointing rate. His already round face now had accentuated jowls, and a third chin was developing; a smattering of freckles had expanded under Lalonde's sunlight to cover both cheeks and his forehead. Once hale ginger hair was thinning and fading towards silver. Whatever ancestor had paid for the geneered metabolic improvements which increased his life expectancy had obviously stinted on the cosmetic side.

More lightning bolts stabbed down out of the smothering cloud blanket. He counted to four before he heard the thunder. If this goes on much longer even the puddles will develop puddles, he thought bleakly.

There was a bleep from the door, and it slid open. His neural nanonics told him it was his executive aide, Terrance Smith.

Colin swivelled his chair back round to the desk. Terrance Smith was thirty-five, a tall, elegant man with thick black hair and a firm jaw; today he was dressed in knee-length grey shorts and a green short-sleeved shirt. His weight was never anything less than optimum. The rumour around Colin's staff said Smith had bedded half of the women in the administration office.

"Meteorology say we're due for a dry week after this passes over," Terrance said as he sat in the chair in front of Colin's desk.

Colin grunted. "Meteorology didn't say this lot was expected."

"True." Terrance consulted a file in his neural nanonics. "The geological engineers up at Kenyon have finished their preliminary survey. They are ready to move on to more extensive drilling for the biosphere cavern." He datavised the report over to Colin.

Kenyon was the twelve-kilometre-diameter stony iron asteroid that had been knocked into orbit a hundred and twelve thousand kilometres above Lalonde by a series of nuclear explosions. When Lalonde's first stage of development was complete, and the planetary economy was up and functioning without requiring any additional investment, the LDC wanted to progress to developing a space industry

station cluster. That was where the real money lay, fully industrial worlds. And the first essential for any zero-gee industrial stations was an abundant supply of cheap raw material, which the asteroid would provide. The mining crews would tunnel out the ores, literally carving themselves a habitable biosphere in the process.

Unfortunately, now Kenyon was finally in place after its fifteen-year journey from the system's asteroid belt, Colin doubted he had the budget even to maintain the geological engineering team, let alone pay for exploratory drilling. Transporting new colonists into the continental interior was absorbing funds at a frightening rate, and the first thing an asteroid settlement needed was a reliable home market as a financial foundation before it could start competing on the interstellar market.

"I'll look into it later," he told Terrance. "But I'm not making any promises. Somebody jumped the gun on that one by about twenty years. The asteroid industry project looks good on our yearly reports. Moving it into orbit is something you can point to and show the board how progressive you're being. They know it doesn't make a dollar while it's underway. But as soon as it's here in orbit they expect it to be instantly profitable. So I'm lumbered with the bloody thing while my cretinous predecessor is drawing his standard pension plus a nice fat bonus for being so dynamic while he was in office. The auditors should have caught this, you know. It's going to be another fifty years before these mud farmers can scrape together enough capital to support high-technology industries. There's no demand here."

Terrance nodded, handsome features composed into a grave expression. "We've authorized start-up loans for another eight engineering companies in the last two months. Power bike sales are healthy in the city, and we should have an indigenous four-wheel-drive jeep within another five years. But I agree, large-scale consumer manufacturing is still a long way off."

"Ah, never mind," Colin sighed. "You weren't the one who authorized Kenyon. If they'd just stop sending us colonists for six months, allow us to catch our breath. A

ship every twenty days is too much, and the passage fees the colonists pay don't cover half of the cost of sending them upriver. Once the starship's been paid for the board doesn't care. But what I wouldn't give for some extra funds to spend on basic infrastructure, instead of subsidizing the river-boats. It's not as if the captains don't make enough."

"That was something else I wanted to bring up. I've just finished accessing the latest schedules flek from the board; they're going to send us five colonist-carrier starships over the next seventy days."

"Typical." Colin couldn't even be bothered with a token protest.

"I was thinking we might ask the river-boat captains to take more passengers each trip. They could easily cram another fifty on board if they rigged up some awnings over the open decks. It wouldn't be any different from the transients' dormitories, really."

"You think they'd go for that?"

"Why not? We pay their livelihood, after all. And it's only temporary. If they don't want to take them, then they can sit in harbour and lose money. The paddle-boats can hardly be used for bulk cargo. Once we've repossessed the boats, we'll give them to captains who are more flexible."

"Unless they all band together; those captains are a clanish lot. Remember that fuss over Crompton's accident? He rams a log, and blames us for sending him off into an uncharted tributary. We had to pay for the repairs. The last thing we need right now is an outbreak of trade unionism."

"What shall I do, then? The transients' dormitories can't hold more than seven thousand at once."

"Ah, to hell with it. Tell the captains they're taking more heads per trip and that's final. I don't want the transients in Durringham a moment longer than necessary." He tried not to think what would ever happen if one of the paddle-boats capsized in the Juliffe. Lalonde had no organized emergency services; there were five or six ambulances working out of the church hospital for casualties in the city, but a disaster a thousand kilometres upriver . . . And the colonists were nearly all arcology dwellers, half of them couldn't swim. "But after this we'll have to see about increasing the

number of boats. Because as sure as pigs shit, we won't ever get a reduction in the number of colonists they send us. I heard on the grapevine Earth's population is creeping up again, the number of illegal births rose three per cent last year. And that's just the official illegals."

"If you want more boats, that will mean more mortgage loans," Terrance observed.

"I can do basic arithmetic, thank you. Tell the comptroller to shrink some other budgets to compensate."

Terrance wanted to ask which divisions, every administration department was chronically underfunded. The look on Colin Rexrew's face stopped him. "Right, I'll get onto it." He loaded a note in his neural nanonics general business file.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to look into safety on those paddle-boats some time. Make them carry lifebelts."

"Nobody in Durringham makes lifebelts."

"So that's a fresh business opportunity for some smart entrepreneur. And yes I know it would need another loan to establish. Hell, do we have a cork-analogue tree here? They could carve them, everything else on this bloody planet is made out of wood."

"Or mud."

"God, don't remind me." Colin glanced out of the window again. The clouds had descended until they were only about four hundred metres above the ground. Dante got it all wrong, he thought, hell isn't about searing heat, it's about being permanently wet. "Anything else?"

"Yes. The marshal you sent up to Schuster County has filed his report. I didn't want to load it into the office datanet."

"Good thinking." Colin knew the CNIS team monitored their satellite communications. There was also Ralph Hiltch sitting snugly over in the Kulu Embassy, like a landbound octopus with its tentacles plugged into damn near every administration office, siphoning out information. Although God alone knew why Kulu bothered, maybe paranoia was a trait the Saldanas had geneered into their super genes. He had also heard a strictly unofficial whisper that the Edenists

had an active intelligence team on the planet, which was pushing credulity beyond any sane limits.

“What was the summary?” he asked Terrance.

“He drew a complete blank.”

“Nothing?”

“Four families have definitely gone missing, just like the sheriff said. All of them lived out on the savannah a fair distance away from Schuster town itself. He visited their homesteads, and said it was like they walked out one morning and never came back. All their gear had been looted by the time he arrived, of course, but he asked around, apparently there was even food laid out ready for a meal in one home. No sign of a struggle, no sayce or kroclion attack. Nothing. It really spooked the other colonists.”

“Strange. Have we had any reports of bandit gangs operating up there?”

“No. In any case, bandits wouldn’t stop after just a few families. They’d keep going until they were caught. Those families disappeared nine weeks ago now, and there have been no reports of any repetition. Whatever did happen, it looks like a one off.”

“And bandits would have stripped the homesteads of every remotely useful piece of gear, anyway,” Colin mused out loud. “What about the Tyrathca farmers? Do they know anything?”

“The marshal rode out to their territory. They claim they’ve had no contact with humans since they left Durringham. He’s pretty sure they’re telling the truth. There was certainly no sign of any humans ever being in their houses. His affinity-bonded dog had a good scout round.”

Colin stopped himself from making the sign of the cross; his Halo asteroid upbringing had been pretty formal. Supervisors and sheriffs using affinity was something he could never get used to.

“The families all had daughters; some teenagers, a couple in their early twenties,” Terrance said. “I checked their registration files.”

“So?”

“Several of the girls were quite pretty. They could have moved downriver to one of the larger towns, set up a

brothel. It wouldn't be the first time. And from what we know, conditions in Schuster are fairly dire."

"Then why not take their gear with them?"

"I don't know. That was the only explanation I could think of."

"Ah, forget it. If there aren't any more disappearances, and the situation isn't developing into an insurrection, I'm not interested. Write it down to an animal carrying them off for nest food, and call the marshal back. Those colonists know the risks of alien frontiers before they start out. If they're mad enough to go and live out in the jungle and play at being cavemen, let them. I've got enough real problems to deal with at this end of the river."

Quinn Dexter had heard of the disappearances, it was all round the Aberdale village camp the day a party from Schuster made their official welcome visit to Group Seven. Four complete families, seventeen people flying off into thin air. It interested him, especially the rumours. Bandits, xenocs (especially the Tyrathca farmers over in the foothills), secret metamorph aborigines, they had all been advanced as theories, and all found wanting. But the metamorph stories fascinated Quinn. One of Schuster's Ivets told him there had been several sightings when they had first arrived a year ago.

"I saw one myself," Sean Pallas told him. Sean was a couple of years older than Quinn, and could have passed for thirty. His face was gaunt, his ribs were starkly outlined. Fingers and arms were covered in red weals, and pocked sores where insects had bitten him. "Out in the jungle. It was just like a man, only completely black. It was horrible."

"Hey," Scott Williams complained. He was the only Afro-Caribbean among Aberdale's eighteen Ivets. "Ain't nothing wrong with that."

"No, man, you don't understand. It didn't have any face, just black skin, there was no mouth or eyes; nothing like that."

"You sure?" Jackson Gael asked.

"Yeah. I was twenty metres from it. I know what I saw. I

shouted out and pointed, and it just vanished, ducked down behind a bush or something. And when we got there—”

“The cupboard was bare,” Quinn said.

The others laughed.

“It’s not funny, man,” Sean said hotly. “It was there, I swear. There was no way it could have got away without us seeing. It changed shape, turned into a tree or something. And there’s more just like it. They are out there in the jungle, man, and they’re angry with us for stealing their planet.”

“If they’re that primitive, how do they know we’ve stolen their planet?” Scott Williams asked. “How do they know we’re not the true aboriginals?”

“It’s no joke, man. You won’t be laughing when one of them morphs out of the trees and grabs you. They’ll drag you underground where they live in big cave cities. Then you’ll be sorry.”

Quinn and the others had talked about Sean and what he said that night. They agreed that he was badly undernourished, probably hysterical, certainly suffering from sun dreams. The visitors from Schuster had cast a tangible gloom on the mood of all Aberdale’s residents, an all too physical reminder of how close failure lurked. There hadn’t been much contact between the two groups since the *Swithland* departed.

But Quinn had thought a lot about what Sean said, and the talk he picked up around the village. A black humanoid, without a face, who could disappear into the jungle without a trace (more than one, judging by the number of sightings). Quinn was pretty sure he knew what that was: someone wearing a chameleon camouflage suit. Nobody else in Aberdale had guessed, their minds just weren’t thinking along those lines, because it would be totally ridiculous to expect someone to be hiding out in the hinterlands of the greatest shit-hole planet in the Confederation. Which, when Quinn considered it, was the really interesting part. To hide away on Lalonde, where *nobody* would ever look, you must be the most desperate wanted criminal in the universe. Group of criminals, he corrected himself; well organized, well equipped. Conceivably, with their own spacecraft.

Later he discovered all the families who had disappeared had been living in savannah homesteads to the south-east of Schuster. Aberdale was east of Schuster.

Could a retinal implant operating in the infrared spectrum spot a chameleon suit?

The options opening up were amazing.

A fortnight after the *Swithland* left Group Seven at their new home on the Quallheim, the voidhawk *Niobe* emerged above Lalonde. With the Edenists having a five per cent stake in the LDC a visit from Jovian Bank officials was a regular occurrence. The visiting voidhawks also brought supplies and fresh personnel to the station in orbit around Murora, the largest of the system's five gas giants. They were there to supervise Aethra, a bitek habitat that had been germinated in 2602 as part of the Edenist contribution to developing the Lalonde system.

Darcy requested the *Niobe's* captain perform a detailed scan of Schuster County as soon as the voidhawk slipped into equatorial orbit. *Niobe* altered its orbital track to take it over Schuster at an altitude of two hundred kilometres. The verdant, undulating quilt of jungle rolled past below the voidhawk's sensor blisters, and it concentrated every spare neural cell on analysing the images. Resolution was ten centimetres, enough to distinguish individual humans.

After five daylight passes *Niobe* reported that there were no unauthorized human buildings within a one-hundred-kilometre radius of Schuster town, and all humans observed within that area were listed in the immigrant file Lori and Darcy had built up. Aboriginal-animal density was within expected parameters, which suggested that even if a group had concealed themselves in caves or stealth-cloaked structures, they weren't hunting for food. It found no trace of the missing seventeen people.

After six months Aberdale was looking more like a village and less like a lumberyard with each passing day. Group Seven had waded ashore that first day, armed with fission saws from their gear, and single-minded resolution. They had felled the mayope trees nearest the water, trimmed the

trunks to form sturdy pillars which they had driven deep into the shingly riverbed, then sliced out thick planks from the boughs to make a solid walkway. Fission blades made easy work of the timber, ripping through the compacted cellulose like a laser through ice. They sawed like mechanoids, and sweated the cuts into place, and hammered away until an hour before the sun set. By then they had a jetty three metres wide that extended twenty-five metres out into the river, with piles that could moor a half-dozen paddle-craft securely against the current.

The next day they had formed a human chain to unload their cargo-pods and cases as the paddle-boats docked one by one. Will-power and camaraderie made light of the task. And when the paddle-boats had set off back down the river the next day, they stood on the sloping bank and sang their hymn: "Onward, Christian Soldiers". Loud, proud voices carrying a long way down the twisting Quallheim.

The clearing which formed over the next fortnight was a broad semicircle, stretching a kilometre along the waterfront with the jetty at its centre. But unlike Schuster, Aberdale trimmed each tree as it came down, carrying the trunks and usable boughs to a neat stack, and flinging the smaller leftover branches into a firewood pile.

They built a community hall first, a smaller wooden version of the transients' dormitory with a wooden slat roof and woven palm walls a metre high. Everyone helped, and everyone learnt the more practical aspects of gussets and joists and tenons and rabbet grooves that a didactic carpentry course could never impart. Food came from frequent hunting trips into the jungle where lasers and electromagnetic rifles would bring down a variety of game. Then there were wild cherry-oak trees with their edible nutty-tasting fruit and acillus vines with small clusters of apple-analogue fruit. The children would be sent on foraging expeditions each day, scouring the fringes of the clearing for the succulent globes. And there was also the river with its shoals of brownspines that tasted similar to trout, and bottom-clinging mousecrabs. It was a bland diet to start with, often supplemented with chocolate and freeze-dried stocks taken

from the cargo-pods, but they never fell anywhere near Schuster's iron regimen.

They had to learn how to cook for batches of a hundred on open fires, mastering the technique of building clay ovens which didn't collapse, and binding up carcasses of sayce and danderil (a gazelle-analogue) to be spit-roasted. How to boil water in twenty-five-litre containers.

There were stinging insects to recognize, and thorny plants, and poisonous berries, nearly all of which somehow managed to look different from their didactic memory images. There were ways of lashing wood together; and firing clay so that it didn't crack. Some fronds were good for weaving and some shredded immediately; vines could be dried and used for string and nets. How to dig latrines that nobody fell into (the Ivets were given that task). A long, long list of practicalities which had to be grasped, the essential and the merely convenient. And, by and large, they managed.

After the hall came the houses, springing up in a crescent just inside the perimeter of the clearing. Two-room shacks with overhanging veranda roofs, standing half a metre off the ground thanks to astute management of the tree stumps. They were designed to be added to, a room at a time extending out of the gable walls.

Out of the two hundred and eighteen family groups, forty-two elected to live away from the village, out on the savannah which began south of the river where the jungle eventually faded away to scrub then finally grassland, a sea of rippling green stalks stretching away to the foothills of the distant mountain range, its uniformity broken only by occasional lonely trees and the far-off silver glimmer of narrow watercourses. They were the families who had brought calves and lambs and goat kids and foals, geneered to withstand months of hibernation; pumped full of drugs, and transported in marsupium shells. All the animals were female, so that they could be inseminated from the stock of frozen sperm that had accompanied them across three hundred light-years from Earth.

The Skibbows and the Kavas were among the families who had visions of filling the vast, empty savannah with

huge herds of meat-laden beasts. They slept in a tent on the edge of the jungle for five weeks while Gerald and Frank assembled their new home, a four-room log cabin with a stone fireplace, and solar panels nailed on the roof to power lights and a fridge. Outside, they built a small lean-to barn and a stockade; then dammed the little nearby stream with grey stones to form a pool they could wash and bathe in.

Four months and three days after the *Swithland* departed, they split open their seventeen marsupium shells (three had been stolen at the spaceport). The animals were curled up in a form-fitting sponge, almost as though they were in wombs, with tubes and cables inserted in every orifice. Fifteen made it through the revival process: three shire-horse foals, three calves, one bison, three goats, four lambs, and an Alsatian pup. It was a healthy percentage, but Gerald found himself wishing he could have afforded zero-tau pods for them.

All five family members spent the day helping the groggy animals stand and walk, feeding them a special vitamin-rich milk to speed recovery. Marie, who had never even patted a living animal before let alone nursed one, was bitten, peed on, butted, and had the yellowy milk spewed up over her dungarees. At nightfall she rolled into bed and cried herself to sleep; it was her eighteenth birthday, and no one had remembered.

Rai Molvi made his way across the clearing towards the jetty where the tramp trader boat was waiting, exchanging greetings with several adults. He felt a surge of pride at what he saw, the sturdy buildings, neat stacks of timber, fish smoking over open fires, danderil hides pegged out on frames to dry in the sun. A well-ordered community chasing a common goal. The LDC could use Aberdale in its promotional campaign without any falsehood, it was exemplary.

A second wave of tree felling had been underway for a month now, cutting rectangular gashes deep into the jungle around the perimeter of the clearing. From the air the village resembled a gear cog with exceptionally long teeth. The colonists were starting to cultivate the new fields, dig-

ging out the tree stumps, ploughing the soil with rotovators that charged from solar cells, planting their vegetable plots and fruit groves. Lines of small green shoots were already visible, pushing up through the rich black soil, and the farmers had to organize a bird patrol to scare off the hungry flocks perched waiting in the surrounding trees.

Not all of the Earth seeds had germinated successfully, which was surprising because they were geneered for Lalonde's environment. But Rai had every confidence the village would triumph. Today's fields would become tomorrow's estates. In six months they had accomplished more than Schuster had in eighteen. It was down to effective organization, he felt. His council was acknowledged as a stroke of salutary foresight, organizing them into an effective interactive work unit even back in the transients' dormitory.

He passed the community hall and stood to one side to let a group of children march by, carrying braces of fat polot birds they had caught in their traps. Their skin was scratched from thorns, and their legs were coated in mud, but they were smiling and laughing. Yes, Rai Molvi felt very good indeed.

He reached the jetty and walked its length. A couple of Ivets were in the river, Irley and Scott, hauling up their creels full of mousecrabs. The creels were adaptations of lobster-pots, one of Quinn's ideas.

Rai waved at the two lads, receiving a grinning thumbs-up. The Ivets were undoubtedly his greatest success. A month after they had arrived, Quinn Dexter had asked to talk to him. "Anything we say to Powel Manani just gets automatically ignored, but we know you'll give us a fair hearing, Mr Molvi."

Which was so true. It was his job to arbitrate, and like it or not, the Ivets were part of Aberdale. He must appear strictly impartial.

"We want to organize ourselves," Quinn had said earnestly. "Right now you have all eighteen of us working for you each day, but you have to feed us and let us live in the hall. It's not the best arrangement, because we just sweat our arses off for you and don't get anything out of it

for ourselves, so we don't give a hundred per cent, that's only human nature. None of us asked to come to Aberdale, but we're here now, and we want to make the most of it. We thought that if we had a rota so that thirteen of us are available as a general work team each day, then the remaining five could use the time to build something for ourselves, something to give us a bit of pride. We want to have our own cabin; and we could trap and grow our own food. That way you don't have to support us, and you get a far more enthusiastic work team to help put up your cabins and fell the trees."

"I don't know," Rai had said, although he could see the logic behind the idea. It was just Quinn he was unsettled over; he had encountered waster kids back in the arcology often enough, and Quinn's sinewy frame and assertive mannerisms brought the memories back. But he didn't want to appear prejudicial, and the lad was making an honest appeal which might well be beneficial to the whole community.

"We could try it for three weeks," Quinn suggested. "What have you got to lose? It's only Powel Manani who could say no to you."

"Mr Manani is here to help us," Rai answered stiffly. "If this arrangement is what the town council wants, then he must see that it is implemented."

Powel Manani had indeed objected, which Rai thought was a challenge to his authority and that of the council. In a session to which Powel Manani was not invited, the council decided that they would give the Ivets a trial period to see if they could become self-sufficient.

Now the Ivets had built themselves a long (and very well constructed, Rai grudgingly conceded) A-frame building on the eastern side of the clearing where they all lived. They caught a huge number of mousecrabs in their creels, which they traded for other types of food among the other villagers. They had their own chicken run and vegetable allotments (villagers had chipped in with three chicks and a few seeds from their own stocks). They joined the hunting parties, even being trusted to carry power weapons, although those did have to be handed back at the end of the day. And the daily work team were enthusiastic in the tasks they were

given. There was also some kind of still producing a rough drink, which Rai didn't strictly approve of, but could hardly object to now.

It all added up to a lot of credit in Rai Molvi's favour for pushing the idea so hard. And it wouldn't be long before the time was right for Aberdale to think about formally electing a mayor. After that, there was the county itself to consider. Schuster town was hardly flourishing; several of its inhabitants had already asked if they could move to Aberdale. Who knew what a positive, forthright man could aspire to out here where this world's history was being carved?

Rai Molvi came to the end of the jetty flushed with a strong sense of contentment. Which was why he was only slightly put out by a close-up view of the *Coogan*. The boat was twenty metres long, a bizarre combination of raft and catamaran. Flotation came from a pair of big hollowed-out trunks of some fibrous red wood, and a deck of badly planed planks had been laid out above them, supporting a palm-thatched cabin which ran virtually the whole length. The aft section was an engine house, with a small ancient thermal-exchange furnace, and a couple of time-expired electric motors used by the McBoeings in their flap actuators which the captain had salvaged from the spaceport. Forward of that was a raised wheel-house, with a roof made entirely of solar panels, then came the galley and bunk cabin. The rest of the cabin was given over to cargo.

The *Coogan*'s captain was Len Buchannan, a wire-thin man in his mid-fifties, dressed in a pair of worn, faded shorts and a tight-fitting blue cap. Rai suspected he had little geneering; the hair peeking out from his cap was tightly curled and pale grey, dark brown skin showed stringy muscles stretched taut and slightly swollen joints, several teeth had rotted away.

He stood in front of the wheel-house and welcomed Rai on board.

"I need a few supplies," Rai said.

"I ain't interested in barter," he said straight away, cheeks puffing out for emphasis. "Not unless it's powered equipment you're offering. I've had my fill of pickled vegetables and fruit preserves and cured hides. And don't even

think about saying fish. They're coming out my ears. I can't sell anything like that downriver. Nobody's interested."

Rai fished a roll of plastic Lalonde francs out of his pocket. Buchanan was the third trader captain to appear at Aberdale recently. All of them wanted cash for their goods, and none had bought much of Aberdale's produce in return. "I understand. I'm looking for cloth. Cotton mainly, but I'll take denim or canvas."

"Cost you a lot of francs. You got anything harder?"

"I might have," Rai said, with a grey inevitability. Didn't anybody use Lalonde francs? "Let's see what you've got first."

Gail Buchanan was sitting in the wheel-house, wearing a coolie hat and a shapeless khaki dress. An obese fifty-year-old with long, straggly dark hair, her legs were like water-filled sacks of skin; when she walked it was with a painful waddle. Most of her life was spent sitting on the *Coogan's* deck watching the world go by. She looked up from the clothes she was sewing to give Rai a friendly nod. "Cloth you wanted, is it, lovie?"

"That's right."

"Plenty of cloth, we've got. All woven in Durringham. Dyed, too. Won't find better anywhere."

"I'm sure."

"No patterns yet. But that'll come."

"Yes."

"Does your wife know how to sew, then?"

"I . . . Yes, I suppose so." Rai hadn't thought about it. Ar-cology synthetics came perfectly tailored; load your size into the commercial circuit and they arrived within six hours. If they started to wear, throw them into the recycler. Waster kids dressed in patched and frayed garments, but not decent people.

"If she doesn't, you send her to me."

"Thank you."

"Knitting too. None of the women that come here know how to knit. I give lessons. Best lessons east of Durringham. Know why, lovie?"

"No," Rai said helplessly.

“Because they’re the only ones.” Gail Buchanan slapped her leg and laughed, rolls of flesh quivering.

Rai gave her a sickly smile and fled into the cargo hold, wondering how many times that joke had been cracked over the years.

Len Buchanan had everything a farmstead could ever possibly want stacked up on his long shelves. Rai Molvi shuffled down the tiny aisle, staring round in awe and envy. There were power tools still in their boxes, solar cells (half of Rai’s had been stolen back in Durringham), fridges, microwaves, cryostats full of frozen animal sperm, MF album flek-players, laser rifles, nanonic medical packages, drugs, and bottle after bottle of liquor. The Lalonde-made products were equally impressive: nails, pots, pans, glass (Rai saw the panes and groaned, what he wouldn’t give for a window of glass), drinking glasses, boots, nets, seeds, cakes of dried meat, flour, rice, saws, hammers, and bale after bale of cloth.

“What kind of things would you take downriver?” Rai asked as Len unrolled some of the cotton for him.

Len pulled his cap off, and scratched his largely bald head. “Truth to tell, not much. What you produce up here, food and the like. People need it. But it’s the transport costs, see? I couldn’t take fruit more than a hundred kilometres and make a profit.”

“Small and valuable then?”

“Yes, that’s your best bet.”

“Meat?”

“Could do. There’s some villages not doing as well as you. They want the food, but how are they going to pay for it? If they spend all their money buying food, it’s going to run out fast, then they won’t be able to buy in new stocks of what they really need like seed and animals. I seen that happen before. Bad business.”

“Oh?”

“The Arklow Counties, a tributary over in the northern territory. All the villages failed about six or seven years back. No food, no money left to buy any in. They started marching downriver towards villages that did have food.”

“What happened?”

“Governor sent in the marshals, plus a few boosted mercenaries from offplanet if you believe what people say. Them starving villagers took a right pounding. Some escaped into the jungle, still there by all accounts, lot of bandit reports in the north. Most got themselves killed. The rest got a twenty-year work-time sentence; the Governor parcelled them out to other villages to work, just like Ivets. Families broken up, children never see their parents.” He sucked his cheeks in, scowling. “Yes, bad business.” Rai sorted out the cloth he wanted, and on impulse bought a packet of sweetcorn seed for Skyba, his wife. He offered the Lalonde notes again.

“Cost you double, that way,” Len Buchannan said. “The LDC people at the spaceport, they don’t give you anything like the proper exchange rate.”

Rai made one last attempt. “How about chickens?”

Len pointed to a shelf given over to cryostats, their tiny green LEDs twinkling brightly in the gloomy cabin. “See that? Two of those chambers are crammed full of eggs. There’s chickens, ducks, geese, pheasants, emus, and turkeys stored in there; I’ve even got three swans. I don’t need live chickens crapping on my deck.”

“OK.” Rai gave up; he dug into his inside pocket and offered his Jovian Bank disk, feeling a little bit shabby. People should believe in their own planet’s currency. If—when—Schuster County became an important commercial region, he would make damn sure every transaction was made in Lalonde francs. Patriotism like that would be very popular with the voters.

Len stood beside his wife as Rai walked back down the jetty. “Ten thousand born every second,” he murmured.

Gail chuckled. “Aye, and all of them come to live here.”

From their vantage point in the river shallows, Irley and Scott gave Rai a cheery wave as he carried his cloth ashore. Another who had a Jovian Bank credit disk, that made seventy-eight known residents now. Quinn would be pleased with them.

Rai reached the end of the jetty just as Marie Skibbow arrived carrying a bulky shoulder-bag. She gave him an uninterested glance and hurried on towards the *Coogan*.

What's she come to pick up? Rai wondered. Gerald's place was one of the prime savannah homesteads. Although the man himself was a complete self-righteous pain in the arse.

Horst Elwes stood at the base of the church's wooden corner stanchion, holding the cloth bag full of nails, and still managing to feel completely useless. Leslie didn't need anyone to hold the nails ready. But Horst could hardly let the Ivet work team assemble the church without being there, without at least the pretence of being involved.

The church was one of the last of Aberdale's buildings to be put up. He didn't mind that at all. These people had toiled hard to build their village and clear their fields. They couldn't spare the time on a structure that would only be used once or twice a week (though he liked to think there would be more services eventually). Nor was it right they should do so. Horst could never forget how the cathedrals of medieval Europe had risen like stone palaces out of the mouldering, stinking wooden slums. How the Church demanded the people of that time give and give and give. How fear was rooted in every soul and carefully nurtured. And because we were so arrogant, as aloof as God Himself, we suffered a terrible price in later centuries. Which again was right. Such a crime deserved a penance that lasted for so long.

So he held his services in the hall, and never complained when only thirty or forty people turned up. The church must be a focal point for unity, a place where people could come together and share their faith, not a baron demanding tribute.

And now the fields had been rotovated, the first batch of crops planted, and the animals brought out of hibernation, Aberdale had a moment of time to spare. Three Ivets had been assigned to him for a fortnight. They had built a long raftlike floor supported half a metre off the ground by old tree stumps, then put up four-metre-high stanchions to hold up the sloping roof.

At the moment it looked like a skeleton of some boxy dinosaur. Leslie Atcliffe was busy hammering the trusses into

place, while Daniel held them steady. Ann was busy cutting slates from the sheets of qualtook bark they had stripped off the felled trunks. The church itself would occupy a third of the structure, with a small infirmary at the rear, and Horst's room sandwiched between the two.

It was all going very well, and would probably go better if Horst wasn't there asking what he could do to help the whole time.

The church was going to be a fine building, second only to the Ivets' own A-frame. And how that structure had shown up the hall and the other houses. Horst had joined Rai Molvi in urging the council to allow the Ivets some independence and dignity. Now Quinn was the one who had really worked miracles in Aberdale. Since the long bark-slate covered A-frame had gone up the other residents had taken to quietly improving the structure of their own homes, adding corner braces, putting up shutters. And none of us will use an A-frame design, Horst thought. Oh, foolish pride! Everyone was captured by the quaint white-painted cottages we saw on the first days of the voyage upriver, we thought if we could emulate the look we would have the life that went with it. Now the most practical method of construction is a monopoly. Because using it would mean the Ivets knew best. And I can't even build the church that way, the sensible way, because people would be offended. Not out loud, but they would see and in their hearts they would object. But at least I can use the bark slates rather than slats that will warp and let in the rain like the houses which were built first.

Leslie climbed down the ladder, a rangy twenty-two-year-old wearing shorts sewn together from an old jump suit. A specially made belt had loops to hold all his carpentry tools. To start with Powel Manani had issued the tools on a daily basis, and demanded their return at night; now the Ivets kept them permanently. Several of them had developed into highly skilled carpenters; Leslie was one of them.

"We'll fetch the last two transverse frames now, Father," Leslie said. "They'll be up by lunch, then we can start with the lathing and the slates. You know, I think we will be fin-

ished by the end of the fortnight after all. It's just those pew benches I'm worried about, cutting that many dovetail joints in time is going to be tricky, even with fission blades."

"Don't pay it a second thought," Horst said. "I don't get enough of a congregation to fill every pew. A roof over our heads is more than enough. The rest can wait. The Lord understands that the farms must come first." He smiled, keenly aware of how shabby he was in his stained ochre shirt and oversize knee-length shorts. So much at variance from these uniformly trim young men.

"Yes, Father."

Horst felt a pang of regret. The Ivets were so insular, yet they did more work than most. Aberdale's success was in no small part due to their efforts. And Powel Manani still grumbled about the liberties they were shown. It didn't happen in other settlements, he complained. But then other settlements didn't have Quinn Dexter. It was a thought Horst couldn't be quite as grateful for as he should be. Quinn was a very cold fish. Horst knew waster kids, their motivations, their shallow wishes. But what went on behind those chilling bright eyes was an utter mystery, one he was afraid to probe.

"I shall be holding a consecration service once the roof's on," he said to the two Ivets. "I hope you'll all come to it."

"We'll think about it," Leslie said with smooth politeness. "Thank you for asking, Father."

"I notice that not many of you come to my services. Everybody is welcome. Even Mr Manani, although I don't think he's particularly impressed with me." He tried to make it sound jovial, but their expressions never flickered.

"We're not very religious," Leslie said.

"I'd be happy to explain the broader ramifications of Christianity to anybody. Ignorance isn't a crime, only a misfortune. If nothing else we could have a good argument about it, you needn't worry about shocking me there. Why, I remember some debates from my novice years, we really gave the bishop a roasting." Now he knew he'd lost them. Their earlier magnanimity had turned to stiff-backed formality, faces hard, sparks of resentment agleam in their

eyes. And once more he was aware of how ominous these young men could appear.

“We have the Light Brother—” Daniel began. He broke off at a furious look from Leslie.

“Light Brother?” Horst asked mildly. He was sure he’d heard that phrase before.

“Was there anything else, Father?” Leslie said. “We’d like to collect the transverse frames now.”

Horst knew when to push, and this wasn’t the time. “Yes, of course. What would you like me to do? Help you fetch them?”

Leslie looked around the church impatiently. “We could do with the slates stacking round the floor ready for when we get the lathing up,” he said grudgingly. “Piles of twenty by each stanchion.”

“Jolly good, I’ll start doing that then.”

He walked over to where Ann was standing beside a workbench, slicing up the bark with a fission jigsaw. She was wearing a pair of hand-stitched shorts and a halter top, both made from grey jump suit fabric. There was a huge pile of the slates on the ground around her. Her long face was crunched up in an expression of furious concentration, dark auburn hair hanging in damp tassels.

“We don’t need the slates that urgently,” Horst said lightly. “And I’m certainly not going to complain to Mr Manani if you slacken off a bit.”

Ann’s hand moved with mechanical precision, guiding the slender blade in a rectangular pattern through the big sheet of glossy ginger-coloured qualtook bark. She never bothered to mark out the shape, but each one came out more or less identical.

“Stops me thinking,” she said.

Horst started to pick up some of the slates. “I was sent here to encourage people to think. It’s good for you.”

“Not me. I’ve got Irley tonight. I don’t want to think about it.”

Irley was one of the Ivets; Horst knew him as a thin-faced lad, who was quiet even by their standards.

“What do you mean, you’ve got him?”

“It’s his turn.”

“Turn?”

Ann suddenly looked up, her face a mask of cold rage, most of it directed at Horst. “He’s going to fuck me. It’s his turn tonight. Do you want it in writing, Father?”

“I . . .” Horst knew his face was reddening. “I didn’t know.”

“What the hell do you think we do in that big hut at night? Basket weaving? There are three girls, and fifteen boys. And the boys all need it pretty bad, banging their fists each night isn’t enough, so they take it in turns with us, those that aren’t AC/DC. Quinn draws up a nice little impartial list, and we stick to it. He makes sure it’s dished out fairly, and he makes sure nobody spoils the merchandise. But Irley knows how to make it hurt without making it painful, without it showing. Do you want to know how, Father? You want the details? The tricks he’s got.”

“Oh, my child. This must stop, at once. I’ll speak to Powel and the council.”

Ann surprised him. She burst into shrill contemptuous laughter. “God’s Brother. I can see why they dumped you out here, Father. You’d be bloody useless back on Earth. You’re going to stop the boys from screwing me and Jemima and Kay, are you? Then where are they going to go for it? Huh? Lotsa your good parishioners got daughters. You think they want Ivets prowling round at night? And how about you, Father, do you want Leslie and Douglas giving your sweet little friend Jay the eye? Do you? Because they will if they can’t get it from me. Get real, Father.” She turned back to the sheet of bark. A dismissal that was frightening in its finality. Nothing Horst could offer was of the remotest use. Nothing.

It was there, right at the bottom of his pack where it had lain for six and a half months. Untouched, *unneded*, because the world was full of worthy challenges, and the sun shone, and the village grew, and the plants blossomed, and the children danced and laughed.

Horst took out the bottle, and poured a long measure. Scotch, though this thick amber liquid had never rested in oak barrels in the Highlands. It had come straight out of a

molecular filter programmed with the taste of a long-lost ideal. But it burnt as it went down, and slowly lit up his belly and his skull, which was all he wanted from it.

How stupid. How blind to think the serpent hadn't come with them to this fresh world. How obtuse that he, a priest, hadn't thought to look below the shining surface of achievement, to see the sewer beneath.

He poured another measure of Scotch. Breath coming in hot bursts between gulps. God, but it felt good, to abandon mortal failings for a few brief hours. To hide in this warm, silent, forgiving place of sanctuary.

God's Brother, she had said. And she was right. Satan is here amongst us, piercing our very heart.

Horst filled his glass to the very top, staring at it in abject dread. Satan: Lucifer, the light bringer. The Light Brother.

"Oh no," he whispered. Tears filled his eyes. "Not that, not that here. Not the sects spreading over this world's purity. I can't, dear Lord. I can't fight that. *Look at me.* I'm here because I can't." He trailed off into sobs.

Now as always, the Lord answered only with silence. Faith alone wasn't enough for Horst Elwes. But then he'd always known that.

The bird was back again, thirty centimetres long, its plumage a tawny brown flecked with gold. It hovered twenty metres above Quinn, half hidden by the jungle's curving branches, its wings blurring in an intricate pattern as it maintained position.

He watched it out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't like any other bird he'd seen on Lalonde; their feathers were almost like membrane scales. When he scanned it with his retinal implant on high magnification he could see it had real feathers, Earth genealogy feathers.

He gave the hand signal, and they advanced steadily through the bush, Jackson Gael on one side of him, Lawrence Dillon on the other. Lawrence was the youngest Ivet, seventeen, with a slim figure, skinny limbs, and sandy blond hair. Lawrence was a gift from God's Brother. It had taken Quinn a month to break him. There had been the

favouritism, the extra food, the smiles and making sure he wasn't bullied by the others. Then there had been the drugs Quinn had bought from Baxter, the gentle lifts which removed Aberdale and all its squalor and endless toil, blurring away the edges until life was easier again. The midnight rape performed in the middle of the A-frame with everybody watching; Lawrence tied to the floor with a pentagon drawn around him in danderil blood, his mind blown out of his skull by the drugs. Now Lawrence belonged to him, his sweet arse, the golden length of his dick, and his mind. Lawrence's devotion to Quinn had evolved to a form of worship.

Sex showed the others the power Quinn had. It showed them how in touch with God's Brother he was. It showed them the glory of freeing the serpent beast that was trapped in every man's heart. It showed them what would happen if they failed him.

He had given them hope and power. All he demanded in return was obedience.

Demanded and received.

The big spongy leaves of the vines which shrouded the trees brushed lightly against Quinn's damp skin as he advanced on his prey. After months of working under the brilliant sun he was a rich all-over brown, wearing just a pair of shorts cut from his jump suit, and the boots he'd stolen in Durringham. He'd eaten well since the Ivets started fending for themselves, and put on muscle weight from the work he'd done around the homesteads.

Creepers were hung between the trunks like a net the jungle had woven to catch its smaller denizens. They crackled annoyingly as he waded through them, booted feet crunching on the spindly mosslike grass that grew deep in the jungle. Birds clucked and squawked as they arrowed through the latticework of branches. He could see the distant movement of vennals high overhead, spiralling round trunks and branches like three-dimensional shadows.

The light filtering down through the leaf canopy was growing darker. He spotted an increasing number of young giganteas interspaced with the usual trees. They resembled elongated cones, with an outer coating of mauve-brown fi-

brous hair rather than a true bark. Their boughs emerged in rings from the trunk, spaced regularly up the entire length; they all sloped downwards at a fifty-degree angle, supporting fanlike arrangements of twigs, densely packed as birds' nests. Leaves grew on the upper surface like a dark green fur.

The first time Quinn had seen a mature gigantea he thought he must have been tripping. It stood two hundred and thirty metres high, with a base forty-five metres in diameter, rearing out of the jungle like a misplaced mountain. Creepers and vines had wrapped themselves around its lower branches, adding a colourful speckle of multi-coloured flowers to its uninspiring leaden-green leaves. But even the vigorous vines couldn't hope to challenge a gigantea.

Jackson clicked his fingers, and pointed ahead. Quinn risked raising his head above the shoulder-high rall bushes and spindly light-starved saplings.

The sayce they had been tracking was padding through the skimpy undergrowth ten metres away. It was a big specimen, a buck, its black hide scarred and flecked with blue spots, ears chewed down to stubs. It had been in a lot of fights, and won them.

Quinn smiled happily, and signalled Lawrence forwards. Jackson stayed where he was, sighting the laser rifle on the sayce's head. Back-up, in case their attack went wrong.

The hunt had taken a while to set up. There were thirty of Aberdale's residents spread out through the jungle today, but they were all nearer to the river. Quinn, Jackson, and Lawrence had made off south-west into the deeper jungle as soon as they could, away from the river and its humidity, into the country where the sayce lurked. Powel Manani had ridden off at dawn to help one of the savannah homesteads track down the sheep that had wandered off after their stockade had failed. Most importantly, he'd taken Vorix with him to find the scent. Irley had arranged for the stockade fence to fail last night.

Quinn put down the pump-action shotgun he'd bought from Baxter, and took the bolas from his belt. He started spinning it above his head, letting out a fearsome yell. To

his right Lawrence was running towards the sayce, his bolas whirling frantically. Nobody knew the Ivets used bolas. The weapon was simple enough to build, all they needed was the dried vine to link the three stones with. They could carry the vine lengths about quite openly, using them as belts.

The sayce turned, its jaws hinging wide to let out its peculiar keening cry. It charged straight at Lawrence. The boy let the bolas fly, yelling with adrenalin intoxication, and it caught the sayce on its forelegs, stones twisting in ever-shorter arcs with incredible speed. Quinn's whirled around the animal's right flank a second later, tangling one of the hind legs. The sayce fell, skidding through the grass and loam, its body bucking in epileptic frenzy.

Quinn ran forward, tugging the lasso off his shoulder. The sayce was thrashing about, howling, trying to get its razor-sharp teeth into the infuriating vine strands binding its legs. He twisted the lasso, working up a good speed, studying the sayce's movements, then threw.

The sayce's jaws shut between cries, and the lasso's loop slipped over the muzzle. He jerked back with all his strength. The jaws strained to open, but the loop held; it was silicon fibre, stolen from one of the homesteads. All three Ivets could hear the furious and increasingly frantic cries, muted to a harsh sneezing sound.

Lawrence landed heavily on the writhing sayce, struggling to shove its kicking hind legs into his own loop of rope. Quinn joined him, hugging the sayce's thick gnarled hide as he fought to coil another length of rope round the forelegs.

It took another three minutes to subdue and bind the sayce completely. Quinn and Lawrence wrestled with it on the ground, getting covered in scratches and mud. But eventually they stood, bruised and shaking from the effort, looking down at their trussed victim lying helplessly on its side. Its green-tinted eye glared back up at them.

"Stage two," said Quinn.

It was Jay who found Horst late in the afternoon. He was sitting slumped against a qualtook tree in the light drizzle,

virtually comatose. She giggled at how silly he was being and shook him by the shoulder. Horst mumbled incoherently then told her to piss off.

Jay stared at him for a mortified second, her lower lip trembling, then rushed to get her mother.

“Ho boy, look at you,” Ruth said when she arrived.

Horst burped.

“Come on, get up. I’ll help you get home.”

The weight of him nearly cracked her spine as he leant against her. With a solemn-faced Jay following a couple of paces behind they staggered across the clearing to the little cabin Horst used.

Ruth let him fall onto his cot, and watched impassively as he tried to vomit onto the duckboard floor. All that came out of his mouth was a few beads of sour yellow stomach juices.

Jay stood in a corner and clutched at Drusilla, her white rabbit. The doe squirmed around in agitation. “Is he going to be all right?”

“Yes,” Ruth said.

“I thought it was a heart attack.”

“No. He’s been drinking.”

“But he’s a priest,” the girl insisted.

Ruth stroked her daughter’s hair. “I know, darling. But that doesn’t mean they’re saints.”

Jay nodded wisely. “I see. I won’t tell anyone.”

Ruth turned and stared at Horst. “Why did you do it, Horst? Why now? You’d been doing so well.”

Bloodshot eyes blinked at her. “Evil,” he groaned. “They’re evil.”

“Who are?”

“Ivets. All of them. Devil’s children. Burn down the church. Can’t consecrate it now. They built it. Evil built it. Herit— here— heretical. Burn it to cinders.”

“Horst, you’re not setting fire to anything.”

“Evil!” he slurred.

“See if there’s enough charge in his electron matrix cells to power the microwave,” Ruth told Jay. “We’ll boil some water.” She started to rummage through Horst’s gear looking for his silver-foil sachets of coffee.

Right up until the moment the electric motors began to thrum, Marie Skibbow hadn't believed it was actually happening. But here it was, bubbles rising from the *Coogan's* propeller, the gap between the boat and the jetty growing.

"I've done it," she said under her breath.

The ramshackle boat began to chug its way out into the middle of the Quallheim, the prow pointing downriver, gradually picking up speed. She stopped dropping logs into the thermal-exchange furnace's square hopper-funnel and started to laugh. "Screw you," she told the village as it began to slide astern. "Screw all of you. And good fucking riddance. You won't ever see me again." She shook her fist at them. Nobody was looking, not even the Ivet lads in the water. "Never ever."

Aberdale disappeared from sight as they steered round a curve. Her laughter became suspiciously similar to weeping. She heard someone making their way aft from the wheel-house, and started lobbing logs into the hopper again.

It was Gail Buchannan, who barely fitted on the narrow strip of decking between the cabin and the half-metre-high gunwale. She wheezed heavily for a moment, leaning against the cabin wall, her face red and sweating below her coolie hat. "Happier now, lovie?"

"Much!" Marie beamed a sunlight smile.

"It's not the kind of place a girlie like you should be living in. You'll be much better off downriver."

"You don't have to tell me. God, it was awful. I hated it. I hate animals, I hate vegetables, I hate fruit trees, I hate the jungle. I hate wood!"

"You're not going to be trouble for us are you, lovie?"

"Oh no, I promise. I never signed a settlement contract with the LDC, I was still legally a minor when we left Earth. But I'm over eighteen now, so I can leave home any time I want to."

A nonplussed frown creased the folds of spare flesh on Gail's gibbous face for a second. "Aye, well you can stop loading the hopper now, there's enough logs in there to last the rest of today. We're only sailing for a couple of hours. Lennie'll moor somewhere below Schuster for the night."

“Right.” Marie stood up straight, hands pressed against her side. Her heart was racing, pounding away against her ribs. I did it!

“You can start preparing supper in a while,” Gail said.

“Yes, of course.”

“I expect you’d like a shower first, lovie. Get cleaned up a bit.”

“A shower?” Marie thought she’d misheard.

She hadn’t. It was in the cabin between the galley and the bunks, an alcove with a curtain across the front, broad enough to fit Gail. When she looked down, Marie could see the river through the gaps between the deck boards. The pump and the heater ran off electricity from the thermal-exchange furnace, producing a weak warm spray from the copper nozzle. To Marie it was more luxurious than a sybarite’s jacuzzi. She hadn’t had a shower since her last day on Earth. Dirt was something you lived with in Aberdale and the savannah homesteads. It got into the pores, under nails, scaled your hair. And it never came out, not completely. Not in cold stream water, not without decent soap and gels.

The first sluice of water from the nozzle disgusted her as it drained away. It was *filthy*. But Gail had given her a bar of unperfumed green soap, and a bottle of liquid soap for her hair. Marie started scrubbing with a vengeance, singing at the top of her voice.

Gwyn Lawes never even knew the Ivets were there until the club smashed into the small of his back. He blacked out for a while from the pain. Certainly he didn’t remember falling. One minute he was lining up his electromagnetic rifle on a danderil, anticipating the praise he would earn from the rest of the hunting party. And the next thing he knew was that there was loam in his mouth, he could barely breathe, and his spine was sheer agony. All he could do was retch weakly.

Hands grabbed his shoulders, and he was turned over. Another blast of fire shot up his spine. The world shuddered nauseously.

Quinn, Lawrence, and Jackson were standing above him,

grinning broadly. They were smothered in mud, hair hanging in soiled dreadlocks, spittle saturating their tufty beards, scratches bleeding, dribbles of red blood curdling with the mud. They were savages reincarnated out of Earth's dawn times. He whimpered in fright.

Jackson bent down, teeth bared with venomous joy. A ball of cloth was thrust into Gwyn's mouth, tied into place with a gag. Breathing became even harder, his nose flaring, sucking down precious oxygen. Then he was turned again, face pressed into the wet ground. All he could see was muddy grass. He could feel thin, hard cord binding his wrists and ankles. Hands began to search him, sliding into every pocket, patting the fabric. There was a hesitant fumble when fingers found the inside leg pouch on his dungarees trousers, tracing the shape of his precious Jovian Bank credit disk.

"Got it, Quinn," Lawrence's voice called triumphantly.

Fingers gripped Gwyn's right thumb, bending it back.

"Pattern copied," Quinn said. "Let's see what he's got." There was a short pause, then a whistle. "Four thousand three hundred fuseodollars. Hey, Gwyn, where's your faith in your new planet?"

Cruel laughter followed.

"OK, it's transferred. Lawrence, put it back where you found it. They can't activate it once he's dead, they'll never know it's been emptied."

Dead. The word cut through Gwyn's sluggish thoughts. He groaned, trying to lift himself. A boot slammed into his ribs. He screamed, or tried to. The gag was virtually suffocating him.

"He's got some handy gear here, Quinn," Lawrence said. "Fission knife, firelighter, and that's a personal guide block. Spare power mags for the rifle, too."

"Leave it," Quinn ordered. "If anything's missing when they find him, they might get suspicious. We can't afford that, not yet. It will all belong to us in the end."

They lifted Gwyn, carrying him on their shoulders like some kind of trophy. He kept drifting in and out of consciousness as he jounced about, twigs and vines slapping against him.

The light was darker when they finally slung him down. Gwyn looked about, and saw the smooth ebony trunk of an old deirar tree twenty metres away, its single giant umbrella-leaf casting a wide circular shadow. A sayce had been tethered to it, straining at the unbreakable silicon-fibre rope, forelegs scrabbling at the loam as it tried to reach its captors, its snapping jaws dripping long chains of saliva. Gwyn suddenly knew what was going to happen next. His bladder gave out.

“Get it riled good and proper,” Quinn ordered.

Jackson and Lawrence started throwing stones at the sayce. It keened in torment, its body jacking about as though an electric current was being run through it.

Gwyn saw a pair of boots appear twenty centimetres from his nose. Quinn squatted down. “Know what’s going to happen afterwards, Gwyn? We’re going to be assigned to help out your widow. Everyone else is busy with their own little plots of heaven. So it’ll be the Ivets who get dumped on. Once again. I’m going to be one of them, Gwyn. I’m going to be a regular visitor to poor, grieving Rachel. She’ll like me, I’ll make sure of that. Just like you and all the others, you want to believe that everything’s so perfect on this planet. You convinced yourselves we’re just a bunch of regular lads who got a bad break in life. Anything else would have cracked your dream open and made you face reality. Illusion is easy. Illusion is the loser’s way out. Your way. You and all the others grubbing round in the dirt and the rain. In a couple of months I’ll be in the bed you made, under the roof you sweated over, and I’ll have my dick rammed up inside Rachel making her squeal like a pig in heat. I hope you hate that idea, Gwyn. I hope it makes you sick inside. Because that’s not the worst. Oh, no. Once I’m through with her, I’ll have Jason. Your shiny-eyed beautiful son. I’ll be his new father. I’ll be his lover. I’ll be his owner. He’ll be joining us, Gwyn, me and the Ivets. I’ll bind him to the Night, I’ll show him where his serpent beast is hidden within. He’s not going to be a dickhead loser like his old man. You’re only the first, Gwyn. One by one I will come to you all, and very few will be given the chance to follow me into darkness. Inside of six months this whole

village, the only hope for a future you ever had, will belong to God's Brother.

"Do you despise me, Gwyn? I want you to. I want you to hate me as much as I hate you and all you stand for. Then you will understand that I'm speaking the truth. You will go to your pitiful Lord Jesus weeping in terror. And you will find no comfort there, because the Light Bringer will be the ultimate victor. You will lose in death, as you have lost in life. You made the wrong choice in life, Gwyn. My path is the one you should have walked. And now it's too late."

Gwyn strained and wheezed against the gag until he thought his lungs would burst from the effort. It made no difference, the shriek of hatred and all the threats, the curses condemning Quinn to an eternity of damnation, were left jailed inside his skull.

Quinn's hands curled round the lapels of Gwyn's shirt, hauling him upright. Jackson took his feet, and the two of them swung him back and forth, building momentum. They let go, and Gwyn's tumbling body flew in a shallow trajectory right over the top of the berserk sayce. He hit the loam with a dull thud, face contorted with insane dread. The sayce leapt.

Quinn put his arms round the shoulders of Lawrence and Jackson as the three of them watched the sayce mauling the man, its teeth tearing out great strips of flesh. The power to bring death was equal to that of bringing about life. He felt enraptured as the hot scarlet blood flowed into the soil.

"After life, death," he chanted. "After darkness, light."

He looked up, and stared round until he found the brown bird. It was perched up in a cherry oak's branches, head cocked on one side, observing the carnage.

"You've seen what we are," Quinn called out. "You've seen us naked. You've seen we're not afraid. We should talk. I think we have a lot to offer each other. What have you got to lose?"

The bird blinked as if in surprise, and launched itself into the air.

Laton let the kestrel's wonderfully clear sensorium fade from his mind. The sensation of air flowing over wings re-

mained for several minutes. Flying the predator via affinity was always an experience he enjoyed, the freedom granted to creatures of the air was unsurpassed.

The ordinary world rushed back in on him.

He was in his study, sitting in the lotus position on a black velvet cushion. It was an unusual room, an ovoid, five metres high, its curving walls a smooth polished wood. A cluster of electrophorescent cells were fitted flush with the apex, supplying a glimmer of jade light. The single cushion on the cup of the floor was the only thing to break the symmetry; even the door was hard to see, its lines blending with the grain.

The study possessed a unifying simplicity, freeing his mind of distractions. In here, his body motionless, his affinity expanding his consciousness through bitek processors and incorporated brains, his mentality was raised by an order of magnitude. It was a hint of what could be. A pale shadow of the goal he chased before his exile.

Laton remained sitting, thinking about Quinn Dexter and the atrocity he had perpetrated. There had been a lurid flash of gratification in Dexter's eyes as that helpless colonist had been thrown to the sayce. Yet he must be more than a brainless sadistic brute. The fact that he had recognized the kestrel for what it was, and worked out what it represented, was proof of that.

Who is God's Brother? Laton asked the house's sub-sentient bitek processor network.

Satan. The Christian devil.

Is this a term in wide use?

The term is common among Earth's waster population. Most arcologies have sects built up around the worship of this deity. Their priest/acolyte hierarchy is a simple variant on that of the more standard officer/soldier criminal organization. Those at the top control those at the bottom through a quasi-religious doctrine, and status is enforced by initiation rituals. Their theology states that after Armageddon has been fought, and the universe abandoned to lost souls, Satan will return bringing light. The sects are unusual only in the degree of violence involved to maintain discipline among the

ranks. Because of the level of devotion involved, the authorities have been generally unsuccessful in eradicating the sects.

That explains Quinn, then, Laton thought to himself. But why did he want the money in the colonist's Jovian Bank credit disk? If he was successful in taking over Aberdale no trading boat would ever stop there; he couldn't buy anything. In fact, the Governor would be more than likely to send in a posse of sheriffs and deputies to stamp out any Ivet rebellion as soon as word leaked out. Quinn must know that, he wasn't stupid.

The last thing Laton wanted was for the outside world to show an interest in Schuster County. One marshal digging around was an acceptable risk, he'd known that when he took the colonists from their homesteads. But a whole team of them scouting through the jungle in search of renegade Devil worshippers was totally out of the question.

He had to know more of Quinn Dexter's plans. They would have to meet, just like Quinn had suggested. Somehow the idea of agreeing to his proposition was vaguely disturbing.

The *Coogan* was moored against a small sandy spit an hour's sailing downriver from Schuster town. Two silicon-fibre ropes had been fastened to trees on the shore, holding the tramp trader secure against the current.

Marie Skibbow sat on the prow, letting the warm evening air dry the last traces of water from her hair. Even the humidity had fallen off. Rennison, Lalonde's largest moon, was rising slowly above the dusky-grey treetops, adding a glimmering oyster light to the gloaming. She sat back against the flimsy cabin wall and watched it contentedly.

Water lapped gently against the *Coogan's* twin hulls. Fish made occasional ripples on the glass-smooth surface.

They've probably realized I've gone by now. Mother will cry, and Father will explode; Frank won't care, and Paula will be sad. They'll all worry about how it will affect them and the animals not having an extra hand at their beck and call all day long. Not one of them will think about what I want, what's good for me.

She heard Gail Buchanan calling, and made her way back to the wheel-house.

"We thought you'd fallen overboard, lovie," Gail said. A splash of light from the galley shone out, showing the sweat beading on her blubbery arms. At supper she had eaten more than half of all the food Marie prepared for the three of them.

"No. I was watching the moon come up."

Gail gave her a lopsided wink. "Very romantic. Get you in the mood."

Marie felt the hairs on the nape of her neck rising. She was cold despite the jungle's breath.

"I've got your night clothes ready," Gail said.

"Night clothes?"

"Very pretty. I did the lacework myself. Len likes his brides to have frills. You won't find better this side of Durringham," she said generously. "That T-shirt's nice and tight. But it hardly flatters your figure, now does it?"

"I paid you," Marie said in a frail voice. "All the way to Durringham."

"That won't cover our costs, lovie. We told you, it's expensive travelling this river. You have to work your passage."

"No."

There was nothing of the bumptious nature left in the huge woman. "We can put you off. Right here."

Marie shook her head. "I can't."

"Course you can. Pretty girl like you." Gail wrapped a weighty hand around Marie's forearm. "Come on, lovie," she coaxed. "Old Lennie, he knows how to treat his brides right."

Marie put one foot forward.

"That's it, lovie. Down you come. It's all laid out here, look."

There was a white cotton negligee on the galley table. Gail led her over to it. "You just slip this on. And don't let's hear any more silly talk about can't." She held it up against Marie. "Oh, you're going to look a picture in this, aren't you?"

She glanced down numbly at it.

"Aren't you?" Gail Buchannan repeated.

"Yes."

"Good girl. Now put it on."

"Where?"

"Here, lovie. Right here."

Marie turned her back to the gross woman, and began to pull her T-shirt off over her head.

Gail chortled thickly. "Oh, you're a one, lovie, you really are. This is going to be a chuckle."

The negligée's hem barely came below Marie's buttocks, but if she tried to pull it down any further her breasts would fall out of the top. She had felt cleaner when she was covered in dirt from the jungle.

Still chortling, and giving her little nudges in her back, Gail followed her into the cabin where Len was waiting dressed in an amber towelling robe. A single electric lamp hanging on the ceiling cast a halo of yellow light. Len's mouth split in a jagged smile as he took in the sight of her.

Gail sank down onto a sturdy stool by the door, puffing in relief. "There now, don't you worry about me, lovie, I only ever watch."

Marie thought that perhaps with the sound of the lapping water and the close wooden walls she could pretend it was Karl and the *Swithland* again.

She couldn't.

The Ly-cilph had been travelling for over five billion years when it arrived at the galaxy which was home to the Confederation, although at that time it was the dinosaurs which were Earth's premier life-form. Half of its existence had been spent traversing intergalactic space. It knew how to slip through the wormhole interstices; a creature of energy, the physical structure of the cosmos was no mystery to it. But its nature was to observe and record, so it sped along at a velocity just short of lightspeed, extending its perceptive field around the outcast hydrogen atoms on their aeons-long fall towards the bright, distant star whorls. Each one was unique, an existence to be treasured, extending the knowledge base, its history placed in the transdimensional storage lattice which provided the Ly-cilph with its identity

focus. The Ly-cilph was the section of space through which it passed with less disturbance than a neutrino. Like a quantum black hole, it had almost no physical size, yet within was an entire universe. A carefully patterned universe of pure data.

After it arrived at the rim stars it spent millions of years drifting among them, categorizing the life-forms which rose and fell on their planets, indexing the physical parameters of the multitudinous solar systems. It witnessed interstellar empires that bloomed and failed, and planet-bound civilizations that were lost to the final night as their stars cooled to frozen iron. Saint-like cultures and the most bestial savagery; all clicking neatly into place within its infinite interior.

It progressed inwards on a loose line towards the scintillating glow of the galactic core. And in doing so, arrived at the volume of space populated by the Confederation. Lalonde, freshly discovered, and on the edge of the territory, was the first human world it encountered.

The Ly-cilph arrived at the star's Oort cloud in 2610. After it passed through the band of circling, sleeping comets, occasional laser and microwave emissions impinged on its perception field boundary. They were weak, random fragments of overspill from the communication beams of starships entering orbit above Lalonde.

A preliminary survey showed the Ly-cilph two centres of sentient life in the solar system: Lalonde itself with the human and Tyrathca settlers, and Aethra, the young Edenist habitat in its solitary orbit above Murora.

As always in cases of life discovery, it first performed analytical sweeps of the barren planets. The four inner worlds: sunblasted Calcott and the colossal Gatley with its immense lethal atmosphere, then skipping past Lalonde to review airless Plewis and the icy Mars-like Coum. The five gas giants followed, Murora, Bullus, Achillea, Tol, and distant Puschk with its strange cryochemistry. All of them had their own moon systems and individual milieux requiring examination. The Ly-cilph took fifteen months to classify their composition and environment, then swooped in towards Lalonde.

The search through the jungle took eight hours. Three-quarters of Aberdale's adult population turned out to help. They found Gwyn Lawes fifteen minutes after Rennison had set below the horizon. Most of him.

Because it was a sayce which had killed him; because the ropes had been taken off his wrists and ankles, and the gag removed from his mouth; because his electromagnetic rifle and all his other possessions were accounted for, everyone accepted it was a natural, if horrible, death.

It was the Ivets who were assigned to dig the grave.

10

The *Udat* slid over the surface of Tranquillity's non-rotating spaceport as though it was running on an invisible wire. A honeycomb of deep docking-bays flashed past below the blue and purple hull; the spherical fuselages of Adamist starships nested inside, glinting dully under the rim floodlights. Meyer watched through the blackhawk's sensors as a fifty-five-metre-diameter clipper-class starship manoeuvred itself onto a cradle that had risen out of a bay, orange balls of chemical flame spitting out of its vernier nozzles. He could see the ubiquitous intersecting violet and green loops of the Vasilkovsky Line bold across the forward quarter. It touched the cradle, and pistonlike latches engaged, slipping into sockets around the hull. Umbilical gantries swung round, plugging it into the spaceport's coolant and environmental circuits. The starship's thermo-dump panels retracted, and the cradle started to descend into the bay.

So much effort just to arrive, *Udat* observed.

Quiet down, you'll hurt people's feelings, Meyer told it fondly.

I wish there were more ships like me. Your race should stop clinging to the past. These mechanical ships belong in a museum.

My race, is it? There are human chromosomes in you, don't forget.

Are you sure?

I think I accessed it in a memory core somewhere. There are in voidhawks.

Oh. Them.

Meyer grinned at the overtone of disparagement. **I thought you liked voidhawks.**

Some of them are all right. But they think like their captains.

And how do voidhawk captains think?

They don't like blackhawks. They think we're trouble. We have been known.

Only when money is short, *Udat* said, gently reproachful.

And if there were more blackhawks and fewer Adamist starships, money would be even tighter. I have wages to pay.

At least we've paid off the mortgage you took out to buy me.

Yes. And there's money to save to buy another when you're gone. But he didn't let that thought filter out of his mind. *Udat* was fifty-seven now; seventy-five to eighty was the usual blackhawk lifespan. Meyer wasn't at all convinced he would want another ship after *Udat*. But there was a quarter of a century of togetherness to look forward to yet, and money wasn't such a problem these days. There was only life-support-section maintenance and the four crew members to pay for. He could afford to pick and choose his charters now. Not like the first twenty years. Now those had been wild days. Fortunately the power compressed into the big asymmetric teardrop shape of *Udat's* hull gave them a terrific speed and agility. They had needed it on occasion. Some of the more covert missions had been hazardous in the extreme. Not all their colleagues had returned.

I'd still like more of my own kind to talk to, *Udat* said.

Do you talk to Tranquillity?

Oh, yes, all the time. We're good friends.

What do you talk about?

I show it places we visit. And it shows me its interior, what humans get up to.

Really?

Yes, it's interesting. This Joshua Calvert who chartered us, Tranquillity says he's a recidivist of the worst kind.

Tranquillity is absolutely right. That's why I like Joshua so much. He reminds me of me at that age.

No. You were never that bad.

Udat's nose turned slightly, gliding delicately between two designated traffic streams congested with He3 tankers and personnel commuters. The bays in this section of the mammoth spaceport disk were larger, it was where the repairs and maintenance work was carried out. Only half of them were occupied.

The big blackhawk came to a halt directly over bay MB 0-330, then slowly rotated around its long axis so that its upper hull was pointing down over the rim. Unlike void-hawks, with their separate lower hull cargo hold and upper hull crew toroid, *Udat* had all its mechanical sections contained in a horseshoe which embraced its dorsal bulge. The bridge and individual crew cabins were at the front, with the two cargo holds occupying the wings, and an ion-field flyer stored in a small hangar on the port side.

Cherri Barnes walked into the bridge compartment. She was *Udat's* cargo officer, doubling as a systems generalist: forty-five years old, with light coffee skin and a wide face prone to contemplative pouts. She had been with Meyer for three years.

She datavised a series of orders into her console processors, receiving images fed from the electronic sensors mounted on the hull. The three-dimensional picture which built up in her mind showed her *Udat* hanging poised thirty metres over the repair bay, holding its position steady.

"Over to you," Meyer said.

"Thanks." She opened a channel to the bay's datanet. "MB 0-330, this is *Udat*. We have your cargo paid for and waiting. Ready for your unload instructions. How do you want to handle it, Joshua? Time is money."

"Cherri, is that you?" Joshua datavised back.

"No one else on board will lower themselves to talk to you."

"I wasn't expecting you for another week, you've made good time."

Meyer datavised an access order into his console. "You hire the best ship, you get the best time."

"I'll remember that," Joshua told him. "Next time I have some money I'll make sure I go for a decent ship."

"We can always take our nodes elsewhere, Mr Hotshot Starship Captain who's never been outside the Ruin Ring."

"My nodes, genetic throwback who's too scared to go in the Ruin Ring and earn a living."

"It's not the Ruin Ring which worries me, it's what the Lord of Ruin does to people who skip outsystem before they register their finds in Tranquillity."

There was an unusually long pause. Meyer and Cherri shared a bemused glance.

"I'll send Ashly out with the *Lady Mac*'s MSV to pick up the nodes," Joshua said. "And you're all invited to the party tonight."

"So this is the famous *Lady Macbeth*?" Meyer asked a couple of hours later. He was in bay 0-330's cramped control centre with Joshua, his left foot anchored by a stikpad, looking out through the glass bubble wall into the bay itself. The fifty-seven-metre ship resting on the cradle in the middle of the floor was naked to space. Its hull plates had been stripped off, exposing the systems and tanks and engines, fantastically complex silver and white entrails. They were all contained inside a hexagonal-lattice stress structure. Jump nodes were positioned over each junction. Red and green striped superconductor cabling wormed inwards from each node, plugged directly into the ship's fusion generators. Meyer hadn't thought about it before, but the lenticular nodes were almost identical to the voidhawk profile.

Engineers wearing black SII suits and manoeuvring packs were propelling themselves over the open stress structure, running tests and replacing components. Others rode platforms on the end of multi-segment arms which were fitted out with heavy tools to handle the larger systems. Yellow strobes flashed on all the bay's mobile equipment, sending sharp-edged amber circles slicing over every surface in crazy gyrating patterns.

Hundreds of data cables were stretched between the ship and the five interface couplings around the base of the cradle. It was almost as though *Lady Macbeth* was being tethered down by a net of optical fibres. A two-metre-diameter airlock tube had concertinaed out from the bay wall, just

below the control centre, giving the maintenance team access to the life-support capsules buried at the core of the ship. Brackets on the bay walls held various systems waiting to be installed. Meyer couldn't see where they could possibly fit. *Lady Macbeth's* spaceplane clung to one wall like a giant supersonic moth, wings in their forward-sweep position. The additional tanks and power cells Joshua had strapped on for flights to the Ruin Ring were gone; a couple of suited figures and a cyberdrone were trying to remove the thick foam from the fuselage with a solvent spray. Crumbling grey flakes were flying off in all directions.

"What were you expecting?" Joshua asked. "A Saturn V?" He was strapped into a restraint web behind a cyberdrone operations console. The boxy drones ran along the rails which spiralled up the bay walls, giving them access to any part of the docked ship. Three of them were currently clustered round an auxiliary fusion generator, which was being eased into its mountings at the end of long white waldo arms. Engineers floated around it, supervising the cyberdrones which were performing the installation, mating cables, coolant lines, and fuel hoses. Joshua monitored their progress through the omnidirectional AV projectors arrayed around his console.

"More like a battle cruiser," Meyer said. "I saw the power ratings on those nodes, Joshua. You could jump fifteen light-years with those brutes fully charged."

"Something like that," he said absently.

Meyer grunted, and turned back to the starship. The MSV was returning from another trip to *Udat*, a pale green oblong box three metres long with small spherical tanks bunched together on the base, and three segmented waldo arms ending in complex manipulators sprouting from the mid-fuselage section. It was carrying a packaged node, coasting down towards one of the engineering shop airlocks.

Cherri Barnes frowned, peering forwards into the bay. "How many reaction drives has she got?" she asked. There seemed an inordinate number of unbilicals jacked into the *Lady Macbeth's* rear quarter. She could see a pair of fusion tubes resting in the wall brackets, fat ten-metre cylinders

swathed with magnetic coils, ion-beam injectors, and molecular-binding initiators.

Joshua turned his head fractionally, switching AV projectors. The new pillar shot a barrage of photons along his optical nerves, giving him a different angle on the auxiliary fusion generator. He studied it for a while, then datavised an instruction into one of the cyberdrones. "Four main drives."

"Four?" Adamist ships usually had one fusion drive, with a couple of induction engines running off the generator as an emergency back-up.

"Yeah. Three fusion tubes, and an antimatter drive."

"You can't be serious," Cherri Barnes exclaimed. "That's a capital offence!"

"Wrong!"

Joshua and Meyer both grinned at her, infuriatingly superior. There were smiles from the other five console operators in the control centre.

"It's a capital offence to *possess* antimatter," Joshua said. "But there's nothing in the Confederation space law about possessing an engine which uses antimatter. As long as you don't fill up the confinement chambers and use it, you're fine."

"Bloody hell."

"It makes you very popular when there's a war on. You can write your own ticket. Or so I'm told."

"I bet you've got a real powerful communication maser as well. One that can punch a message clean through another starship's hull."

"No, actually. *Lady Mac* has eight. Dad was a real stickler for multiple redundancy."

Harkey's Bar was on the thirty-first floor of the StMartha starscraper. There was a real band on the tiny stage, churning out scarr jazz, fractured melodies with wailing trumpets. A fifteen-metre bar made from real oak that Harkey swore blind came from a twenty-second-century Paris brothel, serving thirty-eight kinds of beer, and three times that number of spirits, including Norfolk Tears for those who could afford it. It had wall booths that could be screened from casual observation, a dance floor, long party tables, lighting

globes emitting photons right down at the bottom of the yellow spectrum. And Harkey prided himself on its food, prepared by a chef who claimed he had worked in the royal kitchens of Kulu's Jerez Principality. The waitresses were young, pretty, and wore revealing black dresses.

With its ritzy atmosphere, and not too expensive drinks, it attracted a lot of the crews from ships docked at Tranquility's port. Most nights saw a good crowd. Joshua had always used it. First when he was a cocky teenager looking for his nightly fix of spaceflight tales, then when he was scavenging, lying about how much he made and the unbelievable find that had just slipped from his fingers, and now as one of the super-elite, a starship owner-captain, one of the youngest ever.

"I don't know what kind of crap that foam is which you sprayed on the spaceplane, Joshua, but the bloody stuff just won't come off," Warlow complained bitterly.

When Warlow spoke everybody listened. You couldn't avoid it, not within an eight-metre radius. He was a cosmonik, born on an industrial asteroid settlement. He had spent over sixty-five per cent of his seventy-two years in free fall, and he didn't have the kind of geneering bequeathed to Joshua and the Edenists by their ancestors. After a while his organs had begun to degenerate, depleted calcium levels had reduced his bones to brittle porcelain sticks, muscles had atrophied, and fluid bloated his tissues, impairing his lungs, degrading his lymphatic system. He had used drugs and nanonic supplements to compensate at first, then supplements became replacements, with bones exchanged for carbon-fibre struts. Electrical consumption supplanted food intake. The final transition was his skin, replacing the eczema-ridden epidermis with a smooth ochre silicon membrane. Warlow didn't need a spacesuit to work in the vacuum, he could survive for over three weeks without a power and oxygen recharge. His facial features had become purely cosmetic, a crude mannequin-like caricature of human physiognomy, although there was an inlet valve at the back of his throat for fluid intake. There was no hair, and he certainly didn't bother with clothes. Sex was something he lost in his fifties.

Although some cosmoniks had metamorphosed into little more than free-flying maintenance craft with a brain at the centre, Warlow had kept his humanoid shape. The only noticeable adaptation was his arms; they forked at each elbow, giving him two pairs of forearms. One set retained the basic hand and finger layout, the other set ended in titanium sockets, capable of accepting a variety of rigger tools.

Joshua grinned and raised his champagne glass at the sleek-skinned two-metre-tall gargoyle dominating the table. "That's why I put you on it. If anybody can scrape it off, you can." He counted himself lucky to get Warlow on his crew. Some captains rejected him for his age, Joshua welcomed him for his experience.

"You should get Ashly to fly it on a bypass trajectory that grazes Mirchusko's atmosphere. Burn it off like an ablative. One zip and it's all gone." Warlow's primary left forearm came down, palm slapping the table. Glasses and bottles juddered.

"Alternatively, you could plug a pump in your belly, and use your arse as a vacuum cleaner," Ashly Hanson said. "Suck it off." His cheeks caved in as he made a slurping sound.

The pilot was a tall sixty-seven-year-old, whom geneering had given a compact frame, floppy brown hair, and a ten-year-old's wonderstruck smile. The whole universe was a constant delight for him. He lived for his skill, moving tonnes of metal through any atmosphere with avian grace. His Confederation Astronautics Board licence said he was qualified for both air and space operations, but it was three hundred and twenty years out of date. Ashly Hanson was temporally displaced; born into reasonable wealth, he had signed over his trust fund to the Jovian Bank in 2229 in exchange for a secure zero-tau pod maintenance contract (even then the Edenists had been the obvious choice as custodians). He alternated fifty years in entropy-free stasis, and five years "bumming round" the Confederation.

"I'm a futurologist," he told Joshua the first time they met. "On a one-way ride to eternity. I just get out of my time machine for a look round every now and then."

Joshua had signed him on as much for the tales he could tell as his piloting ability.

"We'll just remove the foam according to the manual, thanks," he told the bickering pair.

The vocal synthesizer diaphragm protruding from Warlow's chest, just above his air-inlet gills, let out a metallic sigh. He shoved his squeezey bulb into his mouth and squirted some champagne into the valve. Drink was one thing he wasn't giving up, although with his blood filters he could sober up with astonishing speed if he had to.

Meyer leant across the table. "Any word on Neeves and Sipika yet?" he asked Joshua quietly.

"Yeah. I forgot, you wouldn't know. They arrived back in port a couple of days after you left for Earth. They bloody nearly got lynched. The serjeants had to rescue them. They're in jail, waiting judicial pronouncement."

Meyer frowned. "Why the wait? I thought Tranquillity processed the charges right away?"

"There's a lot of bereaved relatives of scavengers who never came back who are claiming Neeves and Sipika are responsible. Then there's the question of compensation. The *Madeeir* is still worth a million and a half fuseodollars even after my axe work. I waived my claim, but I suppose the families are entitled."

Meyer took another sip. "Nasty business."

"There's talk about fitting emergency beacons to all the scavenger craft, making it an official requirement."

"They'll never go for that, they're too independent."

"Yeah, well, I'm out of it now."

"Too true," Kelly Tirrel said. She was sitting pressed up next to Joshua, one leg hooked over his, arm draped around his shoulders.

It was a position he found extremely comfortable. Kelly was wearing an amethyst dress with a broad square-cut neckline which showed off her figure, especially from his angle. She was twenty-four, slightly shorter than medium build, with red-brown hair and a delicate face. For the last couple of years she had been a rover correspondent for Tranquillity's office of the Collins news group.

They had met eighteen months earlier when she was

doing a piece on scavengers for distribution across the Confederation. He liked her for her independence, and the fact that she wasn't born rich.

"Nice to know you worry about me," he said.

"I don't, it's the dataloss when you detonate your brain across the cosmos in that relic you're flying, that's what I'm concerned over." She turned to Meyer. "Do you know he won't give me the coordinates for this castle he found?"

"What castle?" Meyer asked.

"Where he found the Laymil electronics stack."

A smile spread across Meyer's whole face. "A castle. You didn't tell me that, Joshua. Did it have knights and wizards in it?"

"No," Joshua said firmly. "It was a big cube structure. I called it a castle because of the weapons systems. It was tough work getting in, one wrong move and . . ." Grave lines scored his face.

Kelly squirmed a fraction closer.

"It was operational?" Meyer was enjoying himself.

"No."

"So why was it dangerous?"

"Some of the systems still had power in their storage cells. So given how much molecular decay they've suffered out there in the Ring, just brushing against them could have triggered off a short circuit. They would have blown like a chain reaction."

"Electronic stacks, *and* functional power cells. That really was a terrific find, Joshua."

Joshua glared at him.

"And he won't tell me where it is," Kelly complained. "Just think, something that big which survived the suicide could well hold the key to the whole Laymil secret. If I could capture that on a sensewise, I'd be made. I could pick my own office with Collins, then. Hell, I'd be in charge of my own office."

"I'll sell you where it is," Joshua said, "it's all up here." He tapped his head. "My neural nanonics have got its orbital parameters down to a metre. I can locate it any time in the next ten years for you."

"How much are you asking?" Meyer asked.

“Ten million fuseodollars.”

“Thanks, I’ll pass.”

“Doesn’t it bother you, standing in the way of progress?”

Kelly asked.

“No. Besides, what happens if the answer turns out to be something we don’t particularly like?”

“Good point.” Meyer raised his glass.

“Joshua! People have a right to know. They are quite capable of making up their own minds, they don’t need to be protected from facts by people like you. Secrets seed oppression.”

Joshua rolled his eyes. “Jesus. You just like to think reporters have a God-given right to stuff their noses in anywhere they want.”

Kelly tipped a glass to his lips, encouraging him to sip the champagne. “But we do.”

“You’ll get it bitten off one day, you see. In any case, we will know what happened to the Laymil. With the size of the research team Tranquillity employs, results are inevitable.”

“That’s you, Joshua, the eternal optimist. Only an optimist would even think about going anywhere in that ship of yours.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the *Lady Mac*,” Joshua bridled. “You ask Meyer, those systems are the finest money can buy.”

Kelly fluttered long dark lashes enquiringly at Meyer.

“Oh, absolutely,” he said.

“I still don’t want you to go,” she said quietly. She kissed Joshua’s cheek. “They were good systems when your father was flying her, and they were newer then. Look what happened to him.”

“That’s different. Those orphans on the hospital station would never have made it back here without the *Lady Mac*. Dad had to jump while he was too close to that neutron star.”

Meyer let out a distressed groan, and drained his glass.

Joshua was up at the bar when the woman approached him. He didn’t even see her until she spoke, his attention was elsewhere. The barmaid’s name was Helen Vanham, she was nineteen, with a dress cut lower than Harkey’s normal, and

she seemed eager to serve Joshua Calvert, the starship captain. She said she finished work at two in the morning.

“Captain Calvert?”

He turned from the pleasing display of cleavage and thigh. Jesus, but that title felt good. “You got me.”

The woman was black, very black. There couldn’t have been much geneering in her family, he decided, although he was suspicious about that deep pigmentation; she was fifty centimetres shorter than him, and her short beret of hair was frosted with strands of silver. He reckoned she was about sixty years old, and ageing naturally.

“I’m Dr Alkad Mzu,” she said.

“Good evening, Doctor.”

“I understand you have a ship you’re fitting out?”

“That’s right, the *Lady Macbeth*. Finest independent trader this side of the Kulu Kingdom. Are you interested in chartering her?”

“I may be.”

Joshua skipped a beat. He took another look at the small woman. Alkad Mzu was dressed in a suit of grey fabric, a slim collar turned up around her neck. She seemed very serious, her features composed in a permanent expression of resignation. And right at the back of his mind there was a faint tingle of warning.

You’re being oversensitive, he told himself, just because she doesn’t smile doesn’t mean she’s a threat. Nothing is a threat in Tranquillity, that’s the beauty of this place.

“Medicine must pay very well these days,” he said.

“It’s a physics doctorate.”

“Oh, sorry. Physics must pay very well.”

“Not really. I’m a member of the team researching Laymil artefacts.”

“Yeah? You must have heard of me, then, I found the electronics stack.”

“Yes, I heard, although memory crystals aren’t my field. I mainly study their fusion drives.”

“Really? Can I get you a drink?”

Alkad Mzu blinked, then slowly looked about. “Yes, this is a bar, isn’t it. I’ll just have a white wine, then, thank you.”

Joshua signalled to Helen Vanham for a wine. Receiving a very friendly smile in return.

“What exactly was the charter?” he asked.

“I need to visit a star system.”

Definitely weird, Joshua thought. “That’s what *Lady Mac* does best. Which star system?”

“Garissa.”

Joshua frowned, he thought he knew most star systems. He consulted his neural nanonics cosmology file. That was when his humour really started to deflate. “Garissa was abandoned thirty years ago.”

Alkad Mzu received her slim glass from the barmaid, and tasted the wine. “It wasn’t abandoned, Captain. It was annihilated. Ninety-five million people were slaughtered by the Omutan government. The Confederation Navy managed to get some off after the planet-buster strike, about seven hundred thousand. They used marine transports and colonist-carrier ships.” Her eyes clouded over. “They abandoned the rescue effort after a month. There wasn’t a lot of point. The radiation fallout had reached everyone who survived the blasts and tsunamis and earthquakes and superstorms. Seven hundred thousand out of ninety-five million.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

Her lips twitched around the rim of the glass. “Why should you? An obscure little planet that died before you were born; for politics that never made any sense even then. Why should anybody remember?”

Joshua shot the fuseodollars from his Jovian Bank credit card into the bar’s accounts block as the barmaid delivered his tray of champagne bottles. There was an oriental man at the far end of the bar who was keeping an unobtrusive watch on himself and Dr Mzu over his beer mug. Joshua forced himself not to stare in return. He smiled at Helen Vanham and added a generous tip. “Dr Mzu, I have to be honest. I can take you to the Garissan system, but a landing given those circumstances is out of the question.”

“I understand, Captain. And I appreciate your honesty. I don’t wish to land, simply to visit.”

“Ah, er, good. Garissa was your homeworld?”

“Yes.”

"I'm sorry."

"That's the third time you've said that to me."

"One of those evenings, I guess."

"How much would it cost me?"

"For a single passenger, there and back; you're looking at about five hundred thousand fuseodollars. I know it's a lot, but the fuel expenditure will be the same for one person as a full cargo hold. And the crew time is the same as well, they all need paying."

"I doubt I can raise your full charter fee in advance. My research position is a comfortable one, but not that comfortable. However, I can assure you that once we reach our destination adequate funds will be available. Does that interest you?"

Joshua gripped the tray tighter, interested despite himself. "It may be possible to come to an arrangement, subject to a suitable deposit. And my rates are quite reasonable, you won't find any cheaper."

"Thank you, Captain. Can I have a copy of your ship's handling parameters and cargo capacity? I need to know whether the *Lady Macbeth* can fulfil my requirements, they are rather specialized."

Jesus, if she needs to know how big the cargo hold is, just what is she planning on bringing back? Whatever it is, it must have been hidden for thirty years.

His neural nanonics reported she had opened a channel. "Sure." He datavisaged over the *Lady Mac*'s performance tables.

"I'll be in touch, Captain. Thank you for the drink."

"My pleasure."

At the other end of the bar, Onku Noi, First Lieutenant serving in the Oshanko Imperial Navy, and assigned to the C5 Intelligence arm (Foreign Observation Division), finished his beer and paid the bill. The audio discrimination program in his neural nanonics had filtered out the bar's chatter and background music, allowing him to record the conversation between Alkad Mzu and the handsome young starship captain. He stood up and opened a channel into Tranquillity's communication net, requesting access to the spaceport's standard commercial reference memory core.

The file on the *Lady Macbeth* and Joshua Calvert was datavised into his neural nanonics. What he accessed caused an involuntary twitch in his jaw muscle. *Lady Macbeth* was a combat-capable starship, complete with antimatter drive and combat-wasp launch-rails, and she was being capaciously refurbished. Pausing only to confirm Joshua Calvert's visual profile was filed correctly in his neural nanonics memory cell, he followed Dr Mzu out of Harkey's Bar, keeping an unobtrusive thirty seconds behind her.

Joshua, interested before, was now outright fascinated as he surreptitiously watched the three men trailing after the diminutive Dr Mzu almost collide in the doorway. His intuition had been right again.

Jesus, who is she?

Tranquillity would know. But then Tranquillity would know she was being tailed as well, and who the tails were. Which meant that Ione would know.

He still hadn't resolved his feelings about Ione. There couldn't be anyone in the universe who was better at sex, but knowing that Tranquillity was looking at him out of those enchanting sea-blue eyes, that all those fluffy girlish mannerisms were wrapped around thought processes cooler than solid helium, was more than a little disconcerting. Though never inhibiting. She had been quite right about that, he simply couldn't say no. Not to her.

He returned to her every day, as instinctively as a migrating bird to an equatorial continent. It was exciting screwing the Lord of Ruin, a Saldana. And the feel of her body pressed against his was supremely erotic.

The male ego, he often reflected these days, was a puppet master with a very black sense of humour.

Joshua didn't have any time to ponder the puzzle of Dr Mzu before someone else hailed him. He turned with a slightly pained expression on his face.

A thirty-year-old man in a slightly worn navy-blue ship's one-piece was pushing through the throng, waving hopefully. He was just a few centimetres shorter than Joshua with the kind of regular features below short black hair that suggested a good deal of geneering. There was a smile on his face, apprehensive and keen at the same time.

“Yes?” Joshua asked wearily, he was only halfway back to his table.

“Captain Calvert? I’m Erick Thakrar, a ship’s general systems engineer, grade five.”

“Ah,” Joshua said.

Warlow’s thousand-decibel laugh blasted out, silencing the bar for an instant.

“Grade ratings are mostly down to logged flight hours,” Erick said. “I did a lot of time in port maintenance. I’m up to grade three level in practice, if not more.”

“And you’re looking for a berth?”

“That’s right.”

Joshua hesitated, He still had a couple of berths to fill, and one of them was for a systems generalist. But that itchy sensation of discomfort had returned, much stronger than it had been with Dr Mzu.

Jesus, what’s this one, a serial killer?

“I see,” he said.

“I would be a bargain, I’m only asking grade five pay.”

“I prefer to make flight pay a percentage of the charter fee, or a percentage of profits if we trade our own cargo.”

“Sounds pretty good to me.”

Joshua couldn’t fault his attitude. Youthful, enthusiastic, no doubt a good worker, obviously willing to accept the rule bending necessary to keep independent ships flying. Ordinarily, a man you’d want at your back. But that intimation of *wrongness* wouldn’t leave.

“OK, let me have your CV file, and I’ll look it over,” he said. “But not tonight, I’m in no fit state to make command judgements tonight.”

In the end he invited Erick Thakrar back to the table to see how he got on with the other three crew members. He shared their sense of humour, had some good stories of his own, drank a lot, but not excessively.

Joshua watched it happen through the increasingly rosy glow fostered by the champagne, occasionally having to push Kelly to one side for a proper view of the table. Warlow liked him, Ashly Hanson liked him, Melvyn Ducharme, the *Lady Mac*’s fusion specialist, liked him, even Meyer and the *Udat* crew liked him. He was one of them.

And that, Joshua decided, was the problem. Erick fitted into his role a little too perfectly.

At quarter past two in the morning, feeling very smug, Joshua managed to give Kelly the slip, and sneaked out of Harkey's Bar with Helen Vanham. She lived by herself in an apartment a couple of floors below Harkey's. It was sparsely furnished, the walls of the lounge were bare white polyp; big brightly coloured cushions had been scattered around on a topaz moss floor, several aluminium cargo-pods served as tables with bottles and glasses, a giant AV projector pillar occupied one corner. The archways into different rooms all had folding silk screens for doors. Someone had been painting outlines of animals on them, there were paint pots and brushes lying on one of the pods. Joshua saw new tumours of polyp pushing up through the moss like rock mushrooms: furniture buds starting the slow growth into the form Helen wanted.

There was a food secretion panel on the wall opposite the window; a row of teats, like small yellow-brown rubber sacks, were standing proud, indicating regular use. It had been a long time since Joshua had used a panel for food, though a few years ago when money was tight they had been a godsend.

Every apartment in Tranquillity had one. The teats secreted edible pastes and fruit juices synthesized by a series of glands in the wall behind. There was nothing wrong with the taste, the pastes were indistinguishable from real chicken, and beef, and pork, and lamb, even the colours were reasonable. It was the constituency, like viscid grease, which always put Joshua off.

The glands ingested a nutrient fluid from a habitatwide network of veins which were fed from Tranquillity's mineral digestion organs in the southern endcap. There was also a degree of recycling, human wastes and organic scraps being broken down in specialist organs at the bottom of each starscraper. Porous sections of the shell vented toxic chemicals, preventing any dangerous build-up in the habitat's closed biosphere.

There was no such thing as starvation in bitek habitats, though both Edenists and Tranquillity's residents imported

vast quantities of delicacies and wines from across the Confederation. They could afford it. But Helen obviously couldn't. Despite its size, the full teats and absence of materialism marked the apartment down as student digs.

"Help yourself to a drink," Helen said. "I'm getting out of this customer-friendly dress." She walked through an archway into the bedroom, leaving the screen folded back.

"What else do you do apart from serve bar at Harkey's?" he asked.

"I'm studying art," she called back. "Harkey's is just for funtime money."

Joshua broke off from examining the bottles and gave the screens with their animals a more appraising look. "Are you any good?"

"I might be eventually. My tutor says I have a good feel for form. But it's a five-year course, we're still on basic sketching and painting. We don't even get to AV technology until next year, and mood synthesis is another year after that. It's a drag, but you need to know the fundamentals."

"So how long have you been at Harkey's?"

"A couple of months. It's not bad work, you space industry people tip well, and you're not a pain like the finance mob. I worked at a bar over in the StPelham for a week. Crapoodle!"

"Have you ever seen Erick Thakrar before? He was sitting at my table, thirtyish, in a blue ship-suit."

"Yes. He's been in most nights for a fortnight or so. He's another good tipper."

"Do you know where he's been working?"

"Out in the dock; the Lowndes company, I think. He started a couple of days after he arrived."

"Which ship did he arrive on?"

"The *Shah of Kai*."

Joshua opened a channel into Tranquillity's communication net, and datavised a search request into the Lloyd's office. The *Shah of Kai* was a cargo vessel registered to a holding company in the New Californian system. It was an ex-navy transport ship, with a six-gee fusion drive; one hold was equipped with zero-tau pods for a company of marines,

and it had proximity-range defence lasers. An asteroid assault craft.

Gotcha, Joshua thought.

“Did you ever meet any of the crew?” he asked.

Helen reappeared in the bedroom archway. She was wearing a long-sleeved net body-stocking, and white suede boots which came halfway up her thighs.

“Tell you later,” she said.

Joshua gave his lips an involuntary lick. “I’ve got a great location file to match that costume, if you want to try it.”

She took a step into the room. “Sure.”

He accessed the sensenviron file, and ordered his neural nanonics to open a channel to Helen. A subliminal flicker crossed his optic nerves. Her sparse apartment gave way to the silk walls of a magnificent desert pavilion. There were tall ferns in brass urns around the entrance, a banquet table along one side was laid out with golden plates and jewelled goblets, and exotic, intricate drapes swung slowly in the warm, dry breeze that blew in from the crimson desert outside. Behind Helen was a curtained-off section, with the silk drawn apart just enough to show them a huge bed with purple sheets and a satin canopy which rose behind the scarlet-tasselled pillows like a sunrise sculpted from fabric.

“Nice,” she said, glancing round.

“It’s where Lawrence of Arabia pleased his harem back in the eighteenth century. He was some sort of sheik king who fought the Roman Empire. Absolutely guaranteed genuine sensewise recording from old Earth. I got it from a starship captain friend of mine who visited the museum.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Old Lawrence had about a hundred and fifty wives, so they say.”

“Wow. And he pleased all of them himself?”

“Oh, yeah, he had to, there was an army of eunuchs to protect them. No other men could get in.”

“Does the magic linger?”

“Wanna find out?”

Ione’s mind encompassed the entirety of Helen Vanham’s bedroom, the photosensitive cells in the bare polyp walls,

floor, and ceiling giving her a complete visualization. It was a thousand times more detailed than an AV projection. She could move through the bedroom as if she was there, which in a way she was.

The bed was simply a plump mattress on the floor. Helen lay across it, with a naked Joshua straddling her. He was slowly and deliberately tearing the body-stocking off her.

Interesting, Ione observed.

If you say so, Tranquillity replied coolly.

Helen's long booted legs kicked the air behind his back. She was giggling and squealing as more and more strips of her stocking were ripped away.

I don't mean the sex, though judging by the way he's turned on I'll have to try wearing something like that for him myself one day. I was thinking of the way he latched on to Erick Thakrar.

His alleged psychic ability again?

He has had twelve applicants for the post of ship's general systems engineer so far. All of them legitimate. Yet the minute Erick asked for the berth, he was suspicious. Are you going to maintain it was nothing but luck?

I acknowledge Joshua's actions do indicate a degree of prescience on his part.

At last! Thank you.

This means you will be going ahead with the zygote extraction, then?

Yes. Unless you have an objection.

I would never object to receiving your child into me, no matter who was the father. It will be our child, too.

And I'll never know him, she said sadly, not really, just for a few years of his childhood, like I saw Daddy. Sometimes I think our way is too harsh.

I will love him. I will tell him of you when he asks.

Thank you. I shall have other children, though. And I'll know them.

With Joshua?

Possibly.

What are you going to do about him and Dr Mzu?

Ione sighed in exasperation. The image of Helen's bed-

room rippled away. She glanced round her own study; it was cluttered with dark wooden furniture, centuries old, brought from Kulu by her grandfather. Her whole environment was steeped in history, reminding her who she was, her responsibilities. It was a depressing burden, one which she'd managed to avoid for a long time. But even that would have to end soon.

I'm not going to say anything to him, not now, anyway. Joshua is the seventh captain Mzu has approached in the last five months, she's just testing the water, seeing what sort of reaction she generates.

She is giving all the Intelligence operatives a bad case of the jitters.

I know. That's partly my fault. They don't know what will happen if she tries to leave. There isn't a Lord of Ruin they can ask, all they have is Daddy's promise.

And that holds true?

Yes, of course it does. She cannot be allowed to leave. The serjeants must be used to restrain her if she ever attempts it. And if she does get into a ship, you're going to have to use the strategic defence weapons.

Even if that ship is the *Lady Macbeth*?

Joshua wouldn't try to take her out, especially if I asked him not to.

But if he does?

Ione's fingers curled about the small silver crucifix round her neck. Then you shoot her out of space.

I'm sorry. I can feel the pain in you.

It's a null situation. He won't do it. I trust Joshua. Money isn't his prime motivation. He could have told people I exist. That reporter woman, Kelly Tirrel, she would have paid him a fortune for a scoop like that.

I don't think he will accept Dr Mzu's charter, either.

Good. All this is making me think. People do need some kind of reassurance that there is an authority figure behind you. Do you think I'm old enough to start making public appearances yet?

Mentally, you have been mature enough for years. Physically, possibly; you are old enough to face motherhood, after all. Although I think a more suitable mode of

attire would help. Image is the paramount issue in your case.

Ione glanced down. She was wearing a pink bikini and a small green beach jacket, ideal for the swim in the cove she took each evening.

I think you may have a point there.

Tranquillity had no blackhawk docking-ledges on its southern endcap. The polyp which made up that hemisphere was twice the usual thickness of the shell so that it could incorporate the massive mineral-digestion organs, as well as several lake-sized hydrocarbon reservoirs. These were the organs which produced the various nutrient fluids circulating in the shell's vast network of ducts, sustaining the mitosis layer which regenerated the polyp, the starscraper apartment food-secretion glands, the ledge pedestals which fed the visiting blackhawks and voidhawks, as well as various specialist organs responsible for environmental maintenance. Access passages to the outer shell would have been difficult to route through such a tightly packed grouping of titanic viscera.

There was no non-rotational spaceport either. The external hub was taken up by a craterlike maw, fifteen hundred metres in diameter. Its inner surface was lined with tubular cilia, hundred-metre spikes that impaled the asteroidal rubble which ships boosted out of Mirchusko's inner ring. Once in the maw, the rocks were coated by enzymes ejected from the cilia and broken down into dust and gravel, more manageable chunks which could be ingested and consumed with ease.

The lack of any spaceport outside the endcap, plus the circumfluous salt-water sea lapping around the base on the inside, meant that there was little activity on its curving slopes. The first two kilometres above the coves were terraced like an ancient hill farm, planted with flowering bushes and orchards tended by agronomy servitors. Above the terraces a claggy soil clung to the ever-steepening polyp wall, a vast annular meadow land of thick grasses, whose roots strove to counteract gravity and keep the soil in place. Both grass and soil stopped short three kilometres from the

hub, where the polyp was virtually a vertical cliff. Right at the axis, the light-tube emerged, running the entire length of the massive habitat: a cylindrical mesh of organic conductors, their powerful magnetic field containing the fluorescent plasma which brought light and heat to the interior.

Michael Saldana had decided that the quiet, semi-secluded southern endcap would be an ideal site for the research project into the Laymil. Its offices and laboratories now sprawled over two square kilometres of the lower terraces, the largest cluster of buildings inside the habitat, resembling the campus of some wealthy private university.

The project director's office was on the top floor of the five-storey administration building, a squat, circular pillar of copper-mirror glass ringed with grey stone colonnaded balconies. It sat on the terrace at the back of the campus, five hundred metres above the circumfluous sea, giving it an unsurpassed view of the cycloramic sub-tropical parkland stretching away into misty distance.

The view was something Parker Higgens was immensely proud of, easily the finest in Tranquillity, another fitting perk due to the research project's eighth director—along with the scrumptious office itself, with its deep-burgundy coloured ossalwood furniture that had come from Kulu in the days before the abdication crisis. Parker Higgens was eighty-five. His appointment had come nine years ago, almost the last act of the Lord of Ruin, and by the grace of God (plus an ancestor wealthy enough to afford some decent geneering) he would keep the post for another nine. He had left actual research behind twenty years ago to concentrate on administration. It was a field he excelled in; building the right teams, massaging mercurial egos, knowing when to push, when to ease off. Genuinely effective scientific administrators were rare, and under his leadership the project had functioned reasonably smoothly, everyone acknowledged that. Parker Higgens liked to keep his world neat and tidy, it was one of his formulas for success, which was why he was particularly shocked to come into work one morning

and find a young blonde-haired girl lounging in the deep cushioning of *his* straight-backed chair behind *his* desk.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” he shouted. Then he saw the five serjeants standing to attention around the room.

Tranquillity’s serjeants were the habitat’s sole police force, sub-sentient bitek servitors controlled via affinity by the personality, enforcing the law with scrupulous impartiality. They were (intentionally) intimidating humanoids, two metres tall, with a reddish-brown exoskeleton, limb joints encased by segmented rings permitting full articulation. The heads had a sculpted appearance, with eyes concealed in a deep horizontal crease. Their hands were their most human characteristic, with leathery skin replacing the exoskeleton. It meant they could use any artefact built for a human, with emphasis on weapons. Each of them carried a laser pistol and a cortical jammer on their belts, along with restraint cuffs. The belt was their sole article of clothing.

Parker Higgs glanced round dumbly at the serjeants, then back at the girl. She was wearing a very expensive pale blue suit, and her ice-blue eyes conveyed an unnerving impression of depth. Her nose . . . Parker Higgs might have been a bureaucrat, but he wasn’t stupid. “You?” he whispered incredulously.

Ione gave him a faint smile and stood up, extending her hand. “Yes, Mr Director. Me, I’m afraid. Ione Saldana.”

He shook the hand weakly, it was very small and cool in his. There was a signet ring on her finger, a red ruby carved with the Saldana crest: the crowned phoenix. It was the Kulu Crown Prince’s ring, Michael hadn’t bothered to return it to the keeper of the crown jewellery when he was sent into exile. Parker Higgs had last seen it on Maurice Saldana’s finger.

“I’m honoured, ma’am,” Parker Higgs said; he had come very close to blurting: *but you’re a girl*. “I knew your father, he was an inspiring man.”

“Thank you.” There was no trace of humour on Ione’s face. “I appreciate you’re busy, Mr Director, but I’d like to inspect the project’s major facilities this morning. Then I shall require each division’s senior staff to assemble summaries of their work for a presentation in two days’ time. I

have tried to keep abreast of the findings, but remote viewing through Tranquillity's senses and having them explained in person are two different things."

Parker Higgens's whole universe trembled. A review, and like it or not this slip of a girl held the purse strings, the *life* strings of the research project. What if . . . "Of course, ma'am, I'll show you round myself."

Ione started to walk round the desk.

"Ma'am? May I ask what your policy towards the Laymil research project is? Previous Lords of Ruin have been very—

"Relax, Mr Director. My ancestors were quite right: unravelling the Laymil mystery should be given the highest priority."

The prospect of imminent disaster retreated from his view, like rain-clouds rolling away to reveal the sun. It was going to be all right after all. Almost. A girl! Saldana heirs were always male. "Yes, ma'am!"

The serjeants lined up into an escort squad around Ione. "Come along," she said, and swept out of the office.

Parker Higgens found his legs racing in an undignified manner to catch up. He wished he could make people jump obediently like that.

There *is* a third Lord of Ruin.

The news broke thirty-seven seconds after Ione and Parker Higgens walked into the laboratory block housing the Laymil Plant Genetics Division. Everybody who worked for the project was fitted with neural nanonics. So once the instinctive flash of guilt and the accompanying shock of having the director and five serjeants walk in unannounced ten minutes into the working day had worn off, and the introductions began, professors and technicians alike opened channels into the habitat's communication net. Nearly every datavise began: You're not going to believe this—

Ione was shown AV projections of Laymil plant genes, sealed propagators with seed shoots worming their way up through the soil, and large fern-analogue plants with scarlet fronds growing in pots, and given small shrivelled black fruits to taste.

After friends, relatives, and colleagues were brought up to speed, it took another fifteen seconds before anyone thought of contacting the news company offices.

Ione and Parker Higgens walked on from the plant genetics laboratory to the Laymil Habitat Structure Analysis office. People were lining the stone path, trampling on the shrubs. Applause and cheers followed her like a wave effect, wolf-whistles were flung boisterously. The serjeants had to gently push aside the more enthusiastic spectators. Ione started to shake hands and wave.

There were five major Confederationwide news companies who maintained offices in Tranquillity, and all of them had been told about Ione's arrival at the research project campus within ninety seconds of her tour beginning. The disbelieving assistant editor at Collins immediately asked the habitat personality if it was true.

"Yes," Tranquillity said simply.

The scheduled morning programmes were immediately interrupted to carry the news. Reporters sprinted for tube carriages. Editors frantically opened channels to their contacts in the Laymil project staff, seeking immediate on-the-ground coverage. Datavises became sensevises, relaying optical and auditory nerve inputs directly to the studio. After twelve minutes, eighty per cent of Tranquillity's residents were hooked in, either watching Ione's impromptu walkabout on the AV broadcasts, or receiving the sensevise direct through neural nanonics.

It's a girl, the Lord of Ruin is a girl. God, the Royal Saldanas will go mad over that, there's not a chance of reconciliation with the Kingdom now.

There were two Kiint working in the physiology laboratory; one of them came into the glass-walled lobby to greet Ione. It was an impressive and moving sight, the slight human girl standing in front of the huge xenoc.

The Kiint was an adult female, icy-white hide glimmering softly in the bright morning light, almost as if she was wearing a halo. She had an oval cross-section body nine metres long, three wide, standing on eight fat elephantlike legs. Her head was as long as Ione was tall, which was slightly intimidating as it reminded her of a primitive shield; a bony,

slightly convex, downward pointing triangle with a central vertical ridge which gave it two distinct planes. There were a pair of limpid eyes halfway up, just above a series of six breathing vents, each of which had a furry fringe that undulated with every breath. The pointed base of the head served as her beak, with two smaller hinged sections behind.

Two arm-appendages emerged from the base of her neck, curving round the lower half of her head. They looked almost like featureless tentacles. Then tractamorphic muscles rippled below the skin, and the end of the right arm shaped itself into a human hand.

You are much welcome here, Ione Saldana, the Kiint spoke into her mind.

Kiint could always use the human affinity band, but Edenists had found it almost impossible to sense any form of private Kiint communication. Perhaps they had a true telepathic ability? It was one of the lesser mysteries about the enigmatic xenocs.

Your interest in this research venture does you credit, the Kiint continued.

My thanks to you for assisting us, Ione replied. **I'm told the analysis instruments you have made available here have been an immeasurable help.**

How could we refuse your grandfather's invitation? Foresight such as his is a rare quality among your race.

I would like to speak with you about that sometime.

Of course. But now you must complete your grand progress. There was a note of lofty amusement behind the thought.

The Kiint extended her new-formed hand, and they touched palms briefly. She inclined her massive head in a bow. Murmurs of surprise rippled round the others in the lobby.

Hell, look at that, even the Kiint's bowled over by her.

After the tour Ione stood alone in one of the orchards outside the campus, surrounded by trees rigorously pruned into mushroom shapes, their branches congested with a fleece of blossom. Petals swirled slowly through the air about her, sprinkling the ankle-length grass with a snowy mantle. She had her back to the habitat, so that the entire interior ap-

peared to curve around her like a pair of emerald waves, their peaks clashing in a long, straight flame of scintillating white light far overhead.

“I want to tell you of the faith I have in everybody who lives in Tranquillity,” she began. “Out of nothing a hundred and seventy-five years ago we have built a society that is respected throughout the Confederation. We are independent, we are virtually crime free, and we are wealthy, both collectively and individually. We can be justifiably proud in that achievement. It was not given to us, it was bought with hard work and sacrifices. And it will continue only by encouraging the industry and enterprise that has generated this wealth. My father and grandfather gave their wholehearted support to the business community, in creating an environment where trade and industry enrich our lives, and allow us to aspire for our children. In Tranquillity, dreams are given a greater than average chance to become real. That you will continue to pursue your dreams is the faith I have in you. To this end I pledge that my reign will be devoted to maintaining the economic, legal, and political environs which have brought us to the enviable position we find ourselves in today and enable us to look forward to the future with courage.”

The image and voice faded from the news studios, along with the aromatic scent of blossom. But not the shy half-smile, that lingered for a long time.

Christ: young, pretty, rich, and smart. How about that!

By the end of the day, Tranquillity had received eighty-four thousand invitations for Ione. She was wanted at parties and dinners, she was asked to give speeches and present prizes, her name was wanted on the board of interstellar companies, designers offered their entire portfolio for her to wear, charities begged her to become their patron. Old friends treated her as though she was a reincarnated messiah. Everyone wanted to be her new friend. And Joshua—Joshua got very grumpy when she spent the first evening reviewing Tranquillity’s summaries of the incredible public reaction rather than spending it in bed with him.

He was also none too happy that *Lady Macbeth’s* refit was still a fortnight short of completion. Over the next

twenty hours, seventy-five charter flights were organized to carry recordings of Ione around the Confederation. The news company offices were engaged in a ferocious ratings war; they were desperate to break the scoop on as many worlds as possible, as soon as possible. Starship captains cursed their earlier binding contracts to deliver mundane cargoes, and some even broke them. Those that didn't have immediate contracts named wholly unreasonable prices to the news companies, which were paid without question.

Right across the Confederation, the sensation-hungry devoured Ione, rekindling an avid interest in the black sheep branch of the Saldana family; and even briefly pushing the old Laymil enigma into the limelight again.

Merchants became extremely wealthy on Ione fashions and Ione accessories. Bluesense directors remodelled their female meat to look and feel like her. Mood Fantasy bands composed tracks about her. Even Jezzibella announced she looked cute, and said she'd like to fuck her one day.

The news agencies on Kulu and its Principality worlds treated her appearance as a minor footnote. The royal family didn't believe in censoring the press, but the court certainly didn't see her appearance as anything to celebrate. Black-market sensewise recordings of her sold for an absolute fortune right across the Kingdom.

It was one of the abandoned cargo contracts which brought Joshua his first charter two days later.

Roland Frampton was a merchant friend of Barrington Grier, which was how he heard of the *Lady Macbeth* and how she would be ready to depart in fourteen days.

"When I get my hands on that bastard Captain McDonald I'll have him broken up for transplant meat," Roland said angrily. "The *Corum Sister* won't get another cargo contract this side of Jupiter, that I do promise." Joshua sipped his mineral water and nodded sympathetically. Harkey's Bar didn't have the same appeal by day, although the term was ambiguous in a starscraper. But people's biorhythms were in tune with the habitat light-tube; his body knew this was mid-morning.

"I paid good rates, you know, not like I was ripping him

off. It was a regular run. Now this bloody girl comes along, and everyone goes berserk.”

“Hey, I’m glad we’ve got a Saldana back running things,” Barrington Grier protested. “If she’s half as good as the last two Lords, this place is going to be swinging.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t got no quarrel with her,” Roland Frampton said hurriedly. “But the way people react.” He shook his head in bemusement. “Did you hear what the news companies were offering captains for the Avon run?”

“Yeah. Meyer and the *Udat* got the Time Universe charter to Avon,” Joshua said with a grin.

“The point is, Joshua, I’m up shit creek,” Roland Frampton said. “I’ve got my clients screaming for those nanonic medical supplements. There are a lot of wealthy old people in Tranquillity, the medical industry here is big business.”

“I’m sure we can come to an arrangement.”

“Cards on the table, Joshua, I’ll pay you three hundred and fifty thousand fuseodollars for the flight, with an extra seventy thousand bonus if you can get them back here in five weeks from today. After that, I can offer you a regular contract, a flight to Rosenheim every six months. Not to be sneered at, Joshua.”

Joshua glanced at Melvyn Ducharme, who was stirring his coffee idly. He had come to rely a lot on his fusion engineer during *Lady Mac*’s refit; he was forty-eight, with over twenty years’ solid starflight experience behind him. The dark-skinned little man gave a small nod.

“OK,” Joshua said. “But you know the score, Roland, the *Lady Mac* doesn’t leave that bay until I’m happy she’s integrated properly. I’m not rushing it and botching it just for the sake of a seventy-thousand-dollar bonus.”

Roland Frampton gave him an unhappy look. “Sure, Joshua, I appreciate that.”

They shook on it and started to work out details.

Kelly Tirrel arrived twenty minutes later, dropped her bag on the carpet, and sat down with an exaggerated sigh. She called a waitress over and ordered a coffee, then gave Joshua a perfunctory kiss.

“Have you got your contract?” she asked.

"We're working on it." He gave the bar a quick scan. Helen Vanham wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Good for you. God what a day! My editor's been having kittens."

"Ione caught you all on the hop, did she?" Barrington Grier asked.

"And then some," Kelly admitted. "I've been researching for the last fifteen hours without a break, going through the Saldana family history. We're putting together an hour-long documentary for tonight. Those royals are one bunch of weird people."

"Are you going to present it?" Joshua asked.

"No chance. Kirstie McShane got it. Bitch. She's sleeping with the current affairs editor, you know, that's why. I'll probably wind up as fashion correspondent or something. If only we'd had some advance warning, I could have prepared, found an angle."

"Ione wasn't sure about the timing herself," he said. "She's only been thinking about public appearances for the last fortnight."

There was a murderous silence as Kelly's head slowly turned to focus on Joshua. "What?"

"Er . . ." He felt as though he'd suddenly been dumped into free fall.

"You know her? You've known who she is?"

"Well, sort of, in a way, I suppose, yes. She did mention it."

Kelly stood up fast, the motion nearly toppling her chair. "Mention it! You SHIT, Joshua Calvert! Ione Saldana is the biggest story to hit the whole Confederation for three years, and you KNEW about it, and you didn't tell me! You selfish, egotistical, mean-minded, xenoc-buggering bastard! I was sleeping with you, I cared . . ." She clamped her mouth shut and snatched her bag up. "Didn't that mean anything to you?"

"Of course. It was . . ." He accessed his neural nanonics' thesaurus file. "Stupendous?"

"Bastard!" She took two paces towards the door then turned round. "And you're shit-useless in bed, too," she shouted.

Everyone in Harkey's Bar was staring at him. He could see a lot of grins forming. He closed his eyes for a moment and let out a resigned sigh. "Women." He swivelled round in his chair to face Roland Frampton. "About the insurance rates . . ."

The cavern wasn't like anything Joshua had seen in Tranquillity before. It was roughly hemispherical, about twenty metres across, with the usual level white polyp floor. But the walls' regularity was broken up by organic protuberances, great cauliflower growths that quivered occasionally as he watched; there were also the tight doughnuts of sphincter muscles. Equipment cabinets, with a medical look, were fused into the polyp; as though they were being extruded, or osmotically absorbed. He couldn't tell which.

The whole place was so *biological*. It made him want to squirm.

"What is it?" he asked Ione.

"A clone womb centre." She pointed to one of the sphincters. "We gestate the servitor housechimps in these ones. All of the habitat's servitors are sexless, you see, they don't mate. So Tranquillity has to grow them. We've got several varieties of chimps, and the serjeants, of course, then there are some specialist constructs for things like tract repair and light-tube maintenance. There are forty-three separate species in all."

"Ah. Good."

"The wombs are plumbed directly into the nutrient ducts, there's very little hardware needed."

"Right."

"I was gestated in here."

Joshua's nose wrinkled up. He didn't like to think about it.

Ione walked over to a waist-high, steel-grey equipment stack standing on the floor. Green and amber LEDs winked at her. There was a cylindrical zero-tau pod recessed into the top, twenty centimetres long, ten wide; its surface resembled a badly tarnished mirror. She used her affinity to load an order into the stack's bitek processors, and the pod hinged open.

Joshua watched silently as she placed the little sustentator globe inside. His son. Part of him wanted to put a stop to this right now, to have the child born properly, to know him, watch him grow up.

"It is customary to name the child now," Ione said. "If you want to."

"Marcus." His father's name. He didn't even have to think about that.

Her sapphire eyes were damp, reflecting the soft pearl light from the electrophorescent strips in the ceiling. "Of course. Marcus Saldana it is, then."

Joshua's mouth opened to protest. "Thank you," he said meekly.

The pod closed and the surface turned black. It didn't look solid, more like a fissure which had opened into space.

He stared at it for a long time. You just can't say no to Ione.

She slipped her arm through his and steered him out of the clone womb centre into the corridor outside. "How's the *Lady Macbeth* coming along?"

"Not so bad. The Confederation Astronautics Board inspectors have cleared our systems integration. We're starting to reassemble the hull now, it should be finished in another three days. One final inspection for the spaceworthiness certificate, and we're away. I've got a contract with Roland Frampton to collect some cargo from Rosenheim."

"That's good news. So I've got you to myself for another four nights."

He pulled her a bit closer. "Yeah, if you can fit me in between engagements."

"Oh, I think I might manage to grant you a couple of hours. I've got a charity dinner tonight, but I'll be finished before eleven. Promise."

"Great. You've done beautifully, Ione, really, you just blew them away. They love you out there."

"And nobody's packed up and left yet, none of the major companies, nor the plutocrats. That's my real success."

"It was that speech you made. Jesus, if there were elections tomorrow you'd be president."

They reached the tube carriage waiting in the little station. Two serjeants stood aside as the door opened.

Joshua looked at them, then looked into the ten-seater carriage. "Can they wait out here?" he asked innocently.

"Why?"

He leered.

She clung to him tightly afterwards, trembling slightly, their bodies hot and sweaty. He was sitting right on the edge of one of the seats, with her as the clinging vine, legs bent up behind his back. The carriage's air-conditioning fans made a loud whirring sound as they recycled the unusually humid air.

"Joshua?"

"Uh huh." He kissed her neck, hands stroking her buttocks.

"I can't protect you once you leave."

"I know."

"Don't do anything stupid. Don't try to beat anything your father did."

His nose nuzzled the base of her chin. "I won't. I'm no death wisher."

"Joshua?"

"What?"

She pulled her head back and looked straight into his eyes, trying to make him believe. "Trust your instincts."

"Hey, I do."

"Please, Joshua. Not just about objects, people too. Be careful of people."

"Yes."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

He rose up, with Ione still wrapped round his torso. She could feel him getting hard again.

"See those hand hoops?" he asked.

She glanced up. "Yes."

"Catch hold, and don't let go."

She reached up with both hands and gripped a pair of the steel loops on the ceiling. Joshua let go of her, and she yelped. Her toes didn't quite reach the floor. He stood in

front of her, grinning, and gave her a small shove, starting her swinging.

“Joshua!” Ione forked her legs at the top of the arc.

He moved forward, laughing.

Erick Thakrar floated into bay MB 0-330’s control centre towing his bag. He stopped himself with an expert nudge against a grab loop. There was an unusually large number of people grouped round the observation bubble. He recognized all of them, engineers who had worked on the *Lady Macbeth*’s refit. All of them had been working long shifts together for the last couple of weeks.

Erick didn’t mind the work, it meant he had won his place on the *Lady Macbeth*’s crew. A stiff back and perpetual tiredness was a price worth paying for that. And in another two hours he would be on his way.

The buzz of voices faded away as people became aware of him. A vacant slot around the observation bubble materialized. He steadied himself and looked out.

The cradle had telescoped up out of the bay, taking the *Lady Macbeth* with it. As he watched, the starship’s thermo-dump panels unfolded from their recesses in the lustreless grey hull. Cradle umbilical couplings withdrew from the rear quarter.

“You are cleared for disconnection,” the bay supervisor datavised. “*Bon voyage*, Joshua. Take care.”

Orange candle-flames ignited around the *Lady Macbeth*’s equator, and the chemical verniers lifted her clear of the cradle with a dexterity only a master pilot could ever achieve.

The engineering team whooped and cheered.

“Erick?”

He looked round at the supervisor.

“Joshua says to say sorry, but the Lord of Ruin thinks you’re an arsehole.”

Erick turned back to the empty bay. The cradle was sinking slowly back towards the floor. Blue light washed down as the *Lady Macbeth*’s ion thrusters took over from the verniers.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered numbly.

There were four separate life-support capsules in the *Lady Macbeth*, twelve-metre spheres grouped together in a pyramid shape at the very heart of the ship. With the expense of fitting them out coming to a minute fraction of the starship's overall cost, they were well appointed.

Capsules B, C, and D, the lower spheres, were split into four decks apiece, with the two middle levels following a basic layout of cabins, a lounge, galley, and bathroom. The other decks were variously storage compartments, maintenance shops, equipment bays, and airlock chambers for the spaceplane and MSV hangars.

Capsule A housed the bridge, taking up half of the upper middle deck, with consoles and acceleration couches for all six crew-members. Because neural nanonics could interface with the flight computer from anywhere in the ship, it was more of a management office than the traditional command centre, with console screens and AV projectors providing specialist systems displays to back up datavised information.

Lady Macbeth was licensed to carry up to thirty active passengers, or if the cabin bunks were removed and zero-tau pods installed, eighty people travelling in stasis. With only Joshua and five crew on board, there was a luxurious amount of space available. Joshua's cabin was the largest, taking up a quarter of the bridge deck. He refused to change it from the layout Marcus Calvert had chosen. The chairs were from some luxury passenger ship decommissioned over half a century ago, hinged black-foam sculptures which looked like giant seashells in their folded positions. A bookcase held acceleration-reinforced leather-bound volumes of ancient star charts. An Apollo command module guidance computer (of dubious provenance) was displayed in a transparent bubble. But the major feature, from his point of view, was the free-fall-sex cage, a mesh globe of rubberized struts which deployed from the ceiling. You could bounce around happily inside that without any danger of crashing into inconvenient (and sharp) pieces of furniture or decking. He intended to get into full practice with Sarha Mitcham, the twenty-four-year-old general systems engineer who had taken Erick Thakrar's place.

Everyone was strapped in their bridge couch when Joshua lifted the *Lady Macbeth* off bay 0-330's cradle. He did it with instinctive ease, he did it like a chrysalis opening its wings to the sun, he did it knowing this was what his spiralling DNA had been reconfigured to do.

Flight vectors from the spaceport traffic control centre insinuated their way into his mind, and ion thrusters rolled the ship lazily. He took them out over the edge of the giant disk of girders using the secondary reaction drive, then powered up the three primary fusion drives. The gee-force built rapidly, and they headed up out of Mirchusko's gravity well towards the green crescent of Falsia, seven hundred thousand kilometres away.

The shakedown flight lasted for fifteen hours. Test programs ran systems checks; the fusion drives were pushed up to producing a brief period of seven-gee thrust, and their plasma was scanned for instabilities; life-support capacity was tested in each capsule. The guidance systems, the sensors, fuel tank slosh baffles, thermal insulation, power circuits, generators . . . the million components that went into making up the starship structure.

Joshua inserted *Lady Mac* into orbit two hundred kilometres above the cratered lifeless moon while they took a rest for ninety minutes. After a final, formal report confirming overall performance efficiency matched the Confederation Astronautics Board's requirements, he powered up the fusion drives again, and accelerated back in towards the hazy ochre gas giant.

Adamist starships lacked the flexibility of voidhawks not only in manoeuvrability, but also in their respective methods of faster than light translation. While the bitek craft could tailor their wormholes to produce a terminus at the required location irrespective of their orbit and acceleration vector, ships like the *Lady Macbeth* jumped along their orbital track without any leeway at all. It was that limitation which cost captains a great deal of time between jumps. The starship had to align itself directly on its target star. In interstellar space it wasn't so difficult, simply a question of adjusting for natural error. But the initial jump out of a star system had to be as accurate as humanly possible to prevent emergence

point inaccuracies from growing out of hand. If a starship was departing an asteroid that was heading away from its next port of call, the captain could spend days reversing his orbit, and the cost in delta-V reserve was horrendous. Most captains simply employed the nearest available planet, giving them the choice of jumping towards any star in the galaxy once every orbit.

Lady Macbeth fell into a circular orbit a hundred and eighty-five thousand kilometres above Mirchusko, a ten-thousand-kilometre safety margin. Gravity distortion prohibited Adamist starships from jumping within a hundred and seventy-five thousand kilometres of gas giants.

The flight computer datavised the vector lines into Joshua's mind. He saw the vast curved bulk of quarrelling storm bands below, the black cave-lip of the terminator creeping towards him. *Lady Mac*'s trajectory was a tube of green neon rings stretching out ahead until they merged into a single thread which looped round behind Mirchusko's darkside. The green rings swept past the hull at a dizzying velocity.

Rosenheim showed as an insignificant point of white light, bracketed by red graphics, rising above the gas giant.

"Generators on line," Melvyn Ducharme reported.

"Dahybi?" Joshua asked.

"Patterning circuits are stable," Dahybi Yadev, their node specialist, said in a calm voice.

"OK, looks like we're go for a jump." He ordered the nodes to power up, feeding the generators' full output into the patterning circuits. Rosenheim was rising higher and higher above the gas giant as *Lady Mac* raced round her orbit.

Jesus, an actual jump.

According to his neural nanonics physiological monitor program his heart rate was up to a hundred beats a minute and rising. It had been known for some first-time crewmembers to panic when the actual moment came, terrified by the thought of the energy loci being desynchronized. All it took was one glitch, one failed monitor program.

Not me! Not this ship.

He datavised the flight computer to pull in the thermo-dump panels and the sensor clusters.

“Nodes fully charged,” Dahybi Yadev said. “She’s all yours, Joshua.”

He had to grin at that. She always had been.

Ion thrusters flickered briefly, fine tuning their trajectory. Rosenheim slid across the vector of green rings, right into the centre. Decimals spun down to zero, tens of seconds, hundredths, thousandths.

Joshua’s command flashed through the patterning nodes at lightspeed. Energy flowed, its density racing to achieve infinity.

An event horizon rose from nowhere to cloak the *Lady Macbeth*’s hull. Within five milliseconds it had shrunk to nothing, taking the starship with it.

Erick Thakrar took the StMichelle starscraper’s lift down to the forty-third floor, then got out and walked down two flights of stairs. There was nobody about on the forty-fifth floor vestibule. This was office country, half of them unoccupied; and it was nineteen hundred hours local time.

He walked into the Confederation Navy bureau.

Commander Olsen Neale looked up in surprise when Erick entered his office. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought the *Lady Macbeth* had departed.”

Erick sat down heavily in the chair in front of Neale’s desk. “She has.” He explained what happened.

Commander Neale rested his head in his hands, frowning. Erick Thakrar was one of half a dozen agents the CNIS was operating in Tranquillity, trying to insert them on independent traders (especially those with antimatter drives) and blackhawks in the hope of getting a lead on pirate activity and antimatter production stations.

“The Lord of Ruin warned Calvert?” Commander Neale asked in a puzzled tone.

“That’s what the maintenance bay supervisor said.”

“Good God, that’s all we need, this Ione girl turning Tranquillity into some kind of anarchistic pirate nation. It might be a blackhawk base, but the Lords of Ruin have always supported the Confederation before.” Commander Neale

glanced round the polyp walls, then stared at the AV pillar sticking out of his desk's processor block, half expecting the personality to contact him and deny the accusation. "Do you think your cover's blown?"

"I don't know. The refit team thought it was all a big joke. Apparently Joshua Calvert signed on some girl to replace me. They said she was rather attractive."

"Well, it certainly fits what we know about him; he could very easily have dumped you for a doxy and a quick leg-over."

"Then why the reference to the Lord of Ruin?"

"God knows." He let out a long breath. "I want you to keep trying for a berth on a ship; you'll find out soon enough if you have been blown. I'm going to put all this on the diplomatic report flek, and let Admiral Aleksandrovich worry about it."

"Yes, sir." Erick Thakrar saluted and left.

Commander Neale sat in his chair for a long time, watching the starfield rotate past the window. The prospect of Tranquillity going renegade was horrifying, especially given the one particular status quo it had maintained for twenty-seven years. Eventually he accessed his neural nanonics file on Dr Mzu, and started to check through the circumstances under which he was authorized to have her assassinated.

11

Some of the more superstitious amongst Aberdale's population were heard to say that Marie Skibbow had taken the village's luck with her when she departed. There was no change in their physical circumstances, but they seemed to suffer a veritable plague of depressing and unfortunate incidents.

Marie had been right about her family's reaction. After the truth was finally established (Rai Molvi confirmed she boarded the *Coogan*, Scott Williams confirmed she was loading the thermal furnace when it cast off) Gerald Skibbow's reaction to what he thought of as his daughter's betrayal was pure fury. He demanded Powel Manani either chase after the tramp trader on his horse, or use his communication block to have the county sheriff arrest her when the *Coogan* sailed past Schuster.

Powel politely explained that Marie was now legally an adult, and didn't have a settlement contract with the LDC, and was therefore free to do as she pleased. Gerald, with Loren weeping quietly at his side, raged at the injustice, then went on to complain bitterly of the incompetence of the LDC's local representatives. At which point the Ivet supervisor, exhausted from leading the search for Gwyn Lawes after a full day spent in the saddle rounding up stray animals on the savannah, came very close to punching Gerald Skibbow's lights out. Rai Molvi, Horst Elwes, and Leslie Atcliffe had to pull them apart.

Marie Skibbow's name was never mentioned again.

The fields and plantations carved out of the jungle at the rear of Aberdale's clearing were now so large that the vigorous ground creepers which invaded the rotovated soil were

growing back almost as fast as they could be chopped up. It was a wearisome task, taxing even the disciplined Ivets. Any further expansion was clearly out of the question until the first batch of crops was firmly established. The more delicate varieties of terrestrial vegetables were struggling laboriously under the never-ending assault from the rain. Even with their geneering, tomatoes, courgettes, lettuce, kale, celeriac, and aubergines laboured upwards, their leaves bent and drooping, yellowing round the edges. One violent storm which left the jungle shrouded in mist for days afterwards scattered half of the village's chickens, few of which were ever found.

A fortnight after the *Coogan* departed, another tramp trader, the *Louis Leonid*, arrived. There was almost a riot at the prices the captain charged; he cast off hurriedly, swearing to warn every boat in the Juliffe basin to avoid the Quallheim tributary in future.

And there were the deaths as well. After Gwyn Lawes there was Roger Chadwick, drowned in the Quallheim, his body discovered a kilometre downriver. Then the terrible tragedy of the Hoffman family: Donnie and Judy, along with their two young teenage children, Angie and Thomas, burnt to death in their savannah homestead one night. It wasn't until morning when Frank Kava saw the thin pyre of smoke rising from the ashes that the alarm was raised. The bodies were charred beyond recognition. Even a well-equipped pathology lab would have been hard pressed to realize that they had all died from having a hunting laser fired through their eyes at a five-centimetre range.

Horst Elwes pushed the sharpened bottom of the cross thirty centimetres into the sodden black loam, and started to press it in with his boot. He had made the cross himself from mayope wood, not as good as anything Leslie could make, of course, but untainted. He felt that was important for little Angie.

"There's no proof," he said as he looked down at the pathetically small oblong mound of earth.

"Ha!" Ruth Hilton said as she handed him Thomas's cross.

They went over to the boy's grave. Horst found it very hard to visualize Thomas's face now. The boy had been thirteen, all smiles, always running everywhere. The cross went in the ground with a sucking sound.

"You said yourself they are Satanists," Ruth insisted. "And we damn well know those three colonists were murdered back in Durringham."

"Mugged," Horst said. "They were mugged."

"They were murdered."

The cross had Thomas's name burnt in crudely with a fission blade. I could have done better than that, Horst thought, it wouldn't have been much to ask for the poor boy, staying sober while I carved his headmarker.

"Murdered, mugged, it happened in a different world, Ruth. Was there ever really such a place as Earth? They say the past is only a memory. I find it very hard to remember Earth now. Does that mean it's gone, do you think?"

She looked at him with real concern. He was unshaven, and probably hadn't been eating properly. The vegetable garden he kept was choked with weeds and vine tendrils. His beefy figure had thinned down considerably. Most people in Aberdale had lost weight since they'd arrived, but they'd built muscle to compensate. Horst's flesh was starting to hang in folds below his chin. She suspected he'd found another supply of drink since she stood on the end of the jetty and emptied his last three bottles of Scotch into the Quallheim. "Where was Jesus born, Horst? Where did he die for our mortal sins?"

"Oh, very good. Yes, very good indeed. I could train you up as a lay preacher in no time if you'd let me."

"I have a field to tend. I have chickens and a goat to feed. I have Jay to look after. What are we going to do about the Ivets?"

"Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone."

"Horst!"

"I'm sorry." He looked mournfully at the cross she was holding.

Ruth thrust it into his hand. "I don't want them living here. Hell, have you seen the way that little Jason Lawes

trots around after Quinn Dexter? He's like a puppy on a leash."

"How many of us stop by to look after Rachel and Jason? Oh, we were all such fine neighbours to her for the first week after Gwyn died, ten days even. But now . . . To keep on and on for weeks without end when you have your own family to nurture. People can't do it, they lack the tenacity. Of course they designate the Ivets to help Rachel. Something is done, and conscience is saved. But I attach no blame for that. This place drains us, Ruth. It turns us inwards, we only have time for ourselves."

Ruth bit back on what she had heard about Rachel and Quinn Dexter. Hell, poor Gwyn had only been gone five weeks, couldn't the damn woman wait a little longer? "Where is it going to stop, Horst? Who's next? Do you know what I dream about? I dream of Jay running round after that super-macho Jackson Gael, or Lawrence Dillon with his pretty face and his dead smile. That's what I dream. Are you going to tell me I have nothing to worry about, that I'm just paranoid? Six deaths in five weeks. Six *accidents* in five weeks. We have to do something."

"I know!" Horst jabbed Judy Hoffman's cross into the ground. Water oozed up around the edge of the wood. Like blood, he thought, filthy blood.

The jungle steamed softly. It had rained less than an hour ago, and every trunk and leaf was still slick with water. One thick stratum of swan-white mist had formed at waist height. It meant the four Ivets tramping down the animal track could barely see their feet. Fingers of sunlight probing down through the screen of overhead leaves shone out like solid strands of gold in the ultra-humid air. Away in the distance was the tremulous gobbling and cooing of the birds, the chorus they had long since learnt to filter out.

The ground here was rough, distorted by meandering hummocks twice the height of a man. Trees grew out of their sides at slapdash angles, curving upwards, supported by vast buttress roots. Their ash-grey trunks were slender in relation to their height, seldom more than thirty centimetres wide, yet they were all over twenty metres high, crowned by in-

terlaced umbrellas of emerald foliage. Nothing grew on the trunks below. Even the vines and scrub plants around the triangular roots lacked their usual vigour.

"There's no game here," Scott Williams said after half an hour of scrambling over interminable hummocks and splashing through the water that pooled around them. "It's the wrong sort of country."

"That's right," Quinn Dexter said. "No reason for anyone to come this way." They had started out early that morning, marching down the well-worn path towards the savannah homesteads to the south of Aberdale, a legitimate hunting party, with four borrowed laser rifles and one electromagnetic rifle. Quinn had led them straight down the path for five kilometres, then broke off into the jungle towards the west. He made one sweep each week, the guido block he'd taken from the Hoffmans' homestead making sure a different area was searched each time.

They had done well from the Hoffmans that night a fortnight ago. Donnie had come to Lalonde well prepared for the rigours of pioneering life. There had been freeze-dried food, tools, medical supplies, several rifles, and two Jovian Bank credit disks. The six Ivets he had led on the night-time mission to the homestead had feasted well before he turned them loose on Judy and the two children.

That had been the first time Quinn had conducted the full ceremony, the dark mass of dedication to God's Brother. Binding the others to him with the shared corruption. Before that it had been fear which made them obey. Now he owned their souls.

Two of them had been the weakest of the Ivet group, Irley and Scott, disbelievers until lovely Angie was offered to them. The serpent beast had awoken in each of them, as it always did, inflamed by the heat, and chanting, and orange torchlight shining on naked skin. God's Brother had whispered into their hearts, and shown them the true way of the flesh, the animal way. Temptation had triumphed yet again, and Angie's cries had carried far across the savannah in the still night air. Since the ceremony they had become Quinn's most trusted comrades.

It was something Banneth had shown him; the cere-

monies were more than simple worship, they had a purpose. If you lived through them, if you committed the rituals, you became part of the sect for ever. There was nobody else after that. You were a pariah, irredeemable; loathed, hated, and rejected by decent society, by the followers of Jesus and Allah.

Soon there would be more ceremonies, and all the Ivets would undergo their initiation.

The ground began to flatten out. The trees were growing closer together now, with thicker undergrowth. Quinn plodded through another stream, boots crunching on the pebbles. He was wearing knee-length green denim shorts and a sleeveless vest of the same material, just right to protect his skin from thorns and twigs. They used to belong to Gwyn Lawes; Rachel had given all his clothes to the Ivets as a thank you for keeping her field free of weeds and creepers. Poor Rachel Lawes was not a well woman these days, she had become very brittle since her husband's death. She talked to herself and heard the voices of saints. But at night she listened to what Quinn wanted, and did it. Rachel hated Lalonde as much as he did, and she wasn't alone in the village. Quinn took note of the names she confessed, and ordered the Ivets to ingratiate themselves with the disaffected.

Lawrence Dillon let out an exuberant whoop, and fired off his borrowed laser rifle. Quinn looked up in time to see a vennial shooting through the tops of the trees, the little lizardlike animal flowing like liquid along the high branches, its paws barely touching the bark.

Lawrence fired again. A puff of smoke squirted from a branch where the vennial had been an instant before. "Sheech, but it's fast."

"Leave it," Quinn said. "You'll only have to carry it the rest of the day. We'll bag some meat on the way back."

"OK, Quinn," Lawrence Dillon said doubtfully. His head was cranked back, shifting from side to side as he squinted upwards. "I've lost it, anyway."

Quinn looked up at where the vennial had been. The nimble tree-dwelling creatures had a blue-green hide which was nearly impossible to distinguish from more than fifteen metres. He switched to infrared, and scanned the treetops of the

shadowless red and pink world his retinal implant revealed. The vennial was a bright salmon-pink corona, lying prone along the top of a thick bough, triangular head peering down nervously at them. Quinn turned a complete circle.

“I want you to put your weapons down,” he said.

The others gave him puzzled glances. “Quinn—”

“Now.” He unslung his laser rifle, and laid it on the wet grass. It was a tribute to his authority that the others did as they were told without any further protest.

Quinn spread his hands, palms open. “Satisfied?” he demanded.

The chameleon suit lost its bark pattern, reverting to a dark grey.

Lawrence Dillon took a pace backwards in surprise. “Shit. I never saw him.”

Quinn only laughed.

The man was standing with his back pressed against a qualtook tree eight metres away. He pulled the hood back revealing a round forty-year-old face with a steep chin and light grey eyes.

“Morning,” Quinn said in a jaunty tone. He had been expecting someone different, someone with Banneth’s brand of lashed-up mania; this man seemed to have no presence at all. “You’ve taken my advice, then? Very wise.”

“Tell me why you should not be eliminated,” the man said.

Quinn thought his voice sounded as though it had been synthesized by a processor block, completely neutral. “Because you don’t know who I’ve told, or what I’ve told them. That makes me safe. If you could go around snuffing out entire villages whenever your security had been compromised, you wouldn’t be stashed away here. Now would you?”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I won’t know that until I see what you’ve got. For a start, who are you?”

“This body’s name is Clive Jenson.”

“What have you done to him, put in a persona sequestrator nanonic?”

“Not quite, but the situation is similar.”

“So, are you ready to talk now?”

"I will listen." The man beckoned. "You will come with me, the others will remain here."

"Hey, no way," Jackson Gael said.

Quinn held his hands up. "It's OK, it's cool. Stay here for three hours, then go back to Aberdale whether I'm back or not." He checked the coordinate on the guido block, and started walking after the man in the chameleon suit whose name used to be Clive Jenson.

After six weeks' travelling and trading the *Coogan* was approaching the end of its voyage. Marie Skibbow knew they were within days of Durringham even though Len Buchanan had said nothing. She recognized the lying villages again; the white-painted slat walls of the trim houses, neat gardens, the pastoral fantasy. The Juliffe was coffee brown again, running eagerly towards the freedom of the ocean that couldn't be far away now. She could see the Hultain Marsh squatting on the north shore when the wavelets weren't riding too high, a dismal snarl of mouldy vegetation sending out eye-smarting streamers of brimstone gases. Big paddlecraft similar to the *Swithland* were churning their way upriver, leaving a foamy wake behind them. Fresh colonists gazed out at the shoreline with wonder and desire animating their faces, and children raced round the decks laughing and giggling.

Fools. All of them, utter fools.

The *Coogan* was stopping at fewer and fewer jetties now. Their original stocks were almost depleted, the tramp trader riding half a metre higher in the water. The balance in Len Buchanan's Jovian Bank credit disk had grown in proportion. Now he was buying cured meat to sell in the city.

"Stop loading," Len shouted at her from the wheel-house. "We're putting ashore here."

The *Coogan*'s blunt prow turned a couple of degrees, aiming for a jetty below a row of large wooden warehouses. There were several cylindrical grain silos to one side. Power bikes bumped along the dirt tracks winding round the houses. The village was a wealthy one. The kind Marie thought Group Seven was heading for, the kind that had tricked her.

She abandoned the logs she was loading into the hopper, and straightened her back. Weeks spent cutting up timber with a fission saw then feeding the hopper in all weathers had given her the kind of muscles she'd never got from the gym at the arcology's day centre. She had lost almost two centimetres from her waist, her old shorts didn't cling anything like the way they used to.

Thin smoke from the furnace's leaky iron stack made her eyes water. She blinked furiously, staring at the village they were approaching, then ahead to the west. She made up her mind, and walked forward.

Gail Buchanan was sitting at the side of the wheelhouse, her scraggly hair tied back, coolie hat casting a shadow over her knitting needles. She had knitted and sewed her way down the whole length of the river from Aberdale.

"Where do you think you're going, lovie?" the huge woman asked.

"My cabin."

"Well, you make sure you get back out here in time to help my Lennie with the mooring. I'm not having you slacking off while he has work to do. I've never known anyone as lazy as you. My poor husband works like a mechanoid to keep us afloat."

Marie ignored the obloquy and brushed past her, ducking down into the cabin. She had turned a corner of the cargo hold into a little nest of her own, sleeping on a length of shelving at nights after Len had finished with her. The wood was hard, and she'd repeatedly knocked her head on the frame during the first week until she got used to the confined space; but there was no way she was going to spend the night lying in his embrace.

She stripped off the colourless dungarees she used on deck, and pulled a clean bra and a T-shirt from her bag where they had lain throughout the voyage. Feeling the smooth synthetic fabric snug against her skin brought back memories of Earth and the arcology. Her world, where there was life and a future, where Govcentral gave away didactic courses, and people had proper jobs, and went to clubs, and had a thousand sensewise entertainment channels to choose

from, and the vac trains could take you to the other side of the planet in six hours. Black tropical-weave jeans with a leathery look finished the change. It was like wearing civilization. She picked up the shoulder-bag, and went forwards.

Gail Buchanan was hollering for her as she slid the bolt on the toilet door. The toilet itself was just a wooden box (built from mayope so it could take Gail's weight) with a hole in the top; there was a stack of big vine leaves to wipe with. Marie knelt down and prised the bottom plank off the front of the box. The river gurgled by a metre below. Her two packets were hanging below the decking, tied into place with silicon-fibre fishing-line. She cut the fibre with a pocket fission blade and stuffed the two polythene-wrapped bundles into her shoulder-bag. They were mostly medical nanonic packages, the highest value-for-weight-ratio items the *Coogan* carried; she'd also included some personal MF players, a couple of processor blocks, small power tools. A hoard that had been steadily built up over the voyage. The shoulder-bag's seal barely closed around them.

Gail's voice was reaching hysteria pitch by the time Marie got back to the galley and gave a last look round the wooden cell where she had spent an eternity cooking and cleaning. She took down the big brown clay pot of mixed herbs, and tugged out a thick wad of Lalonde francs. It was only one of the various bundles Gail had secreted around the tramp trader. She stuffed the crisp plastic notes into a rear pocket, then, on impulse, picked up a match before she went out on deck.

The *Coogan* had already pulled up next to the jetty and Len Buchanan was busy tying one of the cables to a bollard. Gail's face had turned a thunderous purple below her coolie hat.

She took in Marie's appearance with one flabbergasted look. "What the hell do you think you're doing dressed like that, you little strumpet? You've got to give Lennie a hand loading the meat. My poor Lennie can't shift all those heavy carcasses by himself. And where the hell do you think you're going with that bag? And what have you got in it?"

Marie smiled her lazy smile, the one her father always

called intolerably indolent. She struck the match on the cabin wall.

Both of them watched the phosphorus tip splutter into life, the yellow flame biting into the splinter of wood, eating its way along towards her fingers. Gail's mouth dropped open as realization dawned.

"Goodbye," she said brightly. "It's been so nice knowing you." She dropped the match into the sewing box at Gail's feet.

Gail screeched in panic as the match disappeared under her scraps of cotton and lace. Bright orange flames licked upwards.

Marie marched off down the jetty. Len was standing by the bollard ahead of her, a length of silicon-fibre rope coiled in his hands.

"You're leaving," he said.

Gail was shouting a tirade of obscenities and threats after her. There was a loud splash as the precious sewing box hit the water.

Marie couldn't manage the blasé expression she wanted. Not in front of him. There was a curious look of dismay on the skinny old man's face.

"Don't go," he said. It was a plea, she'd never heard his voice so whiny before.

"Why? Was there something you didn't have? Something you forgot to try out?" Her voice came close to breaking.

"I'll get rid of her," he said desperately.

"For me?"

"You're beautiful, Marie."

"Is that it? All you've got to say to me?"

"Yes. I thought . . . I never hurt you. Never once."

"And you want it to go on? Is that what you want, Len? The two of us sailing up and down the Juliffe for the rest of our days?"

"Please, Marie. I hate her. I want you, not her."

She stood ten centimetres away from him, smelling the fruit he'd eaten that morning on his breath. "Is that so?"

"I have money. You would live like a princess, I promise."

"Money is nothing. I would have to be loved. I could give

everything of myself to a man who loved me. Do you love me, Len? Do you really love me?"

"I do, Marie. God, I do. Please. Come with me!"

She ran a finger along his chin. Tears were welling up in his eyes.

"Then kill yourself, Len," she whispered thickly. "For she is all you have. She is all you'll ever have. For the rest of your life, Len, you're going to live with the knowledge that I am always beyond you."

She waited until his tragi-hopeful face crumpled in utter mortification, then laughed. It was so much more satisfactory than kneeling him in the balls.

There was a wagon loaded with silage trundling along the main dirt track, heading west. A fourteen-year-old boy in dungarees was driving it, giving occasional flicks on the big shire-horse's reins. Marie stuck out her thumb, and he nodded eagerly, overawed eyes goggling at her. She clambered aboard while it was still moving.

"How far to Durringham?" she asked.

"Fifty kilometres. But I'm not going that far, just to Mepal."

"That'll do for a start." She sat back on the hard wooden plank seat, the jolting wheels rocking her gently from side to side. The sun was boiling, the swaying was uncomfortable, the horse stank. She felt wonderful.

The gigantea was over seven thousand years old when Laton and his small band of followers arrived on Lalonde. It was set on a small rise in the land, which pushed its three-hundred-metre-plus length even further above the surrounding jungle. Storms had frayed and broken the tip, resulting in a bulbous knot of snarled twigs with tufts of leaves sticking out at odd angles. Birds had turned this malformed pinnacle into a voluminous eyrie, pecking away at it over the centuries until it was riddled with a warren of holes.

When it rained, water would clog in the gigantea's thick fuzzy leaves, their weight pushing the downward-sloping boughs even closer towards the fat bole. Then for hours afterwards droplets would sprinkle down, drying the gigantea out from the top, the boughs slowly rising again. Standing

on the ground below was like standing under a small, powerful waterfall. The last traces of soil had been washed away from under the boughs several millennia ago. All that remained was a solid undulating tangle of roots, extending outwards for a hundred metres, slimed like seaside rocks at low tide.

Laton's blackhawk had brought him to Lalonde in 2575. At that time there were less than a hundred people on the planet, a caretaker squad looking after the landing site camp. The ecological assessment team had completed their analysis and left; the Confederation inspection team wasn't due for another year. He had obtained a classified copy of the company report; the planet was habitable, it would gain the Confederation's certification. There would be colonists eventually; dirt poor, ignorant, without any advanced technology. Given his own particular designs on the future, it would be a perfect culture to infiltrate.

They had landed in the mountains on Amarisk's eastern side, twenty humans and seven landcruisers loaded with enough luxuries to make exile bearable, along with more essential stocks: small cybernetic manufacturing systems, and his genetics equipment. He also had the blackhawk's nine eggs, removed from its ovaries and stored in zero-tau. The blackhawk was sent to oblivion in the fierce blue-white star; and the little convoy started to batter its way through the jungle. It took them two days to reach the tributary river which would one day be called the Quallheim. Three days' sailing (the landcruisers had amphibious fuselages) brought them to Schuster County, a territory where the soil was deep enough to support the giganteas. Jungle again, and half a day later he found what must surely be the largest gigantea specimen on the continent.

"This will do," he told his fellowship. "In fact, I think it is rather appropriate."

The branches were still shedding their weight of water from the earlier rain when Clive Jenson led Quinn Dexter onto the slippery coils of the gigantea's roots. There was a perpetual twilight under the huge shaggy boughs. Water pattered

down, forming runnels that gurgled and sucked their way around the intestinal tangle below his feet.

Quinn resisted the impulse to hunch his shoulders against the big drops splashing on his head. Spores or sap—something organic—had curdled with the water, making it tacky. It was cool in the shade, the coolest he'd ever been on Lalonde.

They neared the colossal bole. The roots began to curve up to the vertical, wooden waves crashing against a wooden cliff. Between the thick cords were dark anfractuous clefts five times his height, tapering away to knife-thin fissures. Clive Jenson stepped into one. Quinn watched him disappear round a curve, then shrugged and followed him in.

After five metres the floor became level and the walls widened out to a couple of metres, the coarse mat of fibre which passed for the gigantea's bark giving way to smooth bare wood. Carved, he realized. God's Brother, he's cut his home into the tree. How much effort has gone into this?

There was a glimmer of light up ahead. He walked round an S-bend, and into a brightly lit room. It was fifteen metres long, ten wide, perfectly ordinary except for the lack of windows. Pegs on one wall held a row of dark green cagoules. Gigantea wood was a pale walnut colour, with a widely spaced grain, making it look as though the walls were built from exceptionally broad planks. There was a desk, like a long bar, running down one side, that had been carved from a single block. A woman stood at the far end of it, watching him impassively.

Quinn broke into a slow grin. She looked about twenty-five, taller than him, with black skin and long chestnut hair, a petite button nose. Her sleeveless amber blouse and white culottes showed off a full figure.

A flicker of distaste crossed her face. "Don't be disgusting, Dexter."

"What? I never said a word."

"You didn't have to. I'd sooner screw a servitor house-chimp."

"Do I get to watch?"

Her expression intensified. "Stand still, don't move, or

I'll have Clive dissect you." She picked a sensor wand off the desk.

Still grinning, Quinn lifted his arms out, and let her run the wand around him. Clive stood to attention a couple of metres away, perfectly still, as if he was a mechanoid construct that had been switched off. Quinn tried not to let it show how much that bothered him.

"So how long have you been here?" he asked.

"Long enough."

"What do I call you?"

"Camilla."

"OK, Camilla, that's cool. So what's the story here?"

"I'll let Laton tell you." Her tongue was pushed into her cheek. "That's if he doesn't just decide to incorporate you like Clive here."

Quinn threw a glance at the stationary man. "One of the colonists from the Schuster homesteads?"

"That's right."

"Ah."

"Your heart rate is high, Dexter. Worried about something?"

"No. Are you?"

She put the wand back on the desk. "You can see Laton now. You're no danger; two implants and a whole load of attitude."

He flinched at the mention of implants. There went his last advantage, tiny though it had been. "Got me this far, hasn't it?"

Camilla started to walk towards the door. "Getting in is the easy part."

There was a broad spiral staircase leading up through the bole. Quinn caught glimpses of corridors and rooms. A whole level was given over to a large pool-cum-spa. Steam was thick in the air, men and women were lounging about in the water or on various ledges; one was lying flat on a slab being given a massage by a middle-aged woman with an empty expression he was beginning to recognize. He realized what was missing: some people were laughing, but nobody was talking. Servitor housechimps scurried down corridors on mysterious errands; they were about a metre

and a half tall, walking with an almost human gait, their golden fur well groomed. When he looked closely he saw they had proper feet rather than the paws of their Earth-jungle ancestors.

God's Brother, those are Edenist constructs. What the fuck is this?

Camilla took him down a corridor that looked no different to any other. A door opened soundlessly, a thick wooden rectangle with some kind of synthetic muscle as a hinge.

"Lion's den, Dexter; in you go."

The door closed as silently as it had opened. Inside was a large circular space with a vaulted ceiling. The furniture was a severe minimalist style: a glass-topped desk with metal legs, a dining table, also glass topped, two settees facing each other; every piece arranged to put a maximum amount of distance between them. One section of the wall was a vast holographic screen with a view of the jungle outside. The camera was well above the treetops, showing an unbroken expanse of leaves; steamy scraps of cloud drifted in meandering patterns. An iron perch, three metres high, stood in the centre of the room. On it was the kestrel, watching him intently. Two people were waiting, a man seated behind the desk and a young girl standing beside the settees.

Laton rose from behind the desk. He was one of the tallest men Quinn had ever seen; well muscled, with cinnamon-coloured skin, looking like a tan rather than natural pigmentation, a handsome, vaguely Asian face with deep-set grey-green eyes and a neat beard, ebony hair tied back in a small pony-tail. He wore a simple green silk robe, belted at the waist. His age was indeterminable, over thirty, less than a hundred. That he was the product of geneering was in no doubt.

This was the presence Quinn had looked for when Clive Jenson had pulled off his chameleon-suit hood. The invincible self-assurance, a man who inspired devotion.

"Quinn Dexter, you've caused quite a stir among my colleagues. We have very few visitors, as you can imagine. Do sit down." Laton gestured to a royal-purple settee where the girl was waiting. "Can we get you anything while you're

here? A decent drink? A proper meal, perhaps? Dear old Aberdale isn't exactly flowing with milk and honey yet."

Quinn's instinct was to refuse, but the offer was too tempting. So bollocks if it made him look grasping and inferior. "A steak, medium rare, with chips and a side salad, no mustard. And a glass of milk. Never thought I'd miss milk." He gave Laton what he hoped was a phlegmatic smile as the big man sat down on the settee opposite. Out-cooling him was going to be a major problem.

"Certainly, I think we can manage that. We use starscraper food-secretion glands, modified to work from the gigantea's sap. The taste is quite passable." Laton raised his voice a degree. "Anname, see to that, would you, please."

The girl gave a slight, uncertain bow. She must have been about twelve or thirteen, Quinn thought, with thick blonde hair coming down below her shoulders and pale Nordic skin; her lashes were almost invisible. Her light blue eyes put Quinn in mind of Gwyn Lawes in the moments before his death. Anname was one very badly frightened little girl.

"Another member of the missing homestead families?" Quinn guessed.

"Indeed."

"And you haven't incorporated her?"

"She's given me no reason to. The adult males are useful for various labour-intensive tasks, which is why I kept them on; but the young boys I had no requirement for at all, so they were stored for transplant material."

"And what were your requirements?"

"Ovaries, basically. I didn't have a sufficient quantity for the next stage of my project. It was a situation which the homestead females were fortunately able to rectify for me. We have enough suspension tanks here to maintain their Fallopian tubes in a fully functional state, thus ensuring they keep dropping their precious little gifts into my palm each month. Anname hasn't quite matured enough for that yet. And seeing as how organs never really prosper in tanks, we allow her to run around the place until she's ready. Some of my companions have become quite fond of her. I even confess to finding her moderately tolerable myself."

Anname flashed him a glance of pure terror before the door opened and let her out.

"There's a lot of bitek at work here," Quinn said. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were an Edenist."

Laton frowned. "Oh dear. My name doesn't register amongst your memories, then?"

"No. Should it?"

"Alas, such is fame. Fleeting at best. Of course, I did achieve my notoriety a considerable number of years before you were born, so I suppose it's to be expected."

"What did you do?"

"There was an irregularity concerning a quantity of anti-matter, and a proteanic virus which damaged my habitat's personality rather badly. I'm afraid I released it before the replicant code RNA transfer was perfected."

"Your habitat? Then you are an Edenist?"

"Wrong tense. I was an Edenist, yes."

"But you're all affinity bonded. None of you breaks the law. You can't."

"Ah, there, I'm afraid, my young friend, you are a victim of popular prejudice, not to mention some rather sickly propaganda on Jupiter's behalf. There aren't many of us; but believe me, not everybody born an Edenist dies an Edenist. Some of us rebel, we shut off that cacophony of nobility and unity that vomits into our minds every living second. We regain our individuality, and our mental freedom. And more often than not, we choose to pursue our independent course through life. Our ex-peers refer to us as Serpents." He gave an ironic smile. "Naturally they don't like to admit we exist. In fact they go to rather tedious lengths to track us down. Hence my current position."

"Serpents," Quinn whispered. "That's what all men are. That's what God's Brother teaches us. Everyone is a beast in their heart, it is the strongest part of us, and so we fear it the most. But if you find the courage to let it rule, you can never be beaten. I just never thought an Edenist could free his beast."

"Interesting linguistic coincidence," Laton murmured.

Quinn leaned forwards. "Don't you see, we're the same, you and me. We both walk the same path. We are brothers."

“Quinn Dexter, you and I share certain qualities; but understand this, you became a waster kid, and from that a Light Brother sect member, because of social conditions. That sect was your only route away from mediocrity. I chose to be what I am only after a careful review of the alternatives. And the one thing I retain from my Edenist past is complete atheism.”

“That’s it! You said it. Shit, both of us told ordinary life to go fuck itself. We follow God’s Brother in our own way, but we both follow him.”

Laton raised an exasperated eyebrow. “I can see this is a pointless argument. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I want your help to subdue Aberdale.”

“Why should I want to do that?”

“Because I’ll turn it over to you afterwards.”

Laton looked blank for a second, then inclined his head in understanding. “Of course, the money. I wondered what you wanted the money for. You don’t want to be Aberdale’s feudal lord, you intend to leave Lalonde altogether.”

“Yeah, on the first starship I can buy passage on. If I can get down to Durringham before any alarm gets out, then I can use one of the villagers’ Jovian Bank credit disks without any trouble. And with you in charge back here there wouldn’t be no alarm.”

“What about your Ivet friends, the ones you seem to be busy baptizing in blood?”

“Fuck ’em. I want out. I got business back on Earth, serious business.”

“I’m sure you have.”

“How about it? We could work it together. Me and the Ivets could round up the women and children during the day when the men are out hunting and farming, use ’em as hostages. Get ’em all into the hall and take their guns away. Once the men are disarmed, it’ll be no problem for you to incorporate ’em all. Then you just make ’em live like they do now. Anyone turns up later, Aberdale is just another crappy colonist village full of arse scratchers. I get what I want, which is *out of here*, and you get plenty of warm bods; plus there’s no more security risk of someone stumbling on this wood palace and shouting to Durringham about it.”

"I think you're overestimating my ability."

"No way. Not now I've seen what you've got. This incorporation gimmick has got to be like persona sequestration. You could run a whole arcology with that technology."

"Yes, but the bitek regulators we implant would have to be grown first. I don't have them in store, certainly not five hundred and fifty of them. It all takes time."

"So? I ain't going anywhere."

"No, indeed. And of course, were I to agree, you would make no mention of me once you returned to Earth?"

"I'm no squeal. One of the reasons I'm here."

Laton eased back onto his settee and gave Quinn a long thoughtful look. "Very well. Now let me make you an offer. Leave Aberdale and join me. I can always use someone with your nerve."

Quinn let his gaze wander round the big vacuous room. "How long have you been here?"

"In the region of thirty-five years."

"I figured something like that; you couldn't have landed after the colonists arrived, not if you're as well known as you say you are. Thirty-five years living in a tree without any windows, I gotta tell you, it ain't me. In any case, I ain't no Edenist, I don't have this affinity trick to control the bitek."

"That can be rectified, you can use neuron symbionts just like your friend Powel Manani. More than a third of my colleagues are Adamists, the rest are my children. You'd fit in. You see, I can give you what you want most."

"I want Banneth, and she's three hundred light-years away. You ain't got her to give."

"I meant, Quinn Dexter, what you really want. What all of us want."

"Oh, yeah? What?"

"A form of immortality."

"Bullshit. Even I know that ain't on. The best the Saldanas can do is a couple of centuries, and that's with all their money and genetic research teams."

"That's because they are going about it the wrong way. The Adamist way."

Quinn hated the way he was being drawn into this con-

versation. It wasn't what he wanted, he'd seen himself making his pitch on how to subdue Aberdale, and the boss-man seeing the sense of it. Now he was having to think about freaky ideas like living for ever, and trying to make up an excuse why he didn't want to. Which was stupid because he did. But Laton couldn't possibly have it to offer anyway. Except this was a very high-technology operation, and he was using the girls for some kind of biological experiment. God's Brother, but Laton was a smooth one. "So what's your way?" he asked reluctantly.

"A combination of affinity and parallel thought-processes. You know Edenists transfer their memories into their habitat's neural cells when they die?"

"I'd heard about it, yeah."

"That's a form of immortality, although I consider it somewhat unsatisfactory. Identity fades after a few centuries. The will to live, if you like, is lost. Understandable, really, there are no human activities to maintain the spark of vitality which goads us on, all that's left is observation, living your life through your descendants' achievements. Hardly inspiring. So I began to explore the option of simply transferring my memories into a fresh body. There are several immediate problems which prevent a direct transfer. Firstly you require an empty brain capable of storing an adult's memories. An infant brain would be empty, but the capacity to retain an adult personality, the century and a half of accumulated memories that go towards making us who we are, that simply isn't there. So I began looking at the neuron structure to see if it could be improved. It's not an area that's been well researched. Brain size has been increased to provide a memory capacity capable of seeing you through a century and a half, and IQ has been raised a few points, but the actual structure is something the geneticists have left alone. I started to examine the idea of human parallel thought-processing, just like the Edenist habitats. They can hold a million conversations at once, as well as regulating their environment, acting as an administrative executive, and a thousand other functions, although they have only the one consciousness. Yet we poor mortal humans can only ever think about or do one thing at a time. I sought to repro-

file a neural network so that it could conduct several operations simultaneously. That was the key. I realized that as there was no limit to the number of operations which could be conducted, you could even have multiple independent units, bonded by affinity, and sharing a single identity. That way, when one dies, there is no identity loss, the consciousness remains intact and a new unit is grown to replace it.”

“Unit?” Quinn said heavily. “You mean a person?”

“I mean a human body with a modified brain, bonded to any number of cloned replicas via affinity. That is the project to which I have devoted my energies here in this exile. With some considerable degree of success, I might add, despite the difficulties of isolation. A parallel-processing brain has been designed, and my colleagues are currently sequencing it into my germ plasm’s DNA. After that, my clones will be grown in exowombs. Our thoughts will be linked right from the moment of conception, they will feel what I feel, see what I see. My personality will reside in each of us equally, a homogenized presence. Ultimately, this original body will wither away to nothing, but I shall remain. Death shall become a thing of the past for me. Death will die. I intend to spread out through this world until its resources belong to me, its industries and its population. Then a new form of human society will take shape, one which is not governed by the blind overwhelming biological imperative to reproduce. We shall be more ordered, more deliberate. Ultimately I envisage incorporating bitek constructs into myself; as well as human bodies I will be starships and habitats. Life without temporal limit nor physical restriction. I shall transcend, Quinn; isn’t that a dream worth chasing? And now I offer it to you. The homestead girls can provide enough ova for all of us to be cloned. Modifying your DNA is a simple matter, and each of your clones will breed true. You can join us, Quinn, you can live for ever. You can even deal with this Banneth person; ten of you, twenty, an army of your mirrorselves can descend on her arcology to effect your revenge. Now doesn’t that appeal, Quinn? Hasn’t that got more style than rushing round a jungle at night carving people’s guts out for a few thousand fuseodollars?”

Sheer willpower kept Quinn’s face composed into an in-

different mask. He wished he had never come, wished he had never figured out the kestrel. God's Brother, how he wished. Banneth was nothing compared to this crazy, Banneth was pure reasoned sanity. Yet all the shit Laton sprouted had a terrible logic, drawing him in like the dance of the black widow. Telling him he could be immortal was the same trick he had used against the Ivets, but with such demonic panache, bleeding him in conspiracy, making sure there was no turning back. He knew Laton would never let him get to Durringham's spaceport, let alone reach an orbiting starship. Not now, not with him knowing. The only way out of this tree—this room!—with his brain still his own was by agreeing. And it was going to have to be the most convincing agreement he had ever made in his life.

"This spreading your mind around gimmick, would I have to give up my belief?" he asked.

Laton gave him a thin smile. "Your belief would be amplified, safeguarded against loss in your multiple units, and carried down the centuries. You could even step out of the shadows to exhort your belief. What difference would it make if individual units were flung in jail or executed? The you that is you would remain."

"And sex, I'd still have sex, wouldn't I?"

"Yes, with one small difference, every gene would be dominant. Every child you sired would be another of your units."

"How far along are you with this parallel-processor brain? Have you actually grown one to see if it works?"

"A numerical simulacrum has been run through a bitek processor array. The analysis program proved its validity. It's a standard technique; the one Edenist geneticists used to design the voidhawks. They work, don't they?"

"Sure. Look, I'm interested. I can hardly deny that. God's Brother, living for ever, who wouldn't want it? Tell you what, I won't make any move to get back to Earth until after these clones of yours have popped out the exowombs. If they check out as good as you say, I'll be with you like a shot. If not, we'll review where we stand. Fuck, I don't mind waiting around a few years if that's what it takes to perfect it."

“Commendable prudence,” Laton purred.

“Meantime, it’d be a good idea to bugger up Supervisor Manani’s communicator block. For both our sakes. However it turns out, neither of us wants the villagers shouting to the capital for help. Can you let me have a flek loaded with some kind of processor-buster virus? If I just smash it, he’s gonna know it’s me.”

Anname walked in carrying a tray with Quinn’s steak, and a half-litre glass of milk. She put it down on Quinn’s lap, and glanced hesitantly at Laton.

“No, my dear,” Laton told her. “This is definitely not St George come to spirit you away from my fire-breathing self.”

She sniffed hard, cheeks reddening.

Quinn grinned wolfishly at her round a mouthful of steak.

“I think I can live with that arrangement,” Laton said. “I’ll have one of my people prepare a flek for you before you go.”

Quinn slurped some of his milk, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Great.”

There was something wrong with Aberdale’s church. Only half of the pews had ever been built and installed, though Horst Elwes occasionally worked on the planks of planed wood the Ivets had cut ready for the remainder. He doubted the three pews he had already assembled in the occasional bouts of shame-induced activity would take the weight of more than four people. But the roof didn’t leak, there was the familiarity of hymn books and vestments, the paraphernalia of worship, and he had a vast collection of devotional music on fleks which the audio-player block projected across the building. For all its deviant inception, it still symbolized a form of hope. Of late, it had become his refuge. Hallowed ground or not, and Horst wasn’t stupid enough to think that was any form of protection, the Ivets never came inside.

But something had.

Horst stood in front of the bench which served as an altar, hair on his arms pricked up as though he was standing in some kind of massive static stream. There was a presence in

the church, ethereal yet with an almost brutal strength. He could feel it watching him. He could feel age almost beyond comprehension. The first time Horst had seen a gigantea he had spent over an hour just looking up at it in stupefaction, a living thing that had been old when Christ walked the Earth. But the gigantea was nothing compared to this, the tree was a mere infant. Age, real age, was a fearful thing.

Horst didn't believe in ghosts. Besides, the presence was too real for that. It enervated the church, absorbing what scant ration of divinity had once existed.

"What are you?" he whispered to the gentle breeze. Night was falling outside, waving treetops cast a jagged sable-black silhouette against the gold-pink sky. The men were returning from the fields, sweaty and tired, but smiling. Voices carried through the clearing. Aberdale was so peaceful, it looked like everything he had wanted when he left Earth.

"What are you?" Horst demanded. "This is a church, a house of God. I will have no sacrilege committed here. Only those who truly repent are welcome."

For a giddy moment his thoughts were rushing headlong through empty space. The velocity was terrifying. He yelled in shock, there was nothing around him, no body, no stars. This was what he imagined the null-dimension that existed outside a starship would look like while it jumped.

Abruptly, he was back in the church. A small ruby star burnt in the air a couple of metres in front of him.

He stared at it in shock, then giggled. "Twinkle twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are."

The star vanished.

His laughter turned to a strangled pule. He fled out into the dusky clearing, stumbling through the soft loam of his vegetable garden, heedless of the shabby plants he trampled.

It was his singing which drew the villagers a few hours later. He was sitting on the jetty with a bottle of home-brew vodka. The group that had gathered looked down at him with contempt.

"Demons!" Horst shouted when Powel Manani and a couple of the others pulled him to his feet. "They've only gone and summoned bloody demons here."

Ruth gave him one disgusted glance, and stalked off back to her cabin.

Horst was dragged back to his cot, where they administered one of his own tranquilizers. He fell asleep still mumbling warnings.

The Ly-cilph was interested in humans. Out of the hundred and seventy million sentient species it had encountered, only three hundred thousand had been able to perceive it, either by technology or their own mentalities.

The priest had clearly been aware of its identity focus, although not understanding the nature. Humans obviously had a rudimentary attunement to their energistic environment. It searched through the records it had compiled by accessing the few processor blocks and memory fleks available in Aberdale, which mostly comprised the educational texts owned by Ruth Hilton. The so-called psychic ability was largely dismissed as hallucinatory or fraud committed for financial gain. However the race had a vast history of incidents and myths in its past. And its strong continuing religious beliefs were an indication of how widespread the faculty was, granting the “supernatural” events a respectable orthodoxy. There was obviously a great deal of potential for energistic perception development, which was inhibited by the rational mentality. The conflict was a familiar one to the Ly-cilph, although it had no record of a race in which the two opposing natures were quite so antagonistic.

What do you think? Laton asked his colleagues when the door closed behind Quinn Dexter.

He’s a psychopathic little shit, with a nasty steak of sadism thrown in, said Waldsey, the group’s chief viral technologist.

Dexter is certainly unstable, Camilla said. **I don’t think you can trust him to keep any agreement. His revenge obsession with this Banneth person is the dominant motivator. Our immortality scheme is unlikely to replace it; too cerebral.**

I say we should eliminate him, Salkid said.

I'm inclined to agree, Laton said. **Pity. It's rather like watching a miniature version of one's self.**

You were never that gratuitous, Father, Camilla said.

Given the circumstances, I might have been. However, that is an irrelevant speculation. Our immediate problem is our own security. One can reasonably assume Quinn Dexter has informed most, if not all, of his fellow Ivets that something wicked lurks in the woods. That is going to make life difficult.

So? We just take out all of them, Salkid said. Out of all the exiles, the ex-blackhawk captain found the decades of inactivity hardest to handle. **I'll lead the incorporated. It'll be a pleasure.**

Salkid, stop acting the oaf, Laton said. **We can't possibly eliminate all the Ivets ourselves. The attention such an overt action would generate would be quite intolerable coming so soon after the homesteads.**

What, then?

Firstly we shall wait until Quinn Dexter incapacitates Supervisor Manani's communicator, then we shall have to get the villagers to eliminate the Ivets for us.

How? Waldsey asked.

The priest already knows the Ivets are Devil worshippers. We shall simply make the knowledge available to everyone else in a fashion they cannot possibly ignore.

12

Idria traced a slightly elliptical orbit through the Lyll asteroid belt in the New Californian system, with a median distance of a hundred and seventy million kilometres from the G5 primary star. It was a stony-iron rock, which looked like a bruised, flaking swede, measuring seventeen kilometres across at its broadest and eleven down the short spin axis. A ring formation of thirty-two industrial stations hung over the crinkled black rock, insatiable recipients of a never-ending flow of raw material ferried out from Idria's non-rotating spaceport.

It was the variety of those compounds which justified the considerable investment made in the rock. Idria's combination of resources was rare, and rarity always attracts money.

In 2402 a survey craft found long veins of minerals smeared like a diseased rainbow through the ordinary metal ores, their chemistry a curious mixture of sulphurs, alumina, and silicas. A planetside board meeting deemed that the particular concentration of crystalline strata was valuable enough to warrant an extraction operation; and the miners and their heavy digging machinery began chewing shafts into the interior in 2408. Industrial stations followed, refining and processing the ores on site. Population began to creep upwards, caverns were expanded, biospheres started. By 2450 the central cavern was five kilometres long and four wide, Idria's rotation was increased to give it a half-standard gravity on the floor. There were ninety thousand people living in it by then, forming a community which was self-sufficient in most areas. It was declared independent, and earned a seat in the system assembly. But it was a company town, the company being Lassen Interstellar.

Lassen was into mining, and shipping, and finance, and

starship components, and military systems, amongst other endeavours. It was a typical New Californian outfit, a product of innumerable mergers and takeovers; a linear extension of its old Earth predecessors which had thrived on America's western seaboard. Its management worshipped the super-capitalist ethic, expanding aggressively, milking governments for development contracts, pressuring the assembly for ever more convenient tax breaks, spreading subsidiaries across the Confederation, shafting the opposition at every opportunity.

There were thousands of companies like it based on New California. Corporate tigers whose spoils elevated the standard of living right across the system. The nature of their competition was fierce and confrontational. The Confederation assembly had passed several censure motions on their dubious exports, and held inquiries into individual supply contracts. New California's level of technology was high, its military products were in great demand. Companies were indifferent to the use they would ultimately be put to: once the buyer was identified, the pitch made, the finance organized, nothing would be allowed to stop the sale. Not the Government Export Licence office, and certainly not the meddling Confederation inspectors. With this in mind, shipping could be a problem, especially the trickier contracts to star systems operating unreasonable embargoes. Captains who took on those contracts could expect high rewards. And the challenge always attracted a certain type of individual.

The *Lady Macbeth* was resting on a docking cradle in one of the thirty-odd industrial stations coasting in a loose orbit around Idria. Both of her circular cargo hold doors on the forward hull were open, each showing a metallic cave of bracing struts coiled by power and data cables, load clamps, and environmental regulation interface sockets; all of it wrapped in tarnished gold foil and badly illuminated to boot.

The docking bay was a seventy-five-metre crater of carbontanium and composite, ribbed by various conduits and pipes. Spotlights around the curving walls shone stark white beams on the starship's leaden hull, compensating for the pallid slivers of sunlight falling on the station while it was

in Idria's penumbra. Several storage frames stood around the rim of the bay, looking much like scaffold towers left over from the station's construction. Each of them was equipped with a long quadruple-jointed waldo arm to load and unload cargo from ships. The arms were operated from a console inside small transparent bubbles protruding from the carbotanium surface like polished barnacles.

Joshua Calvert hung on a grab hoop inside the cargo supervisor's compartment, his face centimetres from the curving radiation-shielded glass, watching the waldo arm raising another cargo-pod out of its storage frame. The pods were two metres long, pressurized cylinders with slightly domed ends; a thick white silicon-composite shell protected them from the wider temperature shifts encountered in space. They were stamped with Lassen's geometric eagle logo, and line after line of red stencil lettering. According to the code they were high-density magnetic-compression coils for tokamaks. And ninety per cent of the pods did indeed contain what they said; the other ten per cent held smaller, more compact coils which produced an even stronger magnetic field, suitable for antimatter confinement.

The waldo arm lowered the pod into *Lady Mac's* hold, and a set of load clamps closed around it. Joshua felt a considerable twinge of apprehension. Inside the New Californian system the coils were a legitimate cargo, no matter the misleading coding. In interstellar space their legality was extremely ambiguous, although a decent lawyer should be able to quash any charges. And in the Puerto de Santa Maria system where he was going they spelt deep shit in capital letters ten metres high.

Sarha Mitcham's hand tightened around his. "Do we really need this?" she asked in a murmur. She had left her padded skullcap off in the transparent hemisphere, letting her short hazel hair wave around lethargically in free fall. Her lips were drawn together in concern.

"'Fraid so." He tickled her palm with a finger, a private signal they often used on board *Lady Mac*. Sarha was a spirited lover, they had spent long hours experimenting in his cabin's cage; but this time it didn't break her mood.

It wasn't that the *Lady Macbeth* didn't make money: in

the eight months since Roland Frampton's first charter they had landed seven cargoes and one passenger group, some bacteriology specialists on their way to join an ecology review team on Northway. But *Lady Macbeth* also consumed money at a colossal rate: there was fuel and consumables each time they docked; an endless list of component spares, there wasn't a flight which went by without some kind of burn-out or a mandatory time-expiry replacement; the crew's wages had to be met; and then there were spaceport charges and customs and immigration fees. Joshua hadn't quite realized the sheer expense involved in operating the *Lady Macbeth*. Somehow Marcus Calvert had glossed over that part. Profits were slim verging on non-existent, and he couldn't afford to bump his rates up any higher, he wouldn't land a single charter. He'd made more money while he was scavenging.

So now he knew the truth behind the captains' talk in Harkey's Bar, and its countless equivalents across the Confederation. Like him they all said how well they were doing, how they only kept flying for the life it offered rather than financial necessity. Lies, all of it a magnificent, artistic construct of lies. Banks sat back and made money, everyone else worked for a living.

"There's no shame in it," Hasan Rawand had told him a fortnight ago. "Everyone's in the same grind. Hell, Joshua, you're a lot better off than most of us. You haven't got a mortgage to pay off."

Hasan Rawand was the captain of the *Dechal*, an independent trader smaller than the *Lady Mac*. He was in his mid-seventies, and he'd been flying for fifty years, the last fifteen as an owner-captain.

"The real money isn't in cargo charters," he explained. "Not for people like us. That's just makework to tide us over. The big lines have got all the really profitable routes tied up. They operate vacuum-sealed cartels the likes of you and I aren't going to break in."

They were drinking in a club in the dormitory section of an industrial station orbiting Baydon, a two-kilometre alithium wheel spinning to produce a two-thirds standard gravity around the rim. Joshua leant against the bar, and

watched the planet's nightside sliding past the huge window. Sparkles of light from cities and towns sketched strange curves across the darkness.

"Where is the money, then?" Joshua asked. He'd been drinking for three solid hours, long enough to sluice enough alcohol past his enhanced organs and into his brain, giving the universe a snug aura.

"Flights which use that fancy fourth drive tube the *Lady Mac*'s fitted out with."

"Forget it, I'm not that anxious to make money."

"All right, OK," Hasan Rawand gestured extravagantly, beer slopping over his glass, drops falling in a slight curve. "I'm just saying that's the nature of it: combat and sanctions busting. That kind of thing is what the independents like you and me were put in this galaxy for. Everybody makes one of those trips every now and then. Some of us, like me, more often than most. That's what keeps the hull intact, and the radiation outside the baffles."

"You make a lot of runs?" Joshua asked, staring into his glass morosely.

"Some. Not a lot. That's where us owner-captains' bad-boy reputation comes from. People think we do it all the time. We don't. But they don't hear about that, about the mundane flights we make for fifty weeks a year. They only hear about us when we get caught, and the news agencies blitz the networks with the arrest. We're the perpetual victims of bad publicity. We should sue."

"But you don't get caught?"

"Haven't yet. There's a method I use, virtually foolproof, but it needs two ships."

"Ah." Joshua must have been drunker than he realized, because the next thing he heard himself saying was: "Tell me more."

And now two weeks later he was starting to regret listening. Although, he had to admit, it damn near was foolproof. Those two weeks had been spent in furious preparation. In a way, he supposed having Hasan Rawand consider him for any kind of partner was an oblique compliment, since only the very best captains could hope to pull it off. And the ultimate risk wasn't his, not this run. He was the junior partner.

But still, twenty per cent wasn't to be sneered at, not when it came to a straight eight hundred thousand fuseodollars, half in advance.

The last pod of magnetic coils was secured in the *Lady Mac*'s cargo hold. Sarha Mitcham let out a soft, rueful sigh as the waldo arm folded down on its cradle. This flight worried her, but she had agreed, along with the rest of the crew when Joshua explained what it entailed. And their money situation was becoming uncomfortably shaky. Even the fleks of MF-band albums the crew always hawked around ports to the bootleg distributors were fetching minimal prices. A lot of her private stock was getting obsolete, official company distribution was catching up on her. Here on Idria she had actually bought more albums than she'd sold. At least New California was a hot system for MF culture, she ought to be able to sell the fresh recordings for another six months yet, especially on the kind of backworld ports *Lady Macbeth* flew to.

The money would go into the crew's pooled account so they could finance their own cargo in a couple of months' time. It was their one bright dream, which made the mundane tolerable. Norfolk was reaching conjunction soon, a cargo of Tears would make some real profit for them if they owned it rather than simply carried it for someone else. And then just maybe they wouldn't have to do this kind of flight again for a long time.

"All loaded, and not a scratch on your hull," the woman operating the waldo arm said cheerfully.

Joshua looked back over his shoulder and smiled at her. She was slender, and a bit tall for his taste, but her one-piece uniform showed a nice collection of curves below its emerald fabric. "Yeah, good work, thanks." He datavised her console, loading in his personal code to confirm the cargo had been transferred on board the *Lady Mac*.

She checked the data, and handed him his manifest flek. "*Bon voyage, Captain.*"

Joshua and Sarha glided out of the compartment, negotiating the maze of narrow corridors down to the telescoping airlock tube that linked the *Lady Mac*'s life-support capsules to the station.

The waldo operator waited for a minute after they left, then closed her eyes. **The cargo pods are all loaded. *Lady Macbeth* is scheduled to disengage from the station in eighteen minutes.**

Thank you, *Oenone* replied.

Tranquillity's senses perceived the gravitational disturbance caused by the wormhole terminus opening in a designated emergence zone a hundred and fifteen thousand kilometres away from the habitat itself. Against Mirchusko's mud-yellow immensity the terminus was a neutral two-dimensional disk. Yet observing it through an optical sensor on one of the strategic-defence platforms ringing the zone, Tranquillity received an inordinately powerful intimation of *depth*.

Ilex flew out of the wormhole. A voidhawk with a hull that was more grey than the usual blue. It slipped smoothly away from the rapidly shrinking terminus, yawing gracefully as it orientated itself.

***Ilex*, Confederation Navy ship ALV-90100, requesting approach and docking permission, it said formally.**

Granted, Tranquillity replied.

The voidhawk accelerated in towards the habitat, building up to three gees almost immediately.

You're very welcome, Tranquillity said. I don't get many voidhawks visiting me.

Thank you. Though this is not a privilege I was expecting. Up until three days ago we were assigned to fleet patrol duties in the Ellas sector. Now we've been switched to diplomatic courier duty. My captain, Auster, is experiencing a mild notion of displeasure, he says we didn't sign on to be used as a taxi service.

Oh, this sounds interesting.

I believe the circumstances are exceptional. And in connection with this, my captain has another request. He asks that lone Saldana receive a special envoy from First Admiral Samuel Aleksandrovich: one Captain Maynard Khanna.

You have come directly from Avon to bring this captain?

Yes.

The Lord of Ruin is honoured to accept the Admiral's envoy, and she invites Captain Auster and his crew to dinner this evening.

My captain accepts. He is curious about lone Saldana, the news agencies have been most effusive on her behalf.

I could tell you a tale or two about her.

Really?

And I'd be interested to hear about the Ellas sector. Are there many pirates there?

The tube carriage slid to a halt and Captain Khanna stepped out onto the small station's platform. He was thirty-eight years old, with crew-cut sandy red hair, pale skin given to freckles if he was caught by the sun, regular features, and dark brown eyes. His body was kept in trim by a stiff forty-minute navy-approved workout each morning without fail. Out of his academy class of one hundred and fifteen officer cadets he had finished third; it would have been first but the computer psychological assessment said his flexibility wasn't all that it could be, he was "doctrine orientated".

He had been on the First Admiral's executive staff for eighteen months, and in that time hadn't made a single mistake. This was his first independent assignment, and he was frankly terrified. Tactics and command decisions he could handle, even Admiralty office politics; but a semi-reclusive universally revered black sheep Saldana teenage girl affinity-bonded to a non-Edenist bitek habitat was another matter. How the hell did you prepare motivation-analysis profiles on such a creature?

"You'll do all right," Admiral Aleksandrovich had said in his final briefing. "Young enough not to alienate her, smart enough not to insult her intelligence. And all the girls love a uniform." The old man had winked and given him a companionable pat on the back.

Maynard Khanna pulled the jacket of his immaculate deep-blue dress uniform straight, placed his peaked cap firmly on his head, squared his shoulders, and marched up the stairs out of the station. He came out onto a courtyard of

flagstones, lined with troughs full of colourful begonias and fuchsias. Paths led off from all sides into the surrounding sub-tropical parkland. He could see some sort of building a hundred metres away; but it was given only a fleeting glance as he stared round in astonishment. After coming through the airlock from the docking-ledge he had climbed straight into the waiting tube carriage, he hadn't seen anything of the interior until now. The sheer size of *Tranquillity* was awesome, big enough to put a couple of standard Edenist habitats inside and shake them around like dice in a cup. A blinding light-tube glared hotly overhead, white candyfloss clouds trailed slowly through the air. A panorama of forests and meadows flecked with silver lakes and long water-courses rose up on either side of him like the walls of God's own valley. And there was a sea about eight kilometres away—it couldn't be called anything else with its sparkling wavelets and picturesque islands. He followed the arch of it rising up and up, his neck tilting back until his cap threatened to fall off. Millions of tonnes of water were poised above him ready to crash down in a flood which would have defeated Noah.

He brought his head down hurriedly, trying to remember how he had got rid of the giddiness when he visited the Edenist habitats orbiting Jupiter.

"Don't look outside the horizontal, and always remember the poor sod above you thinks you're going to fall on him," his crusty old guide had said.

Knowing he had been defeated before he even started, Maynard Khanna walked along the yellow-brown stone path towards the building that resembled a Hellenic temple. It was a long basilica which had one end opening out into a circular area with a domed roof of some jet-black material supported by white pillars, the gaps between them filled by sheets of blue-mirror glass.

The path took him to the opposite end of the basilica, where a pair of serjeants stood guard duty like nightmare goblin statues on either side of the entrance arch.

"Captain Khanna?" one asked. The voice was mild and friendly, completely at odds with its appearance.

"Yes."

“The Lord of Ruin is expecting you, please follow my servitor.” The serjeant turned and led him into the building. They walked down a central nave with large gilt-framed pictures hanging on the brown and white marble walls.

Maynard Khanna assumed they were holograms at first, then he realized they were two-dimensional, and a more detailed look revealed that they were oil paintings. There were a lot of countryside scenes where people wore elaborate, if baroque, costumes, riding on horses or gathered in ostentatious groups. Scenes from old Earth, pre-industrial age. And a Saldana would never make do with copies. They must be genuine. His mind balked at how much they must be worth; you could buy a battle cruiser with the money just one of them would fetch.

At the far end of the nave a Vostok capsule was resting on a cradle under a protective glass dome. Maynard stopped and looked at the battered old sphere with a mixture of trepidation and admiration. It was so small, so *crude*, yet for a few brief years it had represented the pinnacle of human technology. What ever would the cosmonaut who rode it into space think of Tranquillity?

“Which one is it?” he asked the serjeant in a hushed tone.

“Vostok 6, it carried Valentina Tereshkova into orbit in 1963. She was the first woman in space.”

Ione Saldana was waiting for him in the large circular audience chamber at the end of the nave. She sat behind a crescent-shaped wooden desk positioned in the centre; thick planes of light streamed in through the giant sheets of glass set between the pillars, turning the air into a platinum haze.

The white polyp floor was etched with a giant crowned phoenix emblem in scarlet and blue. It took an eternity for him to cover the distance from the door to the desk; the sound of his boot heels clicking against the polished surface echoed drily in the huge empty space.

Intended to intimidate, he thought. You know how alone you are when you confront her.

He snapped a perfect salute when he reached the desk. She was a head of state, after all; the Admiral’s protocol office had been most insistent about that, and how he should treat her.

Ione was wearing a simple sea-green summer dress with long sleeves. The intense lighting made her short gold-blond hair glimmer softly.

She was just as lovely as all the AV recordings he'd studied.

"Do take a seat, Captain Khanna," she said, smiling. "You look most uncomfortable standing up like that."

"Thank you, ma'am." There were two high-backed chairs on his side of the desk; he sat in one, still keeping his pose rigid.

"I understand you've come all the way from the First Fleet headquarters at Avon just to see me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"In a voidhawk?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Owing to the somewhat unusual nature of this worldlet, we don't have a diplomatic corps, nor a civil service," she said airily. A delicate hand waved around at the audience chamber. "The habitat personality handles all the administrative functions quite effectively. But the Lords of Ruin employ a legal firm on Avon to represent Tranquillity's interests in the Confederation Assembly chamber. If there's a matter of urgency arising, you only have to consult them. I have met the senior partners, and I have a lot of confidence in them."

"Yes, ma'am—"

"Maynard, please. Stop calling me ma'am. This is a private meeting, and you're making me sound like a day-club governess for junior aristocrats."

"Yes, Ione."

She smiled brightly. The effect was devastating. Her eyes were an enchanting shade of blue, he noticed.

"That's better," she said. "Now what have you come to talk about?"

"Dr Alkad Mzu."

"Ah."

"Are you familiar with the name?"

"The name and most of the circumstances."

"Admiral Aleksandrovich felt this was not a matter to take to your legal representatives on Avon. It is his opinion

that the fewer people who are aware of the situation, the better.”

Her smile turned speculative. “Fewer people? Maynard, there are eight different Intelligence agencies who have set up shop in Tranquillity; and all of them run surveillance operations on poor Dr Mzu. There are times when their pursuit becomes dangerously close to a slapstick routine. Even the Kulu ESA have posted a team here. I imagine that must be a real thorn in my cousin Alastair’s regal pride.”

“I think what the Admiral meant was: fewer people outside high government office.”

“Yes, of course, the people *most* able to deal with the situation.”

The irony in her tone made Maynard Khanna give an inward flinch. “In view of the fact that Dr Mzu is now contacting a number of starship captains, and the Omutan sanctions are about to expire, the Admiral would be extremely grateful if we could be told of your policy regarding Dr Mzu,” he said formally.

“Are you recording this for the Admiral?”

“Yes, a full sensewise.”

Ione stared straight into his eyes, speaking in a clear precise diction. “My father promised Admiral Aleksandrovich’s predecessor that Dr Alkad Mzu would never be allowed to leave Tranquillity, and I repeat that promise to the Admiral. She will not be permitted to leave, nor will I countenance any attempt to sell or hand over the information she presumably holds to anybody, including the Confederation Navy. Upon her death, she will be cremated in order to destroy her neural nanonics. And I hope to God that sees the end of the threat.”

“Thank you,” Maynard Khanna said.

Ione relaxed a little. “I hadn’t even been gestated when she arrived here twenty-six years ago, so tell me, I’m curious. Has Fleet Intelligence discovered yet how she survived Garissa’s destruction?”

“No. She can’t have been on the planet. The Confederation Navy was in charge of the evacuation, and we have no record of carrying her on any of our ships. Nor was she listed as being in any of the asteroid settlements. The only

logical conclusion is that she was outsystem on some kind of clandestine military mission when Omuta bombed Garissa.”

“Deploying the Alchemist?”

“Who knows? The device certainly wasn’t used; so either it didn’t work or they were intercepted. The general staff favours the interception scenario.”

“And if she survived, so did the Alchemist,” Ione concluded.

“If it was ever built.”

She raised an eyebrow. “After all this time, I thought that was taken for granted.”

“The thinking goes that after all this time, we should have heard something other than rumours. If it does exist, why haven’t the Garissan survivors tried to use it against Omuta?”

“When it comes to Doomsday machines, rumours are all I want to hear.”

“Yes.”

“You know, I’ve watched her sometimes while she’s been working over in the Laymil project’s physics centre. She’s a good physicist, her colleagues respect her. But she’s nothing exceptional, not mentally.”

“One idea in a lifetime is all it takes.”

“You’re right. Clever of her to come here, really. The one place where her security is guaranteed, and at the same time the one mini-nation which everybody knows is no military threat to other Confederation members.”

“So may I say you have no objection to our maintaining our observation team?”

“You can, providing you don’t flaunt the privilege. But please reassure yourselves. I don’t think she’s received much geneering, if any. She can’t last more than another thirty years, forty at the outside. Then it will all be over.”

“Excellent.” He leant forward a few millimetres, lips moving upwards into a slight awkward smile. “There was one other matter.”

Ione’s eyes widened with innocent anticipation. “Yes?”

“An independent trader captain called Joshua Calvert mentioned your name in connection with one of our agents.”

She squinted up at the ceiling as if lost in a particularly difficult feat of recall. "Oh, yes, Joshua. I remember him, he caused quite a stir at the start of the year. Found a big chunk of Laymil electronics in the Ruin Ring. I met him at a party once. A nice young man."

"Yes," Maynard Khanna said gingerly. "So you didn't warn him about Erick Thakrar being one of our deep-cover operatives?"

"Erick Thakrar's name never passed my lips. Actually, Thakrar has just been accepted by Captain André Duchamp for a berth on the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, that's an Adamist ship with an antimatter drive fitted. I'm sure Commander Olsen Neale will confirm that for you. Erick Thakrar's cover is completely intact, I can assure you that André Duchamp doesn't suspect a thing."

"Well, that's a great relief, the Admiral will be pleased."

"I'm glad to hear it. And please don't concern yourself over Joshua Calvert, I'm sure he'd never do anything illegal, he's really an exemplary citizen."

The *Lady Macbeth* is preparing to jump insystem, *Oenone* warned the crew. They were two light-weeks from Puerto de Santa Maria's star, which cast a barely perceptible shadow on the voidhawk's foam-encased hull. The *Nephele* was drifting eight hundred kilometres over the upper hull, yet *Oenone's* optical sensors were unable to see it.

Twenty-eight thousand kilometres further in towards the faint star, the *Lady Macbeth's* sensor clusters and thermo-dump panels were folding with the neatness of an alighting eagle.

If only everything about the Adamist starship's flight was that neat, Syrinx wished. This Captain Calvert was a born incompetent. It had taken them six days to get here from New California, a distance of fifty-three light-years. The manoeuvres which *Lady Macbeth* performed every time she reached a jump coordinate were appallingly sloppy, they went on for hours at a time. Time was money in the cargo business. And if this was the way Calvert navigated on every voyage it was no wonder he needed the money so desperately.

“Stand by,” Syrinx told Larry Kouritz. “He’s lined up on the Ciudad asteroid.”

“Roger,” the marine captain acknowledged.

“The Ciudad,” Eileen Carouch muttered as she accessed the Puerto de Santa Maria file in her neural nanonics. “There are several insurrectionist cells based there, according to the planetary government’s Intelligence agency. They are pushing hard for independence.”

Attention everybody, Syrinx broadcast, I want us out of stealth mode the moment we emerge. This *Lady Macbeth* is fitted with maser cannons, so let’s not have any mistakes. Chi, you have fire-control authority as of now. If they make one smartarse move, slice them in two. *Nephele*, you keep a sharp watch for approaching ships. If these insurrectionists are desperate enough to try and obtain antimatter-confinement technology they may be dumb enough to try and assist their courier.

We’ll cover you, Targard, the *Nephele*’s captain, replied.

Syrinx returned her attention to *Oenone*’s sensor inputs. The *Lady Macbeth* had reverted to a perfect sphere. Blue ion flames shrank away to nothing. There was a sharp twist in space’s uniformity.

Go, she commanded.

Oenone erupted out of the wormhole terminus seventeen hundred kilometres distant from the *Lady Macbeth*. A blizzard of foam flakes swirled away as electronic sensors and thermo-dump panels were uncovered around the crew toroid. Fusion generators in the lower hull combat systems toroid powered up. X-ray lasers deployed. Gravity returned to the crew toroid. The distortion field swelled outwards, accelerating the voidhawk up to seven gees. It chased a sharp curve round to align on the *Lady Macbeth*. Two hundred kilometres away the *Nephele* was shaking off its stealth cloak.

Ciudad was a distant lacklustre speck, with a small constellation of industrial stations wrapped around it. Strategic defence sensor radiation raked across the *Oenone*.

Syrinx was aware of a curious secondary oscillation in the distortion field. Foam was streaming away from all across the hull.

That's better, *Oenone* sighed almost subliminally.

Syrinx didn't have time to form a rebuke. A transmitter dish unfolded from the lower hull toroid, swinging round to focus on the *Lady Macbeth*.

"Starship *Lady Macbeth*," she relayed through the transmitter's bitek processors. "This is Confederation Navy ship *Oenone*. You are ordered to hold your position. Do not activate your reaction drive, do not attempt to jump away. Stand by for rendezvous and boarding."

Oenone's distortion field reached out to engulf the Adamist starship.

Syrinx could hear Tula communicating with Ciudad's defence control centre, informing them of the interception.

"Hi there, *Oenone*," Joshua Calvert's voice came cheerfully out of the bridge's AV pillars. "Are you in some kind of trouble? How can we assist?"

Lying prone on her couch, her teeth gritted against the four-gee acceleration, Syrinx could only glance at the offending pillar in disconcerted amazement.

Oenone covered the last five kilometres cautiously, every sensor and weapon trained on the *Lady Macbeth*, alert for the slightest hint of treachery. At a hundred and fifty metres' distance, the voidhawk rotated slowly, presenting its upper hull towards the Adamist starship. The two extended airlock tubes, then touched and sealed. Larry Kouritz led his squad into the *Lady Macbeth's* life-support capsules, executing the penetration and securement procedures with textbook precision.

Syrinx watched through *Oenone's* sensor blisters as the crew toroid's clamshell hangar doors hinged apart. Oxley piloted their small boxy multifunction service vehicle out into space, yellow-orange chemical flames propelling it round towards *Lady Macbeth's* open cargo hatch.

Joshua Calvert was marched into the bridge by two marines in dark carbotanium armour suits. He grinned round affably at the members of Syrinx's crew, with an even wider display of teeth when his eyes found her.

She shifted uncomfortably under the handsome young

man's attention. This was not how the interception was supposed to be going.

We've been had, Ruben told her abruptly.

Syrinx flicked a glance at her lover. He was sitting behind his console, an expression of glum resignation settling on his features. He combed his fingers back through his beret of curly white hair.

What do you mean? she asked.

Oh, just look at him, Syrinx. Does that look like a man facing a forty-year sentence for smuggling?

We were on the *Lady Macbeth* for the whole flight, she never rendezvoused with anybody.

Ruben simply raised an ironic eyebrow.

She returned her attention to the tall captain. She was annoyed at the way his gaze seemed to be fastened on her breasts.

"Captain Syrinx," he said warmly. "I must congratulate you and your ship. That was a superb piece of flying, really quite superb. Jesus, you scared the crap out of some of my crew the way you jumped us like that. We thought you were a pair of blackhawks." He stuck his hand out. "It's a pleasure to meet a captain who is so obviously talented. And I hope you don't take offence, but an extremely attractive captain as well."

Yes, we've definitely been had.

Syrinx ignored the offered hand. "Captain Calvert, we have reason to suspect you are involved with importing proscribed technology into this star system. I am therefore cautioning you that your ship will be searched under the powers invested in me by the Confederation Assembly. Any refusal to permit our search is a violation of Confederation space regulatory code which permits lawful officers full access to all systems and records once a request has been made by said officers. I am now making that request. Do you understand?"

"Well, gosh, yes," Joshua said earnestly. A note of doubt crept in. "I hate to ask, but are you quite sure you've got the right ship?"

"Perfectly sure," Syrinx said icily.

"Oh, well of course I'll cooperate in any way I can. I think

you navy people do a great job. It's always reassuring for us commercial vessels to know we can always rely on you to maintain interstellar order."

"Please. Don't spoil the effect now, son," Ruben said wearily. "You've been doing so well."

"I'm just a citizen happy to oblige," Joshua said.

"A citizen who owns a ship that has an antimatter drive," Syrinx said sharply.

Joshua's gaze refocused on the front of her pale blue ship-tunic. "I didn't design it. That's the way it was built. Actually it was built by the Ferring Astronautics company in Earth's O'Neill Halo. I understand Earth is the greatest Edenist ally in the Confederation? That's what my didactic history courses say, anyway."

"We have a common viewpoint," Syrinx said reluctantly, anything else would have sounded like an admission of guilt.

"Couldn't you have the drive taken out?" Ruben asked.

Joshua managed an appropriately concerned expression. "I wish I could afford to. But there was a lot of damage when my father saved those Edenists from the pirates. The refit took all the money I had."

"Saved which Edenists?" Cacus blurted.

Idiot, Syrinx and Ruben told him together. The life-support engineer spread his hands helplessly.

"It was an aid convoy to Anglade," Joshua said. "There was a bacteriological plague there several years ago. My father joined the relief effort, of course; what are commercial needs compared to saving human life? They were taking viral-processing equipment to the planet to manufacture an antidote. Unfortunately they were attacked by blackhawks who wanted to steal the cargo, that kind of equipment is expensive. Jesus, I mean some people are really low, you know? There was a fight, and one of the escort voidhawks was wounded. The blackhawks were closing in for the kill, but my father waited until the crew got out. He jumped with a blackhawk's distortion field locked on. It was the only chance they had, they were badly damaged, but the old *Lady Mac*, she got them out alive." Joshua closed his eyes, re-

membering old pain. "Father didn't like to mention it much."

No kidding? Ruben asked heavily.

Was there ever a plague on Anglade? Tula asked.

Yes, *Oenone* said. Twenty-three years ago. I don't have any record of an attack on an aid convoy, though.

You do surprise me, Syrinx said.

This captain seems to be a nice young man, *Oenone* said. He's obviously very taken with you.

I'd sooner join an Adamist nunnery. And just leave the psychological analysis to us humans, please.

The silence in her mind was reproachful.

"Yes, well, that was the past," Syrinx said awkwardly to Joshua Calvert. "Your problem is here in the present."

Syrinx? Oxley called.

The cautious mental tone warned her. Yes?

We've opened two of their cargo-pods. They both contain the tokamak coils listed in the manifest. No antimatter-confinement technology in sight.

What? They can't have tokamak coils. She looked through Oxley's eyes into the MSV's tiny cabin. Eileen Carouch was strapped in a web next to him; several screens were covered in complicated multi-coloured graphics. The liaison officer wore a worried frown as she studied the displays. Outside the port, Syrinx could see one of the *Lady Macbeth's* cargo-pods gripped in the MSV's heavy-duty waldo arm. It had been opened, and the tokamak coils had been removed by some of the mandible-like manipulator waldos.

Eileen Carouch turned to face Oxley. "It doesn't look good. According to our information both of these pods should contain the confinement coils."

We've been had, Ruben said.

Will you stop saying that, Syrinx demanded.

What do you want us to do? Oxley asked.

Examine every pod supposed to hold the antimatter-confinement coils.

OK.

"Everything all right?" Joshua asked.

Syrinx opened her eyes, and manufactured a killer-sweet smile. "Just fine, thank you."

Eileen Carouch and Oxley opened all eighteen cargo-pods supposed to contain the illegal coils. In every one they found neatly packaged tokamak coils.

Syrinx ordered them to open another five pods at random. They contained tokamak coils.

Syrinx gave up. Ruben was right, they'd been had.

That night she lay on her bunk, unable to sleep even though the body tensions due to ten days of enforced stealth routine had almost abated. Ruben was asleep beside her. There had been no prospect of sex when they came off duty, her mood was too black. He seemed to accept their defeat with a phlegmatism which she found annoying.

Where did we go wrong? she asked *Oenone*. **That ratty old ship was never out of your sight. You followed them superbly. I was more worried about the *Nephele* keeping up. Its spacial orientation isn't a patch on yours.**

Perhaps it was the operatives at Idria who lost track of the coils?

They were very certain the coils had been put on board. I could accept Calvert hiding one set in the ship, there's a lot of cubic volume there, but not eighteen.

There must have been a switch.

But how?

I don't know. I'm sorry.

Hey, it's not your fault. You did everything you were asked to, even when you were coated in foam.

I hate that stuff.

I know. Well, we've only got another two months to go. We'll be civilians after that.

Great!

Syrinx smiled in the cabin's half light. **I thought you liked military duty.**

I do.

But?

But it's lonely, all those patrols. When we're on commercial runs we'll meet lots of other voidhawks and habitats. It'll be fun.

Yes, I suppose it will. It's just that I would have liked to finish on a high note.

Joshua Calvert?

Yes! He was laughing at us.

I thought he was nice. Young and carefree, roaming the universe. Very romantic.

Please! He won't be roaming it for much longer. Not with an ego like that. He'll make a mistake soon enough, that sheer arrogance of his will force him into it. I'm only sorry we won't be there when he does. She put an arm over Ruben so that he would know she wasn't angry with him when he woke. But when she closed her eyes the normal vista of starfields that accompanied her into sleep had been replaced by a roguish smile and a rugged face that was all angles.

13

His name was Carter McBride, and he was ten years old; an only child, the pride of his parents Dimitri and Victoria, who spoilt him as best their circumstances would allow. Like most of Aberdale's younger generation he enjoyed the jungle and the river; Lalonde was much more fun than the cheerless dry concrete, steel, and composite caves of Earth's arcologies. The opportunities for games in his new land were limitless. He had his own little garden in the corner of his father's field, which he kept chock-full of strawberry plants, geneered so that the big scarlet fruits didn't rot in the rain and humidity. He had a cocker spaniel called Chomper that was always getting underfoot and making off with clothes from the McBride cabin. He was receiving didactic courses from Ruth Hilton, who said he was absorbing the agronomy data at a satisfactory rate, and would make a promising farmer one day. And because he was almost eleven his parents trusted him to play unsupervised, saying he was responsible enough not to wander too far into the jungle.

The morning after Horst Elwes encountered the Ly-cilph in the church, Carter was down by the river where he and the other kids were building a raft from scraps of timber left over from one of the adults' construction projects. He realized that he hadn't seen Chomper for about fifteen minutes, and looked around the clearing. A flash of ginger fur in the trees behind the community hall made him shout in exasperation at the silly animal. There was no immediate response, so he set off in vigorous pursuit, boots kicking up a splash in the thin layer of mud. By the time he reached the boundary of the jungle he could hear Chomper barking excitedly somewhere inside the crush of trees and

creepers. He waved at Mr Travis, who was hoeing the soil around his baby pineapple plants, and plunged into the jungle after his dog.

Chomper seemed intent on leading him directly away from the village. Carter called and called until his throat felt raw. He was hot and sticky and his fraying T-shirt was smeared in long streaks of green-yellow sap from the broken creepers. He was also very angry with Chomper, who was going to be put on a choker lead as soon as they got home. And after that there would be the proper obedience-training classes that Mr Manani had promised him.

The chase finally came to an end in a small glade of tall qualtook trees, whose thick canopy of foliage didn't let much sunlight through. Spindly blades of grass grew up to Carter's knees, vines with a mass of lemon-coloured berries foamed up around the glossy trunks. Chomper was standing in the middle of the glade, his hackles raised, growling at a tree.

Carter grabbed hold of his neck, yelling out exactly what he thought of dogs at that moment. The spaniel resisted the pulling and urging, yapping frantically.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded in exasperation.

Then the tall black lady appeared. One second there was only a qualtook tree in front of him, the next she was standing five metres away, dressed in a grey jump suit, and pulling her hood off. Long chestnut hair tumbled down.

Chomper had fallen silent. Carter clung to him, gazing at the lady with his mouth open, too surprised to say anything. She winked and beckoned. Carter smiled up at her trustingly, and trotted over.

Got him, Camilla said. He's very sweet.

So is my neck, Laton replied curtly. Just make sure you leave him where they can find him without too much trouble.

"Horst, this can't go on," Ruth said.

The priest just groaned with immense self-pity. He was lying on the cot where he'd been dumped the night before,

crumpled olive-green blankets wound tightly round his legs. Sometime during the night he'd been sick again. A congealing puddle of waxy vomit lay on the floorboards below his pillow.

"Go away," he mumbled.

"Stop feeling so bloody sorry for yourself, and get up."

He rolled over slowly. She could see he'd been crying, his eyes were red rimmed, the lashes sticky. "I mean it, Ruth. Go away, right away. Take Jay with you, and leave. Find a boat, pay whatever it costs, get yourself back to Durringham, then get off this planet. Just leave."

"Stop talking like an idiot. Aberdale isn't that bad. We'll find a way to deal with the Ivets. I'm going to have Rai Molvi call a town meeting tonight, I'm going to tell people what I think is going on." She took a breath. "I want you to back me up, Horst."

"No. You mustn't. Don't antagonize the Ivets. Please, for your own safety, Ruth. Don't do it. There's still time for you to get away."

"For God's sake, Horst—"

"Ha! God is dead," he said bitterly. "Or at least He's banished this planet from His kingdom long ago." He beckoned her down with an agitated hand signal, glancing furtively at the open door.

Ruth took a reluctant step closer to the cot, wrinkling her nose up at the smell.

"I saw it," Horst said in a throaty whisper. "Last night. It was there in the church."

"What was there?"

"It. The demon they've summoned. I saw it, Ruth. Red, gleaming red, blinding red. The light of hell. Satan's eye opened and stared right at me. This is his world, Ruth. Not our lord Christ's. We should never have come here. Never."

"Oh, shit," she murmured under her breath. A whole host of practical problems ran through her mind: how to get him back to Durringham, whether there was even a psychiatrist on the planet, who could take over the little clinic he ran for the village. She scratched at the back of

her sweaty hair, looking down at him as if he was some kind of elaborate riddle she was supposed to solve.

Rai Molvi ran up the wooden steps to the door and barged in. "Ruth," he said breathlessly. "I thought I'd find you here. Carter McBride is missing; kid's been gone a couple of hours now. Someone said they saw him chasing that damn nuisance dog of his into the jungle. I'm organizing a search party. Are you in?" Rai Molvi didn't even seem to have noticed Horst.

"Yes," she said. "I'll get someone to watch Jay."

"Mrs Cranthorp is taking care of that, she'll get the kids into a group and give them some lunch. We're assembling by the hall in ten minutes." He turned to go.

"I'll help," Horst said.

"As you like," Rai said, and hurried out.

"Well, you made a big impression on him," Ruth said.

"Please, Ruth, you must leave this place."

"We'll see after tonight. Right now I've got a child to help find." She paused. "Damn, Carter's about the same age as Jay."

The drawn-out whistle brought them all running. Arnold Travis was sitting slumped against the foot of a mayope tree. He just stared brokenly at the ground, silver whistle hanging from a corner of his mouth.

The villagers arrived in pairs, crashing through the vines and scrub bushes, sending hordes of birds screeching into the baking sky. When they did stumble into the little glade the sight which greeted them seemed to suck the strength from their limbs. A semicircle formed round the big cherry oak tree, stricken faces staring at its grisly burden.

Powel Manani was one of the last to arrive. Vorix was with him, loping easily through the lush undergrowth. Canine senses bubbled into Powel's mind, the monochrome images, the sharp sounds, and the vast range of smells. There was an overpowering scent of blood in the air.

He pushed and elbowed his way to the front of the shocked crowd, caught sight of the cherry oak tree—"Jesus!" His hand came up to cover his mouth. Something

deep inside wanted to let loose a primaeval wail, just to shout and shout until all the pain was disorged.

Carter McBride was hanging upside-down against the tree. His feet had been bound to the trunk with dried vine cords, making it look as though he was standing on his head. Both arms were spread wide, held parallel to the ground by a pair of stakes at each wrist. The long wounds were no longer bleeding. Tiny insects wriggled through the saturated grass below his head, gorging on the bounty.

Dimitri McBride took two tottering steps towards his son, then sank down to his knees as though in prayer. He looked round at the circle of ashen faces with a faintly bewildered expression. "I don't understand. Carter was ten years old. Who did this? I don't understand. Please tell me." He saw his own pain reflected in the weeping eyes surrounding him. "Why this? Why do this?"

"The Ivets," Horst said. Little Carter's scarlet eyeballs were staring right into him, urging him to speak. "This is the inverted cross," he said pedantically. It was important to be right in a matter like this, he felt, important that they should all fully comprehend. "The opposite of the crucifix. They worship the Light Brother, you see. The Light Brother is diametrically opposed to our lord Jesus, so the sects perform this sacrifice as a mockery. It's very logical, really." Horst found his breath was hard to come by, as if he'd been running a long distance.

Dimitri McBride crashed into him with the force of a jackhammer. He was flung backwards, Dimitri riding him down. "You knew! You knew!" he cried. Metal fingers closed round Horst's throat, clawing. "That was my son. And you knew!" Horst's head was yanked up, then slammed down into the spongy loam. "He'd still be alive if you'd told us. You killed him! You killed him! You!"

Horst's world was turning black around the edges. He tried to speak, to explain. That was what he had been trained for, to make people accept the world the way it was. But all he could see was Dimitri McBride's open screaming mouth.

"Get him off," Ruth told Powel Manani.

The supervisor gave her a dark look, then nodded reluc-

tantly. He signalled to a couple of the villagers, and between them they prised Dimitri's fingers from Horst's throat. The priest lay as he was left, sucking air down like a cardiac victim.

Dimitri McBride collapsed into a limp, sobbing bundle.

Three of the villagers cut little Carter down, wrapping him in a coat.

"What do I tell Victoria?" Dimitri McBride asked vacantly. "What do I tell her?" The reassuring hands found his shoulders again, patting, offering their pathetically inadequate sympathy. A hip-flask was pressed to his lips. He spluttered as the acidic brew went down his gullet.

Powel Manani stood over Horst Elwes. I'm as guilty as the priest, he thought. I knew that little ratprick Quinn was trouble. But dear God, *this*. The Ivets, they're not human. Somebody who could do this could do anything.

Anything. The thought struck him like a twister of gelid wind. It cleared away even the remotest feeling of pity for the wretched drunken priest. He nudged Horst with the toe of his boot. "You? Can you hear me?"

Horst gurgled, his eyes rolling around.

Powel let his full fury vent into Vorix's mind. The dog lurched towards Horst, snarling in rage.

Horst saw it coming, and scabbled feebly on all fours, cringing from the hound's ferocity. Vorix barked loudly, his muzzle centimetres away from his face.

"Hey!" Ruth protested.

"Shut up," Powel said, not even looking at her. "You. Priest. Are you listening to me?"

Vorix growled.

Everybody was watching the tableau now, even Dimitri McBride.

"It's what they are," Horst said. "The balance of nature. Black and white, good and evil. God's kingdom of heaven, and hell. Earth and Lalonde. Do you see?" He smiled up at Powel.

"The Ivets didn't all come from the same arcology," Powel said with a dangerously level voice. "They'd never even met each other before they came here. That means Quinn did this since we arrived, turned them into what

they are now. You know about this doctrine of theirs. You know all about it. How long have they been a part of this sect movement? Before Gwyn Lawes? Were they, priest? Were they all involved before his odd, unseen, bloody death out here in the jungle? *Were they?*”

Several of the watchers gasped. Powel heard someone moaning: “Oh, God, please no.”

Horst’s mad smile was still directed up at the supervisor.

“Is that when it started, priest?” Powel asked. “Quinn had months to turn them, to break them, to control them. Didn’t he? That’s what he was doing all the time inside that fancy A-frame hut of theirs. Then when he’d got them all whipped into line, they started to come after us.” His finger lined up on Horst. He wanted it to be a hunting rifle, to blow this failed wreckage of a man to pieces. “Those muggings back in Durringham, Gwyn Lawes, Roger Chadwick, the Hoffmans. My God, what did they do to the Hoffmans that they had to incinerate them afterwards so we wouldn’t see? And all because you didn’t tell us. How are you going to explain that to your God when you face him, priest? Tell me that.”

“I wasn’t sure,” Horst wailed. “You’re as bad as them. You’re a savage, you love it out here. The only difference between you and an Ivet is that you get paid for what you do. You would have gone berserk if I even hinted that they had turned to the sect instead of me.”

“*When did you know?*” Powel screamed at him.

Horst’s shoulders quaked, he hugged his chest, curling up. “The day Gwyn died.”

Powel threw his head back, fists thrust into the sky. “QUINN!” he bellowed. “I’ll have you. I’ll have every fucking one of you. Do you hear me, Quinn? You’re dead.” Vorix was howling defiance into the heavens.

He looked round at the numb expressions centred on him, seeing the cracks opening into their fear, and the anger that was beginning to spark inside. He knew people, and these were with him now. At long last, every one of them. There would be no rest now until the Ivets had been tracked down and exterminated.

“We can’t just assume the Ivets are guilty like this,” Rai

Molvi said. "Not on his word." He glanced scathingly down at Horst. That was how Vorix took him unawares. The hound landed on his chest, bowling him over. Rai Molvi yelped in terror as Vorix barked, long fangs snapping centimetres from his nose.

"You," Powel Manani said. It was spat out like an allegation. "You, lawyer man! You are the one who wanted me to ease off them. You let them have their A-frame. You wanted them walking round free. If we had done this by the book, kept those dickheads in the filth where they belong, none of this would have happened." He called Vorix off from the panting, badly scared man. "But you're right. We don't *know* the Ivets had anything to do with Gwyn or Roger or the Hoffmans. We can't prove that, can we, counsel for the defence? So all we've got is Carter. Do you know anyone else out here that is going to rip apart a ten-year-old child? Do you? Because if you do, I think we'd all like to hear who."

Rai Molvi shook his head, teeth clamped together in anguish.

"Right then," Powel said. "So what do you say, Dimitri? Carter was your boy. What do you think we should do to the people who did this to your son?"

"Kill them," Dimitri said from the centre of the little knot of people who were trying to comfort him. "Kill every last one of them."

High above the treetops, the kestrel wheeled and turned in an agile aerial dance, using the fast streams of hot, moist air to stay aloft with minimum effort. Laton always allowed the bird's natural instincts to take over on such occasions, contenting himself simply to direct. Down below, under the almost impenetrable barrier of leaves, people were moving. Little flecks of colour were visible through the minute gaps, the distinctive pattern of a particular shirt, grubby, sweaty skin. The kestrel's predator instincts amplified each motion, building up a comprehensive picture.

Four men carried the body of the boy on a makeshift stretcher. They moved slowly, picking their way over roots

and small gullies, all of them labouring under an air of reluctance.

Ahead of them was the main body of men, led by Supervisor Manani. They walked with a bold stride. Men who had a purpose. Laton could see it in the stern, hate-filled faces, the grim determination. Those that didn't have laser rifles had acquired clubs or stout sticks.

Trailing way behind everyone else the kestrel saw Ruth Hilton and Rai Molvi. Weak, dejected figures who never said a word. Both lost in their own private guilt.

Horst Elwes was left by himself in the small clearing. He was still curled up on the ground, shivering quite violently. Every now and then he would let out a loud cry, as if something had bitten him. Laton suspected his mind had gone completely. It didn't matter, he had fulfilled his role beautifully.

Leslie Atcliffe broke surface ten metres away from the end of Aberdale's jetty, a creel full of mousecrabs clamped between his hands. He rolled onto his back, and began to kick towards the shore, towing the creel. Rifts of gun-metal cloud were starting to slash the western horizon. It would rain in another thirty minutes, he reckoned.

Kay was sitting on the shore just above the water, opening a creel and tipping the still wriggling mousecrabs into a box ready for filleting. She was wearing a pair of faded shorts, halter made out of a cut-up T-shirt, boots with blue socks rolled down, and a scrappy dried-grass hat she had woven herself. Leslie enjoyed the look of her lean body, a rich nut-brown after all these months in the sun. It was another three days until they would have a night together. And he liked to think Kay enjoyed screwing with him more than the others. She certainly talked to him the rest of the time, like a friend.

His feet found the shingle and he stood up. "Another lot for you," he called. The mousecrabs slithered and squirmed round each other in the creel, ten at least; narrow flat bodies with twelve spindly legs apiece, brown scales that did resemble wet fur, and a pointed head ending in a black tip like a rodent nose.

Kay grinned, and waved at him, her filleting knife gripped in her hand, steel blade glinting in the sun. That grin made his whole day worthwhile.

The search party emerged from the jungle forty metres away from the quay. Leslie knew something was wrong straight away. They were walking too fast, the way angry men walk. And they were heading towards the jetty, all of them, fifty or more. Leslie stared uncertainly. It wasn't the jetty, they were heading for him!

"God's Brother," he murmured. They looked like a lynch mob. Quinn! It had be something Quinn had done. Quinn who was always so smart he never got caught.

Kay twisted round at the sound of the low rumble of voices, shielding her eyes from the sun. Tony had just surfaced with a full creel; he was watching the approaching crowd in confusion.

Leslie looked behind him, over the river. The far shore with its muddy bank and wall of creeper-bound trees was a hundred and forty metres away. It suddenly looked very tempting, he had become a strong swimmer over the last few months. They wouldn't catch him if he started straight away.

The first members of the crowd reached Kay where she was sitting. She was punched full in the face without the slightest warning. Leslie saw who did it, Mr Garlworth, a forty-five-year-old oenophile who was determined to establish his own vineyard. A quiet, peaceable man who was fairly reclusive. Now his face was flushed, berserker exhilaration lighting his features. He grunted in triumph as his knuckles connected with Kay's jaw.

She cried out in pain and toppled over, a bead of blood spurting from her mouth. Men clustered round, kicking at her with a fierceness that rivalled a sayce's blood-lust.

"Fuck you!" Leslie yelled. He slung the creel away and drove his legs through the knee-high water towards the shore, sending up long tails of spray. Kay was screaming, lost behind the flurry of kicking legs. Leslie saw the filleting knife slash once. One of the men fell, clutching at his shin. Then a club was raised high.

Leslie never heard nor saw if it fell on the battered girl.

He cannoned into the band of villagers who were racing down the slope at him. Powel Manani was one of them, a big fist cocked back. Leslie's world disintegrated into a chaos where instinct ruled. Fists slammed into him from all directions. He lashed out with blind violence. Men shouted and roared. His hair was gripped by a meaty hand, strands making a terrible ripping sound as they were torn slowly out of his scalp. A torrent of foam raged around him, almost as though he was fighting under a waterfall. Fangs clamped around his wrist, dragging his arm down. There was snarling, the snap of splintering bone that went on interminably. Pain was everything now, flooding down every nerve. Somehow it didn't bother him nearly as much as it should. He couldn't strike back the way he wanted to now. His arms didn't respond. He found he was on his knees, vision fading away into pink-grey streaks. The muddy river water was boiling scarlet.

There was a moment when nothing happened. He was being held prone by invincible hands. Powel Manani towered in front of him, his thick black beard soaked and straggly, grinning savagely as he lined himself up. In the silent pause, Leslie could hear a child wailing frantically somewhere off in the distance. Then Powel's heavy boot smashed into his balls with all the force the brawny supervisor could summon.

The pulse of agony knocked out every other thread of awareness. Leslie was cut off from life at the centre of a dense red neon mist, feeling or hearing nothing from outside. There was only the sickening pain.

Red turned to black. Twinges of sensation oozed back in on him. His face was being crushed into cold gravel. That was important, but he couldn't think why. His lungs ached abominably. With his jaw shattered and useless, Leslie tried to suck air through his mashed nose. The Quallheim's grubby, blood-stained water rushed into his lungs.

Lawrence Dillon was running for his life, running away from the insanity that had claimed the inhabitants of Abberdale. He and Douglas had been working in the allotments behind the A-frame when the villagers arrived back from

the search. The tall bean canes and flourishing sweetcorn plants had partially hidden them from view as the men attacked Kay and Leslie and Tony down by the river. Lawrence had never seen such a display of wanton violence before. Even Quinn wasn't that rabid, Quinn's violence was directed and purposeful.

Both he and Douglas stood mesmerized as their fellow Ivets disappeared beneath the blows. Only when Powel Manani came wading out of the river did they think to flee.

"Split up," Lawrence Dillon yelled at Douglas as they crashed into the jungle. "We'll stand more chance that way." He heard that monster hound, Vorix, barking loudly behind them, caught a glimpse of it racing across the village clearing in pursuit. "Get to Quinn. Warn him." Then they peeled apart, tearing through the undergrowth as if it was made from tissue paper.

Lawrence found a small animal path a minute later. It was becoming overgrown, deserted by the danderil ever since the village had been built. But it was good enough to give him an extra burst of speed. His tatty shoes were falling apart, and he only had shorts on. Creepers and branches tore at him with needle-sharp claws. Irrelevant. Living was all that mattered, building distance from the village.

Then Vorix went after Douglas. Lawrence threw a wordless cry of thanks to the Light Brother for sparing him, and slackened off his pace a fraction, scanning the ground for suitable stones. The hound would find him as soon as it had dispatched Douglas. The hound could pick up scents even in the damp jungle. The hound would lead the villagers to any hidden Ivet. He must do something about it if any of them were to have the slightest chance of surviving this day. And that bastard supervisor didn't know just how big a menace those who followed the Light Brother could be to any who stood in their way. The thought lifted his spirit, enabling him to throw off some of the panic. He had Quinn to thank for that. Quinn had shown him there was no fear in true release. Quinn had helped him find his own inner strength, showing him how to embrace the serpent

beast. Quinn who featured so powerfully in his dreams, a dark fantasy figure crowned in searing orange flames.

Grimacing at the multitude of scratches he had picked up during his mad flight, Lawrence looked around with a determined gaze.

Powel Manani was used to seeing the world through Vorix's eyes. It was a prospect of blues and greys, as if every structure was bonded together from layers of shadow. Trees stretched far overhead until they vanished into an almost hazy veil of sky and the bushes and undergrowth of the jungle loomed in oppressively, black leaves flicking aside like cards snapped down by an expert dealer.

The robust dog was chasing down an old animal track after Lawrence Dillon. The young Ivet's scent was everywhere. It lay like an oily mist in the footprints left behind in the soft loam, it wafted down from the leaves he had brushed against. Occasional spots of blood from lacerated feet were soaking into the spongy loam. Vorix didn't even have to press his nose to the ground.

Sensations flowed into Powel's mind, the tireless bands of muscle pumping in his haunches, tongue lolling over his jaw, hot breath flaring in his nostrils. They were a duality, Vorix's body, Powel's mind, working in perfect fusion. Just like they had when the dog caught up with Douglas. Animal attack reflexes and human skill combined into a synergistic engine of destruction, knowing exactly where to strike to cause the maximum damage. Powel could still feel the soft flesh giving beneath hardened paws, the taste of blood lingered long after fangs had punctured the lad's throat, severing the carotid. Sometimes the rustling breeze seemed to carry Douglas's gurgling cries.

But that was just a foretaste. Soon it would be Quinn who faced the dog. Quinn who would scream in fright. Just like little Carter must have done. The thought spurred both of them on, Vorix's heart thudding gleefully.

The scent trail petered out. Vorix lumbered on for a few paces then stopped and raised his blunt head, sniffing intently. Powel knew a frown would be crinkling his own face. There was a touch of rain in the air, but not nearly

enough to wash away such a strong trace. He had almost caught up with Lawrence, the Ivvet couldn't be far away.

There was a soft thud behind the dog. Vorix whipped round with electric speed. Lawrence Dillon stood on the track seven metres away, crouched on bloody feet as though he was about to spring at the dog, a fission blade in one hand, some kind of vine loop in the other.

The lad must have backtracked and scampered up one of the trees. Cunning little shit. But it wouldn't do him any good, not against Vorix. His only chance had been to drop on the dog and plunge the knife in before either of them realized what was happening. And he'd blown it.

Powel laughed as the dog started its run. Lawrence twirled the length of vine around. Too late Powel realized it was weighted with oval stones. Vorix was already leaping as the supervisor's mind bawled its warning. Lawrence let go of the bolas.

Insidious coils of vine snagged Vorix's forelegs with a barely audible *whirr*, the spinning cord biting sharply into his fur. One of the stones knocked heavily against his cranium, sending a shower of pain stars down the affinity link to daze Powel. Vorix crashed into the ground, slightly groggy. He flexed round trying to reach the vine with his teeth. An incredibly heavy mass landed hard on his back, nearly snapping his spine. His breath was knocked out of his lungs, winding him. Several ribs cracked. Hind legs scrabbled frantically for purchase to try and buck the Ivvet off.

An excruciating lance of pain fired into Powel Manani's brain. He yelled out loud, stumbling around. He felt one knee give out, and pitched over. For a moment the affinity link wavered, and he saw a ring of villagers gazing down in dismay. Hands reached out to steady him.

Vorix had frozen in pain and shock. There was no feeling at all from one of his hind legs. The dog squirmed round on the rucked loam. His leg was lying on the bloody grass, twitching and jerking.

Lawrence cut the second hind leg off with his fission knife. Blood hissed and steamed as it bubbled over the radiant yellow blade.

Both of Powel's legs were being squeezed by tourniquets made from bands of ice. He fell leadenly to sit on his rump, breath wheezing out of parched lips. His thigh muscles were spasming uncontrollably.

The fission blade penetrated Vorix's left mandible joint, skewering through muscle, bone, and gristle. Its tip emerged into the back of his mouth, severing a large portion of the tongue.

Powel started to gag, fighting for breath. His whole body was shaking wildly. He vomited weakly down his beard.

Vorix was emitting a harrowing whining from his ruined jaw. Sallow eyes rolled round, glazed with pain, trying to find his tormentor. Lawrence aimed a blow at each of his forelegs, slicing clean through the knees, leaving the dog with stumps.

At the far end of a murky whorled tunnel, Powel saw the sandy-haired teenager walk round in front of the dog. He spat on Vorix's squat muzzle. "Not so fucking smart now, are you?" Lawrence shouted. Powel could barely hear him, his voice sounded as though it was coming from the bottom of a deep rocky shaft. "Want to play chase again, doggy?" Lawrence did a little jig, laughing. Vorix's stumps knocked feebly against the soil in a parody of walking. The sight sent him off into another bout of laughter. "Walkies! Come on, walkies!"

Powel groaned with helpless fury. The affinity bond was weakening, stretching the dog's pain-lashed thoughts to a tenuous thread. He coughed some of the bile out of his mouth.

"I know you can hear me, Manani, you superfuck," Lawrence called. "And I hope your heart's bleeding out through these cuts. I'm not going to kill your hound, not all quick and clean and neat. No, I'm going to leave him here rolling round in his own shit and piss and blood. That way you'll feel him dying the whole time, however long it takes. I like that idea, cos you really loved this dog. God's Brother always takes his retribution on those who displease him. Vorix is kind of like an omen, see? I did this to a dog, think what Quinn's gonna do to you."

It was raining steadily when Jay led Sango, Powel Manani's beige horse, from the lean-to at the back of the supervisor's cabin which served as a stable. Mr Manani had been true to his word back on the *Swithland*, he had let her groom Sango, and help feed him, and take him for exercise. Two months ago, when the frantic urgency which governed Aberdale while the cabins were going up and the fields were being levelled had abated, he had taught her how to ride.

Aberdale wasn't quite the dreamy rural existence she had expected, but it was pretty nice in its own fashion. And Sango played a huge part in making it right. Jay knew one thing, she didn't want to go back to any arcology.

Or at least she hadn't before today.

Something had happened out in the jungle this morning that none of the adults would talk about. She and all the other kids knew that Carter was dead, they'd been told that much. But there had been the awful fight down by the jetty, and a lot of the women had cried, the men too though they tried to hide it. Then twenty minutes ago Mr Manani had some kind of dreadful drawn-out fit, howling and panting as he keeled about.

Things had quietened down after that. There had been a meeting in the hall, and afterwards people had gone back to their cabins. Now though she could see them congregating in the centre of the village again; they were all dressed like they did when they went hunting. Everyone seemed to be carrying a weapon.

She knocked on the front stanchion of Mr Manani's cabin. He came out dressed in navy-blue jeans, a green and blue check shirt, and a fawn waistcoat that held a lot of cylindrical power magazines for laser rifles. He carried a couple of slate-grey tubes fifty centimetres long, with pistol grips at one end. She had never seen them before, but she knew they were weapons.

Their eyes met for a moment, then Jay looked at the muddy ground.

"Jay?"

She glanced up.

“Listen, honey. The Ivets have been bad, very bad. They’re all funny in their heads.”

“Like waster kids in the arcologies, you mean?”

A sad smile flickered on his lips at the bright curiosity in her voice. “Something like that. They killed Carter McBride.”

“We thought so,” she admitted.

“So we’re going to have to catch them and stop them from doing anything like it again.”

“I understand.”

He slotted the maser carbines into their saddle holsters. “It’s for the best, honey, really it is. Listen, Aberdale’s not going to be very nice for a couple of weeks, but afterwards it’ll get better. I promise. Before you know it, we’ll be the best village on the whole tributary. I’ve seen it happen before.”

She nodded. “Be careful, Mr Manani. Please.”

He kissed the top of her head. Her hair was sprinkled with tiny drops of water.

“I will be,” he said. “And thank you for saddling up Sango. Now go and find your mum, she’s a bit upset about what happened this morning.”

“I haven’t seen Father Elwes for hours. Will he be coming back?”

He stiffened his back, unable to look at the girl. “Only to pick up his things. He won’t be staying in Aberdale any longer. His work’s done here.”

Powel rode Sango over to the waiting hunters, hoofs splattering in the mud. Most of them were wearing waterproof ponchos, slick with rain. They looked more worried than angry now. The initial heat of Carter’s death had abated, and the shock of killing the three Ivets was percolating through their minds. They were more scared for their families and their own skin than they were bothered about vengeance. But the end product was the same. Their fear of Quinn would compel them until the job was done.

He saw Rai Molvi standing among them, clutching a laser rifle beneath his poncho. It wasn’t worth making an issue over. He leaned forward from the saddle to address them. “First thing you should know is that my communi-

cation block is out. I haven't been able to tell Schuster's sheriff what's been happening here, or the Governor's office in Durringham. Now those communication blocks are more or less solid chunks of circuitry with all kinds of redundancy built in, I've never heard of one failing before. The LED lights up, so it's not a simple power loss. It was working when I made my routine report three days ago. I'll leave it to you to work out the significance of it failing today."

"Christ, just what are we up against?" someone asked.

"We're up against waster kids," Powel said. "Vicious and frightened. That's all they are. This sect crap is just an excuse for Quinn to order them about."

"They've got guns."

"They have eight laser rifles, and no spare power magazines. Now I can see about a hundred and twenty rifles just from here. They aren't going to be any problem. Shoot to kill, and don't give any warning. That's all we have to do. We don't have courts, we don't have time for courts, not out here. I sure as hell know they're guilty. And I want to make damn sure that the rest of your kids can walk about this village without looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives. That's what you came here for, isn't it? To get away from all this shit Earth kept flinging at you. Well, a little bit got carried here with you. But today we finish it. After today there won't be any more Carter McBrides."

Determination returned to the gathering; men nodded and exchanged bolstering glances with their neighbours, rifles were gripped just that fraction harder at the mention of Carter's name. It was a collective building up of nerve, absolving them of any guilt in advance.

Powel Manani watched it accumulate with satisfaction. They were his again, just like the day they came off the *Swithland*, before that dickhead Molvi started interfering. "OK, the Ivets got split into three work parties this morning. There's two out helping the savannah homesteads, and one lot with the hunting party to the east. We'll split into two groups. Arnold Travis, you know the eastern jungle pretty well, you take fifty men with you and try and find

the hunting party. I'm going to ride out to the homesteads to try and warn them. I expect that's where Lawrence Dillon is headed, because that's where Quinn is. The rest of you follow after me as fast as you can, and for Christ's sake don't get spread out. Once you get to the homesteads, we'll decide what to do next. OK, let's go."

Enlarging the Skibbow homestead's stockade was hard work; the wood for the fence had to be pre-cut in the jungle, a kilometre away, then hauled all the way back. The ground was difficult to prepare for the posts, with a vast accumulation of dead matted grass to scrape away before the hard, sandy soil was uncovered. Loren Skibbow's lunch had been cold chikrow meat and some kind of flaccid tasteless stewed vegetable which most of the Ivets had left. And on top of all that, Gerald Skibbow was off on the savannah somewhere looking for a lost sheep, which left Frank Kava in charge, who was a bossy little shit.

By midafternoon Quinn had already decided that the Skibbows and Kavas were going to be playing a very prominent role in his next black mass ceremony.

The lengths of wood they had cut that morning were laid out across the grass, marking out a square of land thirty-five metres a side next to the existing stockade. Quinn and Jackson Gael were working together, taking it in turns to hammer the upright posts into the ground. The other four Ivets in the work party were busy nailing the horizontal beams into place behind them. They had already completed one side, and were three posts along the next. It had rained earlier, but Frank hadn't let them stop work.

"Bastard," Jackson Gael muttered as he took another swing with the sledgehammer. The post shook as it thudded another three centimetres into the soil. "He wants to have this finished by tonight so he can show Gerald what a good keen little boy he's been. Means we're gonna be walking back in the dark."

"Don't worry about it," Quinn said. He was kneeling down, holding the black post upright. The mayope wood was wet, difficult to grip.

"This rain makes everything slippery," Jackson grum-

bled. "Accidents come easy, and on this planet you get damaged, you stay damaged. That drunken old fart of a priest don't know shit about proper doctoring." The sledgehammer hit the post again.

"Relax. I been thinking, this place would be a good target for us."

"Yeah. You know what really pisses me off? Frank climbs into bed with that Paula every bloody night. I mean, she's not got tits like Marie had, but God's Brother, every night!"

"Will you stop thinking with your dick for one fucking minute. I let you have Rachel, don't I? That's as well as our girls."

"Yeah. Thanks, Quinn. Sorry."

"Right, we'll start working out who we want to bring, and when we're going to do it."

Jackson tightened the scraps of cloth he had wrapped round his palms to give a tighter grip on the sledgehammer's handle. "Tony, maybe. He's pretty easy around the village; talks to the residents. Think he could do with reminding where his loyalties lie."

"Could be."

Jackson swung the sledgehammer again.

Quinn caught a flash of motion out on the vast plain of rippling grass back towards the thin dark green line which marked the start of the jungle. "Hold it." He upped his retinal implant to full magnification. The running figure resolved. "It's Lawrence. God's Brother, he looks about dead." He scanned the land behind the youth, looking for a sayce or a kroclion. Something must be making him run like that. "Come on." He started trotting towards the floundering teenager.

Jackson dropped the sledgehammer and followed Quinn.

Frank Kava was measuring out the distance between the posts, setting them up correctly for the Ivets. Not that those idle buggers would appreciate the effort, he thought. You had to watch them the whole time, and they had no initiative, everything had to be explained. He strongly believed

most of them were retarded, their sullen silence certainly indicated it.

He leaned in on the spade, tearing out the knobby roots of grass. This stockade was going to be a mighty useful addition to the homestead. The original one was far too cramped now the animals were reaching adult size. They'd need the extra room for the second generation soon. Certainly the sheep would be mature enough to be inseminated in a few more months.

Frank had been faintly dubious about coming to Lalonde. But now he had to admit it was the greatest decision he'd ever made. A man could sit back every evening and see what he'd achieved. It was a tremendous feeling.

And there was Paula, too. She hadn't said anything yet. But Frank had his suspicions. She looked so *vital* of late.

The sounds made him look up—something wrong. Four of the Ivets were still hammering away at the horizontal bars, but there was no one using the sledgehammer. He cursed under his breath. Quinn Dexter and the stalwart Jackson Gael were a hundred metres away, running through the grass. Unbelievable. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, but they either didn't hear him, or they just ignored him. Probably the latter, knowing them. Then he saw the figure running in from the jungle, the erratic stumbling gait of a desperate man on his last legs. As he watched, the figure fell, arms windmilling; Quinn and Jackson increased their pace. Frowning, Frank started towards them.

The voices led Frank for the last twenty metres. All three of them were crouched below the wispy grass.

It was another Ivet, the young one. He was lying on his back, sucking down air in huge gulps, trying to talk in a high-pitched choking voice. His feet were reduced to bloody meat. Quinn and Jackson were kneeling beside him.

"What's going on here?" Frank asked.

Quinn glanced back over his shoulder. "Take him out," he said calmly.

Frank took a pace backwards as Jackson rose. "Wait—"

Paula and Loren were in the homestead's living-room, waiting for their freshly prepared elwisia jam to boil. The elwisia was one of the local edible fruits, a dark purple sphere ten centimetres in diameter. A whole cluster of the small, wizened trees grew on the fringe of the jungle; they'd had a long picking session yesterday. Sugar was going to be the main problem; several people grew cane in the village, but the few kilos they'd traded weren't particularly high quality.

It would get better though, Loren thought. Everything about Aberdale was slowly getting better. That was part of the joy of living here.

Paula took the clay jars from the oven where they'd been warming.

"Could do with a minute longer," Loren said. She was stirring the mixture that was bubbling away inside the big pan.

Paula put the tray of jars down, and looked out through the open door. A party of people were coming round the corner of the stockade. Jackson Gael was carrying someone in his arms, a teenage boy whose feet were dripping blood. Another two Ivets were carrying the unmistakable figure of Frank.

"Mother!" Paula charged out of the door.

Frank's face was terribly battered, his nose squashed almost flat, lips torn, eyes and cheeks swollen and bruised. He groaned weakly.

"Oh my God!" Paula's hands came up to press against her face. "What happened to him?"

"We did," said Quinn.

Loren Skibbow almost made it. There was something about Quinn Dexter which had always made her uncomfortable, and the sight of Frank had set every mental alarm ringing. Without hesitating she turned and raced back into the house. The laser hunting rifles were hung up on the living-room wall. Five of them, one each. Gerald had taken his with him this morning. She reached for the next one, the one that used to be Marie's.

Quinn punched her in the kidneys. The blow slammed her into the wall. She rebounded, and Quinn kicked her on

the back of the knee. She collapsed onto the floorboards, moaning at the pain. The rifle clattered down beside her.

"I'll take that, thank you," Quinn said.

Loren's vision was blurred by tears. She heard Paula screaming, and managed to turn her head. Jackson Gael had dragged her inside, holding her under one arm while her legs kicked wildly.

"Irley, Malcolm; I want the guns and every spare power magazine, any medical gear, and all their freeze-dried food. Get to it," Quinn ordered as the other Ivets piled in. "Ann, take watch outside. Manani will be coming out here on his horse, and keep an eye out for Gerald as well." He threw the rifle to her. She caught it and nodded crisply.

Irley and Malcolm started to ransack the shelves.

"Shut up," Quinn yelled at Paula.

She broke off screaming, staring at him with huge, terrified eyes. Jackson Gael shoved her into a corner, and she shrank down, hugging herself.

"That's better," Quinn said. "Imran, put Lawrence down in the chair, then search out the boots in this house, as many pairs as you can find. We're gonna need 'em. Got a long way to go."

Loren saw the young Ivet with the ruined feet being lowered into one of the chairs around the square kitchen table. His face was grey, sweating profusely.

"You just find me some bandages and some boots, I'll be all right," Lawrence said. "Really, Quinn, I'll be fine."

Quinn caressed his forehead, fingers teasing back the damp strands of blond hair. "I know. That was a hell of a run out here. You did great, Lawrence. Really. You're the best."

Loren saw Lawrence look up at Quinn, reverence in the lad's eyes. She saw Quinn slide a fission blade from his shorts. She tried to say something as the blade came alive in a burst of yellow light, but only a gurgle emerged from her throat.

Quinn sank the blade into the nape of Lawrence's neck, angling it upwards so it penetrated the brain. "The very best," he whispered. "God's Brother will welcome you into the Night."

Paula opened her mouth in a silent wail as Lawrence's body slid down onto the floor. Loren started to sob quietly.

"Shit, Quinn!" Irley protested.

"What? We've got to get out of here, yesterday. You saw his feet; he would have held us up. That way we all get caught. That what you want?"

"No," Irley mumbled lamely.

"It was quicker than what they would have done to him," Quinn said half to himself.

"You did the right thing," Jackson Gael said. He turned back to Paula and grinned broadly. She whimpered, trying to push herself further back into the corner. He grabbed her hair and pulled her up.

"We don't have time," Quinn said mildly.

"Sure we do. I won't be long."

Loren tried to pick herself off the floor as Paula's screams began again.

"Naughty," Quinn said. His boot caught her on the side of the temple. She flopped onto her back like a broken mechanoid, incapable of movement. Her vision was fuzzy, shapes were obscured behind blotches of grey. But she saw Quinn take Paula's rifle off the wall, calmly check the power level, and shoot Frank. He turned round, and aimed the barrel at her.

The recall whistle sounded sharply through the jungle. Scott Williams sighed and picked himself off the ground, brushing dead leaves from his threadbare jump suit.

The arseholes! He was sure that had been a danderil rustling through the undergrowth up ahead. Well, he'd never know now.

"Wonder what's happened?" Alex Fitton said.

"Dunno," Scott replied. He didn't mind Alex too much. The man was twenty-eight, and he was happy enough to talk to an Ivet. He knew some good filthy jokes too. Scott had hunted with him regularly.

The whistle sounded again.

Alex grunted. "Come on."

They trudged towards the sound. Several other pairs of hunters appeared out of the trees, all of them walking to-

wards the insistent whistle. Queries were shouted to and fro. Nobody knew why they were being called in. The whistle was supposed to be for injuries and the end of the day.

Scott was surprised to see a big group of people lined up waiting at the top of a steepish earth mound, there were about forty or fifty of them. They must have come out from the village. He saw Rai Molvi standing in front of them, blowing the whistle for all he was worth. He was very conscious of all those eyes on him as he and Alex Fitton made their way up the incline.

There was a large qualtook tree straddling the brow of the mound. One of its thick lower branches overhung the slope on the other side. Three silicon-fibre ropes had been slung over it.

The group of villagers parted silently, forming an alley towards the tree. Definitely worried now, Scott walked through them and saw what was hanging from the ropes. Jemima had been the last, she was still choking and kicking. Her face was purple, eyes bulging.

He tried to run, but they shot him in the thigh with a laser pulse, and dragged him back. It was Alex Fitton who pulled the noose tight around his neck. Tears ran down his cheeks as he did it, but then Alex had been Roger Chadwick's brother-in-law.

The run back to his homestead had nearly killed Gerald Skibbow. He had been returning anyway when he saw the smoke, tugging the errant sheep along on a leash. Orlando, the Skibbow family's Alsatian, bounded about through the long grass in high spirits. He knew he'd done well following the sheep's scent. Gerald smiled indulgently at his antics. He was almost fully grown now. Oddly enough it was Loren who was the best at training him.

Gerald had traipsed across what had seemed like half of the savannah that morning. He couldn't believe how far the damn sheep had strayed in just a few hours. They had eventually found it bleating at the end of a steep-walled gully about three kilometres from the homestead. He was just grateful that sayce kept to the jungle. They had never

had any trouble from the kroclions which were supposed to roam the grassland, a few distant glimpses of sleek bodies in the grass, some night-time roars.

Then when he was a couple of kilometres from home that terrible blue-white streamer of smoke twisted idly into the sky ahead of him, its root hidden beyond the horizon. He stared at it in cold fear. All the other homesteads were kilometres away, and there was only one possible source. It was like watching his own life's blood pouring up into the cloudless azure heavens. The homestead was everything, he'd invested his life in it, there was no other future.

"Loren!" he called. He let go of the sheep's leash and started to run. "Paula!" The laser rifle banged against his side. He slung it away. Orlando barked urgently, picking up on his master's agitation.

It was the grass, the bloody grass. It clung to his pounding legs, hindering him. Rucks and folds in the ground kept tripping him. He fell headlong, grazing his hands, knocking his knee. It didn't matter. He picked himself up and kept on running. Again and again.

The savannah sucked sounds away from him. The slashing of the grass on his dungarees trousers, his laboured panting, the grunts each time he fell. All of them soaked away into the hot, still air as though it fed on them, hungry for the slightest noise.

The last two hundred yards were the worst. He topped a small rise, and the homestead was revealed to him. Only the skeleton remained upright, sturdy black timbers swathed by shooting flames. The slats and roof planks had already burnt through, peeling off like putrid skin to lie in crumbling strips around the base.

The animals had scattered. Panicked by the heat and roaring flames they had butted their way through the stockade fence. They had run for a hundred metres or so until their immediate fear slackened, then wandered about aimlessly. He could see the horse and a couple of pigs over by the pool, drinking unconcernedly. Others were dotted about among the grass.

There was no other movement. No people. He gaped

numbly. Where were Frank and Loren and Paula? And the Ivet work team; they should all be trying to put out the fire.

With legs like weights of dead meat, and breath burning in his lungs, he ran the last length in a daze. A bright golden rain of sparks swirled high into the sky. The homestead's frame gave one harrowed creak, and buckled in on itself with a series of jerks.

Gerald let out a single wretched wail as the last timbers crashed down. He slowed to a halt fifteen metres from the wreckage. "Loren? Paula? Frank? Where are you?" The cry was snatched up with the sparks. Nobody answered. He was too frightened to go over to the remnants of the homestead. Then he heard Orlando whine softly. He walked up to the dog.

It was Paula. Darling Paula, the little girl who would sit on his lap in their apartment back in the arcology and try to pull his nose, giggling wildly. Who grew up into a lovely young woman possessed of a quiet dignified strength. Who had bloomed out here in this venturesome land.

Paula. Eyes staring blindly at the swarm of sparks. A two-centimetre hole in the centre of her forehead, cauterized by the hunting laser.

Gerald Skibbow looked down at his daughter, knuckles jammed into his gaping mouth. His legs gave way, and he slowly folded up onto the trampled grass beside her.

That was how Powel Manani found him when he rode up forty minutes later. The supervisor took in the scene with a single glance. All the anger and hatred that had been building up during the day crystallized into a lethal Zen-like calmness.

He inspected the smouldering ruin of the homestead. There were three scorched bodies inside, which puzzled him for a while until he realized the second male was probably Lawrence Dillon.

Quinn would want to move swiftly, of course. And Lawrence's feet had been in poor shape even back when he killed Vorix. Christ, but Quinn was a cold bastard.

The question was, where would he go?

There were just six Ivets left now. Powel had arrived at the Nicholls' homestead where the second Ivet work team was busy assembling a barn. His maser carbine had picked them off one at a time under the horrified eyes of the Nicholls family. He had explained why afterwards. But they had still looked at him as though he was some kind of monster. He didn't much care. The rest of the villagers would put them right tomorrow.

Powel stared at the band of jungle a kilometre away. Quinn was in there, that much was obvious. But finding him was going to be difficult. Unless . . . Quinn might just head back to the village. He was a true bandit now, he'd need food and weapons, enough supplies to get well clear of Schuster County. A small roving band could elude the sheriffs and even a marshal (assuming the Governor sent one) for a long time out here.

Orlando nosed around his legs and Powel stroked him absently. He missed Vorix more than ever now. Vorix would have tracked Quinn down within an hour.

"Right," he said to the Alsatian. "Back to Aberdale it is." It was his duty to warn the villagers what had happened in any case. Quinn would have taken the homestead's weapons. Thank Christ the colonists were only allowed hunting rifles, no heavy-calibre stuff.

Gerald Skibbow said nothing when Powel covered Paula with a canvas tarpaulin used to keep the pile of hay dry. But he allowed Powel to lead him away, and mounted Sango when he was told.

The two of them rode off across the savannah back to the Nicholls homestead, Orlando racing alongside through the thick grass. Behind them, the abandoned animals began to wander over to the pool to drink, nervous with their new-found freedom.

Jay Hilton was bored. The village felt most peculiar with no one working in the fields and allotments. By late afternoon all the children had been called to their cabins. The whole place looked deserted, although she could see people glancing out of their cabin windows as she wandered aimlessly along the familiar paths.

Her mother didn't want to talk, which was unusual. After she had come back from the search for Carter McBride she had rolled onto her bunk and just stared at the ceiling. She hadn't joined the party which left with Mr Manani to hunt down the Ivets.

Jay walked past the church. Father Elwes wasn't back yet. She knew he'd done something terribly wrong from the way Mr Manani had reacted when she mentioned his name earlier, more than just his drinking. But it still wasn't right for him to be out in the jungle alone with the evening coming in. The sun was already invisible, skulking below the tops of the trees.

Her enthusiastic and imaginative mind filled the blank jungle with all sorts of images. The priest had fallen over and broken an ankle. He was blundering about lost. He was hiding up a tree from a wild sayce.

Jay knew the jungle immediately around the village as though a didactic map had been laser imprinted in her brain. If she was the one who found Father Elwes she'd be a real heroine. She threw a quick glance at her cabin. There was no light on inside, Mother wouldn't notice her missing for half an hour or so. She hurried towards the sombre fence of trees.

It was quiet in the jungle. Even the chikrows had departed. And the shadows were deeper than she was used to. Spires of orange and pink light pierced the rustling leaves, unnaturally bright in the gathering gloom.

After ten minutes she thought that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. The well-worn track leading to the savannah homesteads wasn't far off. She cut quickly through the undergrowth, coming out on the path a couple of minutes later.

This was much better, she could see for about seventy metres in each direction. Some of her anxiety evaporated.

"Father?" she called experimentally. Her voice was loud in the hushed ranks of dusky trees looming all around. "Father, it's me, Jay." She turned a complete circle. Nothing moved, nothing made a sound. She wanted the hunting parties to come marching into view so she could walk home with them. Some company would be very welcome.

There was a crackling noise behind her, like someone treading on a twig.

“Father?” Jay turned round, and let out a squeak. At first she thought the black woman’s head was hovering in the air all by itself, but when Jay squinted hard she could just make out the silhouette of her body. It was as though light bent round it, leaving a tiny blue and purple ripple effect around the edges.

The woman raised a hand. Leaves and twigs flowed fluidly over her palm, an exact pattern of what was behind her. She put a finger to her lips, then beckoned.

Sango cantered down the track back to Aberdale, keeping to a steady rhythm as darkness began to pool around the base of the trees. Powel Manani ducked occasionally to avoid low hanging branches. The route was one he knew by heart now. He rode automatically as his mind reviewed possibilities.

Everyone would have to stay in the village tomorrow, they could post guards so that work in the fields could continue. Any major interruption to their lives would be a victory for Quinn, and he mustn’t allow that to happen. People were already badly shaken up by what had happened, their confidence in themselves had to be built up from scratch again.

He had passed Arnold Travis’s group a quarter of an hour ago on their way home. They’d hanged all their Ivets. And the group that had gone out to the homesteads was burying the Ivets he’d shot at the Nicholls place. Tomorrow a gang would trek out to the Skibbow homestead and do what they could.

Which wasn’t going to be much, he admitted bitterly. But it could have been worse. Then again, it could have been a whole lot better.

Powel sucked air in through his teeth at the thought of Quinn on the loose. At first light he would ride downriver to Schuster. The sheriff there would contact Durringham, and a proper manhunt could be organized. He knew Schuster’s supervisor, Gregor O’Keefe, who had an affinity-bonded Doberman. They could go after Quinn straight

away, before the trail went cold. Gregor would understand the need.

None of this was going to look good on his record. Families murdered and Ivets in open revolt. The Land Allocation Office probably wouldn't give him another supervisor contract after this. Well, screw them. Quinn was all that mattered now.

Sango shrieked, rearing up violently. He grabbed the reins hard in reflex. The horse came down, and he realized its legs were collapsing. Momentum carried him forward, his head meeting Sango's neck as it snaked back. Mane hair lashed across his face, and his nose squashed into the bristly beige coat. He tasted blood.

Sango hit the ground, inertia skidding him forwards a couple of metres before he finally rolled onto his side. Powel heard his right leg break with a shockingly loud snap as the horse's full weight came down on it. He blanked out for a moment. When he came to he promptly threw up. His right leg was completely numb below the hip. He felt dangerously light headed. Cold sweat prickled his skin.

The horse's flank had his leg pinned to the ground. He hunched himself up on his elbow, and tried to pull it out. Red-hot pain flared along his nerve paths. He groaned, and slumped back down onto the mossy grass, panting heavily.

The undergrowth swished behind him. There was the sound of footfalls on the loam.

"Hey!" he cried. "Christ, help me. The bloody horse keeled over on me. I can't feel my leg." He craned round. Six figures were walking out of the murky shadows which lined the track.

Quinn Dexter laughed.

Powel made a frantic lunge for the maser carbine in the saddle holster. His fingers curled round the grip.

Ann had been waiting for the move. She fired her laser rifle. The infrared pulse struck the back of Powel's hand, slicing clean through. Skin and muscle vaporized in a five-centimetre crater, veins instantly cauterized, his straining tendons roasted and snapped. Around the edge of the wound skin blackened and flaked away, a huge ring of blis-

ters erupted. Powel let out a guttural snarl, jerking his hand back.

“Bring him,” Quinn ordered.

The demon sprite had come back to the church. It was the first thing Horst Elwes discovered when he returned.

Most of the day was lost to him. He must have lain in the little clearing for hours. His shirt and trousers were damp from the rain, and smeared with mud. And Carter McBride’s blood-filmed eyes still stared at him.

“Your fault!” Supervisor Manani had shouted in rage. He was right, too.

A sin by omission. The belief that human dignity would triumph. That all he had to do was wait and the Ivets would grow tired of their foolish rituals and genuflecting. That they would realize the Light Brother sect was a charade designed to make them do Quinn’s bidding. Then he would be there for them, waiting to forgive and welcome them into the Lord’s fold.

Well, now that arrogance had cost a child his life, perhaps others too if the suspicions of Ruth and Manani were correct. Horst wasn’t at all sure he wanted to go on living.

He walked back into the village clearing as the penumbra arose from the east and the brighter stars started to shine above the black treetops. A few cabins had yellow lights glimmering inside, but the village was deathly quiet. The life had gone out of it.

The spirit, Horst thought, that is what’s missing. Even afterwards, even after they’ve had their revenge and slaughtered the Ivets, this place will be tainted. They have bitten their apple now, and the knowledge of truth has corrupted their souls. They know what beasts lie in their hearts. Even though they dress it up as honour and civilized justice. They know.

He walked heavily out of the shadows towards the church. That simple little church which symbolized all that was wrong with the village. Built on a lie, home to a fool, laughed at by all. Even here, the most God-forsaken planet in the Confederation, where nothing really matters, I can’t

get it right. I can't do the one thing I vowed before God that my life was for, I can't give them faith in themselves.

He pushed through the swing door at the rear of the church. Carter McBride was laid out on a pew at the front, draped in a blanket. Someone had lit one of the altar candles.

A dainty red star flickered a metre over the body.

All Horst's anguish returned in a deluge that threatened to extinguish his sanity. He bit his trembling lower lip.

If God the Holy Trinity exists, said the waster sect Satanists, then, *ipso facto*, the Dark One is also real. For Jesus was tempted by Satan, both have touched the Earth, both will return.

Now Horst Elwes looked at the speck of red light and felt the dry weight of aeons press in on his mind again. To have the existence of supernatural divinity proven like this was a hideous travesty. Men were supposed to come to faith, not have it forced upon them.

He dropped to one knee as if pushed down by a giant irresistible hand. "O my Lord, forgive me. Forgive me my weakness. I beg Thee."

The star slid through the air towards him. It didn't seem to cast any light on the pews or floor.

"What are you? What have you come here for? The boy's soul? Did Quinn Dexter summon you for that? How I pity you. That boy was pure in mind no matter what they did to him, no matter what they made him say. Our Lord would not reject him because of your acolytes' inhumanity. Carter will be welcomed into heaven by Gabriel himself."

The star stopped two metres short of Horst.

"Out," Horst said. He stood, the strength of recklessness infusing his limbs. "Get ye gone from this place. You have failed. Doubly you have failed." His face split in a slow grin, a drop of spittle running down his beard. "This old sinner has taken heart again from your presence. And this place you desecrate is holy ground. Now out!" He thrust a rigid forefinger at the gloaming-soaked jungle beyond the door. "Out!"

Footsteps thudded on the steps outside the church, the

swing door banged open. "Father!" Jay yelled at the top of her voice.

Small, thin arms hugged his waist with a strength a full-grown man would be hard put to match. He instinctively cradled her, hands smoothing her knotted white-blonde hair.

"Oh, Father," she sobbed. "It was horrible, they killed Sango. They shot him. He's dead. Sango's dead."

"Who did? Who shot him?"

"Quinn. The Ivets." Her face tilted up to look at him. The skin was blotchy from crying. "She made me hide. They were very close."

"You've seen Quinn Dexter?"

"Yes. He shot Sango. I *hate* him!"

"When was this?"

"Just now."

"Here? In the village?"

"No. We were on the track to the homesteads, about half a kilometre."

"Who was with you?"

Jay sniffled, screwing a fist into her eye. "I don't know her name. She was a black lady. She just came out of the jungle in a funny suit. She said I must be careful because the Ivets were very near. I was frightened. We hid from them behind some bushes. And then Sango came down the track." Her chin began to tremble. "He's dead, Father."

"Where is this woman now?"

"Gone. She walked back to the village with me, then left."

More puzzled than worried, Horst tried to calm his whirling thoughts. "What was funny about her suit?"

"It was like a piece of jungle, you couldn't see her."

"A marshal?" he said under his breath. That didn't make any sense at all. Then he abruptly realized something missing from her story. He took hold of her shoulders, staring down at her intently. "Was Mr Manani riding Sango when Quinn shot him?"

"Yes."

"Is he dead?"

“No. He was shouting cos he was hurt. Then the Ivets carried him away.”

“Oh, dear Lord. Was that where the woman was going, back to help Mr Manani?”

Jay’s face radiated misery. “Don’t think so. She didn’t say anything, she just vanished as soon as we reached the fields around the village.”

Horst turned to the demon sprite. But it had gone. He started to hustle Jay out of the church. “You are to go straight home to your mother, and I mean straight home. Tell her what you told me, and tell her to get the other villagers organized. They must be warned that the Ivets are near.”

Jay nodded, her eyes round and immensely serious.

Horst glanced about the clearing. Night had almost fallen, the trees seemed much nearer, much larger in the dark. He shivered.

“What are you going to do, Father?”

“Just have a look, that’s all. Now go on with you.” He gave her a gentle push in the direction of Ruth’s cabin. “Home.”

She scampered off between the rows of cabins, long, slender legs flying in a shaky gait that looked as though she was perpetually about to lose her balance. Then Horst was all by himself. He gave the jungle a grim glance, and set off towards the gap in the trees where the track to the savannah homesteads started.

Sentimental fool, Laton said.

Listen, Father, after what I did today I’m entitled to show some sentiment, Camilla retorted. **Quinn would have ripped her apart. There’s no need for that kind of bloodshed any more. We have achieved what we set out to do.**

Well, now this idiot priest is heading out to be a hero. Do you intend to save him as well?

No. He’s an adult. He makes his own choices.

Very well. The loss of Supervisor Manani is vexing, though. I was relying on him to eradicate the rest of the Ivets.

Do you want me to shoot them?

No, the hunting party is returning, they will find the horse soon enough, and the trail Quinn Dexter has left. They would wonder what killed them. There must be no hint of our existence. Though Jay—

Nobody will believe her.

Possibly.

So what are you going to do about Dexter? Our original scenario didn't envisage him surviving this long.

Quinn Dexter will come to me now, there is nowhere else he can go. The sheriffs will assume he has run off into the wilderness, never to be seen again. Not quite the perfect solution, but no battle plan survives the opening shot. And Ann's ova will be a welcome addition to our genetic resources.

Is my provocateur duty over now?

Yes, I don't believe the situation requires further intervention on our part. We can monitor events through the servitor scouts.

Good. I'm on my way home; have a bath and a tall drink waiting, it's been a long day.

Quinn looked down at Powel Manani. The naked supervisor had regained consciousness again now they had finished lashing his badly crushed legs to the mayope's trunk. His head hung a few centimetres from the ground; cheeks puffed out from all the fluid that was building up in the facial tissue. They had spread his arms wide, tying his hands to small stakes in the ground. The inverted cross.

Powel Manani moaned dazedly.

Quinn held out his hands for silence. "The Night grows strong. Welcome to our world, Powel."

"Dickhead," Powel grunted.

Quinn flicked on a pocket-sized thermal inducer, and pressed it against Powel's broken shin. He groaned, and jerked about feebly.

"Why did you do it, Powel? Why did you drown Leslie and Tony? Why did you kill Kay? Why did you send Vorix after Douglas?"

"And the others," Powel wheezed. "Don't forget them."

Quinn stiffened. "Others?"

"You're all that's left, Quinn. And tomorrow there won't even be you."

The thermal inducer was applied to his leg again.

"Why?" Quinn asked.

"Carter McBride. Why do you think? You're fucking animals, all of you. Just *animals*. No human could do that to another. He was ten years old!"

Quinn frowned, turning off the thermal inducer. "What happened to Carter McBride?"

"This! You dickhead. You strung him up, you and your Light Brother bastards. You split him in half!"

"Quinn?" Jackson Gael asked uncertainly.

Quinn gestured him quiet with a wave. "We never touched Carter. How could we? We were out at the Skibbow homestead."

Powel pulled at the vines holding his hands. "And Gwyn Lawes, and Roger Chadwick, and the Hoffmans? What about them? You got alibis for them, too?"

"Ah, well now I have to admit, you have a point there. But how did you know we followed the Light Brother?"

"Elwes, he told us."

"Yes, I should have realized a priest would know what was going down. Not that it matters now." He took his fission blade from his dungarees pocket.

"Quinn," Jackson said hotly. "This is weird, man. Who snuffed out Carter if we didn't?"

Quinn held the blade up in front of his face, regarding it in a virtual trance. "What happened after Carter was found?"

"What do you mean?" Jackson yelled. "What are you talking about? Shit, Quinn, snap out of it, man. We're gonna die if we don't move."

"That's right. We're gonna die. We've been set up." The blade came alive, radiating a spectral yellow light that gave his face a phosphene hue. He smiled.

Jackson Gael felt a deadly frost settle around his heart. He hadn't realized how insane Quinn was before this; nutty, sure, a psycho streak thrown in. But this—God's

Brother, Quinn was actually enjoying himself, he believed he was the Night's disciple.

The other Ivets were giving each other very edgy glances.

Quinn didn't notice. He leaned closer to Powel Manani. The supervisor sagged, giving up the struggle.

"We are the princes of the Night," Quinn intoned.

"We are the princes of the Night," the Ivets chanted with numb obedience.

Camilla, get back there now. Eliminate all of them immediately. I'm dispatching the incorporated to help you clear away the bodies. If the hunting party arrive first, use a thermal grenade to obliterate the scene. It's hardly elegant, but it will have to suffice. Quinn Dexter must not be allowed to divulge our existence.

I'm on my way, Father.

The Ly-cilph moved its identity focus between Quinn Dexter and Powel Manani, extending its perception field around all the people in the cramped jungle clearing. It couldn't quite read individual thoughts, not yet, the complexity of human synaptic discharges would take some time to unravel and catalogue, but their brains' emotional content was plain enough.

The emotional polarity between Quinn Dexter and Powel Manani was enormous; one triumphant and elated, life loving; the other defeated and withdrawn, willing death to come quickly. It mirrored their religious traits, the diametric opposition.

Right out on the fringe of awareness, the Ly-cilph could detect a minute transmission of energy from Powel Manani into Quinn Dexter. It came from the basic energistic force which pervaded every living cell. This kind of transference was extraordinarily rare in corporeal entities. And Quinn Dexter seemed to be aware of it at some fundamental level, he possessed an energistic sense far superior to that of the priest. To Quinn Dexter the black mass sacrifices were a lot more than an empty ritual of worship, they generated a weighty expectation in his mind, confirming his belief.

The Ly-cilph watched the sensation growing inside him, and waited with every perceptive faculty extended eagerly to record the phenomenon.

“When the false lord leads his legions away into oblivion, we will be here,” Quinn said.

“We will be here,” the Ivets repeated.

“When You bring light into the darkness, we will be here.”

“We will be here.”

“When time ends, and space collapses into itself, we will be here.”

“We will be here.”

Quinn reached out with the fission blade. He pushed the tip into Powel Manani’s groin, just above the root of his penis. Skin sizzled as the blade sank in, pubic hair singed and shrivelled. Powel clenched his teeth, neck muscles bulging out like ropes as he struggled against the scream. Quinn began to saw the blade down through the supervisor’s abdomen.

“This is our sacrament to You, Lord,” Quinn said. “We have freed our serpents, we are the beast we were made. We are real. Accept this life as a token of our love and devotion.” The knife reached Powel’s navel, ribbons of blood were pouring out of the wound. Quinn watched the scarlet liquid mat the man’s thick body hair, experiencing a fierce delight. “Give us Your strength, Lord, help us defeat Your enemies.” The dark joy of the serpent beast had never been so good before; he felt intoxicated. Every cell in his body vibrated with euphoria. “Show us, Lord!” he cried. “Speak to us!”

Powel Manani was dying. The Ly-cilph observed the swirl of energistic patterns raging throughout his body. A small discharge crackled into Quinn, where it was hungrily absorbed, raising the Ivet’s mental rapture to greater heights. The remainder of Powel’s life energy dwindled, but its dissipation wasn’t entirely entropic, a minute fraction flowed away through some kind of arcane dimensional twist. The Ly-cilph was fascinated, this ceremony was releasing an incredible wealth of knowledge; it had

never attuned itself to an entity's death so pervasively before in all its terrible length of being.

It inserted itself into the energy flow from Manani's cells, tracing it between the neat folds of quantum reality, and finding itself emerging in a continuum it had no prior conception of: an energistic vacuum. A void as daunting to it as space was to a naked human. Retaining cohesion in such an environment was inordinately difficult, it had to contract its density to prevent flares of self-energy from streaming away like cometary volatiles. Once it had stabilized its internal structure, the Ly-cilph opened its perception field wide. It wasn't alone.

Ill-focused swirls of information raced through this foreign void, similar in nature to the Ly-cilph's own memory facility. They were separate entities, it was sure, though they continually mingled themselves, interpenetrating then diverging. The Ly-cilph observed the alien mentalities cluster around the boundary zone of its identity focus. Delicate wisps of radiation stroked it, bringing a multitude of impossibly jumbled images. It assembled a standardized identity and interpretation message and broadcast it on the same radiation bands they were using. Horrifyingly, instead of responding, the aliens penetrated its boundary.

The Ly-cilph fought to retain its fundamental integrity as its thought routines were violated and subsumed by the incursive alien mentalities. But there were too many of them to block. It started to lose control of its functions; the perception field contracted, access to the vast repository of stored knowledge began to falter, it was unable to move. They began to alter its internal energy structure, opening a wide channel between their empty continuum and space-time. Patterns started to surge back through the dimensional twist, strands of raw memory using the Ly-cilph as a conduit, seeking a specific physical matrix in which they could operate.

It was a monstrous usurpation, one which contravened the Ly-cilph's most intrinsic nature. The alien mentalities were forcing it to participate in the flux of events which ordered the universe, to interfere. There was only one option left. It stored itself. Thought processes and immediate

memory were loaded into the macro-data lattice. The active functions ceased to exist.

The Ly-cilph would hang in stasis between the two variant continua until it was discovered and re-animated by one of its own kind. The chance of that discovery before the universe ended was infinitesimal, but time was of no consequence to a Ly-cilph. It had done all it could.

Thirty metres away from the Ivets and Powel Manani, Horst Elwes crept through the undergrowth, drawn by the low chanting voices. The trail of broken vines and torn leaves leading away from the dead horse had been absurdly easy to follow even in the last flickers of fading sunlight. It was as though Quinn didn't care who found them.

Night had fallen with bewildering suddenness after Horst left the track, and the jungle had constricted ominously around him. Blackness assumed the quality of a thin liquid. He was drowning in it.

Then he heard the grating voices, the truculent incantation. The voices of frightened people.

A spark of yellow light bobbed between the trees ahead of him. He pressed himself against a big qualtook trunk, and peered round. Quinn sank the fission blade into Powel Manani's prostrate body.

Horst gasped, and crossed himself. "Lord, receive Your son—"

The demon sprite flared like a miniature nova between Quinn and Powel, turning the jungle to a lurid crimson all around. It was pulsing in a mockery of organic life. Incandescent webs of vermilion light crawled over Quinn like icy flames.

Horst clung to the tree, beyond both terror and hope. None of the Ivets had even noticed the manifestation. Except for Quinn. Quinn was smiling with orgasmic joy.

When the rapture reached an almost unbearable peak, Quinn heard the voices. They came from inside his head, similar to the fractured whispers which dream chimeras uttered. But these grew louder, entire words rising out of the clamorous babble. He saw light arise before him, a scarlet aureole that cloaked Powel's body. Right at the heart there was a crevice of absolute darkness.

Quinn stretched out his arms towards the empty tear in space. "My Lord! You are come!"

The multitude of voices came together. "Is the darkness what you crave, Quinn?" they asked in unison.

"Yes, oh yes."

"We are of the dark, Quinn. Aeons we have spent here, seeking one such as you."

"I am yours, Lord."

"Welcome us, Quinn."

"I do. Bring me the Night, Lord."

Seething tendrils of spectral two-dimensional lightning burst out of Powel Manani's corpse with an ear-puncturing screech. They reached directly for Quinn like an avaricious succubus. Jackson Gael staggered backwards yelling in shock, shielding his eyes from the blinding purple-white light. Beside him, Ann clung to a slender tree trunk as though caught in the blast of a hurricane, her hair whipping about, eyes squeezed shut. The flat lightning strands were coiling relentlessly around Quinn. His limbs danced about in spastic reflex. Mad shadows flickered across the little clearing. The stench of burning meat filled the air. Powel's body was smouldering.

"You are the chosen one, Quinn," the unified voices called inside his skull.

He felt them emerging out of the shadows, out of Night so profound it was perpetual torment. His heart filled with glory at their presence, they were kindred, serpent beasts. He offered himself to them and they rushed into his mind like a psychic gale. Darkness engulfed him, the world of light and colour falling away at tremendous speed.

Alone in his cherished Night, Quinn Dexter waited for the coming of the Light Brother.

Horst Elwes saw the red demon light wink out. The ungodly lightning blazed in its place, arcing through the air, stray ribbons raking around the clearing. Things seemed to be swimming down the incandescent strands, slender, turbid shadows, like the negative image of a shooting star. Leaves and vine creepers flapped and shook as air rushed by.

The Ivets were screaming, flailing about in panic. Horst

saw Irley being struck by a wild quivering lightning bolt; the lad was flung two metres through the air to land stunned and twitching.

Quinn stood fast at the centre of the storm, his body shaking, yet always remaining upright. An incredulous smile on his face.

The lightning cut off.

He turned slowly, uncertainly, as though he was unacquainted with his own body, testing his musculature. Horst realized he could see him perfectly even though it was now pitch black. The other Ivets were near-invisible shadows. Quinn's beatific gaze swept round them all.

"You as well," he said gently.

Lightning streamed out of him, slender bucking threads that flashed unerringly at his five companions. Screams laced the air.

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven—" Horst said. He was waiting for the lightning to seek him out. "Hallowed be Thy name—" The Ivets' cries were fading. "Forgive us our trespass—"

The terrible surging light vanished. Silence descended.

Horst peeked round the tree. All six Ivets were standing in the clearing. Each had their own nimbus of light.

Like angels, he thought, so handsome with their youthfully splendid bodies. What a cruel deceiver nature is.

As he watched they began to dim. Jackson Gael turned and looked straight at him. Horst's heart froze.

"A priest," Jackson laughed. "How wonderful. Well, we don't require your services, padre. But we do need your body." He took a step forwards.

"Up there," Ann cried. She pointed deeper into the jungle.

Camilla had arrived right at the end of the sacrifice ceremony, just in time to see the lightning writhe around the clearing. She used the chameleon suit's takpads to climb up a big tree, and crouched in the fork of a bough, looking down on them.

I don't know what the hell that lightning is, Laton said. It can't be electrical, they'd be dead.

Does it matter? she demanded. Adrenalin was tingling

inside her veins. **Whatever is causing it isn't working for us.**

True. But look how they are staying visible. It's like a holographic effect.

Where's it coming from?

I have no idea. Somebody must be projecting it.

But the scouts haven't seen anything.

Ann called out and pointed. The other Ivets swiveled round.

Camilla knew what fear was for the first time in her life.

Shit, they can see me! She brought her maser rifle up.

Don't! Laton called.

The chameleon suit ignited. Bright white flame engulfed her completely. She felt her skin burning and screamed. The plastic fabric melted rapidly, flaming droplets raining down out of the tree. She squirmed about, beating at herself frantically with her arms. She fell from her perch, a tumbling fireball, flames streaming out behind her. By then she had no air left in her lungs to scream with. She hit the ground with a dull *whoomp*, flinging out a wreath of flame. The temperature of the internecine fire increased, burning like a magnesium flare, consuming muscles, organs, and bone alike.

The Ivets gathered round as the last flames sputtered and died. All that remained was a blackened outline of scorched earth scattered with glowing clinker-like ashes. They crackled sharply as they cooled.

"What a waste," Jackson Gael said.

They turned as one to look for Horst Elwes. But he had fled long ago.

Ruth Hilton and the other remaining adult villagers were grouped around the community hall in a defensive ring. The children were all inside it. Nobody knew quite what to make of Jay's story, but there was no disputing she had seen Quinn Dexter.

Torchlight sliced round the empty cabins and muddy paths. The wooden slat walls shone a pale grey in the beams. Those whose rifles were equipped with nightsights were scanning the surrounding jungle.

“Christ, how much longer before the hunting party gets back?” Skyba Molvi complained. “They’ve got enough fire-power to blow out an army of Ivets.”

“Won’t be long,” Ruth muttered tightly.

“I see him!” someone bellowed.

“What?” Ruth spun round, every nerve hotwired.

Targeting lasers stabbed out, forming bright ruby and emerald zigzag patterns in the air. A magnetic rifle trilled. A patch of ground forty metres away bucked as the slugs hit, forming deep narrow craters, and surrounding vegetation caught light.

The firing stopped.

“Bugger; it’s a dog.”

The breath rushed out of Ruth. Her arms were trembling.

Children were shouting from the hall, demanding to know what was happening.

I should be in there with Jay, Ruth thought. Fine mother I am, letting her wander off into the jungle while I’m busy moping. And what the hell did happen out there anyway?

Horst came ploughing out of the jungle, arms spinning madly for balance. His clothes were torn, face and hands scratched and grazed. He saw the beams of light sweeping out from the hall, and shouted at the top of his voice.

Ruth heard someone say: “It’s that idiot priest.”

“Drunk again.”

“That bastard could have saved Carter.”

Ruth wanted to shrink up into a little ball that no one could see. She was sure everybody could smell her own guilt.

“Demons,” Horst cried as he ran towards the hall. “They’ve unleashed demons. Lord save us. Flee! Flee!”

“He is drunk.”

“It should have been him, not Carter.”

Horst staggered to a halt in front of them, his body aching so badly from the exertion he could hardly stand. He saw the disgust and contempt in their faces, and wanted to weep. “For pity’s sake. I promise you. Quinn is out there, he killed Powel Manani. Something happened, something came.”

There were angry murmurs from the crowd. One of them spat in Horst's direction.

Ruth noticed her torch was dimming. She slapped it.

"Why didn't you help Powel, priest?" someone asked.

"Ruth?" Horst begged. "Please, tell them how evil Quinn is."

"We know."

"Shut up, priest. We don't need a worthless piss-artist telling us about the Ivets. If Quinn shows his face here, he's dead."

Ruth's torch went out.

Alarmed gasps went up from the others as all the torches began to flicker and fade.

"Demons are coming!" Horst yelled.

Fierce orange flames shot out of one of the cabins fifty metres away from the hall; they licked along its base then raced up the stanchions to the roof. Within thirty seconds the whole structure was ablaze. The twisting flames were ten metres high.

"Holy shit," Ruth whispered. Nothing should burn that quickly.

"Mummy!" a child called from the hall.

"Horst, what *happened* out there?" Ruth cried.

Horst shook his head, a bubbling giggle coming from his lips. "Too late, too late. Satan's beasts walk among us now. I told you."

A second cabin began to blaze.

"Get the children out of the hall," Skyba Molvi shouted. There was a general rush for the door. Ruth hesitated, looking at Horst imploringly. Most of the village clearing was now illuminated by erratic amber light. Shadows possessed a life of their own, leaping about at random. A black silhouette fluttered between the cabins in the distance behind the priest.

"They're here," she said. Nobody was listening. "They're here, the Ivets!" She tugged her laser rifle up. The green targeting beam pierced the air, sending relief flooding through her. At least something bloody worked. She pulled the trigger, sending a barrage of infrared pulses after the elusive figure.

The children swept out of the hall like a wave, some of the older ones scaling the flimsy metre-high side walls. Cries and shouts broke out as they tried to run to their parents.

“Jay!” Ruth called.

A line of flame streaked along the roof. It was an unerring straight line, Ruth could see the wood turning black an instant before the actual flame shot up. Maser!

She worked out roughly where it must be firing from, and brought the laser rifle to bear. Her finger punched down on the trigger stud.

“Mummy,” Jay called.

“Here.”

The laser rifle beeped. Ruth ejected the drained power magazine and slammed in a fresh one.

Several other people were firing into the jungle. The neon threads of targeting lasers lashed out, chasing elusive phantoms.

There was a concerted movement away from the hall, everyone crouching low. It was pandemonium, children wailing, adults shouting. The woven palm wall of the hall caught fire.

They could kill every one of us if they wanted to, she realized.

Jay rushed up and flung her arms round her waist. Ruth grabbed her arm. “Come on, this way.” She started towards the jetty. Another three cabins were on fire.

She saw Horst a couple of metres away, and jerked her head in a determined gesture. He began to lumber along after them.

A scream sounded across Aberdale, a gruesome drawn-out warbling that could never have come from a human throat. It shocked even the distraught children into silence. Targeting lasers jabbed out in reflex, spearing the gaps between the cabins.

The scream faded to a poignant desperate whimper.

“Jesus God, they’re everywhere, all around.”

“Where are the hunters? The hunters!”

There seemed to be fewer targeting lasers active now.

The first burning cabin suddenly crumpled up, blowing out ephemeral spires of brilliant sparks.

“Horst, we’ve got to get Jay away,” Ruth said urgently.

“No escape,” he mumbled. “Not for the damned. And were we ever anything but?”

“Oh, yeah? Don’t you believe it.” She began to pull Jay across the stream of people, heading towards the nearest row of cabins. Horst lowered his head and followed.

They reached the cabins just as some kind of commotion started down by the jetty: shouting, the splash of something heavy falling into the river. It meant nobody was paying her much attention.

“Thank Christ for that,” Ruth said. She led Jay down the gap between two cabins.

“Where are we going, Mummy?” Jay asked.

“We’ll hide out for a couple of hours until that bloody hunting party gets back. God damn Powel for stripping the village.”

“He’s beyond damnation now,” Horst said.

“Look, Horst, just what—”

Jackson Gael stepped around the end of the cabin and planted himself firmly in front of them. “Ruth. Little Jay. Father Horst. Come to me. You are so welcome.”

“Bollocks,” Ruth snarled. She swung the laser rifle round. There was no targeting beam, even the power-level LEDs were dead. “Shit!”

Jackson Gael took a step towards them. “There is no death any more, Ruth,” he said. “There will never be death again.”

Ruth thrust Jay towards Horst. It was one of the hardest things she had ever done. “Get her out of here, Horst, get her away.”

“Trust me, Ruth, you will not die.” Jackson Gael held out his hand. “Come.”

“Screw you.” She dropped the useless laser rifle, standing between him and Jay.

“There is no sanctuary,” Horst mumbled. “Not on this cursed planet.”

“Mummy!” Jay wailed.

“Horst, just for once in your fucking pitiful life do

something right; take my daughter and get her out of here. This bastard isn't getting past me."

"I—"

"Do it!"

"God bless you, Ruth." He started to pull a struggling Jay back the way they had come.

"Mummy, please!" she shrieked.

"Go with Horst. I love you." She drew her Bowie knife from its belt scabbard. Good solid dependable steel.

Jackson Gael grinned. Ruth could have sworn she saw fangs.

14

Ione Saldana stood in front of the tube carriage's door, urging it to open.

I can't make it go any faster, Tranquillity grumbled as the backwash of emotion dissipated through the affinity bond.

I know. I'm not blaming you. She clenched her fists, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. The carriage started to slow, and she reached up to hold one of the hand hoops. The memory of Joshua flashed into her mind—she'd never be able to use the carriages without thinking of him again. She smiled.

There was a frisson of disparagement from Tranquillity sounding in her mind.

Jealous, she teased.

Hardly, came the piqued reply.

The carriage door slid open. Ione stepped out on the deserted platform and raced up the stairs, her serjeant bodyguard clumping along behind.

It was a southern endcap cove station, a couple of kilometres away from the Laymil research project campus. The cove was six hundred metres long, a gentle crescent with fine gold-white sands and several outcrops of granite boulders. A rank of ageing coconut trees followed the beach's curve; several had keeled over, pulling up large clods of sand and roots, and three had snapped off halfway up the trunk, adding to the vaguely wild look of the place. At the centre of the cove, sixty metres out from the shore, there was a tiny island with a few tall palm trees, providing an appealing nook for the more enthusiastic swimmers. A shingly bluff planted with coarse reeds rose up from the rear of the sands, blending into the first and widest of the endcap's terraces.

Six low polyp domes, forty metres in diameter, broke the

expanse of grass and silk oak trees behind the bluff, giving the impression of being partially buried. They were the Kiint residences, grown specifically for the eight big xenocs who participated in the Laymil project.

Their involvement had been quite a coup for Michael Saldana. Even though they didn't build ZTT starships (they claimed their psychology meant they had no real interest in space travel), the Kiint remained the most technologically advanced race in the Confederation. Up until Michael's invitation was accepted they had refrained from any joint scientific enterprise with other Confederation members. However, Michael succeeded where countless others had failed, in presenting them with a peaceful challenge which would tax even their capabilities. Their intellect, along with the instrumentation they provided, would inevitably speed up the research. And of course their presence had helped to bolster Tranquillity's kudos in the difficult early days.

Eight was the largest number of Kiint resident on a human world or habitat outside the Confederation capital, Avon. Something else which had given Michael a considerable degree of underhand satisfaction—Kulu only rated the customary pair as ambassadors.

Inside Tranquillity the Kiint were as insular as they were in the Confederation at large. Although cordial with their fellow project staff members, they did not socialize with any of the habitat's population, and Tranquillity guarded their physical privacy quite rigorously. Even Ione had only had a few formal meetings with them, where both sides stuck to small-talk pleasantries. It was just as bad as having to "receive" all those national ambassadors. The hours she'd spent with those semi-senile bores . . .

Ione had never been out to the Kiint buildings before, and probably never would have. But this occasion justified it, she felt, even if they were upset with her breach of etiquette.

She stood on the top of the bluff, and looked down at the bulky white xenocs bathing in the shallows. From her vantage point she could see a lot of splashing going on.

Thirty metres away, there was a wide path of crumbling soil leading to the sands. She started down.

How do they get to the project campus every day? she asked, suddenly curious.

They walk. Only humans demand mechanized transport to move from one room to another.

My, but we are touchy this morning.

I would point out that guaranteed seclusion was part of the original agreement between the Kiint and your grandfather.

Yes, yes, she said impatiently. She reached the bottom of the path, and took her sandals off to walk across the sand. The towelling robe she wore over her bikini flapped loosely.

There were three Kiint in the water, Nang and Lieria, a pair who worked in the Laymil project Physiology Division, and a baby. Tranquillity had reported its appearance as soon as Ione woke up that morning, although the personality refused to show her its own memory of the birth, which had come sometime in the night. **Would you like recordings of your labour pains shown to xenocs simply because they were morbidly curious?** it asked sternly.

She had acquiesced with bad grace.

The baby Kiint was about two metres long, its body more rounded than the adults' and slightly whiter. The legs were a metre high, which brought the top of the head level with Ione's. It was clearly having a rare old time in the water. The tractamorphic arms were formshifting at a frantic rate, first scoops, then paddles slapped about to raise sheets of spray, now bulblike pods which squirted out jets of water. Its beak was flapping open and shut.

The parents were patting and stroking it with their arms as it charged about in circles. Then it caught sight of Ione.

Panic. Alarm. Incredulity. Thing has not enough legs. Topple walk. Fall over not. Why why why? What is it?

Ione blinked against the sudden wash of jumbled emotions and frantic questions that seemed to be shouted into her mind.

That'll teach you to creep up on entities, Tranquillity said drily.

The baby Kiint butted up against Lieria's flank, hiding itself from Ione.

What is it? What is it? Fear strangeness.

Ione caught the briefest exchange of mental images that the adult Kiints directed at the baby, an information stream more complex than anything she'd known before. The speed was bewildering, over almost as it began.

She stopped with her feet in the warm, clear water and gave the adults a small bow. **Nang, Lieria, I came to offer my congratulations on the birth, and to see if your child has any special requirements. My apologies if I intrude.**

Thank you, Ione Saldana, Lieria said. There was a suggestion of lofty amusement behind the mental voice. **Your interest and concern is gratifying, no apology is required. This is Haile, our daughter.**

Welcome to Tranquillity, Haile, Ione told the baby, projecting as much warmth and delight as she could muster. It came easily, the little Kiint was so cute. Very different from the solemn adults.

Haile pushed her head comically round Lieria's neck, huge violet-tinged eyes looked steadily at Ione. **It communicates! Alive think.**

There was another fast mental communiqué from one of the adults. The baby turned to look at Nang, then back at Ione. The tumult of emotions leaking into the affinity band began to slow.

Formal address wrongness. Much sorriness. Greetings ritual observance. The thoughts stopped abruptly, almost like a mental gathering of breath. **Hello Ione Saldana. Rightness?**

Very much.

Human you are?

I am.

I Haile am.

Hello, Haile, I'm pleased to meet you.

Haile squirmed round excitedly, water frothed around her eight feet. **It likes me! Happiness feel much.**

I'm glad.

Human identity query: Part of the all-around?

She means me, Tranquillity said.

No, I'm not part of the all-around. We're just good friends.

Haile surged forward, ploughing the water aside. She still hadn't quite got the hang of walking, and her rear pair of legs almost tripped her up.

This time Ione could understand the adults' warning perfectly. **Careful!**

Haile stopped a metre short of her. Warm breath exhaled from the facial vents smelt slightly spicy, and the tractamorphic arms waved about. She held her hand out, palm facing the baby, fingers spread. Haile tried to imitate the hand; her attempt looked like a melted wax model.

Fail! Sorrowness. Show me how, Ione Saldana.

I can't, mine's always like this.

Haile emitted a burst of shock.

Ione giggled. **It's all right. I'm very happy with the way I am.**

It is rightness?

It is rightness.

There is so much strangeness to life, Haile said wistfully.

You're right there.

Haile bent her neck almost double to look back round at her parents. The fast affinity exchange which followed made Ione feel woefully inadequate.

Are you my friend, Ione Saldana? Haile asked tentatively.

I think I could be, yes.

Will you show me the all-around? It has a vastness. I don't want to go alone. Loneliness fear.

It would be a pleasure, she said, surprised.

Haile's arms hit the water sending up a giant plume of spray. Ione was instantly drenched. She pulled the wet hair from her eyes, sighing ruefully.

You have no liking of water? Haile asked anxiously.

I'll have you know I'm a better swimmer than you.

Much gleeful!

Ione, Tranquillity said. **The *Lady Macbeth* has just emerged from a ZTT jump. Joshua has requested docking permission.**

"Joshua!" Ione shouted. Too late she remembered Kiint did have auditory senses.

Haile's arms writhed in alarm. **Panic. Fright. Joy shared.** She shied back from Ione and promptly fell down.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ione splashed towards her.

Nang and Lieria came up and slipped their arms under Haile's belly, while the baby Kiint coiled an arm tip around Ione's hand. She tugged.

Query Joshua identity? Haile asked as she regained her feet and stood swaying unsteadily.

He's another friend of mine.

More friends? My friend? I meet him?

Ione opened her mouth—then thought about it. Away at the back of her mind Tranquillity was registering a serene hauteur.

Ione closed her mouth. **I think we'll wait until you understand humans a little better.**

It was almost an infallible rule that to be an Edenist a human must have affinity and live in a habitat; certainly every Edenist returned to a habitat for their death, or had their thoughts transferred to one after death. Physically, the bitek systems integral to their society were capable of sustaining a very high standard of living at little financial cost: the price of steering asteroidal rubble into a habitat maw, the internal mechanical systems like starscraper lifts and the tube carriage network. Culturally though the symbiosis was much more subtle. With the exception of Serpents, there were no psychological problems among the Edenist population; although they displayed a full emotional range, as individuals there were all extremely well adjusted. The knowledge that they would continue as part of the habitat personality after bodily death acted as a tremendous stabilizing influence, banishing a great many common human psychoses. It was a liberation which bestowed them with a universal confidence and poise that Adamists nearly always considered to be unbridled arrogance. The disparity in wealth between the two cultures also contributed to the image of Edenists being humanity's aristocrats.

Edenism, then, was dependent on habitats. And bitek habitats were only to be found orbiting gas giants. They were totally reliant on the vast magnetospheres of such worlds for

power. Photosynthesis was a wholly impractical method of supplying a habitat's energy demands; it necessitated the deployment of vast leaf-analogue membranes, and the numerous difficulties inherent in doing so from a rotating structure, as well as being unacceptably susceptible to damage from both particle impact and cosmic radiation. So the Edenists were confined to colonizing the Confederation's gas giants.

However there was one exception, one terracompatible planet which they settled successfully: Atlantis; so named because it was a single giant ocean of salt water. Its sole exports were the seafood delicacies for which it was renowned across the Confederation. The variety of marine life below its waves was so great that even two hundred and forty years after its discovery barely one-third had been classified. A vast number of traders, both independent and corporate, were attracted to it; which was why Syrinx flew *Oenone* there right after their navy duty tour finished.

Syrinx had decided to go straight into the independent trading business once her discharge order came through. The prospect of years spent on He3 deliveries depressed her. A lot of voidhawk captains took on the tanker contracts for the stability they offered, it was exactly what she'd done when *Oenone* started flying, but the last thing she wanted was to wind up in a rigid flight routine again; the navy had given her quite enough of that already, a feeling the rest of the crew heartily shared (apart from Chi, who left along with all the weapons hardware in the lower hull). Although some doubts lingered obstinately in her mind, it was a big step from the precisely ordered navy life she was used to.

On seeing her daughter dithering, Athene pointed out that Norfolk was approaching conjunction, and spent an evening reminiscing on her own flights to collect the planet's fabled Tears. Three days later *Oenone* left the maintenance station dock at Romulus; new cargo cradles fitted, a new civilian registration filed, licensed by the Confederation Astronautics Board to carry freight and up to twenty passengers, crew toroid refurbished, and crew-members in a tigerish frame of mind.

It emerged from its wormhole terminus a hundred and fifteen thousand kilometres above Atlantis, almost directly over

the dawn terminator. Syrinx felt the rest of the crew observing the planet through the voidhawk's sensor blisters. There was a collective emission of admiration.

Atlantis was a seamless blue, overlaid with rucked spirals of pure white cloud. There were fewer storms than an ordinary world, where continental and sea winds whipped up high and low air fronts in unceasing turmoil. Most of the storms below were concentrated in the tropical zones, stirred by the Coriolis effect. Both the polar icecaps were nearly identical circles, their edges amazingly regular.

Ruben, who was sitting in Syrinx's day cabin in the shape-moulding couch beside her, gripped her hand a fraction tighter. **This was an excellent choice, darling. A true fresh start to our civilian life. You know, in all my years I've never been here before.**

Syrinx knew she was still too tense after every swallow manoeuvre, alert for hostile ships. True navy paranoia. She let the external image bathe her mind, soothing away the old stress habits. The ocean had a delightful sapphire radiance to it. **Thank you. I think I can smell the salt already.**

As long as you don't try and drink this ocean like you did on Uighur.

She laughed at the memory of the time he had taught her how to wind surf in that beautiful deserted cove on a resort island. Four—no five years ago. Where did the time go?

Oenone descended into a five-hundred-kilometre orbit, complaining all the while. The planet's gravity was exerting its inexorable influence over local space, tugging at the stability of the voidhawk's distortion field, requiring extra power to compensate, a degradation which increased steadily as it approached the surface. When *Oenone* reached the injection point, it could barely generate half a gee acceleration.

There were over six hundred voidhawks (and thirty-eight blackhawks, Syrinx noted with vague disapproval), and close to a thousand Adamist starships, sharing the same standard equatorial orbit. *Oenone's* mass-sensitivity revealed them to Syrinx's mind like muddy footprints across snow. Every now and then sunlight would flash off a silvered surface betraying their position to the optical sensors. Ground to orbit craft were shuttling constantly between them and the buoyant is-

lands floating far below. She saw that most of them were spaceplanes rather than the newer ion-field craft. There was a quiet background hum in the affinity band as the void-hawks conversed and exchanged astrogation updates.

Can you find Eysk for me? she asked.

Of course, *Oenone* replied. Pernik Island is just over the horizon, it is midday for them. It would be easier to reach from a higher orbit, it added with apparent innocence.

No chance. We're only here for a week.

She sensed the affinity link to Eysk opening. They exchanged identity traits. He was fifty-eight years old, a senior in a family business that trawled for fish and harvested various seaweeds then packaged them for transit.

My sister Pomona said I should contact you, Syrinx said.

I'm not sure if that's good or bad, Eysk replied. **We haven't quite recovered from her last visit.**

That's my sister, all right. But I'll let you decide. I'm sitting up here with a tragically empty cargo hold which needs filling. Four hundred tonnes of the classiest, tastiest products you have.

Mental laughter followed. **Heading for Norfolk by any chance?**

How did you guess?

Take a look around you, Syrinx, half the ships in orbit are loading up ready for that flight. And they place contracts a year in advance.

I couldn't do that.

Why not?

We just finished a Confederation Navy duty tour three weeks ago. *Oenone* has spent the time since then in dock having the combat-wasp launchers removed and standard cargo systems fitted. She felt his mind close up slightly as he considered her request.

Ruben crossed his fingers and pulled a face.

We might have some surplus, he declared eventually.

Great!

It's not cheap, and it's nowhere near four hundred tonnes.

Money's no problem. She could sense the dismay tweak

of the crew at that blasé statement. They had all pooled their navy severance pay, and taken out a big loan option from the Jovian Bank, in the hope of putting together a cargo deal with a Norfolk roseyard-association merchant. Contrary to the firmly seated Adamist belief, the Jovian Bank did not hand out money to any Edenist on request. Between them, *Oenone's* crew had only just scraped together enough fuseodollars for a cash collateral.

I should be so lucky, Eysk said. **Still, anything to help out an old naval hand. Do you know what you're looking for?**

I had some unlin crab once, they were gorgeous. Orangesole, too, if you have some.

Futchi, Cacus chipped in.

And silvereel, Edwin said eagerly.

I think you'd better come down and have a tasting session, Eysk said. **Give you a better idea of what we have available.**

Right away. And do you know any other families who might have a surplus we can buy up?

I'll ask round. See you for supper.

The affinity link faded.

Syrinx clapped her hands together. Ruben kissed her lightly. "You're a marvel," he told her.

She kissed him back. "This is only half the battle. I'm still relying on your contact once we get to Norfolk."

"Relax, he's a sucker for seafood."

Oxley, she called. **Break out the flyer, it looks like we're in business.**

Joshua hadn't expected to feel like this. He lived for space, for alien worlds, the hard edge of cargo deals, an unlimited supply of adventurous girls in port cities. But now Tranquility's drab matt-russet exterior was filling half of the *Lady Mac's* sensor array visualization, and it looked just *wonderful*. I'm coming home.

A break from Ashly moaning about how much better life was two centuries ago, no more of Warlow's grumpiness, an end to Dahybi's fastidious and perfidious attention to detail. Even Sarha was getting stale, free fall didn't provide an infi-

nite variety of positions after all—and once you'd discounted the sex, there wasn't much else between them.

Yes, a rest was most definitely what he needed. And he could certainly afford one after that Puerto de Santa Maria run. Harkey's Bar was going to resemble a pressure blow-out after he hit it this evening.

The rest of the crew were hooked into the flight computer via their neural nanonics, sharing the view. Joshua guided the ship along the vector spaceport traffic control had datavisited to him, keeping the ion-thruster burns to a strict minimum. *Lady Mac's* mass distribution held no mysteries now, he knew how she would respond to the impact of a single photon.

She settled without a bounce on the cradle, and the hold-down latches clicked home. Joshua joined the rest of them in cheering.

Two serjeants were waiting for him when they came through the rotating pressure seal connecting the spaceport disk with the habitat. He just shrugged lamely at his open-mouthed crew as the bitek servitors hauled him towards a waiting tube carriage, all three of them skip gliding in the ten per cent gravity field, his shoulder-bag with its precious contents trailing in the air like a half-inflated balloon.

"I'll catch up with you tonight," he called over his shoulder as the door slid shut.

Ione was standing on the platform when it opened again. It was the little station outside her cliff-base apartment.

She was wearing a black dress with cut-away sides and a fabulously tight skirt. Her hair was frizzed elaborately.

When he stopped looking at her legs and breasts in anticipation he saw there was a daunting expression on her face.

"Well?" she said.

"Er . . ."

"Where is it?"

"What exactly?"

A black shoe with a sharply pointed toe tapped impatiently on the polyp. "Joshua Calvert, you have spent over eleven months gallivanting around the universe, without, I might point out, sending me a single memory flek to say how you were getting on."

“Yes. Sorry. Busy, you see.” Jesus, but he wanted to rip that dress off. She looked ten times more sexy than she did when he replayed the neural nanonic memories. And everywhere he went people were talking about the new young Lord of Ruin. Their fantasy figure was his girl. It just made her all the more desirable.

“So where’s my present?”

He almost did it, he almost said: “I’m your present.” But even as he started grinning he felt that little spike of anxiety inside. He didn’t want anything to foul up this reunion. Besides, she was only a kid, she needed him. So best to leave off the crappy jokes. “Oh, that,” he murmured.

Sea-blue eyes hardened. “Joshua!”

He twisted the catch on his shoulder-bag. She pulled it open eagerly. The sailu blinked at the light, looking up at her with eyes that were completely black and stupendously appealing.

They were described as living gnomes by the first people to see them, thirty centimetres fully grown, with black and white fur remarkably similar to a terrestrial panda. On their home world, Oshanko, they were so rare they were kept exclusively in an imperial reserve. Only the Emperor’s children were allowed to have them as pets. Cloning and breeding programmes were an anathema to the imperial court, they lived by natural selection alone. No official numbers of their population were given, but strong rumour suggested there were less than two thousand of them left.

Despite the bipedal shape, they had a very different skeleton and musculature to terrestrial anthropoids. There were no elbows or knees, their limbs bent along their whole length, making their movements incredibly ponderous. They were herbivores, and, if official AV recordings of the Emperor’s family were to be believed, clingingly affectionate.

Ione covered her mouth with one hand, eyes alight with incredulity. The creature was about twenty centimetres high. “It’s a sailu,” she said dumbly.

“Yes.”

She put a hand into the bag, extending one finger. The sailu reached for it in a graceful slow motion, deliciously

silky fur stroked against her knuckle. "But only the Emperor's children are supposed to have these."

"Emperor, Lord—what's the difference? I got it because I thought you'd like it."

The sailu had clambered upright, still holding itself against her finger. Its flat wet nose sniffed her. "How?" she asked.

Joshua gave her a precocious smile.

"No. I don't want to know." She heard a soft crooning, and looked down, only to lose herself in the adoring gaze. "It's very wicked of you, Joshua. But he's quite lovely. Thank you."

"Not sure about the 'him'. I think there are three or four sexes. There's not much on them in any reference library. But it does eat lettuce and strawberries."

"I'll remember." She eased her finger from the sailu's grip.

"So what about my present?" Joshua asked.

Ione struck a pose, tongue licking her lips. "I'm your present."

They didn't make it to the bedroom. Joshua got her dress off just inside the door, and in return Ione tugged at his ship-suit seal so hard it broke. The first time was on one of the alcove tables, after that they used the ornate iron stair railings for support, then it was rolling around on the apricot moss carpet.

The bed did get used eventually, after a shower and a bottle of champagne. Hours later, Joshua knew he'd missed the party in Harkey's Bar, and didn't much care. Outside the window the light filtering through the water had faded to a dusky green, small orange and yellow fish were looking in at him.

Ione was sitting cross-legged on the rubbery transparent sheet with her back resting against some of the silk cushions. The sailu was snuggled up in her hand as she fed it with the crinkled red and green leaves of a lollo lettuce. It munched them daintily, gazing up at her.

Isn't he adorable? she said happily.

The sailu genus exhibit a great many anthropomorphic traits which endear them to humans.

I bet you'd be nicer if it wasn't Joshua who brought him.

Removing the sailu from its home planet is not only in complete contravention of the planetary statutes, it is also a direct personal insult to the Emperor himself. Joshua has put you in an invidious position. A typically thoughtless action on his part.

I won't tell the Emperor if you won't.

I was not proposing to tell the Emperor, nor even the Japanese Imperium's ambassador.

That old fart.

Ione, please, Ambassador Ng is a very senior diplomat. His appointment here is a mark of the Emperor's respect towards you.

I know. She tickled the sailu under its tiny chin. Face and body were both flattish ovals, joined by a short neck. Its legs curved slowly, pressing the torso against her finger.

"I'm going to call him Augustine," she announced. "That's a noble name."

"Great," Joshua said. He leant over to the side of the bed and pulled the champagne bottle out of its ice bucket. "Flat," he said, after he tipped some into his glass.

"Proves you have staying power," she said coyly.

He reached for her left breast, smiling.

"No, don't," she moved out of the way. "Augustine's still feeding. You'll upset him."

He lay back, disgruntled.

"Joshua, how long are you staying this time?"

"Couple of weeks. I need to get a contract with Roland Frampton sorted out. Distribution, not a charter. We're going for a Norfolk run, Ione. We raised a lot of capital on some of our contracts; put that together with what I had left over from scavenging, and we'll have enough for a cargo of Norfolk Tears. Imagine that! A hold full of the stuff."

"Really? That's wonderful, Joshua."

"Yeah, if I can swing it. Distribution isn't the problem. Acquisition is. I've been talking to some of the other captains. Those Norfolk roseyard-association merchants are tough nuts to crack. They won't allow a futures market, which is pretty smart of them actually. It would be dominated by offworld finance houses. You have to show up with a ship

and the cash, and even then it's not a certainty you'll get any bottles. You need a pretty reliable contact in the trade."

"But you've never been there, you don't have any contacts."

"I know. First-time captains need a cargo to sell, a part-exchange deal. You've got to have something the merchants can't do without, that way you can get a foot in the door."

"What sort of cargo?"

"Ah, now that's the real problem. Norfolk is constitutionally a pastoral world, there's hardly any high technology they'll allow you to import. Most captains take cordon bleu food, or works of antique art, fancy fabrics, stuff like that."

Ione put Augustine down carefully on the other side of the silk pillows, and rolled onto her side facing him. "But you've got something else, haven't you? I know that tone, Joshua Calvert. You're feeling smug."

He smiled up at the ceiling. "I was thinking about it: something essential, and new, but not synthetic. Something all those Stone Age towns and farms are going to want."

"Which is?"

"Wood."

"You're kidding? Wood as in timber?"

"Yeah."

"But they have wood on Norfolk. It's heavily forested."

"I know. That's the beauty of it, they use it for everything. I've studied some sensewise recordings of the place; they make their buildings with it, their bridges, their boats, Jesus they even make carts out of it. Carpentry is a major industry there. But what I'm going to take them is a hard wood, and I mean really hard, like metal. They can use it in their furniture, or for their tool handles, their windmill cogs even, anything that's used every day, or rots or wears out. It's not high technology, yet it'll be a real cost-effective upgrade. That ought to get me in with the merchants."

"Hauling wood across interstellar space!" She shook her head in amazement. Only Joshua could come up with an idea so wonderfully crazy.

"Yep, *Lady Mac* should be able to carry almost a thousand tonnes if we really pack the stuff in."

"What sort of wood?"

“I checked in a botanical reference library file when I was in the New California system. The hardest known wood in the Confederation is mayope, it comes from a new colony planet called Lalonde.”

Oenone's flyer was a flattened egg-shape, eleven metres long, with a fuselage that gleamed like purple chrome. It was built by the Brasov Dynamics company on Kulu, who had been heavily involved with the Kulu Corporation (owned by the Crown) in pioneering the ion-field technology which had sent panic waves through the rest of the Confederation's astroengineering companies. Spaceplanes were on their way out, and Kulu was using its technological prowess to devastating political effect, granting preferential licence production to the companies of allied star systems.

Standard ion thrusters lifted it out of *Oenone's* little hangar and pushed it into an elliptical orbit that grazed Atlantis's upper atmosphere. When the first wisps of molecular fog began to thicken outside the fuselage, Oxley activated the coherent magnetic field. The flyer was immediately surrounded by a bubble of golden haze, moderating the flow of gas streaking around the fuselage. Oxley used the flux lines to grab at the mesosphere, braking the flyer's velocity, and they dropped in a steep curve towards the ocean far below.

Syrinx settled back in her deeply cushioned seat in the cabin along with Ruben, Tula, and the newest member of the crew, Serina, a crew toroid generalist who had replaced Chi. All of them were gazing keenly out of the single curving transparency around the front of the cabin. The flyer had been customized by an industrial station at Jupiter, replacing Brasov's original silicon flight-control circuits with a bitek processor array; but the image from the sensors had a poor resolution compared to *Oenone's* sensor blisters. Eyes were almost as good.

There was absolutely no way of judging scale, no reference points. Unless she consulted the flyer's processors, Syrinx didn't know what their altitude was. The ocean rolled past below, seemingly without end.

After forty minutes Pernik Island appeared on the horizon. It was a circle of verdant green that was so obviously vege-

tation. The islands which Edenists had used to colonize Atlantis were a variant of habitat bitek. They were circular disks, two kilometres in diameter when they matured, made from polyp that was foamed like a sponge for buoyancy. A kilometre-wide park straddled the centre, with five accommodation towers spaced equidistantly around it, along with a host of civic buildings and light industry domes. The outer edge bristled with floating quays for the boats.

Like habitat starscrapers, the tower apartments had basic food-synthesis glands, though they were primarily for fruit juices and milk—there simply wasn't any need to supply food when you were floating on what was virtually a protein-packed soup. An island had two sources of energy to power its biological functions. There was photosynthesis, from the thick moss which grew over every outside surface including the tower walls, and triplicated digestive tracts which were fed from the tonnes of krill-analogues captured by baleen scoops around the rim. The krill also provided the raw material for the polyp, as well as nutrient fluids. Electricity for industry came from thermal potential cables; complex organic conductors trailing kilometres below the island, exploiting the difference in temperature between the cool deep waters and the sun-heated surface layer to generate a current.

There was no propulsion system. Islands drifted where they would, carried by sluggish currents. So far six hundred and fifty had been germinated. The chances of collision were minute; for two to approach within visible range of each other was an event.

Oxley circled Pernik once. The water in the immediate vicinity was host to a flotilla of boats. Pernik Island's trawlers and harvesters produced a crisscross of large V-shaped wakes as they departed for their fishing fields. Pleasure craft bobbed about behind them, small dinghies and yachts with their verdant green membrane sails fully extended.

The flyer darted in towards one of the landing pads between the towers and the rim. Eysk himself and three members of his family walked over as soon as the haze of ionized air around the flyer dissolved, grounding out through the metal grid.

Syrinx came down the stairs that had folded out of the airlock, breathing in a humid, salty, and strangely silent air. She greeted the reception party, exchanging identity traits: Alto and Kilda, a married couple in their thirties who supervised the preparation of the family's catches, and Mosul, who was Eysk's son, a broad-shouldered twenty-four-year-old with dark hair curling gypsy-style below his shoulders, wearing a pair of blue canvas shorts. He skippered one of the fishing boats.

A fellow captain, Syrinx said appreciatively.

It's not quite the same, he replied courteously as they all started to walk towards the nearest tower. **Our boats have a few bitek items grafted in, but they are basically mechanical. I sail across waves, you sail across light-years.**

To each their own, she replied playfully. There was an almost audible buzz as their thoughts meshed at a deeper, more intense, level. For a moment she felt the sun on his bare torso, the strength in his figure, a sense of balance which was the equal to her spacial orientation. And the physical admiration, which was mutual.

Do you mind if I go to bed with him? she asked Ruben on singular engagement. **He is rather gorgeous.**

I never stand in the way of the inevitable, he replied, and winked.

Eysk had an apartment on the tower's fifteenth floor, a large one which doubled as an entertainment suite for visiting traders. He had chosen a rich style, combining modernist crystal furniture with a multi-ethnic, multi-era blend of artwork from across the Confederation.

The reception room had a transparent wall with archways leading out onto a broad balcony. A long table of sculpted blue crystals flecked with firefly sparks sat in the middle of the room, laid with a scrumptious buffet of Atlantean seafood.

Ruben glanced round at the collection of ornaments and pictures, pulling his lower lip thoughtfully. **The seafood trade must be pretty good.**

Don't let Eysk's dragon hoard fool you, Kilda said, bringing him a goblet of pale rose wine. **His grandfather, Gadra, started it a hundred and eighty years ago. Pernik**

is one of the older islands. Our family could have its own island by now if we didn't suffer from these "investments". Pieces lose their relevance so fast these days.

Ignore the woman, Ruben, Gadra spoke out of the island's multiplicity. A lot of this stuff is worth double what it was bought for. And all of it retains its beauty providing you view it in context. That's the trouble with young people, they take no time to appreciate life's finer qualities.

Syrinx allowed Eysk to lead her along the table. There was an enormous range of dishes arrayed, white meats arranged on leaves, fish steaks in sauces, some wild-looking things that were all legs and antenna and didn't even seem to have been cooked. He handed her a silver fork and a goblet of carbonated water.

The art is to taste then flush the mouth with a sip, he told her.

Like a wine tasting?

Yes, but with so much more to savour. Wines are simply variants on a theme. Here we have diversity that defies even the island personalities to catalogue. We'll start with unlin crab, you said you remembered it.

She pushed her fork into the pâté-like slab he indicated. It melted like fudge in her mouth. **Oh! This is just as good as I remember. How much do you have?**

They started to discuss details as they moved round the table. Everybody joined in good-naturedly, advising and arguing over individual dishes, but the final agreements were always between Syrinx and Eysk. The Jovian Bank segment of the island's personality was brought in to record the transactions as they were finalized.

They wound up with a complicated arrangement whereby Syrinx agreed to sell ten per cent of any cargo of Norfolk Tears back to Eysk's family in return for preferential treatment to obtain the seafood she wanted. The ten per cent would be sold at just three per cent above the transport cost, to allow Eysk to make a decent profit distributing it to the rest of the island. Syrinx wasn't entirely happy, but she had come into the Norfolk run too late to make heavy demands to her only supplier. Besides, ninety per cent was still a lot of

drink, and *Oenone* could transport it right across the Confederation. The price was always set in relation to the distance from Norfolk it had travelled, and a voidhawk's costs were minimal compared to an Adamist starship's.

After two hours negotiating Syrinx stepped out onto the balcony with Serina and Mosul. Ruben, Tula, and Alto had gathered on one of the reception room's low settees to polish off some of the wine.

They were on a corner of the tower which gave them a view over both the park and the ocean. A gentle moist breeze ruffled Syrinx's hair as she leaned on the railing, a glass of honey wine held loosely in her hand.

I'm not going to eat for days after that, she told the other two, giving away a sense of rumbling pressure inside her belly. **I'm bloated.**

I often think we named this planet wrong, Mosul said. **It should have been Bounty.**

You're right, Serina said. **No Norfolk merchant is going to be able to resist this cargo.** She was twenty-two, the only crew-member younger than Syrinx, slightly shorter than the Edenist norm, with black skin and a delicate face. She was watching Syrinx and Mosul with quiet amusement, enjoying the vaguely erotic overspill of their growing rapport.

Syrinx was delighted with her company, it was nice to have someone so unashamedly girlish on board. She'd chosen her original crew for their experience, and they were highly professional, but it was nice to have someone she could really let her hair down with. Serina added a sparkle to shipboard life which had been absent before.

We're a pretty common choice, Mosul said. **But none the less successful for that. Nearly every first-time captain takes some of our produce. That's if they've got any sense. You know, even the Saldanas send a ship here every couple of months to supply the palace kitchens.**

Does lone Saldana send one as well? Serina asked interestedly.

I don't think so.

Tranquillity doesn't own any starships, Syrinx said.

Have you been there? Mosul asked.

Certainly not, it's a blackhawk base.

Ah.

Serina looked up suddenly, her head swivelling round. **At last! I've just worked out what's missing.**

What? Syrinx asked.

Birds. There are always birds by the shore on normal terracompatible worlds. That's why it's so quiet here.

One of the larger cargo spaceplanes chose that moment to lift from its pad. The vertical-lift engines produced a strident metallic whine until it was a hundred metres in the air. It banked to starboard and slid off over the ocean, picking up speed rapidly.

Serina started laughing. **Almost quiet!**

Be a friend, Syrinx said in singular engagement. **Vanish!**

She pulled a wry face, and drained her wineglass. "Refill time. I'll leave you two alone for a moment." She sauntered off into the reception room with a suspicious wiggle.

Syrinx grinned. **My loyal crew,** she told Mosul in singular engagement.

Your attractive crew, he replied on the same mode.

I'll tell her you said that. Once we're safely outsystem.

He came over and put his arm round her shoulder.

I have a small confession, she said. **This isn't all pleasure.**

It looks that way to me.

I want to hire a boat and visit the whales. I'd also need someone who can navigate properly to take me. Is that possible?

Alone on a boat with you? That's not merely possible, that's a guaranteed certainty.

Are there any schools near here, or do we have to go from a different island? I've only got a week.

There was a school of blues a hundred kilometres south of here a day ago. Hang on, I'll ask the dolphins if they're still there.

Dolphins?

Yes. We use dolphins to help with the fishing.

I didn't know you had servitor dolphins.

We don't. They're just plain ordinary dolphins with an affinity gene spliced in.

She followed his mind as he called. The answer was

strange, more of a tune than phrases or emotions. A gentle harmony that quietened the soul. Accompanying senses flooded in. She was barrelling through solid greyness, seeing little, receiving sharp outlines of sound. Shapes moved around her like a galaxy of dark stars. She reached the surface and flashed through the ephemeral mirror into the dazzle and the emptiness where she hung with tingling skin stretched taut.

She felt her own body stretch luxuriously in tandem. The affinity link faded away, and she sighed in regret.

Dolphins are fun, *Oenone* said. They make you feel good. And they rejoice in their freedom.

Like voidhawks in water, you mean?

No! Well, yes. A bit.

Happy with being able to tease *Oenone* successfully, Syrinx turned to Mosul. **It was very beautiful, but I didn't understand any of it.**

Roughly translated from the scherzo, it means the whales are still within range. It'll take a day's sailing if we use my boat. Good enough?

Excellent. Can your family spare you?

Yes. This is a slow month coming up. We've been working our arses off for the last nine weeks preparing for the Norfolk trade, I'm entitled to a rest.

So you think you're going to get some rest on that boat, do you?

I sincerely hope not. Although you didn't strike me as someone who'd do the tourist routine. Not that the whales aren't worth a look.

Syrinx turned to face the ocean again, squinting at the white cloud stripe where the sky merged with the water. **It's a memory for someone else.** "My brother."

Mosul sensed the pain integral with the thought, and didn't pry.

Alkad Mzu walked up the stairs from her first-floor apartment in the StPelham starscraper, coming out into the circular foyer with its high, wave-curved ceiling and tall transparent walls looking out across the habitat parkland. A dozen or so other early risers were moving around the foyer,

waiting for the lifts in the central pillar, or heading for the broad stairs around the rim which led down to the starscraper's tube stations. It was an hour after the axial light-tube had brought a timid rosy dawn to Tranquillity's interior; patches of fine mist were still lurking amid the deeper tracts of undergrowth. The parkland around each of the starscraper foyers was maintained as open meadow dotted with small copses of ornate trees and clumps of flowering bushes. She stepped out through the sliding doors into damp air flush with the perfume of midnight-blooming nicotiana. Colourful birds arrowed through the air, trilling loudly.

She set off down the raked sand path towards a lake two hundred metres away, with only the slightest hint of a limp in her walk. Flamingos were wading through the shallows between the thick clusters of white and blue lilies. Scarlet avian lizards floated among them; the xenoc creatures were smaller than the terrestrial birds, with brilliant turquoise eyes, holding themselves very still before suddenly diving below the glass-smooth surface. Both species began to move towards the shore as she walked past. Alkad reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out some stale biscuits, throwing the crumbs. The birds and lizard-things (she never had bothered to learn their name) gobbled them up hungrily. They were old friends, she had fed them every morning for the last twenty-six years.

Alkad found Tranquillity's interior tremendously relaxing, its sheer size went a long way to suggesting invulnerability. She wished she could find an apartment which was above the surface. Naked space outside the starscraper apartment window still made her shiver even after all this time. But repeated requests to be re-allocated inside were always politely refused by the habitat personality who said there were none. So she made do with the first-floor apartment which was close to the security of the shell, and spent long hours hiking or horse riding through the parkland during her spare time. Partly for her own frame of mind, and partly because it made life very difficult for the Intelligence agency watchers.

A couple of metres from the path a gardener servitor was ambling round an old tree stump which was now hidden beneath the shaggy coat of a stephanotis creeper. It was a heav-

ily geneered tortoise, with a shell diameter of a metre. As well as enlarging the body, geneticists had added a secondary digestive system that turned dead vegetation into small pellets of nitrogen-rich compost which it excreted. It had also been given a pair of stumpy scaled arms which emerged from holes on either side of its neck, ending in pincerlike claws. As she watched it started to clip off the shrivelled tubular flowers and put them into its mouth.

“Happy eating,” she told it as she walked on.

Her destination was Glover’s, a restaurant right on the edge of the lake. It was built out of bare wood, and the architect had given it a distinct Caribbean ancestry. The roof was a steep thatch, and there was a veranda on stilts actually over the water, wide enough for ten tables. Inside it had the same raw-cut appearance, with thirty tables, and a long counter running along the back where the chefs prepared the food over glowstone grills. During the evening it took three chefs to keep up with the orders; Glover’s was popular with tourists and middle-management corporate executives.

When Alkad Mzu walked in there were ten people sitting eating. The usual breakfast crowd, bachelor types who couldn’t be bothered to cook for themselves. An AV projection pillar stood on the counter between the tea urn and the coffee percolator, throwing off a weak moire glow. Vincent raised a hand in acknowledgement from behind the counter where he was whisking some eggs. He had been the morning cook for the last fifteen years. Alkad waved back, nodded to a regular couple she knew, then pointedly ignored the Edenist Intelligence operative, a ninety-seven-year-old called Samuel, who in turn pretended she didn’t exist. Her table was in the corner, giving her a prime view out over the lake. It was set for one.

Sharleene, the waitress, came over with her iced orange juice and a bowl of bran. “Eggs or pancakes today?”

Alkad poured some milk onto the bran. “Pancakes, thanks.”

“New face this morning,” Sharleene said in a quiet voice. “Right nob-case.” She gave Alkad a secret little smile and went back to the bar.

Alkad ate a few spoonfuls of the bran, then sipped her orange, which gave her a chance to look round.

Lady Tessa Moncrieff was sitting by herself at a table near the bar where the smell of frying bacon and bubbling coffee was strongest. She was forty-six, a major in the Kulu ESA, and head of station in Tranquillity. She had a thin, tired face, and fading blonde hair cut into a not very stylish bob; her white blouse and grey skirt gave the impression of an office worker stuck in the promotion groove. Which was almost true. The Tranquillity assignment was one she had accepted with relish two years ago when she'd been briefed on the nature of the observation duty and the underlying reason. It was a hellish responsibility, which meant she'd finally been accepted in her rank. Reverse snobbery was a fact of life in all branches of the Kulu services, and anyone with a hereditary title had to work twice as hard as normal to prove themselves.

Tranquillity had turned out to be a quiet duty, which meant maintaining discipline was difficult. Dr Alkad Mzu was very much a creature of habit, and very boring habit at that. If it hadn't been for her frequent rambles over the parkland, which presented a challenge to the observation team, morale might have gone to pot long ago.

In fact the biggest upset since Lady Moncrieff arrived hadn't been Dr Mzu at all, but rather the sudden appearance of Ione Saldana almost a year ago. Lady Moncrieff had to compile a huge flek report on the girl for Alastair II himself. Interesting to think the royal family shared the same intense thirst for details as the general public.

Lady Moncrieff made sure she was munching her toast impassively as Dr Mzu's glance took her in. This was only the third time she had seen Mzu in the flesh. But this morning wasn't something she could entrust to the team, she wanted to observe the doctor's reactions first hand. Today could well be the beginning of the end of the ESA's twenty-three-year observation duty.

Alkad Mzu ran a visual identity search through her neural nanonics, but drew a blank. The woman could be a new operative, or even a genuine customer. Somehow Alkad didn't think it was the latter; Sharleene was right, there was a re-

fined air about her. She loaded the visual image in the already large neural nanonics file labelled *adversary*.

When she finished her bran and orange, Alkad sat back and looked straight at the AV pillar on the bar. It was relaying the Collins morning news programme. A sparkle of monochrome green light shot down her optic nerve, and the news studio materialized in front of her. Kelly Tirrel was introducing the items, dressed in a green suit and lace tie, hair fastened up in a tight turban. Her rigidly professional appearance added ten years to her age.

She had done local items on finance and trade, a charity dinner Ione had attended the previous evening. Regional items followed, the politics of nearby star systems. An update on Confederation Assembly debates. Military stories:

“This report comes from Omuta, filed nine days ago by Tim Beard.” The image changed from the studio to a terra-compatible planet seen from space. “The Confederation imposed a thirty-year sanction against Omuta for its part in the Garissan holocaust of 2581, prohibiting both trade and travel to the star system. Since then, the 7th Fleet has been responsible for enforcing this sanction. Nine days ago, that duty officially ended.”

Alkad opened a channel into Tranquillity’s communication net, and accessed the Collins sensewise programme directly. She looked out of Tim Beard’s eyes, listening through his ears. And finally her feet were pressed against the ground of Omuta as she filled her lungs with the world’s mild pine-scented air.

What a wretched irony, she thought.

Tim Beard was standing on the concrete desert apron of some vast spaceport. Away to one side were the grey and blue walls of composite hangars, faded with age, stained by streaks of rust from the panel pins. Five large swept-delta Sukhoi SuAS-686 spaceplanes were lined up ahead of him, pearl-grey fuselages gleaming in the warm mid-morning sunlight. A military band stood to rigid attention just in front of their bullet-shaped noses. On one side a temporary seating stand had been erected, holding a couple of hundred people. Omuta’s twenty-strong cabinet were standing on the red car-

pet at the front, fourteen men, six women, dressed in smart formal grey-blue suits.

“You join me in the last minutes of Omuta’s isolation,” Tim Beard said. “We are now awaiting the arrival of Rear-Admiral Meredith Saldana, who commands a squadron of the 7th Fleet on detachment here in the Omutan system.”

In the western sky a glowing golden speck appeared, expanding rapidly. Tim Beard’s retinal implant zoomed in to reveal a navy ion-field flyer. It was a neutral-grey wedge-shape forty metres long, which hovered lightly over the concrete for a moment while the landing struts deployed. The scintillating cloud of ionized air molecules popped like a soap bubble after it touched down.

“This is actually the first ion-field flyer to be seen on Omuta,” Tim Beard said, filling in as the Foreign Minister greeted the Rear-Admiral. Meredith Saldana was as tall and imposing as his royal cousins, with that same distinctive nose. “Although the press cadre received special dispensation to come down last night, we had to use Omuta’s own spaceplanes, some of which are now fifty years old with spare parts hard to come by. That’s an indication of just how hard the sanctions have hit this world; it has fallen behind both industrially and economically. But most of all, it lacks investment. It’s a situation the cabinet is keen to remedy; we’ve been briefed that establishing trade missions will be a priority.”

The Rear-Admiral and his retinue were escorted over to the President of Omuta, a smiling, silver-haired man a hundred and ten years old. The two shook hands.

“There’s some irony in this situation,” Tim Beard said. Alkad could feel his facial muscles shifting into a small smile. “The last time a squadron commander of the Confederation Navy’s 7th Fleet met the Omutan planetary president was thirty years ago, when the entire cabinet were executed for their part in the Garissan holocaust. Today things are a little different.” His retinal implants provided a close-up of the Rear-Admiral handing a scroll to the President. “That is the official invitation from the President of the Confederation Assembly for Omuta to take up its seat again. And now you can see the President handing over the acceptance.”

Alkad Mzu cancelled the channel to Collins, and looked away from the counter. She poured some thick lemon syrup over her pancakes, and used a fork to cut them up, chewing thoughtfully. The AV pillar next to the tea urn buzzed softly as Kelly Tirrel nattered away.

The date was seared into Alkad's brain, of course, she'd known it was coming. But even so her neural nanonics had to send a deluge of overrides through her nervous system to prevent her tears from falling and her jaw from quaking.

Knowing and seeing were two very different things, she discovered painfully. And that ridiculous ceremony, almost designed to reopen the wound in her soul. A handshake and an exchange of symbolic letters, and all was forgiven. Ninety-five million people. Dear Mother Mary!

A single tear leaked out of her left eye despite the best efforts of her neural nanonics. She wiped it away with a paper tissue, then paid for her breakfast leaving the usual tip. She walked slowly back to the StPelham foyer to catch a tube carriage to work.

Lady Moncrieff and Samuel watched her go, her left leg trailing slightly on the gravel path. They exchanged a mildly embarrassed glance.

The tableau hung in Ione's mind as she stirred her morning tea. **That poor, poor woman.**

I think her reaction was admirably restrained, Tranquility said.

Only on the outside, Ione said glumly. She had a hang-over from the charity dinner party of the previous night. It was a mistake to sit next to Dominique Vasilkovsky all evening; Dominique was a good friend, and hadn't exploited that friendship either, which was refreshing—but heavens how the girl drank.

Ione watched as Lady Moncrieff paid her bill and left Glover's. **I wish those agency operatives would leave Mzu alone, that kind of perpetual reminder can't make her life any easier.**

You can always expel them.

She sipped her tea, pondering the option as the house-chimp cleared away her breakfast dishes. Augustine was sit-

ting on top of the oranges in the silver fruit bowl, trying to pull a grape from the cluster. He didn't have the strength.

Better the devil we know, she said in resignation. **Sometimes I wish she'd never come here. Then again, I'd hate anyone else to have her expertise at their disposal.**

I imagine there are several governments who feel the same with respect to you and me. Human nature.

Maybe, maybe not. None of them has volunteered for the job.

They are probably worried about instigating a conflict over possessing her. If one made an approach to you, they would all have to. Such a wrangle would be impossible to keep under wraps. In that respect, the First Admiral is quite correct, the fewer people who know about her the better. Public reaction to super-doomsday weapons would not be favourable.

Yes, I suppose so. That Rear-Admiral Meredith Saldana, I take it he's a relative of mine?

Indeed. He is the son of the last Prince of Nesko, which makes him an earl in his own right. But he chose to become a Confederation fleet career officer, which couldn't be easy, with his name acting against him.

Did he turn his back on Kulu like my grandfather?

No, the fifth son of a principality ruler is not naturally destined for high office. Meredith Saldana decided to achieve what he could on his own merit; had he remained on Nesko such an action could well have brought him into conflict with the new prince. So he left to pursue an independent course; given his position, it was the act of a loyal subject. The family are proud of his accomplishment.

He'll never make First Admiral, then?

No, given his heritage it would be politically impossible, but he might manage 7th Fleet commander. He is a highly competent and popular officer.

Nice to know we're not totally decadent yet. She picked Augustine off the oranges, putting him down beside her side plate, then cut a grape open for him. He hummed contentedly and lifted a segment to his mouth in the dawdling fashion

that so bewitched her. As always, her mind wandered to Joshua. He must be halfway to Lalonde by now.

I have two messages for you.

You're trying to distract me, she accused.

Yes. You know I don't like it when you are upset. It is my failure as well.

No, it isn't. I'm a big girl now, I knew exactly what I was getting into with Joshua. So what are the messages?

Haile wants to know when you are coming for a swim.

Ione brightened. **Tell her I'll see her in an hour.**

Very well. Secondly, Parker Higgens requests you visit him today, as soon as possible, in fact. He was rather insistent.

Why?

I believe the team analysing Joshua's Laymil electronics stack have made a breakthrough.

Pernik's fishing boats were halfway to the horizon by the time Syrinx emerged from the base of the tower on the morning she was due to visit the whales. The cool dawn sun had coloured the island's covering of moss a matt black. She breathed in the salty air, relishing the cleanliness.

I never really thought of our air as anything exceptional, Mosul said. He was walking beside her, holding a big box full of supplies for the voyage.

It isn't once the humidity gets up. But don't forget, over ninety per cent of my life is spent in a perfectly regulated environment. This is an exhilarating change.

Oh, thank you! *Oenone* said tartly.

Syrinx grinned.

We're in luck, Mosul said. **I've checked with the dolphins, and the whales are actually closer today. We should be there by late afternoon.**

Great.

Mosul led her along the broad avenue down to the rim quays. Water slapped lazily against the polyp. Pernik could have been a genuine island rooted in the planet's crust for all the motion it made.

Sometimes a real storm rocks us a degree or so.

Ah, right. Her grin faded. **I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was**

leaking so much. It's very rude of me. Preoccupied, I guess.

No problem. Do you want Ruben to come with us? Perhaps he would make you feel easier.

Syrinx thought of him curled up in the bed where she'd left him half an hour ago. There was no response to her half-hearted query. He had gone back to sleep. **No. I'm never alone, I have *Oenone*.**

She watched a frown form on Mosul's handsome sea-browned face. **How old is Ruben?** the semi-apologetic thought came.

She told him and had to stifle a laugh as the surprise and faint disapproval spilled out of his mind despite a frantic effort to cover them up. Gets them every time.

You shouldn't tease people so, *Oenone* said. He's a nice young man, I like him.

You always say that.

I only voice what you feel.

The quay was balanced on big cylindrical flotation drums which rode the swell in long undulations. Thick purple-red tubes ran along the edge, carrying nutrient fluid out to the boats. Leaky couplings dribbled the dark syrupy fluid into the water.

Syrinx stood to one side as a couple of servitor chimps carrying boxes passed by. They were wildly different from the standard habitat housechimps, with a scaled reptilian skin a mild blue-green in colour. Their feet were broad, with long webbed toes.

The boat that waited for them was called the *Spiros*, a seventeen-metre sailing craft with a white composite hull. Bitek units were blended into the structure with a skill that went far beyond mechanical practicality, it was almost artistry. The digestive organs and nutrient-reserve bladders were in the bilges, supporting the sub-sentient processor array and the mainsail membrane, as well as various ancillary systems. Her cabin fittings were all wooden, the timber coming from trees grown in the island's central park. She was used by Mosul's whole family for recreation. Which explained why the cabin was in a bit of a mess when they came on board.

Mosul stood in the galley clutching his box of supplies and

looking round darkly at the discarded wrappers, unwashed pans, and crusty stains on the work surface. He muttered under his breath. **My younger cousins had her out a couple of days ago**, he apologized.

Well, don't be too hard on them, youth is a time to be treasured.

They're not that young. And it's not as though they couldn't have detailed a housechimp to clean up afterwards. No damn thought for others. There were more curses when he went forward and found the bunks in the same state.

Syrinx overheard a furious affinity conversation with the juvenile offenders. Smiling to herself she started stowing supplies.

Mosul unplugged the quay's nutrient-feed veins from their couplings on the *Spiros's* aft deck, then cast off. Leaning over the taffrail Syrxinx watched the five-metre-long silver-grey eel-derived tail wriggling energetically just below the surface, nudging the boat away from the quay. The tightly whorled sail membrane began to unfurl from its twenty-metre-high mast. When it was fully open it was a triangle the colour of spring-fresh beech leaves, reinforced with a rubbery hexagonal web of muscle cells.

It caught the morning breeze, filling out. A small white wake arose, curling around the bow. The tail straightened out, giving just the occasional tempestuous flick to maintain the course Mosul had loaded into the processor array.

Syrinx made her way forward carefully. The decking was damp below her rubber-soled plimsolls, and they had already picked up a surprising turn of speed. She leaned contentedly on the rail, letting the wind bathe her face. Mosul came up and put his arm round her shoulder.

You know, I think I'm finding this ocean more daunting than space, Syrxinx said as Pernik fell astern rapidly. **I know space is infinite, and that doesn't bother me in the slightest, but Atlantis looks infinite. Thousands of kilometres of empty ocean conjures up a more readily accessible concept for the human mind than all those light-years.**

To your mind, Mosul said. **I was born here, to me it doesn't seem infinite at all, I could never be lost. But**

space, that's something else. In space you can set out in a straight line and never return. That's scary.

They spent the morning talking, exchanging the memories of particularly intense or moving or treasured incidents from their respective lives. Syrinx found herself feeling slightly envious of his simplistic life of fishing and sailing, realizing that was the instinctive attraction she had felt at their first meeting. Mosul was so wonderfully uncomplicated. In turn he was almost in awe of her sophistication, the worlds she'd seen, people she'd met, the arduous naval duty.

Once the sun had risen high enough to be felt on her skin, Syrinx stripped off and rubbed on a healthy dose of screening cream.

That's another difference, she said as Mosul ran his hands over her back, between her shoulder blades where she couldn't reach. **Look at the contrast, I'm like an albino compared to you.**

I like it, he told her. **All the girls here are coffee coloured or darker, how are we supposed to tell if we're African-ethnic or not?**

She sighed and stretched out on a towel on the cabin's roof, forward of the sail membrane. **It doesn't matter. All our ethnic ancestors disowned us long ago.**

There's a lot of resentment in that thought. I don't know why. The Adamists we get here are pleasant enough.

Of course they are, they want your foodstuffs.

And we want their money.

The sail creaked and fluttered gently as the day wore on. Syrinx found the rhythm of the boat lulling her, and coupled with the warmth of the sun she almost went to sleep.

I can see you, *Oenone* whispered on that unique section of affinity which was theirs alone.

Without conscious thought she knew its orbit was taking it over the *Spiros*. She opened her eyes and looked into boundless azure sky. **My eyes aren't as good as your sensor blisters. Sorry.**

I like seeing you. It doesn't happen often.

She waved inanely. And behind the velvet blueness she saw herself prone on the little ship, waving. The boat

dropped away, becoming a speck, then vanishing. Both universes were solid blue.

Hurry back, *Oenone* said. I'm crippled this close to a planet.

I will. Soon, I promise.

They sighted the whales that afternoon.

Black mountains were leaping out of the water. Syrinx saw them in the distance. Huge curved bodies sliding out of the waves in defiance of gravity, crashing down amid breakers of boiling surf. Fountain plumes of vapour rocketing into the sky from their blow-holes.

Syrinx couldn't help it, she jumped up and down on the deck, pointing. "Look, look!"

I see them, Mosul said, amusement and a strange pride mingling in his thoughts. They are blue whales, a big school, I reckon there's about a hundred or more.

Can you see? Syrinx demanded.

I can see, *Oenone* reassured her. I can feel too. You are happy. I am happy. The whales look happy too, they are smiling.

Yes! Syrinx laughed. Their mouths were upturned, smiling. A perpetual smile. And why not? Such creatures' existing was cause to smile.

Mosul angled *Spiros* in closer, ordering the edges of the sail to furl. The noise of the school rolled over the boat. The smack of those huge bodies as they jumped and splashed, a deep gullet-shaking whistle from the blow-holes. She tried to work out how big they were as the *Spiros* approached the school's fringes. Some, the big adult bulls, must have been thirty metres long.

A calf came swimming over to the *Spiros*; over ten metres long, spurting from his blow-hole. His mother followed him closely, the two of them bumping together and sliding against each other. Huge forked tails churned up and down, flukes slapping the water, while flippers beat like shrunken wings. Syrinx watched in utter fascination as the two passed within fifty metres of the boat, rocking it alarmingly in their pounding wake. But she hardly noticed the pitching, the calf was feeding, suckling from its mother as she rolled onto her side.

“That is the most stupendous, miraculous sight,” she said, spellbound. Her hands were gripping the rail, knuckles whitening. “And they’re not even xenocs. They’re ours. Earth’s.”

“Not any more.” Mosul was at her side, as mesmerized as she.

Thank Providence we had the sense to preserve the genes. Although I’m still staggered the Confederation Assembly allowed you to bring them here.

The whales don’t interfere with the food chain, they stand outside it. This ocean can easily spare a million tonnes of krill a day. And nothing analogous could ever possibly evolve on Atlantis, so they’re not competing with anything. The whales are mammals, after all, they need land for part of their development. No, the largest thing Atlantis has produced is the redshark, and that’s only six metres long.

Syrinx curled her arm round his, and pressed against him. **I meant, it’s pretty staggering for the Assembly to show this much common sense. It would have been a monumental crime to allow these creatures to die out.**

What a cynical old soul you are.

She kissed him lightly. **A foretaste of what’s to come.** Then rested her head against him, and returned her entire attention to the whales, gathering up every nuance and committing it lovingly to memory.

They followed the school for the rest of the afternoon as the giant animals played and wallowed in the ocean. Then when dusk fell, Mosul turned the *Spiros*’s bow away. The last she saw of the school was their massive dark bodies arching gracefully against the golden red skyline, whilst the roar of the blow-holes faded away into the ocean’s swell.

That night twisters of phosphenic radiance wriggled through the water around the hull, casting a wan diamond-blue light over the half-reefed sail membrane. Syrinx and Mosul brought cushions out onto the deck, and made love under the stars. Several times *Oenone* gazed down on their entwined bodies, its presence contributing to the wondrous sense of fulfilment in Syrinx’s mind. She didn’t tell Mosul.

The Laymil project's Electronics Division was housed in a three-storey octagonal building near the middle of the campus. The walls were a soft white polyp with large oval windows, and climbing hydrangeas had reached the bottom of the second-storey windows. Chuantawa trees from Raouil were planted around the outside, forty-metre-high specimens, their rubbery bark and long tongue-shaped leaves a bright purple, clusters of bronze berries dangling from every branch.

Ione walked towards it down the amaranthus-lined path from the nearest of the campus's five tube stations, three serjeant bodyguards in tow. Her hair was still slightly damp from her swim with Haile, and the ends brushed against the collar of her formal green-silk suit jacket. She drew wide-eyed stares and cautious smiles from the few project staff wandering around the campus.

Parker Higgens was waiting just outside the main entrance, dressed as ever in his hazel-coloured suit with red spirals on the flared arms. The trousers were fashionably baggy, but he was filling out the jacket quite comfortably. His mop of white hair hung down over his forehead in some disarray.

Ione forbade a smile as they shook hands. The director was always so nervous around her. He was good at his job, but they certainly didn't share the same sense of humour. He would think teasing was a personal insult.

She greeted Oski Katsura, the head of the Electronics Division. She had taken over from the former head six months ago; her appointment had been the first Ione had confirmed. A seventy-year-old, taller than Ione, with a distinguished willowy beauty, wearing an ordinary white lab smock.

"You have some good news for me, then?" Ione asked as they went inside and started walking down the central corridor.

"Yes, ma'am," Parker Higgens said.

"Most of the stack's circuitry was composed of memory crystals," Oski Katsura said. "The processors were subsidiary elements to facilitate access and recording. Basically it was a memory core."

"I see. And had the ice preserved it like we hoped?" Ione asked. "It looked intact when I saw it."

“Oh, yes. It was almost completely intact, the chips and crystals encased in ice functioned perfectly after they had been removed and cleaned. The reason it has taken us so long to decrypt the data stored in the crystals is that it is non-standard.” They came to a set of wide double doors, and Oski Katsura datavised a security code to open them, gesturing Ione through.

The Electronics Division always reminded her of a cyber-factory: rows of identical clean rooms illuminated by harsh white lighting, all of them filled with enigmatic blocks of equipment trailing wires and cables everywhere. This room was no different, broad benches ran round the walls, with another down the centre, cluttered with customized electronics cabinets and test rigs. The far end was a glass wall partitioning off six workshop cubicles. Several researchers were inside, using robot precision-assembly cells to fabricate various units. At the opposite end of the room to the cubicles a stainless steel pedestal sat on the floor, supporting a big sphere made up of tough transparent composite. Thick environmental-support hoses snaked away from the lower quarter of the sphere, plugging into bulky conditioning units. Ione saw the Laymil electronics stack in the middle of the sphere, with power leads and fibre-optic cables radiating out of its base. More surprisingly, Lieria was standing in front of the long bench in the middle of the room, her tractamorphic arms branching into five or six tentacles apiece, all of which were wound through an electronics cabinet.

Ione was quite proud she could recognize the Kiint immediately. **Good morning, Lieria, I thought you worked in the Physiology Division.**

The tentacle appendages uncoiled from the cabinet, flowing back into one solid pillar of flesh again. Lieria turned ponderously, careful not to knock into anything. **Welcome, Ione Saldana. I am here because Oski Katsura requested my input in this programme. I have been able to contribute to the analysis of data stored in the Laymil crystals; there is some crossover into my primary field of study.**

Excellent.

I note your cranial hair carries a residue of salt water; have you been swimming?

Yes, I gave Haile a scrub down. She's getting impatient to look around Tranquillity. You'll have to let me know when you think she's ready.

Your kindness is most welcome. We judge her mature enough to be allowed outside parental restriction providing she is accompanied. But do not permit her to impose upon your own time.

She's no bother.

One of Lieria's arms lengthened to pick up a slender white wafer ten centimetres square from the bench. The unit emitted a single whistle, then spoke. "Greetings, Director Parker Higgs."

He gave the xenoc a small bow.

Oski Katsura tapped the environment bubble with a fingernail. "We cleaned and tested all the components before we reassembled it," she told Ione. "That ice wasn't pure water, there were some peculiar hydrocarbons mixed in."

"Laymil faecal matter," Lieria said through the wafer.

"Quite. But the real challenge came from the data itself, it was like nothing we have found so far. It seemed almost totally randomized. At first we thought it might be some kind of artform, then we began to notice irregular trait repetition."

The same patterns repeated in different combinations, Tranquillity translated.

The science staff always go through this rigmarole, don't they? she asked, half amused.

It is their chance to demonstrate to you, their paymaster, the effort they put in. Don't disillusion them, it is impolite.

Ione kept her face neutral during the second-long exchange. "Which was enough to formulate a recognition program," she said smoothly.

"Quite," said Oski Katsura. "Ninety per cent of the data was garbage to us, but these patterns kept appearing."

"Once we had enough of them clearly identified we held an interdisciplinary conference and asked for best guesses," Parker Higgs said. "Bit of a long shot, but it paid off hand-

somely. I'm pleased to say Lieria said they resembled Laymil optical impulses."

"Correct," Lieria said through the wafer. "Similarity approaching eighty-five per cent. The data packages represented colours to a Laymil eye."

"Once we'd established that, we ran a comparison on the rest of the data, trying to match it with other Laymil nerve impulses," Oski Katsura said. "Jackpot. Well, more or less. It took four months to write interpretation programs and build suitable interface units, but we got there in the end." A wave of her hand took in the benches and all their elaborate equipment. "We unravelled the first full sequence last night."

Dawning realization at what Oski Katsura was actually saying brought a sense of real excitement to Ione. Her eyes were drawn to the stack in its protective bubble. She touched the transparent surface reverently, it was warmer than the ambient temperature. "This is a recording of a Laymil sensorium?" she asked.

Parker Higgs and Oski Katsura grinned like ten-year-olds.

"Yes, ma'am," Parker Higgs said.

She turned to him sharply. "How much is there? How long does it go on for?"

Oski Katsura gave a modest shrug. "We don't quite understand the file sequences yet. The one which we have translated so far lasts a little over three minutes."

"How long?" Ione let a waspish note creep into her voice.

"If the bit rate holds constant for the other sequences . . . approximately eight thousand hours."

Did she say eight thousand?

Yes, said Tranquillity.

"Bloody hell!" An oafish smile appeared on Ione's face. "When you said translated, what did you mean?"

"The sequence has been adapted for human sensewise reception," Oski Katsura said.

"Have you reviewed it?"

"Yes. The quality is below normal commercial standards, but that ought to improve once we refine our programs and equipment."

“Can Tranquillity access your equipment through the communication net?” Ione asked urgently.

“It should be simple enough. One moment, I’ll datavise the entry code,” Oski Katsura said. “That’s it.”

Show me!

Senses which were fundamentally *wrong* engulfed her conscious thoughts, leaving her as a passive, faintly protesting, observer. The Laymil body was trisymmetric, standing one metre seventy-five high, possessing a tough, heavily crinkled slate-grey skin. There were three legs, with a double-jointed knee, and feet which ended in a hoof. Three arms with a bulbous shoulder which permitted a great deal of articulation, a single elbow, and hands with four triple-jointed fingers as thick as a human thumb and twice as long, bestowing considerable strength and dexterity. Most disturbing of all were the three sensor heads, emerging like truncated serpents between the shoulders. Each one had an eye at the front, with a triangular bat-ear above it, and a toothless breathing mouth below. All the mouths could vocalize, but one was larger and more sophisticated than the other two, which made up for their deficiency with a more acute sense of smell. The feeding mouth was on the top of the torso, in the cleft between the necks, a circular orifice equipped with sharp needle teeth.

The body Ione now wore constricted her own figure severely, pulping it below circular bands of muscle that flexed and twisted sinuously, squeezing protesting flesh and bone into a new shape, forcing her to conform to the resurgent identity suspended in the crystal matrix. She felt as though her limbs were being systematically twisted in every direction apart from the ones nature intended. But there was no pain inherent in the metamorphosis. Feverish thoughts, electrified by instinctive revulsion, began to calm. She started to look around, accepting the trinocular viewpoint input as best she could.

She was wearing clothes. The first surprise; born of prejudice, the foreign physique was *animal*, unhuman, no anthropomorphism could possibly exist here to build a bridge. But the trousers were easily recognizable, tubes of midnight-purple fabric, sleek as silk against the coarse skin. They came

halfway down the lower leg, there was even a recognizable belt. The shirt was a stretchy cylinder of light green, with hoops that hung over the necks.

And she was walking, a three-legged walk that was so easy, so natural that she didn't even have to think how to move the limbs to avoid tripping. The sensor head with the speaking mouth was always at the front, swinging slowly from side to side. Her other two heads scanned the surrounding countryside.

Sights and sounds besieged her. There were few half-tones in her visual world, bright primary colours dominated; but the image was flecked with minute black fissures, like an AV projection running heavy interference; the myriad sounds sliced with half-second breaks of silence.

Ione glossed over the flaws. She was walking through a Laymil habitat. If Tranquillity was manicured perfection, this was manicured anarchy. The trees were at war, thrusting and clashing against each other. Nothing grew upright. It was like a jungle hit by a hurricane, but with the trunks packed so closely they couldn't fall, only topple onto their neighbours. She saw trees with their kinked trunks cupped together, trunks that spiralled round each other wrestling for height and light, young shoots piercing old flaking boles. Roots the size of a man's torso emerged from the trunks well above her head, stabbing down like fleshy beige fork prongs into the sandy soil, producing a buttress cone. The leaves were long ribbons, curled into spirals, a deep olive-green in colour. And down where she walked, where shadows and sunbeams alternated like incorporeal pillars, every nook and crevice was crammed with tiny cobalt-blue flowering mushrooms, their pilei fringed with vermilion stamens, swaying like sea anemones in a weak current.

Pleasure and peace soaked into her like sunlight through amber. The forest was in harmony, its life spirit resonating with the spaceholm mother essence, singing their madrigal in unison. She listened with her heart, thankful for the privilege of living.

Hoofs trod evenly along the meandering trail carrying her towards the fourth marriage community. Her husbands/mates

awaited her, the eagerness inside her was woven into the forest song and rejoiced over by the mother essence.

She reached the borders of the jungle, saddened by the smaller trees, the end of song, jubilant that she had passed through cleanly, that she was worthy of a fourth reproduction cycle. The trees gave way to open land, a gentle valley swathed in high, lush grasses and speckled with vivid reds and yellows and blues of bell-shaped flowers. Spaceholm reared around her, a landscape of tangled greens, rampant vegetation choking the silver veins of streams and rivers, smeared with fragile tufts of cloud. Sunspires stabbed out along the axis from the centre of each endcap, thin sabres stretching for twenty kilometres, furiously radiant.

"Tree spirit song unity," she called with voice and mind. Her two clarion heads bugled gleefully. **"I await."**

"Richness reward embryo growth daughter," the spaceholm mother entity replied.

"Male selection?"

"Concord."

"Unison awaits."

"Life urge rapture."

She started to walk down the slope. Ahead of her on the floor of the valley was the fourth marriage community. Blue polyp cuboidal structures, rigidly symmetrical, arrayed in concentric rings. On the paths between the featureless walls she could see other Laymil moving about. All her heads craned forward.

The memory ended.

The lurch back into the conformity of the electronics lab was as abrupt as it was shocking. Ione put a hand on the bench to steady herself. Oski Katsura and Parker Higgins were giving her an anxious look, even Lieria's dark violet eyes were focused on her.

"That was . . . astonishing," she managed to say. The hot Laymil jungle lurked around the fringes of sight like a vengeful daydream. "Those trees, she seemed to think of them as alive."

"Yes," Parker Higgins said. "It was obviously some kind of mating selection test or ritual. We know Laymil females are capable of five reproductive cycles, it never occurred to

anybody that they might be subject to artificial restraints. In fact I find it amazing that a culture so sophisticated should still indulge in what was almost a pagan rite.”

“I’m not sure it was pagan,” Oski Katsura said. “We have already identified a gene sequence similar to the Edenist affinity gene in the Laymil genome. However they are obviously far more Gaiaistic than Edenist humans; their habitat, the spaceholm, was virtually a part of the reproductive process. It certainly seemed to possess some kind of veto power.”

“Like me and Tranquillity,” Ione said under her breath.

Hardly.

Give us another five thousand years, and the birth of a new Lord of Ruin could easily become ritualized.

You are entirely correct, Ione Saldana, Lieria said. The Kiint continued speaking through her white wafer. “I note considerable evidence to indicate the Laymil mate-selection process is based on scientific eugenics rather than primitive spiritualism. Suitability is considerably more than possession of desirable physical characteristics, mental strength is obviously a prime requirement.”

“Whatever, it opens up a fantastic window into their culture,” Parker Higgins said. “We knew so little before this. To think that a mere three minutes could show us so much. The possibilities it reveals . . .” He looked at the electronics stack almost in worship.

“Will there be any problem in translating the rest of it?” Ione asked Oski Katsura.

“I don’t see any. What you accessed was still pretty crude, the emotional analogues were only rough approximates. We’ll tweak the program, of course, but I doubt we could have direct parallels with a race that alien.”

Ione stared at the electronics stack. An oracle for a whole race. And possibly, just possibly, the secret was inside it: why they did it. The more she thought about it, the more puzzling it became. The Laymil were so vibrantly alive. What in God’s name could ever make an entity like that commit suicide?

She shivered slightly, then turned to Parker Higgins. “Set up a priority budget for the Electronics Division,” she said

decisively. "I want all eight thousand hours translated as soon as possible. And the Cultural Analysis Division is going to have to be expanded considerably. We've concentrated far too much on the technological and physical side of the Laymil to date, that's going to have to change now."

Parker Higgens opened his mouth to protest.

"That wasn't a criticism, Parker," she said quickly. "The physical is all we've had to go on so far. But now we have these sensory and emotional memories we're entering a new phase. Extend invitations to whichever xenoc psychology experts you think will be of help, offer endowment sabbaticals from their current tenures. I'll add a personal message to the invitations if you think my name will carry any weight with them."

"Yes, ma'am." Parker Higgens appeared bemused by her speed.

"Lieria, I'd like you or one of your colleagues to assist with the cultural interpretation, I can see your viewpoints will be invaluable."

Lieria's arms rippled from root to tip (a Kiint laugh?). "It will be my pleasure to assist, Ione Saldana."

"One final thing. I want Tranquillity to be the first to review the memories as and when they are translated."

"Yes," Oski Katsura said uncertainly.

"Sorry," Ione said with an earnest smile. "But as Lord of Ruin I retain the right to embargo weapons technology. The cultural experts might argue over the finer nuances of what we see for months at a time, but a weapon is pretty easy to spot. I don't want any particularly unsavoury armaments released to the Confederation at large." And if it was an enemy's weapon that destroyed the Laymil habitats I want to know before I decide what to tell everybody.

15

Night had come to Durringham. It brought with it a thick grey mist which flowed down the slushy streets and over the mouldering roof slats, depositing an unctuous coating of droplets in its wake. The water filmed every exterior wall until the whole city was glistening darkly, droplets running together and dribbling off the eaves and overhangs. Doors and shutters were no protection, the mist penetrated buildings with ease, soaking into fabrics and condensing over furniture. It was worse than the rain.

The Governor's office was faring little better than the rest of the city. Colin Rexrew had turned up the conditioning until it made an aggravated rattling sound, but the atmosphere inside remained obstinately muggy. He was reviewing satellite images with Terrance Smith and Candace Elford, Lalonde's Chief Sheriff. The three big wall-screens opposite the curving window were displaying pictures of a riverside settlement village. They showed the usual collection of shambolic huts and small fields, large piles of felled trunks, and stumps which played host to ears of orange fungi. Chickens scratched around in the dirt between the huts, while dogs roamed free. The few people captured by the camera were dressed in dirty, ragged clothes. One child, about two years old, was completely naked.

"These are very poor images," Colin Rexrew complained. Most of the edges were blurred, even the colours appeared wan.

"Yes," Candace Elford agreed. "We ran a diagnostic check on the observation satellite, but there was no malfunction. The images from any other area it views are flawless. The satellite only has trouble when it's passing over the Quallheim."

“Oh, come on,” Terrance Smith said. “You can’t mean that the people in the Quallheim Counties can distort our observation, surely?”

Candace Elford considered her answer. She was fifty-seven, and Lalonde was her second appointment as chief sheriff. Both senior appointments had been won because of her thoroughness; she had worked her way up through various colony planet police services, and harboured a kind of bewildered contempt for colonists, who, she had discovered, were capable of damn near anything out in the frontier lands. “It’s unlikely,” she admitted. “The Confederation Navy ELINT satellites haven’t detected any unusual emissions from Schuster County. It’s probably a glitch, that satellite is fifteen years old, and it hasn’t been serviced for the last eleven years.”

“All right,” Colin Rexrew said. “Point noted. We don’t have the money for regular services, as you well know.”

“When it breaks down, a replacement will cost the LDC a lot more than the expense of proper triennial maintenance,” Candace Elford countered.

“Please! Can we stick with the topic in hand,” Colin Rexrew said. He eyed the drinks cabinet longingly. It would have been nice to break open one of the chilled white wines and have a more relaxed session, but Candace Elford would have refused, which would make it awkward. She was such an uncompromising officer; one of his best though, someone the sheriffs respected and obeyed. He needed her, so he put up with her rigid adherence to protocol, counting his blessings.

“Very well,” she said crisply. “As you can see, Aberdale has twelve burnt-out buildings. According to the sheriff in Schuster town, Matthew Skinner, there was some kind of Ivets disturbance four days ago, which is when the buildings were razed. The Ivets allegedly murdered a ten-year-old boy, and the villagers set about hunting them down. Supervisor Manani’s communication block wasn’t working, so an Aberdale villager visited Schuster the day after this murder, and Matthew Skinner reported it to my office. That was three days ago. He said he was riding to Aberdale to investigate; apparently most of the Ivets had been killed by that

time. We heard nothing until this morning, when Matthew Skinner said the disturbance was over, and the Aberdale Ivets were all dead.”

“I disapprove of vigilante action,” Colin Rexrew said. “Officially, that is. But given the circumstances I can’t say I blame the Aberdale villagers, those Ivets have always been a mixed blessing. Half of them should never be sent here, ten years’ work-time isn’t going to rehabilitate the real recidivists.”

“Yes, sir,” Candace Elford said. “But that’s not the problem.”

Colin Rexrew brushed back tufts of his thinning hair with clammy hands. “I didn’t think it would be that simple. Go on.”

She datavised an order into the office’s computer. The screens started to display another village; it looked even more impecunious than Aberdale. “This is Schuster town itself,” she said. “The image was recorded this morning. As you can see, there are three burnt-out buildings.”

Colin Rexrew sat up a little straighter behind his desk. “They had Ivet trouble, too?”

“That is the curious thing,” Candace Elford said. “Matthew Skinner never mentioned the fires, and he should have done, fires like that are dangerous in those kinds of communities. The last routine satellite images we have of Schuster are two weeks old, the buildings were intact then.”

“It’s pushing coincidence a long way,” Colin Rexrew said, half to himself.

“That’s what my office thought,” Candace Elford said. “So we started checking a little closer. The Land Allocation Office divided the Quallheim territory up into three counties, Schuster, Medellin, and Rossan, which between them now have ten villages. We spotted burnt-out buildings in six of those villages: Aberdale, Schuster, Qayen, Pamiers, Kilkee, and Medellin.” She datavised more instructions. The screens started to run through the images of the villages her office had recorded that morning.

“Oh, Jesus,” Colin Rexrew muttered. Some of the blackened timbers were still smoking. “What’s been happening up there?”

“First thing we asked. So we called up each of the village supervisors,” Candace Elford said. “Qayen’s didn’t answer, the other three said everything was fine. So we called up the villages that didn’t show any damage. Salkhad, Guer, and Suttal didn’t answer; Rossan’s supervisor said they were all OK, and nothing out of the ordinary was happening. They hadn’t heard or seen anything from any of the other villages.”

“What’s your opinion?” Colin Rexrew asked.

The chief sheriff turned back to the screens. “One final piece of information. The satellite made seven passes over the Quallheim Counties today. Despite the shoddy images, at no time did we see anybody working in any of those fields; not in any of the ten villages.”

Terrance Smith whistled as he sucked air through his teeth. “Not good. There’s no way you’d keep a colonist from his field, not on a day with weather like it has been up there. They are utterly dependent on those crops. The supervisors make it quite plain from the start, once they’re settled, they don’t get any help from Durringham. They can’t afford to leave the fields untended. Remember what happened in Ark-low County?”

Colin Rexrew gave his aide an irritable look. “Don’t remind me, I accessed the files when I arrived.” He transferred his gaze to the screens, and the image of Qayen village. A black premonition was rising in his mind. “So what are you telling me, Candace?”

“I know what it looks like,” she said. “I just can’t believe it, that’s all. An Ivets revolt which has successfully taken control of the Quallheim Counties, and in just four days, too.”

“There are over six thousand colonists spread out in those counties,” Terrance Smith said. “Most of them have weapons and aren’t afraid to use them. Against that, there are a hundred and eighty-six Ivets, unarmed and unorganized, and without any form of reliable communication. They’re Earth’s junk, waster kids; if they could organize something like this they would never be here in the first place.”

"I know," she said. "That's why I said I don't believe it. But what else could it be? Someone from outside? Who?"

Colin Rexrew frowned. "Schuster's been a problem before. What . . ." He trailed off, requesting a search through the files stored in his neural nanonics. "Ah, yes; the disappearing homestead families. Do you remember, Terrance, I sent a marshal up to investigate last year. Bloody great waste of money that was."

"It was a waste of money from our point of view because the marshal didn't find anything," Terrance Smith said. "That in itself was unusual. Those marshals are good. Which means either it was a genuine case of some animal carrying the families away, or some unknown group was responsible, and managed to cover their tracks to such an extent it fooled both the local supervisor and the marshal. If it was an organized raid, then the perpetrators were at least the equal of our marshal."

"So?" Colin Rexrew asked.

"So now we have another event, originating in the same county, that would be hard to explain away in terms of an Ivet revolt. Certainly the scale of the trouble argues against it being the Ivets by themselves. But an external group taking over the Quallheim Counties would fit the facts we have."

"We only have a secondhand report that it was Ivets anyway," Colin Rexrew said, pondering the unwelcome idea.

"It still doesn't make any sense," Candace Elford said. "I concede that the facts indicate the Ivets are getting help. But what external group? And why the Quallheim Counties, for God's sake? There's no wealth out there; the colonists are barely self-sufficient. There's no wealth anywhere on Lalonde, come to that."

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Colin Rexrew said. "Look, I've got three river-boats scheduled to leave in two days, they're taking six hundred fresh settlers up to Schuster County so they can start another village. You're my security adviser, Candace, are you telling me not to send them?"

"I think my advice would have to be, yes; certainly at this stage. It's not as if you're short of destinations. Sending un-

suspecting raw colonists into the middle of a potential revolt wouldn't look good on any of our records. Is there a nearby alternative to Schuster where you can settle them?"

"Willow West County on the Frenshaw tributary," Terrance Smith suggested. "It's only a hundred kilometres north-west of Schuster; plenty of room for them there. It's on our current territory development list anyway."

"OK," Colin Rexrew said. "Get it organized with the Land Allocation Office. In the meantime, what do you intend to do about the Quallheim situation, Candace?"

"I want your permission to send a posse up there on the boats with the colonists. Once the colonists have been dropped off at Willow West, the boats can take them on to the Quallheim. As soon as I've got reliable people on the ground we can establish what's really going on and restore some order."

"How many do you want to send?"

"A hundred ought to be enough. Twenty full-time sheriffs, and the rest we can deputize. God knows, there's enough men in Durringham who'll jump at the chance of five weeks cruising the river on full pay. I'd like three marshals, as well, just to be on the safe side."

"Yes, all right," Colin Rexrew said. "But just remember it comes out of your budget."

"It'll be nearly three weeks before you can get your people up there," Terrance Smith said thoughtfully.

"So?" the chief sheriff asked. "I can't make the boats go any faster."

"No, but a lot can happen in that time. If we believe what we've seen so far, this revolt spread down the Quallheim in four days. Taking a worst case scenario, the revolt could carry on growing at the same rate, leaving your initial hundred-strong posse heavily outgunned. What I suggest is that we get the posse out there as fast as physically possible, and stop any further expansion before it gets totally out of hand. We have three VTOL aircraft at the spaceport, BK133s that our ecology research team use for survey missions. They're subsonic, and they only seat ten, but they could run a relay out to the mouth of the Quallheim. That way we'd have your posse there in two days."

Colin Rexrew let his head rest on the back of the chair, and ran a cost comparison through his neural nanonics. "Bloody expensive," he said. "And one of those VTOLs is out of service anyway after last year's cuts reduced the Aboriginal Fruit Classification budget. We'll compromise, as always. Candace sends her sheriffs and deputies up to the Quallheim on the river-boats, and her office here in town continues to monitor the situation with the observation satellite. If this revolt, or whatever it is, looks like it's spreading down out of the Quallheim Counties, we'll use the VTOLs to reinforce the posse before they get there."

The electrophorescent cells at the apex of Laton's singular study were darkened, eradicating external stimuli so he could focus himself on the inner self. Senses crept in on his glacial mind, impressions garnered via affinity from the servitor scouts spread throughout the jungle. The results displeased him enormously. In fact they were edging him towards worry. He hadn't felt like this since the Edenist Intelligence operatives had closed in, forcing him to flee his original habitat nearly seventy years previously. At that time he had felt fury, fear, and dismay the intensity of which he had never known as an Edenist; it had made him realize how worthless that culture truly was. His rejection had been total after that.

And now something was closing in on him again. Something he neither knew nor understood; something which acted like sequestration nanonics, usurping a human's original personality and replacing it with mechanoid warrior traits. He had watched the drastically modified behaviour of Quinn Dexter and the Ivets after the incident with the lightning in the jungle. They acted like fully trained mercenary troops, and others they came into contact with soon exhibited similar traits, though a minority of those usurped acted almost normally—most puzzling. Nor did they need weapons, they acquired an ability to throw sprays of photons like a holographic projector, light which could act like a thermal-induction field, but with tremendous power and reach. Yet there was no visible physical mechanism.

Laton had felt the first overspill of pain from Camilla

when the Ivets cremated her, mercifully shortened as she lost consciousness. He mourned his daughter as was proper, away in some subsidiary section of his mind, her absence from his life a sting of regret. But the important thing now was the threat he himself faced. In order to confront your enemy without fear, for fear is a bolt in the enemy's quiver, you must understand your enemy. And understanding was the one thing which had not come in four solid days of supreme cerebral effort.

Some of the glimpses he had snatched through the scouts defied physics. Either that or physics had advanced beyond all reasonable expectations during his exile. That was conceivable, he reasoned, weapons science was always kept very close to the government's chest, receiving the most funds and the least publicity.

Memory: of a man looking up at the sky and seeing the affinity bonded kestrel. The man laughed and raised his hand, snapping his fingers. Air around the kestrel solidified, entombing it in a matrix of frozen molecules, and sending it tumbling from the sky to dash its body against the rocks two hundred metres below. A snap of the fingers . . .

Memory: of a frantic terrified villager from Kilkee firing his laser hunting rifle at one of the usurped. The range had been fifteen metres, and the beam had no effect whatsoever. After the first few shots the rifle had died completely. Then the vernal Laton was using to scout with had curled up and sunk into some kind of coma.

The villages throughout the Quallheim Counties had been conquered with bewildering swiftness. That more than anything convinced Laton he was up against some kind of military force. There was a directing intelligence behind the usurped, expanding their numerical strength at an exponential rate. But what really baffled him was why. He had chosen Lalonde because it fitted his long-range goals; other than that it was a worthless planet. Why take control of people out here?

A test was the only explanation he could think of. Which begged the question what was it a preliminary to? The potential was awesome.

Laton? Waldsey's mental tone was fearful and uncertain, not like him at all.

Yes, Laton replied equitably. He could guess what was coming next. After sixty years he knew the way his colleagues' minds worked better than they did. He was only mildly surprised that it had taken them so long to confront him.

Do you know what it is yet?

No. I have been considering some kind of viral nanonic, but the number of demonstrated functions it possesses would be orders of magnitude above anything we even have theories for. And some of those functions are difficult to explain in terms of the physics we know and understand. In short, if you have a technology that powerful, why bother using it in this fashion? It is most puzzling.

Puzzling! Tao said angrily. **Father, it is bloody lethal, and it's right outside the tree. To hell with *puzzling*, we have to do something.**

Laton let the glimmer image of a smile penetrate their shared affinity. Only his children ever dared to contradict him, which pleased him after a fashion; obsequiousness was something he disapproved of almost as much as disloyalty. Which gave everybody a narrow, and perilous, balance to maintain. **No doubt you have an idea as to what we should do.**

Yeah. Load up the landcruisers, and head for the hills. Call it a strategic withdrawal, call it prudence, but just let's get *out* of this tree. Now. While we still can. I don't mind admitting I'm frightened, if nobody else will.

I would imagine that even this planet's chief sheriff will know that something odd is happening in Aberdale and the other Quallheim villages by now, Laton said. He sensed the others coming into the conversation, their minds carefully shielded from leaking too many emotions. **The LDC's surveillance satellite may be in a deplorable condition, but I assure you it would be quite capable of spotting the landcruisers. And it will be focused on the Quallheim Counties with considerable diligence.**

So? We just zap it. The old blackhawk masers you

brought down can reach it. It'll be weeks before the LDC replace it. By that time we'll be long gone. They'll see the track we made breaking through the jungle, but once we reach the savannah they'll lose us.

I would remind you just how close to success our immortality project is. Are you willing to sacrifice that?

Father, unless we get out of here, we aren't going to have a project left, or a life to immortalize. We can't defend ourselves against these usurped villagers. I've watched what happens when anyone shoots them. They don't even notice it! And even if somebody does manage to beat them, the Quallheim Counties are going to be searched a centimetre at a time afterwards. Either way, we can't stay here.

The lad's got a point there, Laton, Salkid said. We can't cling on here simply out of sentiment.

You always told me knowledge can't be destroyed, Tao said. We know how to splice a parallel-processing brain together. What we need is a secure location in which to do it. The tree certainly isn't it, not any more.

Well argued, Laton said. Except I'm not sure anywhere on Lalonde can be classed as safe any more. This technology is fearsome. He deliberately allowed his emotional shield to slip, and felt the shocked recoil of their thoughts that he who never demonstrated weakness was so deeply perturbed.

We can hardly walk into Durringham's spaceport and ask for a lift outsystem, Waldsey said.

The children can, Laton said. They have been born here, the intelligence agencies have no record of them. Once in orbit they can secure a starship for us.

Bloody hell, you mean it.

Indeed. It is the logical course. At the ultimate extreme, I am prepared to contact the Intelligence agencies in Durringham and report the situation to them. They will take me seriously, and that way a warning will get out.

Is it that bad, Father? Salsett asked anxiously.

Laton projected a burst of reassuring warmth at the fif-

teen-year-old girl. **I don't think it will come to that, darling.**

Leaving the tree, she said wonderingly.

Yes, he said. **Tao, that was a good suggestion of yours; you and Salkid take a blackhawk maser out of storage, and be ready to eliminate that observation satellite. The rest of you have ten hours to pack. We start for Durringham tonight.**

He couldn't detect a single whiff of dissension. Minds retreated from the affinity contact.

In the hours which followed, the gigantea tree was subject to the kind of coordinated activity it hadn't seen since their arrival. Orders were flung frantically at the incorporated and the housechimps as the residents attempted to dismantle the work of thirty years in the short hours they had left. Heart-breaking decisions were made over what could go and what must stay, several couples arguing. The landcruisers had to be checked over and prepared after thirty years' unemployment. Laton's younger children scampered about getting in the way, nervous and elated at the prospect of leaving; the older members of the fellowship started thinking about the Confederation worlds again. Thermal charges were set throughout the rooms and corridors, ready to obliterate all trace of the gigantea's secrets.

The hectic activity registered as a background burble amid Laton's steely thoughts. Occasionally someone would intrude into his contemplation to ask for instructions.

After designating the few personal items he wanted to accompany them, he spent his time reviewing the memory of what happened in the clearing when Quinn Dexter killed Supervisor Manani. That strange lightning was the start of it. He ran and re-ran Camilla's memory images, which were stored in the tree's sub-sentient bitek processor array. The lightning seemed to be flat, almost compressed, some sections darker than others. As he ran the memory again the dark areas moved, sliding down the glaring streamers of rampaging electrons. The lightning bolts were acting as conduits to some kind of energy pattern, one which behaved outside the accepted norm.

A draught of air stroked his face. He opened his eyes to

darkness. The study was as it always had been. He switched his retinal implants to infrared. Jackson Gael and Ruth Hilton stood on the curving wood before him.

"Clever," Laton said. His contact with the processors faded away. Affinity was reduced to a whisper rattling round the closed confines of his skull. "It's energy, isn't it? A self-determining viral program that can store itself in a non-physical lattice."

Ruth bent down, and put her hand under his chin, tilting his face up so she could examine him. "Edenists. Always so rational."

"But where did it come from, I wonder?" Laton asked.

"What will it take to break his beliefs?" Jackson Gael asked.

"It's not of human origin," Laton said. "I'm sure of that; nor any of the xenoc races we know."

"We'll find out tonight," Ruth said. She let go of Laton's chin, and held out her hand. "Come along."

The morning after Governor Rexrew's briefing with Candace Elford, Ralph Hiltch was sitting behind his own desk in the Kulu Embassy dumper receiving a condensed version of events from Jenny Harris. One of the ESA assets she ran in the sheriff's office had asked for a meeting and told her about the trouble brewing in the Quallheim Counties.

All well and good, it was nice to see the Governor couldn't fart without the ESA knowing, but like Rexrew before him, Ralph was having a lot of trouble with the concept of an Ivet uprising.

"An open revolt?" he asked the lieutenant sceptically.

"It looks that way," she said apologetically. "Here, my contact gave me a flek of the surveillance satellite images." She loaded it into the processor block on Ralph's desk, and the screens on the wall began to show the Quallheim's motley collection of villages.

Ralph stood in front of them, hands on his hips as the semicircular clearings cut into solid jungle appeared. The treetops looked like green foam, broken by occasional glades, and virtually sealing over streams and the smaller rivers. "There's been a lot of fires," he agreed unhappily.

“And recently, too. Can’t you manage a better resolution than this?”

“Apparently not, and that’s the second cause for alarm. Something is affecting the satellite every time it passes over the Quallheim tributary. No other section of Amarisk is affected.”

He gave her a long look.

“I know,” she said. “It sounds ridiculous.”

Ralph gave his neural nanonics a search request and returned his attention to the screens while it was running. “There’s certainly been some kind of fight down there. And this isn’t the first time Schuster County has come to our attention.” The neural nanonics reported a blank; so he opened a channel to access his processor block’s classified military systems file, extending the search.

“Captain Lambourne reported that nothing ever came out of the marshal’s visit last year,” Jenny Harris said. “We still don’t know what happened to those homestead families.”

Ralph’s neural nanonics told him that the processor block file couldn’t find a match for his request. “Interesting. According to our files, there is no known electronic warfare system which can distort a satellite image like this.”

“How up to date are the files?”

“Last year’s.” He walked back to his seat. “But you’re missing the point. Firstly it’s a wholly ineffective system, all it does is fuzz the image slightly. Secondly, if you’ve gone to all the trouble to tamper with the satellite why not knock it out altogether? Given the age of Lalonde’s satellite, everyone would assume it was a natural malfunction. This method actually draws attention to the Quallheim.”

“Or draws attention away from somewhere else,” she said.

“I’m paranoid, but am I paranoid enough?” he muttered. Outside the window the dark rooftops of Durringham were steaming softly in the bright morning sun. It was all so cheerfully primitive, the residents walking through the tacky streets, power bikes throwing up fans of mud, a teenage couple lost in each other, the tail end of a new colonist group making their way down to the transients’ dormitories. Every morning for the last four years he’d seen variants on the

same scene. Lalonde's inhabitants got on with their basic, modestly corrupt lives, and never bothered anyone. They couldn't, they didn't have the means. "The thing which disturbs me most is Rexrew's idea that it could be an external group attempting some kind of coup. I almost agree with him, it's certainly more logical than an Ivet revolt." He rapped his knuckles on the desktop, trying to think. "When is this posse of Candace Elford's setting off?"

"Tomorrow; she's going to start recruiting her deputies this morning. And incidentally, the *Swithland* is one of the boats that will be carrying them. Captain Lambourne can keep us updated if you allow her to use a communication block."

"OK, but I want at least five of our assets in that group of deputies, more if you can manage. We need to know what's going on up in the Quallheim Counties. Equip them with communication blocks as well, but make sure they understand they must only use them if the situation is urgent. I'll speak to Kelven Solanki about the issue, he's probably as keen as we are to know what's going on."

"I'll get onto it," she said. "One of the sheriffs Elford is sending belongs to me anyway, that'll make placing assets among the deputies a lot easier."

"Good, well done."

Jenny Harris saluted professionally, but before she got to the door she turned back and said, "I don't understand. Why would anyone want to stage a coup out in the middle of the hinterlands?"

"Someone with an eye to the future, maybe. If it is, our duty is very clear cut."

"Yes, sir; but if that is the case, they'd need help from out-system."

"True. Well, at least that's easy enough to watch for."

Ralph occupied himself with genuine embassy attaché work for the next two hours. Lalonde imported very little, but from the list of what it did require he tried to secure a reasonable portion for Kulu companies. He was trying to find a supplier for the high-temperature moulds a new glass-works factory wanted when his neural nanonics alerted him to an unscheduled starship that had just jumped into

Lalonde's designated emergence zone, fifty thousand kilometres above the planet's surface. The dumper's electronics tapped the downlink from Lalonde's two civil spaceflight monitor satellites, giving him access to the raw data. What it didn't provide was system command authority, he was a passive observer.

Lalonde's traffic control took a long time to respond to the monitor satellite's discovery. There were three starships in an equatorial parking orbit, two colonist transports from Earth, and a freighter from New California, nothing else was due for a week. The staff probably hadn't even been in the control centre, he thought impatiently as he waited for them to get off their arses and provide him with more information.

Starship visits outside the regular LDC contracted vessels, and the voidhawk supply run for Aethra, were rare events, there were never more than five or six a year. That this one should appear at this time was a coincidence he couldn't put out of his mind.

The starship was already under power and heading for a standard equatorial parking orbit when traffic control eventually triggered its transponder and established a communication channel. Data flooded into Ralph's mind, the standard Confederation Astronautics Board registration and certification. It was an independent trader vessel called *Lady Macbeth*.

His suspicion deepened.

Rumour hit Durringham and spread with a speed that a news company's distribution division would have envied. It started when Candace Elford's staff went out for a drink after a hard day assessing the scrambled information they were getting from the Quallheim Counties. Durringham's strong beer, sweet wines from nearby estates, and running mild mood-stimulant programs through their neural nanonics liberated a quantity of almost accurate information about exactly what had been going on all day in the chief sheriff's office.

It took half of Lalonde's long night to filter out of the pubs the sheriffs used and down into the more basic taverns the agricultural workers, port labourers, and river crews

favoured. Distance, time, alcohol, and weak hallucinogens distorted and amplified the story in creative surges. The end results which were shouted and argued over loudly through the riverside drinking dens would have impressed any student of social dynamics. The following day, it proliferated through every workplace and home.

The main exchanges of conversations went thus.

The colonists in the Quallheim Counties had been ritually massacred by the Ivets, who had taken up Devil worship. A Satanic theocracy had been declared to the Governor and demanded recognition as an independent state, and all the Ivets were to be sent there.

An army of radical anarchistic Ivets was marching downriver, razing villages as they went, looting and raping. They were kamikazes, sworn to destroy Lalonde.

Kulu Royal Marines had landed upriver and established a beachhead for a full invasion force: all the locals who resisted had been executed. The Ivets had welcomed the marines, betraying colonists who resisted. Supplementary: Lalonde was going to be incorporated into the Kulu Kingdom by force. (Pure crap, people said, why would Alastair II want this God-awful shit-tip of a planet?)

The Tyrathca farmers had suffered a famine and they were eating humans, starting with Aberdale. (No, not possible. Weren't the Tyrathca herbivores?)

Waster kids from Earth had stolen a starship, and after zapping the sheriff's surveillance satellite they'd landed to help their old gang mates, the Ivets.

Blackhawks and mercenary starships had banded together; they were invading Lalonde, and they were planning on turning it into a rebel world which would be a base for raiding the Confederation. Colonists were being used for slave labour to build fortifications and secret landing sites out in the jungle. Ivets were captaining the work parties.

Two things remained reasonably constant amid all the wild theorizing. One: colonists had been killed by Ivets. Two: Ivets were heading/helping the revolt.

Durringham was a frontier town, the vast majority of its population scraping their living with long hours of hard labour. They were poor and proud, and the only group which

stood between them and the bottom rung were those evil, workshy, criminal, daughter-raping Ivets; and by God that's where the Ivets were going to stay: underfoot.

When Candace Elford's sheriffs started to recruit deputies for the posse, tension and nervousness was already gripping the town. Seeing the posse actually assembling down at the port, confirming there really was something going on up-river, tipped unrest into physical aggression.

Darcy and Lori were lucky to miss the worst of the mayhem. On Lalonde they acted as the local representatives for Ward Molecular, a Kulu company that imported various solid-state units as well as a lot of the electron-matrix power cells which the capital's embryonic industries were incorporating into an increasing number of products. The Kulu connection was an ironic added touch to their cover; the deeply religious Kulu and the Edenists were not closely allied in the Confederation. Edenists were not permitted to germinate their habitats in any of the Kingdom's star systems, which made it unlikely that anyone would think of them as anything other than loyal subjects of King Alastair II.

They handled their business from a long wooden warehouse structure, a standard industrial building with an overhanging roof, and a floor which was supported on raised stone pillars a metre above the muddy gravel. Built entirely from mayope, it was strong enough to resist any casual break-in attempt by the capital's slowly increasing population of petty criminals. The single-storey cabin which they lived in sat in the middle of a half-acre plot of land at the back, which like most of Durringham's residents they used to grow vegetables and fruit bushes.

Warehouse and cabin were situated on the western edge of the port, five hundred metres from the water. The majority of nearby buildings were commercial premises—sawmills, lumber-yards, a few forges, and some relatively new cloth factories, their bleak ranks broken by streets of cabins to accommodate their workers. This end of town had stayed the same for years. It was the eastern end and long southern side which were expanding, and no one seemed keen to develop out towards the coastal swamps ten kilome-

tres down the Juliffe. Nor were there any farms to the west; the raw jungle was less than two kilometres away.

But their proximity to the port did put them on the fringe of the trouble. They were in the office at the side of the warehouse when Stewart Danielsson, one of the three men who worked for them, came barging in.

“People outside,” he said.

Lori and Darcy swapped a glance at the agitation in his tone, and went to see.

There was a loose progression of men from the nearby factories and mills heading towards the port. Darcy stood on the ramp outside the big open doorway at the front of the warehouse; there was a work area just inside, where they would pack orders and even perform repairs on Ward Molecular’s simpler units. Cole Este and Gaven Hough, the company’s other two employees, had both left their benches to join him.

“Where are they all going?” Lori asked. **And why do they look so angry?** she addressed Darcy on singular engagement.

“Going down to the port,” Gaven Hough said.

“Why?”

He hunched his shoulders up, embarrassed. “Sort the Ivets out.”

“Bloody right,” Cole Este mumbled sullenly. “Wouldn’t mind going on that posse myself. The sheriffs’ve been recruiting deputies all morning.”

Damnation, trust this town to think with its arse, Darcy said. He and Lori had only been told about the Quallheim Counties revolt by one of their contacts in the Land Allocation Office the previous evening. **Those bloody sheriffs must have been shouting the news about Schuster.** “Gaven, Stewart, let’s get these doors shut. We’re closing for the day.”

They started to slide the big doors shut, while Cole Este stood on the ramp, grinning and exchanging a few shouted comments with the odd person he knew. He was nineteen, the youngest of the three workers, and it was obvious he wanted to join the crowd.

Just look at the little idiot, Lori said.

Easy. We don't involve ourselves, nor criticize. Prime rule.

Tell me about it. They'll kill the Ivets down in the transients' dormitories. You know that, don't you?

Darcy slammed the bolt home on the door, and locked it with a padlock keyed to his finger pattern. **I know.**

"You want us to stay?" Stewart Danielsson asked dubiously.

"No, that's all right, Stewart, you three get off home. We'll take care of things here."

Darcy and Lori sat in the office with all but one of the windows shuttered on the inside. A partition with a line of tall glass panes in wooden frames looked out over the darkened warehouse. The furniture was basic, a couple of tables and five chairs Darcy had made himself. A conditioner whirred almost silently in one corner, keeping the atmosphere cool and dry. The office was one of the few rooms on the planet that was actually dusty.

Once is acceptable, Lori said. Twice is not. Something strange is happening in Schuster County.

Possibly. Darcy put his maser carbine on the table between them. The solitary shaft of sunlight shining through the window made the smooth grey composite casing glimmer softly. Protection, just in case the riot spread back through the town.

They could both hear the distant growl of the crowd down in the port; the newly arrived Ivets being hunted down and killed. Beaten into the mud with makeshift clubs, or gored by baying sayce to the sound of cheers. If they looked through the window at an angle they would be able to see boats of all sizes sailing hurriedly out of the circular polyp harbours for the safety of the water.

I hate Adamists, Lori said. Only Adamists could do this to one another. They do it because they don't know one another. They don't love, they can only lust and fear.

Darcy smiled, and reached out to touch her, because her mind was leaking a longing for the reassurance of physical contact. His hand never bridged the gap. An affinity voice with the power of a thunderstorm roared into their minds.

ATTENTION INTELLIGENCE OPERATIVES ON

LALONDE, I AM LATON. THERE IS A XENOC ENERGY VIRUS LOOSE IN THE QUALLHEIM COUNTIES. HOSTILE AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. LEAVE LALONDE IMMEDIATELY. THE CONFEDERATION NAVY MUST BE INFORMED. THIS IS YOUR ONLY PRIORITY NOW. I CANNOT LAST LONG.

Lori was whimpering, her hands clutching at her ears, mouth frozen open in a horrified wail. Darcy saw her dissolve under a discharge of chaotic mental images, each of them bright enough to dazzle.

Jungle. A village seen from the air. More jungle. A little boy hanging upside-down from a tree, his stomach sliced open. A bearded man hanging upside-down from a different tree, lightning flaring wildly.

Heat, excruciating heat.

Darcy grunted at the pain, he was on fire. Skin blackening, hair singeing, his throat shrivelling.

It stopped.

He was prone on the floor. Flames in the background. Always flames. A man and a woman were leaning over him, naked. Their skin was changing, darkening to green, becoming scaled. Eyes and mouth were scarlet red. The woman parted her lips and a serpent's forked tongue slipped out.

His children were crying all around.

Sorry, so sorry I failed you at the last.

Father shame: ignominy that extended down to a cellular level.

Leathery green hands began to run across his chest, a parody of sensuality. Where the fingers touched he could feel the ruptures begin deep below his skin.

NOW DO YOU BELIEVE?

And voices, audible above his agony. Coming from within, from a deeper part of his brain than affinity originated. Whisperers in chorus: "We can help, we can make it stop. Let us in, let us free you. Give yourself."

WARN THEM, CURSE YOU.

Then nothing.

Darcy found himself curled up on the mayope planks of

the office floor. He had bitten his lip; a trickle of blood wept down his chin.

He touched himself gingerly, fingers probing his ribs, terrified of what he would find. But there was no pain, no open wounds, no internal damage.

"It was him," Lori croaked. She was in her chair, head bowed, hugging her chest, hands clenched into tight fists. "Laton. He's here, he really is here."

Darcy managed to right himself into a kneeling position, it was enough for now, if he tried to stand he was sure he'd faint. "Those images . . ." **Did you see them?**

The reptile people? Yes. But the power in that affinity. It . . . it damn near overwhelmed me.

The Quallheim Counties, that's where he said it was. That's over a thousand kilometres away upriver. Human affinity can only reach a hundred at most.

He's had thirty years to perfect his diabolical genetic schemes. Her thoughts were contaminated with fright and revulsion.

"A xenoc energy virus," Darcy muttered, nonplussed. **What did he mean? And he was being tortured, along with his children. Why? What is going on upriver?**

I don't know. All I know is I wouldn't trust him, not ever. We saw images, fantasy figures. He's had thirty years to construct them, after all.

But they were so real. And why reveal himself? He knows we will eliminate him whatever the cost.

Yes, he knows we will come in force. But with that affinity power he could probably compel even a voidhawk. It would allow himself and his cronies to spread through the Confederation.

It was so real, Darcy repeated numbly. And now we know he is so powerful we can guard against him. It makes no sense, unless he really has run into something he can't handle. Something more powerful than he.

Lori gave him a sad, almost defeated look. **We need to know, don't we?**

Yes.

They let their thoughts flow and entwine like the bodies

of amorous lovers, reinforcing their strengths, eliminating weaknesses. Gathering courage.

Darcy used a chair as support, and pulled himself up. Every joint felt ponderously stiff. He sat heavily and dabbed at his bitten lip.

Lori smiled fondly, and handed him a handkerchief.

Duty first, he said. We have to inform Jupiter that Laton is here. That takes precedence over everything. We're not due a voidhawk visit for another couple of months. I'll see Kelven Solanki and request he sends a message to Aethra and the support station out at Murora immediately, his office has the equipment to do that direct. The Confederation Navy would have to be told anyway, so it might as well be now. He can also include a report in the diplomatic flek on a colonist-carrier ship that's heading back to Earth. That ought to cover us.

And after that we go upriver, Lori said.

Yes.

"Next!" the sheriff called.

Yuri Wilkin stepped up to the table, keeping the leash tight on his sayce, Randolf. Rain pattered on the empty warehouse's roof high above his head. Outside the open end, behind the sheriff, the yellow-brown polyp crater of harbour five was returning to a semblance of normality. Most of the boats had returned after their night on the river. A work crew from one of the shipyards were surveying the fire-ravaged hull that was bobbing low in the water. Some captain who hadn't been fast enough to cast off when the rioters came boiling along the polyp in search of Ivets.

The smell of burnt wood mingled with more exotic smells from the stored goods that had caught fire in several warehouses. The flames shooting out of the doomed buildings had been tremendous, even Lalonde's rain had taken hours to extinguish them.

Yuri had milled around watching along with the rest of the rioters last night, mesmerized with the destruction. The flames had lit something inside him, something that felt joyful at the sight of a young terrified Ivet reduced to a bloody

chunk of unrecognizable meat beneath the crowd's clubs. He had yelled encouragement until his throat was hoarse.

"Age?" the sheriff asked.

"Twenty," Yuri lied. He was seventeen, but he already had a reasonable beard. He crossed his fingers, hoping it would be enough. There were over two hundred people waiting behind him, all wanting their chance now the sheriffs had started recruiting again.

The sheriff glanced up from his processor block. "Sure you are. You ever used a weapon, son?"

"I eat chikrows every week, shoot them myself. I know how to move around in the jungle OK. And I got Randolf, trained him all by myself, he's an ace baiter, knows how to fight, knows how to hunt. He'll be a big help upriver, you get two of us for the price of one."

The sheriff leant forwards slightly, peering over the edge of the table.

Randolf bared his stained fangs. "Killl Ivezss," the beast snarled.

"OK," the sheriff grunted. "You willing to take orders? We don't need people who aren't prepared to work in a team."

"Yes, sir."

"Reckon you might, at that. You got a change of clothes?"

Grinning, Yuri twisted round to show him the canvas duffle bag slung over his shoulder; his laser rifle was strapped to it.

The sheriff picked a vermilion-coloured deputy's badge from the pile beside his processor block. "There you go. Get yourself down to the *Swithland* and find a bunk. We'll swear you in officially once we're underway. And muzzle that bloody sayce, I don't want him chewing up colonists before we get there."

Yuri rubbed the black scales between Randolf's battered ears. "Don't you worry about old Randolf, he ain't going to hurt no one, not till I tell him to."

"Next!" the sheriff called.

Yuri Wilkin settled his hat firmly on his head, and headed for the sun-drenched harbour outside, a song in his heart and mayhem in mind.

* * *

“Gods, I’ve seen some rough planets in my time, Joshua,” Ashly Hanson said. “But this one takes the biscuit. There isn’t even anyone at the spaceport who wanted to buy copies of Jezzibella’s MF album, let alone a black-market distribution net.” He took a drink of juice from his long glass, it was a purplish liquid with plenty of ice bobbing around, some aboriginal fruit. The pilot never touched alcohol while the *Lady Macbeth* was docked to a station or in a parking orbit.

Joshua sipped his glass of bitter, which was warm and carried a punch almost as strong as some spirits he’d tasted. At least it had a decent head.

The pub they were drinking in was called the Crashed Dumper, a wooden barnlike structure at the end of the road that linked the spaceport with Durringham. Various time-expired spaceplane components were fastened up against the walls, the most prominent a compressor fan from one of the McBoeings that took up most of the end wall, with a couple of the fat blades buckled from a bird impact. The pub was used by spaceport staff along with the pilots and starship crews. It was, allegedly, one of the classier pubs in Durringham.

If this was refinement, Joshua didn’t like to think what the rest of the city’s hostels must be like.

“I’ve been on worse,” Warlow growled. The bass harmonics set up vibrations on the surface of the brightlime in his bulbous brandy glass.

“Where?” Ashly demanded.

Joshua ignored them. This was their second day in Durringham, and he was starting to worry. The day Ashly had flown them down there had been some sort of riot next to the river. Everything had shut down, shops, warehouses, government offices. Spaceport procedures had been minimal, but then he suspected they were always like that on Lalonde. Ashly was right, this was one massively primitive colony. Today had been little better; the Governor’s industrial secretary had put him in touch with a Durringham timber merchant. The address turned out to be a small office down near the waterfront. Closed, naturally. Enquiries had eventually traced the owner, Mr Purcell, to a nearby pub. He assured

Joshua a thousand tonnes of mayope was no problem. "You can't give it away down here, we've got stocks backlogged halfway up the Juliffe." He quoted a price of thirty-five thousand fuseodollars inclusive, and promised deliveries could start to the spaceport tomorrow. The wood was a ridiculous price, but Joshua didn't argue. He even paid a two thousand fuseodollar deposit.

Joshua, Ashly, and Warlow had gone back to the spaceport on their hired power bikes (and the rental charge on those was bloody legalized robbery) to try to arrange for a McBoeing charter to ship the wood up to *Lady Mac*. That had taken the rest of the day, and another three thousand fuseodollars in bribe money.

It wasn't the money which bothered him particularly; even taking Lalonde's necessary lubrication into account the mayope was only a small percentage of the cost of a Norfolk flight. Joshua was used to datavised deals, and instant access to anybody he wanted via the local communication net. On Lalonde, where there was no net, and few people with neural nanonics, he was beginning to feel out of his depth.

When he had ridden back into town in the late afternoon to find Mr Purcell and confirm they had a McBoeing lined up, the timber merchant was nowhere to be found. Joshua retreated to the Crashed Dumper in a dark mood. He wasn't at all sure the mayope would even turn up tomorrow; and they had to leave in six days to stand any chance of securing a cargo of Norfolk Tears from a roseyard merchant. Six days, and he didn't have any alternative to mayope. It had seemed such a good idea.

He took another gulp of his bitter. The pub was filling up as the spaceport staff came off shift. Over in one corner an audio block was playing a ballad which some of the customers were singing along to. Large fans spun listlessly overhead, trying to circulate some of the humid air.

"Captain Calvert?"

Joshua looked up.

Marie Skibbow was dressed in a tight-fitting sleeveless green stretch blouse, and a short pleated black skirt. Her thick hair was neatly plaited. She was carrying a circular tray loaded with empty glasses.

"Now this is what I call improved service," Ashly said brightly.

"That's me," Joshua said. Jesus, but she had tremendous legs. Nice face too, ever so slightly wiser than her age.

"I understand you're looking for a cargo of mayope, is that right?" Marie asked.

"Does everybody in town know?" Joshua asked.

"Just about. A visit from an independent trader starship isn't exactly common around here. If we weren't having all this trouble with the Quallheim Counties and the anti-Ivet riots you'd be the most gossiped over item in Durringham."

"I see."

"Can I join you?"

"Sure." He pushed out one of the vacant chairs. People had tended to avoid their table, it was one of the reasons he'd brought Warlow down. Only someone who was stoned out of his brain would try and tangle with the amount of boosted muscle the old cosmonik packed into his giant frame.

Marie sat down and fixed Joshua with an uncompromising gaze. "Would you be interested in taking on an extra crew-member?"

"You?" Joshua asked.

"Yes."

"Do you have neural nanonics?"

"No."

"Then, I'm sorry, but the answer's no. I have a full complement anyway."

"How much do you charge for a trip?"

"Where to?"

"Wherever you're going next."

"If we can acquire a cargo of mayope, I'm going to Norfolk. I'd charge you thirty thousand fuseodollars for passage in zero-tau, more if you wanted a cabin. Starflight isn't cheap."

Marie's air of sophisticated confidence faltered slightly. "Yes, I know."

"You want to leave pretty badly?" Ashly asked sympathetically.

She dropped her gaze and nodded. "Wouldn't you? I lived

on Earth until last year. I hate it here, I'm not staying no matter what it costs. I want civilization."

"Earth," Ashly mused whimsically. "Lord, I haven't been there for a couple of centuries. Wouldn't call it particularly civilized even back then."

"He's a time hopper," Joshua explained as Marie gave the pilot a confused look. "And if you hate this place as much as you say, then Norfolk isn't where you want to go either. It's strictly a pastoral planet. They have a policy of minimal technological usage, and the government enforces it pretty rigorously from what I hear. Sorry."

She gave a small shrug. "I never thought it would be that easy."

"The idea of signing on with a ship is a good one," Ashly said. "But you really need neural nanonics before a captain will consider you."

"Yes, I know, I'm saving up for a set."

Joshua put on a neutral expression. "Good."

Marie actually laughed, he was being so careful not to hurt her feelings. "You think I waitress for a living? That I'm a dumb waster girl saving up tips and dreaming of better days?"

"Er . . . no."

"I waitress here in the evenings because it's the place the starship crews come. This way I get to hear of any openings before the rest of Durringham. And yes there are the tips, too, every little helps. But for real money I bought myself a secretarial job at the Kulu Embassy, in their Commercial Office."

"Bought a job?" Warlow rumbled. His sculpted dark-yellow face was incapable of expression, but the voice booming from his chest diaphragm carried a heavy query. People turned to look as he drowned out the ballad.

"Of course. You think they give away a gig like that? The embassy pays its staff in Kulu pounds." It was the second hardest currency in the Confederation after fuseodollars. "That's where I'm going to get the money to pay for my neural nanonics."

"Ah, now I see." Joshua raised his glass in salute. He ad-

mired the girl's toughness—almost as much as he admired her figure.

“That, or the deputy ambassador's son might get me off,” Marie said quietly. “He's twenty-two, and he likes me a lot. If we married then obviously I'd go back to Kulu with him once his father's tour was over.”

Ashly grinned and knocked back some of his fruit juice. A suspect grumble emerged from Warlow's chest.

Marie gave Joshua a questioning glance. “So. Do you still want your mayope, Captain?”

“You think you can get me some?”

“Like I said, I work in the Commercial Office. And I'm good at it, too,” she said fiercely. “I know more about this town's economic structure than my boss. You're buying your cargo from Dodd Purcell, right?”

“Yes,” Joshua said cautiously.

“Thought so; he's the nephew of the governor's industrial secretary. Dodd Purcell is a complete screwup, but he's a good partner for his uncle. All official tenders for timber go through the company he owns, except it's actually his uncle's, and all it consists of is an office down at the port. They don't actually own a yard, or even any timber. The LDC pays through the nose, but nobody queries it because no lower quotes ever make it past the industrial secretary's office. All that happens is Purcell contracts a real lumberyard to supply whatever project the LDC is paying for; they do all the work while he and uncle cream off thirty per cent. No effort, and all profit.”

Warlow's chair creaked alarmed protests as his bulk shifted round. He tilted the brandy glass to his mouth aperture, the brightlime surged out, almost sucked down into his inlet nozzle. “Smart bastards.”

“Jesus,” Joshua said. “And I'll bet the price goes up tomorrow.”

“I expect so,” Marie said. “And then again the day after, then it will become a rush order to meet your deadline, so you'll have to pay a surcharge.”

Joshua put his empty glass down on the stained table. “All right, you win. What's your counter-offer?”

“You are paying Purcell thirty-five thousand fuseodollars,

which is about thirty per cent over the odds. I'm offering to put you in touch with a lumber-yard direct, they'll supply the wood at the market rate, and you pay me five per cent of the difference."

"Suppose we just go to a lumber-yard direct now you've told us what's happening?" Ashly asked.

Marie smiled sweetly. "Which one? Are you going back to the Governor's industrial secretary for a list? Once you've picked one, do you know if it was burnt down in the riots? Where is it, and how do you get to it? Parts of this town are very unhealthy for visitors, especially after the riots. Does it have that much mayope in stock or is the owner stringing you along? What are you going to use to transport it out to the spaceport? And how much time can you spend sorting all that out? Even a relatively honest lumber-yard owner is going to catch on that you've got a deadline once you start fretting because you haven't got permits and procedures smoothed out in advance. I mean, God, it took you almost a day to hire a McBoeing. Bet you didn't buy energy for it either, they'll hit you for that tomorrow. And when they scent blood it'll be Purcell all over again."

Joshua held up a warning hand to Ashly. Nobody at the spaceport had mentioned energy for the McBoeing. Jesus! On a normal planet it would be part of the charter; and of course he couldn't use his neural nanonics to access the contract and run a legal program check because his copy of the fucking thing was printed out on paper. *Paper*, for Christ's sake. "I'll deal with you," he told Marie. "But I only pay on delivery to orbit, and that includes your fee. So you're going to have to clear all those obstacles you mentioned out of our way, because I don't pay a single fuseodollar once those six days are up."

She stuck out her hand, and after a moment's hesitation Joshua shook.

"We're sleeping in my spaceplane, seeing as how it has the only functional air-conditioner on the entire planet," he told her. "I want you there at seven o'clock tomorrow morning ready to take us to this lumber-yard of yours."

"Aye, aye, Captain." She stood and picked up her tray.

Joshua pulled a wad of Lalonde francs from his jacket

pocket and peeled a few off. "We'll have the same again, and have a large one yourself. I think you've just earned it."

Marie plucked the notes from him and stuffed them in a side pocket on her skirt. She gave them all a ludicrously sassy twitch with her backside as she walked off to the bar.

Ashly watched her go with a lugubrious expression, then drained his juice in one gulp. "God help that ambassador's son."

Darcy and Lori spent the day after the riots preparing for their trip. There was Kelven Solanki to brief on the situation, and their eagles Abraham and Catlin to take out of zero-tau, equipment to make ready. Above all, they had to find transport. The harbour-master's office had been damaged in the riot, so there was no list available of the boats in dock. In the afternoon they sent the eagles skimming over the polyp rings searching for something they could use.

What do you think? Darcy asked. Abraham was turning lazy circles over harbour seven, his enhanced retinas providing an uncluttered image of the boats moored up against the quays.

Them? Lori exclaimed in dismay.

Have you found someone else?

No.

At least we know we can bully them with money.

The port still hadn't recovered from the riot when they made their way down to harbour seven first thing the next morning. Huge piles of ashes which used to be buildings were still radiating heat from their smouldering cores, giving off thin streamers of acrid smoke. Long runnels of mushed ashes meandered away from their bases, sluiced out by the rain; they had coagulated under the morning sunlight, looking like damp lava flows.

Gangs of workers were raking through the piles with long mayope poles, searching for anything salvageable. They passed one ruined transients' warehouse where a stack of cargo-pods had been pulled from the gutted remains, the warped composite resembling surrealistic sculptures. Darcy watched a forlorn family prise open a badly contorted marsupium shell with deep scorch marks on the oyster-coloured

casing. The infant quadruped had been roasted in its chemical sleep, reduced to a shrivelled black mummy. Darcy couldn't even tell what species it was.

Lori had to turn away from the empty-faced colonists scabbling at the pods' distorted lids, shiny new ship-suits smeared with dirt and sweat. They had come to Lalonde with such high hopes, and now they were faced with utter ruin before they'd even been given a chance at a life.

This is awful, she said.

This is dangerous, Darcy replied. **They are numbed and shocked now, but that will soon give way to anger. Without their farmsteading gear they can't be sent upriver, and Rexrew will be hard pushed to replace it.**

It wasn't all burnt, she said sorrowfully. The afternoon and evening of the riot there had been a steady stream of people walking past the Ward Molecular warehouse carrying pods and cartons of equipment they had looted.

They walked round harbour seven until they came to the quay where the *Coogan* was moored. The ageing tramp trader was in a dilapidated state, with holes in its cabin roof and a long gash in the wood up at the prow where it had struck some snag. Len Buchanan had only just managed to get out of the harbour ahead of the rioters, flinging planks from the cabin walls into the furnace hopper in his desperation.

Gail Buchanan was sitting in her usual place outside the galley doorway, coolie hat shading her sweating face, a kitchen knife almost engulfed by her huge hand. She was chopping some long vegetable root, slices falling into a pewter-coloured pan at her feet. Her eyes fastened shrewdly on Darcy and Lori as they stepped onto the decking. "You again. Len! Len, get yourself out here, we've got visitors. Now, Len!"

Darcy waited impassively. They had used the Buchannans as an information source in the past, occasionally asking them to pick up fleks from assets upriver. But they had proved so unreliable and cranky, Darcy hadn't bothered with them for the last twenty months.

Len Buchanan walked forward from the little engine-room, where he'd been patching the cabin walls. He was

wearing jeans and his cap, a carpenter's suede utility belt hanging loosely round his skinny hips, with only a few tools in its hoops.

Darcy thought he looked hungover, which fitted the talk he'd heard around the port. The *Coogan* had hit hard times of late.

"Have you got a cargo to take upriver?" Darcy asked.

"No," Len said sullenly.

"It's been a difficult season for us," Gail said. "Things aren't like they used to be. Nobody shows any loyalty these days. Why, if it wasn't for us virtually giving our goods away half of the settlements upriver would have starved to death. But do they show any gratitude? Ha!"

"Is the *Coogan* fit to be taken out?" Darcy asked, cutting through the woman's screed. "Now? Today?"

Len pulled his cap off and scratched his head. "Suppose so. Engines are OK. I always service them regular."

"Of course it's in tiptop shape," Gail told him loudly. "There's nothing wrong with the *Coogan*'s hull. It's only because this drunken buffoon spends all his time pining away over that little bitch-brat that the cabin's in the state it is."

Len sighed irksomely, and leant against the galley doorframe. "Don't start," he said.

"I knew she was trouble," Gail said. "I told you not to let her on board. I warned you. And after all we did for her."

"Shut up!"

She glared at him and resumed slicing up the cream-white vegetable.

"What do you want the *Coogan* for?" Len asked.

"We have to get upriver, today," Darcy said. "There's no cargo, only us."

Len made a play of putting his cap back on. "There's trouble upriver."

"I know. That's where we want to go, the Quallheim Counties."

"No," Len Buchanan said. "Sorry, anywhere else in the tributary basin, but not there."

"That's where *she* came from," Gail hissed venomously. "That's what you're afraid of."

"There's a bloody war going on up there, woman. You saw the boats with the posse leaving."

"Ten thousand fuseodollars," Gail said. "And don't you two try haggling with me, that's the only offer you'll get, I'm starving myself as it is. I'll take you up on my own if Lennie's too frightened."

If that's starvation, I'd like to see gluttony, Darcy said.

"This is my boat," Len said. "Made with my own hands."

"Half yours," Gail shouted back, waving the knife at him.

"Half! I have a say too, and I say *Coogan* is going back to the Quallheim. If you don't like it, go and cry in her skirts if she'll have you. Drunken old fool."

If this is the way they carry on, they'll kill each other before we get out of the harbour, Lori said. She watched Len staring at the burnt-out sections of the port, his brown weathered face lost with longing.

"All right," he said eventually. "I'll take you to the mouth of the Quallheim, or as near as we can get. But I'm not going anywhere near the trouble."

"Fair enough," Darcy said. "How long will it take us at full speed?"

"Going upriver?" Len closed his eyes, lips moving around figures. "Without stopping to trade, ten or twelve days. Mind, we'll have to moor in the evenings, and cut logs. You'll have to work your passage."

"Forget that," Darcy said. "I'll have some firewood delivered this afternoon, enough to get us there in one go; we can store it in the forward hold instead of a cargo. And I'll spell you at night, I don't need much sleep. How long travelling like that?"

"A week, maybe," Len Buchannan said. He didn't seem terribly happy with the idea.

"That's fine. We'll start this afternoon."

"We'll take half of the money now, as a deposit," Gail said. A Jovian Bank disk appeared from nowhere in her hand.

"You'll get a thousand now as a deposit, plus five hundred to buy enough food and water for three weeks," Lori said. "I'll pay another two thousand once we leave the harbour

this afternoon, two more when we get to Schuster, and the sum when we get back here.”

Gail Buchannan made a lot of indignant noise, but the sight of actual cash piling up in her disk silenced her.

“Make sure it’s decent food,” Lori told her. “Freeze dried, I’m sure you know where to get stocks of that from.”

They left the Buchannans bickering and went on to a lumber-yard to arrange for the logs to be delivered. It took an hour longer than it should have done to get their order sorted out; the only reason they got it at all was because they were regular customers. The yard was frantically busy with an order for a thousand tonnes of mayope. The laughing foreman told them a lunatic starship captain was planning to carry it to another star.

They were going to make Joshua Calvert’s deadline. Marie Skibbow couldn’t keep the thought out of her mind. It was mid-afternoon, and she was sitting up at the bar in the nearly deserted Crashed Dumper having a celebratory drink. What she really felt like doing was singing and dancing, it was a wonderful experience. All the contacts she’d meticulously built up over the last few months had finally paid off. The deals she put together had clicked into place all the way down the line, smoothing the way for the wood to get from the lumber-yard into orbit with minimum fuss and maximum speed. In fact it had turned out they were being limited by how fast Ashly Hanson could load the foam-covered bundles into the *Lady Macbeth*’s cargo holds. The starship only carried one MSV, which imposed a two hundred and fifty tonne per day restriction. The pilot simply couldn’t work any faster; and not even Marie could obtain a MSV from Kenyon, which was the only other place they were in use within the Lalonde star system. But even so, they should have the last bundle loaded tomorrow, a day before the deadline.

Her Jovian Bank disk was burning like a small thermal-induction field in her sawn-off jeans pocket. Joshua had paid her on the nose, every McBoeing flight that lifted off the spaceport’s metal grid runway saw another batch of fuseodollars added to her account. And he’d given her a

bonus for arranging the lorries. The drivers were taking colonists' farmsteading gear from the spaceport down to the harbour and returning half-empty; it didn't take much organization or money to fix it so they brought the mayope with them when they came back. That way Joshua saved money on an official contract with the haulage company that owned them.

Her first major-league deal. She sipped her iced brightlime, enjoying the bitter taste as it went down her throat. Was this how millionaires felt every day? The total satisfaction which came from tangible accomplishment. And all the famous merchant names in history must have started with a first deal like this, even Richard Saldana, who founded Kulu. Now there was a thought.

But there weren't many opportunities for deals this big on Lalonde. She simply had to leave, that goal had never changed. The money from the deal would be a hefty slice towards the eighteen thousand fuseodollars she needed for a basic set of neural nanonics. Joshua would probably pay her an overall bonus as well. He was honest enough.

Which brought her to the real question of the day: whether or not she was going to go to bed with him. He had certainly asked her often enough over the last four days. He was handsome, if a trifle gaunt, with a good-looking body; and he must be talented after all the girls he'd been with. An owner-captain under twenty-five years old, it would surely run into hundreds. Especially with that grin. He must practise it; so sexy. She rather liked the notion of what they'd be capable of doing to each other if they flung off every inhibition. There had been rumours back at the arcology about the prowess of people geneered for spaceflight, something to do with enhanced flexibility.

And if she did—which she probably would—he might just take her with him when he left. It really wasn't a possibility she could afford to ignore. After Norfolk he said he was planning on returning to Tranquillity. That habitat was premier real estate, superior even to Earth and Kulu. I've already whored my way down the river; whoring to Tranquillity would hardly be a hardship after that.

The Crashed Dumper's door creaked open. A young man

in a blue and red checked shirt and long khaki shorts walked in, and sat down at the other end of the bar. He never even glanced at Marie, which was odd. She was wearing her sawn-off jeans and a dark-orange singlet, long limbs on show. His face looked familiar, early twenties, ruggedly attractive with a neatly trimmed beard. His clothes were new, and clean, made locally. Was he one of Durringham's new generation of merchants? She'd met a lot of them since she got the job at the embassy, and they were always keen to talk while they waited for Ralph Hiltch, her boss.

She pouted slightly. There, if she had neural nanonics she'd have no trouble placing the name.

"Beer, please," he told the barkeeper.

The voice fixed him, it just took a moment for her incredulity to die down. No wonder she hadn't recognized him to start with. She went over to him.

"Quinn Dexter, what the bloody hell are you doing here?"

He turned slowly, blinking at her uncertainly in the pub's filtered light. She held back on a laugh, because it was obvious he didn't recognize her either.

His fingers clicked, and he smiled. "Marie Skibbow. Glad to see you made it to the big city. Everybody wondered if you would. They didn't stop talking about you for a month."

"Yeah, well . . ." She sat on the stool next to him as he paid for his beer from a thick wad of Lalonde francs. That wasn't right, Ivets didn't have hard cash. She waited until the barkeeper went away then dropped her voice. "Quinn, don't tell people who you are. They're killing Ivets in this town right now. It's pretty nasty."

"No problem. I'm not an Ivet any more. I bought myself out of my work time contract."

"Bought yourself out?" Marie had never known you could do that.

"Sure," he winked. "Everything on this planet is financially orientated."

"Ah, right. How did you buy it? Don't tell me dear old Aberdale started being successful."

"No, not a chance, it never changed. I found some gold in the river."

"Gold?"

“Yes, a nugget you wouldn’t believe.” He held up his hand, making a fist. “This big, Marie, and that’s the honest truth. So I kept going back, there was nothing ever as big as that first one, but I built up quite a little hoard. They thought it must have washed down from the mountains on the other side of the savannah, remember them?”

“God, don’t remind me. I don’t want to remember anything about that village.”

“Can’t say I blame you. First thing I did was get out. Sailed straight down the Juliffe on a trader boat; took me a week and I got ripped off by the captain, but here I am. Arrived today.”

“Yeah, I got ripped off too.” Marie studied her glass of brightlime. “So what’s happening upriver, Quinn? Have the Ivets really taken over the Quallheim Counties?”

“It was all news to me when we docked this morning. There was nothing like that in the offing when I left. Maybe they’re fighting over the gold. Whoever owns the motherlode is going to be seriously rich.”

“They’ve sent a load of sheriffs and deputies up there, armed to the teeth.”

“Oh, dear. That doesn’t sound good. Guess I’m lucky I got out when I did.”

Marie realized how hot she had become in the last couple of minutes. When she glanced up she saw the fans had stopped spinning. Bloody typical, right when the sun was at its zenith. “Quinn? How are my family?”

“Well . . .” He pulled a sardonic face. “Your father’s not changed much.”

She lifted her glass level with her face. “Amen.”

“Let’s see; your mother’s OK, your brother-in-law is OK. Oh yes, Paula’s pregnant.”

“Really? God, I’ll be an aunt.”

“Looks like it.” He took a swig of his beer.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Leave. Get on a starship and go, some planet where I can start over.”

“There was that much gold?” she asked.

“Yeah, that much, and then some.”

Marie thought fast, weighing up her options. “I can get

you off Lalonde by tomorrow afternoon, and not back to Earth either, this is a fresh planet the captain is heading for. Clean air, open spaces, and a rock-solid economy.”

“Yeah?” Quinn brightened considerably. The overhead fans began to turn again.

“Yes. I have a contact in the ship, but I charge commission for introducing you.”

“You really landed on your feet, didn’t you?”

“I do OK.”

“Marie, there weren’t any girls on the boat down the river.”

She wasn’t sure how he had suddenly got so close. He was pressed up beside her, and his presence was sending fissures of doubt straight through her self-confidence. Something about Quinn was monstrously intimidating, verging on menacing. “I can help there, I think. I know a place, the girls are clean.”

“I don’t want a *place*, Marie. Dear God, seeing you sitting there triggered all those memories I thought I’d put behind me.”

“Quinn,” she said laconically.

“You think I can help it? You were every Ivet’s wet dream back at Aberdale, we’d spend hours talking about you. There’d be fights over who got on the work detail to your homestead. I did, I got it every time, I made bloody sure I did.”

“Quinn!”

“You were everything I could never have, Marie. Damn Christ, I worshipped you, you were perfection, everything that was right and good in the world.”

“Don’t, Quinn.” Her head was spinning, making her dizzy. What he was saying was crazy, he’d never even noticed her when he walked in the Crashed Dumper. It was so hot, the sweat was running down her back. His arm went round her, making her look into fevered eyes.

“And now here you are again. My very own idol. Like God gave me a second chance. And I’m not giving up this chance, Marie. Whatever it takes, I want you. I want you, Marie.” Then his lips were on hers.

She was shaking against him when he finished the kiss.

“Quinn no,” she mumbled. He tightened his grip, squashing her against him. His chest felt as though it was carved from rock, every muscle a steel band. She couldn’t understand why she wasn’t pushing him away. But she wasn’t, the thought was inconceivable.

“I’m going to make it so good you’re never going to leave me,” he said in a frantic whisper. “I’m going to make you see I’m the one for you, that there is no one else in the whole galaxy who can replace me. I’m going to take you from this atrocity of a planet when I go; and we’re going to live somewhere sweet and beautiful, where there isn’t any jungle, and people are happy. And I’m going to buy us a big house, and I’m going to make you pregnant, and our children are going to be so lovely it hurts to look at them. You’ll see, Marie. You’ll see what true love can bring when you give yourself up to me.”

There were tears in her eyes at the terrible wonderful words. Words that spoke out every dream she owned. And how could he possibly know? Yet there was only desire and yearning in his face. So maybe—please God—just maybe it was true. Because nobody could be so cruel as to lie about such things.

They leant together as they stumbled out of the Crashed Dumper, the pair of them drunk with their own brand of desire.

The Confederation Navy office on Lalonde was a two-storey structure, an oblong box sixty-five metres broad, twenty deep. The outer walls were blue-silver mirrors, broken by a single black band halfway up, which ran round the entire circumference. The flat roof had seven satellite up-links covered by geodesic weather casings that resembled particularly virile bright orange toadstools. Only five of them actually housed communication equipment, the other two covered maser cannon which provided a short-range defence capability. The building was situated in the eastern sector of Durringham, five hundred metres from the dumper which housed the Governor’s office.

It was a class 050-6B office, suitable for phase one colonies and non-capital missions (tropical); a programmed

silicon structure made by the Lunar SII. It had arrived on Lalonde in a cubic container five metres to a side. The Fleet marine engineers who activated it had to sink corner foundations fifteen metres deep into the loam in order to secure it against the wind. The silicon walls might have been as strong as mayope, but they were only as thick as paper; it was terribly vulnerable to even mild gusts. And given Lalonde's temperature there was some speculation that warm air accumulating inside might actually provide sufficient lift to get it airborne.

There were fifty Confederation Navy staff assigned to Lalonde: officers, NCOs, and ratings, who ate, worked, and slept inside. The most active department was the recruitment centre, where fifteen permanent staff dealt with youngsters who shared Marie Skibbow's opinion of their world, but lacked her individual resourcefulness. Enlistment offered a golden ticket offplanet, away from the rain, the heat, and the remorseless physical labour of the farms.

Every time Ralph Hiltch walked through the wide automated entrance doors and breathed in clean, dry, conditioned air he felt just that fraction closer to home. Back in a world of right angles, synthetic materials, uniforms, humming machinery, and government-issue furniture.

A pretty rating barely out of her teens was waiting to escort him from the entrance hall where all the farmboy and -girl hopefuls were queueing in their hand-stitched shirts and mud-stained denim trousers. He opened his lightweight cagoule and shook some of the rain from it as she escorted him up the stairs and into the security zone of the second floor.

Lieutenant-Commander Kelven Solanki was waiting for Ralph Hiltch in his large corner office. A career officer who had left his Polish-ethnic world of Mazowiecki twenty-nine years previously, he was forty-seven: a narrow-faced man with a lean build, several centimetres shorter than Ralph, with thick raven-black hair trimmed to a regular one centimetre. His dark-blue port uniform fitted well, although he'd left the jacket on the back of his desk chair.

Ralph was given a genuinely warm handshake when he

came in, and the rating was dismissed. She saluted smartly and closed the door.

Kelven Solanki's welcoming smile faded considerably as he gestured Ralph to the imitation-leather settee. "Who's going to start?"

He hung his cagoule on the edge of the settee and leaned back. "We're on your home territory, so I'll tell you what I know first."

"OK." Kelven sat on the chair opposite.

"First, Joshua Calvert and the *Lady Macbeth*; stunning though it appears, he is actually genuine as far as we can make out. I've got an inside track: my secretary, Marie, is running a deal for him, so she's keeping a strong tab on him for me. He's bought a thousand tonnes of mayope, got himself an export licence, and he's loading the stuff into his starship as fast as the McBoeing he hired can boost it into orbit. He's made no attempt to get in touch with any known fence, he didn't bring any cargo down in his own spaceplane, legal or illegal, and he'll be gone tomorrow."

Kelven found he was more interested in the independent trader captain than the situation really required. "He's genuinely transporting timber to another star?"

"Yes. To Norfolk, apparently. Which, given their import restrictions, isn't quite as insane as it sounds. They may just have a use for it with their pastoral tech. I haven't decided if he's an idiot or a genius. I'd love to know how he gets on."

"Me too. But he isn't quite the innocent you think he is. The *Lady Macbeth* has an antimatter drive unit. And my last general security file update from Avon carried a report that he was intercepted by a navy voidhawk a couple of months back; Fleet Intelligence was convinced he was trying to smuggle proscribed technology. They actually watched the units being loaded into his cargo bay. Yet when the voidhawk captain searched his ship—nothing. So it doesn't look like he's an idiot."

"Interesting. He's not due to leave until tomorrow, so he might still try something. I'll keep him under close observation. Will you?"

"I have been keeping a quiet eye on Captain Calvert since his arrival, and I'll continue to do so. Now, the Quallheim

Counties situation. I don't like it at all. We've been reviewing the images the chief sheriff's observation satellite has been downloading this morning, and the trouble is spreading into Willow West County. There are several burnt-out buildings in the villages, evidence of fighting, and the fields are being ignored."

"Hell, I didn't know that."

"Well, this time Candace Elford has managed to keep it quiet, at least for now. But the sheriffs and supervisors in the Quallheim Counties and Willow West still insist there's nothing wrong. Those that answer their communication blocks. I think that's the strangest aspect of this situation; I can't see the Ivets pointing a laser at their heads all day every day."

"I find it very hard to believe the Ivets could take over a whole county in the first place, let alone four. Rexrew might be right about an external group being behind it. Were these new Willow West images fuzzed like the last batch from the Quallheim?"

Kelven gave his counterpart a significant look. "Yes, unfortunately they were; and my technical officer can't work out how it was done. She's not the greatest electronic warfare expert in the navy, but she says there isn't even a theory which could account for it. I have to give serious consideration to the fact that Rexrew is right. And there's something else, too."

Ralph broke out of his reverie at the tone.

"I have been *authorized*"—he emphasized the word—"to tell you that Edenist Intelligence agents believe Laton is still alive, and may be on Lalonde, specifically in Schuster County. They say he contacted them to warn them of some kind of xenoc incursion. They left Durringham three days ago, heading upriver to investigate, but not before they made me contact Aethra to update it on the situation. And, Ralph, they looked worried."

"Edenist Intelligence is operative here?" Ralph asked. He'd never had the slightest hint.

"Yes."

"Laton, I think I know the name, some kind of Serpent insurrectionist; but he's not stored in my neural nanonics files.

Probably got him in my processor block back in the embassy.”

“I’ll save you the trouble. His file’s in the computer. It’s not nice reading, but be my guest.”

Ralph datavised the request into the office computer, and sat in a disturbed silence as the information ran through his brain. His training had covered Edenist Serpents, but in a remote, academic fashion. He was used to dealing with mercenaries, blackhawks, smugglers, and devious politicians, not someone like this. The datavise seemed to be pumping cryogenic liquid down his spinal cord. “And the Edenists think he’s on Lalonde?” he asked Kelven, aghast.

“That’s right. They were never sure, but he showed an interest in the place decades ago, so they kept a watch. Now it’s confirmed, he survived the navy assault and came here. According to the agents he called them because whatever is behind the Quallheim disturbances was breaking through his defences.”

“Jesus wept!”

“There is a remote possibility that it was some kind of bluff to attract voidhawks here so he could take them over and get himself and his associates offplanet. But I have to say it’s not likely. It looks like there really is some kind of external influence at work in the Quallheim Counties.”

“The Edenists wanted me to know?”

“Yes. They thought it was important enough to override minor political constraints—their words. They want the First Admiral and your senior Saldanas warned as well as their Jupiter Consensus. Laton by himself would require a major military action, something which can defeat him would probably mean deployment at Fleet level.”

Ralph stared at Kelven Solanki. The navy officer was badly frightened. “Have you told the Governor?”

“No. Rexrew has enough problems. There are over four thousand colonists in the transients’ dormitories who have had their farmsteading gear either burnt or looted. He can’t ship them upriver, and he hasn’t got any replacement gear—nor is he going to get any in the near future. There are three colonist-carrier starships in orbit with their Ivets left in zero-tau; Rexrew can’t bring them down because they’ll be mur-

dered as soon as they step out of the McBoeings. The starship captains aren't authorized to take them back to Earth. There are still sectors in the east of Durringham where full civil order hasn't been re-established. Frankly, given the state of the city, we're expecting widespread civil disobedience within three weeks, sooner if word about the Quallheim revolts spreading downriver reaches town. And with the way those idiot sheriffs leak confidential information, it will. We're looking at virtual anarchy breaking out. I don't consider the Governor as someone we can turn to with this information. He's between the classic rock and a hard place right now."

"You're right," Ralph agreed unhappily. God, why Lalonde? He'd hated the place when it was a seedy backward colony going nowhere. But right now a return to that state would have been a blessing. "I consider it my priority to inform Kulu what's happened, and what may happen with regards to Laton and these possible xenocs in the Quallheim Counties."

"Good. I have the legal authority to declare a system-wide emergency and commandeer any available starship. Hopefully it won't come to that, but I am sending one of my officers up to a colonist-carrier starship and diverting it to Avon. That's in hand now, the *Eurydice* finished unloading all its colonists yesterday, it only has about fifty Ivets left in zero-tau. They'll be transferred over to the *Martijn*, where they can stay until Rexrew works out what he's going to do with them. Barring anything totally unforeseen, *Eurydice* should be leaving within another twelve hours. It'll carry my report to the First Admiral on a diplomatic flek, with another flek for the Edenist Ambassador on Avon. You can include a flek to Kulu's mission at the Confederation Assembly."

"Thank you. Although I haven't got a clue how to compile a report like that. They'll think we're crazy."

Kelven glanced out at the rain bouncing on the dark rooftops. The simplicity of the scene made the events in the distant Quallheim Counties seem surreal. "Maybe we are. But we have to do something."

"The first thing our respective bosses will do is send back for confirmation and more information."

“Yes, I thought about that. We must have that information ready for them.”

“Somebody has to go to the Quallheim Counties.”

“The Edenists are already on their way, but I’d like to send my own team. The marines are itching for the chance, of course. Do you have anyone capable of performing this kind of scout mission? I really think we need to pool resources.”

“I agree with you on that. Hell, I even agree with the Edenists.” And he had to smile cynically at that. “A joint venture would produce the best results. I have a couple of people trained to perform a covert penetration and scout mission. In fact, if you let me have access to the communication circuits on your ELINT satellites I can activate some assets I have upriver, see if they can fill us in on what’s happening.”

“I’ll see you get that.”

“OK, I’ll send my Lieutenant Jenny Harris over to supervise the operation. How were you planning on getting the scout teams upriver?”

Kelven datavised an instruction to the office computer and a wall-mounted screen lit up, showing a map of the Juliffe basin tributary network. The Quallheim Counties showed as a red slash clinging to the southern side of the tributary; Willow West glowed a warning amber to the north-west. The next county along was outlined in black, the name Kristo blinking in white script. “A fast boat up to Kristo County, then horses into the trouble zone. If they left by tomorrow, they ought to arrive around only a day or so after the *Swithland* and its posse, perhaps even a little beforehand.”

“Couldn’t we airlift them in? I can obtain one of the BK133s, they could be there by tonight.”

“And how would they get about? This is a scouting mission, remember. You can’t take horses in a VTOL, and nothing else can get through that jungle.”

Ralph scowled at the map on the screen. “Bugger, you’re right. Hell, this planet is bloody pitiful.”

“Convenient, though. One of the few places in the Confederation where a thousand kilometres makes a mockery of our usual transportation systems. We’re so used to instantaneous response, it spoils us.”

“Yes. Well, if any planet can bring us back to fundamentals, it’s Lalonde.”

The bundle of mayope trunks on the payload-handling truck had been assembled by the ground crew in one of the spaceport’s hangars. A simple enough job, even for this planet’s meagre cargo-preparation facilities; the trunks were almost perfectly cylindrical, a metre wide, cut to the same fifteen-metre length. Bright yellow straps held them together; ten load pins had been spaced correctly around the outside. Yet so far, two of the bundles had fallen apart when Ashly used the MSV’s waldo arm to manoeuvre them from the spaceplane into the *Lady Macbeth’s* hold. The delay had cost them eight hours, and replacement wood had to be ordered and paid for.

Since then Warlow had inspected every bundle before it was loaded into the McBoeing. He’d sent three back to the hangar to be reassembled after he found loose straps, his enhanced audio senses picking up the ground crew’s grumbles when they thought they were out of earshot.

But this bundle seemed satisfactory. The grapple socket plugged into his lower left arm closed around the last loading pin. He braced himself on the truck’s base, and tried to shift the pin. The metal below his feet emitted a hesitant creak as his boosted muscles exerted their carefully measured force. The pin remained perfectly steady.

“OK, load it in,” he told the waiting ground crew. His grapple socket disengaged, and he jumped down onto the rough tarmac.

The truck driver edged the vehicle back under the waiting McBoeing. Hydraulics began to slide the bundle into the lower fuselage cargo hold. Warlow stood beside the spaceplane’s rear wheel bogies, in the shade. His body’s thermal-distribution system had more than enough capacity to cope with Lalonde’s blue-white sun, but he *felt* cooler here.

A power bike rounded the corner of the hangar and turned towards the spaceplane. Two people were riding on it, Marie Skibbow and a young man wearing a check shirt

and khaki shorts. She drew to a halt in front of Warlow, giving the big cosmonik a breezy grin.

Cradles in the spaceplane's hold started to snap shut around the bundle's load pins. The truck's payload-handling mechanism slowly withdrew.

"How's it going?" Marie asked.

"One more flight after this, and we'll be finished," Warlow said. "Ten hours, maximum."

"Great." She swung her leg over the bike's saddle. The young man dismounted a moment later. "Warlow, this is Quinn Dexter."

Quinn smiled amicably. "Warlow, pleasure to meet you. Marie here tells me you're heading for Norfolk."

"That's right." Warlow watched the truck drive off back to the hangar; the bright orange vehicle looked strangely washed out. His neural nanonics reported a small data drop-out from his optical sensors, and he ordered a diagnostics program interrogation.

"This could be fortunate for both of us, then," Quinn Dexter said. "I'd like to buy passage on the *Lady Macbeth*, Marie said you're licensed for passengers."

"We are."

"OK, fine. So how much is a berth?"

"You want to go to Norfolk?" Warlow asked. His optical sensors had come back on line, the diagnostics had been unable to pinpoint the glitch.

"Sure." Quinn's happy smile broadened. "I'm a sales agent for Dobson Engineering. It's a Kulu company. We produce a range of basic farm implements—ploughshares, wheel bearings for carts, that kind of thing. Suitable for low-technology worlds."

"Well, you definitely came to the right place when you came to Lalonde," Warlow said, upping the diaphragm's bass level, his best approximation of irony.

"Yes. But I think I need to wait another fifty years before Lalonde even gets up to low technology. I haven't been able to break into the official monopoly, not even with the embassy's help, so it's time to move on."

"I see. One moment." Warlow used his neural nanonics

to open a channel to the spaceplane's flight computer, and requested a link to the *Lady Macbeth*.

"What is it?" Joshua datavised.

"A customer," Warlow told him.

"Give me a visual," he said when Warlow finished explaining.

Warlow focused his optical sensors on Quinn's face. The smile hadn't faded, if anything it had expanded.

"Must be pretty keen to leave if he's willing to buy passage on *Lady Mac* rather than wait for his berth on a company ship," Joshua said. "Tell him it's forty-five thousand fuseodollars for a zero-tau passage."

There were times when Warlow regretted losing the ability to give a really plaintive sigh. "He'll never pay that," he retorted. If Joshua didn't always try to extort clients they might win more business.

"So?" Joshua shot back. "We can haggle. Besides he might, and we need the money. The expenses I've shelled out on this bloody planet have just about emptied our petty cash account. We'll be breaking into our Norfolk fund if we're not careful."

"My captain is currently charging forty-five thousand fuseodollars for a zero-tau flight to Norfolk," Warlow said out loud.

"Zero-tau?" Quinn sounded puzzled.

"Yes."

He glanced at Marie, who remained impassive.

Warlow waited patiently while the spaceplane's cargo hold doors began to swing shut. His neural nanonics relayed the background chitter of the pilot running through the flight-prep sequence.

"I don't want to travel in zero-tau," Quinn said woodenly.

"Got him. Fifty-five thousand for a real-time cabin," Joshua datavised.

"Then I'm afraid cabin passage will cost you fifty-five thousand," Warlow recited laboriously. "Consumables, food, environmental equipment maintenance, it all adds up."

“Yes, so I see. Very well, fifty-five thousand it is then.” Quinn produced a Jovian Bank disk from his shorts pocket.

“Jesus,” Joshua datavised. “This guy has an expense account a Saldana princeling would envy. Grab the money off him now, before he comes to his senses, then send him up on the McBoeing.” The channel to *Lady Macbeth* closed.

Warlow took his own Jovian Bank credit disk from a small pouch in his utility belt, and proffered it to Quinn Dexter. “Welcome aboard,” he boomed.

16

Oenone reduced and refocused its distortion field, allowing the wormhole terminus to close behind it. It looked round curiously with its many senses. Norfolk was a hundred and sixty thousand kilometres away; and the contrasting light from two different stars fell upon its hull. The upper hull was washed in a rosy glow from Duchess, the system's red-dwarf sun two hundred million kilometres away, darkening and highlighting the blue polyp's elaborate purple web pattern. Duke, the K2 primary, shone a strong yellowish light across the environmentally stabilized pods clasped in *Oenone's* cargo bay from a hundred and seventy-three million kilometres in the opposite direction.

Norfolk was almost in direct conjunction between the binary pair. It was a planet that was forty per cent land, made up of large islands a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand square kilometres each, and uncountable smaller archipelagos. *Oenone* hung over the only sliver of darkness which was left on the surface; for the approaching conjunction had banished night to a small crescent extending from pole to pole, measuring about a thousand kilometres wide at the equator, almost as if a slice had been taken out of the planet. Convoluted seas and winding straits sparkled blue and crimson in their respective hemispheres, and cloud swirls were divided into white and scarlet. Under Duke's glare the land was the usual blend of browns and greens, cool and welcoming, whereas the land illuminated by Duchess had turned a dark vermilion, creased with black folds, a harshly inhospitable domain in appearance.

Syrinx requested and received permission to enter a parking orbit from the civil spaceflight authority. *Oenone* swooped towards the planet in high spirits, chattering hap-

pily to the huge flock of voidhawks ahead of it. Three hundred and seventy-five kilometres above the equator a diamante ring was shimmering delicately against the interstellar blackness as twenty-five thousand starships reflected fragments of light from the twin suns off their mirror-bright thermal panels and communication dishes.

Norfolk's star system wasn't an obvious choice for a terracompatible world. When the Govcentral scoutship *Duke of Rutland* emerged into the system in 2207 a preliminary sensor sweep revealed six planets, all of them solid. Two of them were in orbit twenty-eight million kilometres above Duchess; Westmorland and Brenock, forming their own binary as they tumbled round each other at a distance of half a million kilometres. The other four—Derby, Lincoln, Norfolk, and Kent—orbited Duke. It was soon obvious that only Norfolk with its two moons, Argyll and Fife, could support life.

The already cluttered interplanetary space played host to a pair of major asteroid belts, and five minor belts, as well as innumerable rocks which traded stars as their gravity fields duelled for adherents. There was also a considerable quantity of comets and small pebble-sized debris loose in the system. The scoutship's cosmologist was heard to say that it was almost as though it hadn't quite finished condensing out of the whirling protostar disk.

One final point against colonization was the lack of a gas giant for the Edenists to mine for He3. Without a cheap local source of fuel for fusion, industry and spaceflight would be prohibitively expensive.

With this gloomy prognosis in mind, the *Duke of Rutland* went into orbit around Norfolk to conduct its obligatory resources and environment survey. It was bound to be an odd planet, with its seasons governed by conjunction between the Duke and Duchess rather than its sidereal period: midwinter, which came at a distance of a hundred and seventy-three million kilometres from the coolish primary, was Siberian, while midsummer, at equipoise between two stars, was a time when night vanished completely, bringing a Mediterranean balm. There was no distinction between the usual geographical tropical and temperate zones found on

ordinary worlds (although there were small polar ice-caps); instead the seasons were experienced uniformly across the whole planet. Naturally, the aboriginal life followed this cycle, although there were no wild variants from standard evolutionary patterns. Norfolk turned out to have a lower than usual variety of mammals, marine species, and insects. Hibernation was common, in avian species it replaced migration, and they all bred to give birth in the spring. Nothing unusual there. But the plants would only flower and ripen when they were bathed in both yellow and pink light throughout the twenty-three hour, forty-three minute day. That wasn't a condition which could be duplicated easily anywhere, even on Edenist habitats. It made the plants unique. And uniqueness was always valuable.

The discovery was sufficient for Govcentral's English State to fund a follow-up ecological assessment mission. After three months classifying aboriginal plants for edibility and taste, midsummer came to Norfolk, and the team hit paydirt.

Oenone slipped into orbit three hundred and seventy-five kilometres above the eccentrically coloured planet, and contracted its distortion field until it was only generating a gravity field for the crew toroid and gathering in cosmic energy. The nearby starships were mostly Adamist cargo vessels, big spheres performing slow balletic thermal rolls; with their dump panels extended they looked bizarrely like cumbersome windmills. Directly ahead of *Oenone* was a large cargo clipper with the violet and green loops of the Vasilkovsky line prominent on its hull.

The voidhawk was still conversing eagerly with its fellows when Syrinx, Ruben, Oxley, and Tula took the ion-field flyer down to Kesteven, one of the larger islands seven hundred kilometres south of the equator. Its capital was Boston, a trade centre of some hundred and twenty thousand souls, nestling in the intersection of two gentle valleys. The area was heavily forested, and the inhabitants had only thinned the trees out to make room for their houses, almost camouflaging the city from the air. Syrinx could see some parks, and several grey church spires rising up above the trees. The city's aerodrome was a broad greensward set

aside a mile and a half (Norfolk refused to use metric measurements) to the north of its winding leafy boulevards.

Oxley brought the craft in from the north-west, careful not to overfly the city itself. Aircraft were banned on Norfolk, except for a small ambulance and flying doctor service, and ninety per cent of its interstellar trade was conducted at midsummer, which was the only time the planet ever really saw spaceplanes. Consequently, Norfolk's population were a little sensitive to twenty-five-tonne objects shooting through the sky over their rooftops.

There were over three hundred spaceplanes and ion-field flyers already sitting on the grassy aerodrome when they arrived. Oxley settled three-quarters of a mile from the small cluster of buildings that housed the control tower and aerodrome administration.

The airlock stairs unfolded in front of Syrinx revealing the distant verdant wall of trees, and she saw someone pedalling a bicycle along the long rank of spaceplanes, with a dog running alongside. She breathed in, tasting dry, slightly dusty air with a distinct coppery tang of pollen.

The city's larger than I remember, Ruben said, with a mild sense of perplexity jumbled in with his thoughts.

What I saw looked very orderly, quaint almost. I love the way they've incorporated the forest rather than obliterated it.

He raised his eyebrows in dismay. **Quaint, she says. Well, don't tell the natives that.** He cleared his throat. "And don't use affinity too much while you're around them, they consider it very impolite."

Syrinx eyed the approaching cyclist. It was a boy no more than fourteen years old, with a satchel slung over his shoulder. **I'll remember.**

"They are fairly strict Christians, after all. And our facial expressions give us away."

"I suppose they do. Does the religious factor affect our chances of getting a cargo?"

"Definitely not, they're English-ethnic, far too polite to be prejudiced, at least in public." **And while we're on the subject,** he broadcast to his three shipmates, **no passes, please. They like to maintain the illusion they have high**

moral standards. Let them make the running, they invariably do.

“Who, me?” Syrinx asked in mock horror.

Andrew Unwin rode his bicycle up to the group of people standing beside the gleaming purple flyer and braked to a halt, rear wheel squeaking loudly. He had gingerish hair and a sunny face swamped by freckles. His shirt was simple white cotton, with buttons down the front and the arms rolled up to his elbows; his green shorts were held up by a thick black leather belt with an ornate brass buckle. There wasn’t a modern fabric seal anywhere in sight. He glanced at Syrinx’s smart blue ship-tunic with its single silver epaulette star, and stiffened slightly. “Captain, ma’am?”

“That’s me.” She smiled.

Andrew Unwin couldn’t quite keep his formal attitude going, and the corners of his mouth twitched up towards a grin. “Aerodrome Manager’s compliments, Captain, ma’am. He apologizes for not meeting you in person, but we’re chocker busy right now.”

“Yes, I can see that. It’s very kind of him to send you.”

“Oh, Dad didn’t send me. I’m the Acting Passport Officer,” he said proudly, and drew himself up. “Have you got yours, please? I’ve got my processor block.” He dived into his satchel, which excited the dog, who started barking and jumping about. “Stop it, Mel!” he shouted.

Syrinx found she rather liked the idea of a boy helping out like this, walking up to utter strangers with curiosity and awe, obviously never thinking they might be dangerous. It spoke of an easy-going world which had few cares, and trust was prevalent. Perhaps the Adamists could get things right occasionally.

They handed their passport fleks over one at a time for Andrew to slot into his processor block. The unit looked terribly obsolete to Syrinx, fifty years out of date at least.

“Is Drayton’s Import business in Penn Street still going strong?” Ruben asked Andrew Unwin, overdoing his wide I-want-to-be-friends smile.

Andrew gave him a blank stare, then his pixie face was alive with mirth. “Yes, it’s still there. Why, have you been to Norfolk before?”

"Yes, it was a few years ago now, though," Ruben said.

"All right!" Andrew handed Syrinx her passport flek as his dog sniffed round her feet. "Thank you, Captain, ma'am. Welcome to Norfolk. I hope you find a cargo."

"That's very kind of you." Syrinx sent a silent affinity command to the dog to desist, only to feel foolish when it ignored her.

Andrew Unwin was looking up expectantly.

"For your trouble," Ruben murmured, and his hand passed over Andrew's.

"Thank you, sir!" There was a silver flash as he pocketed the coin.

"Where can we get a ride into town?" Ruben asked.

"Over by the tower, there's lots of taxi cabs. Don't take one that asks for more than five guineas. You can get your money changed in the Admin block after you get through Customs, as well." A small delta spaceplane flew low overhead, compressors whistling as the nozzles started to rotate to the vertical, already deploying its undercarriage. Andrew turned to watch it. "I think there's still some rooms at the Wheatsheaf if you're looking for lodgings." He hopped back on his bicycle and pedalled off towards the spaceplane that was landing, the dog chasing after him.

Syrinx watched him go in amusement. Passport control was obviously a serious business on Norfolk.

"But how do we get to the tower?" Tula asked querulously. Her hand was shielding her eyes from the Duke's golden radiance.

"One guess," Ruben said happily.

"We walk," Syrinx said.

"That's my girl."

Oxley went back into the spaceplane to collect the coolbox loaded with samples of food from Atlantis, and then rummaged through the lockers for their personal shoulderbags. He sent a coded order to the flyer's bitek processor as he came out, and the stairs folded away, the airlock closing silently. Tula picked up the coolbox, and they started off towards the white control tower that was wobbling in the heat shimmer.

“What did he mean about overpaying the taxis?” Syrinx asked Ruben. “Surely they have a standard tariff metre?”

Ruben started chuckling. He slipped Syrinx’s arm through his. “When you say taxi, I suppose you mean one of those neat little cars Adamists always use on developed planets, with magnetic suspension, and maybe air-conditioning?”

Syrinx nearly said: “Well of course.” But the gleam in his eyes cautioned her. “No . . . What do they use here?”

He just pulled her closer and laughed.

The bridge of heaven had returned to the skies. Louise Kavanagh wandered across Cricklade Manor’s paddock with her sister Genevieve, the two of them craning their necks to look up at it. They had come out early every Duke-day morning for the past week to see how it had grown during Duchess-night.

The western horizon was suffused with a huge deep-red corona thrown out by the Duchess as she sank below the wolds, but in the northern quadrant orbiting starships sparkled and shone. Glint-specks of vivid ruby light that raced through the sky, strung together so tightly they formed a near-solid band, like a rainbow of red sequins. The western horizon, where the Duke was rising, had a similar arc, one of pure gold. Directly to the north, the band hung low over the rolling dales of Stoke County, lacking the brightness of the two horizon arcs where the reflection angle was most favourable, but still visible by Duke-day.

“I wish they’d stay for ever,” Genevieve said forlornly. “Summer is a truly lovely time.” She was twelve (Earth) years old, a tall, spindly girl with an oval face and inquisitive brown eyes; she had inherited her mother’s dark hair, which hung halfway down her back in the appropriate style for a member of the land-owning class. Her dress was a pale blue with tiny white dots and a broad lacework collar, complemented with long white socks, and polished navy-blue leather sandals.

“Without winter, summer would never come,” Louise said. “Everything would be the same all year round, and we’d have nothing to look forward to. There are lots of

worlds like that out there." They looked up together at the ribbon of starships.

Louise was the elder of the two sisters, sixteen years old, the heir to the Cricklade estate which was their home, and an easy fifteen inches taller than Genevieve, with hair a shade lighter and long enough to reach her hips when it was unbound. They shared the same facial features, with small noses and narrow eyes, although Louise's cheeks were now more pronounced as her puppy fat burned away. Her skin boasted a clear complexion though to her dismay her cheeks remained obstinately rosy—just like a fieldworker.

This morning she was wearing a plain canary-yellow summer dress; and, wonder of all, this was the year Mother had *finally* allowed her to have a square-cut neck on some of her clothes, although her skirt hems had to remain well below her knees. The audacious necks allowed her to show how she was blossoming into womanhood. This summer there wasn't a young male in Stoke County who didn't look twice as she walked past.

But Louise was quite used to being the centre of attention. She had been since the day she was born. The Kavanaghs were Kesteven's premier family; one of the clanlike network of large rich land-owner families who when acting in concert exerted more influence than any of the regional island councils, simply because of their wealth. Louise and Genevieve were members of an army of relatives who ran Kesteven virtually as a private fiefdom. And the Kavanaghs also had strong blood ties with the royal Mountbattens, a family descended from the original British Windsor monarchy, whose prince undertook the role of planetary constitutional guardian. Norfolk might have been English-ethnic, but it owed its social structure to an idealized version of sixteenth-century Britain rather than the federal republic state of Govcentral which had founded the original colony four centuries ago.

Louise's uncle Roland, the senior of her grandfather's six children, owned nearly ten per cent of the island's arable land. Cricklade Manor's estate itself sprawled over a hundred and fifty thousand acres, incorporating forests and farmland and parkland, even whole villages, providing em-

ployment to thousands of labourers who toiled in its fields and woods and rosegroves, as well as tending to its herds and flocks. Another three hundred families farmed tithed crofts within its capacious boundaries. Craftsmen right across Stoke County were dependent on the industry it generated for their livelihood. And, of course, the estate owned a majority share in the county roseyard.

Louise was the most eligible heiress on Kesteven island. And she adored the position, people showed her nothing but respect, and willingly extended favours without expecting any return other than her patronage.

Cricklade Manor itself was a resplendent three-storey grey-stone building with a hundred-yard frontage. Its long stone-mullioned windows gazed out across a vast expanse of lawns and spinneys and walled orchards. An avenue of terrestrial cedars had been set out to mark out the perimeter of the grounds, geneered to endure Norfolk's long year and peculiar dual bombardment of photons. They had been planted three hundred years ago, and were now several hundred feet in height. Louise adored the stately ancient trees; their graceful layered boughs possessed a mystique which the smaller aboriginal pine-analogues could never hope to match. They were a part of her heritage that was for ever lost among the stars, alluding to a romantic past.

The paddock the sisters were walking through lay beyond the cedars on the western side of the manor, taking up most of a gentle slope that led down to a stream which fed the trout lake. Jumps for their horses were scattered around, unused for weeks in the excitement of the approaching rose crop. Midsummer was always a fraught time for Norfolk, and Cricklade seemed to be at the centre of a small cyclone of activity as the estate geared itself up for the roses when they ripened.

When they tired of the starships' grandeur, Louise and Genevieve carried on down to the water. Several horses with rust-red coats were wandering round the paddock, nuzzling amongst the tufty grass. Norfolk's grass-analogue was reasonably similar to Earth's, the blades were all tubular, and throughout the summer conjunction they produced minute

white flowers at their tips. Starcrowns, Louise had called them when she was much younger.

“Father says he’s thinking of inviting William Elphinstone to act as an assistant estate manager to Mr Butterworth,” Genevieve said slyly as they approached the mouldering wooden bar fence at the foot of the paddock.

“That was clever of Father,” Louise replied, straight faced.

“How so?”

“William will need to learn the practicalities of estate management if he is to take over Glassmoor Hall, and he could have nobody finer than Mr Butterworth to tutor him. That puts the Elphinstones under obligation to Father, and they have powerful connections among Kesteven’s farm merchants.”

“And William will be here for two midsummers, that’s the usual period of tutelage.”

“Indeed he will.”

“And you’ll be here as well.”

“Genevieve Kavanagh, silence that evil tongue this instant.”

Genevieve danced across the grass. “He’s handsome, he’s handsome!” she laughed. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you, especially in those dresses you wear for the dances.” Her hands traced imaginary breasts over her chest.

Louise giggled. “Devil child, you have a faulty brain. I’m not interested in William.”

“You’re not?”

“No. Oh, I like him, and I hope we can be friends. But that’s all. In any case, he’s five years older than me.”

“I think he’s gorgeous.”

“Then you can have him.”

Genevieve’s face fell. “I’ll not be offered anyone so grand. You’re the heiress, after all. Mother will make me marry some troll from a minor family, I’m sure of it.”

“Mother won’t *make* us marry anyone. Honest to goodness, Genny, she won’t.”

“Really truly?”

“Really truly,” Louise said, even though she couldn’t quite bring herself to believe it. Truth to be told, there

weren't that many eligible suitors for her on Kesteven. Hers was an invidious position: a husband should hold equal status, but someone of equal wealth would have his own estate and she would be expected to live there. Yet Cricklade was her life, it was beautiful even in midwinter's long barren months when yards of snow covered the ground, the pine trees on the surrounding wolds were denuded, and the birds buried themselves below the frostline. She couldn't bear the thought of leaving it. So who could she marry? It was probably something her parents had discussed; her uncles and aunts too, most likely.

She didn't like to think about what the outcome would be. At the very least she hoped they would give her a list rather than an ultimatum.

One of the butterflies caught her eye, a geneered red admiral sunning itself on one of the grass blades. It was freer than she was, she realized miserably.

"Will you marry for love, then?" Genevieve asked, all dewy eyed.

"Yes, I'll marry for love."

"That's super. I wish I were as bold."

Louise put her hands on the top rail of the fence, looking across the gurgling stream. Forget-me-nots had run wild on the banks, their blue flowers attracting hordes of butterflies. Some time-distant master of Cricklade had released hundreds of species across the grounds. Every year they flourished, invading the orchards and gardens with their fluttering harlequin colours. "I'm not bold, I'm a dithery dreamer. Do you know what I dream?"

"No." Genevieve shook her head, her face rapt.

"I dream that Father lets me travel before I have to take on any of my family responsibilities."

"To Norwich?"

"No, not the capital, that's just like Boston only bigger, and I'll be going there anyway for finishing school. I want to travel to other worlds and see how their people live."

"Gosh! Travel on a starship, that's stupendously wonderful. Can I come too? Please!"

"If I go, then I suppose Father will have to let you go when you reach your age. Fair's fair."

“He’ll never let me go. I’m not even allowed to go to the dances.”

“But you sneak past Nanny and watch them anyway.”

“Yes!”

“Well, then.”

“He won’t let me go.”

Louise grinned down at her sister’s petulant tone. “It is only a dream.”

“You always make your dreams come real. You’re so clever, Louise.”

“I don’t want to change this world with new ideas,” she said, half to herself. “I just want to be allowed out, just once. Everything here is so duty-bound, so regimented. Some days I feel as though I’ve already lived my life.”

“William could get you away from here. He could ask for a star voyage as a honeymoon; Father could never refuse that.”

“Oh! You impudent baby ogress!” She aimed a lazy swipe at her sister’s head, but Genevieve had already skipped out of range.

“Honeymoon, honeymoon,” Genevieve chanted so loudly that even the nearby horses looked up. “Louise is going on honeymoon!” She picked up her skirts and ran, long slender legs flying over the flower-laden grass.

Louise gave chase, the two of them giggling and squealing in delight as they gallivanted about, scattering the butterflies before them.

Lady Macbeth emerged from her final jump insystem, and Joshua allowed himself a breath of silent relief that they were still intact. The trip from Lalonde had been an utter *bitch*.

For a start Joshua found he neither liked nor trusted Quinn Dexter. His intuition told him there was something desperately wrong about him. Wrong in a way he couldn’t define, but Dexter seemed to drain life from a cabin when he entered. And his behaviour was weird, too; he had no instinct, no natural rhythm for events or conversation, as though he was working on a two-second time-delay to reality.

In fact, if Joshua had met him in the flesh back down on Lalonde's spaceport he probably wouldn't have accepted him as a passenger no matter how much money was stashed in his credit disk. Too late now. Although, thankfully, Dexter had spent most of his time alone in his cabin down in capsule C, venturing out only for meals and the bathroom.

That was one of his more rational quirks. After he'd come on board, he had given the compact bulkheads a quick suspicious look, and said: "I'd forgotten how much mechanization there is on a starship."

Forgotten? Joshua couldn't work that one out at all. How could you forget the way a starship looked?

Yet the oddest thing of all was how inept Dexter was at free-fall manoeuvring. Had he been asked, Joshua would have said that the man had never been in space before. Which was ridiculous, because he was a travelling sales manager. One who didn't have neural nanonics. And one who wore a frightened expression the whole time. There had even been occasions when Joshua had caught him flinching from some sudden metallic sound rattling out of the capsule systems, or the creak of the stress structure as they were under acceleration.

Of course, given *Lady Mac's* performance during the voyage, that part of Dexter's behaviour was almost understandable. Joshua had experienced enough nasty moments on the flight himself. It seemed like there wasn't a system on board that hadn't suffered from some kind of glitch since they boosted out of Lalonde's orbit. What should have been a simple four-day trip had stretched out to nearly a week as the crew tackled power surges, data drop-outs, actuator failures, and dozens of smaller niggling malfunctions. Joshua hated to think what was going to happen when he handed over the maintenance log to the Confederation Astronautics Board's inspectors, they'd probably insist on a complete overhaul. At least the jump nodes had functioned, though he'd even begun to have his doubts about them.

He datavised the flight computer to unfold the thermo-dump panels and extend the sensor booms. Fault alerts jangled in his mind; one of the thermo-dump panels refused to

open past halfway, and three booms were jammed in their recesses.

“Jesus!” he snarled.

There were mutters from the rest of the crew strapped into their bridge couches on either side of him.

“I thought you fixed that fucking panel,” Joshua shouted at Warlow.

“I did!” the answer thumped back. “If you think you can do any better, put on a suit and get out there yourself.”

Joshua ran a hand over his brow. “See what you can do,” he said sullenly. Warlow grunted something unintelligible, and ordered the couch’s straps to release him. He pushed himself towards the open hatchway. Ashly Hanson freed himself, too, and went after the cosmonik to help.

Sensor data was coming in from the booms which were functional. The flight computer started tracking nearby stars to produce an accurate astrogration fix. Norfolk with its divergent illumination looked unusually small for a terracompatible planet. Joshua didn’t have time to puzzle that, the sensors reported laser radar pulses were bouncing off the hull, and a voidhawk distortion field had locked on.

“Jesus, now what?” Joshua asked even as the astrogration fix slipped into his mind. *Lady Mac* had translated two hundred and ninety thousand kilometres above Norfolk, way outside the planet’s designated emergence zone. He groaned out loud and hurriedly datavised the communication dish to transmit their identification code. The Confederation Navy ships patrolling Norfolk would start using *Lady Mac* for target practice soon.

Norfolk was almost unique among the Confederation’s terracompatible planets in that it didn’t have a strategic-defence network. There was no high-technology industry, no asteroid settlements in orbit, and consequently there was nothing worth stealing. Protection from mercenaries and pirate ships wasn’t needed; except for the two weeks every season when the starships came to collect their cargoes of Norfolk Tears.

As the planet moved towards midsummer a squadron from the Confederation Navy’s 6th Fleet was assigned to protection duties, paid for by the planetary government. It

was a popular duty with the crews; after the cargo starships departed they were allowed shore leave, where they were entertained in grand style, and all the crews were presented with a special half-sized bottle of Norfolk Tears by the grateful government.

The *Lady Macbeth's* main communication dish servos spun round once, then packed up. Power-loss signals appeared across the schematic the flight computer was datavis-ing into Joshua's brain. "I don't fucking believe it. Sarha, get that bastard dish sorted out!" Out of the corner of his eye he saw her activate the console by her couch. He routed the *Lady Mac's* identification code through her omnidirectional antenna.

An inter-ship radio channel came alive, and the communication console routed the datavise into Joshua's neural nanonics. "Starship *Lady Macbeth*, this is Confederation Navy ship *Pestravka*. You have emerged outside this planet's designated starship emergence zones, are you in trouble?"

"Thank you, *Pestravka*," Joshua datavis-ed in reply. "We've been having some system malfunctions, my apologies for causing any panic."

"What is the nature of your malfunction?"

"Sensor error."

"That's simple enough to sort out; you should know better than to jump insystem with inaccurate guidance information."

"Up yours," Melvin Ducharme grumbled from his couch.

"The error percentage has only just become apparent," Joshua said. "We're updating now."

"What's wrong with your main communications dish?"

"Overloaded servo, it's scheduled for replacement."

"Well, activate your back-up."

Sarha let out an indignant snort. "I'll point one of the masers at him if he likes. They'll receive that blast loud and bloody clear."

"Complying now, *Pestravka*," Joshua glared at Sarha.

He launched a quiet prayer as the ribbed silver pencil of the second dish slid out of *Lady Macbeth's* dark silicon hull,

and opened like a flower. It tracked round to point at the *Pestravka*.

"I'm datavising a copy of this incident to the Confederation Astronautics Board office on Norfolk," the *Pestravka*'s officer continued. "And I'll add a strong recommendation that they inspect your spaceworthiness certificate."

"Thank you so much, *Pestravka*. Are we now cleared to contact civil flight control for an approach vector? I'd hate to be shot at for not asking your permission first."

"Don't push your luck, Calvert. I can easily take a fortnight searching your cargo holds."

"Looks like your reputation's preceding you, Joshua," Dahybi Yadev said after the *Pestravka* cut the link.

"Let's hope it hasn't reached the planet's surface yet," Sarha said.

Joshua aligned the secondary dish on the civil flight control's communication satellite, and received permission to enter a parking orbit. *Lady Mac*'s three fusion tubes came alive, sending out long rivers of hazy plasma, and the starship accelerated in towards the gaudy planet at a tenth of a gee.

Chinks of light were glinting down into Quinn Dexter's vacant world, accompanied by faint scratchy sounds. It was like intermittent squalls of luminous rain falling through fissures from an external universe. Some beams of light flickered in the far distance, others splashed across him. When they did, he saw the images they carried.

A boat. One of the grotty traders on the Quallheim, little more than a bodged-together raft. Speeding downriver.

A town of wooden buildings. Durringham in the rain.

A girl.

He knew her. Marie Skibbow, naked, tied to a bed with rope.

His heartbeat thudded in the silence.

"Yes," said the voice he knew from before, from the clearing in the jungle, the voice which came out of Night. "I thought you'd like this."

Marie was tugging frantically at her bonds, her figure every bit as lush as his imagination had once conceived it.

“What would you do with her, Quinn?”

What would he do? What *couldn't* he do with such an exquisite body. How oh how she would suffer beneath him.

“You are bloody repugnant, Quinn. But so terribly useful.”

Energy twisted eagerly inside his body, and a phantasm come forth to overlay reality. Quinn's interpretation of the physical form which God's Brother might assume should He ever choose to manifest Himself in the flesh. And what flesh. Capable of the most wondrous assaults, amplifying every degradation the sect had ever taught him.

The flux of sorcerous power reached a triumphal peak, opening a rift into the terrible empty beyond, and so another emerged to take possession as Marie pleaded and wept.

“Back you go, Quinn.”

And the images shrank back to the dry wispy beams of flickering light. “You're not the Light Brother!” Quinn shouted into the nothingness. Fury at the acknowledgement of betrayal heightened his perception, the light became brighter, sound louder.

“Of course not, Quinn. I'm worse than that, worse than any mythical devil. All of us are.”

Laughter echoed through the prison universe, tormenting him.

Time was so different in here . . .

A spaceplane.

A starship.

Uncertainty. Quinn felt it run through him like a hormonal surge. The electrical machinery upon which he was now dependent recoiled from his estranged body, which made his dependence still deeper as the delicate apparatuses broke down one by one. Uncertainty gave way to fear. His body trembled as it tried desperately to quieten the currents of exotic energy which infiltrated every cell.

It wasn't omnipotent, Quinn realized, this thing which controlled his body, it had limits. He let the dribs and drabs of light soak into what was left of his mind, concentrating on what he saw, the words he heard. Watching, waiting. Trying to understand.

Syrinx thought Boston was the most delightful city she had seen in fourteen years of travelling about the Confederation, and that included the sheltered enclaves of houses in the Saturn-orbiting habitats of her birth. Every house was built from stone, with thick walls to keep the heat out during the long summer, then keep it in for the equally long winter. Most of them were two storeys high, with some of the larger ones having three; they had small railed gardens at the front, and rows of stables along the back. Terrestrial honeysuckle and ivy were popular creepers for covering the stonework, while hanging baskets provided cheerful dabs of colour to most porches. Roofs were always steep to withstand the heavy snow, and grey slate tiles alternated with jet-black solar panels in pleasing geometric patterns. Wood was burnt to provide warmth and sometimes for cooking, which produced a forest of chimneys thrusting out of the gable ends, topped by red clay pots with elaborate crowns. Every building, be it private, civic, or commercial, was individual, possessing the kind of character impossible on worlds where mass-production facilities were commonplace. Wide streets were all cobbled, with tall cast-iron street lights spaced along them. It was only after a while she realized that as there were no mechanoids or servitors each of the little granite cubes must have been laid by human hand—the time and effort that must have entailed! There were trees lining each pavement, mainly Norfolk's pine-analogues, with some geneered terrestrial evergreens for variety. Traffic was comprised entirely of bicycles, trike scooters (very few, and mostly with adolescent riders), horses, and horse-drawn cabs and carts. She had seen power vans, but only on the roads around the outskirts, and those were farm vehicles.

After they had cleared Customs (altogether more rigorous than Passport Control) they'd found the horse-drawn taxi coaches waiting by the aerodrome's tower. Syrinx had grinned, and Tula had let out an exasperated groan. But the one they used was well sprung, proving a reasonably smooth trip into town. Following Andrew Unwin's advice, they had rented some rooms at the Wheatsheaf, a coaching house on the side of one of the rivers which the town was built around.

Once they had unpacked and eaten a light lunch in the courtyard, Syrinx and Ruben had taken another coach to Penn Street, the precious coolbox on the floor by their feet.

Ruben watched the traffic and pedestrians parading past with a contented feeling. Starship crews strolling about were easy to spot: their clothes of synthetic fabric were curiously bland in comparison to the locals' attire. Bostonians in summer favoured bright colours and raffish styles; this year multicoloured waistcoats were in vogue among the young men, while the girls wore crinkled cheesecloth skirts with bold circular patterns (hems always below their knees, he noted sadly). It was like stepping back into pre-spaceflight history, though he suspected no historical period on Earth was ever as clean as this.

"Penn Street, gov'nor," the driver cried as the horse turned into a road parallel to the River Gwash. It was the commercial sector of the city, with wharves lining the river, and a lengthy rank of prodigious warehouses standing behind them. Here for the first time they encountered powered lorries. A railway marshalling yard was visible at the other end of the dusty road.

Ruben looked down the long row of warehouses and busy yards and offices, only too well aware of Syrinx's gaze hot on his neck. Mordant thoughts started pressing against his mind. Drayton's Import wasn't *in* Penn Street, it was Penn Street. The name was on signs across every building.

"Where to now, gov'nor?" the driver asked.

"Head Office," Ruben replied. The last time he'd been here, Drayton's Import had consisted of a single office in a rented warehouse.

Head Office turned out to be a building in the middle of the street, on the waterfront side, sandwiched between two warehouses. Its arched windows were all iron rimmed, and a large, brightly polished brass plaque was set in the wall next to the double doors. The cab pulled to a halt in front of its curving stone stairs.

"Looks like old Dominic Kavanagh is doing all right for himself," Ruben said as they climbed out. He handed the driver a guinea, with a sixpenny piece for a tip.

Syrinx's stare could have cut diamond.

“Old Dominic, one of the best. Boy, did we have some times together, he knows every pub in town.” Ruben wondered who his bravado was intended to reassure.

“Exactly how long ago was this?” Syrinx asked as they walked into reception.

“About fifteen or twenty years,” Ruben offered. He was sure that was it, although he had a horrible feeling that Dominic had been the same age as himself. That’s the trouble with crewing a voidhawk, he thought, every day the same, and all of them squashed together. How am I supposed to know the exact date?

The reception hall had a black and white marble floor, and a wide staircase leading up the rear wall. A young woman sat behind a desk ten yards inside the door, a uniformed concierge standing beside her.

“I’d like to see Dominic Kavanagh,” Ruben told her blithely. “Just tell him Ruben’s back in town.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “I don’t think we have a Kavanagh of that name working here.”

“But he owns Drayton’s Import,” Ruben said forlornly.

“Kenneth Kavanagh owns this establishment, sir.”

“Oh.”

“Can we see him?” Syrinx asked. “I have flown all the way from Earth.”

The woman took in Syrinx’s blue ship-tunic with its silver star. “Your business, Captain?”

“As everyone else, I’m looking for a cargo.”

“I’ll ask if Mr Kenneth is in.” The woman picked up a pearl handset.

Eight minutes later they were being ushered into Kenneth Kavanagh’s office on the top floor. Half of one wall was an arched window giving a view out over the river. Broad barges were gliding over the smooth black water, as sedate as swans.

Kenneth Kavanagh was in his late thirties, a broad-shouldered man wearing a neat charcoal-grey suit, white shirt, and a red silk tie. His raven-black hair was glossed straight back from his forehead.

Syrinx almost paid him no attention at all. There was another man in the room, in his mid-twenties, with a flat,

square-jawed face, and a mop of pale copper hair combed into a rough parting. He had the kind of build Syrinx associated with sportsmen, or (more likely on this world) outdoor labourers. His suit was made from some shiny grey-green material. The jacket's left arm was flat, pinned neatly to his side. Syrinx had never seen anyone with a limb missing before.

You're staring, Ruben warned her as he shook hands with Kenneth Kavanagh.

Syrinx felt the blood warm her ears. **But what's wrong with him?**

Nothing. They don't allow clone vats on this planet.

That's absurd. It forces him to go through life crippled, I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Medical technology is where the big arguments rage about what they should and shouldn't permit. And wholesale cloning is pretty advanced.

Syrinx recovered and extended her hand to Kenneth Kavanagh. He said hello, then introduced the other man as: "My cousin Gideon."

They shook hands, Syrinx trying to avoid eye contact. The young man had such a defeated air it threatened to drag her down into whatever private misery he was in.

"Gideon is my aide," Kenneth said. "He's learning the business from the bottom upwards."

"It seems the best thing," Gideon Kavanagh said in a quiet voice. "I can hardly manage the family estate now. That requires a great deal of physical involvement."

"What happened?" Ruben asked.

"I fell from my horse. Bad luck, really. Falling is part of horse riding. This time I landed awkwardly, took a fence railing through my shoulder."

Syrinx gave him an ineffectual grimace of sympathy, unsure what to say. *Oenone* was in her mind, its presence alone immensely supportive.

Kenneth Kavanagh indicated the chairs in front of his pale wooden desk. "It's certainly a pleasure to have you here, Captain."

"I think you've said that to a few captains this week," she told him wryly as she sat down.

“Yes, a few,” Kenneth Kavanagh admitted. “But a first-time captain is always welcome here. Some of my fellow exporters take a blasé approach about our planet’s product, and say there will always be a demand. I think a little warmth in the relationship never comes amiss, especially as it is just the one product upon which our entire economy is so dependent. I’d hate to see anyone discouraged from returning.”

“Am I going to have cause to be discouraged?”

He spread his hands. “We can always find the odd case or two. What exactly is your starship’s capacity?”

“*Oenone* can manage seven hundred tonnes.”

“Then I’m afraid that a little bit of disappointment is going to be inevitable.”

“Old Dominic always kept some cases back for a decent trade,” Ruben said. “And we certainly have a trade in mind.”

“You knew Dominic Kavanagh?” Kenneth asked with a note of interest.

“I certainly did. Your father?”

“My late grandfather.”

Ruben’s shoulders sank back into his seat. “Hoh, boy, he was such a lovely old rogue.”

“Alas, his wisdom is sorely missed by all of us.”

“Did he go from natural causes?”

“Yes. Twenty-five years ago.”

“Twenty-five . . .” Ruben appeared to lose himself in reverie.

I’m sorry, Syrinx told him.

Twenty-five years. That means I must have been here at least thirty-five years ago, probably more. Bugger, but there’s no fool like an old fool.

“You mentioned a trade,” Kenneth said.

Syrinx patted the coolbox on the floor by her chair. “The best Atlantis has to offer.”

“Ah, a wise choice. I can always sell Atlantean delicacies; my own family alone will eat half of them. Do you have an inventory?”

She handed over a sheaf of hard copy. There was no desktop processor block, she noticed, although there was a keyboard and a small holoscreen.

Kenneth read down the list, his eyebrows raised in appreciation. "Excellent, I see you have brought some orangesole, that's one of my personal favourites."

"You're in luck, there are five fillets in this coolbox. You can see if they're up to standard."

"I'm sure they are."

"None the less, I'd like you to accept the contents as my gift for your hospitality."

"That's really most kind, Syrinx." He started touch-typing on the keyboard, looking directly at the holoscreen. She was sure her fingers couldn't move at such a speed.

"Happily, my family has interests in several roseyards on Kesteven," Kenneth said. "As you know, we can't officially sell any Norfolk Tears until midsummer when the new crop is in; however, there is an informal allocation system operating amongst ourselves which I can make use of. And I see my cousin Abel has several cases unclaimed, he owns the Eaglethorpe estate in the south of Kesteven. They produce a very reasonable bouquet in that district. Regrettably, I can't offer you a full hold, but I think possibly we can provide you with six hundred cases of bottled Tears, which works out at just under two hundred tonnes."

"That sounds quite satisfactory," Syrinx said.

"Jolly good. So, that just leaves us with the nitty-gritty of working out a price."

Andrew Unwin loaded Quinn Dexter's passport flek into his processor block, and the unit immediately went dead. He rapped on it with his knuckles, but nothing happened. The three men from the spaceplane were watching him keenly. Andrew knew his cheeks would be bright scarlet. He didn't like to think what his father would say. Passport Officer was an important job.

"Thank you, sir." Andrew meekly handed the unread flek back to Quinn Dexter, who took it without comment. Mel was still barking, from a distance, hiding behind the front wheel of his bike. The dog hadn't stopped since the group trotted down the spaceplane's airlock stairs.

And the day had been going so well until the spaceplane from the *Lady Macbeth* landed.

"Is that it?" Joshua asked, his voice raised above the barking.

"Yes, thank you, Captain, sir. Welcome to Norfolk. I hope you find a cargo."

Joshua grinned, and beckoned him over. The two of them walked away from Quinn Dexter and Ashly Hanson who waited at the foot of the stairs, the dog scampering after them.

"Good of you to deal with us so promptly," Joshua said. "I can see the aerodrome's busy."

"It's my job, Captain, sir."

Joshua took a bundle of leftover Lalonde francs from his ship-suit pocket, and slipped three out. "I appreciate it." The plastic notes were pressed into the boy's hand. A smile returned to his face.

"Now tell me," Joshua said in a low tone. "Someone who can be trusted with passport duty must know what goes on around here, where the bodies are buried, am I right?"

Andrew Unwin nodded, too nervous to speak. What bodies?

"I hear there are some pretty important families on Norfolk, do you know which is the most influential here on Kesteven?"

"That would be the Kavanaghs, Captain, sir. There's dozens and dozens of them, real gentry; they own farms and houses and businesses all over the island."

"Do they have any roseyards?"

"Yes, there's several of their estates which bottle their own Tears."

"Great. Now, the big question: do you know who handles their offworld sales for them?"

"Yes, Captain, sir," he said proudly. That wad of crisp notes was still in the captain's hand, he did his best not to stare at it. "You want Kenneth Kavanagh for that. If anyone can find you a cargo, he can."

Ten notes were counted off. "Where can I find him?"

"Drayton's Import company, in Penn Street."

Joshua handed over the notes.

Andrew folded them with practised alacrity, and shoved them in his shorts pocket. After he'd ridden twenty yards

from the spaceplane his processor block let out a quiet bleep. It was fully functional again. He gave it a bewildered look, then shrugged and rode off towards the spaceplane that was just landing.

Judging by the receptionist's initial attitude, Joshua guessed he wasn't the first starship captain to come knocking at Drayton's Import this week. But he managed to catch her eye as she held the pearl handset to her ear, and earned a demure smile.

"Mr Kavanagh will see you now, Captain Calvert," she said.

"That's very kind of you to press my case."

"Not at all."

"I wonder if you could recommend a decent restaurant for tonight. My associate and I haven't eaten for hours, we're looking forward to a meal. Somewhere you use, perhaps?"

She straightened her back self-consciously, and her voice slid up a social stratum. "I sometimes visit the Metropole," she said airily.

"Then I'm sure it must be delightful."

Ashly raised his eyes heavenwards in silent appeal.

It was another quarter of an hour before they were shown into Kenneth Kavanagh's office. Joshua didn't shirk from eye contact with Gideon when Kenneth introduced them. He got the distinct impression the amputee victim was suppressing extreme nervousness, his face was held too rigidly, as if he was afraid of showing emotions. Then he realized that Kenneth was watching his own reaction. Something about the situation wasn't quite right.

Kenneth offered them seats in front of the desk as Gideon explained how he'd lost his arm. The restriction on medical cloning was a stiff one, Joshua thought, although he could appreciate the reasoning. Once the line was drawn, Norfolk had to stick to it. They wanted a stable pastoral culture. If you opened the doors to one medical technology, where did you stop? He was glad he didn't have to decide.

"Is this your first visit to Norfolk, Captain?" Kenneth asked.

"Yes. I only started flying last year."

“Is that so? Well, I always like to welcome first-time captains. I believe it’s important to build up personal contacts.”

“That sounds like a good policy.”

“Exporting Norfolk Tears is our lifeblood, alienating starship captains is not a wise option.”

“I’m hoping I won’t be alienated.”

“And so do I. I try not to send anyone away empty handed, although you must understand there is a high level of demand, and I do have long-established customers to whom I owe a certain loyalty. And most of them have been here a week or more already. I have to say, you have left it somewhat late. What sort of cargo size were you thinking of?”

“*Lady Mac* can boost a thousand tonnes without too much trouble.”

“Captain Calvert, there are some of my oldest customers who don’t get that many cases.”

“I have a trade proposition for you, a part exchange.”

“Well, a trade is always helpful; although Norfolk’s import laws are rather strict. I couldn’t countenance breaking, or even bending them. I have the family reputation to consider.”

“I understand perfectly,” Joshua said.

“Jolly good. What is it you’ve brought?”

“Wood.”

Kenneth Kavanagh gave him a stupefied stare, then burst out laughing. Even Gideon’s sombre expression perked up.

“Wood? Are you serious?” Kenneth asked. “Your starship hold is full of wood?”

“A thousand tonnes.” Joshua turned the seal of the shoulder-bag and pulled out the black wedge of mayope he’d brought. He had chosen it specially in the lumberyard back on Lalonde. It was a standard slice, twenty-five centimetres long, but the bark was still attached, and more importantly, there was a small twig with a few shrivelled leaves. He dropped it on the middle of the desk, making a solid thud.

Kenneth stopped laughing and leaned forward. “Good Lord.” He tapped it with a fingernail, then gave it a harder knock with his knuckles.

Without speaking, Joshua handed over a stainless steel chisel.

Kenneth applied the sharp blade to the wood. "I can't even scratch it."

"You normally need a fission blade to cut mayope. But it can be cut with the mechanical power saws you have on Norfolk," Joshua said. "Though it's a brute of a job. As you can imagine, once it's cut into shape it's incredibly hard wearing. I expect your artisans could come up with a few interesting applications if they put their minds to it."

Kenneth picked the wedge up in one hand to test the weight, pulling thoughtfully on his lower lip with the other. "Mayope, you call it?"

"That's right, it comes from a planet called Lalonde. Which is tropical; in other words it won't grow here on Norfolk. Not without extensive geneering, anyway." He looked at Gideon who was standing behind Kenneth's chair. The man showed a certain admiration for the wood, but he wasn't particularly involved, not like his senior cousin. Surely an aide should at least ask one question? But then he hadn't said a word since they had been introduced. Why was he present? Joshua instinctively knew the reason was important. If the Kavanaghs were as eminent as they appeared, even an injured one wouldn't be wasting time standing about in an office doing nothing.

He thought of Ione again. "Trust yourself when it comes to people," she'd said.

"Have you been to any other importer with this?" Kenneth asked cautiously.

"I only arrived today. Naturally, I came to a Kavanagh first."

"That's most courteous of you to honour my family in such a fashion, Captain. And I'd very much like to return the gesture. I'm sure we can come to some arrangement. As you know, roseyards aren't legally allowed to sell their produce before the new crop comes in, but fortunately my family does have an unofficial allocation system. Let me see what I can find for you." He put the mayope down and began typing.

Joshua met Gideon's gaze levelly. "Did you lead a very physically active life before your accident?"

"Yes, we of the gentry do tend to enjoy our sports. There is little to do in Kesteven during the winter months, so we have an extensive range of events to amuse us. My fall was a sorry blow."

"So office life doesn't really suit you?"

"It's the best occupation given my circumstances, I felt."

Kenneth had stopped typing.

"You know, you wouldn't be nearly so restricted in free fall," Joshua said. "There are many people with medical problems who lead very full lives on starships and industrial stations."

"Is that so?" Gideon asked tonelessly.

"Yes. Perhaps you'd care to consider it? I have a vacancy on board *Lady Macbeth* at the moment. Nothing technical, but it's decent work. You could try it for a Norfolk year, see if it's more agreeable to you than office work. If not, I'll bring you back when I return for another cargo of Tears next summer. The pay is reasonable, and I provide insurance for all my crew." Joshua looked straight at Kenneth. "Which includes complete medical cover."

"That is extraordinarily generous of you, Captain," Gideon said. "I'd like to accept those terms. I'll try ship-board life for a year."

"Welcome aboard."

Kenneth resumed typing, then studied the holoscreen display. "You're in luck, Captain Calvert. I believe I can supply you with three thousand cases of Norfolk Tears, which comes to approximately one thousand tonnes. My cousin Grant Kavanagh has some extensive rosegroves in his Cricklade estate, and he hasn't yet placed all the cases. That district produces an absolutely first-rate bouquet."

"Wonderful," Joshua said.

"I'm sure cousin Grant will want to meet such an important client," Kenneth said. "On behalf of the family, I extend an invitation to you and Mr Hanson to stay at Cricklade for the midsummer harvest. You can see our famous Tears being collected."

The light from Duchess was just making its presence felt as Joshua and Ashly walked out of the Drayton's Import office. Norfolk's short period of darkness was giving way to the light of the red dwarf. Walls and cobbles were acquiring a pinkish shading.

"You did it!" Ashly whooped.

"Yeah, I did," Joshua said.

"A thousand tonnes, I've never heard of anyone getting that much before. You are the sneakiest, most underhand, deviously corrupt little bugger I have met in all my centuries." He flung an arm round Joshua's neck and dragged him towards the main street. "God damn, but we're going to be rich. Medical insurance, by God! Joshua you are beautiful!"

"We'll put Gideon in zero-tau till we reach Tranquillity. It shouldn't take a clinic more than eight months to clone a new arm for him. He can enjoy himself with Dominique's party set for the rest of the time after that. I'll have a word with her."

"How's he going to explain away a new arm when he gets back?"

"Jesus, I don't know. Magic clockwork, I expect. This world is backward enough to believe it."

Laughing, the two of them waved for a taxi coach.

When Duchess had risen well above the horizon, sending her bold scarlet rays to discolour the city, Joshua settled himself on a stool in the Wheatsheaf's wharfside bar and ordered a local brandy. The view outside the window was fascinating, casting everything in tones of red. Some colours were almost invisible. A regular train of barges sailed down the willow-lined river, helmsmen standing by the big tillers at the rear.

It was wonderful to watch, the whole city was a giant tourist fantasy pageant. But some of the inhabitants must lead incredibly dull lives, doing the same thing day after day.

"We worked out how you did it eventually," a female voice said in his ear.

Joshua turned, putting his eyes level with a delightful

swelling at the front of a blue satin ship-tunic. "Captain Syrinx, this is a pleasure. Can I get you a drink? This brandy is more than passable, I can recommend it, or perhaps you'd like a wine?"

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"No, I'll drink anything."

"I don't know how you can sleep at night. Antimatter kills people, you know. It's not a game, it's not funny."

"A beer, maybe?"

"Good day, Captain Calvert." Syrinx started to walk past.

Joshua caught her arm. "If you don't join me for a drink, how can you brag about working *it* out? And incidentally demonstrate how superior you Edenists all are to us poor mud-chewing primitives. Or maybe you don't want to hear my counter-argument. After all, you've convinced yourself I'm guilty of something. I don't even know what that is yet. Nobody ever had the decency to tell me what you thought I was carrying. Have Edenists left justice behind as well as the rest of our poor flawed Adamist customs?"

Syrinx's mouth dropped open. The man was intolerable! How did he twist phrases like that? It was almost as if she was in the wrong. "I never said you were a mud-chewing primitive," she hissed. "That's not what we think at all."

Joshua's eyes slid pointedly to one side. Syrinx realized everyone in the bar was staring at them.

Are you all right? *Oenone* asked anxiously, picking up on the flustered thoughts in her skull.

I'm fine. It's this bloody Calvert man again.

Oh, is Joshua there?

"Joshua?" She winced. She'd been so surprised at *Oenone's* use of his first name it had slipped out.

"You remembered," Joshua said warmly.

"I . . ."

"Have a stool, what are you drinking?"

Furious and embarrassed, Syrinx sat on a barstool. At least it would stop everyone from looking. "I'll try a wine."

He signalled the barmaid for drinks. "You're not wearing your naval stripe."

"No. Our duty tour finished a few weeks back."

"So you're an honest trader now?"

“Yes.”

“Have you got yourself a cargo?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Hey, that’s great news, well done. These Norfolk merchants are tough buggers to crack. I got the *Lady Mac* stocked up, too.” He collected the drinks, and touched his glass to hers. “Have dinner with me tonight, we can celebrate together.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you have a previous engagement?”

“Well . . .” she couldn’t bring herself to lie outright, that would make her no better than him. “I was just on my way to bed. It’s been a long day with some tough negotiations. But thanks for the invitation. Another time.”

“That’s a real shame,” he said. “Looks like you’ve condemned me to a terminally dull evening, then. There’s only my pilot down here, and he’s too old for my kind of fun-seeking. I’m waiting for him now. We seem to have lost our paying passenger. Not that I’m complaining, he wasn’t the party type. Apparently there’s a good restaurant in town called the Metropole, we were going to check it out. It’s our one night in town, we’ve been invited to an estate for the midsummer itself. So, tough negotiations, eh? How many cases did you get?”

“You were a decoy,” Syrinx said, jumping at the chance to get a word in.

“I’m sorry?”

“You were smuggling antimatter-confinement coils into the Puerto de Santa Maria system.”

“Not me.”

“We were trailing you all the way from Idria, we’d got you in our sensors every kilometre. That’s what we couldn’t understand. It was a direct flight. The confinement coils were on board when you left, and they were gone when you arrived. At the time we assumed you hadn’t rendezvoused with anybody, because we never detected them. But then you didn’t know we were there, did you?”

Joshua drank some of his brandy, his eyes never leaving her over the rim of the glass. “No, you were in full stealth mode, remember?”

“So was your friend.”

“What friend?”

“You took a long time to manoeuvre into each jump coordinate. I’ve never seen anyone so clumsy before.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“No, but nobody’s that imperfect either.” She took a sip of the wine. Oh, he was a canny one, this Joshua Calvert; she could see why she’d been fooled before. “What I think happened was this. You had your friend waiting a light-month outside the New California system, in full stealth mode, at a very precise coordinate. When you left Idria you jumped to within a few thousand kilometres of him. It would be difficult, but you could do that. With the nodes the *Lady Macbeth* is equipped with, and your own astrogration skill, that sort of accuracy is possible. And who would suspect? Nobody is that accurate jumping out of a system; it’s when you come insystem you need precision to jump into the correct emergence zones.”

“Go on, this is riveting stuff.”

She took another sip. “Once you jumped outsystem, you shoved the illegal coils out of the cargo hold, and jumped away again. We couldn’t detect that sort of dump of inert mass, not by using passive sensors at the distance we were operating from. Then as soon as *Oenone* and *Nephele* jumped in pursuit, your friend moved in and picked them up. So while you were taking an age to get to Puerto de Santa Maria, and keeping us occupied tracking you, he was racing on ahead. The coils were already there by the time we arrived.”

“Brilliant.” Joshua tossed down the last of his brandy and called the barmaid over. “That would work, wouldn’t it?”

“It did work.”

“No, not really. You see, your hypothesis is based on one assumption. Tragically false.”

Syrinx picked up the second glass of wine. “What’s that?”

“That I’m an ace astrogrator.”

“I think you are.”

“Right, so on a normal commercial run I would use this alleged skill of mine to shave hours off the journey time, wouldn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“So I would have used this skill to get here, to Norfolk, wouldn’t I? I mean, I brought a cargo to trade, I’m not going to waste time, money, and fuel getting it here, now am I?”

“No.”

“Right, so first of all ask the captain on the good ship *Pestravka* when and where I emerged in the Norfolk system. Then you can go and check my departure time from Lalonde, and work out how long it took me. Tell me after that if you think I’m a good astrogrator.” He gave her an annoying toothsome smile.

Thanks to *Oenone*, she was instantly aware of Lalonde’s spacial location; how long it ought to take an Adamist starship of *Lady Macbeth*’s class and performance to make the trip. “How long did it take you?” she asked in resignation.

“Six and a half days.”

It shouldn’t have taken them that long, *Oenone* said.

Syrinx said nothing. She simply couldn’t bring herself to believe he was innocent. His whole attitude spelt complicity.

“Ah, here’s Ashly now.” Joshua stood and waved at the pilot. “And simply because you committed an extraordinarily rude *faux pas* don’t think you have to pay for the drinks to make up for it. They’re on me, I insist.” He raised his glass. “Here’s to mutual understanding and future friendship.”

17

The *Coogan's* battered prow was riding heavily over the steep wavelets the Zamjan tributary sent rushing down its length towards the Juliffe. Lori could feel the length of the light trader boat exaggerating each pitch as they drove against the current. After four and a half days nothing about the *Coogan* bothered her any more; it creaked continually, the engines produced a vibration felt throughout every timber, it was hot, dark, airless, and cramped. But enforced routine had made it all inconsequential. Besides, she spent a lot of time lying inertly on her cot, reviewing the images the eagles Abraham and Catlin provided her.

Right now the birds were six kilometres ahead of *Coogan*, gliding five hundred metres above the water, with just the occasional indolent flick of a wing needed to maintain their flight. The jungle on either side of the swollen river was choked with mist from the rain that had just fallen, swan-white wisps clinging to the glistening green trees like some kind of animate creeper. There was no understanding the jungle's immensity, Lori thought. The sights she saw through the eagles brought home how little impression the settlers had made on the Juliffe basin in twenty-five years. The timorous villages huddled along the riverbanks were a sorry example of the human condition. Microscopic parasites upon the jungle biota rather than bold challengers out to subdue a world.

Abraham saw a ragged line of smoke staining the sky ahead. A village cooking pit, judging by the shape and colour: she'd certainly had enough practice over the last few days to recognize one. She consulted her bitek processor block, and the visualization of the Zamjan eclipsed the image from the eagles. A vast four-hundred-kilometre river

in its own right, the broad tributary was the one which the Quallheim emptied into. Inertial guidance coordinates flicked round. The village was called Oconto, founded three years ago. They had an asset planted there, a man by the name of Quentin Montrose.

Lori, Darcy called, I think there's another one, you'd better come and have a look.

The visualization withdrew into the bitek processor. **I'm on my way.** She opened her eyes, and looked out through the nearest slit in the side of the rickety cabin wall. All she could see was the grizzled water being lashed by the squall. Warm droplets ran along the inside of the roof, defying gravity before they plopped down on the cots where she and Darcy had spread their sleeping-bags. There was more room now a third of the logs had been fed into the insatiable hopper, but she still had to squirm out through the Buchannans' cabin and the galley.

Gail was sitting at the table on one of the special stools that could take her weight. Packets of freeze-dried food were strewn across the greasy wood in front of her. "What would you like tonight?" she asked as Lori hurried past.

"Doesn't matter."

"That's typically thoughtless. How am I supposed to prepare an adequate meal for people who won't help? It would serve all of you right if I was to do nothing but boiled rice. Then you'd all moan and complain, I'd be given no peace at all."

Lori gave her a grimace-smile and ducked through the hatch out onto the deck. The fat woman disgusted her, not just her size, but her manner. Gail Buchanan surely represented the antithesis of Edenism, everything her culture strove to distance themselves from in human nature.

Rain was pelting down on the little wheel-house's solar-cell roof. Darcy and Len Buchanan were inside, hunched against the drops which came streaking in through the open sides. Lori dashed the four metres round to the door, drenching her loose grey jacket in the process.

"It'll be over in a minute," Darcy said. Up ahead, the end of the steel rainclouds was visible as a bright haze band surmounting the river and jungle.

"Where's the boat?" she asked, screwing her eyes against the stinging rain.

"There." Len raised a hand from the wheel and pointed ahead.

It was one of the big paddle-boats used to take colonists upriver, slicing imperiously through the water towards them. It didn't pitch about like the *Coogan*, its greater mass kept it level as the wavelets broke against its side and stern. Smoke streamed almost horizontally from its twin stacks.

"Dangerous fast, that is," Len said. "Specially for these waters. Plenty of foltwine about; catch a bundle of that in the paddle and she'll do her bearings a ton of damage. And we're heading into the snowlily season now as well, they're as bad as foltwine when they stick together."

Lori nodded briefly in understanding. Len had pointed out the thin grasslike leaves multiplying along the shallow waters near the shores, fist-sized pods just beginning to rise above the surface. Snowlilies bloomed twice every Lalonde year. They looked beautiful, but they caused havoc with the boats.

In fact Len Buchanan had opened up considerably once the trip started. He still didn't like the idea of Lori and Darcy steering his precious boat, but had grudgingly come to admit they could manage it almost as well as himself. He seemed to enjoy having someone to talk to other than his wife; he and Gail hadn't shared ten words since they cast off from Durringham. His conversation was mostly about river lore and the way Lalonde was developing, he had no interest in the Confederation. Some of the information was useful to her when she took the wheel. He seemed surprised by the way she remembered it all. The only time he'd gone sullen on her was when she told him her age, he thought it was some kind of poor-taste joke; she looked about half as old as he did.

The three of them watched the paddle-boat race past. Len turned the wheel a couple of points, giving it a wide passage. Darcy switched his retinal implants up to full resolution and studied the deck. There were about thirty-five people milling about on the foredeck; farmer-types, the men with thick beards, women with sun-ripened faces, all in clothes

made from local cloth. They paid very little attention to the *Coogan*, apparently intent on the river ahead.

Len shook his head, a mystified expression in place. "That ain't right. The *Broadmoor* ought to be in a convoy, three or more. That's the way them paddlers always travel. Captain didn't call us on the radio neither." He tapped the short-range radio block beside the forward-sweep mass-detector. "Boats always talk out here, ain't so much traffic as you can ignore each other."

"And those weren't colonists on the deck," Darcy said.

The *Coogan* pitched up hard as the prow reached the first of the deep furrows of water which the wayward *Broadmoor* produced in its wake.

"Not going downriver, no," Len said.

"Refugees?" Lori suggested.

"Possibly," Darcy said. "But if the situation is that bad, why weren't there more of them?" He replayed the memory of the paddle-boat. It was the third they had encountered in twenty hours; the other two had steamed past in the dark. The attitude of the people on deck bothered him. They just stood there, not talking, not clustered together the way people usually did for companionship. They even seemed immune to the rain.

Are you thinking the same as me? Lori asked. She conjured up an image of the reptile people from Laton's call, and superimposed them on the deck of the *Broadmoor*—rain running off their green skin without wetting it.

Yes, he said. It's possible. Probable, in fact. Some kind of sequestration is obviously involved. And those people on board weren't behaving normally.

If boats are carrying the sequestered downriver, it would mean that the posse on the *Swithland* have been circumvented.

I never expected them to be anything other than a token, and a rather pathetic one at that. If this is a xenoc invasion, then obviously they will want to subdue the entire planet. The Juliffe tributaries are the only feasible transport routes. Naturally they would use the river-boats.

I can't believe that anyone with the technology to

cross interstellar space would then be reduced to using wooden boats to get about on a planet.

Human settlers do. Darcy projected an ironic moue.

Yes, colonists who can't afford anything better, but a military conquest force?

Point taken. But there's an awful lot about this situation we don't understand. For a start, why invade Lalonde?

True. But to return to the immediate, if we've already penetrated the incursion front, do we need to go on?

I don't know. We need information.

We have an asset in the next village. I suggest we stop there and see what he knows.

Good idea. And Solanki will have to be informed about the aberrant river traffic.

Lori left Darcy to feed the furnace hopper and made her way back to the space in the cabin they shared. She pulled her backpack from under the cot and retrieved the palm-sized slate-grey communication block from among her clothes. It took a couple of seconds for the Confederation Navy's ELINT satellite to lock on to the scrambled channel. Kelven Solanki's tired-looking face appeared on the front of the slim rectangular unit.

"We may have a problem," she said.

"One more won't make any difference."

"This one might. We believe the presence Laton warned us of is spreading itself downriver on the boats. In other words, it can't be confined by the posse."

"Bloody hell. Candace Elford decided last night that Kristo County has also been taken over, that's halfway down the Zamjan from the mouth of the Quallheim. And after reviewing the satellite images, I have to concur. She's reinforcing the posse by BK133. They have a new landing point, Ozark, in Mayhew County, fifty kilometres short of Kristo. The BK133s are lifting in men and weapons right now. The *Swithland* should reach them early tomorrow, they can't be far ahead of you."

"We're approaching Oconto village right now."

"About thirty kilometres, then. What are you going to do?"

“We haven’t decided yet. We’ll need to go ashore whatever the outcome.”

“Well, be careful, this is turning out to be even bigger than my worst-case scenarios.”

“We don’t intend to jeopardize ourselves.”

“Good. Your message flek was dispatched to your embassy on Avon, along with mine to the First Admiral, and one from Ralph Hiltch to his embassy. Rexrew sent one to the LDC office as well.”

“Thank you. Let’s hope the Confederation Navy responds swiftly.”

“Yes. I think you should know, Hiltch and I have dispatched a combined scout team upriver. If you want to wait in Oconto for them to arrive, you’re more than welcome to join them. They’re making good time, I estimate they should be with you in a couple of days at the most. And my marines are carrying a fair amount of fire-power.”

“We’ll retain it as an option. Though Darcy and I don’t believe fire-power is going to be an overwhelming factor in this case. Judging by what we gleaned from Laton, and what we’ve observed on the paddle-boats, it appears wide-scale sequestration is playing a major part in the invasion.”

“Dear Christ!”

She smiled at his expletive. Why did Adamists always appeal to their deities? It wasn’t something she understood. If there was an omnipotent god, why did he make life so full of pain? “You might find a prudent course of action is to review river traffic out of the affected areas over the last ten days.”

“Are you saying they’ve already reached Durringham?”

“It is more than likely, I’m afraid. We are almost at Kristo, and we’re travelling against the current on a decidedly third-rate boat.”

“I see what you mean, if they left Aberdale right at the start they could have been here a week ago.”

“Theoretically, yes.”

“All right, thanks for the warning. I’ll pull some people in and start analysing the boats that have come down out of the Zamjan. Hell, this is just what the city needs on top of everything else.”

“How are things in Durringham?”

“None too good, actually. Everyone’s starting to hoard food, so prices are going through the roof. Candace Elford is deputizing young men left, right, and centre. There’s a lot of unrest among the residents about what’s happening up-river. She’s afraid it’s going to spiral out of control. Then on Wednesday the transient colonists decided to hold a peaceful rally outside the Governor’s dumper demanding new gear to replace what was stolen, and extra land in compensation for the upset. I could see it from my window. Rexrew refused to talk to them. Too scared they’d lynch him, I should think. It was that sort of mood. Things got a bit rough, and they clashed with the sheriffs. Quite a lot of casualties on both sides. Some idiot let a sayce loose. The power cables from the dumper’s fusion generator were torn down. So there was no electricity in the precinct for two days, and of course that includes the main hospital. Guess what happened to its back-up power supply.”

“It failed?”

“Yeah. Someone had been flogging off the electron-matrix crystals to use in power bikes. There was only about twenty per cent capacity left.”

“Sounds like there’s not much to choose between your position and mine.”

Kelven Solanki gave her a measured stare. “Oh, I think there is.”

Oconto was a typical Lalonde village: a roughly square clearing shorn straight into the jungle, with the official Land Allocation Office marker as its pivot; cabins with trim vegetable gardens clustered at the nucleus, while broader fields made up the periphery. The normally black mayope planks of the buildings were turning a lighter grey from years of exposure to the sun and heat and rain, hardening and cracking, like driftwood on a tropical shore. Pigs squealed in their pens, while cows munched contentedly at their silage in circular stockades. A line of over thirty goats were tethered to stakes around the border of the jungle, chomping away at the creepers which edged in towards the fields.

The village had done well for itself during the three years

since its founding. The communal buildings like the hall and church were well maintained; the council had organized the construction of a low, earth-covered lodge to smoke fish in. Major paths were scattered with wood flakes to stem the mud. There was even a football pitch marked out. Three jetties stuck out of the gently sloped bank into the Zamjan's insipid water; two of them responsible for mooring the village's small number of fishing boats.

When the *Coogan* nosed up to the main central jetty Darcy and Lori were relieved to see a considerable number of people working the fields. Oconto hadn't succumbed yet. Several shouts went up as the trader boat was spotted. Men came running, all of them carrying guns.

It took a quarter of an hour to convince the nervous reception committee that they posed no threat, and for a few minutes at the start Darcy thought they were going to be shot out of hand. Len and Gail Buchannan were well known (though not terribly popular), which acted in their favour. The *Coogan* was travelling upriver, heading towards the rebel counties, not bringing people down from them. And finally, Lori and Darcy themselves, with their synthetic fabric clothes and expensive hardware units, were accepted as some kind of official team. With what mandate was never asked.

"You gotta understand, people round here are getting mighty trigger happy since last Tuesday," Geoffrey Tunnard said. He was Oconto's acting leader, a lean fifty-year-old with curly white hair, wearing much-patched colourless dungarees. Now he was satisfied the *Coogan* wasn't bringing revolution and destruction, and his laser rifle was slung over his beefy shoulder again, he was happy to talk.

"What happened last Tuesday?" Darcy asked.

"The Ivets." Geoffrey Tunnard spat over the side of the jetty. "We heard there'd been trouble up Willow West way, so we shoved ours in a pen. They've been good workers since we arrived. But there's no point in taking chances, right?"

"Right," Darcy agreed diplomatically.

"But on Monday we had some people visit, claimed they were from Waldersy village, up in Kristo County. They said

the Ivets were all rebelling in the Quallheim Counties and Willow West, killing the men and raping the women. Said plenty of younger colonists had joined them, too. They was nothing but a vigilante group, you could see that, all hyped up they were, on a high. I reckoned they'd been smoking some canus; that'll send you tripping if you dry the leaves right. Trouble they were, just wanted to kill our Ivets. We wouldn't have it. A man can't kill another in cold blood, not just on someone else's say so. We sent them on downriver. Then blow me if they didn't creep back that night. And you know what?"

"They let the Ivets out," Lori said.

Geoffrey Tunnard gave her a respectful look. "That's right. Stole back in here right under our noses. Dogs never even noticed them. Slit old Jamie Austin's throat, him that was standing guard on the pen. Our supervisor Neil Barlow went right off after them that morning. Took a bunch of fifty men with him, armed men they were, too. And we haven't heard a damn thing since. That ain't like Neil, it's been six days. He should have sent word. Them men have families. We've got wives and kiddies left here that are worried sick." He glanced from Darcy to Lori. "Can you tell us anything?" His tone was laboured; Geoffrey Tunnard was a man under a great deal of strain.

"Sorry, I don't know anything," Darcy said. "Not yet. That's why we're here, to find out. But whatever you do, don't go after them. The larger your numbers, the safer you are."

Geoffrey Tunnard pursed his lips and looked away, eyes raking the jungle with bitter enmity. "Thought you'd say something like that. Course, there's those that have gone looking. Some of the women. We couldn't stop them."

Darcy put his hand on Geoffrey Tunnard's shoulder, gripping firmly. "If any more want to go, stop them. Have a log fall on their foot if that's what it takes, but you must stop them."

"I'll do my best." Geoffrey Tunnard dipped his head in defeat. "I'd leave if I could, take the family downriver on a boat. But I built this place with my own hands, and no damn Govcentral interference. It was a good life, it was. It can be

again. Bloody Ivets never were any use for anything, waster kids in dungarees, that's all."

"We'll do what we can," Lori said.

"Sure you will. You're doing what you tell me not to: go out in the jungle. Just the two of you. That's madness."

Lori thought Geoffrey Tunnard had been about to say suicide. "Can you tell us where Quentin Montrose lives?" she asked.

Geoffrey Tunnard pointed out one of the cabins, no different to any of the others; solar panels on the roof, a sagging overhang above the verandah. "Won't do you no good, he was in Neil's group."

Lori stood at the side of the wheel-house as the *Coogan* cast off; Darcy was aft, heaving more of the interminable logs into the furnace hopper. Len Buchanan whistled tunelessly as he steered his boat into the middle of the river. Oconto gradually shrank away to stern until it was nothing but a deeper than usual gash in the emerald cliff. Smoke from the cooking fires drifted apathetically across the choppy water.

We could send one of the eagles looking for them, Lori suggested.

You don't really mean that.

No. I'm sorry, I was just trying to save my own conscience.

Fifty armed men, and no trace. I don't know about your conscience, but my courage has almost deserted me.

We could go back, or even wait for Solanki's marines. Yes, we could.

You're right. We'll go on.

We should have told Geoffrey Tunnard to leave, Darcy said. I should have told him; take his family and flee back to Durringham. At least it would have been honest. None of this false hope we left him with.

That's all right, I think he already knows.

Karl Lambourne woke without knowing why. It wasn't noon yet, and he hadn't got to go back on watch until two o'clock. The blinds on his cabin's port were still shut, reducing the

light inside to a mysterious and enticing dusk. Booted feet thudded along the deck outside the door. Conversation was a persistent background hum, children calling out in their whiny voices.

Everything normal. So why was he awake with a vague feeling of unease?

The colonist girl—what was her name?—stirred beside him. She was a few months younger than him, with dark hair teased into ringlets around a dainty face. Despite his initial dismay with the *Swithland* carrying all those extra sheriffs and deputies it was turning out to be a good trip. The girls appreciated the space and privacy his cabin gave them; the boat was very crowded, with sleeping-bags clogging every metre of deck space.

The girl's eyelids fluttered, then opened slowly. She—Anne, no Alison; that was it, Alison! remember that—grinned at him.

“Hi,” she said.

He glanced along her body. The sheet was tangled up round her waist, affording him a splendid view of breasts, lean belly muscles, and sharply curving hips. “Hi yourself.” He brushed some of the ringlets from her face.

Shouts and a barking laugh sounded from outside. Alison gave a timid giggle. “God, they're only a metre away.”

“You should have thought of that before you made all that noise earlier.”

Her tongue was caught between her teeth. “Didn't make any noise.”

“Did.”

“Didn't.”

His arms circled her, and he pulled her closer. “You did, and I can prove it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” He kissed her softly, and she started to respond. His hand stole downwards, pushing the sheet off her legs.

Alison turned over when he told her to, shivering in anticipation as his arm slid under her waist, lifting her buttocks up. Her mouth parted in expectation.

“What the hell was that?”

“Karl?” She bent her head round to see him kneeling behind her, frowning up at the ceiling. “Karl!”

“Shush. Listen, can you hear it?”

She couldn't believe this was happening. People were still clumping up and down the deck outside. There wasn't any other sound! And she'd never ever been so turned on before. Right now she hated Karl with the same intensity she'd adored him a second before.

Karl twitched his head round, trying to catch the noise again. Except it wasn't so much a noise, more a vibration, a grumble. He knew every sound, every tremble the *Swithland* made, and that wasn't in its repertoire.

He heard it again, and identified it. A hull timber quaking somewhere aft. The creak of wood under pressure, almost as if they had touched a snag. But his mother would never steer anywhere near a snag, that was crazy.

Alison was looking up at him, all anger and hurt. The magic had gone. He felt his penis softening.

The noise came again. A grinding sound that lasted for about three seconds. It was muted by the bilges, but this time it was loud enough even for Alison to hear.

She blinked in confusion. “What . . .”

Karl jumped off the bed, snatching up his shorts. He jammed his legs into them, and was still struggling with the button when he yanked the door lock back and rushed out onto the deck.

Alison squealed behind him, trying to cover herself with her arms as vibrant midmorning sunlight flooded into the cabin. She grabbed the thin sheet to wrap herself in, and started hunting round for her clothes.

After the seductive shadows of his cabin the sunlight on deck sent glaring purple after-images chasing down Karl's optic nerves. Tear ducts released their stored liquid, which he had to wipe away annoyingly. A couple of colonists and three deputies, barely older than him, were staring at him. He leaned out over the rail and peered down at the river. There was some sediment carried by the water, and shimmering sunlight reflections skittering across the surface, but he could see a good three or four metres down. But there was nothing solid, no silt bank, no submerged tree trunk.

Up on the bridge Rosemary Lambourne hadn't been sure about the first scrape, but like her eldest son she was perfectly in tune with the *Swithland*. Something had left her with heightened senses, a suddenly hollow stomach. She automatically checked the forward-sweep mass-detector. This section of the Zamjan was twelve metres deep, giving her a good ten metres of clearance below the flat keel, even overloaded like this. There was nothing in front, nothing below, and nothing to the side.

Then it happened again. The aft hull struck something. Rosemary immediately reduced power to the paddles.

"Mother!"

She bent over the starboard side to see Karl looking up at her.

"What was that?"

He beat her to it by a fraction.

"I don't know," she shouted down. "The mass-detector shows clear. Can you see anything in the water?"

"No."

The river current was slowing the *Swithland* rapidly now the paddles were stilled. Without the steady thrash of the blades, the racket the colonists made seemed to have doubled.

It came again, a long rending sound of abused wood. There was a definite crunching at the end.

"That was aft," Rosemary yelled. "Get back there and see what happened. Report back." She pulled a handset from its slot below the communication console, and dropped it over the edge of the rail. Karl caught it with an easy snap of his wrist and raced off down the narrow decking, slipping through the knots of colonists with urgent fluid movements.

"*Swithland*, come in, please," the speaker on the communication console said. "Rosemary, can you hear me? This is Dale here. What's happening, why have you stopped?"

She picked up the microphone. "I'm here, Dale," she told the *Nassier's* captain. When she glanced up she could see the *Nassier* half a kilometre upriver, pulling ahead; the *Hycel* was downriver on the starboard side, catching up fast. "It sounds like we struck something."

"How bad?"

"I don't know yet. I'll get back to you."

"Rosemary, this is Callan, I think it would be best if we didn't get separated. I'll heave to until you know if you need any assistance."

"Thanks, Callan." She leant out over the bridge rail and waved at the *Hycel*. A small figure on its bridge waved back.

A screech loud enough to silence all the colonists erupted from the *Swithland's* hull. Rosemary felt the boat judder, its prow shifting a degree. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before. They were almost dead in the water, it couldn't possibly be a snag. It couldn't be!

Karl reached the afterdeck just as the *Swithland* juddered. He could feel the whole boat actually lift a couple of centimetres.

The afterdeck was packed full of colonists and posse members. Several groups of men were lying down, playing cards or eating. Kids charged about. Eight or nine people were fishing over the stern. Cases of farmsteading gear were piled against the superstructure and the taffrail. Dogs ran about underfoot; there were five horses tethered to the side rail, and two of them started pulling at their harnesses as the brassy scrunching noise broke across the boat. Everybody froze in expectation.

"Out of the way!" Karl shouted. "Out of the way." He started elbowing people aside. The noise was coming from the keel, just aft of the furnace room which was tacked on to the back of the superstructure. "Come on, move."

A sayce snarled at him. "Killl."

"Get that fucking thing out of my way!"

Yuri Wilken dragged Randolph aside.

The whole afterdeck complement was watching Karl. He reached the hatchway over the feed mechanism that shunted logs into the furnace. It was hidden beneath a clutter of composite pods. "Help me move these," he yelled.

Barry MacArple emerged from the furnace room, a brawny twenty-year-old, sweaty and sooty. He had kept indoors for most of this trip, and carefully avoided any member of the posse. None of the Lambourne family had mentioned that he was an Ivet.

The noise came to an abrupt halt. Karl was very aware of

the apprehensive faces focusing on him, the silent appeal for guidance. He held up his hands as Barry started to haul the pods off the hatchway. "OK, we're riding on some sort of rock. So I want all the kids to slowly make their way forwards. Slowly mind. Then the women. Not the men. You'll upset the balance with that much weight forward. And whoever those horses belong to, calm them down now."

Parents hustled their children towards the prow. A hushed murmur swept round the adults. Three men were helping Barry clear the hatchway. Karl lifted off a couple of the pods himself. Then he heard the noise again, but it was distant this time, not from the *Swithland's* hull.

"What the hell—" He looked up to see the *Hycel* a hundred metres astern.

"Karl, what's happening?" Rosemary's voice demanded from the handset.

He raised the unit to his mouth. "It's the *Hycel*, Mum. They've hit it as well."

"Bloody hell. What about our hull?"

"Tell you in a minute."

The last of the pods were cleared away, revealing a two-metre-square hatch. Karl bent down to unclip the latches.

That was when the second sound rang out, a water-muffled THUNK of something heavy and immensely powerful slamming into the keel. *Swithland* gave a small jolt, riding up several centimetres. Some of the more loosely stacked cases and pods tumbled over. The colonists shouted in panic and dismay, and there was a general surge for the prow. One of the horses reared up, forelegs scraping the air.

Karl ripped the hatch open.

THUNK

Ripples rolled away from the *Swithland* as it wallowed about.

"Karl!" the handset squawked.

He looked down into the hull. The log-feed mechanism took up most of the space below the hatch, a primitive-looking clump of motors, pulley loops, and pistons. Two grab belts ran away to the port and starboard log holds. The black mayope planks of the hull itself were just visible. Water was welling out of cracks between them.

THUNK

Karl stared down in stupefaction as the planks bowed inward. That was mayope wood, nothing could dint mayope.

THUNK

Splinters appeared, long dagger fingers levering apart.

THUNK

Water poured in through the widening gaps. An area over a metre wide was being slowly hammered upwards.

THUNK

THUNK

Swithland was rocking up and down. Equipment and pods rolled about across the half-abandoned afterdeck. Men and women were clinging to the rail, others were spread-eagled on the decking, clawing for a handhold.

"It's trying to punch its way in!" Karl bellowed into the handset.

"What? What?" his mother shouted back.

"There's something below us, something alive. For Christ's sake, get us underway, get us to the shore. The shore, Mum. Go! Go!"

THUNK

The water was foaming up now, covering the hull planks completely. "Get this shut," Karl called. He was terribly afraid of what would come through once the hole was big enough. Together, he and Barry MacArple slammed the hatch back down, dogging the latches.

THUNK

Swithland's hull broke. Karl could hear a long dreadful tearing sound as the iron-hard wood was wrenched apart. Water seethed in, gurgling and slurping. It ripped the log feeder from its mountings, crashing it against the decking above. The hatch quaked violently.

A gloriously welcome whine from the paddle engines sounded. The familiar slow thrashing of the paddles started up. *Swithland* turned ponderously for the unbroken rampart of jungle eighty metres away.

Karl realized people were sobbing and shouting out. A lot of them must have made it forward, the boat was riding at a downward incline.

THUNK

This time it was the afterdeck planks. Karl, lying prone next to the hatch, yelled in shock as his feet left the deck from the impact. He twisted round immediately, rolling over three times to get clear. Pods bounced and pirouetted chaotically. The horses were going berserk. One of them broke its harness, and plunged over the side. Another was kicking wildly. A blood-soaked body lay beside it.

THUNK

The planks beside the hatch lifted in unison, snapping back as if they were elastic. Water started to seep out.

Barry MacArple was scrambling on all fours along the deck, his face engorged with desperation. Karl held out his hand to the Ivet, willing him on.

THUNK

The planks directly below Barry were smashed asunder. They ruptured upwards, jagged edges puncturing the Ivet's belly and chest, then ripping his torso apart like a giant claw. A metre-wide geyser of water slammed upwards out of the gap, buffeting the corpse with it.

Karl turned to follow the water rising, fear stunned out of him by the incredible, impossible sight. The geyser roared ferociously, shaking Karl's bones and obliterating the impassioned shouts from the colonists. It rose a full thirty metres above the decking, its crown blossoming out like a flower. Water, silt, and fragments of mayope plank splattered down.

Clinging for dear life to one of the cable drums as the *Swithland* bucked about like a wounded brownspine, Karl watched the geyser chewing away at the ragged sides of the hole it had bored. It was creeping forward towards the superstructure. The bilges must be full already. Slowly and surely more and more wood was eroded by the terrific force of the water. In another minute it would reach the furnace room. He thought of what would happen when the water struck all fifteen tonnes of the searingly hot furnace, and whimpered.

Rosemary Lambourne had a hard struggle to stay upright as the *Swithland* tossed about. Only by clinging to the wheel could she even stay on her feet. It was the sheer fright in Karl's voice which had spurred her into action. He wasn't

afraid of anything on the river, he had been born on the *Swithland*.

That deadly battering noise was knocking into her heart as much as the hull. The strength behind anything that could thump the boat about like this was awesome.

How much of the *Swithland* is going to be left after this? God damn Colin Rexrew, his laxness and stupidity. The Ivets would never dare to revolt with a firm, competent governor in charge.

A roar like a continual explosion made her jump, almost sending her feet from under her. It was suddenly raining on the *Swithland* alone. The entire superstructure was trembling. What was happening back there?

She checked the little holoscreen which displayed the boat's engineering schematics. They were losing power rapidly from the furnace. Reserve electron-matrix crystals cut in, maintaining the full current to the engines.

"Rosemary," the radio called.

She couldn't spare the time to answer.

Swithland's prow was pointing directly at the bank sixty-five metres away, and they were picking up speed again. Pods and cases were scattered in the boat's wake, jouncing about in the water. She saw a couple of people splashing among them. More people went falling from the foredeck; it was as tightly packed as a rugby scrum down there. And there wasn't a thing she could do, except get them to the shore.

Off on the port side, *Nassier* was floundering about, paddles spinning intermittently. Rosemary saw a giant fountain of water smash through the middle of its superstructure, debris whirling away into the sky. What the fuck could do that? Some kind of water monster skulking around the riverbed? Even as the fantasy germinated in her mind she knew that wasn't the real answer. But she did know what the roaring noise behind her was now. The knowledge sucked at the last of her strength. If it hit the furnace . . .

Nassier's prow lifted into the air, shoving the afterdeck below the water. The superstructure crumpled up, large chunks being flung aside by the tremendous jet of water.

Dozens of people were swept into the river, arms and legs twirling frantically. In her mind she could hear the screams.

There were just too many people on board the paddle-boats. Rexrew had already increased the numbers of colonists they were made to carry, refusing to listen to the warning from the captains' delegation. Then he dumped this posse on them as well.

If I ever get back to Durringham, you're dead, Rexrew, she promised herself. You haven't just failed us, you've condemned us.

Then the *Nassier* began to capsize, rolling ever faster onto her starboard side. The jet of water died away as the keel flipped up. Rosemary saw a huge hole in the planks amidships as it reached the vertical. That was when the water must have rushed in on the furnace. A massive blast of white steam devoured the rear of the boat, rolling out across the surface of the river. Mercifully, it shielded the final act in the *Nassier's* convulsive death.

Swithland's prow was fifteen metres from the trees and creepers which were strangling the bank. Rosemary could hear the sound of their own bedevilling geyser reducing. She fought the wheel to keep the boat lined up straight on the bank. The bottom was shelving up rapidly, the forward-sweep mass-detector emitting a frantic howl in warning. Five metres deep. Four. Three. They struck mud eight metres from the long flower-heavy vines trailing in the water. The big boat's awesome inertia propelled them along, slithering and sliding through the thick black alluvial muck. Bubbles of foul-smelling sulphurous gas churned around the sides of the hull. The geyser had died completely. There was a moment of pure dreamy silence before they hit the bank.

Rosemary saw a huge qualtook tree dead ahead; one of its thick boughs was the same height as the bridge. She ducked—

The impact threw Yuri Wilken back onto his belly just as he was starting to get up again. His nose slammed painfully against the deck. He tasted warm blood. The boat was making hideous crunching sounds as it ploughed into the frill of vegetation along the bank. Long vine strands lashed through the air with the brutality of bullwhips. He tried to bury him-

self into the hard decking as they slashed centimetres above his head. *Swithland's* blunt prow rammed the low bank, jolting upwards to ride a good ten metres across the dark-red sandy earth. The paddle-boat finally came to a bruising halt with its forward deck badly mangled, and the qualtook tree embedded in the front of the superstructure.

Screams and wailing gave way to moans and shrill cries for help. Yuri risked glancing about, seeing the way in which the jungle had shrink-wrapped itself around the forward half of the boat. The superstructure looked dangerously unstable, it was leaning over sharply, with tonnes of vegetation pressing against the front and side.

His limbs were shaking uncontrollably. He wanted to be home in Durringham, taking Randolph for walks or playing football with his mates. He didn't belong here in the jungle.

"Are you all right, son?" Mansing asked.

Sheriff Mansing was the one who had signed him on for the expedition. He was a lot more approachable than some of the sheriffs, keeping a fatherly eye out for him.

"I think so." He dabbed at his nose experimentally, sniffing hard. There was blood on his hand.

"You'll live," Mansing said. "Where's Randolph?"

"I don't know." He climbed shakily to his feet. They were standing at the front corner of the superstructure. People were lying about all around, slowly picking themselves up, asking for help, wearing a numb, frightened expression. Two bodies had been trapped between the qualtook trunk and the superstructure; one was a small girl aged about eight. Yuri could only tell because she was wearing a dress. He turned away, gagging.

"Call for him," Mansing said. "We're going to need all the help we can get pretty soon."

"Sir?"

"You think this was an accident?"

Yuri hadn't thought it was anything. The notion sent a tremble down his spine. He put his lips together, and managed a feeble whistle.

"Twelve years I've been sailing up and down this river," Mansing said grimly. "I've never seen anything like that

geyser before. What the hell can shoot water about like that? And there was more than one of them.”

Randolf came lumbering up over the gunwale, his sleek black hide covered in smelly mud. The sayce had lost all of his usual aggressive arrogance, slinking straight over to Yuri and pressing against his master’s legs. “Waaterrr baddd,” he growled.

“He’s not far wrong there,” Mansing agreed cheerlessly.

It took quarter of an hour to establish any kind of order around the wrecked paddle-boat. The sheriffs organized parties to tend to the wounded and set up a makeshift camp. By general consensus they moved fifty metres inland, away from the river and whatever prowled below the water.

Several survivors from the *Nassier* managed to swim to the stern of the *Swithland* which was half submerged; the boat formed a useful bridge over the stinking quagmire which lined the bank. The *Hycel* had managed to reach the Zamjan’s far bank; it had been spared the destructive geyser, but its hull had taken a dreadful pounding. Radio contact was established and both groups decided to stay where they were rather than attempt to cross the river and join forces.

Sheriff Mansing located an unbroken communication block amongst the remnants of the posse’s gear, and patched a call through the LDC’s single geostationary satellite to Candace Elford. The shocked chief sheriff agreed to divert the two BK133s to the *Swithland* and fly the seriously injured back to Durringham straight away. What she never mentioned was the possibility of reinforcing the forsaken boats. But Sheriff Mansing was above all a pragmatic man, he really hadn’t expected any.

After making three trips to the camp, carrying pods of gear from the paddle-boat, Yuri was included into a small scout party of three sheriffs and nine deputies. He suspected they only included him because of Randolf. But that was OK, the other detail of deputies was now removing bodies from the *Swithland*. He preferred to take his chances with the jungle.

When Yuri and the scouts marched away, colonists with fission-blade saws were felling trees on one side of the

camp's glade so the VTOL aircraft could land. A fire was burning in the centre.

It didn't take long for the groans of the casualties to fade away, blocked by the density of the foliage. Yuri couldn't get over how dark this jungle was, very little actual sunlight penetrated down to ground level. When he held his hand up the skin was tinted a deep green, the cinnamon-coloured jacket they had issued him with to protect him from thorns was jet black. The jungle around Durringham was nothing like this. It was tame, he realized, with its well-worn paths and tall trees spiralled with thin colourful vines. Here there were no paths, branches jutted out at all heights, and the vines were slung between boughs either at ankle height or level with his neck. A sticky kind of fungal mould slimed every leaf for three metres above the ground.

The scouts paired up, fanning out from the camp. The idea was to familiarize themselves with the immediate area out to five hundred metres, search for any more survivors from *Nassier*, and verify that no hostiles were near the camp.

"This is stupid," Mansing said after they had gone fifty metres. He was leading, chopping at the vines and small branches and bushes with a fission-blade machete. "I couldn't see you if you were three metres away."

"Perhaps it thins out up ahead," Yuri said.

Mansing slashed at another branch. "You're giving away your age again, son. Only the very young are that hopelessly optimistic."

They took turns to lead. Even with the fission blade hacking out every metre of path it was tiring work. Randolph loped along behind, occasionally butting against Yuri's calves.

According to Mansing's guidance block they had travelled about three hundred metres when the sayce stood still, head held up, sniffing the humid air. The species didn't have quite the sense of smell terrestrial canines possessed, but they were still excellent hunters in their own territory: the jungle.

"Peeeople," Randolph grunted.

"Which way?" Yuri asked.

"Here." The sayce pushed into the severed branches that

made up the walls of the path. He turned to look at them. "Here."

"Is this for real?" Mansing asked sceptically.

"Sure is," Yuri answered, stung by the doubt. "How far, boy?"

"Soon."

"All right," Mansing said. He started to hack at the jungle where the sayce indicated.

It was another two minutes of sweaty labour before they heard the voices. They were high and light, female. One of them was singing.

Mansing was so intent on cutting the cloying vegetation away, swinging the heavy machete in endless rhythm, that he nearly fell head first into the stream when the creepers came to an abrupt end. Yuri grabbed his jacket collar to stop him slipping down the small grassy slope. Both of them stared ahead in astonishment.

Sunlight poured down through the overhead gap in the trees, hovering above the water like a thin golden mist. The stream widened out into a rock-lined pool fifteen metres across. Creepers with huge ruffed orange blooms hung like curtains from the trees on the far side. Tiny turquoise and yellow birds fluttered about through the air. It was a scene lifted from Greek mythology. Seven naked girls were bathing in the pool, ranging from about fifteen years up to twenty-five. All of them were slender and long limbed, sunlight glinting on their skin. White robes were strewn over the black rocks at the water's edge.

"Nooo," Randolph moaned. "Baddd."

"Bollocks," Yuri said.

The girls caught sight of them and shrieked with delight, smiling and waving.

Yuri shouldered his laser rifle, grinning deliriously at the seven pairs of wet breasts bouncing about.

"Bloody hell," Mansing muttered.

Yuri pushed past him, and scuttled down the slope into the stream. The girls cheered.

"Nooo."

"Yuri," Mansing gestured ineffectually.

He turned round, face illuminated with delight. "What?"

We've got to find out where their village is, haven't we? That's our assignment, scout the terrain."

"Yes. I suppose so." He couldn't keep his eyes from the naiads sporting about.

Yuri was plunging on, legs sending up a wave of spray.

"Nooo," Randolph bayed urgently. "Baddd. Peeeople baddd."

Mansing watched the girls whooping encouragement to Yuri as the lad ploughed through the water towards them. "Oh, to hell with dignity," he said under his breath, and splashed down into the stream.

The first girl Yuri reached was about nineteen, with scarlet flowers tucked into her wet hair. She smiled radiantly up at him, hands holding his. "I'm Polly," she laughed.

"All right!" Yuri cried. The water only came halfway up her thighs; she really was completely naked. "I'm Yuri."

She kissed him, damp body pressing against his sleeveless shirt, leaving a dark imprint. When she broke off another girl slipped a garland of the orange vine flowers round his neck. "And I'm Samantha," she said.

"You gonna kiss me too?"

She twined her arms round his neck, tongue slipping hungrily into his mouth. Other girls were circling round, scooping up handfuls of spray and showering them. Yuri was in the midst of a warm silver rain with raw ecstasy pounding down his nerves. Here in the middle of nowhere, paradise had come to Lalonde. The droplets fell in slow motion, tinkling sweetly as they went. He felt hands slip the rifle strap from his shoulder, more hands pulled at his shirt buttons. His trousers were undone, and his penis stroked lovingly.

Samantha took a pace back looking at him in adoration. She cupped her breasts, lifting them up towards him. "Now, Yuri," she pleaded. "Take me now."

Yuri pulled her roughly against him, his soaking trousers tangling round his knees. He heard an alarmed shout that was cut off. Three of the girls had pushed Mansing under the water, his legs were thrashing above the surface. The girls were laughing hysterically, muscles straining with the effort of keeping him down.

“Hey—” Yuri said. He couldn’t move because of his stupid trousers.

“Yuri,” Samantha called.

He turned back to her. She was opening her mouth wider than he would have believed physically possible. Long bands of muscle writhed around her chin as if fat worms were tunnelling through her veins. Her cheeks started to split, beginning at the corners of her mouth and tearing back towards her ears. Blood leapt out of the wounds in regular beats, and she was still hinging her jaw apart.

Yuri stared for one petrified second then let loose a guttural roar of fright that reverberated round the impassive sentinel trees. His bladder gave out.

Samantha’s grisly head darted forward, carmine teeth clamping solidly round his throat, her blood spraying against his skin.

“Randolf—” he yelled. Then her teeth tore into his throat, and his own blood burst out of his carotid artery to flood his gullet, quashing any further sounds.

Randolf howled in rage as his master fell into the water with Samantha riding him down. But one of the other girls looked straight at him and hissed in warning, flecks of saliva spitting out between her bared teeth. The sayce turned tail and sprinted back into the jungle.

“Power’s going. Losing height. Losing height!” The BK133 pilot’s frantic voice boomed out of the command centre’s AV pillars.

Every sheriff in the room stared at the tactical communication station.

“We’re going down!”

The carrier wave hissed for another couple of seconds, then fell silent. “God Almighty,” Candace Elford whispered. She was sitting at her desk at the end of the rectangular room. Like most of the capital’s civic buildings, the sheriff’s headquarters was made of wood. It sat in its own square fortified enclosure a couple of hundred metres from the governor’s dumper, a simplistic design that any pre-twentieth-century soldier would have felt at home in. The command centre itself formed one side of the parade

ground, a long single-storey building with four grey composite spheres housing the satellite uplinks spaced along the apex of the roof. Inside, plain wooden benches ran around the walls, supporting an impressive array of modern desktop processor consoles operated by sheriffs seated in composite chairs. On the wall opposite Candace Elford's desk a big projection screen displayed a street map of Durringham (as far as it was possible to map that conglomeration of erratic alleyways and private passages). Conditioners hummed unobtrusively to keep the temperature down. The atmosphere of technological efficiency was spoilt slightly by the fans of yellow-grey fungus growing out of the skirting-board underneath the benches.

"Contact lost," Mitch Verkaik, the sheriff sitting at the tactical communication station reported, stone faced.

Candace turned to the small team she had assigned to monitor the posse's progress. "What about the sheriffs on the ground? Did they see it come down?"

Jan Routley was operating the satellite link to the *Swithland* survivors; she loaded an order into her console. "There is no response from any communicator on the *Swithland* or the *Hycel*. I can't even raise a transponder identity code."

Candace studied the situation display projected by her own console's AV pillar, more out of habit than anything else. She knew they were all waiting for her to rap out orders, smooth and confident, producing instant perfect solutions like an ambulatory computer. It wasn't going to happen. The last week had been a complete nightmare. They couldn't contact anyone in the Quallheim Counties or Willow West any more, and communications with villages along the Zamjan were patchy. The reinforcement flights to Ozark were a stopgap at best; privately she had intended that the fresh men and weapons would simply safeguard an evacuation of settlers down the river. She had long since abandoned the idea of restoring order to the Quallheim Counties, confinement was her best hope. Now it looked like Ozark was inside the affected zone. Seventy men and almost a quarter of her armoury.

"Call the second BK133 back to Durringham right away," she said shortly. "If the invaders can bring down one, they

can bring down another.” And at least ten sheriffs with their heavy-duty weapons would be saved. They might need them badly in the weeks to come. It was pretty obvious the invaders were intent on complete domination of the planet.

“Yes, ma’am.” Mitch Verkaik turned back to his console.

“How long before the observation satellite makes a pass over the paddle-boats?” Candace asked.

“Fifteen minutes,” Jan Routley answered.

“Program it for an infrared overscan fifty kilometres either side of its orbital track, see if it can locate the downed BK133. It shouldn’t be too hard to spot.” She rested her chin in her hands, staring blankly at her desktop processor. Protecting Durringham was her priority now, she decided. They must hold on to the city until the LDC sent a combat force capable of regaining the countryside. She was convinced they were faced with an invasion, the hour-long briefing she’d had with Kelven Solanki that morning had put paid to any final doubts. Kelven was badly worried, which wasn’t like him at all.

Candace hadn’t told her staff what Kelven had said to her, about the possible use of sequestration and river-boats that might have already brought a preliminary platoon of invaders to Durringham. It didn’t bear thinking about. There were three chairs conspicuously empty in the command centre today; even the sheriffs were reverting to a self-protective mentality. She couldn’t blame them; most had a family in the city, and none had signed on to fight a well-organized military force. But she’d agreed to cooperate with the Confederation Navy office in reviewing satellite image records of river traffic for the last fortnight.

“We’re receiving the images now,” Jan Routley called out.

Candace stirred herself, and walked over to the woman’s position. Kilometre after kilometre of jungle streamed across the high-definition holoscreen; the green treetops were overlaid by transparent red shadows to indicate the temperature profile. The Zamjan leapt into view at the bottom of the screen, *Swithland*’s stern jutting out onto the water from under the bankside canopy of vegetation. Graph-

ics flashed across the holoscreen, drawing orange circles around a glade close to the water.

"It's a fire," Jan Routley said. She datavised an order into the desktop processor to centre on the infrared source. The clearing expanded on the screen, showing a bonfire burning in its centre. There were blankets and the unmistakable white cargo-pods of homesteading gear littered about. Several trees had been felled on one side. "Where have all the people gone?" she asked in a small voice.

"I don't know," Candace said. "I really don't."

It was midafternoon, and the *Coogan* was twenty-five kilometres downriver from the abandoned paddle-boats when Len Buchanan and Darcy spotted the first pieces of flotsam bobbing about in the water. Crates of farmsteading gear, lengths of planking, fruit. Five minutes later they saw the first body: a woman in a one-piece ship-suit, face down, with arms and legs spread wide.

"We're turning back now," Len informed him.

"All the way to the mouth of the Quallheim," Darcy reminded him.

"Shove your money and your contract." He started turning the wheel. "You think I'm blind to what's going on? We're already in the rebel area. It's gonna take a miracle to get us downriver if we start now, never mind from another hundred and fifty kilometres further east."

"Wait," Darcy put his hand on the wheel. "How far to Ozark?"

Scowling, Len consulted an ancient guidance block sitting on a shelf in the wheel-house. "Thirty kilometres, maybe thirty-five."

"Put us ashore five kilometres short of the village."

"I dunno—"

"Look, the eagles can spot any boat coming down the river ten kilometres ahead of us. If one does come, then we turn round immediately and sail for Durringham. How does that sound?"

"Why didn't the eagles spot all this, then? Hardly something you could miss."

"They're out over the jungle. We'll call them back now.

Besides, it could be a genuine accident. There might be people hurt up ahead.”

The lines around Len’s mouth tightened, reflecting his indecision. No true captain would ignore another boat in distress. A broken chunk of yellow foam packaging scraped down the side of the *Coogan*. “All right,” he said, clutching at the wheel. “But the first sign of trouble, and I’m off downriver. It’s not the money. *Coogan*’s all I’ve got, I built her with my own hands. I ain’t risking the old girl for you.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m just as anxious as you that nothing happens to the boat, or you. No matter what we find in the villages, we’ve still got to get back to Durringham. Lori and I are too old to walk.”

Len grunted dismissively, but started feeding the wheel round again, lining the prow up on the eastern horizon.

The affinity call went out, and Abraham and Catlin curved through the clear air, racing for the river. From their vantage point seven kilometres ahead of the *Coogan* they could see tiny scraps of debris floating slowly in the current. They were also high enough for the water to be almost completely transparent. Lori could see large schools of brown-spines and reddish eel-analogues swimming idly.

It wasn’t until the sun was a red-gold ball touching the treetops ahead of the little trader boat that the eagles found the paddle-boats jammed into opposite banks. Lori and Darcy guided them in long spirals above the surrounding jungle, searching for the colonists and crew and posse. There was nobody on the boats, or in the camps that had been set up.

There’s one, Lori said. She felt Darcy come into the link with Abraham, looking through the bird’s enhanced eyes. Down below, a figure was slipping through the jungle. The tightly packed leaves made observation difficult, granting them only the most fleeting of glimpses. It was a man, a new colonist they judged, because he was wearing a shirt of synthetic fabric. He was walking unhurriedly westwards, parallel to the river about a kilometre inland.

Where does he think he’s going? Darcy asked. **There isn’t another village on this side for fifty kilometres.**

Do you want to send Abraham down below the tree level for a better look?

No. My guess is this man's been sequestered. They all have.

There were nearly seven hundred people on those three boats.

Yes.

And there are close to twenty million people on Lalonde. How much would it cost to sequester them all?

A lot, if you used nanonics.

You don't think it is nanonics?

No; Laton said it was an energy virus. Whatever that is.

And you believe him?

I hate to say it, but I'm giving what he said a great deal of credence right now. There's certainly something at work here beyond our normal experience.

Do you want to capture this man? If he is a victim of the virus we should learn all we need to know from him.

I'd hate to try chasing anyone through this jungle, especially a lone man on foot who obviously has colleagues nearby.

We go on to Ozark, then?

Yes.

The *Coogan* advanced up the river at a much slower pace, waiting for the sun to set before passing the two paddle-boats. For the first time since he arrived on the planet, Darcy actually found himself wishing it would rain. A nice thick squall would provide extra cover. As it was they had to settle for thin clouds gusting over Diranol, subduing its red lambency to a sourceless candle-glow which reduced ordinary visibility to a few hundred metres. Even so the trader's wheezing engines and clanking gearbox sounded appallingly loud on the night-time river where silence was sacrosanct.

Lori engaged her retinal implants as they crept thieflike between the two boats. Nothing moved, there were no lights. The two derelicts set up cold resonances in her heart she couldn't ignore. The ships brooded.

“There should be a small tributary around here,” Darcy said an hour later. “You can moor the *Coogan* in it; that ought to make it invisible from anyone on the *Zamjan*.”

“How long for?” Len asked.

“Until tomorrow night. That should give us plenty of time, Ozark is only another four kilometres east of here. If we’re not back by 04:00 hours, then cast off and get home.”

“Right you are. And I ain’t spending a minute more, mind.”

“Make sure you don’t cook anything. The smell will give you away if there’s any trained hunting beasts in the area.”

The little tributary stream was only twice the width of the *Coogan*, with tall cherry oak trees growing on the boggy banks. Len Buchannan backed his boat down it, cursing every centimetre of the way. Once cables had secured it in the middle of the channel, Len, Lori, and Darcy worked for an hour cutting branches to camouflage the cabin.

Len’s dark mood became apprehensive when Darcy and Lori were finally set to leave. Both of them had put on their chameleon suits; matt grey, tight fitting, with a ring of broad equipment pouches around the waist. He couldn’t see an empty one.

“Look out for yourselves,” he mumbled, embarrassed at what he was saying, as they walked down the plank to the jungle.

“Thank you, Len,” Darcy said. “We will. Just make sure you’re here when we get back.” He pulled the hood over his head.

Len raised a hand. The air around the Edenists turned impenetrably black, flowing like oily smoke around their bodies. Then they were gone. He could hear their feet squelching softly in the mud, slowly fading into the distance. A sudden chill breeze seemed to rise out of the cloying jungle humidity, and he hastened back into the galley. Those chameleon suits were too much like magic.

Four kilometres through the jungle in the dead of night.

It wasn’t too bad, their retinal implants had low-light and infrared capability. Their world was a two-tone of green and red, shot through with strange white sparkles, like interfer-

ence on a badly tuned holoscreen. Depth perception was the trickiest, compressing trees and bushes into a flat mantle of landscape.

Twice they came across sayces on a nocturnal prow. The animals' hot bodies shone like a dawn star amongst the lacklustre vegetation. Each time, Darcy killed them with a single shot from his maser carbine.

Lori's inertial guidance block navigated them towards the village, its bitek processor pumping their coordinates directly into her brain, giving her the mindless knowledge and accuracy of a migratory bird. All she had to watch out for was the lie of the land; even the most exhaustive satellite survey couldn't reveal the folds, rillelets, and gullies that hid below the treetops.

Two hundred metres from the edge of Ozark's clearing, their green and red world began to grow lighter. Lori checked through Abraham high overhead, keeping the bird circling outside the clearing. There were a number of fires blazing in open pits outside the cabins.

Seems pretty normal, she told Darcy.

From here, yes. Let's see if we can get in closer and spot any of the sheriffs and their weapons.

OK. One minute, I'll bring Kelven in. We'll update him as we go. In case anything happens and we don't get back, that way they'll have some record—but she tried not to think that. She ordered her communication block to open a channel to the naval ELINT satellite. The unit had a bitek processor, so the conversation wouldn't be audible.

We're at Ozark village now, she told the navy commander.

Are you all right? Kelven Solanki asked.

Yes.

What's your situation?

Right now we're on our hands and knees about a hundred metres from the fields around the village. There are several fires burning in the village, and a lot of people moving round for this time of night. There must be three or four hundred of them outside, can't be many in the cabins. Apart from that it looks pretty ordinary. She wormed her way forward through the tangle of long grass

and creepers, avoiding the bushes. Darcy was a metre to her left. It had been a long time since her last fieldcraft training session, she was moderately pleased by how little noise she was making.

Kelven, I want you to datavise a list of the sheriffs the BK133s landed at Ozark, Darcy said. We'll see if we can identify any of them.

Right away, here they come.

Lori pressed the twigs of a low-hanging branch to the ground, and slithered over them. There was the trunk of a large mayope four metres ahead, its roots sloping up out of the soil. Light from the fires fluoresced the bark to a lurid topaz.

The list of sheriffs streamed into her mind; facts, figures, and profiles, most importantly the holograms. Mirages of seventy men shimmered over the vapid low-light image of Ozark. Lori reached the mayope trunk and looked out over the lines of seedy cabins, trying to match the visual patterns in her mind with what she could see.

There's one, Darcy said. His mind indicated one of the men squatting in a circle of people around a fire. Some kind of animal carcass was roasting above the flames.

And another, Lori indicated.

They swiftly located a further twelve sheriffs at various fires.

None of them look particularly concerned that their communications with Candace Elford have been cut off, she said.

Have they been sequestered? Kelven Solanki asked.

There's no way of knowing for sure, but my best guess is yes, Darcy said. **Given their current situation, their behaviour is abnormal. They should at least have posted a perimeter guard.**

The bitek processor in Lori's back-up communication block reported a power loss in the unit's electron-matrix crystal. She automatically ordered the reserve crystal to be brought on line, the thought was virtually subconscious.

I concur, Lori said. **I think our original primary goal of verifying Laton's presence is irrelevant in these circumstances.**

Seconded. We'll attempt to seize one of these people and bring them back to Durringham for examination. The mimetic governor circuitry on Darcy's chameleon suit indicated a databus glitch in his right leg; alternative channels were brought on line by the master processor.

Our best bet will be that cabin there, it's reasonably isolated, and I saw someone go in just now. Lori evinced a five-room building standing apart from the others. It was a hundred and twenty metres from the edge of the jungle, but the intervening ground was mostly allotments, providing as much cover as the trees. She took an image enhancer out of a pouch on her waist, and brought it up to her eyes. **Bloody thing's broken. Try yours, we need to know how many are inside.**

Darcy's chemical/biological agent detector shut down. **It hasn't broken,** he said in consternation. **We're in some kind of electronic warfare field!**

Damn it! Lori's back-up communicator and target-laser-acquisition warning sensors dropped out. **Kelven, did you hear that? They're using highly sophisticated electronic warfare systems.**

Your signal strength is fading, Kelven said.

Darcy felt his affinity link with his maser carbine's controlling processor vanish. When he looked at the gun its LCD display panel was dead. **Come on, move it! Back to the Coogan.**

Darcy!

He twisted round to see five people standing in a semicircle right-behind them. One woman, four men. All of them with strange placid smiles; dressed like settlers in denim trousers and cotton shirts, the men with thick beards. Even with shock paralysing his nerves he retained enough presence of mind to glance at his own arm. Infrared showed him a faint pink outline, but low-light simply revealed long blades of grass. The chameleon circuitry was still functional.

"Shit!" Kelven, they can see chameleon suits. Warn your people. Kelven? The hardware units he wore round his waist were all failing in rapid succession, affinity filling

his mind with processor caution warnings. They started to wink out. There was no reply from Kelven Solanki.

“You must be the pair Laton called,” one of the men said. He looked from Lori to Darcy. “You can get up now.”

The power supply to Lori’s chameleon suit ebbed to nothing, and the fabric reverted to its natural dull grey. She rolled to one side and stood in one smooth motion. Implant glands were feeding a gutsy brew of hormones into her blood supply, hyping her muscles. She dropped both her maser carbine and the image enhancer, freeing her hands. Five wouldn’t be a problem. “Where do you come from?” she asked. “I’m talking to you that’s in charge of them. Is your origin in your memory?”

“You’re an atheist,” the woman replied. “It would be kinder to spare you the answer.”

Take them out, Darcy said.

Lori stepped forwards, turning, arms and legs moving fast. Left ankle swinging into the man’s kneecap with her full bodyweight behind it—satisfying crackle of breaking bone; right hand chopping the woman’s larynx, slamming her Adam’s apple into her vertebrae. Darcy was wreaking similar mayhem on his targets. Lori spun round on one foot, left leg kicking out again, back arching supplely, and her boot’s toecap caught a man just below and behind his ear, splitting his skull.

Hands gripped at her arms from behind. Lori yelped in shock. Nobody should be there. But reflexes took over, a fast back-kick which connected with a thigh, and she completed the turn with her arms locking into a defensive posture in time to see the woman staggering back. She blinked in incomprehension. The woman had blood pouring out of her mouth, her throat was severely disfigured from the first blow. As she watched, the skin inflated out, Adam’s apple reappearing. The gush of blood stopped.

Sweet shit, what does it take to stop them?

The two men Darcy had knocked over were regaining their feet. One had a shattered shin bone, its jagged end protruding from the flesh just below his knee; he stood on it and walked forwards.

Electrodes, Darcy ordered. The first of the men was

reaching for him, the side of his face caved in where Darcy's boot had impacted, eyeball mashed in its socket, shedding tears of syrupy yellow fluid, but still smiling. He deliberately stepped inside the groping embrace, bringing his hands up, fingers wide, and clamping his palms on either side of the man's head. The long cords of eel-derived electroplaque cells buried in his forearms discharged through organic conductors that emerged from his fingertips in the form of tiny warts. The man's head was crowned with a blinding flare of purple-white static accompanied by a gunshot crack as the full two-thousand-volt charge slammed into his brain.

A vicious tingling erupted across Darcy's hands as some of the current leaked through the subcutaneous insulation. But the effect on the man was like nothing Darcy had ever seen before. The discharge should have felled him instantly, nothing living could withstand that much electricity. Instead he lurched backwards clutching at his mangled head, emitting a soprano keening. His skin began to glow, shining brighter and brighter. The shirt and jeans flamed briefly, falling away from the incandescent body as blackened petals. Darcy shielded his eyes with his hand. There was no heat, he realized, with a light so bright he ought to feel a scorch wave breaking across his chameleon suit. The man had become translucent now, so powerful was the surge of photons, revealing bones and veins and organs as deep scarlet and purple shadows. Their solidity dissolved, as if they were different coloured gases caught in a hurricane. He managed one last wretched wail as his body gave a massive epileptic spasm.

The light snuffed out, and the man fell flat on his face.

The other four assailants began to howl. Lori had heard a dog lamenting the death of its master once; their voices had that same bitter resentful grieving. She realized some of her hardware units were coming back on-line, the disruption effect was abating. Her chameleon suit circuitry sent psychedelic scarlet and green fireworks zipping over the fabric.

"Kelven!" she shouted desperately.

Alone in his darkened office a thousand kilometres away Kelven Solanki jerked to attention behind his desk as her static-jarred voice crashed into his neural nanonics.

"Kelven, he was right, Laton was right, there is some kind of energy field involved. It interfaces with matter somehow, controls it. You can beat it with electricity. Sometimes. Hell, she's getting up again."

Darcy's voice broke in. "Run! Now!"

"Don't let them gang up on you, Kelven. They're powerful when they group together. It's got to be xenocs."

"Shit, the whole village is swarming after us," Darcy called.

Static roared along the satellite link like a rogue binary blitzkrieg, making Kelven wince.

"Kelven, you must quarantine . . ." Lori never finished, her signal drowning below the deluge of rampaging whines and hisses. Then the racket ended.

TRANSPONDER SIGNAL DISCONTINUED, the computer printed neatly on Kelven's desk screen.

"I told you we shouldn't have come up here, didn't I?" Gail Buchanan said. "Plain as day, I said no, I said you can't trust Edenists. But you wouldn't listen. Oh no. They just waved their fancy credit disk in front of your eyes, and you rolled over like a wet puppy. It's worse than when she was on board."

Sitting on the other side of the galley's table, Len covered his eyes with his hands. The diatribes didn't bother him much now, he had learnt to filter them out years ago. Perhaps it was one of the reasons they had stayed together so long, not from attraction, simply because they ignored each other ninety per cent of the time. He had taken to thinking about such things recently, since Marie had left.

"Is there any coffee left?" he asked.

Gail never even glanced up from her knitting needles. "In the pot. You're as lazy as she was."

"Marie wasn't lazy." He got up and walked over to the electric hotplate where the coffee-pot was resting.

"Oh, it's *Marie* now, is it? I bet you can't name ten of the others we ferried downriver."

He poured half a mug of coffee and sat back down. "Neither can you."

She actually stopped knitting. "Lennie, for God's sake,

none of them had this effect on you. Look at what's happened to us, to the boat. What was so special about her? There must have been over a hundred brides in that bunk of yours down the years."

Len glanced up in surprise. With her bloated features rendering her face almost expressionless it was difficult to know what went on behind his wife's eyes, but he could tell how confused she was. He dropped his gaze to the steaming mug, and blew on it absently. "I don't know."

Gail grunted, and resumed her knitting.

"Why don't you go to bed?" he said. "It's late, and we ought to stay awake in shifts."

"If you hadn't been so eager to come here we wouldn't have to mess our routine up."

Arguing just wasn't worth the effort. "Well, we're here now. I'll keep watch until midmorning."

"Those damn Ivets. I hope Rexrew has every one of them shot."

The lighting panel screwed into the galley's ceiling began to dim. Len gave it a puzzled glance; all the boat's electrical systems ran off the big electron-matrix crystals in the engine-room, and they were always kept fully charged. If nothing else, he did keep the boat's machinery in good order. Point of honour, that was.

Someone stepped onto the *Coogan's* deck between the wheel-house and the long cabin. It was only the slightest sound, but Len and Gail both looked up sharply, meeting each other's gaze.

A young-looking teenage lad walked into the galley. Len saw he was wearing a sheriff's beige-coloured jungle jacket, the name Yuri Wilken printed on the left breast. Darcy had told him about the invaders using sequestration techniques. At the time he'd listened cynically; now he was prepared to believe utterly. There was a vicious wound on the lad's throat, long scars of red tender skin all knotted up. A huge ribbon of dried blood ran down the front of his sleeveless shirt. He wore the kind of dazed expression belonging to the very drunk.

"Get off my boat," Len growled.

Yuri Wilken parted his mouth in a parody of a smile. Liq-

uid rasps emerged as he tried to speak. The lighting panel was flashing on and off at high frequency.

Len stood up and calmly walked over to the long counter fitted along the starboard wall.

“Sit,” Yuri grated. His hand closed on Gail’s shoulder. There was a sizzling sound, and her dress strap ignited, sending licks of yellow flame curling round his fingers. His skin remained completely unblemished.

Gail let out an anguished groan at the pain, her mouth yawning open. Wisps of blue smoke were rising from below Yuri’s hand as her skin was roasted. “Sit or she’s dead.”

Len opened the top drawer next to the fridge, and pulled out the 9mm, semi-automatic pistol he kept for emergencies. He never had trusted lasers and magnetic rifles, not exposed to the Juliffe’s corrosive humidity. If anyone came aboard looking for trouble after a deal went sour, or a village got worked up about prices, he wanted something that would be guaranteed to work first time.

He flicked the safety catch off, and swung the heavy blue-black gun around to point at Yuri.

“No,” the lad’s malaised voice croaked. He brought his hands up in front of his face, cowering back.

Len fired. The first bullet caught Yuri on his shoulder, spinning him round and pushing him into the wall. Yuri snarled, furious eyes glaring at him. The second was aimed at Yuri’s heart. It hit his sternum and the planks behind him were splashed with crimson as two of his ribs were blown apart. He began to slide down the wall, breath hissing through feral teeth. The lighting panel jumped up to its full brightness.

Len watched with numb dismay as the shoulder wound closed up. Yuri squirmed round, trying to regain his feet with slow tenacity. He grinned evilly. The grip on the pistol was growing alarmingly warm inside Len’s hand.

“Kill him, Lennie!” Gail shouted. “Kill, kill!”

Feeling preternaturally calm, Len took aim at the lad’s head and squeezed the trigger. Once. Twice. The first punched Yuri’s nose into his skull, ripping through his brain. He sucked air in, warbling frantically. Blood and

gore slurped out of the hole. The second shot caught the right side of his temple, driving splinters of bone into the wood behind like a flight of Stone Age darts. His feet began to drum on the deck.

Len was seeing it through a cold mist. The punished, mutilated body just refused to give up. He yelled a wordless curse, finger tugging back again and again.

The pistol was clicking uselessly, its magazine empty. He blinked, trying to pull the world back into focus. Yuri had finally fallen still, there was very little left of his head. Len turned aside, grasping the side of the basin for support as a flush of nausea travelled through him. Gail was whimpering softly, a hand stroking the terrible blisters and long blackened burn marks that mottled her shoulder.

He went over and cradled her head with a tenderness he hadn't shown in years.

"Get us out of here," she pleaded. "Please, Lennie."

"Darcy and Lori . . ."

"Us, Lennie. Get us out of here. You don't think they're going to live through tonight, do you?"

He licked his lips, making up his mind. "No." He brought her the first aid kit and applied a small anaesthetic patch to her shoulder. She let out a blissful little sigh as it discharged.

"You go start the engines," she said. "I'll see to this. I've never held you back yet." She started to rummage through the kit box, hunting for a medical nanonic package.

Len went out onto the deck and untied the silicon-fibre cables mooring the *Coogan*, slinging the ends over the side. They were expensive, and hard to come by, but it would take another quarter of an hour if he went stumbling round the banks coiling them all up properly.

The furnace was quite cool, but the electron-matrix crystals had enough power to take *Coogan* an easy seventy kilometres downstream before they were drained. He started the motors, shoving the trader boat out from under the lace-work awning of cut branches veiling it from casual eyes. As if there were any of those left on the river, he mused.

Getting underway was a miraculous morale booster. Alone on the lively Zamjan amid the first tinges of dawn's

grey light he could almost believe they were trading again. Simple times, watching the wheel-house's basic instrumentation, and enjoying the prospect of milking another batch of dumb dreamers at the next village. He even managed to keep his mind from the macabre corpse in the galley.

They had gone six kilometres almost due west, helped by the broad river's swift current, when Len saw two dark smudges on the water up ahead. *Swithland* and *Hycel* were steaming towards him. A great cleft had been made in the *Swithland's* prow, and the superstructure was leaning over at a hellish angle; but neither seemed to be affecting her speed.

The short-range radio block beside the forward-sweep mass-detector let out a bleep, then the general contact band came on. "Hoi there, Captain Buchanan, this is the *Hycel*. Reduce speed and prepare to come alongside."

Len ignored it. He steered a couple of degrees to starboard. The two paddle-boats altered course to match. Blocking him.

"Come on, Buchanan, what do you hope to gain? That pitiful little boat can't out-race us. One way or the other, you're coming on board. Now heave to."

Len thought of the burns the lad had inflicted with his bare hand, the flickering lighting panel. It was all way beyond anything he could hope to understand or resolve. There was no going back to life as it had been, not now. And in the main it had been a good life.

He increased the power to the motors, and held the course steady, aiming for the *Hycel's* growing prow. With a bit of luck Gail would never know.

He was still standing resolutely behind the *Coogan's* wheel when the two boats collided. The *Hycel* with its greater bulk and stalwart hull rode the impact easily, smashing the flimsy *Coogan* apart like so much kindling, and sucking the debris below its hull in a riot of bubbles.

Various chunks of wood and plastic bobbed about in the paddle-boat's wake, spinning in the turbulent water. Thick black oil patches welled up among them. The current slowly pushed the scraps of wreckage downriver, dispers-

ing them over a wide area. Within quarter of an hour there was no evidence left to illustrate the trader boat's demise.

Swithland and *Hycel* continued on their way upriver without slowing.

18

Joshua Calvert was surprised to find himself enjoying the train journey. He had almost expected to see a nineteenth-century steam engine pumping out clouds of white smoke and clanking pistons spinning iron wheels. Reality was a sleek eight-wheel tractor unit with magnetic axle-motors powered from electron matrices, pulling six coaches.

The Kavanaghs had provided him with a first-class ticket, so he sat in a private compartment with his feet up on the opposite seat, watching the sprawling forests and picturesque hamlets go past. Dahybi Yadev sat next to him, eyelids blinking heavily as a mild stimulant program trickled through his neural nanonics. In the end they had decided that Ashly Hanson should remain behind to operate the *Lady Mac*'s MSV as the crew emptied the mayope from her cargo holds. Dahybi had volunteered to take his place quickly enough, and as the nodes had been glitch free on the trip to Norfolk, Joshua had agreed. The rest of the crew had been detailed to maintenance duty. Sarha had sulked at the prospect, she'd been looking forward to an extended leave exploring the gentle planet.

The train compartment's PA came on to announce they were pulling in to Colsterworth Station. Joshua stretched his limbs, and loaded a formal etiquette program into his neural nanonics. He had found it in *Lady Mac*'s memory cores; his father must have visited the planet at some time, though he had never mentioned it. The program might well turn out to be a saviour, country-dwelling Norfolk was supposed to be even more stuffy than swinging cosmopolitan Boston. Pursing his lips at the prospect, Joshua shook Dahybi Yadev's shoulder. "Come on, cancel the program. We've arrived."

Dahybi's face lost its narcotic expression, and he squinted out of the window. "This is it?"

"This is it."

"It looks like a field with a couple of houses in it."

"Don't yell that kind of comment about, for God's sake. Here." He datavised a copy of the etiquette program over. "Keep that in primary mode. We don't want to annoy our benefactor."

Dahybi ran through some of the social jurisprudence listed in the program. "Bloody hell, I think *Lady Mac* fell through a time warp to get here."

Joshua rang for the steward to carry their cases. The etiquette program said the man should be tipped five per cent of the ticket price, or a shilling, whichever was the larger sum.

Colsterworth Station consisted of two stone platforms, covered with broad wooden canopies supported by ornate wrought-iron pillars. The waiting-room and ticket office were built from red brick, and a row of metal brackets along the front wall were used to hold big hanging baskets full of bright flowering plants. Appearance was a priority to the stationmaster; the scarlet and cream paintwork was kept gleaming the whole year round, brasswork was polished, and his staff were always smartly turned out.

Such persistence had paid off handsomely today. He was standing next to the heir to Cricklade herself, Louise Kavanagh, who had remarked how nice it all looked.

The morning train from Boston pulled in slowly, and the stationmaster checked his watch. "Thirty seconds late."

Louise Kavanagh inclined her head graciously at the stout little man. On her other side William Elphinstone shuffled his feet impatiently. She silently prayed for him not to make a complete mess of things. He was so impetuous at times, and he looked totally out of place in his grey suit; field working clothes were much more apposite on him.

For herself, she'd carefully chosen a pale lavender dress with puff sleeves to wear. Nanny had helped to pleat her hair into an elaborate weave at the back of her head which ended in a long pony-tail. Hopefully the combination would give her a suitably dignified appearance.

The train halted, its first three coaches taking up the entire length of the platform. Doors banged open noisily, and passengers started to climb down. She straightened her back to get a better look at the people emerging from the first-class coach.

"There they are," William Elphinstone said.

Louise wasn't entirely sure what she'd been expecting, although she was pretty sure in her own mind that starship captains were wise, serious, and mature responsible men, perhaps a bit like her father (except without the temper). Who else would be entrusted with such a fearsome responsibility? What a captain did not look like, even in her most fantastical dreams, was a young man with strong regular features, six foot tall, wearing a smart, exotically stylish uniform that emphasized his powerful build. But there was the silver star on his shoulder, plain for all the world to see.

Louise swallowed hard, tried to remember the words she was supposed to say, and stepped forwards with a polite smile in place. "Captain Calvert, I'm Louise Kavanagh; my father apologizes for not being here to greet you in person, but the estate is very busy right now and requires his full attention. So I'd like to welcome you to Cricklade myself, and hope you enjoy your stay." Which was almost what she'd rehearsed, but there was something about enjoying his train journey which had been missed out. Oh, well . . .

Joshua took her hand in an emphatic grip. "That's very kind of you, Louise. And I must say I consider myself most fortunate that your father is so occupied, because there simply cannot be a nicer way of being welcomed to Cricklade than by a young lady as beautiful as yourself."

Louise knew her cheeks would be colouring, and wanted to turn and hide. What a juvenile reaction. He was only being polite. But so utterly charming. And he sounded sincere. Could he really think that about her? Her discipline had gone all to pieces. "Hello," she said to Dahybi Yadev. Which was so dreadfully gauche. Her blush deepened. She realized Joshua was still holding her hand.

"My starflight engineering officer," Joshua said, with a slight bow.

Louise recovered, and introduced William Elphinstone as

an estate manager, not mentioning he was only a trainee. Which he should have been grateful for, but she got the distinct impression he wasn't terribly impressed with the starship captain.

"We have a carriage laid on to take you to the manor," William said. He signalled to the driver to take Joshua's bags from the steward.

"That's really most thoughtful of you," Joshua told Louise.

Dimples appeared in her cheeks. "This way." She gestured to the platform exit.

Joshua thought the waiting carriage looked like an oversized pram fitted with modern lightweight wheels. But the two black horses moved it along at a fair clip, and the ride over the rutted track was comfortably smooth. There hadn't been much to Colsterworth, it was a rural market town with very few industries; the countryside economy revolved around the farms. Its houses were mostly built from locally quarried stone with a bluish tinge. Doors and windows were almost always arched.

When they rode down the busy High Street, pedestrians nudged one another and glanced over as the carriage went by. At first Joshua thought they were looking at him and Dahybi, but then he realized it was Louise who drew their attention.

Outside Colsterworth the rolling countryside was a patchwork of small fields separated by immaculately layered hedges. Streams wound down through the gentle valleys, while spinneys clung to the rounded heights and deeper folds. The wheat and barley had already been harvested, he saw. Plenty of haystacks were dotted about, steeply sloping tops netted against the expected winter winds. Tractors were ploughing the stubble back into the rich red soil before drilling the second crop. There would be just enough time for the stalks to ripen before the long autumn and winter seasons began.

"You don't have any proscription against power tractors, then?" Joshua asked.

"Certainly not," William Elphinstone replied. "We're a stable society, Captain, not a backward one. We use what-

ever is appropriate to maintain the status quo, and give people a decent standard of living at the same time. Using horses to plough every field would be pure drudgery. That's not what Norfolk is about. Our founders wanted pastoral life to be enjoyable for all." To Joshua's ears he sounded defensive, but then he had been on edge since they'd been introduced.

"Where does all the power come from?" Joshua asked.

"Solar cells are sufficient for domestic utilities, but ninety per cent of the electricity used for industry and agriculture is geothermal. We buy in thermal-potential fibres from the Confederation and drill them three or four miles down into the mantle. Most towns have five or six heat shafts; they're virtually maintenance free, and the fibres last for a couple of centuries. It's a much neater solution than building hydro dams everywhere and flooding valleys."

Interesting how he said Confederation, Joshua thought, almost as if Norfolk wasn't a part of it.

"All this must seem terribly cumbersome to you, I expect," Louise said.

"Not at all," Joshua answered. "What I've seen so far is admirable. You should visit some of the so-called advanced worlds I've been to. Technology comes with a very high price in terms of society, they have dreadful levels of crime and vice. Some urban areas have decayed into complete no-go zones."

"Three people were murdered on Kesteven last year," Louise said.

William Elphinstone frowned as if to object, but let it pass.

"I think your ancestors got your constitution about right," Joshua said.

"Hard on people who are sick," Dahybi Yadev observed.

"There aren't many illnesses," William Elphinstone said. "Our lifestyle means we're a very healthy people. And our hospitals can cope with most accidents."

"Including cousin Gideon," Louise said slyly.

Joshua pressed down on a smile as William Elphinstone gave her a curtly censorious look. The girl wasn't quite as meek as he'd first supposed. They were sitting opposite each

other in the carriage, which gave him a good opportunity to study her. He had thought that she and William pain-in-the-arse Elphinstone were an item, but judging from the way she virtually ignored him it didn't seem too likely. William Elphinstone appeared none too happy with the cold-shoulder treatment, either.

"Actually, William isn't being entirely honest," she went on. "We don't catch diseases because most of our first-comer ancestors were recipients of geneering before they settled here. It stands to reason, on a planet which deliberately excludes the most advanced medical treatments it's wise to protect yourself in advance. So in that respect we don't quite match up to the simplistic pastoral ideal. You probably couldn't have built a society as successful as Norfolk before geneering; people would have insisted on continuing technical and medical research to better their lot."

William Elphinstone made a show of turning his head and staring out over the fields.

"Fascinating idea," Joshua said. "You can only have stability once you've passed a certain technological level, and flux is the natural order until that happens. Are you going to take politics at university?"

Her lips depressed fractionally. "I don't think I'll be going. Women don't, generally. And there aren't many universities anyway; there's no research to be done. Most of my family go to agricultural colleges, though."

"And will you be joining your relatives there?"

"Maybe. Father hasn't said. I'd like to. Cricklade is going to be mine one day, you see. I want to be more than just a figurehead."

"I'm sure you will be, Louise. I can't imagine you as just a figurehead for anything." He was surprised at how earnest his voice had become.

Louise cast her eyes down to see she was knotting her fingers in her lap in a most unladylike manner. Whatever was making her babble like this?

"Is this Cricklade now?" Joshua asked. The fields had given way to larger expanses of parkland between the small woods. Sheep and cattle were grazing placidly, along with

some xenoc bovine-analogue that looked similar to a very hairy deer, with fat legs and hemispherical hoofs.

"We've been riding through the Cricklade estate since we left town, actually," William Elphinstone said snidely.

Joshua gave Louise an encouraging smile. "As far as the eye can see, is it?"

"Yes."

"Then I can see why you love it so much. If I ever settle down, I'd want it to be in a land like this."

"Any chance we can see some roses?" Dahybi Yadev asked loudly.

"Yes, of course," Louise said, suddenly brisk. "How dreadfully remiss of me. Cousin Kenneth said this was your first time here." She turned round and tapped the driver on his shoulder. The two of them exchanged a few words. "There's a grove beyond the forest up ahead," she said. "We'll stop there."

The grove took up ten acres on a northern-facing slope. To catch the suns, Louise explained. It was marked out by a dry-stone wall that was host to long patches of moss-analogue which sprouted miniature pink flowers. The flat stones themselves were often crumbling from frost erosion; little attempt had been made at repairs except in the worst sections of subsidence. In one corner of the grove there was a long barn with a thatched roof; moss had clawed its way into the reeds, loosening the age-blackened bundles. New wooden pallets stacked with what looked like thousands of conical white plant pots were just visible through the barn's open doorway.

Still, dry air magnified the grove's placid composure, adding to the impression of genteel decay. If it hadn't been for the perfectly regimented rows of plants, Joshua would have believed the grove had been neglected, simply treated as a hobby by an indulgent landowner rather than the vital industry it was.

Norfolk's weeping rose was unarguably the most famous plant in the Confederation. In its natural state it was a thornless rambling bush that favoured well-drained peaty soil. But when cultivated and planted in groves it was trained up wire trellises three metres high. The jade-green leaves were

palm sized, reminiscent of terrestrial maples with their deep serrations, their tips coloured a dull red.

But it was the flowers which drew Joshua's scrutiny; they were yellow-gold blooms, twenty-five centimetres in diameter with a thick ruff of crinkled petals hugging a central onion-shaped carpel pod. Each plant in the grove had produced thirty-five to forty flowers, standing proud on fleshy green stems as thick as a man's thumb. Under Duke's unremitting glare they had acquired a spectral lemon-yellow corona.

The four of them walked a little way down the mown grass between the rows. Careful pruning of the bushes had ensured that each flower was fully exposed to the sunlight, none of them overlapped.

Joshua pressed his toe into the wiry grass, feeling the solid earth. "It's very dry," he said. "Will there be enough water to fill them out?"

"It never rains at midsummer," Louise said. "Not on the inhabited islands, anyway. Convection takes all the clouds up to the poles; most of the ice-caps melt under the deluge, but the temperature is still only a couple of degrees above freezing. It's considered frightfully bad luck if it even drizzles here in the week before Midsummer's Day. The roses store up all the moisture they need for fruition in their roots during springtime."

He reached up and touched one of the big flowers, surprised by how stiff the stem was. "I had no idea they were so impressive."

"This is an old grove," she said. "The roses here are fifty years old, and they're good for another twenty. We replant several groves each year from the estate's nurseries."

"That sounds like quite an operation. I'd like to see it. Perhaps you could show me, you seem very knowledgeable about their cultivation."

Louise blushed again. "Yes, I do; I mean, I will," she stammered.

"Unless you have other duties, of course. I don't wish to impose." He smiled.

"You're not," she assured him quickly.

"Good."

She found herself smiling back at him for no particular reason at all.

Joshua and Dahybi had to wait until late afternoon before they were introduced to Grant Kavanagh and his wife, Marjorie. It was an opportunity for Joshua to be shown round the big manor house and its grounds, with Louise continuing her role of informative hostess. The manor was an impressive set-up; an unobtrusive army of servants was employed to keep the rooms in immaculate condition, and a lot of money had been spent making the decor as tasteful as possible. Naturally enough, the style was based prominently on the eighteenth-century school of design, history's miniature enclave.

Thankfully, William Elphinstone left them, claiming he had to work in the groves. They did, however, meet Genevieve Kavanagh as soon as their carriage drew up outside the entrance. Louise's young sister tagged along with them for the entire afternoon, giggling the whole time. Joshua wasn't used to children that age, in his opinion she was a spoilt brat who needed a damn good smack. If it wasn't for Louise he would have been mighty tempted to put her over his knee. Instead he suffered in silence, making the most of the way Louise's dress fabric shifted about as she moved. There was precious little else to absorb his attention. To the uninitiated eye the estate beyond the grounds was almost deserted.

Midsummer on Norfolk was a time when almost everybody living in the countryside helped out with the weeping rose crop. The travelling Romany caravans were in high demand, with estates and independent grove owners competing for their labour. Even school terms (Norfolk didn't use didactic laser imprints) were structured round the season, giving children time off to assist their parents, leaving winter as the principal time for studying. As the whole Tear crop was gathered in two days, preparation was an arduous and exacting business.

With over two hundred groves in his estate (not counting those in the crofts), Grant Kavanagh was the most industrious man in Stoke County during the days leading up to mid-

summer. He was fifty-six years old; modest geneering had produced a barrel-chested physique, five feet ten inches tall, with brown hair that was already greying around his mutton-chop sideboards. But a lifetime of physical activity and keeping a strict watch on what he ate meant he retained the vigour of a man in his twenties. He was able to chase up his flock of junior estate managers with unnerving doggedness. Which, as he knew from sore experience, was the only way of achieving anything in Stoke County. Not only did he have to supervise the teams which went round the groves setting up the collection cups, but he was also responsible for the county's bottling yard. Grant Kavanagh did not tolerate fools, slackers, and family sinecurists, which in his view described a good ninety-five per cent of Norfolk's population. Cricklade estate had run smoothly and profitably for the last two hundred and seventy years of its distinguished three-hundred-year existence, and by God that superb record wasn't going to end in his lifetime.

An afternoon spent in the saddle riding round some of the rosegroves closest to the manor, with the eternally enduring Mr Butterworth accompanying him, did not put him in the best frame of mind for trotting out glib niceties to dandies like visiting starship captains. He marched into the house slapping dust from his riding breeches and shouting for a drink, a bath, and a decent meal.

Having this red-faced martinet figure bearing down on him across the large airy entrance hall put Joshua in mind of a Tranquillity serjeant—only lacking the charm and good looks.

"Bit young to be skippering a starship, aren't you?" Grant Kavanagh said when Louise introduced them. "Surprised the banks gave you the loan to fly one."

"I inherited *Lady Mac*, and my crew made enough money in our first year of commercial flying to make the run to this planet. It's the first time we've been, and your family turned somersaults to give me three thousand cases of the best Tears on the island. What criteria would you judge my competence by?"

Louise closed her eyes and wished herself very, very small.

Grant Kavanagh stared at the utterly uncompromising expression of the young man who had answered him back in his own home, and burst out laughing. "By Christ, now that's the sort of attitude we could do with a hell of a lot more of around here. Well done, Joshua, I approve. Don't give ground, and bite back every time." He put a protective arm around both his daughters. "See that, you two rascal-lions? That's what you've got to have to run commercial enterprises; starships or estates, it doesn't matter which. You just have to be the boss man each and every time you open your mouth." He kissed Louise on her forehead, and tickled a giggling Genevieve. "Glad to meet you, Joshua. Nice to see young Kenneth hasn't lost his touch when it comes to judging people."

"He puts together a tough deal," Joshua said, sounding unhappy.

"So it would seem. This mayope wood, is it as good as he says? I couldn't shut him up about it when he was on the phone."

"Yes, it's impressive. Like a tree that's grown out of steel. I brought some samples with me, of course, you can have a look for yourself."

"I'll take you up on that later." The manor's butler came into the hall carrying Grant's gin and tonic on a silver tray. He picked it up and took a sip. "I suppose this damned Lalonde planet will start charging a premium once they know how valuable it is to us?" he said in a disgruntled tone.

"That depends, sir."

"Oh?" Grant Kavanagh widened his eyes with interest at the humorously furtive tone. He let go of Genevieve, and patted her fondly. "Run along, poppet. It looks like Captain Calvert and I have something to discuss."

"Yes, Daddy." Genevieve capered past Joshua, giving him a sidelong glance, and breaking into giggles again.

Louise showed him a lopsided grin as she started to walk away. She had seen the other girls at school do that when they wanted to be coquettish with their boys. "You will be joining us for dinner, won't you, Captain Calvert?" she asked airily.

"I imagine so, yes."

"I'll tell cook to prepare some iced chiplemon. You'll like that; it's my favourite."

"Then I'm sure I'll like it too."

"And don't be late, Daddy."

"Am I ever?" Grant Kavanagh retorted, enchanted as ever by his little girl's playfulness.

She rewarded them both with a sunlight smile, then skipped off across the hall tiles after Genevieve.

An hour later Joshua was lying on his bed, fathoming the mysteries of the planet's communication system. His bedroom was in the west wing, a large room with *en suite* bathroom, its walls papered with a rich purple and gold pattern. The bed was a double, with a carved oak headboard and a horribly solid mattress. It required very little imagination on his part to picture Louise Kavanagh lying on it beside him.

There was a phone on the bedside table, but the impossibly antique gadget didn't have a standard processor; he couldn't use his neural nanonics to datavise the communication net control computer. It didn't even have an AV pillar, just a keyboard, a holoscreen, and a handset. He did think that Norfolk had written a wonderfully realistic Turing program into the exchange's processor array to deal patiently with requests, until he finally realized he was actually talking to a human operator. She patched him into the geostationary relay satellite circuit and opened a channel to *Lady Macbeth*. What the call must be costing Grant Kavanagh was an item he managed to put firmly at the back of his mind. Humans operating a basic computer management routine!

"We've unloaded a third of the mayope already," Sarha said; the link was audio only, no visual. "Your new merchant friend Kenneth Kavanagh has hired half a dozen spaceplanes from other starships to ferry it down to the surface. At this rate we'll be finished by tomorrow."

"Great news. I don't want to sound premature, but after this run is over it looks like we'll be coming back here to finalize that arrangement we were kicking around earlier."

"You're making progress, then?"

"Absolutely."

“What’s Cricklade like?”

“Astonishing, it’s enough to make a Tranquillity plutocrat jealous. You’d love it.”

“Thanks, Joshua. That really makes me feel good.”

He grinned and took another sip of the Norfolk Tears his thoughtful host had provided. “How are you and Warlow coping with the maintenance checks?”

“We’ve finished.”

“What?” He sat up abruptly, nearly spilling some of the precious drink.

“We’ve finished. There isn’t a system on board that isn’t as smooth as a baby’s bum.”

“Jesus, you must have been working your arses off.”

“It took us five hours, grand total. And most of that was spent waiting for the diagnostics programs to run. There’s nothing wrong with *Lady Mac*, Joshua. Her performance rating is as good as the day the CAB awarded us our space-worthiness certificate.”

“That’s ridiculous. We were so glitch prone after Lalonde we were lucky to get here at all.”

“You think I don’t know how to load a diagnostics program?” she asked, her voice sounding very tetchy.

“Of course you know your job,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “It just doesn’t make a lot of sense, that’s all.”

“You want me to datavise the results down to you?”

“No. You can’t, anyway; this planet’s net couldn’t handle anything like that. What does Warlow say, is *Lady Mac* up to a CAB inspection?”

“We’ll pass with flying colours.”

“OK, I’ll leave it up to the pair of you what you do.”

“We’ll get the inspectors up here tomorrow morning. Norfolk’s CAB office only runs stage D checks in any case. Our own diagnostics are stricter than that.”

“Fine. I’ll call tomorrow for an update.”

“Sure. ’Bye, Joshua.”

Tehama asteroid was one of the most financially and industrially successful independent industrial settlements in the New Californian star system. A stony iron rock twenty-eight kilometres long and eighteen wide, tracing an irregular fifty-

day elliptical orbit within the trailing Trojan point of Yosemite, the system's largest gas giant, it had all the elements and minerals necessary to support life, barring hydrogen and nitrogen. But that deficiency was made good from a snowball-shaped carbonaceous chondritic asteroid, one kilometre wide, which had been nudged into a fifty-kilometre orbit around Tehama in 2283. Since then its shale had been mined and refined; hydrogen was combined with oxygen to produce water, plain and simple; nitrogen underwent more complex bonding procedures to form useable nitrates; hydrocarbons were an essential. They were all introduced to the caverns being bored out of Tehama's metallic ore, producing a habitable biosphere capable of supporting the increasing population.

By 2611 there were two major caverns inside Tehama; and its small companion had been reduced to a sable lump two hundred and fifty metres wide, with a silver-white refinery station, almost as large, clinging to it barnacle-fashion.

The *Villeneuve's Revenge* jumped into an emergence zone a hundred and twenty thousand kilometres away, and began its approach manoeuvres. After months tending the starship's ageing, failure-prone systems, Erick Thakrar was grateful for any shore time. Shipboard life was one long grind, he'd lost count of how many times he'd falsified the maintenance log so they could avoid CAB penalties and keep flying. There was no doubt about it, the *Villeneuve's Revenge* was operating dangerously close to the margin, both mechanically and financially. Genuine independence was proving an elusive goal; Captain Duchamp was in debt to the banks to the tune of a million and a half fuseodollars, and charters were hard to find.

Some small part of Erick felt sorry for the old boy. Commercial starflight was a viciously tough business, a tightly woven web of large cartels and monopolies that resented the very existence of independent traders. Starships like the *Villeneuve's Revenge* forced the major carrier fleets to keep their own prices down, reducing profits. They retaliated with semi-legal syndicates in an attempt to lock out small ships.

Duchamp was an excellent captain, but his business acumen was highly questionable. His crew was loyal, though, and Erick had heard enough stories of past missions to know they had few qualms about how they earned money. If he wanted to, he could have had them arrested within a week of coming on board—neural-nanonics recorded conversation was admissible evidence in court. But he was after bigger prizes than a worn-out ship with its loser crew. The *Villeneuve's Revenge* was his access code to whole strata of illegal operations. And it looked like Tehama was going to be the start of the game.

After docking at the asteroid's non-rotating axis spaceport, four crew members from the *Villeneuve's Revenge* descended on the Catalina bar in the Los Olivos cavern, the first to be dug, a cylindrical hollow nine kilometres long and five in diameter. The Catalina was one of the spaceport crew bars, with aluminium tables and a small stage for a band. At three in the afternoon, local time, it was almost dead.

The bar was a cave drilled into the cavern's vertical cliff-face endwall, one of thousands forming an interconnected cave city, producing a band of glass windows and foliage-wrapped balconies that encircled the base of the endwall. Like an Edenist habitat, nobody lived on the cavern floor itself, it was a communal park and arable farm. But there the resemblance stopped.

Erick Thakrar sat at an alcove table near the balcony window with two of his shipmates, Bev Lennon and Desmond Lafoe, and their captain, André Duchamp. The Catalina was near the top of the city levels, giving it a seventy-five per cent gravity field, and a good view out into the cavern. Erick wasn't impressed by what he could see. The axis was taken up by a hundred-metre diameter gantry, most of which was filled by the thick black pipes of the irrigation-sprinkler nozzles. It was ringed at two hundred and fifty metre intervals by doughnut-shaped solartubes that shone with a painful blue-white intensity. They lacked the warm incandescence of an Edenist habitat's axis light-tube, which was dramatically illustrated by the plants far below. The cavern floor's grass shaded towards the yellow, while trees and shrubs were spindly, missing their full complement of leaves. Even

the fields of crops were hungry looking (one reason why imported delicacies were so popular and profitable in all asteroid settlements). It was as though an unexpected autumn had visited the tropical climate.

The whole cavern was cramped and clumsy, a poor copy of a bitek habitat's excellence. Erick found himself thinking back to Tranquillity with nostalgia.

"Here he comes," André Duchamp muttered. "Be nice to the *Anglo*, remember we need him." The captain came from Carcassonne, a die-hard French nationalist, who blamed the ethnic English in the Confederation for everything from failed optical fibres in the starship's flight computer to his current overdraft. At sixty-five years old his geneered DNA maintained his physique in the lean mould which was the staple criterion of the space adapted, as well as providing him with a face that was rounded all over. When André Duchamp laughed, everyone in the room found themselves smiling along, so powerful was the appeal; he had the same emotional conviction as a painted clown.

Right now he put on his most welcoming smile for the man sidling anxiously up to the table.

Lance Coulson was a senior flight controller in Tehama's Civil Astronautics Bureau; in his late fifties, he lacked the political contacts necessary to gain senior management ranking. It meant he was stuck in inter-system tracking and communications until retirement now; that made him resentful, and agreeable to supplying people like André Duchamp with information—for the right price.

He sat at the table and gave Erick Thakrar a long look. "I haven't seen you before."

Erick started recording his implant-enhanced sensorium directly into a neural nanonics memory cell, and ordered a file search. Image: of an overweight man, facial skin a red tinge of brown from exposure to the cavern solartubes; grey suit with high circular collar, pinching the neck flesh; light brown hair, colour-embellished by follicle biochemical treatments. Sound: of slightly wheezy breathing, heartbeat rate above average. Smell: sour human sweat, beads standing out on a high forehead and the back of chubby hands.

Lance Coulson was nerving himself up. A weakling ruffled by the company he kept.

"Because I haven't been here before," Erick replied, unyielding. His CNIS file reported a blank, Lance Coulson wasn't a known criminal. Probably too petty, he thought.

"Erick Thakrar, my systems generalist," André Duchamp said. "Erick is an excellent engineer. Surely you don't question my judgement when it comes to my own crew?" There was just enough hint of anger to make Lance Coulson shift round in his seat.

"No, of course not."

"Excellent!" André Duchamp was all smiles again; he clapped Lance Coulson on the back, winning a sickly smile, and pushed a glass of Montbard brandy over the scratched aluminium slab to him. "So what have you got for me?"

"A cargo of micro-fusion generators," he said softly.

"So? Tell me more."

The civil servant rolled the stem of his glass between his thumb and finger, not looking at the captain. "A hundred thousand." He slid his Francisco Finance credit disk across the table.

"You jest!" André Duchamp said. There was a dangerous glint to his eyes.

"There were . . . questions last time. I'm not doing this again."

"You're not doing it this time at that price. If I had that kind of money do you think I would be here crawling to a tax-money leech like you?"

Bev Lennon put a restraining hand on Duchamp's shoulder. "Easy," he said smoothly. "Look, we're all here because money is tight, right? We can certainly pay you a quarter of that figure in advance."

Lance Coulson picked up his credit disk and stood up. "I see I have been wasting my time."

"Thank you for the information," Erick said in a loud voice.

Lance Coulson gave him a frightened look. "What?"

"That's going to be enormously useful to us. How would you like to be paid? Cash or commodities?"

"Shut up."

“Sit down, and stop fucking about.”

He sat, checking the rest of the tables with twitchy glances.

“We want to buy, you want to sell,” Erick said. “So let’s stop the drama queen tactics, assume you’ve shown us what a tough negotiator you are, and we’re all shitting bricks. Now what’s your price? And be realistic. There are other flight controllers.”

He overcame his agitation for just long enough to shoot Erick a look of one hundred per cent hatred. “Thirty thousand.”

“Agreed,” André Duchamp said immediately. He held out his Jovian Bank disk.

Lance Coulson gave a last furtive glance round before shoving his own disk in André’s direction.

“*Merci*, Lance.” André’s grin was scathing as he received the datavised flight vector.

The four crewmen watched the civil servant retreating, and laughed. Erick was congratulated for calling the other man’s bluff, Bev Lennon fetching him half a litre of imported Lübeck beer.

“You had me panicking!” the wiry fusion specialist protested as he dropped the tankards down on their table.

Erick took a sip of the icy beer. “I had me panicking.”

It was going well, they accepted him, reservations (and he knew some still had them) were fading, breaking down. He was becoming one of the lads.

Along with Bev Lennon and Desmond Lafoe, the ship’s node specialist, a brawny two-metre-tall bear of a man, Erick spent the next ten minutes talking trivia while André Duchamp sat back with a blank expression reviewing the vector he had just bought.

“I don’t see any problem,” the captain announced eventually. “If we use a Sacramento orbit to jump from we can rendezvous any time in the next six days. Fifty-five hours from now would be the ideal . . .” His voice trailed off.

Erick turned to follow his gaze. Five men wearing copper-coloured one-piece ship-suits walked into the Catalina bar.

Hasan Rawand caught sight of André Duchamp as he was about to sit at the bar. He tapped Shane Brandes, the

Dechal's fusion engineer, on the side of his arm and flicked a finger in the direction of the master of *Villeneuve's Revenge*. His other three crew-members, Ian O'Flaherty, Harry Levine, and Stafford Charlton, caught the gesture and turned to look.

The two crews regarded each other with mutual hostility and antagonism.

Hasan Rawand walked over to the window booth table, his crew right behind him. "André," he said with mock civility. "So nice to see you. I trust you have brought my money. Eight hundred thousand, wasn't it? And that's before interest. It has been seventeen months after all."

André Duchamp gazed straight ahead, his hands cupping his beer tankard. "I owe you no money," he said darkly.

"I think you do. Cast your mind back; you were carrying plutonium initiators from Sab Biyar to the Isole system. *Dechal* waited in Sab Biyar's Oort cloud for thirty-two hours for you, André. Thirty-two hours in stealth mode, with freezing air and iced food, pissing into tubes that leaked, not even allowed a personal MF player in case the navy ships picked up its electronic emission. That's not nice, André; it's about as close as you can get to a Confederation penal colony without being shot down to the surface in a drop capsule. We waited for *thirty-two hours* in the stinking dark for you to show so we could take the initiators in, doing your dirty work for you and carrying all the risk. And when we got back to Sab Biyar what did I find?"

André Duchamp grinned round at his own crew, trying to brazen it out. "I'm sure you'll tell me, *Anglo*."

"You went to Nuristan and sold the initiators to one of their naval contractors, you Gallic *shithead*! I was left trying to explain to the Isole Independence Front where their nukes had gone, and why their poxy rebellion was going to fail because they hadn't got the fire-power to back up their demands."

"You can show me the contract?" André Duchamp asked mockingly.

Hasan Rawand glared down at him, lips compressed in rage. "Just hand over the money. A million will see you clear."

“To hell with you, *Anglo* filth. I, André Duchamp, owe nobody money.” He stood up and tried to barge past the *Dechal*’s captain.

It was the move Erick Thakrar was waiting for and dreading. Sure enough, Hasan Rawand shoved André Duchamp back in the booth. The back of the older captain’s knee struck a seat which almost tipped him off balance. He recovered and launched himself at Hasan Rawand, fists flying.

Desmond Lafoe rose to his feet drawing a frantic gasp from Ian O’Flaherty when his size, weight, and strength became apparent. Huge hands reached forward, and Ian O’Flaherty was jerked off his feet. He kicked out wildly, toecap striking Desmond Lafoe’s shin. The giant merely grunted, and then threw his victim across the room. He landed awkwardly on one of the aluminium tables, his shoulder taking the brunt of his momentum before he crashed down backwards onto a pair of chairs.

Erick felt a hand close around the neck fabric of his ship-suit. It was Shane Brandes who was hauling him out of the booth; a forty-year-old with a bald head and small gold earrings, smiling with ugly anticipation. The unarmed combat file in Erick’s neural nanonics went into primary mode. His instinctive thought routines were superseded by logic-based patterns, calculating inertia and intent with an ease surpassing any kung fu master. Nanonic supplement boosted muscles powered up.

Shane Brandes was surprised how easy it was to pull his opponent out of the booth. Gratification became alarm when he kept on coming. Shane had to backstep to keep balance, his own neural nanonics assuming command of his mass positioning. He cocked a fist back to smash into Erick’s face, only to have a nanonic warning blare in his mind as Erick’s forearm swung up with incredible speed. His punch was blocked, arm chopped painfully to one side. A furious kick to Erick’s groin—his knee nearly fractured from the impact of the counter-kick. He reeled to one side, banging into Harry Levine and Bev Lennon, who were locked together.

Erick slammed an elbow into Shane’s ribs, hearing bone break. He let out an agonized grunt.

The unarmed combat file said that speed was essential,

take out your opponent as soon as possible. His neural nanonics analysed Shane's movements, the half twist as he clutched at his ribs, bending over. The motion was projected two seconds into the future. Interception points were computed. A list materialized in his consciousness, and he selected a blow that would cause temporary incapacitation. His right leg shot out, booted foot aiming for a patch of empty air. Shane's head fell into it.

A threat assessment sub-routine shifted his peripheral senses into priority focus. André Duchamp and Hasan Rawand were still battering away at each other on the side of the booth's table. Neither was inflicting much damage in the confined space.

Harry Levine had got Bev Lennon into a head lock. The two of them were on the floor, squirming round like theatrical wrestlers, sending chairs spinning. Bev Lennon sent a flurry of elbow jabs into Harry Levine's stomach, attempting to knock his navel into his spine.

Stafford Charlton obviously had a boosted musculature. He was standing in front of Desmond Lafoe, landing blow after blow on the big man, arms moving with programmed efficiency. He had almost doubled up from the pain, his right arm hung limply, the shoulder broken. Blood ran out of his flattened nose.

Ian O'Flaherty rose behind Desmond Lafoe, berserk loathing contorting his face, a pocket fission blade in his right hand. With his enhanced retinas on full amplification, the yellow haze emitted by the activated blade dazzled Erick for an instant. The threat assessment sub-routine activated the defensive nanonic implant in his left hand. A targeting grid of fine blue lines flipped up across his vision. A rectangular section flashed red, and wrapped itself around Ian O'Flaherty, adapting to his movements like elastic thread.

"Don't!" Erick Thakrar shouted.

Ian O'Flaherty had already raised the blade high above his head when the shout came. In his wired state he probably wouldn't have obeyed even if he heard. Erick saw the muscles in his lower arm begin to contract, the knife quivered as it started on its downward slash.

The neural nanonics program reported that even with

boosted muscles Erick couldn't reach Ian O'Flaherty in time. He made his decision. A small patch of skin above the second knuckle of his left hand dilated, and the implant spat out a dart of nanonic circuitry, barely as large as a wasp stinger. It struck the bare skin of Ian O'Flaherty's neck, penetrating to a depth of six millimetres. The fission blade had already descended twenty centimetres towards Desmond Lafoe's broad back. As soon as it sensed it was buried inside the flesh, and its momentum was spent, the dart sprouted a fur of microscopic filaments. They quested round on a pre-programmed search pattern for nerve strands, tips wriggling between the close-packed honeycomb of cells. Ganglions were located, and the sharp filament tips forced their way through gossamer membranes sheathing the individual nerves. At this time the knife had descended twenty-four centimetres. Ian O'Flaherty's right eyelid gave an involuntary twitch at the small sting from the dart's entry. The dart's internal processor analysed the chemical and electrical reactions flashing along the nerves; it began to broadcast its own signal into the brain. His neural nanonics detected the signal at once, but the circuitry was powerless to help, it could only override natural impulses originating from within the brain.

Ian O'Flaherty had brought the blade thirty-eight centimetres down towards Desmond Lafoe when he felt a million lacework rivulets of fire igniting inside his body. The blade fell another four centimetres before his muscles were convulsed by the besieging deluge of impulses. His nerves were burning out, overloaded by the nanonic dart's diabolical signal, ordering the massive uncontrolled release of energy along each strand, a simultaneous chemical detonation inside every neuron cell.

Breath rasped out of his wide mouth, aghast eyes looking round the room in a final plea for life. His skin turned red, as if afflicted by instant sunburn. His muscles lost all strength, and he toppled limply onto the floor. The fission blade skittered about, shaving flakes of rock from the floor whenever it touched.

No one else was fighting any more.

Desmond Lafoe gave Erick a puzzled, pain-filled glance. "What . . ."

"He would have killed you," Erick said in a quiet voice; he lowered his left arm. Everyone in the bar seemed to be staring at the offending limb.

"What did you do to him?" a horrified Harry Levine asked.

Erick shrugged.

"Screw that," André Duchamp rasped. There was blood running out of his left nostril, and his eye was swelling rapidly. "Come on."

"You can't just go!" Hasan Rawand shouted. "You killed him."

André Duchamp tugged Bev Lennon to his feet. "It was self-defence. That *Anglo* bastard tried to kill one of my crew."

"That's right," Desmond Lafoe rumbled. "It was attempted murder." He waved Erick on towards the door.

"I'll call the cops," Hasan Rawand said.

"Yes, you would, wouldn't you?" André Duchamp sneered. "That's your level, *Anglo*. Lose and weep, run to the law." He fixed the shock-frozen barkeeper with a warning stare, then jerked his head for his crew to go through the door. "Why were we fighting, Hasan? Ask yourself that. The *gendarmes* certainly will."

Erick stepped out into the rock tunnel which connected the Catalina with the rest of the vertical city's corridors and lifts and lobbies, helping a white-faced Desmond Lafoe to limp along.

"Run and hide then, Duchamp," Hasan Rawand's voice echoed after them. "And you, murderer. But this universe isn't so large. Remember that."

True night, with its darkness and lordly twinkling stars, had come and gone above Cricklade. It lasted less than eight minutes before the red blaze of Duchess-night began, and even those scant minutes hadn't been particularly dim. The ring of orbiting starships had looked spectacular, dominating the cloudless northern sky with their cold sparkle. Joshua had gone out onto the manor's balcony with the Kavanagh family to see the bridge of heaven after they'd finished their five-course dinner. Louise had worn a cream

dress with a tight bodice; it had come alive with a pale blue fire under the cometary light showering down. The amount of attention she had shown him during the meal verged on the embarrassing, it was almost as bad as the hostility he got from William Elphinstone. He was rather looking forward to being shown round the estate by her tomorrow. Grant Kavanagh had been enthusiastic about the idea once it was announced. Without consulting his neural nanonics he couldn't be quite sure who had brought the subject up at the dinner table.

There was a light knock on his bedroom door, and it opened before he could say anything. Hadn't he turned the key?

He rolled over on the bed where he'd been lying watching the holoscreen with its inordinately bland drama programmes. Everything was set on Norfolk, where nobody swore and nobody screwed and nobody scrapped; even the one news programme he'd caught earlier was drearily parochial, with only a couple of references to the visiting starships and nothing at all about Confederation politics.

Marjorie Kavanagh slipped into the room. She smiled and held up a duplicate key. "Scared of things that go bump in the night, Joshua?"

He grunted in dismay, and flopped back down on the bed.

They had met for the first time just before dinner, a formal drinks session in the drawing-room. If the line hadn't been so antique and passé he would have said: "Louise didn't tell me she had an elder sister." Marjorie Kavanagh was a lot younger than her husband, with thick raven hair and a figure which showed that even Louise had still got quite a way to go yet. Thinking about it logically, he should have realized that someone as rich and aristocratic as Grant Kavanagh would have a beautiful young wife, especially on a planet where status ruled. But Marjorie was also a flirt, which her husband seemed to find highly amusing, especially as she delivered her teasing innuendos while clinging to his side. Joshua didn't laugh; unlike Grant he knew she was serious.

Marjorie came over to stand by the side of the bed, looking down at him. She was wearing a long blue silk robe,

loosely tied around her waist. The heavy curtains were drawn against the red gleam of Duchess-night, but he could see enough of her cleavage to know she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

"Er . . ." he began.

"Not sleeping? Something on your mind, or southwards of there?" Marjorie asked archly; she looked pointedly at his groin.

"I have a lot of geneering in my heritage. I don't need much sleep."

"Oh, goodie. Lucky me."

"Mrs Kavanagh—"

"Knock it off, Joshua. Playing the innocent doesn't suit you." She sat on the edge of the bed.

He raised himself up on his elbows. "In that case, what about Grant?"

A long-fingered hand ran back through her hair, producing a dark cascade over her shoulders. "What about him? Grant is what you might call a man's man. He excels in the more basic male pursuits of hunting, drinking, filthy jokes, gambling, and women. If you haven't yet noticed, Norfolk isn't exactly a model of social enlightenment and female emancipation. Which gives him full licence to indulge himself while I sit at home playing the good wifey. So while he's off rogering a pair of teenage Romany girls he spotted helping out in the groves this afternoon, I thought: Fuck it, I'm going to have some fun myself for once."

"Do I get a say?"

"No, you're too perfect for me. Big, strong, young, handsome, and gone in a week. How could I possibly let that opportunity go by? Besides, I'm fiercely protective when it comes to my daughters, a proper hax bitch."

"Er . . ."

"Ah ha!" Marjorie grinned. "You're blushing, Joshua." Her hand found the hem of his shirt, and slid across his abdomen. "Grant can be so very idiotic when it comes to the girls. He had quite a chortle at the way Louise took to you at dinner. He doesn't think, that's his problem. You see, here on Norfolk they are in no danger at all from the local boys, they don't need chaperones for dances nor guardian aunts

when they stay with friends. Their name protects them. But you're not a local boy, and I saw exactly what was going on inside that testosterone-fuelled mind of yours. No wonder you and Grant get on so well together, I can barely tell you apart."

Joshua squirmed from her hand as she stroked the sensitive skin at the side of his ribs. "I think Louise is very sweet. That's all."

"Sweet." Marjorie smiled softly. "I was just eighteen when I had her. And I'll thank you not to work out how old that makes me! So you see I know exactly what she's thinking right now. Captain Romance from beyond the sky. Norfolk girls of my class are virgins in more ways than one. I'm not about to let some over-sexed stranger ruin her future, she has a slim enough chance of a happy one as it is, what with arranged marriages and minimal education, which is the lot of females on this planet, even for our class. And I'm doing you a favour into the bargain."

"Me?"

"You. Grant would kill you if you ever laid a finger on her. And, Joshua, I don't mean metaphorically."

"Er . . ." He couldn't believe that; not even in this society.

"So I'm going to sacrifice my virtue to save both of you." She undid the belt, and slipped the robe from her shoulders. Sultry red light gleamed on her body, embellishing the erotic allure. "Isn't that just so *terribly* noble of me?"

The emergent snowlily plants were starting to be a problem around the village jetties along the length of the Juliffe and its multitudinous tributaries. The tightly clumped red-brown fronds occupied the shallows, the banks, and the mud-banks. None of which affected the *Isakore* as it sailed its unerringly straight course along the Zamjan towards the Quallheim Counties, carrying its boisterous passenger complement of four Confederation Navy Marines, and three Kulu ESA tactical operation agents. *Isakore* hadn't put ashore once since it left Durringham. It was an eighteen-metre-long fishing boat, with a carvel hull of mayope, sturdy enough for its original owners to take it down to the mouth of the Juliffe and catch sea fish in their nets. Ralph Hiltch had ordered its

thermal-conversion furnace to be taken out, and got the boatyard to install the micro-fusion generator which the Kulu Embassy used as its power reserve. With one high-pressure gas canister of He3 and deuterium for fuel, *Isakore* now had enough power to circumnavigate the globe twice over.

Jenny Harris was lying on her sleeping-bag under the plastic awning they had rigged up over the prow, out of the light drizzle sweeping the river. The sheeting didn't make much difference, and her shorts and white T-shirt were soaking. Four days of sailing without a break from the humidity left her vainly trying to remember whether she had ever been dry.

A couple of the marines were on their sleeping-bags beside her, Louis Beith and Niels Regehr, barely out of their teens. They were both 'vising their personal MF players, eyes closed, fingers tapping out chaotic rhythms on the deck. She envied their optimism and confidence. They treated the scouting mission with an almost schoolboyish enthusiasm; although she admitted they were well trained and physically impressive with their boosted muscles. A tribute to their lieutenant, Murphy Hewlett, who had kept his small squad's morale high even on a dead-end posting like Lalonde. Niels Regehr had confided they all thought the mission upriver was a reward not a punishment.

Her communication block datavised that Ralph Hiltch was calling. She got to her feet and walked out from under the awning, giving the young marines some privacy. The dampness in the air wasn't noticeably increased. Dean Folan, her deputy, waved from the wheel-house amidships. Jenny acknowledged him, then leant on the gunwale and accepted the channel from the communication block.

"I'm updating you on the Edenist agents," Ralph datavised.

"You've found them?" she queried. It had been twenty hours since they had gone off air.

"Chance would be a fine thing. No, and the observation satellite images show that Ozark village is being abandoned. People are just drifting away—walking into the jungle, as far as we can tell. We must assume they have been either se-

questrated or eliminated. There is no trace of the boat they were using, the *Coogan*, the satellite can't see it anywhere on the river."

"I see."

"Unfortunately, the Edenists knew you were coming up-river behind them."

"Hellfire!"

"Exactly, so if they have been sequestrated the invaders will be watching out for you."

Jenny ran a hand over her head. Her ginger hair had been shaved down to a half-centimetre stubble, the same as everyone else on board. It was standard procedure for jungle missions, and her combat shell-helmet would make better contact. But it did mean anyone who saw them would immediately know what they were. "We weren't exactly inconspicuous anyway," she datavised.

"No, I suppose not."

"Does this change our mission profile?"

"Not the directive, no. Kelven Solanki and I still want one of these sequestrated colonists brought back to Durringham. But the timing has certainly altered. Where are you now?"

She datavised the question into her inertial guidance block. "Twenty-five kilometres west of Oconto village."

"Fine, put ashore at the nearest point you can. We're a little worried about the boats coming out of the Quallheim and Zamjan tributaries. When we reviewed the satellite images we found about twenty that have set off downriver in the last week, everything from paddle-steamers to fishing ketches. As far as we can make out they're heading for Durringham, they certainly aren't stopping."

"You mean they're behind us as well?" Jenny asked in dismay.

"It looks that way. But, Jenny, I don't leave my people behind. You know that. I'm working on a method of retrieving you that doesn't include the river. But only ask if you really need it. There are only a limited number of seats," he added significantly.

She stared across the grey water at the unbroken jungle, and muttered a silent curse. She liked the marines, a lot of trust had been built up between the two groups in the last

four days; there were times when the ESA seemed too duplicitous and underhand even for an Intelligence agency. “Yes, boss, I understand.”

“Good. Now, remember; when you put ashore, assume everyone is hostile, and avoid all groups of locals. Solanki is convinced it was sheer numbers which overwhelmed the Edenists. And, Jenny, don’t let prejudice inflate your ego, the Edenist operatives are good.”

“Yes, sir.” She signed off and picked her way past the wheel-house to the little cabin which backed onto it. A big grey-green tarpaulin had been rigged over the rear of the boat to screen the horses. She could hear them snorting softly. They were agitated and jumpy after so long cooped up in their tiny enclosure. Murphy Hewlett had kept them reasonably comfortable, but she’d be glad when they could let them loose on land again. So would the team which had to shovel their crap overboard.

Murphy Hewlett was sheltering in the lee of the tarpaulin, his black fatigue jacket open to the waist, showing a dark green shortsleeved shirt. She started to explain the change in schedule.

“They want us to go ashore right now?” he asked. He was forty-two years old, and a veteran of several combat campaigns both in space and on planets.

“That’s right. Apparently people are deserting the villages in droves. Picking one of them up shouldn’t be too big a problem.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” He shook his head. “I don’t like this idea that we’re already behind enemy lines.”

“I didn’t ask my boss what the situation was like in Durringham right now, but to my mind this whole planet is behind the lines.”

Murphy Hewlett nodded glumly. “There’s real trouble brewing here. You get to recognize the feeling after a while, you know? Combat sharpens you, I can tell when things ain’t right. And they’re not.”

Jenny wondered guiltily if he could guess the essence of what Ralph Hiltch had said to her. “I’ll tell Dean to look out for a likely landing spot.”

She hadn't even reached the wheel-house before Dean Folan was shouting urgently. "Boat coming!"

They went to the gunwale and peered ahead through the thin grey gauze of drizzle. The shape slowly resolved, and both of them watched it sail past with shocked astonishment.

It was a paddle-steamer which seemed to have ridden straight out of the nineteenth-century Mississippi River. Craft just like it were the inspiration behind Lalonde's current fleet of paddle-boats. But while the *Swithland* and her ilk were bland distaff inheritors utilizing technology instead of engineering craftsmanship, this *grande dame* could have been a true original. Her paintwork was white and glossy, black iron stacks belched out a thick, oily smoke, pistons hissed and clanked as they turned the heavy paddles. Happy people stood on the decks, the handsome men in suits with long grey jackets, white shirts, and slender lace ties, their elegant women in long frilly dresses, casually twirling parasols on their shoulders. Children ran about, sporting gaily; the boys were in sailor suits, and the girls had ribbons in their flowing hair.

"It's a dream," Jenny whispered to herself. "I'm living a dream."

The stately passengers were waving invitingly. Sounds of laughter and merrymaking rang clearly across the water. Earth's mythical golden age had come back to nourish them with its supreme promise of unspoiled lands and uncomplicated times. The paddle-steamer was taking all folk of good will back to where today's cares would cease to exist.

The sight was tugging at the hearts of all on board the *Isakore*. There wasn't one of them who didn't feel the urge to jump into the river and swim across the gulf. The gulf: between them and bliss, an eternal joy of song and wine which waited beyond the cruel divide which was their own world.

"Don't," Murphy Hewlett said.

Jenny's euphoria shattered like crystal as the discordant voice struck her ears. Murphy Hewlett's hand was on hers, pressing down painfully. She found her arms were rigid, tensed, ready to propel her over the side of the fishing boat.

"What is that?" she asked. At some deep level she was bemoaning the loss, being excluded from the journey into a

different future; now she would never know if the promise was true . . .

“Don’t you see?” he said. “It’s them, whatever they are. They’re growing. They don’t care about us seeing them unmasked any more, they don’t fear us.”

The colourful solid mirage sailed on regally down the river, its wake of joyous invocation tarrying above the brown water like a dawn mist. Jenny Harris stayed at the gunwale for a long time, staring into the west.

The grove was a site of intense activity. Over two hundred people were working their way along the rows, positioning the collection cups around the weeping roses. It was early Duke-day; Duchess had just set, leaving a slight pink fringe splashing the western horizon. Between them, the two suns had banished all trace of moisture from the torrid air. Most of the men and women tending the big weeping roses wore light clothes. The younger children ran errands, bringing new stacks of collection cups to the teams, or supplying iced fruit juice from large jugs.

Joshua was feeling the heat despite being dressed in a burgundy sleeveless T-shirt and black jeans. He sat on the back of his horse watching the cupping teams at work. The cups that were being hung so carefully were white cardboard cones, with a waxed shiny inner surface, thirty centimetres wide at the open end, tapering down to a sealed point. Stiff hoops pasted onto the side were used to wire them onto the trellis below the weeping rose flowers. Everyone he could see carried a thick bundle of wires tucked into their belt. It didn’t take more than thirty seconds for them to fix each cup.

“Is there one collection cup for every single flower?” he asked.

Louise was sitting on her horse next to him, dressed in jodhpurs and a plain white blouse, hair held by a single band at the back. She had been surprised when he accepted her invitation to take the horses rather than use a carriage to get about the estate. Where would a starship captain learn how to ride? But ride he could. Not as well as her, which gave her a little thrill, that she should be better than a man at anything.

Especially Joshua. "Yes," she said. "How else could you do it?"

He gave the stacks of collection cups piled up at the end of each row a puzzled frown. "I don't know. Jesus, there must be millions of them."

Louise had grown accustomed to his casual swearing now. It had shocked her a little at first, but people from the stars were bound to have slightly different customs. Coming from him it didn't seem profane, just exotic. Perhaps the most surprising thing was the way he could suddenly switch from being himself to using the most formal mannerisms.

"Cricklade alone has two hundred groves," she said. "That's why there are so many cuppers. It has to be done entirely in the week before midsummer when the roses are in bloom. Even with every able-bodied person in the county drafted in there's only just enough to get it finished in time. A team like this takes nearly a day to complete a grove."

Joshua leant forwards in the saddle, studying the people labouring away. It all seemed so menial, yet every one of them looked intent, devoted almost. Grant Kavanagh had said that a lot of them worked through half of Duchess-night, they would never have got the work finished otherwise. "I'm beginning to see why a bottle of Norfolk Tears costs so much. It's not just the rarity value, is it?"

"No." She flicked the reins, and guided the horse along the end of the rows, heading for the gate in the wall. The foreman touched his wide-brimmed hat as she passed. Louise gave a reflex smile.

He rode beside her after they left the grove. Cricklade Manor's protective ring of cedars was just visible a couple of miles away across the wolds. "Where now?" It was parkland all around, sheep clustering together under the lonely trees for shade. The grass was furry with white flowers. Everywhere he looked there seemed to be blooms of some kind—trees, bushes, ground plants.

"I thought Wardley Wood would be nice, you can see what wild Norfolk looks like." Louise pointed at a long stretch of dark-green trees a mile away, following the bottom of a small valley. "Genevieve and I often walk there. It's lovely." She

dropped her head. As if he would be interested in the glades with their multicoloured flowers and sweet scents.

"That sounds good. I'd like to get out of this sunlight. I don't know how you can stand it."

"I don't notice it, really."

He spurred his horse on, breaking into a canter. Louise rode past him easily, moving effortlessly with her horse's rhythm. They galloped across the wolds, scattering the somnolent sheep, Louise's laughter trilling through the heavy air. She beat him easily to the edge of the wood, and sat there smiling as he rode up to her, panting heavily.

"That was quite good," she said. "You could be a decent rider if you had a bit of practice." She swung her leg over the saddle and dropped down.

"There are some stables on Tranquillity," he said, dismounting. "That's where I learnt, but I'm not there very often."

A big mithorn tree stood just outside the main body of the wood, its coin-sized dark red flowers sprinkling the end of every twig. Louise wrapped the reins round one of its lower branches, and started off into the wood along one of the little animal tracks she knew. "I've heard of Tranquillity. That's where the Lord of Ruin lives, Ione Saldana. She was on the news last year; she's so beautiful. I wanted to cut my hair short like hers, but Mother said no. Do you know her?"

"Now that's the trouble when you really do know someone famous; no one ever believes you when you say yes."

She turned round, eyes wide with delight. "You do know her!"

"Yes. I knew her before she inherited the title, we grew up together."

"What's she like? Tell me."

An image of a naked sweaty moaning Ione bent over a table while he was screwing her appeared in his mind. "Fun," he said.

The glade she led him to was on the floor of the valley; a stream ran through it, spilling down a series of five big rock-pools. Knee-high flower stems with tubular yellow and lavender blooms clotted the ground, giving off a scent similar to orange blossom. Water-monarch trees lined the stream

below the pools, fifty yards tall, their long, slender branches swaying in the slight breeze, fernlike leaf fronds drooping. Birds flittered about in the upper boughs, uninspiring dun-coloured bat-analogues with long, powerful forelimbs for tunnelling into the ground. Wild weeping roses boiled over the stones along the side of two of the pools; years of dead petrified branches overlaid by a fresh growth of new living shoots to produce hemispherical bushes. Their flowers were crushed together, disfigured as they vied for light.

"You were right," Joshua told her. "It is lovely."

"Thank you. Genevieve and I often bathe here in the summer."

He perked up. "Really?"

"It's a little place of the world that's all our own. Even the hax don't come here."

"What's a hax? I heard someone mention the name."

"Father calls them wolf-analogues. They're big and vicious, and they'll even attack humans. The farmers hunt them in the winter, it's good sport. But we've just about cleared them out of Cricklade now."

"Do the hunters all get dressed up in red jackets and charge around on horses with packs of hounds?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"I suppose you've seen real monsters on your travels. I've seen pictures of the Tyrathca on the holoscreen. They're horrible. I couldn't sleep for a week afterwards."

"Yes, the Tyrathca look pretty ferocious. But I've met some breeder pairs; they don't think of themselves like that. To them we're the cruel alien ones. It's a question of perspective."

Louise blushed and ducked her head, turning away from him. "I'm sorry. You must think me a frightful bigot."

"No. You're just not used to xenocs, that's all." He stood right behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "But I would like to take you away from here some time and show you the rest of the Confederation. Some of it is quite spectacular. And I'd love to take you to Tranquillity." He looked round the glade, thoughtful. "It's a bit like this, only much much bigger. I think you'd like it a lot."

Louise wanted to squirm away from his grip, men simply shouldn't act in such a familiar fashion. But his customs were surely different, and he was massaging her shoulder muscles gently. It felt nice. "I always wanted to fly on a starship."

"You will, one day. When Cricklade is yours you can do anything you want." Joshua was enjoying the touch of her. Naïvety, a voluptuous body, and the knowledge that he should never, ever be even thinking about screwing her were combining to form a potent aphrodisiac.

"I never thought of that," she said brightly. "Can I charter the *Lady Macbeth*? Oh, but it will be simply ages yet. I don't want Father to die, that would be an absolutely awful thing to think. Will you still be coming to Norfolk in fifty years' time?"

"Of course I will. I have two things tying me here now. Business, and you."

"Me?" It came out as a frightened squeak.

He turned her round to face him, and kissed her.

"Joshua!"

He put two fingers over her lips. "Shush. No words, only us. Always us."

Louise stood rigidly still as he unbuttoned her blouse, all kinds of strange emotions battling in her head. I ought to run. I ought to stop him.

Sunlight fell onto her bare shoulders and back. It was a peculiar sensation, a tingling warmth. And the expression on his face as he gazed at her was scary, he looked so hungry, but anxious at the same time.

"Joshua," she murmured, half nervous, half amused. Her shoulders had hunched up of their own accord.

He pulled his T-shirt off over his head. They kissed again, his arms going around her. He seemed very strong. His skin pressing against her had started a trembling in her stomach that nothing was able to stop. Then she realized her jodhpurs were being peeled down.

"Oh God."

His finger lifted her chin up. "It's all right. I'll show you how." And his smile was at least as warm as the sun.

She took her black leather riding boots off herself, then helped him with the jodhpurs. Her brassiere and knickers

were plain white cotton. Joshua removed them slowly, savouring the drawn-out exposure.

He spread their clothes out and laid her down. She was terribly tense to start with, her lower lip clamped between her teeth, narrow eyes peeking down fearfully at the length of her body. It took a long, pleasant time of soft caresses, kisses, stealthy whispers, and tickles before she began to respond. He coaxed a giggle from her, then another, then it was a squeal, a groan. She touched his body, curious and suddenly bold, a hand sliding down his belly to cup his balls. He shuddered and repaid her by massaging her thighs. There was another long interval while their hands and mouths explored each other. Then he slid above her, looking down at dishevelled hair, drowsy eyes, dark nipples standing proud, legs parted. He moved into her carefully, the damp warmth enveloping and squeezing his cock an erotic splendour. Louise writhed tempestuously below him, and he began a slow, provocative stroke. He used neural nanonic overrides to restrain his own body's responses, sustaining his erection as long as he wanted it, determined that she should reach a climax, that it should be as perfect for her as he could possibly make it.

After an age he was rewarded by her complete loss of control. Louise threw away every last inhibition as her orgasm built, shouting at the top of her voice, her body arching desperately below him, lifting his knees from the ground. Only then did he allow himself any release, joining her in absolute bliss.

Post-coital languor was a sweet time, one of tiny kisses, stroking individual strands of sticky hair from her face, single compassionate words. And he had been quite right all along, forbidden fruit tasted the best.

"I love you, Joshua," she whispered into his ear.

"And I love you."

"Don't leave."

"That's unfair. You know I'm coming back."

"I'm sorry." She tightened her grip around him.

He moved his hand up to her left breast and squeezed, hearing a soft hiss of indrawn breath. "Are you sore?"

"A bit. Not much."

"I'm glad."

"Me too."

"Do you want to have that swim now? Water can be a lot of fun."

She grinned cautiously. "Again?"

"If you want."

"I do."

Marjorie Kavanagh came to his bedroom again that Duchess-night. The prospect of Louise sneaking through the red-shaded manor to be with him and discovering him with her mother added a spice to his lovemaking that left her exhausted and delighted.

The next day Louise, eyes possessively agleam, announced at breakfast that she would show Joshua round the county roseyard, so he could see the casks being prepared for the new Tears. Grant declared this a stupendous idea, chuckling to himself that his little cherub was having her first schoolgirl crush.

Joshua smiled neutrally, and thanked her for being so considerate. There were another three days to go until midsummer.

At Cricklade, and all across Norfolk, they marked the onset of Midsummer's Day with a simple ceremony. The Kavanaghs, Colsterworth's vicar, Cricklade Manor's staff, the senior estate workers, and representatives from each of the copper teams gathered at the nearest grove to the manor towards the end of Duke-day. Joshua and Dahybi were invited, and stood at the front of the group that assembled just inside the shabby stone wall.

The rows of weeping roses stretched out ahead of them; blooms and cups alike upturned to a fading azure sky, perfectly still in the breathless evening air. Time seemed to be suspended.

Duke was falling below the western horizon, a sliver of pyrexia tangerine, pulling the world's illumination down with it. The vicar, wearing a simple cassock, held his arms up for silence. He turned to face the east. On cue, a watery pink light expanded across the horizon.

A sigh went up from the group.

Even Joshua was impressed. There had been about two minutes of darkness the previous evening. Now there would be no night for a sidereal day, Duchess-night flowing seamlessly into Duke-day. It wouldn't be until the end of the following Duchess-night that the stars would come out again for a brief minute. After that it would be the evenings when the two suns overlapped, and the morning darkness would grow longer and longer, extending back into Duchess-night until Norfolk reached inferior conjunction and only Duke was visible: midwinter.

The vicar led his flock in a brief Harvest Thanksgiving service. Everybody knew the words to the prayers and psalms, and quiet, murmuring voices banded together to be heard right across the grove. Joshua felt quite left out. They finished by singing "All Creatures Great and Small". At least his neural nanonics had that in a memory file; he joined in heartily, surprised by just how good he felt.

After the service, Grant Kavanagh led his family and friends on a rambling walk along the aisles between the rows. He touched various roses, feeling their weight, rubbing petals between his thumb and forefinger, testing the texture.

"Smell that," he told Joshua as he handed over a petal he had just picked. "It's going to be a good crop. Not as good as five seasons ago. But well above average."

Joshua sniffed. The scent was very weak, but recognizable, similar to the smell which clung to a cork after a bottle of Tears had been opened. "You can tell from this?" he asked.

Grant put his arm around Louise as they sauntered along the aisle. "I can. Mr Butterworth can. Half of the estate workers can. It just takes experience. You need to be here for a lot of summers." He grinned broadly. "Perhaps you will be, Joshua. I'm sure Louise will ask you back if no one else does."

Genevieve shrieked with laughter.

Louise blushed furiously. "Daddy!" She slapped his arm.

Joshua raised a weak smile and turned to examine one of the rose plants. He found himself facing Marjorie Kavanagh. She gave him a languid wink. His neural nanonics sent out a

volley of overrides to try and stop the rush of blood to his own cheeks.

After the inspection walk the manor staff served up an outdoor buffet. Grant Kavanagh stood behind one of the trestle tables, carving from a huge joint of rare beef, playing the part of jovial host, with a word and a laugh for all his people.

As Duchess-night progressed the rose flowers began to droop. It happened so slowly that the eye could detect no motion, but hour by hour the thick stems lost their stiffness, and the weight of the large petals and their central carpel pod made gravity's triumph inevitable.

By Duke-morning most of the flowers had reached the horizontal. The petals were drying out and shrivelling.

Joshua and Louise rode out to one of the groves close to Wardley Wood, and wandered along the sagging plants. There were only a few cuppers left tending the long rows, straightening the occasional collection cup. They nodded nervously to Louise and scurried on about their business.

"Most people have gone home to sleep," Louise said. "The real work will begin again tomorrow."

They stood aside as a man pulled a wooden trolley past them. A big glass ewer, webbed with rope, was resting on it. Joshua watched as he stopped the trolley at the end of a row and lifted the ewer off. About a third of the rows had a similar ewer waiting at the end.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"They empty the collection cups into those," Louise said. "Then the ewers are taken to the county roseyard where the Tears are casked."

"And they stay in the cask for a year."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"So that they spend a winter on Norfolk. They're not proper Tears until they've felt our frost. It sharpens the taste, so they say."

And adds to the cost, he thought.

The flowers were wilting rapidly now, the stems curving down into a U-shape. Their sunlight-fired coronal cloak had faded away as the petals darkened, and with it had gone a lot of the mystique. They were just ordinary dying flowers now.

“How do the cuppers know where to wire the cups?” he asked. “Look at them. Every flower is bending over above a cup.” He glanced up and down the aisle. “Every one of them.”

Louise gave him a superior smile. “If you are born on Norfolk, you know how to place a cup.”

It wasn't just the weeping roses which were reaching fruition. As they trotted the horses over to Wardley Wood Joshua saw flowers on the trees and bushes closing up, some varieties leaning over in the same fashion as the roses.

In their peaceful glade the wild rose bushes along the rock pools seemed flaccid, as if their shape was deflating. Flowers lolled against each other, petals agglutinating into a quilt of pulp.

Louise let Joshua undress her as he always did. Then they spread a blanket down on the rocks below the weeping roses and embraced. Joshua had got to the point where Louise was shuddering in delighted anticipation as his hands roved across her lower belly and down the inside of her thighs when he felt a splash on his back. He ignored the first one and kissed Louise's navel. Another splash broke his concentration. It couldn't be raining, there wasn't a cloud in the barren blue sky. He twisted over. “What—?”

Norfolk's roses had begun to weep. Out of the centre of the carpel pod a clear fluid was exuded in a steady monotonous drip. It was destined to last for ten to fifteen hours, well into the next Duchess-night. Only when the pod was drained would it split open and release the seeds it contained. Nature had intended the fluid to soften the soil made arid by weeks without rain, allowing the seeds to fall into mud so they would have a greater chance of germination. But then in 2209 a woman called Carys Thomas, who was a junior botanist in the ecological assessment mission, acting against all regulations (and common sense), put her finger under a weeping pod, then touched the single pearl of glistening fluid to her tongue. Norfolk's natural order came to an immediate end.

Joshua wiped up the dewy bead from his skin and licked his finger. It tasted coarser than the Norfolk Tears he'd so rel-

ished back in Tranquillity, but the ancestry was beyond doubt. A roguish light filled his eyes. "Hey, not bad."

A snickering Louise was moved round until she was directly underneath the lax hanging flowers. They made love under a shower of sparkling droplets prized higher than a king's ransom.

The cuppers returned to the groves as the next Duchess-night ended. They cut away the collection cups, now heavy with Tears, and poured their precious contents into the ewers. It was a task that would take another five days of intensive round-the-clock labour to complete.

Grant Kavanagh himself drove Joshua and Dahybi down to the county roseyard in a four-wheel-drive farm ranger, a powerful boxy vehicle with tyres deep enough to plough through a shallow marsh. The yard was on the outskirts of Colsterworth, a large collection of ivy-clad stone buildings with few windows. Beneath the ground was an extensive warren of brick-lined cellars where the casks were stored throughout their year of maturation.

When he drove through the wide entrance gates the yard workers were already rolling out the casks of last year's Tears.

"A year to the day," he said proudly as the heavy iron-bound oak cylinders rattled and skipped over the cobbles. "This is your cargo, young Joshua. We'll have it ready for you in two days." He braked the farm ranger to a halt outside the bottling plant where the casks were being rolled inside. The plant supervisor rushed out to meet them, sweating. "Don't you worry about us," Grant told him blithely. "I'm just showing our major customer around. We won't get in the way." And with that he marched imperiously through the broad doorway.

The bottling plant was the most sophisticated mechanical set-up Joshua had seen on the planet, even though it lacked any real cybernetic systems (the conveyor belts actually used rubber pulleys!). It was a long hall with a single-span roof, full of gleaming belts, pipes, and vats. Thousands of the ubiquitous pear-shaped bottles trundled along the narrow belts, looping overhead, winding round filling nozzles, the

racket of their combined clinking making conversation difficult.

Grant walked them along the hall. The casks were all blended together in big stainless-steel vats, he explained. Stoke County's bouquet was a homogenized product. No groves had individual labels, not even his.

Joshua watched the bottles filling up below the big vats, then moving on to be corked and labelled. Each stage added to the cost. And the weight of the glass bottles reduced the amount of actual Tears each starship could carry.

Jesus, what a sweet operation. I couldn't do it better myself. And the beauty of it is we're the ones most eager to cooperate, to inflate the cost.

At the end of the line, the yard manager was waiting with the first bottle to come off the conveyor. He looked expectantly at Grant, who told him to proceed. The bottle was uncorked, and its contents poured into four cut-crystal glasses.

Grant sniffed, then took a small sip. He cocked his head to one side and looked thoughtful. "Yes," he said. "This will do. Stoke can put its name to this."

Joshua tried his own glass. It chilled every nerve in his throat, and burst into flames in his stomach.

"Good enough for you, Joshua?" Grant clapped him on the back.

Dahybi was holding his glass up to the light, staring at it with greedy enchantment.

"Yes," Joshua declared staunchly. "Good enough."

Joshua and Dahybi took it in turns to oversee the cases the roseyard put together for them. For space travel the bottles were hermetically sealed in composite cube containers one metre square, with a thick lining of nultherm foam to protect them (more weight); the roseyard had its own loading and sealing machinery (more cost). There was a railway line leading directly from the yard to the town's station, which meant they were able to dispatch several batches to Boston every day.

All this activity severely reduced the amount of time Joshua spent at Cricklade Manor, much to Louise's chagrin.

Nor was there any believable reason why she should take him riding over the estate again.

He arranged the shifts with Dahybi so that he worked most of Duchess-night at the roseyard, which meant his tussles with Marjorie were curtailed.

The morning of the day he was leaving, however, Louise did manage to trap him in the stables. So he had to spend two hours in a dark, dusty hay loft satisfying an increasingly bold and adventurous teenager who seemed to have developed a bottomless reserve of physical stamina. She clung to him for a long time after her third climax, while he whispered assurances of how quickly he would come back.

“Just for business with Daddy?” she asked, almost as an accusation.

“No. For you. Business is an excuse, it would be difficult otherwise on this planet. Everything’s so bloody formal here.”

“I don’t care any more. I don’t care who knows.”

He shifted round, brushing straw from his ribs. “Well, I *do* care; because I don’t want you to be treated like a pariah. So show a little discretion, Louise.”

She ran her fingertips over his cheeks, marvelling. “You really care about me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Daddy likes you,” she said uncertainly. Now probably wasn’t the best time to press him on their future after he returned. He must have a lot on his mind with the awesome responsibility of the starflight ahead of him. But it did seem as though her father’s plaudit was like an omen. So few people ever met with Daddy’s approval. And Joshua had said how much he adored Stoke County. The kind of land I’d like to settle in: his exact words.

“I’m rather fond of the old boy myself. But God he’s got a temper.”

Louise giggled in the dark. Down below the horses were shuffling about. She straddled his abdomen, her mane of hair falling around the two of them. His hands found her breasts, fingers tightening until she moaned with desire. In a low, throaty voice he told her what he wanted her to do. She strained her body to accommodate him, trembling at her own

daring. He was solid against her, wonderfully *there*, encouraging and praising.

"Tell me again," she murmured. "Please, Joshua."

"I love you," he said, breath teasingly hot on her neck. Even his neural nanonics couldn't banish the dawning guilt he felt at the words. Have I really been reduced to lying to trusting, hopelessly unsophisticated teenagers? Perhaps it's because she is so magnificent, what we all want girls to be like even though we know it's wrong. I can't help myself. "I love you, and I'm coming back for you."

She groaned in delirium as he entered her. Ecstasy brought its own special light, banishing the darkness of the loft.

Joshua only just managed to reach the manor's hall in time to kiss or shake hands with members of the large group of staff and family (William Elphinstone was absent) who had come to wish him and Dahybi farewell. The horse-drawn carriage carried the two of them back to Colsterworth Station, where they boarded the train back to Boston along with the last batch of their cargo.

Melvyn Ducharme met them when they arrived back in the capital, and told them that over half of the cases were already up in the *Lady Macbeth*. Kenneth Kavanagh had used his influence with captains whose spaceplanes were being under-used for their own smaller cargos. It hadn't generated much goodwill, but the loading was well ahead of schedule. Using *Lady Mac*'s small spaceplane alone would have meant taking eleven days to boost all the cases into orbit.

They returned up to the starship straight away. When Joshua floated into his cabin, Sarha was waiting with the free-fall sex cage expanded, and a hungry smile in place. "No bloody chance," he told her, and curled up into a ball to sleep for a solid ten hours.

Even if he had been awake he had no reason to focus the *Lady Macbeth*'s sensors on departing starships. So he would never have seen that out of the twenty-seven thousand eight hundred and forty-six starships which had come to Norfolk, twenty-two of them experienced an alarming variety of severe mechanical and electrical malfunctions as they departed for their home planets.

PART 2: EXPANSION

1

Graeme Nicholson sat on his customary stool beside the bar in the Crashed Dumper, the one furthest away from the blaring audio block, and listened to Diego Sanigra, a crewman from the *Bryant*, complain about the way the ship had been treated by Colin Rexrew. The *Bryant* was a colonist-carrier starship that had arrived at Lalonde two days ago, and so far not one of its five and a half thousand colonists had been taken out of zero-tau. It was a ruinous state of affairs, Diego Sanigra claimed, the governor had no right to refuse the colonists disembarkation. And the energy expenditure for every extra hour they spent in orbit was costing a fortune. The line company would blame the crew, as they always did. His salary would suffer, his bonus would be non-existent, his promotion prospects would be reduced if not ruined.

Graeme Nicholson nodded sympathetically as his neural nanonics carefully stored the aggrieved ramblings in a memory cell. There wasn't much which could be used, but it was good background material. How the big conflict reached down into individual lives. The kind of thing he covered so well.

Graeme had been a reporter for fifty-two of his seventy-eight years. He reckoned no journalist didactic course could teach him anything new, not now. With his experience he should have been formatting didactic courses, except there wasn't a news company editor in existence who would want junior reporters corrupted to such an extent. In every sense he was a hack reporter, with an unerring knack of turning daily misfortune into spicy epic tragedy. He went for the human underbelly every time, highlighting the

suffering and misery of little people who were trampled on, the ones who couldn't fight back against the massive uncaring forces of governments, bureaucracies, and companies. It was not from any particular moral indignation, he certainly didn't see himself as championing the underdog. He simply felt emotions laid raw made for a better story, with higher audience ratings. To some degree he had even begun to look like the victims he empathized with so well; it was partly reflexive, they were less suspicious of someone whose clothes never quite fitted, who had thick ruddy skin and watery eyes.

His brand of sensationalism went down well with the tabloid broadcasts, but by concentrating on the seedy aspects he knew best, building a reputation as a specialist of dross, he found himself being squeezed out of the more prestigious assignments; he hadn't covered a half-decent story for a decade. Over the last few years his neural nanonics had been used less for sensewise recording and more for running stimulant programs. Time Universe had given him a roving assignment eight years ago, pushing him off onto all the shabby little fringe jobs that no one else with a gram of seniority would cover. Anything to keep him out of a studio, or an editorial office where his contemporaries had graduated to.

Well, no more. The joke was on the office has-beens now. Graeme Nicholson was the only man on the ground, the one with the clout, the one with the kudos. Lalonde was going to earn him the awards he'd been denied all these years; then maybe after that one of those nice cosy office seats back home on Decatur.

He had been on Lalonde for three months to do a documentary-style report on the new world frontier, and gather general sensewise impressions and locations for the company library's memory cores. Then this wonderful calamity had fallen on Lalonde. Calamitous for the planet and its people, for Rexrew and the LDC career administration staff; but for Graeme Nicholson it was manna from heaven. *It* being war, or an Ivet rebellion, or a xenoc inva-

sion, depending on who you were talking to. He had included accounts of all three theories on the fleks *Eurydice* had taken to Avon last week. But it was strange that after two and a half weeks the Governor had still made no official announcement as to exactly what was happening up in the Quallheim and Zamjan Counties.

“That executive assistant of Rexrew’s, Terrance Smith, he’s talking about sending us to another phase one colony world,” Diego Sanigra grumbled. He took another gulp of bitter from his tankard. “As if that’s going to be any help. What would you say if you were a colonist who paid passage for Lalonde and came out of zero-tau to find yourself on Liao-tung Wan? That’s Chinese-ethnic, you know, they wouldn’t like the EuroChristian-types we’ve got stored on board.”

“Is that where Terrance Smith suggested you take them?” Graeme Nicholson asked.

He gave a noncommittal grunt. “Just giving you an example.”

“What about fuel reserves? Have you got enough He₃ and deuterium to get to another colony world and then return to Earth?”

Diego Sanigra started to answer. Graeme Nicholson wasn’t listening too hard, he let his eyes wander round the hot crowded room. One of the spaceport shifts had just come off duty. At the moment there were few McBoeing flights. Only the three cargo ships orbiting Lalonde were being unloaded; the six colonist-carriers were waiting for Rexrew to decide what to do with their passenger complements. Most of the spaceport crews simply turned up at the start of each shift so they could keep claiming their pay.

I wonder what they feel about the end of overtime, Graeme asked himself. Might be another story there.

The Crashed Dumper certainly wasn’t suffering from the troubles afflicting the rest of the city; this outlying district didn’t protest or riot over Rexrew and the Ivets, it housed too many LDC worker families. There were a lot of people in tonight, drowning their sorrows. The waitresses

were harried from one end of the long room to the other. The overhead fans were spinning fast, but made little impression on the heat.

Graeme heard the audio block falter, the singer's voice slowing, deepening to a weird bass rumble. It picked up again, turning the voice to a girlish soprano. The crowd clustered round started laughing, and one of them brought his fist down on it. After a moment the loud output returned to normal.

Graeme saw a tall man and a beautiful teenage girl walk past. Something about the man's face was familiar. The girl he recognized as one of the Crashed Dumper's waitresses, although tonight she was dressed in jeans and a plain cotton blouse. But the man—he was middle-aged with a neat beard and small pony-tail, wearing a smart leather jacket and ash-grey shorts, and he was very tall, almost like an Edenist.

The glass of lager dropped from Graeme's numb fingers. It hit the mayope planks and smashed, soaking his shoes and socks. "Holy shit," he croaked. The fright constricting his throat prevented the exclamation being more than a whisper.

"You all right?" Diego Sanigra asked, annoyed at being interrupted in mid-complaint.

He forced himself to look away from the couple. "Yes," he stammered. "Yes, I'm fine." Thank Christ nobody was paying any attention, if he had looked round . . . He reddened and bent down to pick up the shards of glass. When he straightened up the couple were already at the bar. Somehow they had cut straight through the crush.

Graeme ran a priority search program through his neural nanonics. Not that he could possibly be mistaken. The public figures file produced a visual image from a memory cell, recorded forty years ago. It matched perfectly.

Laton!

Lieutenant Jenny Harris twitched the reins, and the dun-coloured horse gave the big qualtook tree a wide berth. Her

only previous experience with the animals was her didactic course and a week in the saddle five years ago during an ESA transportation training exercise back on Kulu. Now here she was, leading an expedition through one of the toughest stretches of jungle in the Juliffe tributary network and trying to avoid the attention of a possible military invasion force at the same time. It wasn't the best reintroduction to the equestrian art. She thought the horse could sense her discomfort, he was proving awkward. A mere three hours' riding and every muscle in her lower torso was crying for relief; her arms and shoulders were stiff; her backside had gone from soreness to numbness and finally settled for a progressive hot ache.

I wonder what all this bodily offensive is doing to my implants?

Her neural nanonics were running an extended sensory analysis program, enhancing peripheral vision and threshold audio inputs, and scrutinizing them for any signs of hidden hostiles. Electronic paranoia, basically.

There had been nothing remotely threatening, except for one sayce, since they left the *Isakore*, and the sayce hadn't fancied its chances against three horses.

She could hear Dean Folan and Will Danza plodding along behind her, and wondered how they were getting on with their horses. Having the two ESA G66 Division (Tactical Combat) troops backing her up was a dose of comfort stronger than any stimulant program could provide. She had been trained in general covert fieldwork, but they had virtually been bred for it, geneering and nanonic supplements combining to make them formidable fighting machines.

Dean Folan was in his mid-thirties, a quiet ebony-skinned man with the kind of subtle good looks most of the geneered enjoyed. He was only medium height, but his limbs were long and powerful, making his torso look almost stunted by comparison. It was the boosted muscles which did that, Jenny knew; his silicon-fibre-reinforced

bones had been lengthened to give him more leverage, and more room for implants.

Will Danza fitted people's conception of a modern-day soldier; twenty-five, tall, broad, with long, sleek muscles. He was an old Prussian warrior genotype, blond, courteous, and unsmiling. There was an almost psychic essence of danger emanating from him; you didn't tangle with him in any tavern brawl no matter how drunk you were. Jenny suspected he didn't have a sense of humour; but then he'd seen action in covert missions three times in the last three years. She'd accessed his file when the jungle mission was being assembled; they had been tough assignments, one had earned him eight months in hospital being rebuilt from cloned organs, and an Emerald Star presented by the Duke of Salion, Alastair II's first cousin, and chairman of the Kulu Privy Council's security commission. He had never talked about it on the journey upriver.

The nature of the jungle started to change around them. Tightly packed bushy trees gave way to tall, slender trunks with a plume of feather-fronds thirty metres overhead. A solid blanket of creepers tangled the ground, rising up to hug the lower third of the tree trunks like solid conical encrustations. It increased their visibility dramatically, but the horses had to pick their hoofs up sharply. High above their heads vinnals leapt between the trees in incredible bounds, streaking up the slim trunks to hide in the foliage at the top. Jenny couldn't see how they clung to the smooth bark.

After another forty minutes they came to a small stream. She dismounted in slow tender stages, and let her horse drink. Away in the distance she could see a herd of danderil bounding away from the trickle of softly steaming water. White clouds were rolling in from the east. It would rain in an hour, she knew.

Dean Folan dismounted behind her, leaving Will Danza sitting on his horse, keeping watch from his elevated vantage point. All three of them were dressed identically, wearing a superstrength olive-green one-piece anti-projec-

tile suit, covered with an outer insulation layer to diffuse beam weapons. The lightweight armour fitted perfectly, with an inner sponge layer to protect the skin. Thermal-shunt fibres woven into the fabric kept body temperature to a pre-set norm, which was a real blessing on Lalonde. If they were struck by a projectile slug the micro-valency generators around her waist would activate, solidifying the fabric instantly, distributing the impact, preventing the wearer's body from being pulped by automatic fire. (Jenny's only regret was that it didn't protect her from saddle sores.) The body armour was complemented by a shell-helmet which fitted with the same tight precision as the suit. It gave them all an insect appearance, with its wide goggle lenses and a small central V-shaped air-filter vent. The collar had a ring of optical sensors which could be accessed through neural nanonics, giving them a rear-view capability. They could even survive underwater for half an hour with its oxygen-recycling capacity.

The stream was muddy, its stones slimed with algae, none of which seemed to bother the horses. Jenny watched them lapping it up, and requested a drink from her shell-helmet. She sucked ice-cold orange juice from the nipple as she reviewed their location with help from the inertial guidance block.

When Dean and Will swapped position she datavised the armour suit's communications block to open a scrambled channel to Murphy Hewlett. The ESA team had split up from the Confederation Navy Marines after leaving the *Isakore*. Acting separately they thought they stood a better chance of intercepting one of the sequestered colonists.

"We're eight kilometres from Oconto," she said. "No hostiles or locals encountered so far."

"Same with us," the marine lieutenant answered. "We're six kilometres south of you, and there's nobody in this jungle but us chickens. If Oconto's supervisor did lead fifty people in pursuit of the Ivets, he didn't come this way. There's a small savannah which starts about fifteen kilo-

metres away, there are about a hundred homesteads out there. We'll try them."

Static warbled down the channel. Jenny automatically checked her electronic warfare suite, which reported zero activity. Must be atmospheric.

"OK. We're going to keep closing on the village and hope we find someone before we reach it," she datavised.

"Roger. I suggest we make half-hourly check-ins from now on. There isn't . . ." His signal dissolved into rowdy static.

"Hell! Dean, Will, we're being jammed."

Dean consulted his own electronic warfare block. "No activity detected," he said.

Jenny steadied her horse and put her foot in the stirrup, swinging a leg over the saddle. Will was mounting hastily beside her. All three of them scanned the surrounding jungle. Dean's horse snickered nervously. Jenny tugged at the reins to keep hers from twisting about.

"They're out there," Will said in a level tone.

"Where?" Jenny asked.

"I don't know, but they're watching us. I can feel it. They don't like us."

Jenny bit down on the obvious retort. Soldier superstitions were hardly appropriate right now, yet Will had more direct combat experience than her. A quick hardware status check showed that only the communications block was affected so far. Her electronic warfare block remained stubbornly silent.

"All right," she said. "The one thing we don't want to do is run into a whole bunch of them. The Edenists said they were most powerful in groups. Let's move out, and see if we can get outside this jamming zone. We ought to be able to move faster than them."

"Which way?" Dean asked.

"I still want to try and reach the village. But I don't think a direct route is advisable now. We'll head south-west, and curve back towards Oconto. Any questions? No. Lead off then, Dean."

They splashed over the stream, the horses seemingly eager to be on the move again. Will Danza had pulled his thermal induction pulse carbine from its saddle holster; now it was cradled in the crook of his right arm, pointing upwards. The datavised information from its targeting processor formed a quiet buzz at the back of his mind. He didn't even notice it at a conscious level, it was as much a part of the moment as the easy rhythm of the horse or the bright sunlight, making him whole.

He made up the rear of the little procession, constantly reviewing the sensors on the back of his shell-helmet. If anyone had asked him how he knew hostiles were nearby he would just have to shrug and say he couldn't explain. But instinct was pulling at him with the same irresistible impulse that pollen exerted on bees. They were here, and they were close. Whoever, or whatever, they were.

He strained round in the saddle, upping his retinal implants' resolution to their extreme. All he could see was the long thin black trunks and their verdant cone island bases, outlines wavering in the heat and unstable magnification factor.

A movement.

The TIP carbine was discharging before he even thought about it, blue target graphics sliding across his vision field like neon cell doors as he dropped the barrel in a single smooth arc. A red circle intersected the central grid square and his neural nanonics triggered a five-hundred-shot fan pattern.

The section of jungle in the central blue square sparkled with orange motes as the induction pulses stabbed against the wood and foliage. It lasted for two seconds.

"Down!" Will datavised. "Hostiles four o'clock."

He was already slithering off the horse, feet landing solidly on the broad triangular creeper leaves. Dean and Jenny obeyed automatically, rolling from their saddles to land crouched, thermal induction pulse carbines held ready. The three of them turned smoothly, each covering a different section of jungle.

“What was it?” Jenny asked.

“Two of them, I think.” Will quickly replayed the memory. It was like a dense black shadow dashing out from behind one of the trees, then it split into two. That was when he fired, and the image jolted. But the black shapes refused to clarify, no matter how many discrimination programs he ran. Definitely too big for sayce, though. And they were moving towards him, using the shaggy treebases for cover.

He felt a glow of admiration, they were good.

“What now?” he datavisised. Nobody responded. “What now?” he asked loudly.

“Reconnaissance and evaluation,” said Jenny, who had just realized even short-range datavisises were being disrupted. “We’re still not out of that jamming effect.”

There was a silent orange flash above her. The top third of the tree ten metres to her left began to topple over, hinging on a section of trunk that was mostly charred splinters. Just as it reached the horizontal, the rich green plumes at the top caught on fire. They spluttered briefly, belching out a ring of blue-grey smoke, then the fire really caught. Two vennals leapt out, squeaking in pain, their hides badly scorched. Before the whole length of wood crashed down, the plumes were burning with a ferocity which matched the sun.

The horses reared up, whinnying alarm. They were pulled down by boosted muscles.

Jenny realized the animals were rapidly becoming a liability as she clung on to hers. Her neural nanonics reported the suit sensors had detected a maser beam striking the tree, which was what snapped it. But there was no detectable follow-up energy strike to account for the ignition.

Dean’s sensors had also detected the maser beam. He fired a fifty-shot barrage back along the line.

The fallen tree’s tip fizzled out. All that was left was a tapering core of wood and a heap of ash. Blackened ground creepers smouldered in a wide circle around it.

“What the hell did that?” Dean asked.

“No data,” Jenny answered. “But it isn’t going to be healthy.”

Globules of vivid white fire raced up the trunks of several nearby trees like some bizarre astral liquid. Bark shrivelled and peeled off in long strips behind them, the naked wood below roaring like a blast furnace as it caught alight. The flames redoubled in vehemence. Jenny, Will, and Dean were surrounded by twelve huge torches of brilliant fire.

Jenny’s retinal implants struggled to cope with the vast photon flood. Her horse reared up again, fighting her, neck sweeping from side to side in an effort to make her let go, forelegs cycling dangerously close to her head. She could see the terror in its eyes. Foam sprayed out of its mouth to splatter her suit.

“Save the equipment,” she shouted. “We can’t hang on to the horses in this.”

Will heard the order as his horse began bucking, its hind legs kicking imaginary foes. He drove his fist into its head, catching it between the eyes, and it froze for a second in stunned surprise, then slowly buckled, collapsing onto the ground. One of the blazing trees gave a single creak of warning and keeled over. It slammed down on the horse’s back, breaking ribs and legs, searing its way into the flesh. Oily smoke billowed up. Will darted forward, and tugged at the saddle straps. His suit datavised an amber alert to his neural nanonics as the heat impact of the flames gusted against the outer layer.

Balls of orange flame were hurtling through the air above him, spitting greasy black liquids: vennals, fleeing and dying as their roosts were incinerated. Small withered bodies hit the ground all around, some of them moving feebly.

Dean and Jenny were still struggling with their horses, filling the air with confused curses. Will’s suit sounded a preliminary caution that thermal input was reaching the limit of the handling capacity. He felt the saddle strap give, and jumped backwards, hugging the equipment packs. The

suit's outer dissipator layer glowed cherry red as it radiated away the excess heat, and wisps of smoke rose from around his feet.

More trees were falling as the flame consumed the wood at a fantastic rate. For one nasty moment they were completely penned in by a rippling fence made up from solid sheets of that strange lethal white flame.

Jenny salvaged her equipment packs from her horse and let go of the bridle. It raced away blindly, only to veer to one side as another burning tree fell in its path. One of the fiery vennals landed on its back, and it charged straight into the flames, screaming piteously. She watched it tumble over. It twitched a couple of times, trying to regain its feet, then flopped down limply.

By now a ring of ground a hundred metres in diameter was burning, leaving just a small patch at the centre untouched. The three of them grouped together at the middle as the last two trees went down. Now there was only the ground creepers burning, sending up forked yellow flames and heavy blue smoke.

Jenny pulled her packs towards her and ran a systems status check. Not good. The guidance block was putting out erratic data, and the suit's laser rangefinder return was dubious. The hostiles' electronic warfare field was growing stronger. And according to her external temperature sensors, if they hadn't been wearing suits with a thermal-dispersal layer they would have been roasted alive by now.

She gripped the TIP carbine tighter. "As soon as the flames die down I want a sweep-scorch pattern laid down out to four hundred metres. Fight fire with fire. They've shown us what they can do, now it's our turn."

"All right," Will muttered happily.

Rummaging round in her packs for one of the spherical heavy duty power cells she was carrying, she plugged its coiled cable into the butt of her carbine. The other two were doing the same thing.

"Ready?" she asked. The flames were only a couple of

metres high now, the air above them swarmed with ash flakes, blotting out the sun. "Go."

They stood, shoulders together, forming a triangle. The TIP carbines blazed, sending out two hundred and fifty invisible deadly shots every second. Targeting processors coordinated the sweep parameters, overlapping their fields of fire. Neural nanonics ordered their muscles to move in precise increments, controlling the direction of the energy blitz.

A ripple of destruction roared out across the already cremated land, then started to chew its way into the vegetation beyond. Dazzling orange stars scintillated on tree trunks and creepers, desiccating then igniting the wood and tangled cords of vine. The initial ripple became a fully-fledged hurricane firestorm, exacerbated by the relentless push of the carbines.

"Burn, you mothers," Will yelled jubilantly. "Burn!"

The entire jungle was on fire around them, an avalanche of flames racing outward. One again the vennals were dying in their hundreds, plunging out of their igneous trees right into the conflagration.

Dean's neural nanonics reported that his carbine was stuttering whenever he wiped the barrel across a certain coordinate. He brought it back and held it. The shot rate declined to five a second.

"Shit. Jenny, they're locking their electronic warfare into my carbine targeting processor."

"Let me have the section," she said.

He datavised the coordinates over—no problem with communication any more. When she aimed her own TIP carbine along the line its output dropped off almost immediately, but her suit blocks were coming back on-line. "Jeeze, that electronic warfare of theirs is the weirdest."

"Want me to try?" Will asked.

"No. Finish the sweep-scorch first, we'll deal with them in a minute." She turned back to her section. Watching the invincible rampart of flame cascade over the jungle had sent her heart racing wildly. The awe that she could com-

mand such fearsome power was soaring through her veins, taking her to a dangerous high. She had to load a suppression order into her neural nanonics, which restricted the release of natural adrenalin sharply. The sweep pattern was completed, and her flesh cooled. But she still felt supreme.

A holocaust of flame raged a hundred and twenty metres away.

“OK, they’ve given their position away,” she said. “Dean, Will: gaussguns, please. Fragmentation and electron-explosive rounds, forty–sixty ratio.”

Will grinned inside his shell-helmet as he bent down to retrieve the heavy-duty weapon. The gaussgun barrel was dark grey in colour, a metre and a half long. It weighed thirty kilograms. He picked it up as if it was made from polystyrene, checked the feed tube was connected to the bulky magazine box at his feet, datavised in the ratio, and aimed it out through the shimmering flames. Dean deployed its twin beside him.

Jenny had been probing through the flames, using her TIP carbine to determine the extent and location of the dead zone simply by recording where it cut out. She datavised the coordinates over to Dean and Will: an oval area fifty metres long, roughly three hundred metres away.

“One hundred and fifty per cent coverage,” she said. “Fire.” Even she had to marvel at how the two men handled the weapons. The gaussguns hurled ten rounds a second, leaving the muzzle at five times the speed of sound. Yet they hardly moved as the recoil hammered at them, swaying gently from side to side. She doubted her boosted muscles could cope.

Away beyond the first rank of flames, a wide island of intact jungle erupted in violent pyrotechnics. Explosions five metres above the ground slammed out hundreds of thousands of slender crystallized carbon shrapnel blades. They scythed through the air at supersonic velocity, sharp as scalpels, stronger than diamond. Those trees which had survived the firestorm disintegrated, shredded instantly by

the rabid aerial swarm. Confetti fragments blew apart like a dandelion cloud in a tornado.

The rest of the shrapnel impacted on the ground, slicing through the tangled mat of creepers, blades stabbing themselves thirty to forty centimetres down into the loose moist loam. They never had a chance to settle. EE projectiles rained down, detonating in hard vicious goutts of ionic flame. Plumes of black loam jetted up high into the ash-dimmed sky. The whole area was ruptured by steep-walled two-metre craters, undulating like a sea swell.

Looking down on the desolation, it was hard to believe even an insect could have survived, let alone any large animal.

The three ESA agents stared through the ebbing flames at the dark cyclone of loam particles and wood splinters obscuring the sun.

Jenny's neural nanonics ran a series of diagnostic programs through her suit equipment blocks. "That electronic warfare field has shut down," she said. There was a faint quaver to her voice as she contemplated the destructive forces she had unleashed. "Looks like we got them."

"And everybody knows it," Dean said flatly. "They must be able to see this fire halfway back to Durringham. The hostiles are going to come swarming to investigate."

"You're right," she said.

"They're still there," Will pronounced.

"What?!" Dean said. "You've cracked. Nothing could survive that kind of barrage, not even an army assault mechanoid. We blasted those bastards to hell."

"I'm telling you; they're still out there," Will insisted. He sounded nervous. Not like him at all.

His edginess crept in through the comfortable insulation of Jenny's suit. Listening to him she was half convinced herself. "If someone survived, that's good," she said. "I still want that captive for Hiltch. Let's move out. We'd have to investigate anyway. And we can't stay here waiting for them to regroup."

They quickly distributed the remaining ammunition and

power cells from their packs, along with basic survival gear. Each of them kept their TIP carbine; Will and Dean shouldered the gaussguns without a word of protest.

Jenny led off at a fast trot across the smouldering remnants of jungle, towards the area they had bombarded with the gaussguns. She felt terribly exposed. The fire had died down, it had nothing left to burn. Away in the distance they could see a few sporadic flames licking at bushes and knots of creeper. They were in the middle of a clearing nearly a kilometre across, the only segment of colour. Everything was black, the remnants of creepers underfoot, tapering ten-metre spikes of trees devoured by natural flames (as opposed to the white stuff the hostiles threw at them), cooked vennals that lay scattered everywhere, other smaller animals, a savagely contorted corpse of one of the horses, even the air was leaden with a seam of fine dusky motes.

She datavisited her communication block to open a scrambled channel to Murphy Hewlett. To her surprise, he responded straight away.

“God, Jenny, what’s happened? We couldn’t raise you, then we saw that bloody great fire-fight. Are you all OK?”

“We’re in one piece, but we lost the horses. I think we did some damage to the hostiles.”

“Some damage?”

“Yeah. Murphy, watch out for a kind of white fire. So far they’ve only used it to set the vegetation alight, but our sensors can’t pick up how they direct the bloody stuff. It just comes at you out of nowhere. But they hit you with an electronic warfare field first. My advice is that if your electronics start to go, then lay down a scorch pattern immediately. Flush them away.”

“Christ. What the hell are we up against? First that paddle-boat illusion, now undetectable weapons.”

“I don’t know. Not yet, but I’m going to find out.” She was surprised at her own determination.

“Do you need assistance? It’s a long walk back to the boat.”

“Negative. I don’t think we should join up. Two groups still have a better chance to achieve our objective than one, nothing has changed that.”

“OK, but we’re here if it gets too tough.”

“Thanks. Listen, Murphy, I’m not aiming to stay in this jungle after dark. Hell, we can’t even see them coming at us in the daytime.”

“Now that sounds like the first piece of sensible advice you’ve given today.”

She referred to her neural nanonics. “There are another seven hours of daylight left. I suggest we try and rendezvous back at the *Isakore* in six hours from now. If we haven’t captured a hostile, or found out what the hell is going down around here, we can review the situation then.”

“I concur.”

“Jenny,” Dean called with soft urgency.

“Call you back,” she told Murphy.

They had reached the edge of the barrage zone. Not even the tree stumps had survived here. Craters overlapped, producing a crumpled landscape of unstable cones and holes; crooked brown roots poked up into the sky from most of the denuded soil slopes. Long strands of steam, like airborne worms, wound slowly around the crumbling protrusions, sliding into the holes to pool at the bottom.

Over on the far side she watched three men emerging from the craters, scrambling sluggishly for solid ground. They helped each other along, wriggling on their bellies when the slippery loam proved impossible to stand on.

Jenny watched their progress in the same kind of bewildered daze which had engulfed her as the fantastical paddle-steamer sailed down the river.

The men reached level ground sixty metres away from the ESA team, and stood up. Two were recognizable colonist types: dungarees, thick cotton work shirts, and woolly beards. The third was dressed in some kind of antique khaki uniform: baggy trousers, calves bound up by strips of yellowish cloth; a brown leather belt round his

waist sporting a polished pistol holster; a hemispherical metal hat with a five-centimetre rim.

They couldn't possibly have survived, Jenny found herself thinking, yet here they were. For one wild second she wondered if the electronic warfare field had won, and was feeding the hallucination directly into her neural nanonics.

The two groups stared at each other for over half a minute.

Jenny's electronic warfare block reported a build-up of static in the short-range datavise band. It broke the spell. "OK, let's go get them," she said.

They started to circle round the edge of the barrage zone. The three men watched them silently.

"Do you want all three?" Will asked.

"No, just one. The soldier must be equipped with the most powerful systems if he can create that kind of chameleon effect. I'd like him if we can manage it."

"I thought chameleon suits were supposed to blend in," Dean muttered.

"I'm not even sure we're seeing men," Will added. "Maybe the xenocs are disguising themselves. Remember the paddle-steamer."

Jenny ordered her suit's laser rangefinder to scan the soldier; its return should reveal the true outline to an accuracy of less than half a millimetre. The blue beam stabbed out from the side of her shell-helmet. But instead of sweeping the soldier, it broke apart a couple of metres in front of him, forming a turquoise haze. After a second the rangefinder module shut down. Her neural nanonics reported the whole unit was inoperative.

"Did you see that?" she asked. They had covered about a third of the distance round the barrage zone.

"I saw it," Will said brusquely. "It's a xenoc. Why else would it want to hide its shape?"

The distortion in the datavise band began to increase. Jenny saw the soldier start to unbuckle his holster.

"Stop!" she commanded, her voice booming out of the communication block's external speaker. "The three of you

are under arrest. Put your hands on your head, and don't move."

All three men turned fractionally, focusing on her. Her neural nanonics began to report malfunctions in half of her suit's electronics.

"Screw it! We must break them up, even three of them are too powerful. Will, one round EE, five metres in front of them."

"That's too close," Dean said tensely as Will brought the gaussgun to bear. "You'll kill them."

"They survived the first barrage," Jenny said tonelessly.

Will fired. A fountain of loam sputtered up into the air, accompanied by a bright blue-white sphere of flame. The blast-wave flattened some of the nearby piles of soil.

Jenny's neural nanonics reported the electronics coming back on-line. The loam subsided, revealing the three men standing firm. A faint whistle was insinuating itself into the datavise band; her neural nanonics couldn't filter it out.

"One metre," she snapped. "Fire."

The explosion sent them spinning, tottering about for balance. One fell to his knees. For the first time there was a reaction; one of the two farmer-types started snarling and shouting. His face above the beard was black, whether from loam or a flashburn she couldn't tell.

"Keep firing, keep them apart," Jenny called to Will. "Come on, run."

Explosions bloomed around the three men. Will was using the gaussgun the way riot police employed a water cannon, harrying the men as they tried to come together. Blasts that would rip a human to pieces barely affected them, at the most they tumbled backwards to sprawl on the ground. He was tempted to land a round straight on one, just to see what it would do. They scared him.

Jenny's feet pounded over the scorched creepers. The packs and the TIP carbine weighed nothing as her boosted muscles powered up and took the full load. Will was doing a good job, one of the men had been separated from the other two. He was the farmer-type who had shouted earlier.

She brought her TIP carbine round and aimed it at his left ankle, neural nanonics allowing her to compensate for the vigorous motion of her body. If they could disable him, they could chase off or kill the other two. A severed cauterized foot wasn't lethal.

Her neural nanonics triggered a single shot. She actually saw the induction pulse. A complete impossibility, her mind insisted. But a slender violet line materialized in the air ahead of her. It struck the farmer's ankle and splashed apart, sending luminous tendrils clawing up his leg. He yelled wildly, and tumbled headlong.

"Dean, subdue him," she ordered. "I want him in one piece. Will and I will fend off the other two." Her carbine's targeting circle slithered round on the soldier as she stopped running. He was taking aim with his revolver. They both fired.

Jenny saw luminous purple tapeworms writhing across the neatly pressed khaki uniform. The soldier began to jerk about as if he was being electrocuted. Then the bullet struck her with the force of a gaussgun's kinetic round. Her suit hardened instantly, and she found herself somersaulting chaotically, grey sky and black land streaking past in a confused blur. There was an instant's silence. She landed hard, and her suit unfroze. She was rolling, arms and legs jolting the ground sharply.

The gaussgun was roaring three metres away. Will was standing his ground, feet apart to brace himself, swivelling from the hip to send EE rounds chasing after each of the men.

Jenny scrambled to her feet. The soldier and one of the farmers were fifty metres away. They were facing Will, but retreating in juddering steps from the onslaught of projectiles. Somehow she had hung on to the TIP carbine, and now she lined it up. Radiant purple lines shivered across the soldier once more. He threw up his hands, as if he was physically warding off the intense energy pulses. Then both he and the farmer looked at each other. Something

must have been said, because they both turned and ran towards the rim of the jungle eighty metres behind them.

Dean Folan dropped his gaussgun and backpack, which allowed him to cover the last thirty metres in two and a half seconds. In that time he fired his TIP carbine twice. The beams tore into glaring purple streamers which knocked the farmer down into the soft loam. With his opponent out for the count, Dean took the last five metres in a flying tackle, landing straight on top of him. The weight of his own body and the suit and his equipment should have been enough to finish it. But the man started to rise straight away. Dean gave a surprised yelp as he was lifted right off the ground, and went for a stranglehold, only to find a hand clamping round each wrist pulling his arms apart. He fell onto his back as the farmer regained his feet. A booted foot kicked him in the side of his ribs. His suit hardened, and he was thrown onto his belly by the force of the blow. The farmer must be a construct made entirely out of boosted muscle! His neural nanonics combat routine programs went into primary mode. He swung the TIP carbine round, and another vicious kick actually cracked the casing. But he lashed out with his free arm, knocking the farmer's other leg out from under him. The farmer went down heavily on his backside.

Somewhere in the distance the gaussgun was thumping out a stream of EE projectiles.

Both of them struggled into a semi-crouch, then launched themselves. Once again, Dean found himself losing. The farmer's impact sent him reeling backwards, fighting to keep his feet. Arms with the strength of a hydraulic ram grappled at him. His neural nanonics reviewed tactical options, and decided his physical strength was dangerously inferior. He let himself sway backwards, taking the farmer with him. Then his leg came straight up, slamming into the man's stomach. A classic judo throw. The farmer arched through the air, snarling in rage. Dean drew his twenty-centimetre fission blade and twisted round just in time to meet the man as he charged. The blade sliced

down, aiming for the meat of the right forearm. It struck, cutting through the cloth sleeve. But the yellow glow faded, and it skated across the skin, scoring a shallow gash.

Dean stared at the narrow wound, partly numbed, partly shocked. Will was right, it must be a xenoc. As he watched, the skin on the forearm rippled, closing the gash. The farmer laughed evilly, teeth showing white in his grubby face. He started to walk towards Dean, arms coming up menacingly. Dean stepped inside the embrace, and ordered his suit to solidify below his shoulders. The farmer's arms closed round him in a bear hug. Composite fibres, stiffened by the suit's integral valency generators, creaked ominously as the farmer's arms squeezed. A couple of equipment blocks snapped. Instinct made Dean switch off the fission blade's power, leaving a dull black blade with wickedly sharp edges. The hostiles seemed capable of controlling and subverting any kind of electrical circuit—maybe if the knife wasn't powered up . . . He pressed the tip up into the base of the farmer's jaw.

"You can heal wounds on your arm. But can you heal your brain as it's sliced in half?" The blade was shoved up a fraction until a bead of blood welled out around the tip. "Wanna try?"

The farmer hissed in animosity. He eased off his grip around Dean's chest.

"Now keep very still," Dean said as he unlocked his suit. "Because I'm very nervous, and an accident can happen easily and quickly."

"You'll suffer," the farmer said malevolently. "You'll suffer longer than you have to. I promise."

Dean took a pace to one side, the blade remaining poised on the man's neck. "You speak English, do you? Where do you come from?"

"Here, I come from here, warrior man. Just like you."

"I don't come from here."

"We all do. And you're going to stay here. For ever, warrior man. You're never going to die, not now. Eternity in

purgatory is that which awaits you. Do you like the sound of that? That's what's going to happen to you."

Dean saw Will walk behind the farmer, and touch the muzzle of the gaussgun to the back of his skull.

"I've got him," said Will. "Hey, xenoc man, one bad move, one bad word, and you are countryside." He laughed. "You got that?"

The farmer's dirty lips curled up in a sneer.

"He's got it," Dean said.

Jenny came over and studied the strange tableau. The farmer looked perfectly ordinary apart from his arrogance. She thought of his two comrades that had run into the jungle, the hundreds—thousands—more just like him out there. Maybe he had a right to be arrogant.

"What's your name?" she asked.

The farmer's eyes darted towards her. "Kingsford Garrigan. What's yours?"

"Cuff him," Jenny told Dean. "We'll take him back to the *Isakore*. You're going for a long trip, Kingsford Garrigan. All the way to Kulu." She thought she saw a flash of surprise in his eyes. "And you'd better hope your friends don't try and interfere with us. I don't know what you are, but if you attempt to screw up our electronics again, or if we have to cut and run, the first thing we drop is you. And drop you we will, from a very great height."

The farmer spat casually on her foot. Will jabbed him with the gaussgun.

Jenny opened a communication channel to the geosynchronous platform, and connected into the Kulu Embassy dumper.

"We've got you one of the hostiles," she datavised to Ralph Hiltch. "And when I say hostile, I'm not kidding."

"Fantastic. Well done, Jenny. Now get back here soonest. I've got our transport to Ombey arranged. The ESA office there has the facilities for a total personality debrief."

"I wouldn't bank on it working," she said. "He's immune to a TIP shot."

"Repeat, please."

“I said the TIP carbine doesn’t hurt him, the energy pulse just breaks apart. Only physical weapons seem to have any effect. At the moment we’ve got him subdued with a gaussgun. He’s also stronger than the G66 boys, a lot stronger.”

There was a long silence. “Is he human?” Ralph Hiltch asked.

“He looks human. But I don’t see how he can be. If you want my opinion, I’d guess at some kind of super bitek android. It’s got to be a xenoc bitek, and a pretty advanced bitek at that.”

“Christ Almighty. Datavise a full-spectrum image over, please. I’ll run it through some analysis programs.”

“Sure thing.”

Dean had the man’s hands behind his back to slide a zipcuff over his wrists. It was a figure-of-eight band of polyminium with a latch buckle at the centre. Jenny watched Dean tighten the pewter-coloured loops; no electronic lock, thank heavens, just simple mechanics.

She ordered her neural nanonics to encode the retinal pixels, and datavised the complete image over to the embassy. Infrared followed, then a spectrographic print.

Dean ejected the power magazine from his broken TIP carbine and handed it to Jenny along with the spares, then recovered his gaussgun. With Will covering their prisoner, they started walking back towards the *Isakore* at a brisk pace. Jenny aimed them off at a slight tangent, taking them quickly back into the jungle. She still felt too exposed in the firestorm clearing.

“Jenny,” Ralph called after a minute. “What did the hostile say his name was?”

“Kingsford Garrigan,” she replied.

“He’s lying. And you’re wrong about him being a xenoc android, too. I’ve run a search program through our records. He’s a colonist from Aberdale called Gerald Skibbow.”

“It is a wet, humid night here in Durringham, as they always are on this poor benighted planet. The heat clogs my throat

and my skin sweats as though I have caught a fever. But still I feel cold inside, a coldness that grips the very cells of my heart." Was that a bit too purple? Oh well, the studio can always edit it out.

Graeme Nicholson was squatting on aching ankles in the deepest shadows cast by one of the spaceport's big hangars. It was drizzling hard, and his cheap synthetic suit was clinging to his flabby body. Despite the warmth of the water he really was shivering, the fat rolls of his beer belly were shaking the same way they did when he laughed.

Fifty metres away a defeated yellow light shone from an office in the spaceport's single-storey administration block. It was the only occupied office, the rest had shut long ago. With his retinal implants straining, Graeme could just make out Laton, Marie Skibbow, and two other men through the grimed glass. One of them was Emlyn Hermon, the *Yaku's* second-in-command, who had met Marie and Laton in the Crashed Dumper. He didn't know the fourth, but he must work for the spaceport administration in some capacity.

He just wished he could listen to whatever deal they were making. But his boosted hearing was only effective inside a fifteen-metre radius. And no prize in the universe would make him creep any closer to Laton. Fifty metres was quite close enough, thank you.

"I have followed the arch-diabolist here from the city. And nothing I have seen has given me the slightest hope for the future. His interest in the spaceport can only indicate he is ready to move on. His work on Lalonde is complete. Violence and anarchy reign beyond the city. What monstrous curse he has let loose is beyond my imagination; but each new day brings darker stories down the river, sucking away the citizens' hope. Fear is his real weapon, and he possesses it in abundance."

Marie held out a small object Graeme took to be a Jovian Bank credit disk. The spaceport administration official proffered its counterpart.

"The alliance has been formed. His plan advances an-

other notch. And I cannot believe it will bring anything other than disaster upon us. Four decades has not reduced the fear. What has he achieved in those four decades? I ask myself this question time and again. The only answer must be: evil. He has perfected evil.”

The office light went out. Graeme emerged from his sheltered recess, and walked along the side of the hangar until he could see the administration block's main entrance. The drizzle was worsening, becoming rain. His suit felt cool, and unbearably clammy, restricting his movements. A prodigious amount of water was running off the ezytak-panel roof overhead, splattering onto the chip-pings round his soaking feet. Despite the physical discomfort and nagging consternation at Laton's presence, he felt an excitement that had been absent for years. This was real journalism: the million to one break, the hazardous follow-up, getting the story at any cost. Those shits back in the editing offices could never handle this, safe paunchy career creatures; and they would know it too. His real victory.

Laton and his cohorts had all emerged into the bleak night wearing cagoules against the weather. They had their backs to him, heading for the flight line where the indistinct outlines of the parked McBoeings formed windows into an even graver darkness. Laton (betrayed by his height) had his arm around Marie.

“The beauty and the beast, look. What can she see in him? For Marie is just a simple colony girl, proud and decent, loving her new planet, working long hours like all of this city's residents. She shares the planetary ethic of her neighbours, striving hard to achieve a better world for her children. Yet somehow she has stumbled. A warning that none of us is immune to the attraction of the dark side of human nature. I look at her, and I think: there but for the grace of God go I.”

Halfway along the McBoeings was a smaller space-plane. It was obviously Laton's goal. Bright light shone out of its open airlock, casting a grey smear across the ground.

A couple of maintenance crew personnel were tending the mobile support units under its nose.

Graeme sneaked up to the big undercarriage bogies of a McBoeing forty metres away, and crouched down below the broad tyres. The spaceplane was one of the small swing-wing VTOL marques starships carried in their hangars. He switched his retinal implants to full magnification and scanned the fuselage. Sure enough, the name *Yaku* was printed on the low angular tail.

Some kind of argument was going on at the foot of the steps leading up to the airlock. The administration official was talking heatedly to another man wearing a cagoule with the LDC emblem on the arm. Both of them were waving their arms around. Laton, Marie, and Emlyn Hermon stood to one side, watching patiently.

"The last obstacle has been reached. It is ironic to consider that all that stands between Laton and the Confederation is one immigration official. One man between us and the prospect of galactic tragedy."

The argument ended. A Jovian Bank disk was offered.

"Can we blame him? Should we blame him? It is a foul night. He has a family which looks to him for support. And how harmless it is, a few hundred fuseodollars to avert his eyes for one swift minute. Money which can buy food for his children in these troubled times. Money which can make life that fraction easier. How many of us would do the same? How many? Would you?" Nice touch that, involve people.

Laton and Marie went up the battered aluminium stairs, followed by a furtive Emlyn Hermon. The administration official was talking to the two ground crew.

Just as he reached the airlock hatch, Laton turned, the hood of his cagoule falling back to reveal his face in full. Handsome, well proportioned, a hint of aristocracy: Edenist sophistication, but without the cultural heritage, that essential counterbalance which made the affinity gene carriers human. It looked as though he was staring straight

at Graeme Nicholson. He laughed with a debonair raffishness. Mocking.

Everyone in the Confederation who accessed the sensewise in the weeks which followed experienced the old journalist's heart thud inside his ribs. All of a sudden breath was very hard to come by, stalling in his throat.

That pause, the derision. It wasn't an accident, chance. Laton knew he was there, and didn't care. Graeme was too far beneath him to care.

"He is going now. Free to roam the stars. Should I have tried to stop him? Put myself up against a man who can make entire worlds tremble at the mention of his name? If you think I should, then I am sorry. For I am so frightened of him. And I do not believe I would have made any difference, not against his strength. He would still be on his way."

The airlock hatch shut. The two ground crew scuttled about, hunched against the rain, unplugging the thick dark-yellow ribbed hoses from their underbelly hatches. Compressors wound up, kicking out micro-squalls of the heavy rain. Their reedy sibilance built steadily until the spaceplane rocked on its undercarriage. It lifted into the murky sky.

"My duty now is to warn you all. I will do what I can, what I must, to ensure this sensewise reaches you. So that you know. He is coming. It is you who must fight him. I wish you luck. Those of us left here have our own battle against the calamity he has unleashed out in the hinterlands. It is not one for which we are well prepared, this is not a planet of epic heroes, just ordinary people like yourselves. As always, the burden falls upon those least able to shoulder it; for a terrible night has fallen on Lalonde, and I do not think we will see the dawn again."

The spaceplane swooped up in a sharp climb, its wings beginning to fold back. It arrowed into the low, bulging cloud base, and disappeared from view.

A dozen paltry fires spluttered and hissed on the broad road outside the Governor's dumper, the flames devouring fence

posts and broken carts that had been snatched for fuel. Little knots of protesters clustered round them under the watchful eyes of the sheriffs and deputies circling the carbotanium cone. An uneasy truce had broken out after the anger and violence of the day. The earlier barrages of stones and bottles had been answered each time by cortical-jamming impulses from the sheriffs. Thankfully the protesters had refrained from using any real weapons today. Now the chanting had stopped. The naked menace in a thousand throats screaming in unison wasn't something Colin Rexrew was accustomed to dealing with. He could never make out what they had been chanting for these last few days; he thought they weren't entirely sure themselves apart from wanting the turmoil to end. Well, so did he. Very badly.

Each time Colin Rexrew looked out of his window he could see some new plume of smoke rising from the vista of dark rooftops. Tonight the horizon was dotted with three or four fierce orange flares as buildings burned. If it wasn't for the rain and humidity Durringham would have been reduced to a single giant firestorm days ago.

And the deteriorating civic situation in the city wasn't even his real problem.

When Candace Elford came into the office Colin Rexrew was behind his desk as always, gazing vacantly at the window strip and the luckless city outside. Terrance Smith gave her a fast, expressive grimace, and they both sat down.

"I'm afraid I have now effectively lost control over a third of the city," she started.

It was the nightly situation briefing. Or the nightly crisis meeting, depending on how cynical Colin felt. The intensifying pressures seemed to make it hard to concentrate at the very times he needed his full mental resources. He would have given a lot to be able to run a stimulant program through his neural nanonics, or even escape into a MF album for a few hours like he used to in his adolescence. It would have made the strain a little easier to bear.

Not even his neural nanonics with their top of the range

managerial programs were much help. There were too many unaccountable—downright weird—factors cropping up to apply standard responses. Had there ever been a stage one colony governor who had lost all control of his planet? The memory cells held no record of any.

What a way to get into the history books.

“Is it the invaders?” he asked.

“No, as far as we can make out they are still some distance away. What we’re dealing with here is mainly opportunist looting, and some organized grabs for power. Nothing political, but there are some strong criminal gangs who have been quick to take advantage of the unrest. I’d point out that most of the districts my sheriffs have been excluded from are on the south-eastern side of town. Those are the newest and poorest; in other words the most disaffected to begin with. The heart of the city, and more importantly the merchant and industrial sectors, remain stable. If anything, the older residents resent the lawlessness. I’m looking to recruit more deputies from them.”

“How long before you can start to regain control of the south-east districts?” Terrance Smith asked.

“At the moment I’m just looking to contain the trouble,” Candace Elford said.

“You mean you can’t?”

“I didn’t say that, but it isn’t going to be easy. The gangs have captured two dumpers, and their fusion generators. We can’t afford to damage them, and they know that. I lost a lot of good people in Ozark and on the *Swithland* fiasco. Plus we have to deal with the transient colonists. They seem to be the biggest problem right now; they’re holed up in the docks and I can’t shift them. There are barricades across every access route and there’s a lot of wanton destruction and looting going on. So half the port is currently unusable, which has antagonized the boat captains; and I have to deploy a lot of people to keep an eye on them.”

“Starve them out,” Colin said.

She nodded reluctantly. “That’s one option. About the

least expensive at the moment. But it will take time, there was a lot of food stored in those warehouses.”

“The merchants won’t like that,” Terrance Smith said.

“Screw the merchants,” Colin said. “I’m sorry about the transients’ gear being looted, but that doesn’t excuse this kind of behaviour. We can help them eventually, but not if they’re going to hamper every effort with petty-minded belligerence.”

“Some families lost everything—”

“Tough shit! *We* are in danger of losing an entire planet of twenty million people. My priority is to the majority.”

“Yes, sir.”

There were times when Colin just felt like telling his aide: here’s my seat, you take over, you with your situation summaries and cautiously formulated response suggestions. Instead, the Governor walked over to the drinks cabinet and searched through the bottles for a decent chilled white wine, and to hell with the chief sheriff’s disapproval.

“Can we defend Durringham from the invaders?” he asked quietly as he flipped the neck seal and poured out a glass.

“If we had enough time to prepare, and you declared martial law, and if we had enough weapons.”

“Yes or no?”

Candace Elford watched the glass in the Governor’s hand. It was shaking quite badly, the wine nearly spilling. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Whatever it is that’s out there, it’s strong, well armed, and well organized. The Confederation Navy office thinks they are using some kind of sequestration technology to turn colonists into a slave army. Faced with that, I don’t think we really stand much of a chance.”

“Sequestration nanonics,” Colin mumbled as he sank back into his chair. “Dear God, who are these invaders? Xenocs? Some exiled group from another planet?”

“I’m not one hundred per cent certain,” she said. “But my satellite image analysis people found these this morning. I think it may throw a little light on the situation.” She

datavised an order into the office's computer. The wall-screens lit up, showing a blank section of jungle fifty kilometres west of Ozark.

The satellite had passed over in the middle of the afternoon, giving a clear bright image. Trees were compacted so tightly the jungle looked like an unbroken emerald plain. Five perfectly straight black lines began to probe across the green expanse, as if the talons of a huge invisible claw were being scored down the screen. The satellite cameras zoomed in on the head of one line, and Colin Rexrew saw trees being bulldozed into the ground. A big ten-wheeled vehicle rolled into view, grey metal glinting dully, a black bubble-cab protruding from a flat upper surface. It had a blunt wedge-shaped front that smashed through trunks without the slightest resistance. Viscous sprays of red-brown mud were being flung up by its rear wheels, caking the metal bodywork. There were another three identical vehicles following it along the track of shattered vegetation it was ripping through the jungle.

"We positively identified them as Dhyaan DLA404 landcruisers; they are made on Varzquez. Or I should say, were made. The Dhyaan company stopped producing that particular model over twenty years ago."

Colin Rexrew datavised a search order into the office computer. "The LDC never brought any to Lalonde."

"That's right. The invaders brought them. What you're seeing is the first definite proof that it is an external force behind all this. And they're heading straight towards Durringham."

"Dear God." He put his empty wineglass down on the desk, and stared at the screens. The enemy had a physical form. After weeks of helpless wrestling with an elusive, possibly imaginary, foe, it was finally real; but a reason for the invasion, logical or otherwise, was impossible to devise.

Colin Rexrew gathered up what was left of his old determination and resolve. Something tangible gave his psyche a fragment of very welcome confidence. He accessed

the one neural nanonics program he had thought he would never have to use, strategic military procedure, and put it into primary mode. "We have to stop deluding ourselves we can handle this on our own. I need combat troops backed up with real fire-power. I'm going to blow these invaders right off my planet. We only need to locate the headquarters. Kill the brain and the body is irrelevant. We can see about removing the sequestration nanonics from people later."

"The LDC board will need convincing," Terrance Smith said. "It won't be easy."

"They will be told afterwards," Colin said. "You've seen those landcruisers. They'll be here in a week. We must move fast. After all, it's the board's interest I'm ultimately protecting; without Lalonde there will be no LDC."

"Where can you get troops from without going through the board?" Terrance asked.

"The same place they would ultimately get them from. We buy them on a short-term contract."

"Mercenaries?" the aide asked in surprised alarm.

"Yes. Candace, where's the nearest port we can get enough in reasonable numbers? I want armed ships, too; they can provide the fire-power back-up from low orbit. It's expensive, but cheaper than buying in strategic-defence platforms. They can also prevent any more of the invader's ships from landing."

The chief sheriff gave him a long, testing stare. "Tranquillity," she said eventually. "It's a base for blackhawks and the so-called independent traders. Where you find the ships, you find the people. Ione Saldana might be young, but she's not stupid, she won't throw out the undesirables. The plutocrats who live in the habitat have too many uses for them."

"Good," Colin said decisively. "Terrance, cancel all work on Kenyon as of now. We'll use the money earmarked for mining its main chamber. It always was bloody premature."

"Yes, sir."

“After that, you can take one of the colonist-carrier ships to Tranquillity and supervise the recruitment.”

“Me?”

“You.” Colin watched the protest form and die unvoiced on the younger man’s lips. “I want at least four thousand general troops to re-establish order in Durringham and the immediate counties. And I also want teams of combat scouts for the Quallheim Counties. They are going to have to be the best, because they are going to be assigned the search and destroy mission in the deep jungle. Once they locate the invader’s home base they can zero it for the starships’ weapons. We can pound it from orbit.”

“What sort of armaments are we looking for on these starships?” Terrance asked guardedly.

“Masers, X-ray lasers, particle beams, thermal inducers, kinetic harpoons, and atmospheric penetration nukes—straight fusion, I don’t want any radioactives clogging the environment.” He caught the aide’s eye. “And no antimatter, not under any circumstances.”

Terrance gave a cautious grin. “Thank you.”

“What ships have we got available in orbit right now?”

“That was something I was going to mention,” Terrance said. “The *Yaku* left its parking orbit this evening. It jumped outsystem.”

“So?”

“Firstly, it was a cargo ship, and only fifty per cent of its cargo had been unloaded. And cargo is the one thing we are still bringing down to the spaceport. It had no reason to leave. Secondly, it had no permission to leave. There was no prior contact with our Civil Flight Control Office. The only reason I found out it had left was because Kelven Solanki got in touch with me to query it. When I checked with flight control to ask why they hadn’t informed us about it, they didn’t even know *Yaku* had lifted from parking orbit. It turns out someone had erased the traffic-monitor satellite data from the spaceport computer.”

“Why?” Candace asked. “It’s not as if we have anything that could prevent them from leaving.”

“No,” Colin said slowly. “But we could have asked another ship to track it. Without the monitor satellite data we don’t know its jump coordinate, we don’t know where it went.”

“Solanki will have a copy,” Terrance said. “Ralph Hiltch too, I suspect. If he was pressed.”

“That’s all we need, another bloody puzzle,” Colin said. “See what you can find out,” he told Candace.

“Yes, sir.”

“Back to the original question. What other ships are available?”

Terrance consulted his neural nanonics. “There are eight left in orbit; three cargo ships, the rest colonist-carriers. And we’re due for another two colonist-carriers this week, as well as a Tyrathca merchant ship sometime before the end of the month to check on their farmers.”

“Don’t remind me,” Colin said sorely.

“I think the *Gemal* would be the best bet. That only has forty Ivets left in zero-tau. They can be transferred to the *Tachad* or the *Martijn*, both of them have spare zero-tau pods. It wouldn’t take more than a few hours.”

“Get onto it tonight,” Colin said. “And, Candace, that means the spaceport has to be defended at all costs. We have to be able get those troops down in the McBoeings. There’s nowhere else for them to land. The scouts can use VTOLs to take them direct to the Quallheim Counties, but the rest will have to use the McBoeings.”

“Yes, sir, I am aware of that.”

“Good, start organizing for it, then. Terrance, I want you back here in ten days. Give me one month, and I’ll have these bastards begging me for surrender terms.”

The gaussgun’s fragmentation round hit the man full in his chest, and penetrated to a depth of ten centimetres, already starting to crater the flesh, impact shock pulverizing the entire mass of organs held within his rib cage to mucilaginous jelly. Then it exploded, silicone shrapnel reducing the entire body to a spherical cascade of scarlet cells.

Will Danza grunted in acute satisfaction. “Try rebuilding yourself out of that, my xenoc friend,” he told the slippery red leaves.

The hostiles were impervious to almost any major injury. The little ESA team had found that out long ago. Gaping lacerations, severed limbs—they barely slowed the hostiles down as they emerged from the thick bushes to harass the party. Wounds closed up, bones knitted in seconds. Lieutenant Jenny Harris might insist on calling the prisoner a sequestered colonist, but Will knew what it really was. Xenoc monster. And its friends wanted it back.

Twice in the last three kilometres Jenny Harris had been forced to order a sweep-scorch pattern. The things had been throwing that eerie white fire of theirs. Once a ball had struck Dean Folan’s arm, burning through the suit’s energy diffusion layer as if it wasn’t there. The medical nanonic package they’d put on his arm looked like a tube of translucent green exoskeleton.

“Hey!” Dean yelled. “Get back here!”

Jenny Harris looked round. Gerald Skibbow was running into the jungle, both arms pumping wildly. “Shitfire,” she muttered. He had been zipcuffed a moment ago. Dean was lining up his gaussgun.

“Mine,” she called. Her blue TIP carbine targeting graphic centred on a tree five metres ahead of the running man; the shots punched straight through the slim trunk, puffs of steam and flame squirted out. Gerald Skibbow swerved frantically as the tree toppled across his path. Another volley of shots and the jungle around him caught light. One final shot on his knee knocked his legs from under him.

The three of them trotted over where he lay sprawled in the crushed muddy vines.

“What happened?” Jenny asked. She had assigned Dean to guard the prisoner. Unless a gaussgun was in his back the whole time, Gerald Skibbow felt free to cause as much trouble as possible.

Dean held up the zipcuff. It was unbroken. "I saw a hostile," he said. "I only turned away for a second."

"OK," Jenny sighed. "I wasn't blaming you." She bent over Gerald Skibbow, whose grimed face was grinning up at them, and jerked his right arm up. There was a narrow red line braceleting the wrist, an old scar. "Very clever," she told him wearily. "Next time, I'll order Dean to slice your legs off below the knee. We'll see how long it takes you to grow a new pair."

Gerald Skibbow laughed. "You don't have that much time available, Madame bitch."

She straightened up. Her spine creaked and groaned as if she was a hundred and fifty. She felt older. The fire was crackling loudly in the surrounding bushes, flames inhibited by the green twigs.

It was another four kilometres back to the *Isakore*, and the jungle was becoming progressively thicker. Vines here wrapped the trees like major arteries, creating a solid hurdle of verdant mesh between the trunks. Visibility was down to less than twenty-five metres, and that was with enhanced senses.

We're not going to make it, she realized.

They'd been expending gaussgun ammunition at a heavy rate ever since they set off. They had to, nothing else worked against the hostiles. Even the two TIP carbines were down to forty per cent of their power reserve. "Get him up," she ordered curtly.

Will clamped an arm round Gerald Skibbow's shoulder and hauled him to his feet.

White fire burst out of the ground around Jenny's feet, damp loam tearing open to spit out dazzling globules which spiralled up her legs like a liquid repelled by gravity. She screamed at the pain as her skin blistered and burned inside the anti-projectile suit. Her neural nanonics isolated the nerve strands, eliminating the raw impulses with analgesic blocks.

Will and Dean started firing their gaussguns at random into the blank impassive jungle in the vain hope of hitting

a hostile. EE projectiles mashed the nearby trees. Shreds of sappy vegetation whirred through the air, forming a loose curtain behind which vivid explosions boomed.

The viscid beads of white fire evaporated as they reached Jenny's hips. She clenched her teeth against the solid ache from her legs. Frightened by the damage her neural nanonics were shielding her from. Frightened she couldn't walk. The medical program was choking up her mind with red symbols, all of them clustered around schematics of her legs like bees round honey. She felt faint.

"We can help you," silver voices whispered in chorus.

"What?" she asked, disorientated. She sat on the lumpy ground to take the strain off her legs. Her trembling muscles had been about to dump her there anyway.

"You all right, Jenny?" Dean asked. He was standing with the gaussgun pointing threateningly into the broken trees.

"Did you say something?"

"Yes, are you OK?"

"I . . ." I'm hearing things. "We've got to get out of here."

"First thing you have to do is get a medical nanonic package on those legs. I think there's enough," he said, uncertainty clouding his voice.

Jenny knew there wasn't, not to get her patched up for a hike of four kilometres under combat conditions. The neural nanonics prognosis wasn't good; the program was activating her endocrine implant, sending a potent stew of chemicals into her bloodstream. "No," she said forcefully. "We're not going to get back to the boat like this."

"We ain't going to leave you," Will said hotly.

She grinned unseen inside her shell-helmet. "Believe me, I wasn't going to ask you to. Even if the medical nanonics can get me walking, we don't have enough ordinance left to blast our way back to the *Isakore* from here."

"What then?" Will demanded.

Jenny requested a channel to Murphy Hewlett. Static crashed into her neural nanonics, that eerie whistling.

“Shitfire. I can’t get the marines.” She hated the idea of abandoning them.

“I think I can see why,” Dean said. He pointed at the treetops. “Smoke, and plenty of it. South of here. Some distance by the look of it. They must have laid down a sweep-scorch pattern. They got troubles, too.”

Jenny couldn’t see any smoke. Even the leaves at the top of the trees had turned a barren grey. Her vision was tunnelling. A physiological-status request showed her endocrines were barely coping with the flayed legs. “Sling me your medical nanonics,” she said.

“Right.” Will fired six EE rounds into the jungle then hurriedly detached his backpack and tossed it over. He was back watching the abused trees before it reached her.

She ordered her communications block to open a channel to Ralph Hiltch, then turned the backpack seal’s catch and fumbled around inside. Instead of the subliminal digital bleep that signalled the block was interfacing with the geosynchronous platform, all she heard was a monotonous buzz.

“Will, Dean, open a channel to the geosync platform, maybe a combined broadcast will get through.” She picked up her TIP carbine, and pointed it at Gerald Skibbow, who was squatting sullenly beside a swath of vines four metres away. “And you, if I think you are part of the jamming effort, I will start a little experiment to see exactly how much thermal energy you can fight off. You got me, Mr. Skibbow? Is this message getting through the electronic warfare barrier?”

The communication block reported the channel to the embassy was open.

“What’s happening?” Ralph Hiltch asked.

“Trouble—” Jenny broke off to hiss loudly. The medical nanonic package was contracting round her left leg, it felt as though a thousand acid-tipped needles were jabbing into the roasted gouges as the furry inner surface knitted with her flesh. She had to order the neural nanonics to block all the nerve impulses. Her legs went completely numb, lack-

ing even the heavy vacuum feeling of chemical anaesthetics. “Boss, I hope that fall-back scheme of yours works. Because we need it pretty badly. Now, boss.”

“OK, Jenny. I’m putting it in motion. ETA fifteen minutes, can you hang on that long?”

“No problem,” Will said. He sounded indecently cheerful.

“Are you secure where you are?” Ralph asked.

“Our security situation wouldn’t change if we moved,” Jenny told him, marvelling at her own understatement.

“OK, I’ve got your coordinates. Use your TIP carbines to scorch a clearing at least fifty metres across. I’ll need it for a landing-zone.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m on my way.”

Jenny swapped her TIP carbine for Dean’s gaussgun. By sitting with her back to a tree she could keep it pointed at Gerald Skibbow. The two G66 troops began slashing at the jungle with their TIP carbines.

The captain of the *Ekwan* was a middle-aged woman in a blue ship-suit, with the kind of robust, lanky figure that suggested she was from a space-adapted geneered family. The AV projector showed her floating ten centimetres above the acceleration couch in her compact cabin. “How did you know we were leaving orbit?” she asked. Her voice was slightly distorted by a curious whistle that was coming through the relay from the LDC’s geosynchronous communication platform.

Graeme Nicholson smiled thinly at her puzzled tone. He diverted his eyes from the projection for a second. On the other side of Durringham spaceport’s flight control centre Langly Bradburn rolled his eyes and turned back to his monitor console.

“I have a contact in the Kulu Embassy,” Graeme said, returning to the projection.

“This isn’t a commercial flight,” the captain said, a fair amount of resentment bubbling into her voice.

"I know." Graeme had heard of the Kulu Ambassador throwing his authority around and virtually commandeering the Kulu-registered colonist-carrier. A situation which became even more interesting when he discovered from Langly that it was Cathal Fitzgerald who was in orbit making sure the captain did as she was told. Cathal Fitzgerald was one of Ralph Hiltch's people. And now, as Graeme looked through the flight control centre's window, he could see a queue of people standing on the nearby hangar apron, shoulders angled against the rain as they embarked on a passenger McBoeing BDA-9008. The entire embassy staff and dependants. "But it is only one memory flek," he said winningly. "And the Time Universe office will pay a substantial bonus when you hand it in to them, I can assure you of that."

"I haven't been told where we're going yet."

"We have offices in every Confederation system. And it would be a personal favour," Graeme emphasized.

There was a pause as the captain worked out that she would receive the entire carriage fee herself. "Very well, Mr. Nicholson. Give it to the McBoeing pilot, I'll meet him when he docks."

"Thank you, Captain, pleasure doing business with you."

"I thought you sent a flek out with the *Gemal* this morning?" Langly observed as Graeme switched off the metre-high projection pillar.

"I did, old boy. Just covering my back."

"Are people really going to be interested in a riot on Lalonde? Nobody even knows this planet even exists."

"They will. Oh, indeed they will."

Rain slammed against the little spaceplane's fuselage as it dived out through the bottom of the clouds. It made a fast rattling sound against the tough silicolithium-composite skin. Individual drops burst into streaks of steam, vaporized by the friction heat of the craft's Mach five velocity.

Looking over the pilot's shoulder Ralph Hiltch saw the

jungle blurring past below. It was grey-green, sprinkled by flexuous strands of mist. Up ahead was a broad band of brighter grey where the clouds ended, and getting broader.

“Ninety seconds,” Kieron Syson, the pilot, shouted over the noise.

A loud metallic whirring filled the small cabin as the wings began to swing forward. The spaceplane pitched up at a sharp angle, and the noise of the rain impacts increased until talking was impossible. Deceleration hit three gees, forcing Ralph back into one of the cabin’s six plastic seats.

Sunlight burst into the cabin with a fast rainbow flash. The sound of the rain vanished. They levelled out as their speed dropped to subsonic.

“We’ll need a complete structure fatigue check after this,” Kieron Syson complained. “Nobody flies supersonic through rain, half the leading edges have abraded down to their safety margins.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ralph told him. “It’ll be paid for.” He turned to check with Cathal Fitzgerald. Both of them were wearing the same model of olive green one-piece anti-projectile suits as Jenny and the two G66 troops. It had been a long time since Ralph had dressed for combat, a cool tension was compressing his body inside and out.

“Looks like your people have been having themselves a wild time,” Kieron said.

Away in the southern distance a vast column of dense soot-laden smoke was rising high into the pale blue sky, a ring of flames dancing round its base. Ten kilometres to the east a kilometre-wide ebony crater had been burned out of the trees.

The spaceplane banked sharply, variable-camber wings twisting elastically to circle it round a third, smaller, blackened clearing. This one was only a hundred metres across. Small licks of flame fluttered from the fallen trees around the perimeter, and thin blue smoke formed a mushroom dome of haze. There was a small green island of withered vegetation in the exact centre.

“That’s them,” Kieron said as the spaceplane’s guidance systems locked on to the signal from Jenny Harris’s communication block.

Four people were standing on the crush of vine leaves and grass. As Ralph watched, one of them fired a gaussgun into the jungle.

“Down and grab them,” he told Kieron. “And make it fast.”

Kieron whistled through closed teeth. “Why me, Lord?” he muttered stoically.

Ralph heard the fan nozzles rotate to the vertical, and the undercarriage clunked as it unfolded. They were swinging round the black scorch zone in decreasing circles. He ordered his communication block to open a local channel to Jenny Harris.

“We’re coming down in fifty seconds,” he told her. “Get ready to run.”

The cabin airlock’s outer hatch hinged open, showing him the fuselage shield sliding back. A blast of hot, moist air hurtled in, along with the howl of the compressors.

“Faster, boss,” Jenny shouted, her voice raw. “We’ve only got thirty gaussgun rounds left. Once we stop this suppression fire they’ll hit the spaceplane with everything they’ve got.”

A fine black powder was churning through the cabin like a sable sandstorm. Environment-contamination warnings sounded above the racket from the compressors, amber lights winked frantically on the forward bulkhead.

“Land us now,” Ralph ordered Kieron. “Cathal, give them some covering fire, scorch that jungle.”

The compressor noise changed, becoming strident. Cathal Fitzgerald moved into the airlock, bracing himself against the outer hatch rim. He began to swing his TIP carbine in long arcs. A sheet of flame lashed the darkening sky around the edge of the clearing.

“Ten seconds,” Kieron said. “I’ll get as close to them as I can.”

Ash rose up in a cyclonic blizzard as the compressor

nozzle efflux splashed against the ground. Visibility was reduced drastically. An orange glow from the flames fluoresced dimly on one side of the spaceplane.

Jenny Harris watched the craft touch and bounce, then settle. She could just make out the name *Ekwan* on the narrow, angled tail. Ralph Hiltch and Cathal Fitzgerald were two indistinct figures hanging on to the side of the open airlock. One of them was waving madly; she guessed it was Ralph.

Will Danza fired the last of his gaussgun rounds, and dropped the big weapon. "Empty," he muttered in disgust. His TIP carbine came up, and he started adding to the flames.

"Come on, move!" Ralph's datavise was tangled with discordant static.

"Get Skibbow in," Jenny ordered Dean and Will. "I'll cover our backs." She brought her TIP carbine to bear on the soot-occluded jungle, putting her back to the spaceplane.

Will and Dean grabbed Gerald Skibbow and started to drag him towards the sleek little craft.

Jenny limped after them, trailing by several metres. The last heavy duty power cell banged against her side, its energy level down to seven per cent. She reduced the carbine's rate of fire, and fired off fifteen shots blindly. Grunting and shuffling sounds were coming down her headset, relayed by the suit's audio pick-ups. She flicked to her rear optical sensors for a moment and saw Gerald Skibbow putting up a struggle as four people tried to haul him through the spaceplane's airlock hatch. Ralph Hiltch slammed his carbine butt into Gerald's face. Blood poured out of the colonist's broken nose, dazing him long enough for Will to shove his legs through.

Jenny switched her attention back to her forward view. Five figures were solidifying out of the swirl of ash. They were stooped humanoids; like big apes, she thought. Blue targeting graphics closed like a noose around one. She fired, sending it flailing backwards.

A ball of white fire raced out of the gloom, too fast to duck. It splashed over her TIP carbine, intensifying. The weapon casing distorted, buckling as though it was made of soft wax. She couldn't free her fingers from the grip; it had melted round them. Her throat voiced a desolate cry as the terrible fire bit hard into her knuckles. The flaming remnants of the carbine fell to the ground. She held up her hand; there were no fingers or thumb, only the smoking stump of her palm. Her cry turned to a wail, and she tripped over a root protruding from the loam. The woody strand coiled fluidly round her ankle like a malicious serpent. Four dark figures loomed closer, a fifth lumbering up behind.

She twisted round on the ground. The spaceplane was twelve metres away. Gerald Skibbow was lying on the floor of the airlock with two suited figures on top of him pinning him down. He looked straight at Jenny, a gleeful sneer on his blooded lips. The root tightened its vicelike grip, cutting into her ankle. He was doing it, she knew that then.

"Lift," she datavised. "Ralph, for God's sake lift. Get him to Ombey."

"Jenny!"

"Make it mean something."

One of the dark figures landed on her. It was a man, strangely corpulent, bulky without being fat; thick matted hair covered his entire body. Then she couldn't see anything; his belly was pressed against her shell-helmet.

That quiet chorus spoke to her again. "There is no need for fear," it said. "Let us help you."

Another of the man-things gripped her knees, his buttocks squashing her damaged legs into the ground. The front of her anti-projectile suit was ripped open. It was difficult to breathe now.

"Jenny! Oh Christ, I can't shoot, they're on top of her."

"Lift!" she begged. "Just lift."

All the neural nanonics analgesic blocks seemed to have collapsed. The pain from her legs and hand was debilitat-

ing, crushing her thoughts. More ripping sounds penetrated her dimming universe. She felt hot, damp air gust across her bared crotch.

“We can stop it,” the chorus told her. “We can save you. Let us in.” There was a pressure against her thoughts, like a warm dry wind blowing through her skull.

“Go to hell,” she moaned. She sent one final diamond-hard thought needling into her faltering neural nanonics, a kamikaze code. The order was transferred into the high-density power cell, shorting it out. She wondered if there would be enough energy left for an explosion big enough to engulf all the man-things.

There was.

The *Ekwan* fell around Lalonde’s equator, six hundred kilometres above the brown and ochre streaks of the deserts which littered the continent of Sarell. With its five windmill-sail thermo-dump panels extended from its central section, the colonist-carrier was rotating slowly about its drive axis, completing one revolution every twenty minutes. A passenger McBoeing BDA-9008 was docked to an airlock tube on its forward hull.

It was a tranquil scene, starship and spaceplane sliding silently over Sarell’s rocky shores and out across the deepening blues of the ocean. Thousands of kilometres ahead, the terminator cast a black veil over half of Amarisk. Every few minutes a puff of smoky yellow vapour would flash out of a vernier nozzle between the starship’s thermo-dump panels, gone in an eyeblink.

Such nonchalant technological prowess created an effect which totally belied the spectacle inside the airlock tube, where children cried and threw up and red-faced parents cursed as they fended off the obnoxious sticky globules. Nobody had been given time to prepare for the departure; all they had brought with them was clothes and valuable items stuffed hastily into shoulder-bags. Children hadn’t even been given anti-nausea drugs. The embassy staffers shouted back and forth in angry tones, disguising both re-

lief at leaving Lalonde and disgust at the flying vomit. But the *Ekwan's* crew were used to the behaviour of planet dwellers; they floated around with hand-held suction sanitizers, and cajoled the reluctant children towards one of the five big zero-tau compartments.

Captain Farrah Montgomery watched the picture projected from an AV pillar on the bridge command console, indifferent to the suffering. She'd seen it all before, a thousand times over. "Are you going to tell me where we are heading?" she asked the man strapped into her executive officer's acceleration couch. "I can start plotting our course vector. Might save some time."

"Ombey," said Sir Asquith Parish, Kulu's Ambassador to Lalonde.

"You're the boss," she said acidly.

"I don't like this any more than you."

"We've got three thousand colonists left in zero-tau. What are you going to tell them when we get to the Principality?"

"I've no idea. Though once they hear what's actually happening down on the surface I doubt they'll complain."

Captain Montgomery thought about the flek in her breast pocket with a glimmer of guilt. The reports they'd been receiving from Durringham over the past week were pretty garbled, too. Maybe they were better off leaving. At least she could transfer the responsibility to the ambassador when the line company started asking questions.

"How soon before we can leave orbit?" Sir Asquith asked.

"As soon as Kieron gets back. You know, you had no right to send him on a flight like that."

"We can wait for two more orbits."

"I'm not leaving without my pilot."

"If they're not airborne by then, you don't have a pilot any more."

She turned her head to look at him. "Just what is going on down there?"

"I wish I knew, Captain. But I can tell you I'm bloody glad we're leaving."

The McBoeing undocked as the *Ekwan* moved into the penumbra. Its pilot fired the orbital manoeuvring rockets, and it dropped away into an elliptical orbit which would intercept Lalonde's upper atmosphere. *Ekwan* started her preflight checks, testing the ion thrusters, priming the fusion tubes. The crew scurried through the life-support capsules, securing loose fittings and general rubbish.

"Got him," the navigation officer called out.

Captain Montgomery datavised the flight computer, requesting the external sensor images.

A long contrail of blue-white plasma stretched out across Amarisk's darkened eastern side, its star-head racing over the seaboard mountains. Already fifty kilometres high and rising. Bright enough to send a backwash of lame phosphorescent light skating over the snow-capped peaks.

Ekwan's flight computer acknowledged a communication channel opening.

Ralph Hiltch watched the hyped-up Kieron Syson start to relax once he could datavise the starship again. It should have been something for Ralph to be thankful about, too, communications had been impossible in the aftermath of the landing. Instead he treated it like a non-event, he expected nothing less than the communications block to work. They were owed functional circuitry.

Environment-contamination warning lights were still winking amber, though the pilot had shut off the cabin's audio alarm. The air was dry and calciferous, scratching the back of Ralph's throat. Gravity was falling off as they soared ever higher above the ocean, curving up to rendezvous with the big colonist-carrier. The prolonged bass roar of the reaction rockets was reducing.

The air they breathed was bad enough, but the human atmosphere in the spaceplane's confined cabin was murderous. Gerald Skibbow sat at the rear of the cabin, shrunk down into his plastic seat, a zipcuff restraining each wrist against the armrests, his hands white knuckled as he

gripped the cushioning. He had been subdued since the airlock hatch closed. But then Will and Dean were looking hard for an excuse to rip his head off. Jenny's death had been fast (thank God) but very, very messy.

Ralph knew he should be reviewing the memory of the ape-analogue creatures, gaining strategically critical information on the threat they faced, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Let the ESA office on Ombey study the memory sequence, they wouldn't be so emotionally involved. Jenny had been a damn good officer, and a friend.

The spaceplane's reaction drive cut off. Free fall left Ralph's stomach rising up through his chest. He accessed a nausea-suppression program and quickly activated it.

Huddled in his chair, Gerald Skibbow began to tremble as the forked strands of his filthy, blood-soaked beard waved about in front of his still-bleeding nose.

Ekwan's hangar was a cylindrical chamber ribbed by metal struts; the walls were composed of shadows and crinkled silver blankets. The spaceplane, wings fully retracted, eased its squashed-bullet nose through the open doors into the waiting clamp ring. Actuators slid catches into a circle of load sockets behind the radar dome, and the craft was drawn inside.

Three of *Ekwan's* security personnel, experts at handling troublesome Ivets in free fall, swam into the cabin, coughing at the ash dust which filled the air.

Will took the zipcuffs off Gerald Skibbow. "Run, why don't you," he said silkily.

Gerald Skibbow gave him a contemptuous glance, which turned to outright alarm as he rose into the air. Hands clawed frantically for a grip on the cabin ceiling. He wound up clutching a grab loop for dear life.

The grinning security personnel closed in.

"Just tow him the whole way," Ralph told them. "And you, Skibbow, don't cause any trouble. We'll be right behind, and we're armed."

"You can't use TIP carbines in the ship," one of the security men protested.

“Oh, really? Try me.”

Gerald Skibbow reluctantly let go of the grab loop, and let the men tug him along by his arms. The eight-strong group drifted out into the tubular corridor connecting the hangar to one of the life-support capsules.

Sir Asquith Parish was waiting outside the zero-tau compartment, a stikpad holding his feet in place. He gave Gerald Skibbow a distasteful look. “You lost Jenny Harris for him?”

“Yes, sir,” Will said through clamped teeth.

Sir Asquith recoiled.

“Whatever sequestered him has several ancillary energy-manipulation functions,” Ralph explained. “He is lethal; one on one, he’s better than any of us.”

The ambassador gave Gerald Skibbow a fast reappraisal. Light strips circling the corridor outside the zero-tau compartment hatch flickered and dimmed.

“Stop it,” Dean growled. He jabbed his TIP carbine into the small of Skibbow’s back.

The light strips came up to full strength again.

Gerald Skibbow laughed jauntily at the shaken ambassador as the security men shoved him through the hatch. Ralph Hiltch cocked an ironic eyebrow, then followed them in.

The zero-tau compartment was a big sphere, sliced into sections by mesh decking that was only three metres apart. It didn’t look finished; it was poorly lit, with bare metal girders and kilometres of power cable stuck to every surface. The sarcophagus pods formed long silent ranks, their upper surface a blank void. Most of them were activated, holding the colonists who had gambled their future on conquering Lalonde.

Gerald Skibbow was manoeuvred to an open pod just inside the hatchway. He glanced around the compartment, his head turning in fractured movements to take in the compartment. The security men holding him felt his muscles tensing.

“Don’t even think of it,” one said.

He was propelled firmly towards the waiting pod.

"No," he said.

"Get in," Ralph told him impatiently.

"No. Not that. Please. I'll be good, I'll behave."

"Get in."

"No."

One of the security men anchored himself to the decking grid with a toe clip, and tugged him down.

"No!" He gripped both sides of the open pod, his features stone-carved with determination. "I won't!" he shouted.

"In!"

"No."

All three security men were pushing and shoving at him. Gerald Skibbow strove against them. Will tucked a leg round a nearby girder, and smacked the butt of his TIP carbine against Gerald Skibbow's left hand. There was a crunch as the bones broke.

He howled, but managed to keep hold. His fingers turned purple, the skin undulating. "No!"

The carbine came down again. Ralph put his hands flat against the decking above, and stood on Gerald Skibbow's back, knees straining, trying to thrust him down into the pod.

Gerald Skibbow's broken hand slipped a couple of centimetres, leaving a red smear. "Stop this, stop this." Rivulets of white light began to shiver across his torso.

Ralph felt as though his own spine was going to snap, the force his boosted muscles were exerting against his skeleton was tremendous. The soles of his feet were tingling sharply, the worms of white light coiling round his ankles. "Dean, switch the pod on the second he's in."

"Sir."

The hand slipped again. Gerald Skibbow started a high-pitched animal wailing. Will hammered away at his left elbow. Firefly sparks streaked back up the carbine every time it hit, as though he was striking flint.

"Get in, you bastard," one of the security men shouted,

nearly purple from the effort, face shrivelled like a rubber mask.

Gerald Skibbow gave way, the arm Will had hammered on finally losing hold. He crashed down into the bottom of the pod with an oof of air punched out through his open mouth. Ralph cried out at the shock of the jolt that was transmitted back up his cramped legs. The curving lid of the pod began to slide into place, and he bent his knees frantically, lifting his legs out of the way.

“No!” Gerald Skibbow shouted. He had begun to glow like a hologram profile, rainbow colours shining bright in the compartment’s gloom. His voice was cut off by the lid sliding into place, and it locked with a satisfying mechanical *click*. There was a muffled thud of a fist striking the composite.

“Where’s the bloody zero-tau?” Will said. “Where is it?”

The lid of the pod hadn’t changed, there was no sign of the slippery black field effect. Gerald Skibbow was pounding away on the inside with the fervour of a man buried alive.

“It’s on,” Dean shouted hoarsely from the operator’s control panel. “Christ, it’s on, it’s drawing power.”

Ralph stared at the sarcophagus in desperation. Work, he pleaded silently, come on fuck you, work! Jenny died for this.

“Switch on, you shit!” Will screamed at it.

Gerald Skibbow stopped punching the side of the pod. A black emptiness irised over the lid.

Will let out a sob of exhausted breath.

Ralph realized he was clinging weakly to one of the girders, the real fear had been that Gerald Skibbow would break out. “Tell the captain we’re ready,” he said in a drained voice. “I want to get him to Ombey as quickly as we can.”

2

The event horizon around *Villeneuve's Revenge* dissolved the instant the starship expanded out to its full forty-eight-metre size. Solar wind and emaciated light from New California's distant sun fell on the dark silicon hull which its disappearance exposed. Short-range combat sensors slid out of their jump recesses with smooth animosity, metallic black tumours inset with circular gold-mirror lenses. They scoured a volume of space five hundred kilometres across, hungry for a specific shape.

Data streams from the sensors sparkled through Erick Thakrar's mind, a rigid symbolic language written in monochromic light. Cursors chased through the vast constantly reconfiguring displays, closing in on an explicit set of values like circling photonic-sculpture vultures. Radiation, mass, and laser returns slotted neatly into their parameter definition.

The *Krystal Moon* materialized out of the fluttering binary fractals, hanging in space two hundred and sixty kilometres away. An inter-planetary cargo ship, eighty metres long; a cylindrical life-support capsule at one end, silver-foil-cloaked tanks and dull-red fusion-drive tube clustered at the other. Thermo-dump panels formed a ruff collar on the outside of the environmental-engineering deck just below the life-support capsule; communication dishes jutted out of a grid tower on the front of it. The ship's mid-section was a hexagonal gantry supporting five rings of standard cargo-pods, some of them plugged into the environmental deck via thick cables and hoses.

A slender twenty-five-metre flame of hazy blue plasma

burnt steadily from the fusion tube, accelerating the *Krystal Moon* at an unvarying sixtieth of a gee. It had departed Tehama asteroid five days ago with its cargo of industrial machinery and micro-fusion generators, bound for the Ukiah asteroid settlement in the outer asteroid belt Dana, which orbited beyond the gas giant Sacramento. Of the star's three asteroid belts, Dana was the least populated; traffic this far out was thin. *Krystal Moon's* sole link to civilization (and navy protection) was its microwave communication beam, focused on Ukiah, three hundred and twenty million kilometres ahead.

Erick's neural nanonics reported that pattern lock was complete. He commanded the X-ray lasers to fire.

Two hundred and fifty kilometres away, the *Krystal Moon's* microwave dishes burst apart into a swirl of aluminium snowflakes. A long brown scar appeared on the forward hull of the life-support capsule.

God, I hope no one was in the cabin below.

Erick tried to push that thought right back to the bottom of his mind. Straying out of character, even for a second, could quite easily cost him his life. They'd drilled that into him enough times back at the academy. There was even a behavioural consistency program loaded into his neural nanonics to catch any wildly inaccurate reactions. But flinches and sudden gasps could be equally damning.

The *Villeneuve's Revenge* triggered its fusion drive, and accelerated in towards the stricken cargo ship at five and a half gees. Erick sent another two shots from the X-ray cannon squirting into the *Krystal Moon's* fusion tube. Its drive flame died. Coolant fluid vented out of a tear in the casing, hidden somewhere in the deep shadows on the side away from the sun, the fountain fluorescing grey-blue as it jetted out from behind the ship.

"Nice going, Erick," André Duchamp commented. He had the secondary fire-control program loaded in his own neural nanonics. If the newest crew-member hadn't fired he could have taken over within milliseconds. Despite Erick's performance in the Catalina Bar, André had a sin-

gle nagging doubt. After all, O'Flaherty was one of their own—after a fashion—and eliminating him didn't require many qualms no matter who you were; but firing on an unarmed civil ship . . . You have earned your place on board, André said silently. He cancelled his fire-control program.

Villeneuve's Revenge was a hundred and twenty kilometres from the *Krystal Moon* when André turned the starship and started decelerating. The hangar doors began to slide open. He started to whistle against the push of the heavy gee force.

He had a right to be pleased. Even though it had only been a tiny interplanetary jump, two hundred and sixty kilometres was an excellent separation distance. Since leaving Tehama, *Villeneuve's Revenge* had been in orbit around Sacramento. They had extended every sensor, focusing along the trajectory Lance Coulson had sold them until they had found the faint splash of the *Krystal Moon's* exhaust. With its exact position and acceleration available in real time, it was just a question of manufacturing themselves a jump co-ordinate.

Two hundred and sixty kilometres, there were voidhawks that would be pushed to match that kind of accuracy.

Thermo-dump panels stayed inside the monobonded silicon hull as the *Villeneuve's Revenge* rendezvoused with *Krystal Moon*. The jump nodes were fully charged. André was cautious, they might need to leave in a hurry. It had happened before; stealthed voidhawks lying in wait, Confederation Navy Marines hiding in the cargo-pods. Not to him, though.

"Bev, give our target an active sensor sweep, please," André ordered.

"Yes, Captain," Bev Lennon said. The combat sensors sent out fingers of questing radiation to probe the *Krystal Moon*.

The brilliant lance of fusion fire at the rear of the *Villeneuve's Revenge* sank away to a minute bubble of radiant helium clinging to the tube's nozzle. *Krystal Moon* was six

kilometres away, wobbling slightly from the impulse imparted by the venting coolant fluid. Thrusters flared around the rear bays, trying to compensate and stabilize.

Ion thrusters on the *Villeneuve's Revenge* fired, nudging the bulky starship in towards its floundering prey. Brendon piloted the multifunction service vehicle up out of the hangar and set off towards the *Krystal Moon*. One of the cargo-bay doors slowly hinged upwards behind him.

"Come on, Brendon," André murmured impatiently as the small auxiliary craft rode its bright yellow chemical rocket exhaust across the gap. Ukiah traffic control would know the communication link had been severed in another twelve minutes; it would take the bureaucrats a few minutes to react, then sensors would review the *Krystal Moon's* track. They'd see the spaceship's fusion drive was off, coupled with the lack of an emergency distress beacon. That could only mean one thing. The navy would be alerted, and if the *Villeneuve's Revenge* was really unlucky a patrolling voidhawk would investigate. André was allowing twenty minutes maximum for the raid.

"It checks out clean," Bev Lennon reported. "But the crew must have survived that first X-ray laser strike, I'm picking up electronic emissions from inside the life-support capsule. The flight computers are still active."

"And they've suppressed the distress beacon," André said. "That's smart, they must know we'd slice that can in half to silence any shout for help. Maybe they'll be in a cooperative mood." He datavisaged the flight computer to open an inter-ship channel.

Erick heard the hiss of static fill the dimly lit bridge as the AV pillar was activated. A series of musical bleeps came with it, then the distinct sound of a child crying. He saw Madeleine Collum's head come up from her acceleration couch, turning in the direction of the communication console. Blue and red shadows flowed over her gaunt, shaven skull.

"*Krystal Moon*, acknowledge contact," André said.

"Acknowledge?" a ragged outraged male voice shouted

out of the AV pillar. “You shithead animal, two of my crew are dead. Fried! Tina was fifteen years old!”

Erick’s neural nanonics staunched the sudden damp fire in his eyes. A fifteen-year-old girl. Great God Almighty! These interplanetary ships were often family operated affairs, cousins and siblings combining into crews.

“Release the latches on pods DK-30-91 and DL-30-07,” André said as though he hadn’t heard. “That’s all we’re here for.”

“Screw you.”

“We’ll cut them free anyway, *Anglo*, and if we cut then the capsule will be included. I’ll open your hull up to space like the foil on a freeze-dried food packet.”

A visual check through the combat sensors showed Erick the MSV was two hundred metres away from the *Krystal Moon*. Desmond Lafoe had already fitted laser cutters to the craft’s robot arms; the spindly white waldos were running through a preprogrammed articulation test. *Villeneuve’s Revenge* was lumbering along after the smaller, more agile, auxiliary craft; three kilometres away now.

“We’ll think about it,” said the voice.

“Daddy!” the girl in the background wailed. “Daddy, make them go away.”

A woman shushed her, sounding fearful.

“Don’t think about it,” André said. “Just do it.”

The channel went silent.

“Bastards,” André muttered. “Erick, put another blast through that capsule.”

“If we kill them, they can’t release the pods.”

André scowled darkly. “Scare them, don’t kill them.”

Erick activated one of the starship’s lasers; it was designed for close-range interception, the last layer of defence against incoming combat wasps. Powerful and highly accurate. He reduced the power level to five per cent, and lined it up on the front of the life-support capsule. The infrared beam sliced a forty-centimetre circle out

of the foam-covered hull. Steamy gas erupted out of the breach.

André grunted at what he considered to be Erick's display of timidity, and opened the inter-ship channel again. "Release the pods."

There was no answer. Erick couldn't hear the girl any more.

Brendon guided the MSV around the rings of barrel-like cargo-pods circling the *Krystal Moon's* mid-section. He found the first pod containing microfusion generators, and focused the MSV's external cameras on it. The latch clamps of the cradle it was lying in were closed solidly round the load pins. Sighing regretfully at the time and effort it would cost to cut the pod free, he engaged the MSV's attitude lock, keeping station above the pod, then datavisaged the waldo-control computer to extend the arm. Droplets of molten metal squirted out where the cutting laser sliced through the clamps, a micrometeorite swarm glowing as if they were grazing an atmosphere.

"Something's happening," Bev Lennon reported. The electronic sensors were showing him power circuits coming alive inside the *Krystal Moon's* life-support capsule. Atmosphere was still spewing out of the lasered hole, unchecked. "Hey—"

A circular section of the hull blew out. Erick's mind automatically directed the X-ray lasers towards the hole revealed by the crumpled sheet of metal as it twirled off towards the stars. A small craft rose out of the hole, ascending on a pillar of flame. Recognition was immediate: lifeboat.

It was a cone, four metres across at the base, five metres high; with a doughnut of equipment and tanks wrapped round the nose. Tarnished-silver protective foam reflected distorted star-specks. The lifeboat could sustain six people for a month in space, or jettison the equipment doughnut and land on a terracompatible planet. Cheaper than supplying the crew with zero-tau pods, and given that the

mother ship would only be operating in an inhabited star system, just as safe.

“*Merde*, now we’ll have to laser every latch clamp,” André complained. He could see that Brendon had cut loose half of the first pod. By his own timetable, they had nine minutes left. It was going to be a close-run thing. “Knock that bloody lifeboat out, Erick.”

“No,” Erick said calmly. The lifeboat had stopped accelerating. Its spent solid rocket booster was jettisoned.

“I gave you an order.”

“Piracy is one thing; I’m not being a party to slaughter. There are children on that lifeboat.”

“He’s right, André,” Madeleine Collum said.

“*Merde!* All right, but once Brendon has those pods cut free I want the *Krystal Moon* vaporized. That bloody captain has put our necks on the block by defying us, I want him ruined.”

“Yes, Captain,” Erick said. How typical, he thought, we can go in with lasers blazing, but if anyone fights back, that’s *unfair*. When we get back to *Tranquillity*, I’m going to take a great deal of unprofessional pride in having André Duchamp committed to a penal planet.

They made it with forty-five seconds to spare. Brendon cut both cargo-pods free, and manoeuvred them into the waiting cargo hold in the *Villeneuve’s Revenge*. X-ray lasers started to chop at the *Krystal Moon* as the MSV docked with its own cradle to be drawn gingerly into the hangar bay. The remaining cargo-pods were split open, spilling their wrecked contents out into the void. Structural spars melted, twisting as though they were being chewed. Tanks were punctured, creating a huge vapour cloud that chased outward, its fringes swirling round the retreating lifeboat.

The starship’s hangar door slid shut. Combat sensors retreated back into the funereal hull. An event horizon sprang up around the *Villeneuve’s Revenge*. The starship shrank. Vanished.

Floating alone amid the fragmented debris and vacuum-

chilled nebula, the lifeboat let out a passionless electromagnetic shriek for help.

The word was out even before the *Lady Macbeth* docked at Tranquillity's spaceport. Joshua's landed the big one. On his first Norfolk run, for Heaven's sake. How does he do it? Something about that guy is uncanny. Lucky little sod.

Joshua led his crew into a packed Harkey's Bar. The band played a martial welcome with plangent trumpets; four of the waitresses were standing on the beer-slopped bar, short black skirts letting everyone see their knickers (or not, in one case); crews and groups of spaceport workers whistled, cheered, and jeered. One long table was loaded down with bottles of wine and champagne in troughs of ice; Harkey himself stood at the end, a smile in place. Everyone quietened down.

Joshua looked round slowly, an immensely smug grin in place. This must be what Alastair II saw from his state coach every day. It was fabulous. "Do you want a speech?"

"NO!"

His arm swept out expansively towards Harkey. He bowed low, relishing the theatre. "Then open the bottles."

There was a rush for the table, conversation even loud enough to drown out Warlow erupted as though someone had switched on a stack of AV pillars, the band struck up, and the waitresses struggled with the corks. Joshua pushed a bemused and slightly awestruck Gideon Kavanagh off on Ashly Hanson, and snatched some glasses from the drinks table. He was kissed a great many times on his way to the corner booth where Barrington Grier and Roland Frampton were waiting. He loaded visual images and names of three of the girls into his neural nanonics for future reference.

Roland Frampton was rising to his feet, a slightly apprehensive smile flicking on and off, obviously worried by exactly how big the cargo was—he had contracted to buy all of it. But he shook Joshua warmly by the hand. "I thought I'd better come here," he said in amusement. "It would

take you days to reach my office. You're the talk of Tranquillity."

"Really?"

Barrington Grier gave him a pat on the shoulder and they all sat down.

"That Kelly girl was asking after you," Barrington said.

"Ah." Joshua shifted round. Kelly Tirrel, his neural nanonics file supplied, Collins news corp reporter. "Oh, right. How is she?"

"Looked pretty good to me. She's on the broadcasts a lot these days. Presents the morning news for Collins three times a week."

"Good. Good. Glad to hear it." Joshua took a small bottle of Norfolk Tears from the inside pocket of the gold-yellow jacket he was wearing over his ship-suit.

Roland Frampton stared at it as he would a cobra.

"This is the Cricklade bouquet," Joshua said smoothly. He settled the three glasses on their table, and twisted the bottle's cork slowly. "I've tasted it. One of the finest on the planet. They bottle it in Stoke county." The clear liquid flowed out of the pear-shaped bottle.

They all lifted a glass, Roland Frampton studying his against the yellow wall lights.

"Cheers," Joshua said, and took a drink. A dragon breathed its diabolical fire into his belly.

Roland Frampton sipped delicately. "Oh, Christ, it's perfect." He glanced at Joshua. "How much did you bring? There have been rumours . . ."

Joshua made a show of producing his inventory. It was a piece of neatly printed paper with Grant Kavanagh's stylish signature on the bottom in black ink.

"Three thousand cases!" Roland Frampton squeaked, his eyes protruded.

Barrington Grier gave Joshua a sharp glance, and plucked the inventory from Roland's hands. "Bloody hell," he murmured.

Roland was dabbing at his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "This is wonderful. Yes, wonderful. But I wasn't ex-

pecting quite so much, Joshua. Nothing personal, it's just that first-time captains don't normally bring back so much. There are arrangements I have to make . . . the bank. It will take time."

"Of course."

"You'll wait?" Roland Frampton asked eagerly.

"You were very good to me when I started out. So I think I can wait a couple of days."

Roland's hand sliced through the air, he ended up making a fist just above the table. Determination visibly returned his old spark. "Right, I'll have a Jovian Bank draft for you in thirty hours. I won't forget this, Joshua. And one day I want to be told how you did it."

"Maybe."

Roland drained his glass in one gulp and stood up. "Thirty hours."

"Fine. If I'm not about, give it to one of the crew. I expect they'll still be here."

Joshua watched the old man weave a path through the excited crowd.

"That was decent of you," Barrington said. "You could have made instant money going to a big commercial distribution chain."

Joshua flashed him a smile, and they touched glasses. "Like I said, he gave me a break when I needed it."

"Roland Frampton doesn't need a break. He thought he was doing you a favour agreeing to buy your cargo. First-time captains on the Norfolk run are lucky if they make two hundred cases."

"Yeah, so I heard."

"Now you come back with a cargo worth five times as much as his business. You going to tell us how you did it?"

"Nope."

"Didn't think so. I don't know what you've got, young Joshua. But by God, I wish I had shares in you."

He finished his glass and treated Barrington to an iniquitous smile. He handed over the small bottle of Norfolk Tears. "Here, with compliments."

“Aren’t you staying? It’s your party.”

He looked round. Warlow was at the centre of a cluster of girls, all of them giggling as one sat on the crook of his outstretched arm, her legs swinging well off the floor. Ashly was slumped in a booth, also surrounded by girls, one of them feeding him dainty pieces of white seafood from a plate. He couldn’t even spot the others. “No,” he said. “I have a date.”

“She must be quite something.”

“They are.”

The *Isakore* was still anchored where they had left it, prow wedged up on the slippery bank, hull secure against casual observation by a huge cherry oak tree which overhung the river, lower branches trailing in the water.

Lieutenant Murphy Hewlett let out what could well have been a whimper of relief when its shape registered. His retinal implants were switched to infrared now the sun had set. The fishing boat was a salmon-pink outline distorted by the darker burgundy flecks of the cherry oak leaves, as if it was hidden behind a solidified waterfall.

He hadn’t really expected it to be there. Not a quantifiable end, not to this mission. His mates treated his name as a joke back in the barracks. Murphy’s law: if anything can go wrong, it will. And it had, this time as no other.

They had been under attack for five hours solid now. White fireballs that came stabbing out of the trees without warning. Figures that lurked half seen in the jungle, keeping pace, never giving them a moment’s rest. Figures that weren’t always human. Seven times they’d fallen back to using the TIP carbines for a sweep-scorch pattern, hacking at the jungle with blades of invisible energy, then tramping on through the smouldering vine roots and cloying ash.

All four of them were wounded to some extent. Nothing seemed to extinguish the white fire once it hit flesh. Murphy was limping badly, his right knee enclosed by a medical nanonic package, his left hand was completely useless, he wasn’t even sure if the package could save his fingers.

But Murphy was most worried about Niels Regehr; the lad had taken a fireball straight in the face. He had no eyes nor nose left, only the armour suit sensors enabled him to see where he was going now, datavising their images directly into his neural nanonics. But even the neural nanonics pain blocks and a constant infusion of endocrines couldn't prevent him from suffering bouts of hallucination and disorientation. He kept shouting for *them* to go away and leave him alone, holding one-sided conversations, even quoting from prayers.

Murphy had detailed him to escort their prisoner; he could just about manage that. She said her name was Jacqueline Couteur, a middle-aged woman, small, overweight, with greying hair, dressed in jeans and a thick cotton shirt. She could punch harder than any of the supplement-boosted marines (Louis Beith had a broken arm to prove it), she had more stamina than them, and she could work that electronic warfare trick on their suit blocks if she wasn't being prodded with one of their heavy-calibre Bradfield chemical-projectile rifles.

They had captured her ten minutes after their last contact with Jenny Harris. That was when they'd let the horses go. The animals were panicking as balls of white fire arched down out of the sky, a deceitfully majestic display of borealis rockets.

Something made a slithering sound in the red and black jungle off to Murphy's right. Garrett Tucci fired his Bradfield, slamming explosive bullets into the vegetation. Murphy caught the swiftest glimpse of a luminous red figure scurrying away; it was either a man with a warm cloak spread wide, or else a giant bat standing on its hind legs.

"Bloody implants are shot," he muttered under his breath. He checked his TIP carbine's power reserve. He was down to the last heavy-duty power cell: twelve per cent. "Niels, Garrett, take the prisoner onto the boat and get the motor going. Louis, you and I are laying down a sweep-scorch. It might give us the time we need."

"Yes, sir," he answered.

Murphy felt an immense pride in the tiny squad. Nobody could have done better, they were the best, the very best. And they were his.

He drew a breath, and brought the TIP carbine up again. Niels was shoving his Bradfield's muzzle into the small of Jacqueline Couteur's back, urging her towards the boat. Murphy suddenly realized she could see as well as them in the dark. It didn't matter now. One of the day's smaller mysteries.

His TIP carbine fired, nozzle aimed by his neural nanonics. Flames rose before him, leaping from tree to tree, incinerating the twigs, biting deeply into the larger branches. Vines flared and sparkled like fused electrical cables, swinging in short arcs before falling to the ground and writhing ferociously as they spat and hissed. A solid breaker of heat rolled around him, shunted into the ground by his suit's dispersal layer. Smoke rose from his feet. The medical nanonic package around his knee datavised a heat-overload warning into his neural nanonics.

"Come on, Lieutenant!" Garrett shouted.

Through the heavy crackling of the flames Murphy could hear the familiar chugging sound of the *Isakore's* motor. The suit's rear optical sensors showed him the boat backing out from under the cherry oak, water boiling ferociously around its stern.

"Go," Murphy told Louis Beith.

They turned and raced for the *Isakore*. Murphy could just targeting graphics circling his back.

We'll never make it, not out of this.

Flames were rising thirty metres into the night behind them. *Isakore* was completely free of the cherry oak. Niels was leaning over the gunwale, holding out a hand. The green-tinted medical nanonic package leaching to his face looked like some massive and grotesque wart.

Water splashed around his boots. Once he nearly slipped on the mud and tangled snowlily fronds. But then he was clinging to the side of the wooden boat, hauling himself up onto the deck.

“Holy shit, we made it!” He was laughing uncontrollably, tears streaming out of his eyes. “We actually bloody made it.” He pulled his shell-helmet off, and lay on his back, looking at the fire. A stretch of jungle four hundred metres long was in flames, hurling orange sparks into the black sky far above.

The impenetrable water of the Zamjan shimmered with long orange reflections. Garrett was turning the boat, aiming the prow downriver.

“What about the Kulu team?” Louis asked. He’d taken his shell-helmet off, showing a face glinting with sweat. His breathing was heavy.

“I think that was a sonic boom we heard this afternoon,” Murphy said, raising his voice above the flames. “Those Kulu bastards, always one move ahead of everyone else.”

“They’re soft, that’s all,” Garrett shouted from the wheel-house. “Can’t take the pressure. We can. We’re the fucking Confed fucking Navy fucking Marines.” He whooped.

Murphy grinned back at him; fatigue pulled at every limb. He’d been using his boosted muscles almost constantly, which meant he’d have to make sure he ate plenty of high-protein rations to regain his proper blood energy levels. He loaded a memo into his neural nanonics.

His communication block let out a bleep for the first time in five hours; the datavise told him that there was a channel to the navy ELINT satellite open.

“Bloody hell,” Murphy said. He datavised the block: “Sir, is that you, sir?”

“Christ, Murphy,” Kelven Solanki’s datavise gushed into his mind. “What’s happening?”

“Spot of trouble, sir. Nothing we can’t handle. We’re back on the boat now, heading downriver.”

Louis gave an exhausted laugh, and flopped onto his back.

“The Kulu team evacuated,” Kelven Solanki reported. “Their whole embassy contingent upped and left in the *Ekwan* this evening. Ralph Hiltch called me from orbit to

say there wasn't enough room on the spaceplane to pick you up."

Murphy could sense a great deal of anger lying behind the lieutenant-commander's smooth signal. "Doesn't matter, sir; we got you a prisoner."

"Fantastic. One of the sequestered ones?"

Murphy glanced over his shoulder. Jacqueline Couteur was sitting on the deck with her back to the wheel-house. She gave him a dour stare.

"I think so, sir, she can interfere with our electronics if we give her half a chance. She's got to be watched constantly."

"OK, when can you have her back in—" Kelven Solanki's datavise vanished under a peal of static. The communications block reported the channel was lost.

Murphy picked up his TIP carbine and pointed it at Jacqueline Couteur. "Is that you?"

She shrugged. "No."

Murphy looked back at the fire on the bank. They were half a kilometre away now. People were walking along the shoreline where the *Isakore* had been anchored. The big cherry oak was still standing, intact, a black silhouette against the blanket of flame.

"Can they affect our electronics from here?"

"We don't care about your electronics," she said. "Such things have no place in our world."

"Are you talking to them?"

"No."

"Sir!" Garrett yelled.

Murphy swung round. The people on the shore were standing in a ring, holding hands. A large ball of white fire emerged from the ground in their midst and curved over their heads, soaring out across the river.

"Down!" Murphy shouted.

The fireball flashed overhead, making the air roil from its passage, bringing a false daylight to the boat. Murphy ground his teeth together, anticipating the strike, the pain as it vaporized his legs or spine. There was a clamorous

BOOM from behind the wheel-house, the boat rocked violently, and the light went out.

“Oh shit, oh shit.” Garrett was crying.

“What is it?” Murphy demanded. He pulled himself onto his feet.

The boxy wooden structure behind the wheel-house was a smoking ruin. Fractured planks with charred edges pointed vacantly at the sky. The micro-fusion generator it had covered was a shambolic mass of heat-tarnished metal and dripping plastic.

“You will come to us in time,” Jacqueline Couteur said calmly. She hadn’t moved from her sitting position. “We have no hurry.”

The *Isakore* drifted round a bend in the river, water gurgling idly around the hull, pulling the fire from view. A duet of night and silence closed over the boat, a void surer than vacuum.

Ione wore a gown of rich blue-green silk gauze. A single strip of cloth which clung to her torso then flared and flowed into a long skirt, it forked around her neck, producing two ribbonlike tassels that trailed from each shoulder. Her hair had been given a damp look, it was bound up and held in place at the back by an exquisite red flower brooch, its tissue-thin petals carved from some exotic stone. A long platinum chain formed a cobweb around her neck.

The trouble with looking so elegant, Joshua thought, was that part of him just wanted to stare at her, while the other part wanted to rip the dress to shreds so he could get at the body beneath. She really did look gorgeous.

He ran a finger round the collar on his own black dinner-jacket. It was too tight. And the butterfly tie wasn’t straight.

“Leave it alone,” Ione said sternly.

“But—”

“Leave it. It’s fine.”

He dropped his hand and glowered at the lift’s door. Two Tranquillity serjeants were in with them, making it seem

crowded. The door opened on the twenty-fifth floor of the StOuen starscraper, revealing a much smaller lobby than usual. Parris Vasilkovsky's apartment took up half of the floor, his offices and staff quarters took up the other half.

"Thanks for coming with me," Joshua said as they stood in front of the apartment door. He could feel the nerves building in the base of his stomach. This was the real big time he was bidding for now. And Ione on his arm ought to impress Parris Vasilkovsky. Precious little else would.

"I want to be with you," Ione murmured.

He leant forward to kiss her.

The muscle membrane opened, and Dominique was standing behind it. She had chosen a sleeveless black gown with a long skirt and a deep, highly revealing V-neck. Her thick honey-blond hair had been given a slight wave, curling around her shoulders. Broad scarlet lips lifted in appreciation as she caught the embrace.

Joshua straightened up guiltily, though his errant eyes remained fixed on Dominique's cleavage. A host of memories started to replay through his mind without any assistance from his neural nanonics. He'd forgotten how impressive she was.

"Don't mind me," Dominique said huskily. "I adore young love."

Ione giggled. "Evening, Dominique."

The two girls kissed briefly. Then it was Joshua's turn.

"Put him down," Ione said in amusement. "You might catch something. Heaven only knows what he got up to on Norfolk."

Dominique grinned as she let go. "You think he's been bad?"

"He's Joshua; I *know* he's been bad."

"Hey!" Joshua complained. "That trip was strictly business."

Both girls laughed. Dominique led the way into the apartment. Joshua saw her skirt was made up from long panels, split right up to the top of her hips. The fabric

swayed apart as she walked, giving Joshua brief glimpses of her legs, and a pair of very tight white shorts.

He held back on a groan. It was going to be hard to concentrate tonight without that kind of distraction.

The dining-room had two oval windows to show Mirchusko's dusky crescent—south of the equator two huge white cyclone swirls were crashing, in a drama which had been running for six days. Slabs of warmly lit coloured glass paved the polyp walls from floor to ceiling, each with an animal engraved on its surface by fine smoky grooves. Most of them were terrestrial—lions, gazelles, elephants, hawks—though several of the more spectacular non-sentient xenoc species were included. The grooves moved at an infinitesimal speed, causing the birds to flap their wings, the animals to run; their cycles lasted for hours. The table was made from halkett wood (native to Kulu), a rich gold in colour, with bright scarlet grain. Three antique silver candelabras were spaced along the polished wood, with slender white candles tipped by tiny flames.

There were six people at the dinner. Parris himself sat at the head of the table, looking spruce in a black dinner-jacket. The formal evening attire suited him, complementing his curly silver-grey hair to give him a distinguished appearance. At the other end of the table was Symone, his current lover, a beautiful twenty-eight-year-old whose geneered chromosomes had produced a dark walnut skin and hair a shade lighter than Dominique's, a striking and delightful contrast. She was eight months pregnant with Parris's third child.

Joshua and Dominique sat together on one side of the table. And Dominique's long legs had been riding up and down his trousers all through the meal. He had done his best to ignore it, but his twitching mouth had given him away to Ione, and, he suspected, Symone as well.

Opposite them were Ione and Clement, Parris's son. He was eighteen, lacking his big sister's miscreant force, but quietly cheerful. And handsome, Ione thought, though not in the mould of Joshua's wolfish ruggedness; his younger

face was softer, framed with fair curly hair that was recognizably Parris's. He had just returned from his first year at university on Kulu.

"I haven't been to Kulu yet," Joshua said as the white-jacketed waiter cleared the dessert dishes away, assisted by a couple of housechimps.

"Wouldn't they let you in?" Dominique asked with honeyed malice.

"The Kulu merchants form a tight cartel, they're hard to crack."

"Tell me about it," Parris said gruffly. "It took me eight years before I broke in with fabrics from Oshanko, until then my ships were going there empty to pick up their nanonics. That costs."

"I'll wait until I get a charter," Joshua said. "I'm not going to try head-butting that kind of organization. But I'd like to play tourist sometime."

"You did all right penetrating Norfolk," Dominique said, eyes wide and apparently innocent over her crystal champagne glass.

"Hey, neat intro," he said enthusiastically. "We just slid into that subject, didn't we? I never noticed."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"You got off lightly, Joshua," Parris said. "Me, I get lumbered with her subtlety all day every day."

"I would have thought she was old enough to have left home by now," he said.

"Who'd have her?"

"Good point."

Dominique lobbed a small cluster of grapes at her father.

Parris caught them awkwardly, laughing. One went bouncing off across the moss carpet. "Make me an offer for her, Joshua, anything up to ten fuseodollars considered."

He saw the warning gleam in Dominique's eye. "I think I'll decline, thanks."

"Coward." Dominique pouted.

Parris dropped the grapes onto a side plate, and wiped

his hand with a napkin. "So how did you do it, Joshua? My captains don't get three thousand cases, and the Vasilkovsky line has been making the Norfolk run for fifty years."

Joshua activated a neural nanonics memory cell. "Confidentiality coverage. Agreed?" His gaze went round the table, recording everyone saying yes. They were legally bound not to repeat what they heard now. Although quite what he could do about Ione was an interesting point, since her thought processes were Tranquillity's legal system. "I traded something they needed: wood." He explained about the mayope.

"Very clever," Dominique drawled when he finished, though there was a note of respect in amongst the affected languor. "Brains as well as balls."

"I like it," Parris said. He studied his cut-crystal glass. "Why tell us?"

"Supply and demand," Joshua said. "I've found a valuable hole in the market, and I want to fill it."

"But the *Lady Macbeth* hasn't got the capacity to do it by herself," Clement said. "Right?"

Joshua had wondered how smart the lad was. Now he knew. A real chip off the Vasilkovsky block. "That's right. I need a partner, a big partner."

"Why not go to a bank?" Dominique asked. "Charter some ships for yourself."

"There's a loose end which needs tying up."

"Ah," Parris, showing some real interest at last, leant forward in his seat. "Go on."

"The power mayope has over Norfolk lies in keeping it a monopoly, that way we can keep the price high. I have a provisional arrangement with a distributor on Norfolk who's agreed to take as much as we can ship in. What we need to do next is pin down the supply to a single source, one that only we can obtain. That is going to take upfront money, the kind which can't be explained away to bank auditors."

"You can do that?"

“Parris, I have never been on a planet more corrupt than Lalonde. It’s also very primitive and correspondingly poor. If you, with all your money, went there, you would be its king.”

“No, thank you,” Parris said sagely.

“Fine, but with money pushed into the right credit disks we can guarantee that no one else gets an export licence. OK, it won’t last for ever, administration people move on, traders will offer counter-bribes when they find what we’re doing; but I figure we ought to get two of Norfolk’s conjunctions out of it. Two conjunctions where your ships are filled to capacity with Norfolk Tears.”

“Every ship? I do have quite a few.”

“No, not every ship. We have to walk a fine line between greed and squeeze. My Norfolk distributor will give us most favoured customer status, that’s all. It’ll be up to us to work out exactly how much we can squeeze them for before they start to protest. You know how jealously they guard their independence.”

“Yes.” Parris nodded thoughtfully.

“And what about Lalonde?” Ione asked quietly. Her glass was dangling casually between thumb and forefinger, she rocked it from side to side, swirling the champagne around the bottom.

“What about Lalonde?” Joshua asked.

“Its people,” Symone said. “It doesn’t sound as though they get a very good deal out of this. The mayope is their wood.”

Joshua gave her a polite smile. Just what I need, bleeding hearts. “What do they get at the moment?”

Symone frowned.

“He means they get nothing,” Dominique said.

“We’re developing their market for them,” Joshua said. “We’ll be pumping hard cash into their economy. Not much by our standards, I admit, but to them it will buy a lot of things they need. And it will go to the people too, the colonists who are breaking their backs to tame that world, not just the administration staff. We pay the loggers up-

river in the hinterlands, the barge captains, the timber-yard workers. Them, their families, the shops they buy stuff from. All of them will be better off. We'll be better off. Norfolk will be better off. It's the whole essence of trade. Sure, banks and governments make paper money from the deal, and we slant it in our favour, but the bottom line is that people benefit." He realized he was staring hard at Symone, daring her to disagree. He dropped his eyes, almost embarrassed.

Dominique gave him a soft, and for the first time, sincere kiss on his cheek. "You really did pick yourself the best, didn't you?" she said challengingly to Ione.

"Of course."

"Does that answer your question?" Parris asked his lover, smiling gently at her.

"I guess it does."

He started to use a small silver knife to peel the crisp rind from a date-sized purple fruit. Joshua recognized it as a saltplum from Atlantis.

"I think Lalonde would be in capable hands if we left it to Joshua," Parris said. "What sort of partnership were you looking for?"

"Sixty-forty in your favour," he said amicably.

"Which would cost me?"

"I was thinking of two to three million fuseodollars as an initial working fund to set up our export operation."

"Eighty-twenty," Dominique said.

Parris bit into the saltplum's pink flesh, watching Joshua keenly.

"Seventy-thirty," Joshua offered.

"Seventy-five-twenty-five."

"I get that percentage on all Norfolk Tears carried by the Vasilkovsky Line while our mayope monopoly is in operation."

Parris winced, and gave his daughter a small nod.

"If you provide the collateral," she said.

"You accept my share of the mayope as collateral, priced at the Norfolk sale value."

“Done.”

Joshua sat back and let out a long breath. It could have been a lot worse.

“You see,” Dominique said wickedly. “Brains as well as breasts.”

“And legs,” Joshua added.

She licked her lips provocatively, and took a long drink.

“We’ll get the legal office to draw up a formal contract tomorrow,” Parris said. “I can’t see any problem.”

“The first stage will be to set up an office on Lalonde and secure that mayope monopoly. The *Lady Mac* has still got to be unloaded, then she needs some maintenance work, and we’re due a grade-E CAB inspection as well thanks to someone I met at Norfolk. Not a problem, but it takes time. I ought to be ready to leave in ten days.”

“Good,” said Parris. “I like that, Joshua. No beating around, you get straight to it.”

“So how did you make your fortune?”

Parris grinned and popped the last of the saltplum into his mouth. “Given this will hopefully develop into quite a large operation, I’ll want to send my own representative with you to Lalonde to help set up our office. And keep an eye on this upfront money of mine you’ll be spending.”

“Sure. Who?”

Dominique leaned over until her shoulder rubbed against Joshua’s, a hand made of steel flesh closed playfully on his upper thigh. “Guess,” she whispered salaciously into his ear.

Durringham had become ungovernable, a city living on spent nerves, waiting for the final crushing blow to fall.

The residents knew of the invaders marching and sailing downriver, everyone had heard the horror stories of xenoc enslavement, of torture and rape and bizarre bloodthirsty ceremonies; words distorted and swollen with every kilometre, like the river down which they travelled. They had also heard of the Kulu Embassy evacuating its personnel in one madcap night, surely the final confirmation—Sir

Asquith wouldn't do that unless there was no hope left. Durringham, their homes and jobs and prosperity, was in the firing line of an unknown, unstoppable threat, and they had nowhere to run. The jungle belonged to the invaders, the seven colonist-carrier starships orbiting impotently overhead were full, they couldn't offer an escape route. There was only the river and the virgin sea beyond.

The second morning after Ralph Hiltch made his dash to the relative safety of the *Ekwan*, the twenty-eight paddle-boats remaining in the frightened city's circular harbours set off in convoy downriver. Price of a ticket was one thousand fuseodollars per person (including a child). No destination was named: some talked about crossing the ocean to Sarell; Amarisk's northern extremity was mooted. It didn't matter, leaving Durringham was the driving factor.

Given the exorbitant price the captains insisted on, and the planet's relative poverty, it was surprising just how many people turned up wanting passage. More than could be accommodated. Tempers and desperation rose with the brutal sun. Several ugly scenes flared as the gangplanks were hurriedly drawn up.

Frustrated in their last chance to escape, the crowd surged towards the colonists barricaded in the transients' dormitories at the other end of the port. Stones were flung first, then Molotovs.

Candace Elford dispatched a squad of sheriffs and newly recruited deputies, armed with cortical jammers and laser rifles, to quell this latest in a long line of disturbances. But they ran into a gang ransacking a retail district. The tactical street battle which followed left eight dead, and two dozen injured. They never got to the port.

That was when Candace finally had to call up Colin Rexrew and admit that Durringham was out of control. "Most urban districts are forming their own defence committees," she datavised. "They've seen how little effect the sheriffs have against any large-scale trouble. All the riots we've had these last few weeks have shown that often enough, and everyone's heard about the *Swithland* posse.

They don't trust you and me to defend them, so they're going to do it for themselves. There's been a lot of food stockpiled over the last couple of weeks. They all think they're self-sufficient, and they're not letting anyone over their district's boundary. That's going to cause trouble, because I'm getting reports of people in the outlying villages to the east abandoning their land and coming in looking for a refuge. Our residents aren't letting them through. It's a siege mentality out there. People are waiting for Terrance Smith to come back with a conquering army, and hoping they can hold out in the meantime."

"How far away are the invaders?"

"I'm not sure. We're judging their progress by the way our communications with the villages fail. It's not constant, but I'd say their main force is no more than ten or fifteen kilometres from Durringham's eastern districts. The majority are on foot, which should give us two or three days' breathing space. Of course, you and I know there are nests of them inside the city as well. I've had some pretty weird stories about bogeymen and poltergeists coming in for days now."

"What do you want to do?" Colin asked.

"Revert to guarding our strategic centres; the spaceport, this sector, possibly both hospitals. I'd like to say the port as well, but I don't think I've got the manpower. There have been several desertions this week, mostly among the new deputies. Besides, nearly all of the boats have left now; there's been a steady exodus of fishing craft and even some barges since the paddle-boat convoy cast off this morning, so I can't see a lot of point."

"OK," Colin said with his head in his hands. "Do it." He glanced out of the office window at the sun-lashed rooftops. There was no sign of any of the usual fires that had marked the city's torment over the last weeks. "Can we hang on until Terrance returns?"

"I don't know. At the moment we're so busy fighting each other that I couldn't tell you what sort of resistance we can offer to the invaders."

“Yeah. That sounds like Lalonde through and through.”

Candace sat behind her big desk, watching the situation reports paint unwelcome graphics across the console displays, and issuing orders through her staff. There were times when she wondered if anyone out there was even receiving them, let alone obeying them.

Half of her sheriffs were deployed around the spaceport, spending the afternoon digging in, and positioning some large maser cannons to cover the road. The rest took up position around the administration district in the city, covering the governor's dumper, the sheriff's headquarters, various civic buildings, and the Confederation Navy office. Five combined teams of LDC engineers and sheriffs went round all the remaining dumpers they could reach, powering down the fusion generators. If the invaders wanted Durringham's industrial base, such as it was, Rexrew was determined to thwart them. The He₃ and deuterium fuel was collected and put into storage at the spaceport. By midafternoon the city was operating on electron-matrix power reserves alone.

That more than anything else brought home the reality of the situation to the majority. Fights and squabbles between gangs and districts ended, those barricades which had been erected were strengthened, sentry details were finalized. Everyone headed home, the roads fell silent. The rain which had held off all day began to slash down. Beneath its shroud of miserable low cloud, Durringham held its breath.

Stewart Danielsson watched the rain pounding away on the office windows as the conditioner hummed away efficiently, sucking the humidity from the air. He had made the office his home over the last week; Ward Molecular had seen a busy time of it. Everybody in town was keen to have the ancillary circuits on their electron-matrix cells serviced, especially the smaller units which could double as rifle power magazines at a pinch. He'd sold a lot of interface cables as well.

The business was doing fine. Darcy and Lori would be

pleased when they got back. They hadn't actually said he could sleep over when they left him in charge, but with the way things were it was only right. Twice he'd scared off would-be burglars.

His sleeping-bag with the inflatable mattress was comfy, and the office fridge was better than the one in his lodgings; he'd brought the microwave cooker over from the cabin out back of the warehouse. So now he had all the creature comforts. It was turning into a nice little sojourn. Gaven Hough stayed late most nights, keeping him company. Neither of them had seen Cole Este since the night after the first anti-Ivet riot. Stewart wasn't much bothered by that.

Gaven opened the door in the glass partition wall and stuck his head round. "Doesn't look like Mr. Crowther is coming to pick up his unit now, it's gone four."

Stewart stretched himself, and turned the processor block off. He'd been trying to keep their work records and payments up to date. It had always seemed so easy when Darcy was handling it. "OK, we'll get closed up."

"We'll be the last in the city. There's been no traffic outside for the last two hours. Everyone else has gone home, scared of these invaders."

"Aren't you?"

"No, not really. I haven't got anything an army would want."

"You can stay here tonight. I don't think it'll be safe walking home through this town now, not with the way people are on edge. There's enough food."

"Thanks. I'll go and shut the doors."

Stewart watched the younger man through the glass partition as he made his way past the workbenches to the warehouse's big doors. I ought to be worried, he thought, some of the rumours flying around town are blatantly unreal, but something is happening upriver. He gave the warehouse a more thoughtful glance. With its mayope walls it was strong enough to withstand any casual attempt at damage. But there were a lot of valuable tools and

equipment inside, and everybody knew that. Maybe we should be boarding the windows up. There was no such thing as an insurance industry on Lalonde, if the warehouse went so did their jobs.

He turned back to the office windows, giving them a more objective appraisal; the frames were heavy enough to nail planks across.

Someone was walking down the muddy road outside. It was difficult to see with the way the rain was smearing the glass, but it looked like a man dressed in a suit. A very strange suit; it was grey, with a long jacket, and there was no seal up the front, only buttons. And he wore a black hat that looked like a fifty-centimetre column of brushed velvet. His right hand gripped a silver-topped cane. Rain bounced off him as though his antique clothes were coated in frictionless plastic.

“Stewart!” Gaven called from somewhere in the warehouse. “Stewart, come back here.”

“No. Look at this.”

“There’s three of them in here. Stewart!”

The native panic in Gaven’s voice made him turn reluctantly from the window. He squinted through the partition wall. It was dark in the cavernous warehouse, and Gaven had shut the wide doors. Stewart couldn’t see where he’d got to. Humanoid shapes were moving around down by the stacks of crates; bigger than men. And it was just too gloomy to make out quite what—

The window behind him gave a loud grating moan. He whirled round. The frames groaned again as though they had been shoved by a hurricane blast. But the rain was falling quite normally outside. It couldn’t be the wind. The man in the grey suit was standing in the middle of the road, cane pressing into the mud, both hands resting on the silver pommel. He stared directly at Stewart.

“Stewart!” Gaven yelled.

The window-panes cracked, fissures multiplying and interlacing. Animal reflex made Stewart spin round, his arms coming up to protect his head. *They’re going to smash!*

A two and a half metre tall yeti was standing pressed up against the glass of the partition wall. Its ochre fur was matted and greasy, red baboon lips were peeled back to show stained fangs. He gagged at it in amazement, recoiling.

All the glass in the office shattered at once. In the instant before he slammed his eyelids shut, he was engulfed by a beautiful prismatic cloud of diamonds, sparkling and shimmering in the weak light. Then the slivers of glass penetrated his skin. Blood frothed out of a thousand shallow cuts, staining every square centimetre of his clothes a bright crimson. His skin went numb as his brain rejected outright the shocking level of pain. His sight, the misty vermilion of tightly shut eyes, turned scarlet. Pain stars flared purple. Then the universe went harrowingly black. Through the numbness he could feel hot coals burning in his eye sockets.

“Blind, I’m blind!” He couldn’t even tell if his voice was working.

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” someone said to him. “We can help you. We can let you see again.”

He tried to open his eyelids. There was a loathsome sensation of thin tissues ripping. And still there was only blackness. Pain began to ooze its way inwards, pain from every part of his body. He knew he was falling, plummeting to the ground.

Then the pain in his legs faded, replaced by a blissful liquid chill, as if he was bathing in a mountain tarn. He was given his sight back, a spectral girl sketched against the infinite darkness. It looked as though she was made up from translucent white membranes, folded with loving care around her svelte body, then flowing free somehow to become her fragile robes as well. She was a sublime child, in her early teens, poised between girlhood and womanhood, what he imagined an angel or fairy would be like. And she danced all the while, twirling effortlessly from foot to foot, more supple and graceful than any ballerina; her face blessed by a bountiful smile.

She held out her arms to him, ragged sleeves floating softly in the unfelt breeze. "See?" she said. "We can stop it hurting." Her arms rose, palms pressing together above her head, and she spun round again, lightsome laughter echoing.

"Please," he begged her. "Oh, please."

The pain returned to his legs, making him cry out. His siren vision began to retreat, skipping lightly over the emptiness.

She paused and cocked her head. "Is this what you want?" she asked, her dainty face frowning in concern.

"No! Back, come back. Please."

Her smile became rapturous, and her arms closed around him in a celebratory embrace. Stewart gave himself up to her balmy caresses, drowning in a glorious tide of white light.

Ilex coasted out of its wormhole terminus a hundred thousand kilometres above Lalonde. The warped gateway leading out of space-time contracted behind the voidhawk as it refocused its distortion field. Sensors probed round cautiously. The bitek starship was at full combat stations alert.

Waiting tensely on his acceleration couch in the crew toroid, Captain Auster skimmed through the wealth of data which both the bitek and electronic systems gathered. His primary concern was that there were no hostile ships within a quarter of a million kilometres, and no weapon sensors were locking on to the voidhawk's hull. A resonance effect in *Ilex's* distortion field revealed various ship-sized masses orbiting above Lalonde, then there were asteroids, satellites, moons, boulder-sized debris. Nothing large was in the starship's immediate vicinity. It took a further eight seconds for *Ilex* and Ocyroe, the weapons-systems officer, working in tandem, to confirm the absence of any valid threat.

OK, let's go for a parking orbit; seven hundred kilometres out, Auster said.

Seven hundred? *Ilex* queried.

Yes. Your distortion field won't be so badly affected at that altitude. We can still run if we have to.

Very well.

Together their unified minds arrived at a suitable flight vector. *Ilex* swooped down the imaginary line towards the bright blue and white planet.

"We're going into a parking orbit," Auster said aloud for the benefit of the three Adamist naval officers on the bridge. "I want combat stations maintained at all times; and please bear in mind who could be here waiting for us." He allowed an overtone of stern anxiety to filter out to the Edenist crew to emphasize the point. "Ocyroe, what's our local space situation?"

"Nine starships in a parking orbit, seven colonist-carriers and two cargo ships. There are three interplanetary fusion drive ships en route from the asteroid Kenyon, heading for Lalonde orbit. Nothing else in the system."

"I can't get any response from Lalonde civil flight control," said Erato, the spaceplane pilot. He looked up from the communication console he was operating. "The geosynchronous communication platform is working, as far as I can tell. They just don't answer."

Auster glanced over at Lieutenant Jeroen van Ewyck, the Confederation Navy Intelligence officer they had brought with them from Avon. "What do you think?"

"This is a backward planet anyway, so their response isn't going to be instantaneous. But given the contents of those fleks I'd rather not take any chances. I'll try and contact Kelvin Solanki directly through the navy ELINT satellites. Can you see if you can get anything from your planetside agents?"

"We'll broadcast," Auster said.

"Great. Erato, see what the other starship captains can tell us. It looks like they must have been here some time if there are this many left in orbit."

Auster added his own voice to *Ilex's* affinity call, spanning the colossal distance to the gas giant. Aethra answered straight away; but the immature habitat could only

confirm the data which Lori and Darcy had included in their flek to the Edenist embassy on Avon. Since Kelven Solanki had transmitted the files to Murora there had only been the usual weekly status updates from Lalonde. The last one, four days ago, had contained a host of information on the colony's deteriorating civil situation.

Can you tell us what's happening? Gaura asked through the affinity link between Aethra and *Ilex*. He was the chief of the station supervising the habitat's growth out at the lonely edge of the star system.

Nobody is answering our calls, Auster said. When we know something, Ilex will inform you immediately.

If Laton is on Lalonde he may make an attempt to capture and subvert Aethra. He has had over twenty years to perfect his technique. We have no weaponry to resist him. Can you evacuate us?

That will depend on the circumstances. Our orders from the First Admiral's office are to confirm his existence and destroy him if at all possible. If he has become powerful enough to defend himself against the weapons we are carrying, then we must jump back to Fleet Headquarters and alert them. That takes priority over everything. Auster extended a burst of sympathy.

We understand. Good luck with your mission.

Thank you.

Can you sense Darcy and Lori? Auster asked *Ilex*.

No. They do not answer. But there is a melodic in the affinity band which I've never encountered before.

The voidhawk's perceptive faculty expanded into Auster's mind. He perceived a distant soprano voice, or a soft whistle; the effect was too imprecise to tell. It was an adagio, a slow harmonic which slipped in and out of mental awareness like a radio signal on a stormy night.

Where is it coming from? Auster asked.

Ahead of us, Ilex said. Somewhere on the planet, but it's skipping about. I can't pin it down.

Keep tuned in to it, and if you track down its origin let me know right away.

Of course.

Jeroen van Ewyck datavised his console processor to point one of *Ilex's* secondary dishes at a navy ELINT satellite orbiting Lalonde, then opened a channel down to the office in Durringham. There was nothing like the usual bit rate available, the microwave beam emitted by the navy office was well below standard strength. A flustered rating answered, and switched the call straight through to Kelven Solanki.

"We're here in response to the flek you sent on the *Eurydice*," Jeroen van Ewyck said. "Can you advise us of the situation on the planet, please?"

"Too late," Kelven datavised. "You're too bloody late."

Auster ordered the bitek processor in his command console to patch him into the channel. "Lieutenant-Commander Solanki, this is Captain Auster. We were dispatched as soon as we were refitted for this mission. I can assure you the Admiralty took the report from you and our Intelligence operatives very seriously indeed."

"Seriously? You call sending one ship a serious response?"

"Yes. We are primarily a reconnaissance and evaluation mission. In that respect, we are considered expendable. The Admiralty needs to know if Laton's presence has been confirmed, and what kind of force level is required to deal with the invasion."

There was a moment's pause.

"Sorry if I shouted off," Kelven said. "Things are getting bad down here. The invaders have reached Durringham."

"Are these invaders acting under Laton's orders?"

"I've no idea yet." He started to summarize the events of the last couple of weeks.

Auster listened with growing dismay, a communal emotion distributed equally around the other Edenists on board. The Adamists too, if their facial expressions were an accurate reflection of their thoughts.

“So you still don’t know if Laton is behind this invasion?” Auster asked when he finished.

“No. I’d say not; Lori and Darcy had virtually written him off by the time they got to Ozark. If it is him backing the invaders, then he’s pulling a very elaborate double bluff. Why did he warn Darcy and Lori about this energy virus effect?”

“Have you managed to verify that yet?” Jeroen van Ewyck asked.

“No. Although the supporting circumstantial evidence we have so far is very strong. The invaders certainly have a powerful electronic warfare technology at their fingertips, and it’s in widespread use. I suppose Kulu will be the place to ask; the ESA team managed to get their prisoner outsystem.”

Typical of the ESA, Erato said sourly.

Auster nodded silently.

“How bad are conditions in the city?” Jeroen van Ewyck asked.

“We’ve heard some fighting around the outlying districts this evening. The sheriffs are protecting the spaceport and the government district. But I don’t think they’ll hold out for more than a couple of days. You must get back to Avon and inform the First Admiral and the Confederation Assembly what’s happening here. At this point we still can’t discount xenocs being involved. And tell the First Admiral that Terrance Smith’s mercenary army must be prevented from landing here, as well. This is far beyond the ability of a few thousand hired soldiers to sort out.”

“That goes without saying. We’ll evacuate you and your staff immediately,” Auster said.

Forty-five of them? Ocyroe asked. That’s pushing our life-support capacity close to the envelope.

We can always make a swallow direct to Jospool, That’s only seven light-years away. The crew toroid can support us for that long.

“There’s some of the ratings and NCOs I’d like to get

off,” Kelven Solanki datavised. “This wasn’t supposed to be a front-line posting. They’re only kids, really.”

“No, all of you are coming,” Auster said flatly.

“I’d like to capture one of these sequestered invaders if possible,” Jeroen van Ewyck put in quickly.

What about the marines, Erato? Auster asked. **Do you think it’s worth a try?**

I’ll fly recovery if we can spot them, the pilot said. His thoughts conveyed a rising excitement.

Auster acknowledged his leaked feelings with an ironic thought. Pilots were uniformly a macho breed, unable to resist any challenge, even Edenist ones.

The Juliffe basin is proving difficult to resolve, *Ilex* said with a note of annoyance. **My optical sensors are unable to receive a clearly defined image of the river and its tributaries for about a thousand kilometres inland.**

It’s night over the basin, and we’re still seventy thousand kilometres away, Auster pointed out.

Even so, the optical resolution should be better than this.

“Commander Solanki, we’re going to attempt to recover the marines as well,” Auster said.

“I haven’t been able to contact them for over a day. God, I don’t even know if they’re still alive, let alone where they are.”

“None the less, they are our naval personnel. If there’s any chance, we owe them the effort.”

The statement drew him a startled glance from Jeroen van Ewyck and the other two Adamists on the bridge. They quickly tried to hide their gaffe. Auster ignored it.

“Christ but— All right,” Kelven Solanki datavised. “I’ll fly the recovery myself, though. No point in risking your spaceplane. It was me who ordered them in there to start with. My responsibility.”

“As you wish. If our sensors can locate their fishing boat, do you have an aircraft available?”

“I can get one. But the invaders knocked out the last

plane to fly into their territory. One thing I do know is that they've got some lethal fire-power going for them."

"So has *Ilex*," Auster said bluntly.

Joshua Calvert fell back onto the translucent sheet and let out a heartfelt breath. The bed's jelly-substance mattress was rocking him gently as the waves slowed. Sweat trickled across his chest and limbs. He gazed up at the electrophorescent cell clusters on Ione's ceiling. Their ornate leaf pattern was becoming highly familiar.

"That's definitely one of the better ways of waking up," he said.

"One?" Ione unwrapped her legs from his waist and sat back on his legs. She stretched provocatively, hands going behind her neck.

Joshua groaned, staring at her voraciously.

"Tell me another," she said.

He sat up, bringing his face twenty centimetres from hers. "Watching you," he said in a throaty voice.

"Does that turn you on?"

"Yes."

"Solo, or with another girl?" She felt his muscles tighten in reflex. Well, that's my answer, she thought. But then she'd always known how much he enjoyed threesomes. It wasn't Joshua's cock which was hard to satisfy, just his ego.

He grinned; the Joshua rogueish-charm grin. "I bet this conversation is going to turn to Dominique."

Ione gave his nose a butterfly kiss. They just couldn't fool each other; it was a togetherness similar to the one she enjoyed with the habitat personality. Comforting and eerie at the same time. "You mentioned her name first."

"Are you upset about her coming to Lalonde with me?"

"No. It makes sound business sense."

"You do disapprove." He stroked the side of her breasts tenderly. "There's no need to be jealous. I have been to bed with Dominique, you know."

"I know. I watched you on that big bed of hers, remember?"

He cupped her breasts and kissed each nipple in turn. "Let's bring her to this bed."

She looked down on the top of his head. "Not possible, sorry. The Saldanas eradicated the gay gene from their DNA three hundred years ago. Couldn't risk the scandal, they are supposed to uphold the ten commandments throughout the kingdom, after all."

Joshua didn't believe a word of it. "They missed erasing the adultery gene, then."

She smiled. "What's your hurry to hit the mattress with her? The two of you are going to spend a week locked up in that zero-gee sex cage of yours."

"You are jealous."

"No. I never claimed to have an exclusive right to you. After all, I didn't complain about Norfolk."

He pulled his head back from her breasts. "Ione!" he complained.

"You reeked of guilt. Was she very beautiful?"

"She was . . . sweet."

"Sweet? Why, Joshua Calvert, I do believe you're getting romantic in your old age."

Joshua sighed and dropped back on the mattress again. He wished she'd make up her mind whether she was jealous or not. "Do I ask about your lovers?"

Ione couldn't help the slight flush that crept up her cheeks. Hans had been fun while it lasted, but she'd never felt as free with him as she did with Joshua. "No," she admitted.

"Ah hah, I'm not the only one who's guilty, by the looks of it."

She traced a forefinger down his sternum and abdomen until she was stroking his thighs. "Quits?"

"Yes." His hands found her hips. "I brought you another present."

"Joshua! What?"

"A gigantea seed. That's an aboriginal Lalonde tree. I

saw a couple on the edge of Durringham, they were eighty metres tall, but Marie said they were just babies, the really big ones are further inland from the coast.”

“Marie said that, did she?”

“Yes.” He refused to be put off. “It should grow all right in Tranquillity’s parkland. But you’ll have to plant it where the soil is deep and there’s plenty of moisture.”

“I’ll remember.”

“It’ll grow up to the light-tube eventually.”

She pulled a disbelieving face.

I will have to run environmental compatibility tests first, Tranquillity said. Our biosphere is delicately balanced.

So cynical. “Thank you, Joshua,” she said out loud.

Joshua realized he had regained his erection. “Why don’t you just ease forward a bit?”

“I could give you a treat instead,” Ione said seductively. “A real male fantasy come true.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. There’s a girlfriend of mine I’d like you to meet. We go swimming together every morning. You’d like that, watching us get all wet and slippery. She’s younger than me. And she never, ever wears a swimming costume.”

“Jesus.” Joshua’s face went from greed to caution. “This isn’t on the level,” he decided.

“Yes, it is. She’s also very keen to meet you. She likes it a lot when people wash her. I do it all the time, sliding my hands all over her. Don’t you want to join me?”

He looked up at Ione’s mock-innocent expression, and wondered what the hell he was letting himself in for. Gay gene, like bollocks. “Lead on.”

They had walked fifty metres down the narrow sandy path towards the cove, Ione’s escort of three serjeants an unobtrusive ten paces behind, when Joshua stopped and looked round. “This is the southern endcap.”

“That’s right,” she said slyly.

He caught up with her as she reached the top of the

bluff. The long, gently curving cove below looked tremendously enticing, with a border of shaggy palm trees and a tiny island offshore. Away in the distance he could see the elaborate buildings of the Laymil project campus.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I won’t have you arrested for coming here.”

He shrugged and followed her down the bluff. Ione was running on ahead as he reached the sand. Her towelling robe was flung away. “Come on, Joshua!” Spray frothed up as her feet reached the water.

A naked girl, a tropical beach. Irresistible. He dropped his own robe and jogged down the slope. Something was moving behind him, something making dull thudding sounds as it moved, something heavy. He turned. “Jesus!”

A Kiint was running straight at him. It was smaller than any he’d seen before, about three metres long, only just taller than him. Eight fat legs were flipping about in a rhythm which was impossible to follow.

His feet refused to budge. “Ione!”

She was laughing hysterically. “Morning, Haile,” she called at the top of her voice.

The Kiint lumbered to a halt in front of him. He was looking into a pair of soft violet eyes half as wide as his own face. A stream of warm damp breath poured from the breathing vents.

“Er . . .”

One of the tractamorphic arms curved up, the tip formshifting into the shape of a human hand—slightly too large.

“Well, say hello, then,” Ione said; she had walked up to stand behind him.

“I’ll get you for this, Saldana.”

She giggled. “Joshua, this is my girlfriend, Haile. Haile, this is Joshua.”

Why has he so much stiffness? Haile asked.

Ione cracked up, nearly doubling over as she laughed. Joshua gave her a furious glare.

Not want to shake hands? Not want to initiate human

greetings ritual? Not want to be friends? The Kiint sounded mournfully disappointed.

“Joshua, shake hands. Haile’s upset you don’t want to be friends with her.”

“How do you know?” he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“Affinity. The Kiint can use it.”

He put his hand up. Haile’s arm reached out, and he felt a dry, slightly scaly, bud of flesh flow softly around his fingers. It tickled. His neural nanonics were executing a priority search through the xenoc files he had stored in a memory cell. The Kiint could hear.

“May your thoughts always fly high, Haile,” he said, and gave a slight formal bow.

I have much likening for him!

Ione gave him a calculating stare. I might have known that charm of his would work on xenocs too, she thought.

Joshua felt the Kiint’s flesh deliver a warm squeeze to his hand, then the pseudo-hand peeled back. The itchy sensation it left in his palm seemed to spread up along his spine and into his skull.

“Your new girlfriend,” he said heavily.

Ione smiled. “Haile was born a few weeks ago. And boy, does she grow fast.”

Haile started to push Ione towards the water, flat triangular head butting the girl spiritedly, beak flapping. One of her tractamorphic arms beckoned avidly at Joshua.

He grinned. “I’m coming.” His scalp felt as if he’d been in the sun too long, an all-over tingle.

“The water eases her skin while she’s growing,” Ione said as she skipped ahead of the eager Kiint. “She needs to bathe two or three times a day. All the Kiint houses have interior pools. But she loves the beach.”

“Well, I’ll be happy to help scrub her while I’m here.”

Much gratitude.

“My pleasure,” Joshua said. He stopped. Haile was standing at the edge of the water, big eyes regarding him attentively. “That was you.”

Yes.

“What was?” Ione asked, she looked from one to the other.

“I can hear her.”

“But you don’t have an affinity gene,” she said, surprised, and maybe a little indignant.

Joshua has thoughts of strength. Much difficulty to effect interlocution, but possible. Not so with most humans. Feel hopelessness. Failure sorrow.

He swaggered. “Strong thoughts, see?”

“Haile hasn’t quite mastered our language, that’s all,” Ione smiled with menace. “She’s confused strength with simplicity. You have very elementary thoughts.”

Joshua rubbed his hands together determinedly, and walked towards her. Ione backed away, then turned and ran giggling into the water. He caught her after six metres, and the two of them fell into the small clear ripples whooping and laughing. Haile plunged in after them.

Much joyness. Much joyness.

Joshua was interested by how well the young Kiint could swim. He would have considered her body too heavy to float, but she could move at a fair speed; her tractamorphic arms spread out into flippers, and angled back along her flanks. Ione wouldn’t let her go out to the little island, saying it was still too far, which ruling Haile accepted with rebellious sulks.

I have seen some of the all-around’s park space, she told Joshua proudly as he rubbed the dorsal ridge above her rump. **Ione has shown me. So much to absorb. Adventure fun. Envy Joshua.**

Joshua didn’t quite understand how to collect his thoughts into a voice Haile could understand, instead he simply spoke. “You envy me? Why?”

Venture as you please. Fly to stars so distant. Welcome sights so strange. I want this, muchness!

“I don’t think you’d fit in the *Lady Mac*. Besides, human ships that can carry Kiint have to be licensed by your government. I haven’t got that licence.”

Sadness. Anger. Frustration. I may not venture beyond adult defined constraints. Much growth before I can.

“Bumming round the universe isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Most of the Confederation planets are pretty tame, and travelling on a starship is boring; dangerous too.”

Danger? Excitement query?

Joshua moved down towards Haile’s flexible neck. Ione was grinning at him over the xenoc’s white back.

“No, not excitement. There’s a danger of mechanical failure. That can be fatal.”

You have excitement. Achievement. Ione narrated many voyages you have undertaken. Triumph in Ruin Ring. Much gratification. Such boldness exhibited.

Ione turned her giggle into a cough. **You’re a flirt, girl.**

Incorrect access mode to human males, query? Praise of character, followed by dumb admiration for feats; your instruction.

Yes, I did say that, didn’t I. Perhaps not quite so literally, though.

“That was a while ago now,” Joshua said. “Of course, life was pretty tricky in those days. One wrong move and it could have been catastrophic. The Ruin Ring is an ugly place. You’ve gotta have determination to be a scavenger. It’s a lonely existence. Not everyone can take it.”

You achieved legend status. Most famous scavenger of all.

Don’t push it, Ione warned.

“You mean the Laymil electronics stack? Yeah, it was a big find, I earned a lot of money from that one.”

Much cultural relevance.

“Oh, yeah, that too.”

Ione stopped rubbing Haile’s neck and frowned. “Joshua, haven’t you accessed the records we’ve been decoding?”

“Er, what records?”

“Your electronics stack stored Laymil sensewise record-

ings. We've uncovered huge amounts of data on their culture."

"Great. That's good news."

She eyed him suspiciously. "They were extremely advanced biologically. Well ahead of us on the evolutionary scale; they were almost completely in harmony with their habitat environment, so now we have to question just how artificial their habitats were. Their entire biology, the way they approached living organisms, is very different to our own perception. They revered any living entity. And their psychology is almost incomprehensible to us; they could be both highly individual, and at the same time submerge themselves into a kind of mental homogeneity. Two almost completely different states of consciousness. We think they may have been genuine telepaths. The research project geneticists are having furious arguments over the relevant gene sequence. It is similar to the Edenist affinity gene, but the Laymil psychology complements it in a way which is impossible to human Edenist culture. Edenists retain a core of identity even after they transfer their memories into the habitat personality at death, whereas the Laymil willingness to share their most private selves has to be the product of considerable mental maturity. You can't engineer behavioural instinct into DNA."

"Have you found out what destroyed their habitats yet?" Joshua asked. Haile shuddered below his hand, a very human reflex. He felt a burst of cold alarm invading his thoughts. "Hey, sorry."

Fright. Scared feel. So many deaths. They had strength. Still were defeated. Query cause?

"I wish I knew," Ione said. "They seemed to celebrate life, much more than we do."

The *Isakore* was bobbing about inertly on the Zamjan as though it was a log of elegantly carved driftwood, ripples slopping against the hull with quiet insistence. They had rigged up a couple of oarlike outriggers to steer with during the first day—the rudder alone was no good. And they'd

managed to stick more or less to the centre of the river. It was eight hundred metres wide here, which gave them some leeway when the current began to shift them towards one of the banks.

According to Murphy Hewlett's inertial-guidance block they had floated about thirty kilometres downriver since the micro-fusion generator had been taken out. The current had pushed them with dogged tenacity the whole time, taking them away from the landing site and the burnt antagonistic jungle. Only another eight hundred plus kilometres to go.

Jacqueline Couteur had been no trouble, spending her time sitting up in the prow under the canvas awning. If it hadn't been for the ordeal they'd been through, the price they'd paid in their own pain and grief, to capture her, Murphy would have tied the useless micro-fusion generator round her neck and tossed her overboard. He thought she knew that. But she was their mission. And they were still alive, and still intact. Until that changed, Lieutenant Murphy Hewlett was going to obey orders and take her back to Durringham. There was nothing else left, no alternative purpose to life.

Nobody had tried to interfere with them, although their communication channels were definitely being jammed (none of the other equipment blocks were affected). Even the villages they had sailed past had shown no interest. A couple of rowing dinghies had ventured close the first morning, but they'd been warned off with shots from one of the Bradfields. After that the *Isakore* had been left alone.

It was almost a peaceful voyage. They'd eaten well, cleaned and reloaded the weapons, done what they could about their wounds. Niels Regehr swam in and out of lucidity, but the medical nanonic package clamped over his face was keeping him reasonably stable.

Murphy could just about allow himself to believe they would return to Durringham. The placid river encouraged that kind of foolish thinking.

As night fell at the end of the second day he sat at the stern, holding on to the tiller they had fixed up, and doing his best to keep the boat in the centre of the river. At least with this job he didn't have to use his leg with its achingly stiff knee, though his left hand was incapable of gripping the tiller pole. The clammy air from the water made his fatigues uncomfortably sticky.

He saw Louis Beith making his way aft, carrying a flask. A medical nanonic package made a broad bracelet around his arm where Jacqueline Couteur had broken the bone and it glimmered dimly in the infrared spectrum.

"Brought you some juice," Louis said. "Straight out the cryo."

"Thanks." Murphy took the mug he held out. With his retinal implants switched to infrared, the liquid he poured from the flask was a blue so deep it was nearly black.

"Niels is talking to his demons again," Louis said quietly.

"Not much we can do about it, short of loading a somnolence program into his neural nanonics."

"Yeah, but Lieutenant; what he says, it's like it's for real, you know? I thought people hallucinating don't make any sense. He's even got me looking over my shoulder."

Murphy took a swallow of the juice. It was freezing, numbing the back of his throat. Just perfect. "It bothers you that bad? I could put him under, I suppose."

"No, not bad. It's just kinda spooky, what with everything we saw, and all."

"I think that electronic warfare gimmick the hostiles have affects our neural nanonics more than we like to admit."

"Yeah?" Louis brightened. "Maybe you're right." He stood with his hands on his hips, staring ahead to the west. "Man, that is some meteorite shower. I ain't never seen one that good before."

Murphy looked up into the cloudless night sky. High above the *Isakore's* prow the stars were tumbling down from their fixed constellations. There was a long broad

slash of them scintillating and flashing. He actually smiled, they looked so picturesque. And the hazy slash was still growing as more of them hit the atmosphere, racing eastwards. It must be a prodigious swarm gliding in from interplanetary space, the remains of some burnt-out comet that had disintegrated centuries ago. The meteorites further away were developing huge contrails as they sizzled their way downwards. They were certainly penetrating the atmosphere a long way, tens of kilometres at least. Murphy's smile bled away. "Oh my God," he said in a tiny dry voice.

"What?" Louis asked happily. "Isn't that something smooth? Wow! I could look at that all night long."

"They're not meteorites."

"What?"

"They're not meteorites. Shit!"

Louis looked at him in alarm.

"They're bloody kinetic harpoons!" Murphy started to run forwards as fast as his knee would allow. "Secure yourself!" he shouted. "Grab something and hold on. They're coming down right on top of us."

The sky was turning to day overhead, blackness flushed away by a spreading stain of azure blue. The contrails to the west were becoming too bright to look at. They seemed to be lengthening at a terrific rate, cracks of sunlight splitting open across the wall of night.

Kinetic harpoons were the Confederation Navy's standard tactical (non-radioactive) planetary surface assault weapon. A solid splinter of toughened, heat-resistant composite, half a metre long, needle sharp, guided by a cruciform tail, steered by a processor with preprogrammed flight vector. They carried no explosives, no energy charge; they destroyed their target through speed alone.

Ilex accelerated in towards Lalonde at eight gees, following a precise hyperbolic trajectory. The apex was reached twelve hundred kilometres above Amarisk, two hundred kilometres east of Durringham. Five thousand harpoons were expelled from the voidhawk's weapons cra-

dles, hurtling towards the night-masked continent below. *Ilex* inverted the direction of its distortion field's acceleration wave, fighting Lalonde's gravity. Stretched out on their couches, the crew raged impotently against the appalling gee force, nanonic supplement membranes turning rigid to hold soft weak human bodies together as the void-hawk dived away from the planet.

The harpoon swarm sheered down through the atmosphere, hypervelocity friction ablating away the composite's outer layer of molecules to leave a dazzling ionic tail over a hundred kilometres long. From below it resembled a rain of fierce liquid light.

Their silence was terrifying. A display of such potency should sound like the roar of an angry god. Murphy clung to one of the rails along the side of the wheel-house, squinting through squeezed-up eyelids as the solid sheet of vivid destruction plummeted towards him. He heard Jacqueline Couteur moaning in fear, and felt a cheap, malicious satisfaction. It was the first time she had shown the slightest emotion. Impact could only be seconds away now.

The harpoons were directly overhead, an atmospheric river of solar brilliance mirroring the Zamjan's course. They split down the centre, two solid planes of light diverging with immaculate symmetry, sliding down to touch the jungle away in the west then racing past the *Isakore* at a speed too fast even for enhanced human senses to follow. None of them, not one, landed in the water.

Multiple explosions obliterated the jungle. Along both sides of the Zamjan gouts of searing purple flame streaked upwards as the harpoons struck the earth, releasing their colossal kinetic energy in a single devastating burst of heat. The swath of devastation extended for a length of seven kilometres along the banks, reaching a kilometre and a half inland. A thick filthy cloud of loam and stone and wood splinters belched up high into the air, blotting out the heat flashes. The blast-wave rolled out in both directions, flattening still more of the jungle.

Then the sound broke over the boat. The roar of the explosions overlapped, merging into a single sonic battering-ram which made every plank on the *Isakore* twang as if it was an overtuned guitar string. After that came the eternal thunderclap of the air being ripped apart by the harpoons' plunge; sound waves finally catching up with the weapons.

Murphy jammed his hands across his stinging eardrums. His whole skeleton was shaking, joints resonating painfully.

Debris started to patter down, puckering the already distressed surface of the river. A sprinkling of fires burnt along the banks where shattered trees lay strewn among deep craters. Pulverized loam and wood hung in the air, an obscure black fog above the mortally wounded land.

Murphy slowly lowered his hands, staring at the awful vision of destruction. "It was our side," he said in dazed wonder. "We did it."

Garrett Tucci was at his side, jabbering away wildly. Murphy couldn't hear a thing. His ears were still ringing vociferously. "Shout! Datavise! My ears have packed up."

Garrett blinked, he held up his communications block. "It's working," he yelled.

Murphy datavised his own block, which reported the channel to the ELINT satellite was open.

A beam of bright white light slid over the *Isakore*, originating from somewhere above. Murphy watched as the beam swung out over the water, then tracked back towards the boat. He looked up, beyond surprise. It was coming from a small aircraft hovering two hundred metres overhead, outlined by the silver stars. Green, red, and white strobes flashed on the tips of its wings and canards. His neural nanonics identified the jet-black planform, a BK133.

Murphy's communication block beeped to acknowledge a local channel opening. "Murphy? Are you there, Murphy?"

"Sir? Is that you?" he asked incredulously.

"Expecting someone else?" Kelven Solanki datavised.

The beam found the *Isakore* again, and remained trained on the deck.

“Have you still got your prisoner?”

“Yes, sir.” Murphy glanced at Jacqueline Couteur, who was staring up at the aircraft, shielding her eyes against the spotlight.

“Good man. We’ll take her back with us.”

“Sir, Niels Regehr is injured pretty badly. I don’t think he can climb a rope ladder.”

“No problem.”

The BK133 was descending carefully, wings rocking in the thermal microbursts generated by the harpoons’ impact. Murphy could feel the compressor jets gusting against his face, a hot dry wind, pleasant after the river’s humidity. He saw a wide hatch was open on the side of the fuselage. A man in naval fatigues was slowly winching down towards the *Isakore*.

Floodlights on the roof of the navy office showed the grounds around the building were thick with people. All of them seemed to be looking up into the night sky.

Murphy watched them through the BK133’s open mid-fuselage hatch as Kelven Solanki piloted it down onto the roof pad. A wedge-shaped spaceplane was sitting on one side of the roof, wings retracted; it only just fitted, tail and nose were overhanging the edges. It was one of the most welcome sights he had seen in a long long while.

“Who are all those people?” he asked.

“Anyone who saw *Ilex*’s spaceplane taking the staff away earlier,” Vince Burtis said. He was the nineteen-year-old navy rating who had winched the marine squad to safety. To him the invasion was exactly what he had signed on for, adventure on alien worlds; he was enjoying himself. Murphy hadn’t the heart to disillusion him. The kid would realize soon enough.

“I guess they want to leave too,” Vince Burtis said soberly.

The BK133 settled on the roof. Kelven datavised the

flight computer to power down the internal systems. "Everyone out," he said.

"Hurry, please." Erato's appeal was relayed through his communication block. "I'm in touch with the sheriffs outside. They say the crowd is already at the door."

"They shouldn't be able to get in," Kelven datavised.

"I think some of the sheriffs may be with them," Erato said hesitantly. "They're only human."

Kelven released his straps and hurried back into the cabin. Vince Burtis was guiding Niels Regehr's tentative footsteps, helping him down through the hatch. Garrett Tucci and Louis Beith were already out, marching Jacqueline Couteur towards the spaceplane at gunpoint.

Murphy Hewlett gave his superior a tired smile. "Thank you, sir."

"Nothing to do with me. If the *Ilex* hadn't shown up you'd still be paddling home."

"Is everyone else from the office out?"

"Yes, the spaceplane made a couple of flights earlier this evening, we're the last," Kelven said.

They both hopped down onto the roof. The noise of the spaceplane's compressors rose, obscuring the sound of the crowd below. Kelven did his best to ignore the sensation of guilt. He had made a lot of friends among Lalonde's civil administration staff. Candace Elford had turned over the BK133 as soon as he asked, no questions. Surely some people could have been taken up to the orbiting colonist-carriers.

Who though? And who would choose?

The best—the only—way to help Lalonde now was through the Confederation Navy.

The stairwell door on the other side of the BK133 burst open. People began to spill out onto the roof, shouting frantically.

"Oh, Christ," Kelven said under his breath. He could see three or four sheriffs among them, armed with cortical jammers, one had a laser hunting rifle. The rest were civilians. He looked round. Vince Burtis and Niels Regehr were

halfway up the stairs to the airlock. One of the *Ilex*'s crew was leaning out, offering a hand to Niels. Vince was staring over his shoulder in shock.

"Get in," Kelven datavisaged, waving his arms.

Two sheriffs were rounding the nose of the BK133, more people were crouched low scuttling under the fuselage. Still more were running out of the open door. There must have been thirty on the roof.

"Wait for us."

"You can carry one more."

"I have money, I can pay."

Murphy aimed his Bradfield into the air and fired off two shots. The heavy-calibre weapon was startlingly loud. Several people threw themselves down, the rest froze.

"Don't even think about it," Murphy said. The Bradfield lined up on one of the ashen-faced sheriffs. A cortical jammer fell from the man's hands.

The noise of the spaceplane's compressors was becoming strident.

"There's no room on board. Go home before anyone gets hurt."

Kelven and Murphy started backing towards the spaceplane. A young brown-skinned woman who had crawled under the BK133 straightened up, and walked towards them defiantly. She was holding a small child in front of her, it couldn't have been more than two years old. Plump face and wide liquid eyes.

Murphy just couldn't bring himself to point the Bradfield at her. He reached the foot of the spaceplane's aluminium stairs.

"Take him with you," the woman called. She held the child out. "For Jesus's sake, take my son, if you have a gram of pity in you. I'm begging you!"

Murphy's foot found the first step. Kelven had a hand on his arm, guiding him back.

"Take him!" she shrieked over the swelling compressor efflux. "Take him, or shoot him."

He shuddered at her fervour. She meant it, she really meant it.

“It would be a kindness. You know what will happen to him on this cursed planet.” The child was crying, squirming about in her grip.

The other people on the roof were all motionless, watching him with hard, accusing eyes. He turned to Kelven Solanki, whose face was a mask of torment.

“Get him,” Kelven blurted.

Murphy dropped the Bradfield, letting it skitter away across the silicon roof. He datavised a codelock into its controlling processor so no one could turn it on the spaceplane, then grabbed the child with his right hand.

“Shafi,” the woman shouted as he raced up the stairs. “His name’s Shafi Banaji. Remember.”

He barely had a foot in the airlock when the spaceplane lifted, its deck tilting up immediately. Hands steadied him, and the outer hatch slid shut.

Shafi’s baggy cotton trousers were soiled and stinking; he let out a long fearful wail.

3

Including Tranquillity, there were only five independent (non-Edenist) bitek habitats to be found within the boundaries of the Confederation. After Tranquillity, probably the most well known, or notorious depending on your cultural outlook and degree of liberalism, was Valisk.

Although they were both, technically, dictatorships, they occupied opposite ends of the political spectrum, with the dominant ideologies of the remaining three habitats falling between them, a well-deserved mediocrity. Tranquillity was regarded as elitist, or even regal given its founder: industrious, rich, and slightly raffish, with a benevolent, chic ruler, it emphasized the grander qualities of life, somewhere you aspired to go if you made it. Valisk was older, its glory days over, or at the very least in abeyance: it played host to a more decadent population; money here (and there was still plenty) came from exploiting the darker side of human nature. And its strange governorship repelled rather than attracted.

It hadn't always been so.

Valisk was founded by an Edenist Serpent called Rubra. Unlike Laton, who terrorized the Confederation two and a half centuries later, his rebellion was of an altogether more constructive nature. He was born in Machaon, a habitat orbiting Kohistan, the largest gas giant in the Srinagar star system. After forty-four years, he abandoned his culture and his home, sold his not inconsiderable share in his family's engineering enterprise, and emigrated to a newly opened Adamist asteroid settlement in Kohistan's trailing Trojan cluster.

It was a period of substantial economic growth for the star system. Srinagar had been colonized by ethnic-Hindus in 2178 during the Great Dispersal, a hundred and sixteen years earlier. Basic industrialization had been completed, the world was tamed, and people were looking for new ways of channelling their energies. All across the Confederation emerging colony planets were exploiting space resources and increasing their wealth dramatically. Srinagar was eager to be numbered among them.

Rubra started with six leased interplanetary cargo ships. Like all Serpents he was a high achiever in his chosen field (nearly always to Edenist embarrassment, for so many of them chose crime). He made a small fortune supplying the Trojan cluster's small but wealthy population of engineers and miners with consumer goods and luxuries. He bought more ships, made a larger fortune, and named his expanding company Magellanic Itg—joking to his peers that one day he would trade with that distant star cluster. By 2306, after twelve years of steady growth, Magellanic Itg owned manufacturing stations and asteroid-mining operations, and had moved into the interstellar transport market.

At this point Rubra germinated Valisk in orbit around Opuntia, the fourth of the system's five gas giants. It was a huge gamble. He spent his company's entire financial reserves cloning the seed, mortgaging half of the starships to boot. And bitek remained technology *non grata* for the major religions, including the Hindu faith. But Srinagar was sufficiently Bolshevik about its new economic independence from its sponsoring Govcentral Indian states, and energetic enough in its approach to innovation, to cast a blind eye to proscriptions announced by fundamentalist Brahmians on a distant imperialist planet over two centuries earlier. Planet and asteroid governments saw no reason to impose embargoes against what was rapidly evolving into one of the system's premier economic assets. Valisk became, literally, a corporate state, acting as the home port for Magellanic Itg's starship fleet (already one

of the largest in the sector) and dormitory town for its industrial stations.

Although Valisk was a financially advantageous location from which Rubra could run his flourishing corporate empire, he needed to attract a base population to the habitat to make it a viable pocket civilization. Industrial stations were therefore granted extremely liberal weapons and research licences and Valisk started to attract companies specializing in military hardware. Export constraints were almost non-existent.

Rubra also opened the habitat to immigration for “people who seek cultural and religious freedom”, possibly in reaction to his own formal Edenist upbringing. This invitation attracted several nonconformist religious cults, spiritual groups, and primitive lifestyle tribes, who believed that a bitek environment would fulfil the role of some benevolent Gaia and provide them free food and shelter. Over nine thousand of these people arrived over the course of the habitat’s first twenty-five years, many of them drug- or stimulant-program addicts. At this time, Rubra, infuriated with their unrepentant parasitical nature, banned any more from entering.

By 2330 the population had risen to three hundred and fifty thousand. Industrial output was high, and many interstellar companies were opening regional offices inside.

Then the first blackhawks to be seen in the Confederation began to appear, all of them registered with Magellanic Itg, and captained by Rubra’s plentiful offspring. Rubra had pulled off a spectacular coup against both his competitors and his former culture. Voidhawk bitek was the most sophisticated ever sequenced; copying it was a triumph of genetic retro-engineering.

With blackhawks now acting as the mainstay of his starship fleet, Rubra was unchallengeable. A large-scale cloning programme saw their numbers rising dramatically; neural symbionts were used to give captaincies to Adamists who had no qualms about using bitek, and there

were many. By 2365 Magellanic Itg ceased to use anything other than blackhawks in its transport fleet.

Rubra died in 2390, one of the wealthiest men in the Confederation. He left behind an industrial conglomerate used as an example by economists ever since as the classic corporate growth model. It should have carried on. It had the potential to rival the Kulu Corporation owned by the Saldana family. Ultimately it might even have equalled the Edenist He₃ cloud-mining operation. No physical or financial restrictions existed to limit its inherent promise; banks were more than willing to advance loans, the markets existed, supplied by its own ships.

But in the end—after the end—Rubra's Serpent nature proved less than benign after all. His psychology was too different, too obsessional. Brought up knowing his personality pattern would continue to exist for centuries if not millennia, he refused to accept death as an Adamist. He transferred his personality pattern into Valisk's neural strata.

From this point onward company and habitat started to degenerate. Part of the reason was the germination of the other independent habitats, all of whom offered themselves as bases for blackhawk mating flights. The Valisk/Magellanic Itg monopoly was broken. But the company's industrial decline, and the habitat's parallel deterioration, was due principally to the inheritance problem Rubra created.

When he died he was known to have fathered over a hundred and fifty children, a hundred and twenty-two of whom were carefully conceived *in vitro* and gestated in exowombs; all had modifications made to their affinity gene, as well as general physiological improvements. Thirty of the exowomb children were appointed to Valisk's executive committee, which ran both the habitat and Magellanic Itg, while the remainder, along with the rapidly proliferating third generation, became blackhawk pilots. The naturally conceived children were virtually disinherited from

the company, and many of them returned to the Edenist fold.

Even this nepotistic arrangement shouldn't have been too much trouble. There would inevitably be power struggles within such a large committee, but strong characters would rise to the top, simple human dynamics demanded it. None ever did.

The alteration Rubra had made to their affinity gene was a simple one; they were bonded to the habitat and a single family of blackhawks alone. He robbed them of the Edenist general affinity. The arrangement gave him access to their minds virtually from the moment of conception, first through the habitat personality, then after he died, as the habitat personality.

He shaped them as they lay huddled in the metal and composite exowombs, and later in their innocent childhood; a dark conscience nestled maggot-fashion at the centre of their consciousness, examining their most secret thoughts for deviations from the path he had chosen. It was a dreadfully perverted version of the love bond which existed between voidhawks and their captains. His descendants became little more than anaemic caricatures of himself at his prime. He tried to instil the qualities which had driven him, and wound up with wretched neurotic inadequates. The more he attempted to tighten his discipline, the worse their dependence upon him became. A slow change manifested in the habitat personality's psychology. In his growing frustration with his living descendants he became resentful; of their lives, of their bodily experiences, of the emotions they could feel, the humanness of glands and hormones running riot. Rubra was jealous of the living.

Edenist visits to the habitat, already few and far between, stopped altogether after 2480. They said the habitat personality had become insane.

Dariat was an eighth-generation descendant, born a hundred and seventy-five years after Rubra's body died. Physically

he was virtually indistinguishable from his peer group; he shared the light coffee-coloured skin and raven hair that signalled the star system's ethnic origin. A majority of Valisk's population originated insystem, though few of them were practising Hindus. Only his indigo eyes marked him out as anything other than a straight Srinagar genotype.

He never knew of his calamitous inheritance until his teens, although even from his infancy he knew in his heart he was different; he was better, superior to all the other children in his day club. And when they laughed at him, or teased him, or sent him to Coventry, he laid into them with a fury that none of them could match. He didn't know where it came from himself, only that it lay within, like some slumbering lake-bottom monster. At first he felt shame at the beatings he inflicted, blood for a five-year-old is a shocking sight; but even as he ran home crying a different aspect of the alien ego would appear and soothe him, calming his pounding heart. There was nothing wrong, he was assured, no crime committed, only rightness. They shouldn't have said what they did, catcalled and sneered. You were right to assert yourself, you are strong, be proud of that.

After a while the feelings of guilt ebbed away. When he needed to hit someone he did it without remorse or regret. His leadership of the day club was undisputed, out of fear rather than respect.

He lived with his mother in a starscraper apartment; his father had left her the year he was born. He knew his father was important, that he helped to manage Magellanic Itg; but whenever he paid mother and son one of his dutiful visits he was subject to moody silences or bursts of frantic activity. Dariat didn't like him, the grown-up was weird. I can do without him, the boy thought, he's weak. The conviction was as strong as one of his didactic imprints. His father stopped visiting after he was twelve years old.

Dariat concentrated on science and finance subjects when he began receiving didactic courses at ten years old,

although right at the back of his mind was the faintest notion that the arts might just have been equally appealing. But they were despicable moments of weakness, soon swallowed by the pride he felt whenever he passed another course assessment. He was headed for great things.

At fourteen the crux came. At fourteen he fell in love.

Valisk's interior did not follow the usual bitek habitat convenience of a tropical or sub-tropical environment. Rubra had decided on a scrub desert extending out from the base of the northern endcap, then blending slowly into hilly savannah plain of terrestrial and xenoc grasses before the standard circumfluous salt-water reservoir at the base of the southern endcap.

Dariat was fond of hiking round the broad grasslands with their subtle blend of species and colours. The children's day club which he used to dominate had long since broken up. Adolescents were supposed to join sports groups, or general interest clubs. He had trouble integrating, too many peers remembered his temper and violence long after he had stopped resorting to such crude methods. They shunned him, and he told himself he didn't care. Somebody told him. In dreams he would find himself walking through the habitat talking to a white-haired old man. The old man was a big comfort, the things he said, the encouragement he gave. And the habitat was slightly different, richer, with trees and flowers and happy crowds, families picnicking.

"It's going to be like this once you're in charge," the old man told him numerous times. "You're the best there's been for decades. Almost as good as me. You'll bring it all back to me, the power and the wealth."

"This is the future?" Dariat asked. They were standing on a tall altar of polyp-rock, looking down on a circular starscraper entrance. People were rushing about with a vigour and purpose not usually found in Valisk. Every one of them was wearing a Magellanic Itg uniform. When he lifted his gaze it was as though the northern endcap was transparent; blackhawks flocked around their docking

rings, loaded with expensive goods and rare artefacts from a hundred planets. Further out, so far away it was only a hazy ginger blob, Magellanic Itg's failed Von Neumann machine spun slowly against the gas giant's yellow-brown ring array.

"It could be the future," the old man sighed regretfully. "If you will only listen how."

"I will," Dariat said. "I'll listen."

The old man's schemes seemed to coincide with the pressure of conviction and certainty which was building in his own mind. Some days he seemed so full of ideas and goals he thought his skull must surely burst apart, whilst on other occasions the dream man's long rambling speeches seemed to have developed a tangible echo, lasting all day long.

That was why he enjoyed the long bouts of solitude provided by the unadventurous interior. Walking and exploring obscure areas was the only time the raging thoughts in his brain slowed and calmed.

Five days after his fourteenth birthday he saw Anastasia Rigel. She was washing in a river that ran along the floor of a deep valley. Dariat heard her singing before he saw her. The voice led him round some genuine rock boulders onto a shelf of naked polyp which the water had scoured of soil. He squatted down in the lee of the boulders, and watched her kneeling at the side of the river.

The girl was tall and much much blacker than anyone he'd seen in Valisk before. She appeared to be in her late teens (seventeen, he learned later), with legs that seemed to be all bands of muscle, and long jet-black hair that was arranged in ringlets and woven with red and yellow beads. Her face was narrow and delicate with a petite nose. There were dozens of slim silver and bronze bracelets on each arm.

She was only wearing a blue skirt of some thin cotton. A brown top of some kind lay on the polyp beside her. Dariat caught some fleeting glimpses of high pointed breasts as she rubbed water across her chest and arms. It was even

better than accessing bluesense AV fleks and tossing off. For once he felt beautifully calm.

I'm going to have her, he thought, I really am. The certainty burned him.

She stood up, and pulled her brown top on. It was a sleeveless waistcoat made from thin supple leather, laced up the front. "You can come out now," she said in a clear voice.

Just for a moment he felt wholly inferior. Then he trotted towards her with a casualness that denied she had just caught him spying. "I was trying not to alarm you," he said.

She was twenty centimetres taller than him; she looked down and grinned openly. "You couldn't."

"Did you hear me? I thought I was being quiet."

"I could feel you."

"Feel me?"

"Yes. You have a very anguished spirit. It cries out."

"And you can hear that?"

"Lin Yi was a distant ancestress."

"Oh."

"You have not heard of her?"

"No, sorry."

"She was a famous spiritualist. She predicted the Big One2 quake in California back on Earth in 2058 and led her followers to safety in Oregon. A perilous pilgrimage for those times."

"I'd like to hear that story."

"I will tell it if you like. But I don't think you will listen. Your spirit is closed against the realm of Chi-ri."

"You judge people very fast. We don't stand much of a chance, do we?"

"Do you know what the realm of Chi-ri is?"

"No."

"Shall I tell you?"

"If you like."

"Come then."

She led him up the river, bracelets tinkling musically at

every motion. They followed the tight curve of the valley; after three hundred metres the floor broadened out, and a Starbridge village was camped along the side of the river.

Starbridge was the remnants of the cults and tribes and spiritualists who had moved into Valisk during its formative years. They had slowly amalgamated down the decades, bonding together against the scorn and hostility of the other inhabitants. Now they were one big community, united spiritually with an *outré* fusion of beliefs that was often incomprehensible to any outsider. They embraced the primitive existence, living as tribes of migrants, walking round and round the interior of the habitat, tending their cattle, practising their handicraft, cultivating their opium poppies, and waiting for their nirvana.

Dariat looked out on the collection of ramshackle tepees, stringy animals with noses foraging the grass, children in rags running barefoot. He experienced a contempt so strong it verged on physical sickness. He was curious at that, he had no reason to hate the Starbridge freakos, he'd never had anything to do with them before. Even as he thought that, the loathing increased. Of course he did, slimy parasites, vermin on two legs.

Anastasia Rigel stroked his forehead in concern. "You suffer yet you are strong," she said. "You spend so much time in the realm of Anstid."

She brought him into her tepee, a cone of heavy handwoven cloth. Wicker baskets ringed the walls. The light was dim, and the air dusty. The valley's pinkish grass was matted, dry and dying underfoot. He saw her sleeping roll bundled up against one basket, a bright orange blanket with pillows that had some kind of green and white tree motif embroidered across them, haloed by a ring of stars. He wondered if that was what he'd do it on, where he'd finally become a real man.

They sat crosslegged on a threadbare rug and drank tea, which was like coloured water, and didn't taste of much. Jasmine, she told him.

"What do you think of us?" she asked.

“Us?”

“The Starbridge tribes.”

“Never really thought about you much,” Dariat said. He was getting itchy sitting on the rug, and it was pretty obvious there weren’t going to be any biscuits with the tea.

“You should. Starbridge is both our name and our dream, that which we seek to build. A bridge between stars, between all peoples. We are the final religion. They will all come to us eventually; the Christians and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, even the Satanists and followers of Wicca; every sect, every cult. Each and every one of them.”

“That’s a pretty bold claim.”

“Not really. Just inevitable. There were so many of us, you see, when Rubra the Lost invited us here. So many beliefs, all different, yet really all the same. Then he turned on us, and confined us, and isolated us. He thought he would punish us, force us to conform to his materialistic atheism. But faith and dignity is always stronger than mortal oppression. We turned inwards for comfort, and found we had so much that we shared. We became one.”

“Starbridge being the one?”

“Yes. We burned the old scriptures and prayer books on a bonfire so high the flames reached right across the habitat. With them went all the ancient prejudices and the myths. It left us pure, in silence and darkness. Then we rebirthed ourselves, and renamed what we knew was real. There is so much that old Earth’s religions have in common; so many identical beliefs and tenets and wisdoms. But their followers are forced apart by names, by priests who have grown decadent and greedy for physical reward. Whole peoples, whole planets who denounce one another so that a few evil men can wear robes of golden cloth.”

“That seems fairly logical,” Dariat said enthusiastically. “Good idea.” He smiled. From where he was sitting he could see the whole side of her left breast through the waistcoat’s lace-up front.

"I don't think you have come to faith that quickly," she said with a trace of suspicion.

"I haven't. Because you haven't told me anything about it. But if you were telling the truth about hearing my spirit, then you've got my full attention. None of the other religions can offer tangible proof of God's existence."

She shifted round on the rug, bracelets clinking softly. "Neither do we offer proof. What we say is that life in this universe is only one segment of the great journey a spirit undertakes through time. We believe the journey will finish when a spirit reaches heaven, however you choose to define that existence. But don't ask how close this universe is to heaven. That depends on the individual."

"What happens when your spirit reaches heaven?"

"Transcendence."

"What sort?"

"That is for God to proclaim."

"God. Not a goddess, then?" he asked teasingly.

She grinned at him. "The word defines a concept, not an entity, not a white man with a white beard, nor even an earth mother. Physical bodies require gender. I don't think the instigator and sovereign of the multiverse is going to have physical and biological aspects, do you?"

"No." He finished the tea, relieved the cup was empty. "So what are these realms?"

"While the spirit is riding a body it also moves through the spiritual realms of the Lords and Ladies who govern nature. There are six realms, and five Lords and Ladies."

"I thought you said there was only one heaven?"

"I did. The realms are not heaven, they are aspects of ourselves. The Lords and Ladies are not God, but they are of a higher order than ourselves. They affect events through the wisdoms and deceits they reveal to us. But they have no influence on the physical reality of the cosmos. They are not the instigators of miracles."

"Like angels and demons?" he asked brightly.

"If you like. If that makes it easier to accept."

"So they're in charge of us?"

“You are in charge of yourself. You and you alone chose where your spirit roams.”

“Then why the Lords and Ladies?”

“They grant gifts of knowledge and insight, they tempt. They test us.”

“Silly thing to do. Why don’t they leave us alone?”

“Without experience there can be no growth. Existence is evolution, both on a spiritual and a personal level.”

“I see. So which is this Chi-ri I’m closed against?”

Anastasia Rigel climbed to her feet and went over to one of the wicker baskets. She pulled out a small goatskin bag. If she was aware of his hungry look following her every move she never showed it. “These represent the Lords and Ladies,” she said as she sat back down. The bag’s contents were tipped out. Six coloured pebble-sized crystals bounced on the rug. They had all been carved, he saw; cubes with their faces marked by small runes. She picked up the red one. “This is for Thoale, Lord of destiny.” The blue crystal was held up, and she told him it was for Chi-ri, Lady of hope. Green was for Anstid, Lord of hatred. Yellow for Tarrug, Lord of mischief. Venus, Lady of love, was as clear as glass.

“You said there were six realms,” he said.

“The sixth is the emptiness.” She proffered a jet-black cube, devoid of runes. “It has no Lord or Lady, it is where lost spirits flee.” She crossed her arms in front of herself, fingers touching her shoulders, bracelets falling to the crook of her elbows. She reminded Dariat of a statue of Shiva he’d seen in one of Valisk’s four temples; Shiva as Nataraja, king of dancers. “A terrible place,” Anastasia Rigel murmured coolly.

“You don’t think I have any hope?” he asked, suddenly annoyed at this primitive paganish nonsense again.

“You resist it.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve got lots of hope. I’m going to run this habitat one day,” he added. She ought to be impressed by that.

Her head was shaken gently, hair partly obscuring her

face. "That is Anstid deceiving you, Dariat. You spend so much time in his realm, he has an unholy grip upon your spirit."

"How do you know?" he said scornfully.

"These are called Thoale stones. He is the Lord I am beholden to. He shows me what is to unfold." A slight, droll smile flickered over her lips. "Sometimes Tarrug intervenes. He shows me things I should not see, or events I cannot understand."

"How do the stones work?"

"Each face is carved with the rune of a realm. I read the combinations, how they fall, or in the case of the emptiness where it falls in relation to the others. Would you like to know what your future contains?"

"Yeah. Go on."

"Pick up each crystal, hold it in your hands for a moment, try to impress it with your essence, then put it in the bag."

He picked up the clear one, naturally. Love Lady. "How do I impress it?"

She just shrugged.

He squeezed the crystals one at a time, feeling increasingly stupid, and dropped them in the goatskin bag. Anastasia Rigel shook the bag, then tipped the crystals out.

"What does it say?" Dariat asked, a shade too eagerly for someone who was supposed to be sceptical.

She stared at them a while, eyes flicking anxiously between the runes. "Greatness," she said eventually. "You will come to greatness."

"Hey, yeah!"

Her hand came up, silencing him. "It will not last. You shine so bright, Dariat, but for such a short time, and it is a dark flame which ignites you."

"Then what?" he asked, disgruntled.

"Pain, death."

"*Death?*"

"Not yours. Many people, but not yours."

Anastasia Rigel didn't offer to sleep with him that time.

Nor any of his visits during the month which followed. They walked round the savannah together, talking inanities, almost as brother and sister. She would tell him about the Starbridge philosophy, the idiosyncrasies of the realms. He listened, but became lost and impatient with a world-view which seemed to have little internal logic. In return he told her of his father, the resentment and the confusion of loss; mainly in the hope she'd feel sorry for him. He took her down into a starscraper; she said she'd never been in one before. She didn't like it, the confining walls of the apartments, although she was fascinated by the slowly spinning starfield outside.

The sexual tension died down from its initial high-voltage peak, though it was never laid to rest. It became a sort of game, jibes and smirks, played for points that neither knew how to win. Dariat enjoyed her company a lot. Someone who treated him fairly, who took time to hear what he said. Because she wanted to. He could never quite understand what she got out of the arrangement. She read his future several times, though none of the readings ever proved quite as dire as the first.

Dariat spent more and more time with her, almost divorcing himself from the culture lived out in the starscrapers and industrial stations (except for keeping up on his didactic courses). The portentous aspirations in his mind lost their grip when he was in her presence.

He learnt how to milk a goat, not that he particularly wanted to. They were smelly, bad-tempered creatures. She cooked him fish which she caught in the streams, and showed him which plants had edible roots. He found out about the tribe's way of life, how they sold a lot of their handicrafts to starship crews, chiefly the rugs and pottery, how they shunned technology. "Except for nanonic medical packages," she said wryly. "Amazing how many women become technocrats around childbirth time." He went to some of their ceremonies, which seemed little more than open air parties where everyone drank a strong distilled spirit, and sang gospel hymns late into the night.

One evening, when she was wearing just a simple white cotton poncho, she invited him into her tepee. He felt all the sexual heat return as the outline of her body was revealed through the fabric by the light of the tepee's meagre oil lamp. There was some kind of clay pot in the centre with a snakelike hose coming from the side. It was smoking docilely, filling the air with a funny sweet and sour scent.

Anastasia took a puff on the pipe, and shivered as if she'd swallowed a triple whisky. "Try some," she said, her voice rich with challenge.

"What is it?"

"A wide gate into Tarrug's realm. You'll like it. Anstid won't. He'll lose all control over you."

He looked at the crimped end of the tube, still wet from her mouth. He wanted to try it. He was frightened. Her eyes were very wide.

She tipped her head back, expelling two long plumes of smoke from her nostrils. "Don't you want to explore the realm of mischief with me?"

Dariat put the tube in his mouth and sucked. The next minute he was coughing violently.

"Not so hard," she said. Her voice sounded all furred. "Take it down slow. Feel it float through your bones."

He did as he was told.

"They're hollow, you know, your bones." Her smile was wide, shining like the light-tube against her black face.

The world spun round. He could feel the habitat moving, stars whipping round faster and faster, smearing across space. Smearred like cream. He giggled. Anastasia Rigel gave him a long, knowing grin, and took another drag on the tube.

Space was pink. Stars were black. Water smelt of cheese. "I love you," he told her. "I love you, I love you." The tepee walls were palpitating in and out. He was in the belly of some huge beast, just like Jonah.

Bloody hell.

"What did you say?"

Shit, I can't filter . . . What's green? What are you—

"My hands are green," he explained patiently.

"Are they?" Anastasia Rigel asked. "That's interesting."

What has she given you?

"Tarrug?" Dariat asked. Anastasia had said that was who they were going to visit. "Hello, Tarrug. I can hear him. He's talking to me."

Anastasia Rigel was at right angles to him. She pulled the poncho off over her head, sitting crosslegged and naked on the rug. Now she was totally upside-down. Her nipples were black eyes following him.

"That's not Tarrug you hear," she said. "That's Anstid."

"Anstid. Hi!"

What is it? What is in that bloody pipe? Wait, I'm reviewing the local memory . . . Oh, fuck, it's salfrond. I can't hold onto your thoughts when you're tripping on that, you little prick.

"I don't want you to."

Yes, you do. Oh, believe me you do, boy. I've got the keys to every dark door in this kingdom, and you're the golden protégé. Now stop smoking that mind-rotting crap.

Dariat very deliberately stuck the tube in his mouth, and inhaled until his lungs were about to burst. His cheeks puffed out. Anastasia Rigel leant forwards and took the tube from between his lips. "Enough."

The tepee was spinning in the opposite direction to the habitat, and outside it was raining shoes. Black leather shoes with scarlet buckles.

Shit! I'm going to kill that little black junkie bitch for this. It's high bloody time I shoved the Starbridge tribes out of the airlock. Dariat, stand up, boy. Walk outside, get some fresh air. There's some medical nanonic packages in the village, the headman's got some. They can straighten out your blood chemistry.

Dariat's giggles returned. "Piss off."

GET UP!

"No."

Weakling! Always bloody weaklings. You're no better than your bastard father.

Dariat squeezed his eyes shut. The colours were behind his eyelids too. "I am not like him."

Yes, you are. Weak, feeble, pathetic. All of you are. I should have cloned myself when I had the chance. Parthenogenetics would have solved all this bullshit. Two fucking centuries of weaklings I've had to endure. Two centuries, fuck it.

"Go away!" Even stoned, he could tell this wasn't part of the trip. This was more. This was much much worse.

"Is he hurting you, baby?" Anastasia Rigel asked.

"Yes."

I'll fucking cripple you if you don't get up. Smash your legs, shred your hands to ribbons. Do you like the sound of that, boy? A life spent grubbing round like a snail. Can't walk, can't feed yourself, can't wipe your arse.

"Stop it," Dariat screamed.

Get up!

"Don't listen to him, baby. Close your mind."

Tell that bitch from me, she's dead.

"Please, both of you, stop it. Leave me alone."

Get up.

Dariat tried to rise. He got up to his knees, then fell into Anastasia's lap.

"You're mine now," she said gladly.

No, you're not. You're mine. Always mine. You can never leave. I won't allow you to.

Her hands ran over his clothes, opening seals. Kisses with the sharp cold impact of hailstones fell on his face. "This is what you wanted, what you always wanted," she breathed in his ear. "Me."

The nauseating colour stripes blitzing his sight swirled into blackness. Her hot skin sliding up and down against him. Weight pressing against every part of him. He was doing it! He was fucking! Tears poured out of his eyes.

"That's right, baby. Up inside me. Purge him. Purge him

with me. Fly, fly into Venus and Chi-ri. Leave him behind. Free yourself.”

Always mine.

Dariat woke feeling awful. He was lying on the stiff tousled grass of the tepee without a stitch of clothing. The entrance flap was open, a slice of bright morning light sliding through. A heavy dew mottled his legs. Something had died and decomposed in his mouth, his tongue by the feel of it. Anastasia Rigel was lying beside him. Naked and beautiful. Arms tucked up against her chest.

Last night. I fucked her. I did it!

He tried to smother an ecstatic laugh.

Feeling better?

Dariat screamed. It was inside his head. Anstid. The realm demigod.

He jerked around, hugging himself, biting his lower lip so hard he drew blood.

Don't be an idiot. I'm not a bloody spirit bogeyman. There's no such thing. Religion is a psychological crutch for mental inadequates. Spiritualism is for mental paraplegics. Think what that makes your girlie friend.

“What are you?”

Anastasia Rigel woke up, blinking against the light. She ran her hand through her wild hair and sat up, looking at him with a curious expression.

I'm your ancestor.

“A lost spirit from the emptiness?” he asked, wide eyed with fright.

Give me one more word of mythology and I really will have your legs broken. Now think logically. I'm your ancestor. Who can I be?

Information from his didactic history courses tumbled into his thoughts. “Rubra?” The idea didn't make him feel any better at all.

Well done. Now stop panicking, and stop shivering. I don't normally talk direct to someone your age, I like to let you have sixteen years to yourself. But I'm not

going to allow you to become a dopehead. Do not ever smoke that stuff again. Understand?

“Yes, sir.”

Stop vocalizing. Concentrate your thoughts.

“What are you saying, baby?” Anastasia Rigel asked. “Are you still tripping?”

“No. It’s Rubra, he’s . . . We’re talking.”

She pulled the white poncho round herself, giving him an alarmed look.

I’ve got plans for you, boy, Rubra said. Big plans. You’re destined for Magellanic Itg’s executive committee.

I am?

Yes. If you play your cards right. If you do as you’re told.

I will.

Good. Now I’ve been lenient letting you sow your oats with dinky little Anastasia. I can understand that, she’s got a nice body, good tits, pretty face. I had a sex drive myself, once. But you’ve had your fun now; so put your clothes on and say goodbye. We’ll find someone a bit more suitable.

I can’t leave her. Not after . . . last night.

Take a real good look at yourself, boy. Rutting with a bubblehead primitive on a filthy mat in a tepee. Some friend, she filled your brain with two kinds of shit. That’s not how Valisk’s future ruler is going to behave. Is it?

No, sir.

Good boy.

He started to pick up his clothes.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Home.”

“He told you to.”

“I . . . What is there here?”

She gave him a forlorn look over the white poncho which was still clasped to her body. “Me. Your friend. Your lover.”

He shook his head.

“I’m human. That’s more than he is.”

Come on. Leave.

Dariat pulled on his shoes. He paused by the entrance flap.

“It’s Anstid,” she said in a mournful tone. “That’s who you really talk to.”

Pseudobabble. Ignore her.

Dariat walked slowly out of the village. Some of the elders gave him strange looks as he passed their steaming cooking pits. They couldn’t understand. Why would anyone leave Anastasia’s bed?

That’s their trouble, boy. They’re too backward. The real world is beyond them. I really must get round to cleaning them out one day.

Now Dariat knew what he was, what he was destined for, the didactic courses took on a whole new level of importance. He listened to Rubra’s advice on the specializations he needed, the grades he had to achieve. He became obedient, and a shade resentful at his own compliance. But what else was there? Starbridge?

In return for acquiescence Rubra taught him how to use the affinity bond with the habitat. How to access the sensitive cells to see what was going on, how he could call on vast amounts of processing power, the tremendous amount of stored data that was available.

One of the first things Rubra did was to guide him through a list of possible replacement girls, eager to bury the lingering traces of yearning for Anastasia Rigel. Dariat felt like a voyeuristic ghost, watching the prospective candidates through the sensitive cells; seeing them at home, talking to their friends. Some of them he watched having sex with their boyfriends, two with other girls, which was exciting. Rubra didn’t seem to object to these prolonged observations. At least it meant he didn’t have to pay for bluesense fleks any more.

One girl he chanced on was nice, Chilone, nine months

older than him. As black as Anastasia (which was what first caught his attention), but with dark auburn hair. Shy and pretty, who talked a lot about sex and boys with her girl friends.

Still he hesitated from meeting her, even though he knew her daily routine, knew her interests, what to say, which day clubs she belonged to. He could contrive a dozen encounters.

Get on with it, Rubra told him after a week of cautious scrutiny. Screw her brains out. You don't think Anastasia's still pining over you, do you?

What?

Try using the sensitive cells around the tepee.

That was something he'd never done, not using the habitat's perception faculty to spy on her. But the tone Rubra used had a hint of cruel amusement in it.

Anastasia had a lover, Mersin Columba, another Starbridge. A man in his forties; overweight, balding, with white pallid skin. They looked horrible locked together. Anastasia flinched silently as she lay underneath his pumping body.

The old white-hot infantile fury rose into Dariat's mind. He wanted to save her from the repellent humiliation; his beautiful girl who had loved him.

Take my advice. Go find young Chilone.

Like juvenile Edenists, it hadn't taken Dariat long to discover how to fox the habitat's sensitive cells. Unless Rubra's principal personality pattern was concentrating on him in particular, the autonomous monitoring of the sub-routines could be circumvented.

Dariat used the sensitive cells to follow Mersin Columba out of the tepee. The podgy oaf had a smug smile on his face as he made his way down to the stream. Anastasia Rigel was curled up on her rug, staring at nothing.

Mersin Columba made his way down the valley before stripping off his shirt and trousers. He splashed into a wide pool, and began to wash off the smell and stains of sex.

The first blow from Dariat's wooden cudgel caught him

on the side of his head, tearing his ear. He grunted and dropped to his knees. The second blow smashed across the crown of his skull.

Stop it!

Dariat aimed another blow; laughing at the surprise on the man's face. Nobody does that to my girl. Nobody does that to me! A cascade of blows rained down on Mersin Columba's unprotected head. Rubra's furious demands were reduced to a wasp's buzz at the back of Dariat's raging mind. He was vengeance. He was omnipotent, more than any realm Lord. He struck and struck, and it felt good.

The water pushed at Mersin Columba's inert body. Long ribbons of blood wept from the battered head, turned to tattered curlicues by the current. Dariat stood over him. The bloody length of wood dropped from his fingers.

I didn't realize what I'd created with you, Rubra said. The silent voice lacked its usual conviction.

Dariat shivered suddenly. His heart was pumping hard. **Anastasia is mine. Well, she certainly doesn't belong to poor old Mersin Columba any more, and that's a fact.**

The body had drifted five metres downstream. Dariat thought it looked repugnant, sickly white, bloated.

Now what? he asked sullenly.

I'd better get some housechimps to tidy up. And you'd better make tracks.

Is that it?

I'm not going to punish you for killing a Starbridge. But we're going to have to work on that temper of yours. It can be useful, but only if it's applied properly.

For the company.

Yes. And don't you forget it. Don't worry, you'll improve with age.

Dariat turned and walked away from the river. He hiked up out of the valley and spent the afternoon wandering aimlessly around the savannah.

His thoughts were glacial. He had killed a man, but there was no remorse, no sense of guilt. No sense of satisfaction,

either. He felt nothing, as if the whole incident was an act he'd seen on an AV recording.

When the light-tube began to dim into brassy twilight he turned and made his way towards the Starbridge village.

Where do you think you're going? Rubra asked.

She's mine. I love her. I'm going to have her. Tonight, always.

No. Only I am for always.

You can't stop me. I don't care about the company. Keep it. I never wanted it. I want Anastasia.

Don't be a fool.

Dariat detected something then, a strand of emotion wound up with the mental voice: anxiety. Rubra was worried.

What's happened?

Nothing's happened. Go home. It's been a hellish day.

No. He tried to use the sensitive cells to show him the village. Nothing, Rubra was blocking his affinity.

Go home.

Dariat started running.

Don't, boy!

It was over a kilometre back to the valley. The pink and yellow grass came up to his waist in places, blades whipping his legs. He reached the brow of the slope and looked down in dismay. The village was packing up, moving on. Half of the tepees were already down, folded into bundles and put on the carts. Animals were being rounded up. All the fire pits were out. It was a crazy time to be moving. Night was almost here. His sense of calamity redoubled.

Dariat sprinted down the steep slope, falling twice, grazing his knees and shins. He didn't care. Faces turned to watch as he dashed towards Anastasia's tepee.

He was shouting her name as he shoved the entrance flap aside.

The rope had been tied to the apex of the tepee. She must have used a stack of her wicker baskets to stand on. They were scattered all over the floor.

Her head was tilted to one side, the rope pressing into her left cheek, just behind the ear. She swayed slightly from side to side, the tepee's poles letting out quiet creaks.

Dariat stared at her for some immeasurable time. He didn't understand why. Not any of it.

Come on, boy. Come on home.

No. You did this. You made me leave her. She was mine. This would never have happened if you'd stayed out of my life. Tears were pouring down his cheeks.

I am your life.

You're not. Not not not. He closed out the voice. Refusing to hear the pleas and threats.

One of the wicker baskets had a piece of paper lying on top. It was weighted down by Anastasia's goatskin bag. Dariat picked it up, and read the message she'd written.

Dariat, I know it was you. I know you thought you did it for me. You didn't. You did it because it's what Anstid wanted, he will never allow you an alliance with Thoale. I thought I could help you. But I see I can't; I'm not strong enough to defy a realm Lord. I'm sorry.

I can't see any purpose in staying in this universe any more. I'm going to free my spirit and continue my flight towards God. The Thoale stones are my gift to you; use them please. You have so many battles to fight. Seeing the future may help you win some.

I want you to know I loved you for all the time we were together.

Anastasia Rigel

He loosened the thong at the top of the bag and spilled the six crystals onto the dusty rug. The five which were carved with runes landed with the blank face uppermost. He slowly picked them up, and threw them again. They came up blank. The empty realm, where lost spirits go.

Dariat fled the Starbridge village. He never went back. He stopped taking didactic courses, refused to acknowledge Rubra's affinity bond, argued a lot with his mother,

and moved into a starscraper apartment of his own at fifteen.

There was nothing Rubra could do. His most promising protégé for decades was lost to him. The affinity window into Dariat's mind remained closed; it was the most secure block the habitat personality pattern had ever known, remaining in place even while the boy slept. After a month of steady pressure Rubra gave up, even Dariat's subconscious was sealed against subliminal suggestions. The block was more than conscious determination, it was a profound psychological inhibition. Probably trauma based.

Rubra cursed yet another failure descendant, and switched his priority to a new fledgeling. Monitoring of Dariat was assigned to an autonomic sub-routine. Occasional checks by the personality's principal consciousness revealed a total drop-out, a part-time drunk, part-time hustler picking up beer money by knowing people and where to find them, getting involved with deals which were dubious even for Valisk. Dariat never got a regular job, living off the starscraper food pap, accessing MF albums, sometimes for days on end. He never approached a girl again.

It was a stand-off which lasted for thirty years. Rubra had even stopped his intermittent checks on the wrecked man. Then the *Yaku* arrived at Valisk.

The *Yaku's* emergence above Opuntia six days after it left Lalonde never raised a query. None of Graeme Nicholson's fleks had yet reached their destination when the cargo starship asked for and was granted docking permission. As far as both the habitat personality and the Avon Embassy's small Intelligence team (the only Confederation observers Rubra would allow inside) were concerned it was just another cargo starship visiting a spaceport which handled nearly thirty thousand similar visits a year.

Yaku had emerged a little further away from Valisk than was normal, and its flight vector required a more than average number of corrections—the fusion drive was fluctuating in an erratic fashion. But then a lot of the Adamist

starships using Valisk operated on the borderline of CAB spaceworthiness requirements.

It docked at a resupply bay on the edge of the three-kilometre-wide disk which was the habitat's non-rotational spaceport. The captain requested a quantity of He₃ and deuterium, as well as oxygen, water, and some food. Spaceport service companies were contracted within ten minutes of its arrival.

Three people disembarked. Their passport fleks named them as Marie Skibbow, Alicia Cochrane, and Manza Balyuzi; the last two were members of *Yaku's* crew. All three cleared Valisk's token immigration and customs carrying small bags with a single change of clothing.

The *Yaku* undocked four hours later, its cryogenic tanks full, and flew down towards Opuntia. Whatever its jump coordinate was, the gas giant was between it and Valisk when it activated its energy patterning nodes. No record of its intended destination existed.

Dariat was sitting up at the bar in the Tabitha Oasis when the girl caught his eye. Thirty years of little exercise, too much cheap beer, and a diet of starscraper gland synthesized pastes had brought about a detrimental effect on his once slim physique. He was fat verging on obese, his skin was flaky, his hair was dulled by a week's accumulation of oil. Appearance wasn't something he paid a lot of attention to. A togalike robe covered a multitude of laxities.

That girl, though: teenaged, long limbed, large breasted, exquisite face, bronzed, strong. Wearing a tight white T-shirt and short black skirt. He wasn't alone in watching her. The Tabitha Oasis attracted a tough crew. Girl like that was a walking gang-bang invitation. It had happened before. But she hadn't got a care in the world, there was an *élan* to her which was mesmerizing. All the more surprising, then, was her table companion.

Anders Bospoort: physically her counterpart; late twenties, slab muscles, the best swarthy face money could buy. But he didn't have her youthful exuberance, his mouth and

eyes smiled (for that money they ought to) but there was no emotion powering the expression. Anders Bospoort was in almost equal proportions gigolo, pimp, pusher, and blue-sense star.

Strange she couldn't see that. But he could pile on the charm when necessary, and the expensive wine bottle sitting on the table between them was nearly empty.

Dariat beckoned the barkeeper over. "What's her name?"

"Marie. Arrived on a ship this afternoon."

That explained a lot. Nobody had warned her. Now the wolves of the Tabitha Oasis were circling the camp-fire, enjoying her elaborate seduction. Later they would be able to share the corruption of youth, sensevising Anders Bospoort's boosted penis sliding up between her legs. Have her surprise and pleading in their ears. Feel the ripe body molested by powerful skilled hands.

Maybe Anders wasn't so stupid, Dariat thought, bringing her here was a good advert. He could ask an easy ten per cent over the odds for her flek.

The barkeeper shook his head sadly. He was three times Dariat's age, and he'd spent his every year in Valisk. He'd seen it all, so he claimed, every human foible. "Pity, nice girl like that. Someone should tell her."

"Yeah. Anywhere else, and someone might." Dariat looked at her again. Surely a girl with her beauty couldn't be that naïve about men?

Anders Bospoort extended a gracious arm as they rose from the table. Marie smiled and accepted it. He thought she looked glad at the opportunity to stay close. The gazes she drew from the men of the Tabitha Oasis weren't exactly coy. His size and measured presence was a reassurance. She was safe with him.

They walked across the vestibule outside the bar, and Anders datavised the starscraper's mechanical systems control processor for a lift.

"Thank you for taking me there," Marie said.

He saw the excitement in her eyes at the little taste of the illicit. "I don't always go there. It can get a little rough. Half of the regulars have Confederation warrants hanging over them. If the navy ever comes visiting Valisk the population on penal planets would just about double overnight."

The lift arrived. He gestured her through the open doors. Halfway there, and it was going so smoothly. He'd been a perfect gentleman from the moment they met outside the Apartment Allocation Office (always the best place to pick up clean meat), every word clicking flawlessly into place. And she'd been drawn closer and closer, hypnotized by the old Bospoort magic.

She glanced uncertainly at the floor as the doors closed, as if she'd only just realized how far from her home and family she was. All alone with her only friend in the whole star system. No going back for her now.

He felt a tightening in his stomach as the anticipation heightened. This would all go on the flek; the prelude, the slow-burning conquest. People appreciated the build in tension. And he was an artiste supreme.

The doors opened to the eighty-third floor.

"It's a walk down two floors," Anders told her apologetically. "The lifts don't work below here. And the maintenance crews won't come down to fix them. Sorry."

The vestibule hadn't been cleaned for a long time and rubbish was accumulating in the corners. There was graffiti on the walls, a smell of urine in the air. Marie looked round nervously, and stayed close to Anders' side.

He guided her to the stairwell. The light was dim, a strip of electrophorescent cells on the wall whose output had faded to an insipid yellow. Dozens of big pale moths whirred incessantly against it. Water leaked down the walls from cracks in the polyp. A cream-coloured moss grew along the edge of every step.

"It's very kind of you to let me stay with you," Marie ventured.

"Just until you get your own apartment sorted out. There

are hundreds of unused ones. It's one of life's greater mysteries why it always takes so long for the Allocation Office to assign one."

Nobody else was using the stairs. Anders very rarely got to meet any of his neighbours. The bottom of the starscraper was perfect for him. No quick access, everyone stayed behind closed doors to conduct their chosen business in life, and no questions were ever asked. The cops Magellanic Itg contracted to maintain a kind of order in the rest of Valisk didn't come down here.

They left the stairwell on his floor, and he datavised a code at his apartment door. Nothing happened. He flashed her a strained smile, and datavised the code again. This time it opened, juddering once or twice as it slid along its rails. Marie went in first. Anders deliberately kept the inside lights low, and codelocked the door behind him—at least the processor acknowledged that. He put his arm round her shoulder and steered her into the biggest of the three bedrooms. That door was codelocked too.

Marie walked into the middle of the room, eyes straying to the double bed. There were long velvet straps fixed to each corner.

"Take your clothes off," Anders told her. An uncompromising sternness appeared in his voice. He datavised an order to the overhead light panel, but it remained at its lowest level. Shit! And she was obediently stripping off. Nothing for it, he'd have to stay with the deep shadows and hope everyone found it erotic.

"Now take mine off," he ordered. "Slowly."

He could feel her hands trembling as she pushed the shirt off his broad shoulders, which made a nice touch. Nervous ones were always more responsive.

His eyes ran over her with expert tracking as she walked ahead of him to the bed, capturing every square centimetre of flesh on display. When she was lying on the water mattress his hands traced the same route. Then his boosted cock was swelling to its full length, and he focused on her

face to make sure he captured her fear. That was always a big turn on for the punters.

Marie was smiling.

The lights sprang up to full intensity.

Anders twisted round in confusion. "Hey—"

At first he thought someone had crept up and snapped handcuffs round his wrists, but when he looked he saw it was Marie's elegant feminine hands gripping him.

"Let go." The pain as she squeezed harder was frightening. "Bitch! Let go. Christ—"

She laughed.

He looked back down at her, and gasped. She was sprouting hair right across her chest and stomach, thick black bristles that scratched and pricked his skin where he lay on top of her. Individual strands began to harden. It was like lying on a hedgehog hide. The long tips were puncturing his own skin, needling in through the subcutaneous layers of fat.

"Fuck me, then," she said.

He tried to struggle, but all that did was push more needle spines into his abdomen. Marie let go of one wrist. He hit her then, on the side of her ribs, and her flesh gave way below his fist. When he brought his hand away it was covered in yellow and red slime. The spines piercing him turned to worms, slick and greasy, licking round inside the swath of puncture holes down his torso. Blood trickled out.

Anders let out an insane howl. She was rotting below him, skin melting away into a putrescent crimson film of mucus. It was acting like glue, sticking him to her. The stench was vile, stinging his eyes. He puked, the wine from the Tabitha Oasis splattering down on her deliquescing face.

"Kiss me."

He bucked and floundered against her, weeping helplessly, praying to a God he hadn't addressed in over a decade. The worms were wriggling between his abdominal muscles, twining round tendon fibres. Blood and pus

squelched and intermingled, forming a sticky glue which wedded them belly to belly like Siamese twins.

“Kiss me, Anders.”

Her free hand clamped onto the back of his skull. It felt like there was nothing left on it but bone. Sludge dripped into his coiffured hair.

“No!” he whimpered.

Her lips had dribbled away like candle wax, leaving a wide gash in the bubbling corruption that was her face. The teeth were a permanent grin. His head was being forced down towards her. He saw her teeth parting, then they were rammed against his own face.

The kiss. And hot, black, gritty liquid surged up out of her throat. Anders couldn't scream any more. It was in his own mouth, kneading its way down his air passage like a fat, eager serpent.

A voice from nowhere said: “We can stop it.”

The liquid detonated into his lungs. He could feel it, hot and rancid inside his chest, swelling out to invade every delicate cavity. His ribcage heaved at the alien pressure from within. He had stopped struggling.

“She'll kill you unless you let us help. She's drowning you.”

He wanted to breathe. He wanted air. He would do anything to breathe. Anything.

“Then let us in.”

He did.

Using the sensitive cells in the polyp above Anders Bospoort's bed, Dariat watched as the injuries and manifestations reversed themselves. Marie's glutinous skin hardened, bristles retracting. The wounds down Anders Bospoort's abdomen closed up. They became what they were before: satyr and seraph.

Anders began to stroke himself, hands tracing lines of muscle across his chest. He looked down on his body with a childlike expression of awe which swiftly became a broad grin. “I'm magnificent,” he whispered. “Utterly

magnificent.” The accent was different to Anders’ usual. Dariat couldn’t quite place it.

“Yes, you look pretty good,” she replied indifferently. She sat up. The sheets were stained a faint pink below her back.

“Let me have you.”

Her mouth wrinkled up with indecision.

“Please. You know I need to. Hell, it’s been seven hundred years. Show a little compassion here.”

“All right then.” She lay back down. Anders started to lick her body, reminding Dariat of a feeding dog. They fucked for twenty minutes, Anders rutting with a fervour he’d never shown in any of his fleks. Electric lights and household equipment went berserk as they thrashed about. Dariat quickly checked the neighbouring apartments; a stimulant-program writer was yelling in frustration as his processors crashed at tremendous speed; a clone merchant’s vats seethed and boiled as regulators fried the fragile cell clusters which they were wired up to. Doors all around the vestibule opened and shut like guillotines. He had to launch a flurry of subversive affinity orders into the floor’s neural cells to prevent the local personality sub-routines from alerting Rubra’s principal consciousness.

When he arrived, puffing heavily, outside the apartment, Marie and Anders Bospoort were getting dressed. He used a black-market customized processor block to break the door’s codelock, and walked straight in.

Marie and Anders looked up in alarm. They ran out of the bedroom. The processor block died in Dariat’s hand and the apartment was plunged into pitch darkness.

“The dark doesn’t bother me,” he said loudly. The sensitive cells showed him the two of them were walking towards him menacingly.

“Nothing will bother you from now on,” Marie replied.

The belt of his toga robe began to tighten round his belly. “Wrong. Firstly you won’t be able to tyrannize me like you did poor old Anders, I’m not that weak. Secondly, if I die Rubra will see exactly what’s been going on, and

what you are. He might be crazy, but he'll fight like a lion to defend his precious habitat and corporation. Once he knows you exist you've lost ninety per cent of your advantage. You'll never take over Valisk without my help."

The lights came back on. His belt loosened. Marie and Anders regarded him with expressionless faces.

"It's only thanks to me he doesn't know already. You obviously don't understand much about bitek. I can help there as well."

"Perhaps we don't care if he knows," Anders said.

"OK, fine. You want me to lift the limiter orders I put on this floor's sensitive cells?"

"What do you want?" Marie asked.

"Revenge. I've waited thirty years for you. It's been so long, so very tiring; I nearly broke on more than one occasion. But I knew you would come in the end."

"You expected me?" she asked derisively.

"What you are, yes."

"And what am I?"

"The dead."

4

Gemal emerged from its jump six hundred and fifty thousand kilometres above Mirchusko, where the gas giant's gravity anchored it in a slightly elliptical orbit; *Tranquillity*, in its lower circular orbit, was trailing by two hundred thousand kilometres. Oliver Llewelyn, the colonist-carrier's captain, identified his starship to the habitat personality, and requested approach and docking permission.

"Do you require assistance?" *Tranquillity* asked.

"No, we're fully functional."

"I don't get many colonist-carrier vessels visiting. I thought you might have been making an emergency maintenance call."

"No. This flight is business."

"Does your entire passenger complement wish to apply for residency?"

"Quite the opposite. The zero-tau pods are all empty. We've come to hire some military specialists who live here."

"I see. Docking and approach request granted. Please datavise your projected vector to spaceport flight control."

Terrance Smith datavised a sensor access request into the starship's flight computer, and watched the massive bitek habitat growing larger as they accelerated towards rendezvous in a complex manoeuvre at two-thirds of a gee. He opened a channel to the habitat's communication net, and asked for a list of starships currently docked. Names and classifications flowed through his mind. A collation program sorted through them, indicating possibles and probables.

"I didn't realize this was such a large port," he said to Oliver Llewelyn.

"It has to be," the captain replied. "There are at least five major family-owned civil carrier fleets based here purely because of the tax situation, and most of the other line companies have offices in the habitat. Then you've got to consider the residents. They import one hell of a lot; everything you need to live the good life, from food to clothes to pretentious art. You don't think they'll eat the synthesized pulp the starscrapers grow, do you?"

"No, I suppose not."

"A lot of ships pick up contracts for them, bringing stuff in from all over the Confederation. And of course Tranquillity is the Confederation's principal base for blackhawk mating flights now Valisk is falling from favour with the captains. The eggs gestate down in the big inner ring. It all adds together. The Lords of Ruin have built it into one of the most important commercial centres in this sector."

Terrance looked across the bridge. Seven acceleration couches were arranged in a petal pattern on its composite decking, and only one of them was empty. The compartment had an industrial look, with cables and ducts fixed to the walls rather than being tucked neatly out of sight behind composite panels. But then that was a uniform characteristic throughout the *Gemal* and her sister ships which shuttled between Earth and stage one colony worlds. They were bulk carriers whose cargo happened to be people, and the line companies didn't waste money on cosmetic finishes.

Captain Llewelyn was lying inertly on his acceleration couch, surrounded by a horseshoe of bulky consoles; a well-built sixty-eight-year-old oriental with skin as smooth as any adolescent. His eyes were shut as he handled the datavise from the flight computer.

"Have you been here before?" Terrance asked.

"I stopped over two days, that was thirty-five years ago when I was a junior officer in a different company. Don't

suppose it's changed much. Plutocrats put a lot of stock in stability."

"I'd like you to talk to the other captains for me, the independent trader starships we want to hire. I haven't exactly done this kind of work before."

Oliver Llewelyn snorted softly. "You let people know what kind of flight you're putting together, then start flashing that overloaded Jovian Bank credit disk around, and you'll be beating them off with a stick."

"What about the mercenaries and general troops?"

"The captains will put you in touch. Hell, the combat boosted will pay the captains for an introduction. You want my advice, delegate. Find yourself ten or twenty officer types with some solid experience, and let them recruit troops for you. Don't try and do it all yourself. We haven't got time, for a start. Rexrew gave us a pretty tight schedule."

"Thanks."

"You're paying, remember?"

"Yeah." It had taken twenty thousand fuseodollars just to get Oliver Llewelyn to agree to take the *Gemal* to Tranquillity. "Not part of my LDC contract," the captain had said stubbornly. Money was easier than datavisiting legal requirements at him. Terrance suspected it was going to cost a lot more to take the *Gemal* back to Lalonde. "You sound like you know what you're talking about," he said, mildly intrigued.

"I've flown a lot of different missions in my time," the old captain said indifferently.

"So where do I meet these starship captains?"

Oliver Llewelyn accessed a thirty-five-year-old file in his neural nanonics. "We'll start at Harkey's Bar."

Fifteen hours later Terrance Smith had to admit that Oliver Llewelyn had been perfectly correct. He didn't need to make any effort, the people he wanted came to him. Like iron to a magnet, he thought, or flies to shit. He was sitting in a wall booth, feeling like an old-style tsar holding court, receiving

petitions from eager subjects. Harkey's Bar was full with starship crews hunched around tables, or concentrating in small knots at the bar. There was also a scattering of the combat boosted in the room. He had never seen them before, not in the flesh—if that's what it could be called. Several of them resembled cosmoniks, with a tough silicon outer skin, and dual—even triple—lower arms, sockets customized for weapons. But the majority had a sleeker appearance than the cosmoniks, whose technology they pilfered; they'd been sculpted for agility rather than blunt EVA endurance, although Terrance could see one combat boosted who was almost globular, his (her?) head a neckless dome, with a wrap-around retinal strip, grainy auburn below its clear lens. The lid rippled constantly, a blink moving round and round. There were four stumpy legs, and four arms, arranged symmetrically. The arms were the most human part of the modified body, since only two of them ended in burnished metal sockets. He tried not to stare at the assembled grotesqueries, not to show his inner nerves.

The bar's atmosphere was subdued, heavy with anticipation. It was long past the time the band were usually jamming on stage, but tonight they were drinking back in the kitchen, resigned to a blown gig.

"Captain André Duchamp," Oliver Llewelyn said. "Owner of the *Villeneuve's Revenge*."

Terrance shook hands with the smiling round-faced captain. There was some contradiction in his mind that such a jovial-seeming man should want to join a military mission. "I need starships capable of landing a scout team on a terracompatible planet, then backing them up with tactical ground strikes," he said.

André put his wineglass down squarely on the table. "The *Villeneuve's Revenge* has four X-ray lasers and two electron-beam weapons. Planetary bombardment from low orbit will not be a problem."

"There could also be some anti-ship manoeuvres required from you. Some interdiction duties."

"Again, monsieur, this is not a problem from my per-

sonal position; we do have combat-wasp launch-cradles. However, you would have to provide the wasps themselves. And I would require some reassurance that we will not be involved in any controversial action in a system where Confederation Navy ships are present. As a commercial vessel I have no licence to carry such items.”

“You would be operating under government licence, which allows you to carry any weapons system quite legitimately. This entire mission is completely legal.”

“So?” André Duchamp gave him a quizzical glance. “This is excellent news. A legal combat mission is one I will welcome. As I say, I have no objection to conducting anti-ship engagements. May I ask which government you represent?”

“Lalonde.”

André Duchamp had a long blink while his neural nanonics almanac file reviewed the star system. “A stage one colony world. Interesting.”

“I am negotiating with several astroengineering companies with stations here at Tranquillity for combat wasps,” Terrance Smith said. “There will also be several nuclear-armed atmospheric-entry warheads to be taken on the mission. Would you be prepared to carry and deploy them?”

“*Oui.*”

“In that case, I believe we can do business, Captain Duchamp.”

“You have yet to mention money.”

“I am authorized to issue a five hundred thousand fuseodollar fee for every ship which registers for Lalonde naval duty, payable on arrival at our destination. Pay for an individual starship is three hundred thousand fuseodollars per month, with a minimum of two months’ duty guaranteed. There will be bonuses for enemy starships and spaceplanes destroyed, and a completion bonus of three hundred thousand fuseodollars. We will not, however, be providing insurance cover.”

André Duchamp took a leisurely sip of wine. “I have one further question.”

“Yes?”

“Does this *enemy* use antimatter?”

“No.”

“Very well. I would haggle the somewhat depressing price . . .” He cast a glance around the crowded room, crews not quite watching to see what the outcome would be. “But I feel I am not in a strong bargaining position. Today it is a buyer’s market.”

From his table on the other side of the bar Joshua watched André Duchamp rise from Terrance Smith’s booth. The two of them shook hands again, then André went back to the table where his crew were waiting. They all went into a tight huddle. Wolfgang Kuebler, captain of the *Maranta*, was shown to Smith’s booth by Oliver Llewelyn.

“That looks like five ships signed up,” Joshua said to his crew.

“Big operation,” Dahybi Yadev said. He drained his beer glass and sat it down on the table. “Starships, combat-boosted mercs, enhanced troops; that’s a long, expensive shopping list. Big money involved.”

“Lalonde can’t be paying, then,” Melvyn Ducharme said. “It doesn’t have any money.”

“Yes, it does,” Ashly Hanson said quietly. “A colony world is a massive investment, and a very solid one if you get in early enough. A healthy percentage of my zero-tau maintenance trust-fund portfolio is made up from development company shares, purely for the long-term stability they offer. I’ve never, ever heard of a colony failing once the go-ahead has been given. The money may not be floating around the actual colonists themselves, but the amount of financial resources required simply to initiate such a venture runs close to a trillion fuseodollars. And Lalonde has been running for over a quarter of a century, they’d even started an asteroid industrial settlement project. Remember? The development company has the money; more than enough to hire fifteen independent traders and a few

thousand mercenary troops. I doubt it would even cause a ripple in their accountancy program.”

“What for, though?” Sarha Mitcham asked. “What couldn’t the sheriffs handle by themselves?”

“The Ivet riots,” Joshua said. Even he couldn’t manage any conviction. He shrugged under the sceptical looks the others gave him. “Well, there was nothing else while we were there. Marie Skibbow was worried about the scale of the civil disturbance. Nobody quite knew what was happening upriver. And the number of troops this Smith character is trying to recruit implies some kind of ground action is required.”

“Hard to believe,” Dahybi Yadev muttered. “But the actual mission objective won’t be known until after they’ve jumped away from Tranquillity. Simple security.”

“All right,” Joshua said. “We all know the score. With Parris Vasilkovsky backing us on the mayope venture we have a chance to make macro money. And at the same time, with the money we made from the Norfolk run we certainly don’t need to hire on with any mercenary fleet.” He looked at each of them in turn. “Given the circumstances, we can hardly take *Lady Mac* to Lalonde ahead of the fleet. I’ve heard that Terrance Smith has ordered a batch of combat wasps from the McBoeing and Signal-Yakovlev industrial stations. He’s clearly expecting some kind of conflict after they arrive. So the question is, do we go with him to find out what’s happening, and maybe protect our interest, or do we wait here for news? We’ll take a vote, and it must be unanimous.”

Time Universe’s Tranquillity office was on the forty-third floor of the StCroix starscraper. It was the usual crush of offices, studios, editing rooms, entertainment suites, and electronic workshops; a micro-community where individual importance was graded by allocated desk space, facility size, and time allowance. Naturally, given the make-up of the habitat’s population, it had a large finance and com-

merce bureau, but it also provided good Confederationwide news coverage.

Oliver Llewelyn walked into the wood-panelled lobby at ten thirty local time the day after the *Gemal* had docked. The receptionist palmed him off on a junior political correspondent called Matthias Rems. In the composite-walled office Matthias used to assemble his reports he produced the flek Graeme Nicholson had given him and named a carriage fee of five thousand fuseodollars. Matthias wasn't stupid, the fact that the *Gemal's* captain had come direct from Lalonde was enough to warrant serious attention. By now the entire habitat knew about the mercenary fleet being assembled by Terrance Smith, though its purpose remained unknown. Rumour abounded. Lalonde was immediate news; plenty of Tranquillity residents would have LDC shares sleeping in their portfolios. First-hand sense-ises of the planet and whatever was happening there would have strong ratings clout. Ordinarily Matthias Rems might have hesitated about the shameless rip-off fee (he guessed correctly that Llewelyn had already been paid), especially after he accessed the company personnel file on Graeme Nicholson; but given the circumstances he knuckled under and paid.

After the captain left, Matthias slotted the flek into his desktop player block. The sensewise recording was code-locked, so Graeme Nicholson had obviously considered it important. He pulled Nicholson's personal code from his file, then sat back and closed his eyes. The Crashed Dumper invaded his sensorium; its heat and noise and smell, the taste of a caustic local beer tarring his throat, unaccustomed weight of a swelling belly. Graeme Nicholson held the fragments of a broken glass in his hand, his arms and legs trembling slightly; both eyes focused unwaveringly on a tall man and lovely teenage girl over by the crude bar.

Twelve minutes later a thoroughly shaken Matthias Rems burst in on Claudia Dohan, boss of Time Universe's Tranquillity operation.

The ripple effect of Graeme Nicholson's flek was similar to the sensation Ione's appearance had caused the previous year, in every respect save one. Ione had been a feel-good item: Laton was the antithesis. He was terror and danger, history's nightmare exhumed.

"We have to show a sense of responsibility," a twitchy Claudia Dohan said after she surfaced from the sensewise. "Both the Confederation Navy and the Lord of Ruin must be told."

The AV cylinder on her desktop processor block chimed. "Thank you for your consideration," Tranquillity said. "I have informed Ione Saldana about Laton's reappearance. I suggest you contact Commander Olsen Neale yourself to convey the contents of the flek."

"Right away," Claudia Dohan said diligently.

Matthias Rems was glancing nervously round the office, disturbed by the reminder of the habitat personality's perpetual vigilance.

Claudia Dohan broke the news on the lunchtime programme. Eighteen billion fuseodollars was wiped off share values on Tranquillity's trading floor within quarter of an hour of the sensewise being broadcast. Values crept back up during the rest of the afternoon as brokers assessed possible war scenarios. By the end of the day seven billion fuseodollars had been restored to prices—mainly on astro-engineering companies which would benefit from armaments sales.

The Time Universe office had done its work well, considering the short period it had in which to prepare. Its current affairs channel's usual afternoon schedule was replaced by library memories of Laton's earlier activities and earnest studio panel speculation. While Tranquillity's residents were being informed, Claudia Dohan started hiring starships to distribute copies of Graeme Nicholson's flek across the Confederation. This time she had a small lever against the captains, unlike Ione's very public appearance; she had a monopoly on Laton's advent and they were bidding against each other to deliver fleks. By the

evening she had dispatched eighteen starships to various planets (Kulu, Avon, Oshanko, and Earth being the principals). Those Time Universe offices would in turn send out a second wave of fleks. Two weeks ought to see the entire Confederation brought up to speed. And warned, Claudia Dohan thought, Time Universe alone alerting the human and xenoc races to the resurgent danger. A greater boost to company fortunes simply wasn't possible.

She took the whole office out to a five-star meal that night. This coup, following so soon after Ione, should bring them all some heady bonuses, as well as boosting them way ahead of their contemporaries on the promotion scale. She was already thinking of a seat on the board for herself.

But it was a hectic afternoon. Matthias Rems (making his debut as a front-line presenter) introduced forty-year-old recordings of the broken Edenist habitat Jantrit, its shell cracked like a giant egg where the antimatter had detonated. Its atmosphere jetted out of a dozen breaches in the five-hundred-metre-thick polyp, huge grey-white plumes which acted like rockets, destabilizing the cylinder's ponderous rotation. The wobble built over the period of a few hours, until it developed into an uncontrollable tumble. On the outside, induction cables lashed round in anarchic hundred-kilometre arcs, preventing even the most agile voidhawks from rendezvousing. Inside, water and soil were tossed about, acting like a permanent floating earthquake. Starscrapers, weakened by the blast, broke off like rotten icicles, whirling away at terrific velocities. And all the while their air grew thinner.

Some people were saved as the voidhawks and Adamist starships hurtled after the spinning starscrapers. Eight thousand out of a population of one and a quarter million. Even then utter disaster might have been averted. The dying Edenists should have transferred their memories into the habitat personality. But Laton had infected Jantrit's neuron structure with his proteanic virus and its rationality was crumbling as trillions upon trillions of cells fell to the

corruption every second. The other two habitats orbiting the gas giant were too far away to provide much assistance; personality transference was a complex function, distance and panic confused the issue. Twenty-seven thousand Edenists managed to bridge the gulf; three thousand patterns were later found to be incomplete, reduced to traumatized childlike entities. Voidhawks secured another two hundred and eighty personalities, but the bitek starships didn't have the capacity to store any more, and they were desperately busy anyway, chasing the starscrapers.

For Edenists it was the greatest tragedy since the founding of their culture. Even Adamists were stunned by the scale of the disaster. A living sentient creature thirty-five kilometres in length mind-raped and killed, nearly one and a quarter million people killed, over half a million stored personality patterns wiped.

And it had all been a diversion. A tactic to enable Laton and his cohorts to flee without fear of capture after their coup failed. He used the community's deaths as a cover; there was no other reason for it, no grand strategic design.

Every voidhawk, every Confederation Navy ship, every asteroid settlement, every planetary government searched for Laton and the three blackhawks he had escaped with.

He was cornered two months later in the Ragundan system: three blackhawks, armed with antimatter and refusing to surrender. Three voidhawks and five Confederation Navy frigates were lost in the ensuing battle. An asteroid settlement was badly damaged with the loss of a further eight thousand lives when the blackhawks tried to use it as a hostage, threatening to bomb it with antimatter unless the navy withdrew. The naval flotilla's commanding admiral called their bluff.

As with all space engagements there was nothing left of the vanquished but weak nebulas of radioactive molecules. There was no body to identify. But it couldn't have been anyone else.

Now it seemed there must have been four blackhawks. Nobody could mistake that tall, imperious man standing on

the steps of the *Yaku's* spaceplane, laughing at a cowering Graeme Nicholson.

The guests Matthias Rems invited into the studio, a collection of retired navy officers, political professors, and weapons engineers, observed that Laton's actual goal had never been declared. Speculation had been rife for years after the event. It obviously involved some kind of physical (biological) and mental domination, subverting the Edenists through the (fortunately) imperfect proteanic virus he had developed. Changing them and the habitats. But to what grandiose ideal had been thought for ever unknown. The studio debate concentrated on whether Laton was behind the current conflict on Lalonde, and if it was the first stage in his bid to impose his will on the Confederation again. Graeme Nicholson had certainly believed so.

Laton was different to the kind of planetary disputes like Omuta and Garissa; the perennial squabbling between asteroid settlements and their funding companies over autonomy. Laton wasn't a violence-tinged argument over resources or independence, he was after people, individuals. He wanted to get into your genes, your mind, and alter you, mould you to his own deviant construct. Laton was deadly personal.

One of the keenest observers of the Time Universe programmes was Terrance Smith. The Laton revelation had come as a profound shock. He, and the *Gemal's* crew, became the objects of intense media interest. Hounded every time he left the colonist-carrier, he eventually had to appeal to Tranquillity for privacy. The habitat personality agreed (a resident's freedom from intrusion was part of the original constitution Michael Saldana had written), and the reporters were called off. They promptly switched their attention to anyone who had signed on as a member of the mercenary fleet, all of whom protested (truthfully) that they knew nothing of Laton.

"What do we do?" Terrance Smith asked in a bleak voice. He was alone with Oliver Llewelyn on the *Gemal's* bridge. Console holoscreens were showing the Time Uni-

verse evening news programme, cutting between a studio presenter and segments of Graeme Nicholson's recording. The captain was someone whose opinion Terrance valued, in fact he'd grown heavily dependent on him during the last couple of days. There weren't many other people he confided in.

"You don't have many options," Oliver Llewelyn pointed out. "You've already paid the registration fee to twelve ships, and you've got a third of the troops you wanted. Either you go ahead as originally planned, or you cut and run. Doing nothing isn't a valid alternative, not now."

"Cut and run?"

"Sure. You've got enough money in the LDC's credit account to lose yourself. Life could get very comfortable for you and your family." Oliver Llewelyn watched Terrance Smith closely, trying to anticipate his reaction. The notion obviously appealed, but he didn't think the bureaucrat would have enough backbone.

"I . . . No, we can't. There are too many people depending on me. We have to do something to help Durringham. You weren't down there, you don't know what it was like that last week. These mercenaries are the only hope they've got."

"As you wish." Pity, Oliver Llewelyn thought, a great pity. I'm getting too old for this kind of jaunt.

"Do you think fifteen ships is enough to go up against Laton?" Terrance Smith asked anxiously. "I have the authority to hire another ten."

"We're not going up against Laton," Oliver Llewelyn said patiently.

"But—"

The captain gestured at one of the console holoscreens. "You accessed Graeme Nicholson's senseise. Laton has left Lalonde. All your mercenaries are faced with is a big mopping-up operation. Leave Laton to the Confederation; the navy and the voidhawks will be going after him with every weapon they've got."

The notion of taking on Laton was something the starship captains had been discussing among themselves. Only three were sufficiently alarmed to return Terrance Smith's registration fee. He had no trouble in attracting replacements, and bringing the number of the fleet up to nineteen—six blackhawks, nine combat-capable independent traders, three cargo carriers, and the *Gemal* itself. Virtually none of the general troops or the combat-boosted mercenaries resigned. Fighting Laton's legions, being on the *right* side, gave the whole enterprise a kudos like few others; old hands and fresh youngsters queued up to sign on.

Three and a half days after he arrived, Terrance Smith had all he came for. The one request from Commander Olsen Neale to hold off and wait for a Confederation naval investigatory flight was smilingly refused. Durringham needs us now, Terrance told him.

Ione and Joshua walked down one of Tranquillity's winding valleys in the late afternoon, dew-heavy grass staining their sandals. She was wearing a long white cotton skirt and a matching camisole, a loose-fitting outfit which allowed the air to circulate over her warm skin. Joshua just wore some long dark mauve shorts. His skin was tanning nicely, she thought, he was almost back to his old colour. They had spent most of his stopover outside; swimming with Haile, riding, walking, having long sexual adventures. Joshua seemed to get very turned on having sex beside and in the bountiful streams meandering through the habitat.

Ione stopped at a long pool which formed the intersection of two streams. It was lined by mature rikbal trees, whose droopy branches stroked the water with their long, thin leaves. They were all in flower, bright pink blooms the size of a child's fist.

Gold and scarlet fish slithered through the water. It was tranquillity, Ione thought, small t, created by big T; name chasing form, name creating form. The lake—the whole park—was a pause from the habitat's bustle; the habitat

was a pause from the Confederation's bustle. If you wanted it to be.

Joshua pushed her gently against a rikbal trunk, kissing her cheek, her neck. He opened the front of her camisole.

Hair fell down across her eyes, she was wearing it longer these days. "Don't go," she said quietly.

His arms dropped inertly to his sides, head slumping forwards until his brow touched hers. "Good timing."

"Please."

"You said you weren't going to dump this possessive scene on me."

"This isn't being possessive."

"What then? It sounds like it."

Her head came up sharply, pink spots burning on both cheeks. "If you must know, I'm worried about you."

"Don't be."

"Joshua, you're flying into a war zone."

"Not really. We're flying escort duty for a troop convoy, that's all. The soldiers and combat boosted are in at the hard edge."

"Smith wants the starships to provide ground strikes; he's bought combat wasps for interdiction missions. That's the hard edge, Joshua, that's the dead edge. Bloody hell, you're going up against Laton in an antique wreck that barely rates its CAB spaceworthiness licence. And there's no reason. None. You don't need mayope, you don't need Vasilkovsky." She held his arm, imploring. "You're rich. You're happy. Don't try and tell me you're not. I've watched you for three years. You've never had so much fun as when you gallivanted around the galaxy in the *Lady Macbeth*. Now look at what you're doing. Paper deals, Joshua. Making paper money you can never spend. Sitting behind a desk, that's your destination. That's where you're flying to, Joshua, and it isn't you."

"Antique, huh?"

"I didn't mean—"

"How old is Tranquillity, Ione? At least I own the *Lady Mac*, it doesn't own me."

"I'm just trying to shock some sense into you. Joshua, it's Laton you're facing. Don't you watch the AV recordings? Didn't you access Graeme Nicholson's sensewise?"

"Yes. I did. Laton isn't on Lalonde. He left on the *Yaku*. Did you miss that bit, Ione? If I wanted to go on suicide flights I'd chase after the *Yaku*. That's where the danger is. That's where the navy heroes are going. Not me, I'm protecting my own interests."

"But you don't need it!" she said. God, but he could be bonehead stubborn at times.

"You mean you don't."

"What?"

"Not convenient, is it? Me having that much money. That much money would mean I make the decisions, I make the choices. It gives me control over my life. Where does that fit into your cosy scenario of us, Ione? I won't be so easy to manipulate then, will I?"

"Manipulate! One glimpse of a female nipple and your fly seal bursts apart from the pressure. That's how complicated your personality is. You don't need manipulating, Joshua, you need hormone suppressors. All I'm doing is trying to think ahead for you, because God knows you can't do it for yourself."

"Jesus, Ione! Sometimes I can't believe you're bonded to a cubic kilometre of neuron cells, you don't display the IQ of an ant most days. This is my *chance*, I can make it. I can be your equal."

"I don't want an equal." Ione jammed her mouth shut. She'd nearly done it, nearly said: "I just want you." But torture wouldn't bring that from her lips, not now.

"Yeah, so I noticed," he said. "I started with a broken-down ship. I made that work, I earned a living flying it. And now I'm moving on, moving up. That's life, Ione. Growing, evolving. You should try it sometime." He turned and stomped off through the trees, sweeping the hanging branches aside impatiently. If she wanted to say sorry, she could damn well come after him and do it.

Ione watched him go, and fumbled with the front of her

camisole. What an asshole. He might be psychic, but only at the expense of common sense.

I'm so sorry, Tranquillity said gently.

She sniffed hard. **What about?**

Joshua.

There's no reason. If he wants to go, let him. See if I care.

You do care. He is right for you.

He doesn't think so.

Yes, he does. But he is prideful. As are you.

Thanks for nothing.

Don't cry.

Ione glanced down, seeing her hands as blobs. Her eyes were horribly warm. She wiped at them vigorously. God, how could I have been so stupid? He was just supposed to be a fun stud. Nothing more.

I love you, Tranquillity said, so full of cautious warmth that Ione had to smile. Then she winced as her stomach churned, and promptly threw up. The bile was acid and disgusting. She cupped her hands to capture some of the cool pool water so she could rinse her mouth out.

You are pregnant, Tranquillity observed.

Yes. The last time Joshua came back, before he made the Norfolk run.

Tell him.

No! That would only make it worse.

You are both fools, Tranquillity said with unaccustomed ardour.

Stars slid across the window behind Commander Olsen Neale. Choisya was the only one of Mirchusko's moons visible, a distant grey-brown crescent sliver peeping up over the bottom of the oval every three minutes. Erick Thakrar didn't like the sight of the starfield, it was too close, too easy to reach. He wondered, briefly, if he was developing a space-phobia. It wasn't unheard of, and there were a lot of associations involved. That horrified, distraught voice coming from the *Krystal Moon*; a fifteen-year-old girl. What had

Tina looked like? It was a question he'd been asking himself a lot recently. Did she have a boyfriend? What mood fantasy bands did she cherish? Had she enjoyed her life on the old interplanetary vessel? Or did she find it intolerable?

What the fuck was she doing in the forward compartment below the communication dishes?

"The micro-fusion generators were handed directly over to the *Nolana* as soon as we docked," Erick said. "They never even passed through Tranquillity's cargo-storage facility. Which means there was no data work, no port manager's inspection. And of course we were all on board the *Villeneuve's Revenge* until the transfer was finished. I couldn't get a message out to you."

"We'll track the *Nolana*, of course," Olsen Neale said. "See where the generators go. It should expose the distribution net. You've done well," he added encouragingly. The young captain looked haggard, nothing like the bright eager agent who had wangled himself a berth on the *Villeneuve's Revenge* those long months ago.

It hits us all in the end, son, Olsen Neale thought soulfully to himself. We deliberately bring ourselves down to their level so we can blend in, and sometimes it costs just too much. Because nothing can go lower than human beings.

Erick remained unmoved by the compliment. "You can have Duchamp and the rest of the crew arrested immediately," he said. "My neural nanonics recording of our attack on the *Krystal Moon* will be more than enough to convict them. I want you to tell the prosecutor to ask for maximum penalties. We can have them all committed to a penal planet. The whole lot of them, and that's better than they deserve."

And it transfers your guilt, as well, Neale thought silently. "I don't think we can do that right now, Erick," he said.

"What? Three people have died just so that you have enough evidence against Duchamp. Two of them I killed myself."

"I'm truly sorry, Erick, but circumstances have changed somewhat radically since your mission began. Have you accessed Time Universe's Lalonde sensewise?"

Erick gave him a demoralized stare, guessing what was coming. "Yes."

"Terrance Smith has signed on the *Villeneuve's Revenge* for his mercenary fleet. We've got to have somebody there, Erick. It's a legal mission for a planetary government, there's nothing I can do to prevent them from leaving. Christ, this is Laton we're talking about. I was about ten years old when he destroyed Jantrit. One and a quarter million people just so he could make a clean getaway, and the habitat itself; the Edenists had never lost a habitat before, their life expectancy is measured in millennia. And now he's had nearly forty years to perfect his megalomaniac schemes. Shit, we don't even know what they are; but what I've heard about Lalonde is enough to frighten me. I'm scared, Erick, I've got a family. I don't want him to get his hands on them. We have to know where he went on the *Yaku*. Nothing is more important than that. Piracy and flogging off black-market goods are totally irrelevant by comparison. The navy has to find him and exterminate him. Properly this time. Until he's dead, we have no other goal. I've already sent a flek to Avon, a courier left on a blackhawk an hour after the Time Universe people told me about their recording."

Erick's brow crinkled in surprise.

Olsen Neale gave a modest smile. "Yes, a blackhawk. They're fast, they're good. And Laton will ultimately have them too if we don't stop him. Their captains are just as unnerved by him as we are."

"All right." Erick gave up. "I'll go."

"Anything. Any piece of data. What he's done out in the Lalonde hinterlands. Where the *Yaku* went. Just anything."

"I'll get whatever I can."

"You could try asking this journalist, Graeme Nicholson." He shrugged at Erick's expression. "The man's smart, resourceful. If anyone on that planet had the pres-

ence of mind to track the *Yaku*'s jump coordinate, it'll be him."

Erick rose to his feet. "OK."

"Erick . . . take care."

The heavy curtains in Kelly Tirrel's bedroom were drawn across the two oval windows. Ornate wall-mounted glass globes emitted a faint turquoise light. It made the white bed-sheets shimmer as if they were the surface of a moonlit lake; human skin was dark and tantalizing.

Kelly let Joshua run his hands over her, parting her legs so he could probe the damp cleft hidden below her tangle of pubic hair.

"Nice," she purred, squirming over the rumpled sheets.

His teeth shone as he parted his lips. "Good."

"If you take me with you, there will be five days of this. Nonstop; and in free fall, too."

"A powerful argument."

"Money as well. Collins will pay triple rate for my passage."

"I'm already rich."

"So get richer."

"Jesus, you're a pushy bitch."

"Is that a complaint? Did you want to be with someone else tonight?"

"Er, no."

"Good." Her hand slid round his balls. "This is the one for me, Joshua. This is my make or break chance. I blew the Ione story because of someone not a million kilometres from here." Her fingers tightened slightly. "Opportunities like this don't come to a place like Tranquillity three times in a life. If I pull it off I'll be made; top of the seniority table, good assignments, a decent bureau posting, a real salary. You owe me this, Joshua. You owe me very big."

"Suppose the mercenaries don't want you with them?"

"You leave them to me. The way I'll pitch it at them, they'll eat up the offer. Heroes up against frightening odds

helping to flatten Laton, rogues with a heart of gold, sensevised into every home in the Confederation. Come on!”

“Jesus.” There was still an uncomfortable pressure round his balls, long red nails touching his scrotum, a little too sharply to be described as tickling. She wouldn’t. Would she? Her smart, expensive grey-blue Crusto suit was folded neatly over a chair by the dresser. It had been taken off with military regimentation as she *prepared* for sex.

She probably would. Jesus.

“Of course I’ll take you.”

Thumb and forefinger nipped one ball impishly.

“Yow!” His eyes watered. “You don’t think you’re getting carried away with this idea, do you? I mean, there are career moves and career moves. Landing on a hostile planet behind enemy lines is pushing company loyalty to extremes.”

“Crap.” Kelly rolled onto one elbow and glared at him. “Did you see who Time Universe had introducing their studio segments? Matthias bastard Rems, that’s who. Just because he was in the right place at the right time. That lucky little shit. He’s younger than me, barely out of his nursery pen. And they gave him three days prime scheduling time. And market research says he’s popular because he’s *boy-ish*. Some women like that, it turns out. Eighty-year-old virgins, I should think. The reason Time Universe won’t let him record sensevises is because then we’d all know for sure he hasn’t got any balls.”

“Not a problem in your case, is it?”

It came out before he could think. Kelly spent a hot violent twenty minutes making him wish it hadn’t.

The nineteen starships under Terrance Smith’s command assembled a thousand kilometres beyond Tranquillity’s spaceport: the *Gemal* with five thousand general troops, three cargo clippers carrying their equipment and supplies, and fifteen combat-capable ships, six of which were blackhawks.

Tranquillity watched their drives come on, and the flotilla moved in towards Mirchusko at one gee. The Adamist starships employed a single-file formation (with *Gemal* leading) which the blackhawks encircled insolently. Strategic-defence sensor-platforms detected a vast amount of encrypted data traffic being exchanged between the ships as communication channels were tested and combat tactics exchanged.

They curved around the gas giant, heading towards its penumbra. Their drive exhausts shortened and vanished while they were still a hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometres above the unruly cloudscape, coasting towards the jump co-ordinate. Tranquillity saw the faint blue flickers of ion jets perfecting their orbital tracks; then the thermo-dump panels and sensor clusters began to withdraw. The blackhawks rushed away from the main convoy, freed of the constraints imposed by their Adamist partners, expanding in a perfectly spaced rosette. Then the bitek starships performed their swallow manoeuvre, jumping on ahead to scout for any possible trouble. Space reverberated with the gravity-wave backwash of their wormhole interstices snapping shut behind them, impinging on the habitat's sensitive mass-detection organs.

Gemal jumped. Tranquillity noted its spacial location and velocity vector. The trajectory was aligned exactly on Lalonde. One by one the remaining starships fell into the same jump coordinate and triggered their energy patterning nodes, squeezing themselves out of space-time.

5

Since the advent of its independence in 2238, Avon's government had contracted civil astroengineering teams to knock fifteen large (twenty- to twenty-five-kilometre diameter) stony iron asteroids into high orbit above the planet using precisely placed and timed nuclear explosions. Fourteen of them followed the standard formula of industrialization adopted throughout the Confederation. After their orbits were stabilized with a perigee no less than a hundred thousand kilometres, their ores had been mined out and the refined metal sent down to the planet below in the form of giant lifting bodies which coasted through the atmosphere to a splash-glide landing in the ocean. The resulting caverns were expanded, regularized into cylindrical shapes, the surface sculpted into a landscape, sealed, then turned into habitable biospheres. At the same time the original ore refineries would gradually be replaced by more sophisticated industrial stations, allowing the asteroid's economy to shift its emphasis from the bulk production of metals and minerals to finished micro-gee engineered products. The refineries moved on to a fresh asteroid in order to satisfy the demand of the planetary furnaces and steel mills, keeping the worst aspects of raw-material exploitation offplanet where the ecological pollution on the aboriginal biota was zero.

Anyone arriving at a terracompatible planet in the Confederation could tell almost at a glance how long it had been industrialized by the number of settled asteroids in orbit around it.

Avon had been opened for colonization to ethnic Cana-

dians in 2151 during the Great Dispersal, and conformed to the usual evolutionary route out of an agrarian economy into industrialization in slightly less than a century. A satisfactory achievement, but nothing remarkable. It remained a pedestrian world until 2271 when it played host to the head of state conference called to discuss the worrying upsurge in the use of antimatter as a weapon of mass destruction. From that conference was born the Confederation, and Avon seized its chance to leapfrog an entire developmental stage by offering itself as a permanent host for the Assembly. Without any increase in exports, foreign currency poured in as governments set up diplomatic missions; and the lawyers, interstellar companies, finance institutions, influence peddlers, media conglomerates, and lobbyists followed, each with their own prestige offices and staff and dependents.

There was also the Confederation Navy, which was to police the fragile new-found unity between the inhabited stars. Avon contributed to that as well, by donating to the Assembly an orbiting asteroid named Trafalgar which was in the last phase of mining.

Trafalgar was unique within the Confederation in that it had no industrial stations after the miners moved out. It was first, foremost, and only, a naval base, developing from a basic supply and maintenance depot for the entire Confederation Navy (such as it was in the early days) up to the primary military headquarters for the eight hundred and sixty-two inhabited star systems which made up the Confederation in 2611. When First Admiral Samuel Alexandrovich took up his appointment in 2605 it was the home port for the 1st Fleet and headquarters and training centre for the Marine Corps. It housed the career Officer Academy, the Engineering School, the Navy Technical Evaluation Office, the First Admiral's Strategy Office, the Navy Budget Office, the principal research laboratories for supralight communications, and (more quietly) the headquarters of the Fleet Intelligence Arm. A black and grey peanut shape, twenty-one kilometres long, seven wide, ro-

tating about its long axis; it contained three cylindrical biosphere caverns which housed a mixed civilian and military population of approximately three hundred thousand. There were non-rotational spaceports at each end: spheres two kilometres in diameter, the usual gridwork of girders and tanks and pipes, threaded with pressurized tubes carrying commuter cars, and docking-bays ringed by control cabins. Their surface area was just able to cope with the vast quantity of spaceship movements. The spindles were both fixed to Trafalgar's axis at the centre of deep artificial craters two kilometres wide which the voidhawks used as docking-ledges.

As well as its responsibility for defence and anti-pirate duties across the Confederation it coordinated Avon's defence in conjunction with the local navy. The strategic-defence platforms protecting the planet were some of the most powerful ever built. Given the huge numbers of government diplomatic ships, as well as the above average number of commercial flights using the low-orbit docking stations, security was a paramount requirement. There hadn't been an act of piracy in the system for over two and a half centuries, but the possibility of a suicide attack against Trafalgar was uppermost in the minds of navy tacticians. Strategic sensor coverage was absolute out to a distance of two million kilometres from the planetary surface. Reaction time by the patrolling voidhawks was near instantaneous. Starships emerging outside designated areas took a formidable risk in doing so.

Ilex was calling for help even before the wormhole terminus closed behind it. Auster had ordered the voidhawk to fly straight to Avon, over four hundred light-years from Lalonde. Even for a voidhawk, the distance was excessive. *Ilex* needed to recharge its energy patterning cells after ten swallows, which involved a prolonged interval of ordinary flight to allow its distortion field to concentrate the meagre wisps of radiation which flittered through the interstellar medium.

The voyage had taken three and a half days. There were sixty people on board, and the bitek life-support organs were rapidly approaching their critical limit. The air smelt bad, membrane filters couldn't cope with the body gases, CO₂ was building up, oxygen reserves were almost exhausted.

Trafalgar was five thousand kilometres away when the wormhole terminus sealed. Legally, it should have been a hundred thousand. But a long sublight flight to a docking-ledge would have pushed *Ilex*'s life-support situation from critical to catastrophic.

The asteroid immediately went to defence condition C2, allowing the duty officer to engage all targets at will. Nuclear-pumped gamma-ray lasers locked onto the voidhawk's hull within three-quarters of a second of the wormhole opening.

Every Edenist officer in Trafalgar's strategic-defence command-centre heard *Ilex*'s call. They managed to load a five-second delay order into the defence platforms. Auster gave a fast resume of the voidhawk's situation. The delay was extended for another fifteen seconds while the duty officer made her evaluation. A squadron of patrol voidhawks closed on *Ilex* at ten gees.

"Stand down," the duty officer told the centre, and datavisaged a lockdown order into the fire-command computer. She looked across at the nearest Edenist. "And tell that idiot captain from me I'll fry his arse off next time he pulls a stunt like this."

Ilex swooped in towards Trafalgar at five gees as traffic control cleared a priority approach path ahead of it. Six patrol voidhawks spiralled round it like over-protective avian parents, all seven bitek starships exchanging fast affinity messages of anxiety, interest, and mild rebuke. The northern axial crater was a scene of frantic activity while *Ilex* chased the asteroid's rotation, looping around the globular non-rotating spaceport to fly in parallel to the spindle. It settled on a titanium pedestal with eight balloon-tyre main-

tenance vehicles and crew buses racing towards it, bouncing about in the low gravity.

Lalonde's navy office personnel disembarked first, hurrying along the airlock tube to the waiting bus, all of them taking deep gulps of clean, cool air. A medic team carried Niels Regehr off in a stretcher, while two paediatric nurses soothed and patted a blubbering Shafi Banaji. Environment-maintenance vehicles plugged hoses and cables into the crew toroid's umbilical sockets, sending gales of fresh air gusting through the cabins and central corridor. Resenda, *Ilex's* life-support officer, simply vented the fouled atmosphere they'd been breathing throughout the voyage, and grey plumes jetted up out of the toroid, seeded with minute water crystals that sparkled in the powerful lights mounted on the spindle to illuminate the crater.

Once the first bus trundled away, a second nosed up to the airlock. A ten-strong marine squad in combat fatigues and armed with chemical projectile guns marched on board. Rhodri Peyton, the squad's captain, saluted an exhausted, unwashed, and unshaven Lieutenant Murphy Hewlett.

"This is her?" he asked sceptically.

Jacqueline Couteur stood in the middle of the corridor outside the airlock, with Jeroen van Ewyck and Garrett Tucci training their Bradfields on her. She was even dirtier than Murphy, the check pattern of her cotton shirt almost lost below the engrained grime picked up in the jungle.

"I'm tempted to let her show you what she can do," Murphy said.

Kelven Solanki stepped forwards. "All right, Murphy." He turned to the marine captain. "Your men are to have at least two weapons covering her at all times. She's capable of emitting an electronic warfare effect, as well as letting loose some kind of lightning bolt. Don't try to engage her in physical combat, she's quite capable of ripping you apart."

One of the marines snickered at that. Kelven didn't have the energy left to argue.

"I'll go with her," Jeroen van Ewyck said. "My people need to be briefed anyway, and I'll let the science officers know what's required."

"What is required?" Jacqueline Couteur asked.

Rhodri Peyton turned, and gave a start. In place of the dumpy middle-aged woman there was a tall, beautiful, twenty-year-old girl wearing a white cocktail gown. She gave him a silent entreating look, the maiden about to be offered to the dragon. "Help me. Please. You're not like them. You're not an emotionless machine. They want to hurt me in their laboratories. Don't let them."

Garrett Tucci jabbed the Bradfield into her back. "Pack it in, bitch," he said roughly.

She twisted, like an AV projection with a broken focus, and the old Jacqueline Couteur was standing there, a mocking expression on her face. Her jeans and shirt were now clean and pressed.

"My God," Rhodri Peyton gasped.

"Now do you see?" Kelven asked.

The now nervous marine squad escorted their prisoner along the connecting tube to the bus. Jacqueline Couteur sat beside one of the windows, five guns lined up on her. She watched the bare walls of sterile rock impassively as the bus rolled back across the crater and into a downward sloping tunnel that led deep into the asteroid.

First Admiral Samuel Aleksandrovich hadn't set foot on his native Russian-ethnic birth planet Kolomna for the last fifty-three of his seventy-three years; he hadn't been back for a holiday, nor even his parents' funeral. Regular visits might have been deemed inappropriate given that Confederation Navy career officers were supposed to renounce any national ties when they walked through the academy entrance; for a First Admiral to display any undue interest would have been a completely unacceptable breach of diplomatic etiquette. People would have understood his attending the funerals, though. So everyone assumed he was applying the

same kind of steely discipline to his private affairs that ruled his professional life.

They were all wrong. Samual Aleksandrovich had never been back because there was nothing on the wretched planet with its all-over temperate climate which interested him, not family nor culture nor nostalgic scenery. The reason he left in the first place was because he couldn't stand the idea of spending a century helping his four brothers and three sisters run the family fruit-farming business. The same geneering which had produced his energetic one metre eighty frame, vivid copper hair, and enhanced metabolism, bestowed a life expectancy of at least a hundred and twenty years.

By the time he was nineteen years old he had come to realize that such a life would be a prison sentence given the vocations available on a planet just emerging from its agrarian phase. A potentially blessed life should not be faced with such finite horizons, for if it was it would turn from being a joy into a terrible burden. Variety was sanity. So on the day after his twentieth birthday he had kissed his parents and siblings goodbye, walked the seventeen kilometres into town through a heavy snowfall, and signed on at the Confederation Navy recruitment office.

Metaphorically, and otherwise, he had never looked back. He had never been anything other than an exemplary officer; he'd seen combat seven times, flown anti-pirate interddictions, commanded a flotilla raiding an illegal anti-matter-production station, and gained a substantial number of distinguished service awards. But appointment to the post of First Admiral required a great deal more than an exemplary record. Much as he hated it, Samual Aleksandrovich had to play the political game; appearing before Assembly select committees, giving unofficial briefings to senior diplomats, wielding Fleet Intelligence information with as much skill as he did the rapier (he was year champion at the academy). His ability to pressure member states was admired by the Assembly President's staffers, as much for its neatness as the millions of fuseodollars saved by cir-

cumventing fleet deployment to trouble spots; and their word counted for a great deal more than the Admiralty, who advanced the names of candidates to the Assembly's Navy Committee.

In the six years he had held the office he had done a good job keeping the peace between sometimes volatile planetary governments and the even more mercurial asteroid settlements. Leaders and politicians respected his toughness and fairness.

A great deal of his renowned even-handed approach was formed when at the age of thirty-two he was serving as a lieutenant on a frigate that had been sent to Jantrit to assist the Edenists in some kind of armed rebellion (however unbelievable it sounded at the time). The frigate crew had watched helplessly while the antimatter was detonated, then spent three days in exhausting and often fruitless manoeuvres to rescue survivors of the tragedy. Samuel Aleksandrovich had led one of the recovery teams after they rendezvoused with a broken starscraper. With heroic work that won him a commendation he and his crew-mates saved eighteen Edenists trapped in the tubular honeycomb of polyp. But one of the rooms they forced their way into was filled with corpses. It was a children's day club that had suffered explosive decompression. As he floated in desolated horror across the grisly chamber, he realized the Edenists were just as human as himself, and just as fallible. After that the persistent snide comments from fellow officers about the tall aloof bitek users annoyed him intensely. From then on he devoted himself body and soul to the ideal of enforcing the peace.

So when the *Eurydice* had docked at Trafalgar carrying a flek from Lieutenant-Commander Kelven Solanki about the small possibility (and he had been most unwilling to commit himself) that Laton was still alive and stirring from his self-imposed exile, First Admiral Samuel Aleksandrovich had taken a highly personal interest in the Lalonde situation.

Where Laton was concerned, Samuel Aleksandrovich

exhibited neither his usual fairness nor a desire for justice to be done. He just wanted Laton dead. And this time there would be no error.

Even after his staff had edited down Murphy Hewlett's neural nanonics recording of the marine squad's fateful jungle mission, to provide just the salient points, there was three hours of sensorium memory to access. When he surfaced from Lalonde's savage heat and wearying humidity, Samuel Aleksandrovich remained lost in thought for quarter of an hour, then took a commuter car down to the Fleet Intelligence laboratories.

Jacqueline Couteur had been isolated in a secure examination room. It was a cell cut into living rock with a transparent wall of metallized silicon whose structure was reinforced with molecular-binding-force generators. On one side it was furnished with a bed, wash-basin, shower, toilet, and a table, while the other side resembled a medical surgery with an adjustable couch and a quantity of analysis equipment.

She sat at the table, dressed in a green clinical robe. Five marines were in the cell with her, four of them carrying chemical-projectile guns, the fifth a TIP carbine.

Samual Aleksandrovich stood in front of the transparent wall looking at the drab woman. The monitoring room he was in resembled a warship's bridge, a white composite cube with a curved rank of consoles, all facing the transparent wall. The impersonality disturbed him slightly, an outsized vivarium.

Jacqueline Couteur returned his stare levelly. She should never have been able to do that, not a simple farmer's wife from a backwoods colony world. There were diplomats with eighty years of experienced duplicity behind them who broke into a sweat when Samuel Aleksandrovich turned his gaze on them.

He likened the experience to looking into the eyes of an Edenist habitat mayor at some formal event, when the consensus intellect of every adult in the habitat looked back at him. Judging.

Whatever you are, he thought, you are not Jacqueline Couteur. This is the moment I've dreaded since I took my oath of office. A new threat, one beyond anything we know. And the burden of how to deal with it will inevitably fall heaviest on my navy.

"Do you understand the method of sequestration yet?" He asked Dr Gilmore, who was heading the research team.

The doctor made a penitent gesture. "Not as yet. She's certainly under the control of some outside agency, but so far we haven't been able to locate the point where it interfaces with her nervous system. I'm a neural nanonics expert, and we've got several physicists on the team. But I'm not entirely sure we even have a specialization to cover this phenomenon."

"Tell me what you can."

"We ran a full body and neural scan on her, looking for implants. You saw what she and the other sequestered colonists could do back on Lalonde?"

"Yes."

"That ability to produce the white fireballs and electronic warfare impulses must logically have some kind of focusing mechanism. We found nothing. If it's there it's smaller than our nanonics, a lot smaller. Atomic sized, at least, maybe even sub-atomic."

"Could it be biological? A virus?"

"You're thinking of Laton's proteanic virus? No, nothing like that." He turned and beckoned to Euru.

The tall black-skinned Edenist left the monitor console he was working at and came over. "Laton's virus attacked cells," he explained. "Specifically neural cells, altering their composition and DNA. This woman's brain structure remains perfectly normal, as far as we can tell."

"If she can knock out a marine's combat electronics at over a hundred metres, how do you know your analysis equipment is giving you genuine readings?" Samuel Aleksandrovich asked.

The two scientists exchanged a glance.

"Interference is a possibility we've considered," Euru

admitted. "The next stage of our investigation will be to acquire tissue samples and subject them to analysis outside the range of her influence—if she lets us take them. It would require a great deal of effort if she refused to cooperate."

"Has she been cooperative so far?"

"For most of the time, yes. We've witnessed two instances of visual pattern distortion," Dr Gilmore said. "When her jeans and shirt were removed she assumed the image of an apelike creature. It was shocking, but only because it was so unusual and unexpected. Then later on she tried to entice the marines to let her out by appearing as an adolescent girl with highly developed secondary sexual characteristics. We have AV recordings of both occasions; she can somehow change her body's photonic-emission spectrum. It's definitely not an induced hallucination, more like a chameleon suit's camouflage."

"What we don't understand is where she gets the energy to produce these effects," Euru said. "The cell's environment is strictly controlled and monitored, so she can't be tapping Trafalgar's electrical power circuits. And when we ran tests on her urine and faeces we found nothing out of the ordinary. Certainly there's no unusual chemical activity going on inside her."

"Lori and Darcy claimed Laton warned them of an energy virus," Samual Aleksandrovich said. "Is such a thing possible?"

"It may well be," Euru said. His eyes darkened with emotion. "If that *creature* was telling the truth he would probably have been attaching the nearest linguistic equivalents to a totally new phenomenon. An organized energy pattern which can sustain itself outside a physical matrix is a popular thesis with physicists. Electronics companies have been interested in the idea for a long time. It would bring about a radical transformation in our ability to store and manipulate data. But there has never been any practical demonstration of such an incorporeal matrix."

Samual Aleksandrovich switched his glance back to the

woman behind the transparent wall. "Perhaps you are looking at the first."

"It would be an extraordinary advance from our present knowledge base," Dr Gilmore said.

"Have you asked the Kiint if it is possible?"

"No," Dr Gilmore admitted.

"Then do so. They may tell us, they may not. Who understands how their minds work? But if anyone knows, they will."

"Yes, sir."

"What about her?" Samual Aleksandrovich asked. "Has she said anything?"

"She is not very communicative," Euru said.

The First Admiral grunted, and activated the intercom beside the cell's door. "Do you know who I am?" he asked.

The marines inside the cell stiffened. Jacqueline Cou-teur's expression never changed; she looked him up and down slowly.

"I know," she said.

"Who exactly am I talking to?"

"Me."

"Are you part of Laton's schemes?"

Was there the faintest twitch of a smile on her lips?
"No."

"What do you hope to achieve on Lalonde?"

"Achieve?"

"Yes, achieve. You have subjugated the human population, killed many people. This is not a situation I can allow to continue. Defending the Confederation from such a threat is my responsibility, even on a little planet as politically insignificant as Lalonde. I would like to know your motives so that a solution to this crisis may be found which does not involve conflict. You must have known that ultimately your action would bring about an armed response."

"There is no 'achievement' sought."

"Then why do what you have done?"

"I do as nature binds me. As do you."

"I do what my duty binds me to do. When you were on

the *Isakore* you told the marines that they would come to you in time. If that isn't an objective I don't know what is."

"If you believe I will aid you to comprehend what has happened, you are mistaken."

"Then why did you allow yourself to be captured? I've seen the power you possess; Murphy Hewlett is good, but not that good. He couldn't get you here unless you wanted to come."

"How amusing. I see governments and conspiracy theories are still inseparable. Perhaps I'm the lovechild of Elvis and Marilyn Monroe come to sue the North American Govcentral state in the Assembly court for my rightful inheritance."

Samual Aleksandrovich gave her a nonplussed look. "What?"

"It doesn't matter. Why did the navy want me here, Admiral?"

"To study you."

"Precisely. And that is why I am here. To study you. Which of us will learn the most, I wonder?"

Kelven Solanki had never envisaged meeting the First Admiral quite so early in his career. Most commanders were introduced, certainly those serving in the 1st Fleet. But not lieutenant-commanders assigned to minor field-diplomat duties. Yet here he was being shown into the First Admiral's office by Captain Maynard Khanna. Circumstances muted the sense of excitement. He wasn't sure how the First Admiral viewed his handling of events on Lalonde, and the staff captain had given him no clues.

Samual Aleksandrovich's office was a circular chamber thirty metres across, with a slightly domed ceiling. Its curving wall had one window which looked out into Trafalgar's central biosphere cavern, and ten long holo-screens, eight slowly flicking through images from external sensors and the remaining two showing tactical displays. The ceiling was ribbed with bronze spars, with a fat AV cylinder protruding from the apex resembling a

crystalline stalactite. There were two clusters of furniture; a huge teak desk with satellite chairs; and a sunken reception area lined by padded leather couches.

Maynard Khanna showed him over to the desk where the First Admiral was waiting. Auster, Dr Gilmore, Admiral Lalwani, the Fleet Intelligence chief, and Admiral Motela Kolhammer, the 1st Fleet Commander, were all sitting before the desk in the curved blue-steel chairs that had extruded out of the floor like pliable mercury.

Kelven stood to attention and gave a perfect salute, very conscious of the five sets of eyes studying him. Samuel Aleksandrovich smiled thinly at the junior officer's obvious discomfort. "At ease, Commander." He gestured at one of the two new chairs formatting themselves out of the floor material. Kelven removed his cap, tucked it under his arm, and sat next to Maynard Khanna.

"You handled Lalonde quite well," the First Admiral said. "Not perfectly, but then you weren't exactly prepared for anything like this. Under the circumstances I'm satisfied with your performance."

"Thank you, sir."

"Bloody ESA people didn't help," Motela Kolhammer muttered.

Samuel Aleksandrovich waved him quiet. "That is something we can take up with their ambassador later. Though I'm sure we all know what the outcome will be. Regrettable or not, you acted properly the whole time, Solanki. Capturing one of the sequestered was exactly what we required."

"Captain Auster made it possible, sir," Kelven said. "I wouldn't have got the marines out otherwise."

The voidhawk captain nodded thankfully in acknowledgement.

"None the less, we should have given your situation a higher priority to begin with, and provided you with adequate resources," Samuel Aleksandrovich said. "My mistake, especially given who was involved."

"Has Jacqueline Couteur confirmed Laton's existence?"

Kelven asked. Part of him was hoping that the answer was going to be a resounding no.

“She didn’t have to.” Samual Aleksandrovich sighed ponderously. “A blackhawk”—he paused, raising his bushy ginger eyebrows in emphasis—“has just arrived from Tranquillity with a flek from Commander Olsen Neale. Under the circumstances I can quite forgive him for using the ship as a courier. If you would like to access the sensewise.”

Kelven sank deeper into the scoop of his chair as Graeme Nicholson’s recording played through his brain. “He was there all along,” he said brokenly. “In Durringham itself, and I never knew. I thought the *Yaku*’s captain left orbit because of the deteriorating civil situation.”

“You are not in any way to blame,” Admiral Lalwani said.

Kelven glanced over at the grey-haired Edenist woman. There was an inordinate amount of sympathy and sadness in the tone.

“We should never have stopped checking, all those years ago,” she continued. “The presence of Darcy and Lori on Lalonde was a rather miserable token to appease our paranoia. Even we were guilty of wishing Laton dead. The hope overwhelmed reason and rational thought. All of us knew how resourceful he was, and we knew he had acquired data on Lalonde. The planet should have been thoroughly searched. Our mistake. Now he has returned. I don’t like to think of the price we will all have to pay before he is stopped this time.”

“Sir, Darcy and Lori seemed very uncertain that he was behind this invasion,” Kelven said. “Laton actually warned them of this illusion-creating ability the sequestered have.”

“And Jacqueline Couteur agrees he isn’t a part of this,” Dr Gilmore said. “That’s one of the few things she will admit to.”

“I hardly think we can take her word for it,” Admiral Kolhammer said.

“Precise details are for later,” Samual Aleksandrovich said. “What we have with Lalonde is shaping up into a major, and immediate, crisis. I’m tempted to ask the Assembly President to declare a state of emergency; that would put national navies at my disposal.”

“In theory,” Admiral Kolhammer said drily.

“Yes, and yet anything less may not suffice. This undetectable sequestration ability has me deeply worried. It has been used so freely on Lalonde, hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions. How many people does the agency behind it intend to subjugate? How many planets? It is a threat which the Assembly cannot be allowed to ignore in favour of its usual horse trading.” He considered the option of total mobilization before reluctantly dismissing it. There wasn’t enough evidence to convince the president, not yet. It would come eventually, he was in no doubt of that. “For the moment we will do what we can to contain the spread of this plague, whilst trying to find Laton. The flek from Olsen Neale also went on to report that Terrance Smith has met with some success in recruiting mercenaries and combat-capable starships for Governor Rexrew. That blackhawk made excellent time from Tranquillity; a little over two days, the captain told me. So we may just be able to put a brake on Lalonde before it gets totally out of hand. Terrance Smith’s ships are scheduled to depart from Tranquillity today. Lalwani, you estimate it will take them a week to reach Lalonde?”

“Yes,” she said. “It took the *Gemal* six days to get from Lalonde to Tranquillity. With the starships in Smith’s fleet having to match formation after each jump, a single extra day is a conservative estimate. Even a navy flotilla would be hard pushed to match that. And those are not front-line ships.”

“Apart from the *Lady Macbeth*,” Maynard Khanna said in a quiet voice. “I accessed the list of ships Smith recruited; the *Lady Macbeth* is a ship I am familiar with.” He glanced at the First Admiral.

“I know that name . . .” Kelven Solanki ran a search pro-

gram through his neural nanonics. “The *Lady Macbeth* was orbiting Lalonde when the trouble first broke out upriver.”

“That wasn’t mentioned in any of your reports,” Lalwani said. Her slim forehead showed a frown.

“It was a commercial flight. Slightly odd, the captain wanted to export aboriginal wood, but as far as we could tell perfectly legitimate.”

“This name does seem to be popping up with suspicious regularity,” Maynard Khanna said.

“We should be able to look into it easily enough,” Samuel Aleksandrovich said. “Commander Solanki, the principal reason I asked you here was to inform you that you are to act as an adviser to the squadron which will blockade Lalonde.”

“Sir?”

“We’re launching a dual programme to terminate this threat. The first aspect is a Confederationwide alert for Laton. We have to know where the *Yaku* went, where it is now.”

“He won’t stay on board,” Lalwani said. “Not after he reaches a port. But we’ll find him. I’m organizing the search now. All the voidhawks in the Avon system will be conscripted and dispatched to alert national governments. I’ve already sent one to Jupiter; once the habitat consensus is informed, every voidhawk in the Sol system will be used to relay the news. I estimate it will take four to five days to blanket the Confederation.”

“Time Universe will probably beat you to it,” Admiral Kolhammer said gruffly.

Lalwani smiled. The two of them were sparring partners from way back. “In this case I wouldn’t mind in the least.”

“Be a lot of panic. Stock markets will take a tumble.”

“If it makes people take the threat seriously, so much the better,” Samuel Aleksandrovich said. “Motela, you are to assemble a 1st Fleet squadron, a large one, to be held on fifteen-minute-departure alert. When we find Laton, eliminating him is going to be your problem.”

“What problem?”

"I admire the sentiment," Samual Aleksandrovich said with a touch of censure. "But kindly remember he escaped from us last time, when we were equally hungry for blood. That mistake cannot be repeated. This time I shall require proof, even though it will no doubt be expensive. I imagine Lalwani and Auster will agree."

"We do," Lalwani said. "All Edenists do. If there is any risk in confirming the target is Laton, then we will bear it."

"In the meantime, I want Lalonde to be completely isolated," Samual Aleksandrovich said. "The mercenary force is not to be allowed to land, nor do I want any surface bombardments from orbit. Those colonists have suffered enough already. The solution to this sequestration lies in discovering the method by which it is implemented, and devising a counter. Brute force is merely dumping plutonium in a volcano. And I suspect the mercenaries would simply be sequestered themselves should they land. Dr Gilmore, this is your field."

"Not really," the doctor said expressively. "But we shall put our female subject through an extensive series of experiments to see if we can determine the method of the sequestration and how to cancel it. However, judging by what we know so far, which is virtually nothing, I have to say an answer is going to take a considerable time to formulate. Though you are quite right to instigate a quarantine. The less contact Lalonde has with the rest of the Confederation the better, especially if it turns out Laton isn't behind the invasion."

"The doctor has a point," Lalwani said. "What if the Lalonde invasion is the start of a xenoc incursion, and Laton himself has been sequestered?"

"I'm keeping it in mind," Samual Aleksandrovich said. "We need to know more, either from the Couteur woman or Lalonde itself. Our principal trouble remains what it has always been: reaction time. It takes us far too long to amass any large force. Always our conflicts are larger than they would have been if we had received a warning of problems and threats earlier in their development. But just

this once, we may actually be in luck. Unless there was some supreme diplomatic foul-up, Meredith Saldana's squadron was due to leave Omuta three days ago. They were in the system mainly for pomp and show, but they carried a full weapons load. A squadron of front-line ships already assembled and perfectly suited to these duties; we couldn't have planned it better. It'll take them five days to get back to Rosenheim. Captain Auster, if *Ilex* can get there before they dock at 7th Fleet headquarters and all the crews go on leave, then Meredith might just be able to get to Lalonde before Terrance Smith. And if not before, then certainly in time to prevent the bulk of the mercenary troops from landing."

"*Ilex* will certainly try, First Admiral," Auster said. "I have already asked for auxiliary fusion generators to be installed in the weapons bays. The energy patterning cells can be recharged directly from them, reducing the flight time between swallows considerably. We should be ready to depart in five hours, and I believe we can make the two-day deadline."

"My thanks to *Ilex*," Samuel Aleksandrovich said formally.

Auster inclined his head.

"Lieutenant-Commander Solanki, you'll travel with Captain Auster, and carry my orders for Rear-Admiral Saldana. And I think we can manage a promotion to full commander before you go. You've shown considerable initiative over the last few weeks, as well as personal courage."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," Kelven said. The promotion barely registered, some irreverent section of his mind was counting up the number of light-years he had flown in a week. It must be some kind of record. But he was going back to Lalonde, and bringing his old friends help. That felt good. I've stopped running.

"Add an extra order that the *Lady Macbeth* and her crew is to be arrested," Samuel Aleksandrovich told Maynard

Khanna. "They can try explaining themselves to Meredith's Intelligence officers."

The *Santa Clara* materialized a hundred and twenty thousand kilometres above Lalonde, almost directly in line between the planet and Rennison. Dawn was racing over Amarisk, half of the Juliffe's tributary network flashing like silver veins in the low sunlight. The early hour might have accounted for the lack of response from civil traffic control. But Captain Zaretsky had been to Lalonde before, he knew the way the planet worked. Radio silence didn't particularly bother him.

Thermo-dump panels slid out of the hull, and the flight computer plotted a vector which would deliver the starship to a five hundred kilometre equatorial orbit. Zaretsky triggered the fusion drive and the ship moved in at a tenth of a gee. *Santa Clara* was a large cargo clipper, paying a twice-annual visit to the Tyrathca settlements, bringing new colonists and shipping out their rygar crop. There were over fifty Tyrathca breeders on board, all of them shuffling round the cramped life-support capsules; the dominant xenocs refused to use zero-tau pods (though their vassal castes were riding the voyage in temporal suspension). Captain Zaretsky didn't particularly like being chartered by Tyrathca merchants, but they always paid on time, which endeared them to the ship's owners.

Once the *Santa Clara* was underway, he opened channels to the nine starships in parking orbit. They told him about the riots, and rumours of invaders, and the fighting in Durringham which had lasted four days. There had been no information coming up from the city for two days now, they said, and they couldn't decide what to do.

Zaretsky didn't share their problem. *Santa Clara* had a medium-sized VTOL spaceplane in its hangar, his contract didn't call for any contact with the human settlements. Whatever rebellion the Ivets were staging, it didn't affect him.

When he opened a channel to the Tyrathca farmers on

the planet they reported a few skirmishes with humans who were “acting oddly;” but they had prepared their rygar crop, and were waiting for the equipment and new farmers the *Santa Clara* was bringing. He acknowledged the call, and continued the slow powered fall into orbit, the *Santa Clara*’s fusion exhaust drawing a slender thread of incandescence across the stars.

Jay Hilton sat on the rock outcrop fifty metres from the savannah homestead cabin, her legs crossed, head tipped back to watch the starship decelerating into orbit, and mournful curiosity pooling in her eyes. The weeks of living with Father Horst had brought about a considerable change in her appearance. For a start her lush silver-white hair had been cropped into a frizz barely a centimetre long, making it easier to keep clean. She had cried bucketfuls the day Father Horst took the scissors to it. Her mother had always looked after it so well, washing it with special shampoo brought from Earth, brushing it to a shine each night. Her hair was her last link with the way things used to be, her last hope that they might be that way again. When Father Horst had finished his snipping she knew in her heart that her most precious dream, that one day she’d wake up to find everything had returned to normal, was just a stupid child’s imagination. She had to be tough now, had to be adult. But it was so hard.

I just want Mummy back, that’s all.

The other children looked up to her. She was the oldest and strongest of the group. Father Horst relied on her a great deal to keep the younger ones in order. A lot of them still cried at night. She heard them in the darkness, crying for their lost parents or siblings, crying because they wanted to go back to their arcology where none of this horrid confusion and upset happened.

Dawn’s rosy crown gave way to a tide of blue which swept across the sky, erasing the stars. Rennison faded to a pale crescent, and the starship’s exhaust became more dif-

ficult to see. Jay unfolded her legs and clambered down off the rocks.

The homestead on the edge of the savannah was a simple wooden structure, its solar-cell roof sheets glinting in the strong morning light. Two of the dogs, a Labrador and an Alsatian, were out and about. She patted them as she went up the creaking wooden stairs to the porch. The cows in the paddock were making plaintive calls, their udders heavy with milk.

Jay went in through the front door. The big lounge whiffed strongly—of food, and cooking, and too many people. She sniffed the air suspiciously. Someone had wet their bedding again, probably more than one.

The floor was a solid patchwork of sleeping-bags and blankets, their occupants only just beginning to stir. Grass stuffing from the makeshift mattresses of canvas sacks had leaked out again.

“Come on! Come on!” Jay clapped her hands together as she pulled the reed blinds open. Streamers of gold-tinged sunlight poured in, revealing children blinking sleep from their eyes, wincing at the brightness. Twenty-seven of them were crammed together on the mayope floorboards, ranging from a toddler about two years old up to Danny, who was nearly the same age as Jay. All of them with short haircuts and rough-tailored adult clothes which never quite fitted. “Up you get! Danny, it’s your gang’s turn to do the milking. Andria, you’re in charge of cooking this morning: I want tea, oatmeal, and boiled eggs for breakfast.” A groan went up, which Jay ignored; she was just as fed up with the changeless diet as they were. “Shona, take three girls with you and collect the eggs, please.”

Shona gave a timid smile as well as she could, grateful for being included in the work assignments and not being treated any differently to the others. Jay had drilled herself not to flinch from looking at the poor girl. The six-year-old’s face was covered in a bandage mask of glossy translucent epithelium membrane, with holes cut out for her eyes and mouth and nose. Her burn marks were still a

livid pink below the overlapping membrane strips, and her hair was only just beginning to grow back. Father Horst said she ought to heal without any permanent scarring, but he was forever grieving over the lack of medical nanonic packages.

Coughs and grumbles and high-pitched chattering filled the room as the children struggled out of bed and into their clothes. Jay saw little Robert sitting brokenly on the side of his sleeping-bag, head in his hands, not bothering to get dressed. "Eustice, you're to get this room tidied up, and I want all the blankets aired properly today."

"Yes, Jay," she answered sullenly.

The outside door was flung open as five or six children rushed out laughing, and ran for the lean-to, which they used as a toilet.

Jay picked her way over the rectangles of bedding to Robert. He was only seven, a black-skinned boy with fluffy blond hair. Sure enough, the navy blue pants he wore were damp.

"Pop down to the stream," she said kindly. "There will be plenty of time to wash before breakfast."

His head was lowered even further. "I didn't mean to," he whispered, on the verge of tears.

"I know. Remember to wash out your sleeping-bag as well." She caught the sound of someone giggling. "Bo, you help him take the bag down to the stream."

"Oh, Jay!"

"It's all right," Robert said. "I can manage."

"No, you won't, not if you want to be back in time for breakfast." The big table was already being pulled out from the kitchen corner by three of the boys, scraping loudly across the floor. They were shouting for people to get out of the way.

"Don't see why I should have to help him," Bo said intransigently. She was an eight-year-old, meaty for her age, with chubby red cheeks. Her size was often deployed to help boss the smaller children around.

"Chocolate," Jay said in warning.

Bo blushed, then stalked over to Robert. "Come on then, you."

Jay knocked once on Father Horst's door and walked in. The room had been the homestead's main bedroom when they moved in; it still had a double bed in it, but most of the floor space was taken up with packets, jars, and pots of food they'd taken from the other deserted homestead cabins. Clothes and cloth and powered tools, anything small or light enough to be carried, filled the second bedroom in piles that were taller than Jay.

Horst was getting up as the girl came in. He'd already got his trousers on, thick denim jeans with leather patches, a working man's garment, requisitioned from one of the other savannah homesteads. She picked up the faded red sweatshirt from the foot of the bed and handed it to him. He had lost a lot of weight—a lot of fat—over the last weeks; slack bands of flesh hung loosely from his torso. But even the folds were shrinking, and the muscles they covered were harder than they had ever been, though at night they felt like bands of incandescent metal. Horst spent most of every day working, hard manual work; keeping the cabin in shape, repairing and strengthening the paddock fence, building a chicken run, digging the latrines; then in the evening there would be prayers and reading lessons. At night he dropped into bed as if a giant had felled him with its fist. He had never known a human body could perform such feats of stamina, least of all one as old and decrepit as his.

Yet he never wavered, never complained. There was a fire in his eyes that had been ignited by his predicament. He was embarked on a crusade to survive, to deliver his charges to safety. The bishop would be hard pressed to recognize that dreamy well-meaning Horst Elwes who had left Earth last year. Even thinking about his earlier self with its disgusting self-pity and weaknesses repelled him.

He had been tested as few had ever been before, his faith thrown onto towering flames that had threatened to reduce him to shreds of black ash so powerful was the doubt and

insecurity fuelling them: but he had emerged triumphant. Born of fire, and reforged, his conviction in self, and Christ the Saviour, was unbreakable.

And he had the children to thank. The children who were now his life and his task. The hand of God had brought them together. He would not fail them, not while there was a breath left in his body.

He smiled at Jay who was as grave faced as she always was at the break of day. The sounds of the usual morning bedlam were coming through the door as bedding was put away and the furniture brought out.

“How goes it today, Jay?”

“Same as always.” She sat on the end of the bed as he pulled on his heavy hand-tooled boots. “I saw a starship arrive. It’s coming down into low orbit.”

He glanced up from his laces. “Just one?”

“Uh huh,” she nodded vigorously.

“Ah well, it’s not to be today, then.”

“*When?*” she demanded. Her small beautiful face was screwed up in passionate rage.

“Oh, Jay.” He pulled her against him, and rocked her gently as she sniffled. “Jay, don’t give up hope. Not you.” It was the one thing he promised them, repeating it every night at prayers so they would believe. On a world far away lived a wise and powerful man called Admiral Aleksandrovich, and when he heard what terrible things had happened on Lalonde he would send a fleet of Confederation Navy starships to help its people and drive away the demons who possessed them. The soldiers and the navy crews would come down in huge spaceplanes and rescue them, and then their parents, and finally put the world to rights again. Every night Horst said it, with the door locked against the wind and rain, and the windows shuttered against the dark empty savannah. Every night he believed and they believed. Because God would not have spared them if it was not for a purpose. “They will come,” he promised. He kissed her forehead. “Your mother will be so proud of you when she returns to us.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She pondered this. “Robert wet his bed again,” she said.

“Robert is a fine boy.” Horst stomped on the second boot. They were two sizes too large, which meant he had to wear three pairs of socks, which made his feet sweat, and smell.

“We should get him something,” she said.

“Should we now? And what’s that?”

“A rubber mat. There might be one in another cabin. I could look,” she said, eyes all wide with innocence.

Horst laughed. “No, Jay, I haven’t forgotten. I’ll take you out hunting this morning, and this time it will be Danny who stays behind.”

Jay let out a squeal of excitement and kicked her legs in the air. “Yes! Thank you, Father.”

He finished tying his laces and stood up. “Don’t mention the starship, Jay. When the navy comes it will be in a mighty flotilla, with their exhaust plumes so strong and bright they will turn night into day. Nobody will mistake it. But in the meantime we must not pour cold water on the others’ hopes.”

“I understand, Father. I’m not as dumb as them.”

He ruffled her hair, which she pretended not to like, wriggling away. “Come along now,” he said. “Breakfast first. Then we’ll get our expedition sorted out.”

“I suppose Russ will come with us?” she asked in a martyred voice.

“Yes, he will. And stop thinking uncharitable thoughts.”

The children already had most of the bedding off the floor. Two boys were sweeping up the dried grass from the sack mattresses (Must find a better replacement, Horst thought). Eustice’s voice could be heard through the open door, yelling instructions to the children airing the linen outside.

Horst helped to pull the big table into the middle of the room. Andria’s team were scurrying round the kitchen corner, tending the equipment and the meal. The big urn was

just starting to boil, and the three IR plates were heating up the boiling pans ready for the eggs.

Once again Horst gave a fast prayer of thanks that the solar-powered equipment functioned so well. It was easy enough for the children to use without hurting themselves, and most of them had helped their mothers with the cooking before. All they needed was some direction, as they did in every task he set them. He didn't like to think how he would have coped if the homestead hadn't been empty.

It took another fifteen minutes before Andria's cooking party were ready to serve breakfast. Several of the eggs Shona brought back were broken, so Horst himself scrambled them up in a pan on a spare IR plate. It was easier to feed Jill, the toddler, that way.

The tea was finally ready, and the eggs boiled. Everyone lined up with their mug and cutlery and eggcup, and filed past the kitchen bar which doubled as a serving counter. For a few wonderful minutes the room was actually quiet as the children drank, and cracked their eggs open, and pulled faces as they munched the dry oatmeal biscuits, dunking them in the tea to try and soften them up first. Horst looked round his extended family and tried not to feel frightened at the responsibility. He adored them in a way he had never done with his parishioners.

After breakfast it was wash time, with the extra two tanks he had installed in the rafter space struggling to provide enough hot water. Horst inspected them all to make sure they were clean and that they had jell-rinsed their teeth. That way he could have a few words with each of them, make them feel special, and wanted, and loved. It also gave him the chance to watch for any sign of illness. So far there had been remarkably little, a few colds, and one nasty outbreak of diarrhoea a fortnight ago, which he suspected was from a batch of jam that had come from another homestead.

The morning would follow its standard pattern while he and Jay were away. Clothes to be washed in the stream and hung out to dry. Hay to be taken into the cows, corn to be

measured out into the chicken-run dispensers (they never did that very well), lunch to be prepared. When he went away it was always the packets of protein-balanced meals from Earth—all they had to do was put them in the microwave for ninety seconds, and nothing could go wrong. Sometimes he allowed a group to pick elwisie fruit from the trees on the edge of the jungle. But not today; he gave Danny a stern lecture that no one was to wander more than fifty metres from the cabin, and someone must be on watch the whole time in case a kroclion turned up. The plains carnivores hadn't often plagued the homesteads, but his didactic memory showed what a menace the lumbering animals could be. The boy nodded earnestly, eager to prove his worth.

Horst was still suffering from stings of doubt when he led the group's one horse from its stable. He trusted Jay to be left in charge, she acted far older than her years. But he had to hunt for meat, there were hardly any fish in the nearby stream. If they stuck to the cache of food in his bedroom it would be gone within ten days; it existed to supplement what he killed and stored in the freezer, and acted as an emergency reserve just in case he ever did get ill. And Jay deserved a break from the homestead, she hadn't been away since they arrived.

He took two other children with him as well as Jay. Mills, an energetic eight-year-old from Schuster village, and Russ, a seven-year-old who simply refused to ever leave Horst's side. The one and only time he had gone hunting without him the boy had run off into the savannah and it had taken the whole afternoon to find him.

Jay was grinning and waving and playing up to her jealous friends when they set off. The savannah grass quickly rose up around their legs; Horst had made Jay wear a pair of trousers instead of her usual shorts. A thick layer of mist started to lift from the waving stalks and blades now the sun was rising higher into the sky. Haze broke the visibility down to less than a kilometre.

"This humidity is worse than the Juliffe back in Dur-

ringham," Jay exclaimed, waving her hand frantically in front of her face.

"Cheer up," Horst said. "It might rain later."

"No, it won't."

He glanced round to where she was walking in the track he was making through the stiff grass. Bright eyes gleamed mischievously at him from below the brim of her tatty felt sun-hat.

"How do you know?" he asked. "It always rains on Lalonde."

"No, it doesn't. Not any more, not during the day."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed? It only ever rains at night now."

Horst gave her a perplexed stare. He was about to tell her not to be silly. But then he couldn't remember the last time he'd rushed indoors to shelter from one of Lalonde's ferocious downpours—a week, ten days? He had an uncomfortable feeling it might even have been longer. "No, I hadn't noticed," he said temperately.

"That's all right, you've had a lot on your mind lately."

"I certainly have." But the chirpy mood was broken now.

I should have noticed, he told himself. But then who regards the weather as something suspicious? He was sure it was important though, he just couldn't think how, or why. Surely they couldn't change the weather.

Horst made it a rule that he was never away for more than four hours. That put seven other homestead cabins within reach (eight counting the ruins of the Skibbow building) as well as allowing enough time to shoot a danderil or some vennals. Once he had shot a pig that had run wild, and they'd eaten ham and bacon for the rest of the week. It was the most delicious meat he'd ever tasted, terrestrial beasts were pure ambrosia compared to the coarse and bland aboriginal animals.

There was hardly anything of any value left in the cabins now, he had stripped them pretty thoroughly. After another couple of visits there would be little point in

returning. He caught himself before brooding turned to melancholia; he wouldn't need to go back, the navy would come. And don't ever think anything different.

Jay bounded up to walk beside him, adjusting her stride to match his. She gave him a sideways smile, then returned her gaze to the front, perfectly content.

Horst felt his own tensions seeping away. Having her so close was like the time right after that dreadful night. She had screamed and fought him as he pulled her away from Ruth and Jackson Gael. He had forced her through the village towards the jungle, only once looking back. He saw it all then, in the light of the fire which pillaged their sturdy tranquil village, snuffing out their ambitions of a fair future as swiftly as rain dissolved the mud castles the children built on the riverbank. Satan's army was upon them. More figures were marching out of the dark shadows into the orange light of the flames, creatures that even Dante in his most lucid fever-dreams had never conceived, and the screams of the ensnared villagers rose in a crescendo.

Horst had never let Jay look back, not even after they reached the trees. He knew then that waiting for the hunting party to return was utter folly. Laser rifles could not harm the demon legions Lucifer in his wrath had loosed upon the land.

They had carried on far into the jungle, until a numbed, petrified Jay had finally collapsed. Dawn found them huddled together in the roots of a qualtook tree, soaked and shivering from a downpour in the night. When they eased their way cautiously back towards Aberdale and hid themselves in the vines ringing the clearing they saw a village living a dream.

Several buildings were razed to the ground. People walked by without paying them a glance. People Horst knew, his flock, who should have been overwrought by the damage. That was when he knew Satan had won, his demons had possessed the villagers. What he had seen at the Ivet ceremony had been repeated here, again and again.

"Where's Mummy?" Jay asked miserably.

"I have no idea," he said truthfully. There were fewer people than there should have been, maybe seventy or eighty out of the population of five hundred. They acted as though devoid of purpose, walking slowly, looking round in befogged surprise, saying nothing.

The children were the exception. They ran around between the somnolent, shuffling adults, crying and shouting. But they were ignored, or sometimes cuffed for their trouble. Horst could hear their distraught voices from his sanctuary, deepening his own torment. He watched as a girl, Shona, trailed after her mother pleading for her to say something. She tugged insistently at the trousers, trying to get her to stop. For a moment it looked like she had succeeded. Her mother turned round. "Mummy," Shona squealed. But the woman raised a hand, and a blast of white fire streamed from her fingers to smite the girl full in the face.

Horst cringed, crossing himself instinctively as she dropped like a stone, not even uttering a cry. Then anger poured through him at his own cravenness. He stood up and strode purposefully out of the trees.

"Father," Jay squeaked behind him. "Father, don't."

He paid her no heed. In a world gone mad, one more insanity would make no difference. He had sworn himself to follow Christ, a long time ago, but it meant more to him now than it ever had. And a child lay suffering before him. Father Horst Elwes was through with evasions and hiding.

Several of the adults stopped to watch as he marched into the village, Jay scuttling along behind him. Horst pitied them for the husks they were. The human state of grace had been drained from their bodies. He could tell, accepting the gift of knowledge as his right. Six or seven villagers formed a loose group standing between him and Shona, their faces known but not their souls.

One of the women, Brigitte Hearn, never a regular churchgoer, laughed at him, her arm rising. A ball of white fire emerged from her open fingers and raced towards him. Jay screamed, but Horst stood perfectly still, face resolute.

The fireball started to break apart a couple of metres away from him, dimming and expanding. It burst with a wet crackle as it touched him, tiny strands of static burrowing through his filthy sweatshirt. They stung like hornets across his belly, but he refused to reveal his pain to the semicircle of watchers.

“Do you know what this is?” Horst thundered. He lifted the stained and muddied silver crucifix that hung round his neck, brandishing it at Brigitte Hearn as though it was a weapon. “I am the Lord’s servant, as you are the Devil’s. And I have His work to do. Now stand aside.”

A spasm of fright crossed Brigitte Hearn’s face as the silver cross was shaken in front of her. “I’m not,” she said faintly. “I’m not the Devil’s servant. None of us are.”

“Then stand aside. That girl is badly hurt.”

Brigitte Hearn glanced behind her, and took a couple of steps to one side. The other people in the group hurriedly parted, their faces apprehensive, one or two walked away. Horst gestured briefly at Jay to follow him, and went over to the fallen girl. He grimaced at the singed and blackened skin of her face. Her pulse was beating wildly. She had probably gone into shock, he decided. He scooped her up in his arms, and started for the church.

“I had to come back,” Brigitte Hearn said as Horst walked away. Her body was all hunched up, eyes brimming with tears. “You don’t know what it’s like. I had to.”

“It?” Horst asked impatiently. “What is it?”

“Death.”

Horst shuddered, almost breaking his stride. Jay looked round fearfully at the woman.

“Four hundred years,” Brigitte Hearn called out falteringly. “I died four hundred years ago. Four hundred years of nothing.”

Horst barged into the small infirmary at the back of the church, and laid Shona down on the wooden table which doubled as an examination bed. He snatched the medical processor block from its shelf and applied a sensor pad to the nape of her neck. The metabolic display appeared as he

described her injuries to the processor. Horst read the results and gave the girl a sedative, then started spraying a combination analgesic and cleansing fluid over the burns.

“Jay,” he said quietly. “I want you to go into my room and fetch my rucksack from the cupboard. Put in all the packets of preprocessed food you can find, then the tent I used when we first arrived, and anything else you think will be useful to camp out in the jungle—the little fission blade, my portable heater, that kind of stuff. But leave some space for my medical supplies. Oh, and I’ll need my spare boots too.”

“Are we leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Are we going to Durringham?”

“I don’t know. Not straight away.”

“Can I go and fetch Drusilla?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. She’ll be better off here than tramping through the jungle with us.”

“All right. I understand.”

He heard her moving about in his room as he worked on Shona. The younger girl’s nose was burnt almost down to the bone, and the metabolic display said only one retina was functional. Not for the first time he despaired the lack of nanonic medical packages; a decent supply would hardly have bankrupted the Church.

He had flushed the dead skin from Shona’s burns as best he could, coating them in a thin layer of corticosteroid foam to ease the inflammation, and was binding her head with a quantity of his dwindling stock of epithelium membrane when Jay came back in carrying his rucksack. It was packed professionally, and she had even rolled up his sleeping-bag.

“I got some stuff for myself,” she said, and held up a bulging shoulder-bag.

“Good girl. You didn’t make the bag too heavy, did you? You might have to carry it a long way.”

“No, Father.”

Someone knocked timidly on the door post. Jay shrank into the corner of the infirmary.

"Father Horst?" Brigitte Hearn poked her head in. "Father, they don't want you here. They say they'll kill you, that you can't defend yourself against all of them."

"I know. We're leaving."

"Oh."

"Will they let us leave?"

She swallowed and looked over her shoulder. "Yes. I think so. They don't want a fight. Not with you, not with a priest."

Horst opened drawers in the wooden cabinet at the back of the infirmary, and started shoving his medical equipment into the rucksack. "What are you?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said woefully.

"You said you had died?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Ingrid Veenkamp, I lived on Bielefeld when it was a stage one colony world, not much different to this planet." She twitched a smile at Jay. "I had two girls. Pretty, like you."

"And where is Brigitte Hearn now?"

"Here, in me. I feel her. She is like a dream."

"Possession," Horst said.

"No."

"Yes! I saw the red demon sprite. I witnessed the rite, the *obscenity* Quinn Dexter committed to summon you here."

"I'm no demon," the woman insisted. "I lived. I am human."

"No more. Leave this body you have stolen. Brigitte Hearn has a right to her own life."

"I can't! I'm not going back there. Not to that."

Horst took a grip on his trembling hands. Thomas had known this moment, he thought, when the disciple doubted his Lord's return, when in prideful arrogance he refused to believe until he had seen the print of nails in His hand.

“Believe,” he whispered. “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name.”

The Brigitte/Ingrid woman bowed her head.

Horst asked the question that should never be asked: “Where? Where, damn you!”

“Nowhere. There is nothing for us. Do you hear? Nothing!”

“You lie.”

“There is nothing, just emptiness. I’m sorry.” She took an unsteady breath, seemingly gathering up a remnant of dignity. “You must leave now. They are coming back.”

Horst shut the flap on his rucksack and sealed it. “Where are the rest of the villagers?”

“Gone. They hunt fresh bodies for other souls trapped in the beyond, it has become their quest. I haven’t the stomach for it, nor have the others who remained in Aberdale. But you take care, Father. Your spirit is hale, but you could never withstand one of us for long.”

“They want more people to possess?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“Together we are strong. Together we can change what is. We can destroy death, Father. We shall bring eternity into existence here on this planet, perhaps even across the entire Confederation. I shall stay as I am for all time now; ageless, changeless. I am alive again, I won’t give that up.”

“This is lunacy,” he said.

“No. This is wonder, it is our miracle.”

Horst pulled his rucksack onto his back, and picked Shona up. Several adults had started to gather around the church. He walked down the steps pointedly disregarding them, Jay pressing into his side. They stared at him, but no one made a move. He turned and headed for the jungle, mildly surprised to see Ingrid Veenkamp walking with him.

“I told you,” she said. “They lack nerve. You will be safer if I am with you. They know I can strike back.”

“Would you?”

“Perhaps. For the girl’s sake. But I don’t think we will find out.”

“Please, lady,” Jay said, “do you know where my mummy is?”

“With the others, the pernicious ones. But don’t look for her, she is no longer your mother. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“We’ll get her back for you, Jay,” Horst said. “One day, somehow. I promise.”

“Such faith,” Ingrid Veenkamp said.

He thought she was mocking, but there was no trace of a smile on her face. “What about the other children?” he asked. “Why haven’t you possessed them?”

“Because they are children. No soul would want a vessel so small and frail, not when there are plentiful adults to be had. Millions on this planet alone.”

They had reached the fields, and the soft loam was clinging to Horst’s feet in huge claggy lumps. With the weight of the rucksack and Shona conspiring to push him into the ground he wasn’t even sure he could make it to the first rank of trees. Sweat was dripping from his forehead at the effort. “Send the children after me,” he wheezed. “They are hungry and they are frightened. I will take care of them.”

“You make a poor Pied Piper, Father. I’m not even sure you’ll last until nightfall.”

“Mock and scorn as you like, but send them. They’ll find me. For God knows I’ll not be able to travel far or fast.”

She dipped her head briefly. “I’ll tell them.”

Horst staggered into the jungle with Jay beside him, her big shoulder-bag knocking against her legs. He managed another fifty metres through the inimical vines and undergrowth, then sank panting painfully to his knees, face perilously red and hot.

“Are you all right?” Jay asked anxiously.

“Yes. We’ll just have to take it in short stages, that’s all. I think we’re safe for now.”

She opened the shoulder-bag’s seal. “I brought your cooler flask, I thought you might need it. I filled it with the high-vitamin orange juice you had in your room.”

“Jay, you are a twenty-four-carat angel.” He took the flask from her and drank some of the juice; she had set the thermostat so low it poured like slushy snow. They heard someone pushing their way through the undergrowth behind them, and turned. It was Russ and Andria, the first of the children.

Trudging across the savannah wasn’t quite the holiday Jay had told herself it would be. But it was lovely being away from the homestead, even if it was only going to be for a few hours. She longed to ride the horse, too; though there was no way she was going to plead with Father Horst in front of the boys.

They arrived at the Ruttan family’s old homestead after forty minutes’ walking. Untended, it had suffered from Lalonde’s rain and winds. The door which had been left open had swung to and fro until the hinges broke, and now it lay across the small porch. Animals (probably sayce) had used it for shelter at some time, adding to the disarray inside.

Jay waited with the two boys while Father Horst went in, carrying his laser hunting rifle, and checked over the three rooms. The abandoned cabin was eerie after the noise and bustle of their own homestead. She heard a distant rumble, and looked up, thinking it was approaching thunder. But the sky remained a perfect basin of blue. The noise grew louder, swelling out of the west.

Father Horst emerged from the homestead carrying a wooden chair. “It sounds like a spaceplane,” he said.

The grimed window-panes were rattling in their frames. Jay searched the sky frantically as the sound began to fade into the east. But there was nothing to be seen, the spaceplane was too high. She gave the distant mountains to the

south a forlorn glance. It must have been going to the Tyrathca farmers, she thought.

“Have a hunt round,” Horst said. “See if you can find anything useful; you might try the barn as well. I’m going to the roof to cut the solar-cell sheets down.” He put the chair down under the eaves, and stood on it, squirming his way up onto the roof.

There was nothing much in the cabin; fans of grey fungus had established a foothold in the cracks between the planks, and greenish ripples of mould patterned the damp mattresses. She pulled a couple of clay mugs out from under one of the beds, and Russ found some shirts in a box below the kitchen workbench.

“They’ll be all right once we wash them,” Jay declared, holding up the smelly, soiled garments.

They had more luck in the barn: two sacks of protein-concentrate cakes used to feed young animals that had just come out of hibernation, and Mills discovered a small fission-blade saw behind a pile of old cargo-pods. “Good work!” Horst told them as he clambered down. “And look what I got, all three sheets. We’ll be able to heat the water tanks up in half the time now.”

Jay rolled up the solar-cell sheets while he lifted the sacks into the plough horse’s big saddle-bags.

Horst handed round his chill flask full of icy elwiese juice, then they set off again. Jay was glad of her hat. The sunlight was scorchingly hot on her arms and back, air rippled and shimmered all around. I never thought I’d miss the rains.

There was a river to cross before they reached the Soeborgs’ homestead. It was less than a metre deep, but about fifteen metres wide. A fast, steady flow from the mountains, winding in broad curves along the savannah’s gentle contours. The bottom was smooth rock and rounded pebbles. Snowlily plants were growing right across it, their long fronds waving in the current. Flower buds as big as her head bobbed on the surface, the first splits starting to appear in their sides.

Jay and Horst took their boots off, and waded across clinging to the side of the horse. The water was invigorating, numbing her toes. She could easily believe it must have come directly from the snow peaks themselves, she wouldn't have been surprised to see nuggets of ice bobbing about. After she sat on the bottom of the bank and dried her feet she thought she could walk for another hundred kilometres. Her skin was still tingling delightfully when they started up the bank.

They had been walking for another ten minutes when Horst held up his hand. "Mills, Russ, come down off the horse," he said with quiet insistence.

The tone he used set up an uncomfortable prickling along Jay's spine. "What is it?" she asked.

"The Soebergs' homestead. I think."

She peered over the tops of the wavering grass stems. There was something up ahead, a white silhouette against the indistinct horizon, but the sun-roiled air made it hard to tell exactly what.

Horst fished his optical intensifier from a pocket. It was a curving band of black composite that fitted over his eyes. He studied the scene ahead for a while, his right forefinger adjusting the magnification control.

"They are coming back," he said in a soft murmur.

"Can I see?" she asked.

He handed her the band. It was large and quite heavy; the edges annealed to her skin with a pinching sensation.

She thought she was looking at some kind of AV recording, a drama play perhaps. Sitting in the middle of the savannah was a lovely old three-storey manor house, surrounded by a wide swath of tidy lawns. It was made of white stone, with a grey slate roof and large bay windows. Several people were standing under the portico.

"How do they do that?" Jay asked, more curious than alarmed.

"When you sell your soul to Satan, the material rewards are generous indeed. It is what he asks in return you should fear."

“But Ingrid Veenkamp said—”

“I know what she said.” He removed the band from her face, and she blinked up at him. “She is a lost soul, she knows not what she does. Lord forgive her.”

“Do they want our homestead too?” Jay asked.

“I shouldn’t think so. Not if they can build that in a week.” He sighed, and took one final look at the miniature mansion. “Come along, we’ll see if we can find a nice fat danderil. If we get back early I’ll have time to mince the meat, and you can have burgers tonight. What do you say?”

“Yeah!” the two boys chanted in chorus, grinning.

They turned round, and started to trek back across the heat-soaked savannah to the homestead.

Kelven Solanki floated through the open hatch into the *Arikara*’s bridge. The blue-grey compartment was the largest he’d ever seen in a warship before. As well as the normal flight crew it had to accommodate the admiral’s twenty-strong squadron-coordination staff. Most of their couches were empty now. The flagship was orbiting Takfu, the largest gas giant in the Rosenheim star system, taking on fuel.

Commander Mircea Kroeber was stretched out along his couch, supervising the fuelling operation with three other crew-members. Kelven had seen the cryogenic tanker as *Ilex* docked with the huge flagship. A series of spherical tanks stacked on top of a reaction drive section, and sprouting thermo-dump panels like the wings of a mutant butterfly.

The squadron of twenty-five ships was in formation around the *Arikara*, holding station five hundred kilometres away from Uhewa, the Edenist habitat which was re-supplying them with both fuel and consumables. It was just one of the priority operations *Ilex*’s arrival in the star system had kicked off ten hours ago. Rosenheim’s planetary government had immediately placed a restriction on all starship passengers and crew wanting to visit the sur-

face. They now had to go through a rigorous screening process to make sure Laton wasn't amongst them, creating a vast backlog in the low orbit port stations. The system's asteroid settlements had swiftly followed suit. Reserve naval officers were being called up, and the 7th Fleet elements present in the system had been put on alert status along with the national navy.

Kelven was beginning to feel like a plague carrier, infecting the Confederation with panic.

Rear-Admiral Meredith Saldana was hanging in front of a console in the C&C section of the bridge, his soles touching the decking's stikpads. He was wearing an ordinary naval ship-suit, but it seemed so much smarter on him, braid stripes shining brightly on his arm. A couple of his staff officers were in attendance behind him. One of the console's AV projection pillars was emitting a low-frequency laser sparkle. When Kelven looked straight at it he saw Jantrit breaking apart.

Meredith Saldana datavised a shutdown order at the console as Kelven let the stikpad claim his shoes. The Rear-Admiral was six centimetres taller than him, and possessed a more distinguished appearance than the First Admiral. Could the Saldanas sequence dignity into their genes?

"Commander Kelven Solanki reporting as ordered, sir."

Meredith Saldana gave him a frank stare. "You are my Lalonde advisory officer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just been promoted, Commander?"

"Yes, sir."

"It always shows."

"Sir, I have your orders flek from the First Admiral." Kelven held it out.

Meredith Saldana took the black coin-sized disk with some reluctance. "I don't know which is worse. Three months of these ridiculous ceremonial fly-bys and flag-waving exercises in the Omutan system, or a combat mission which is going to get us shot at by unknown hostiles."

“Lalonde needs our help, sir.”

“Was it bad, Kelven?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose I’d better access this flek, hadn’t I? All we’ve received so far are the emergency deployment orders from Fleet headquarters and the news about Laton showing up again.”

“There is a full situation briefing included, sir.”

“Excellent. If we run to schedule we should be departing for Lalonde in eight hours. I’ve requested another three voidhawks be assigned to the squadron for liaison and interdiction duties. Is there anything else you think I need immediately? This mission’s code rating gives me the authority to requisition almost any piece of hardware the navy has in the system.”

“No, sir. But you will have a fourth extra voidhawk, *Ilex* has been assigned to the squadron as well.”

“You can never have too many voidhawks,” Meredith said lightly. There was no response from the young commander. “Carry on, Kelven. Find yourself a berth, and get settled in. Report for duty here to me an hour before departure time, you can give me a first-hand account of what we can expect. I always feel a lot happier being brought up to date by someone with hands-on experience. Meanwhile I suggest you get some sleep, you look like you need it.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

Kelven twisted his feet free of the stikpad, and pushed off towards the hatch.

Meredith Saldana watched him manoeuvre through the open oval without touching the rim. Commander Solanki seemed to be a very tense man. But then I’d probably be the same in his place, the admiral thought. He held up the flek with a sense of foreboding, then slotted it into his couch player to find out exactly what he was up against.

Horst was always glad to get back to the homestead and greet his scampish charges; after all, when all was said and

done, they were only children. And profoundly shocked children at that. They should never be left on their own, and if he had his way they never would. Practicality dictated otherwise, of course, and there had never yet been any major disaster while he was roaming the savannah for meat and foraging the other homesteads. To some extent he had grown blasé about his trips. But this time, after encountering the possessed out at the Soeberg homestead, he had forced the return pace, stopping only to kill a danderil, his mind host to a whole coven of thoughts along the theme of what if.

When he topped a small rise six hundred metres away and saw the familiar wood cabin with the children sporting around outside he felt an eddy of relief. Thank you, Lord, he said silently.

He slowed down for the last length, giving Jay a respite. Sweat made her blue blouse cling to her skinny frame. The heat was becoming a serious problem. It seemed to have banished the hardy chikrows back into the jungle. Even the danderil he'd shot had been sheltering in the shade of one of the savannah's scarce trees.

Horst blinked up at the unforgiving sky. Surely they don't mean to burn this world to cinders? They have form now, stolen bodies; and all the physical needs, urges, and failings which go with them.

He squinted at the northern horizon. There seemed to be an effete pink haze above the jungle, dusting the sharp seam between sky and land, like the flush of dawn refracted over a deep ocean. The harder he tried to focus upon it, the more insubstantial it became.

He couldn't believe it was a natural meteorological *rara avis*. More an omen. His humour, already tainted by the Soeberg homestead, sank further.

Too much is happening at once. Whatever polluted destiny they are manufacturing, it is reaching its zenith.

They were a hundred metres from the cabin when the children spotted them. A scrum of small bodies came run-

ning over the grass, Danny in the lead. Both of the homestead's dogs chased around them, barking loudly.

"Freya's here," the boy yelled out at the top of his voice. "Freya's here, Father. Isn't it wonderful?"

Then they were all clinging to him, shouting jubilantly and smiling up with enthusiasm as he laughed and patted them and hugged them. For a moment he revelled in the contact, the hero returning. A knight protector and Santa Claus rolled into one. They expected so much of him.

"What did you find in the cabins, Father?"

"You were quick today."

"Please, Father, tell Barnaby to give my reading tutor block back."

"Was there any more chocolate?"

"Did you find any shoes for me?"

"You promised to look for some story fleks."

With his escort swirling round and chattering happily, Horst led the horse over to the cabin. Russ and Mills had slithered off its back to talk with their friends.

"When did Freya arrive?" Horst asked Danny. He remembered the dark-haired girl from Aberdale, Freya Chester, about eight or nine, whose parents had brought a large variety of fruit trees with them. Kerry Chester's grove had always been one of the better maintained plots around the village.

"About ten minutes ago," the boy said. "It's great, isn't it?"

"Yes. It certainly is." Remarkable, in fact. He was surprised she had survived this long. Most of the children had turned up during the first fortnight while they were still camping in a glade a kilometre away from Aberdale. Five of them walking from Schuster. They had said a woman was with them for most of the journey—Horst suspected it was Ingrid Veenkamp. Several others, the youngest ones, he had found himself as they wandered aimlessly through the jungle. He and Jay made a regular circuit of the area round the village in the hope of finding still more. And for every one they did save he suffered the images of ten more

lost in the ferocious undergrowth, stalked by sayce and slowly starving to death.

At the end of a fortnight it was obvious that the messy, hot, damp glade was totally impractical as a permanent site. By that time he had over twenty children to look after. It was Jay who suggested they try a homestead cabin, and four days later they were safely installed. Only five more children had turned up since then, all of them in a dreadful state as they tramped down the overgrown track between Aberdale and the savannah. Dispossessed urchins, totally unable to fend for themselves, sleeping in the jungle and stealing food from the village when they could, which wasn't anything like often enough. The last had been Eustice, two weeks ago when Horst skirted the jungle on a hunting trip; a skeleton with skin, her clothes reduced to tattered grey rags. She couldn't walk, if the Alsatian hadn't scented her and raised the alarm she would have been dead inside of a day. As it was, he had nearly lost her.

"Where is Freya?" Horst asked Danny.

"Inside, Father, having a rest. I said she could use your bed."

"Good lad. You did the right thing."

Horst let Jay and some of the girls lead the horse over to the water trough, and detailed a group of boys to remove the danderil carcass he'd secured to its back. Inside the cabin it was degrees cooler than the air outside, the thick double layer of mayope planks which made up the walls and ceiling proving an efficient insulator. He said a cheery hello to a bunch of children sitting around the table who were using a reading tutor block, and went into his own room.

The curtains were drawn, casting a rich yellow light throughout the room. There was a small figure lying on the bed wearing a long navy-blue dress, legs tucked up. She didn't appear starved, or even hungry. Her dress was as clean as though it had just been washed.

"Hello, Freya," Horst said softly. Then he looked at her

fully, and even more of the savannah's warmth was drained from his skin.

Freya raised her head lazily, brushing her shoulder-length hair from her face. "Father Horst, thank you so much for taking me in. It's so kind of you."

Horst's muscles froze the welcoming smile on his face. She was one of them! A possessed. Below the healthy deeply tanned skin lay a wizened sickly child, the dark dress hid a stained adult's T-shirt. The two images overlapped each other, jumping in and out of focus. They were enormously difficult to distinguish, obscured by a covering veil which she drew over his mind as well as his eyes. Reality was repugnant, he didn't want to see, didn't want truth. A headache ignited three centimetres behind his temple.

"All are welcome here, Freya," he said with immense effort. "You must have had a terrible time these last weeks."

"I did, it was horrible. Mummy and Daddy wouldn't speak to me. I hid in the jungle for ages and ages. There were berries and things to eat. But they were always cold. And I sometimes heard a sayce. It was really scary."

"Well, there are no sayce around here, and we have plenty of hot food." He walked along the side of the bed towards the dresser below the window, every footfall magnified to a strident thump in the still room. The noise of the children outside had perished. There was just the two of them now.

"Father?" she called.

"What do you want here?" he whispered tightly, his back towards her. He was afraid to pull the curtains open, afraid there might be nothing outside.

"It is a kindness." Her voice was deepening, becoming a morbid atonality. "There is no place for you on this world any more. Not as you are. You must change, become as us. The children will come to you one at a time when you call. They trust you."

"A trust that will never be betrayed." He turned round,

Bible in hand. The leather-bound book his mother had given him when he became a novice; it even had a little inscription she had written in the cover, the black ink fading to a watery blue down the decades.

Freya gave him a slightly surprised look, then sneered. "Oh, poor Father! Do you need your crutch so badly? Or do you hide from true life behind your belief?"

"Holy Father, Lord of Heaven and the mortal world, in humility and obedience, I do ask Your aid in this act of sanctification, through Jesus Christ who walked among us to know our failings, grant me Your blessing in my task," Horst incanted. It was so long ago since he had read the litany in the Unified prayer-book; and never before had he spoken the words, not in an age of science and universal knowledge, living in an arcology of crumbling concrete and gleaming composite. Even the Church questioned their need: they were a relic of the days when faith and paganism were still as one. But now they shone like the sun in his mind.

Freya's contempt descended into shock. "What?" She flung her legs off the bed.

"My Lord God, look upon Your servant Freya Chester, fallen to this unclean spirit, and permit her cleansing; in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Horst made the sign of the cross above the furious little girl.

"Stop it, you old fool. You think I fear that, your blind faith?" Her control over her form was slipping. The healthy clean image flickered on and off like a faulty light, exposing the frail malnourished child underneath.

"I beseech You to grant me Your strength, O Lord; so that her soul may be saved from damnation."

The Bible burst into flames. Horst groaned as the heat gnawed at his hand. He dropped it to the floor where it sputtered close to the leg of the bed. His hand was agony, as though it was dipped in boiling oil.

Freya's face was screwed up in determination, great rubberlike folds of skin distorting her pretty features almost

beyond recognition. "Fuck you, priest." The obscenity seemed ludicrous coming from a child. "I'll burn your mind out of your skull. I'll cook your brain in its own blood." Her possessed shape shimmered again. The lame Freya below was choking.

Horst clutched at his crucifix with his good hand. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I order you, servant of Lucifer, to be gone from this girl. Return to the formless nothing where you belong."

Freya let out a piercing shriek. "How did you know!"

"Begone from this world. There is no place in the sight of God for those who would dwell in Evil."

"How, priest?" Her head turned from side to side, neck muscles straining as though she was fighting some invisible force. "Tell me . . ."

Heat was building along Horst's spine. He was sweating profusely, frightened she really would burn him. It was like the worst case of sunburn he had ever known, as though his skin was splitting open. His clothes would catch fire soon, he was sure.

He thrust the crucifix towards the girl. "Freya Chester, come forth, come into the light and the glory of our Lord."

And Freya Chester was solidly before him, thin sunken face racked by pain, spittle on her chin. Her mouth was working, struggling around complex words. Terror pounced from her black eyes.

"Come, Freya!" Horst shouted jubilantly. "Come forth, there is nothing to fear. The Lord awaits."

"Father." Her voice was tragically frail. She coughed, spewing out a meagre spray of saliva and stomach juices. "Father, help."

"In God we trust, to deliver us from evil. We seek Your justice, knowing we are not worthy. We drink of Your blood, and eat of Your flesh so we may share in Your glory. Yet we are but the dust from which You made us. Guide us from our errors, Lord, for in ignorance and sin we know not what we do. And we ask for Your holy protection."

For one last supremely lucid moment the demon possessor returned. Freya glared at him with a ferocity which withered his resolution by its sheer malice.

"I won't forget you," she ground out between her curled lips. "Never in all eternity will I forget you, priest."

Unseen hands scrabbled at his throat, tiny fingers, like an infant's. Blood emerged from the grazes sharp nails left around his Adam's apple. He held the crucifix on high, defiant that Christ's symbol would triumph.

Freya let out a last bellow of rage. Then the demon spirit was gone in a blast of noxious arctic air which blew Horst backwards. Neatly stacked piles of food packets went tumbling over, the bedlinen took flight, loose articles stampeded off the dresser and table. There was a bang like a castle door slamming in the face of an invading army.

Freya, the real Freya, all crusty sores, ragged clothes, and bony famined figure, was stretched out on the bed, emitting quiet gurgles from her chapped mouth. She started to cry.

Horst clambered to his feet, hanging on to the edge of the bed for support. He drew a gasping breath, his body aching inside and out, as though he had swum an ocean.

Jay and a troop of frantic children rushed in, shouting in a confused babble.

"It's all right," he told them, dabbing at the scratch marks on his throat. "Everything's all right now."

When Jay awoke the next morning she was surprised to see she had overslept. She hardly ever did that, the few minutes alone to herself at the start of each morning were among the most precious of the day. But it had to be dawn. A pale tinge of hoary light was creeping into the cabin's main room around the reed blinds. The other children were all still sound asleep. She quickly pulled on her shorts, boots, and an adult-sized shirt she had altered to something approximating her own size, and slipped quietly out of the door. Thirty sec-

onds later she ran back in shouting for Father Horst at the top of her voice.

Far above the lonely savannah cabin, the long vivid contrails of thirteen starship fusion drives formed a cosmic mandala across the black pre-dawn sky.

6

Lewis Sinclair had been born in 2059. He lived in Messopia, one of the first purpose-built industrial/accommodation/leisure complexes to be constructed on Spain's Mediterranean coast; a cheerless mathematical warren of concrete, glass, and plastic which covered five square kilometres and sheltered ninety thousand people against the ferocious armada storms which were beginning to plague Earth. It was a heavily subsidized experiment by the European Federal Parliament, by that time desperate to tackle the cancerous underclass problem thrown up by the continent's eighty-five million unemployed. Messopia was a qualified success; its medium-scale engineering industries provided only a minimal return for investors, but it provided a foretaste of the huge arcologies which in the centuries to come would house, protect, and employ Earth's dangerously expanded population.

His path through life was never going to be anything other than troublesome; born to low-income parents, who were only in the new microcosm city because of the parliamentary law requiring a socially balanced population. There was no real niche for him in an enterprise geared so resolutely towards the middle-class job/family/home ethic. He played truant from school, turned to crime, drugs, violence. A textbook delinquent, one of thousands who ran through Messopia's architecturally bankrupt corridors and malls.

It could have been different, if the education system had caught him early enough, if he had had the strength to hold out against peer pressure, if Messopia's technocrat design-

ers had been less contemptuous of the social sciences. The opportunities existed. Lewis Sinclair lived in an age of quite profound technological and economic progress, and never really knew it, let alone shared in it. The first batches of asteroid-mined metal were starting to supplement depleted planetary reserves; biotechnology was finally living up to its initial promise; crude examples of the affinity bond were being demonstrated; more and more non-polluting fusion plants were coming on-stream as the supplies of He₃ mined from Jupiter's atmosphere increased. But none of it reached down to his level of society. He died in 2076, seventeen years old; one year after the bitek habitat Eden was germinated in orbit around Jupiter, and one year before the New Kong asteroid settlement began its FTL stardrive research project. His death was as wasteful as his life, a fight with power-blade knives in a piss-puddled subterranean warehouse, him and his opponent both high on synthetic crack. The fight was over a thirteen-year-old girl they both wanted to pimp.

He lost, the power blade chopping through his ribs to slice his stomach into two unequal portions.

And Lewis Sinclair made the same discovery as every human eventually made. Death was not the end of being. In the centuries that followed, spent as a virtually powerless astral entity suspended in dimensional emptiness, perceiving and envying mortals in their rich physical existence, he simply wished it were so.

But now Lewis Sinclair had returned. He wore a body again, weeping for joy at such simple magnificence as raindrops falling on his upturned face. He wasn't going to go back into the deprivation which lay after physical life, not ever. And he had the power to see that it was so; him and all the others, acting in combination, they were supreme badasses.

There was more to him than before, more than the strength which flesh and blood provided. Part of his soul was still back there in the terrible empty gulf; he hadn't

emerged fully into life, not yet. He was trapped like a butterfly unable to complete the transformation from dirt-bound pupa to wing-free ephemeral. Often he felt as though the body he had possessed was simply a biological sensor mechanism, a mole's head peeking out from the earth, feeding sensations back to his feeling-starved soul via an incorporeal umbilical cord. Strange energistic vortices swirled around the dimensional twist where the two continua intermingled, kinking reality. The bizarre effect was usable, bending to his will. He could alter physical structures, sculpt energy, even prise open further links back into the extrinsic universe. His mastery of this power was increasing gradually, but its wild fluxes and resonances caused havoc in cybernetic machinery and electronic processor blocks around him.

So he watched through the spaceplane's narrow curving windscreen as the *Yaku* (now operating under a forged registration) dwindled against the sharp-etched stars, and felt his new muscles relaxing below the seat webbing. The spaceplane systems were an order of magnitude simpler than the *Yaku*'s, and critical malfunctions were highly unlikely now. Starflight was a disturbing business, so very technical. His dependency on the machines which his very presence disrupted was unnerving. With some luck he would never have to venture across the interstellar gulf again. He and his five colleagues riding down to the surface would be sufficient to conquer this unsuspecting world, turning it into a haven for other souls. Together they would make it their own.

"Retro burn in five seconds," Walter Harman said.

"OK," Lewis said. He concentrated hard, feeling round a chorus of distant voices with the peculiar cell cluster in this body's brain. **We're coming down now**, he told Pernik Island.

I look forward to your arrival, the island personality replied.

The affinity voice sounded clear and loud in his mind. Bitek functioned almost flawlessly despite the energistic

turmoil boiling around his cells. It was one reason for selecting this particular planet.

The manoeuvring rockets at the rear of the little spaceplane fired briefly, pushing him down into the angle of the seat. The conditioning grille above his head was emitting an annoyingly loud whine as the fan motor spun out of control. His fingers tightened their grip on the armrests.

Walter Harman claimed to have been a spaceplane pilot back in the 2280s, serving in the Kulu Navy. As only three of them had even been in space before, his right to pilot the spaceplane went unchallenged. The body he used belonged to one of *Yaku's* crew, possessed within minutes of Lewis boarding the starship. It was equipped with neural nanonics, which unlike bitek proved almost useless in the constant exposure to the hostile energistic environment a possession generated, so Walter Harman had activated the spaceplane's manual-control system, an ergonomic joystick which deployed from the console in front of the pilot's seat. A projection pillar showed trajectory graphics and systems information, updating constantly as he muttered instructions to the flight computer.

The spaceplane rolled, and Lewis saw the mass of the planet slide round the windscreen. They were over the terminator now, heading into the penumbra.

Night was always their best time, putting mortal humans at a disadvantage, adding to their own potency. Something about the darkness embraced their nature.

The spaceplane shook gently as the upper atmosphere began to strike the heatshield belly. Walter Harman pitched them up at a slight angle, and swung the wings out a few degrees, beginning the long aerobrake glide downwards.

They were still in the darkness when they dropped below subsonic. Lewis could see a hemispherical bauble of light glinting on the horizon ahead.

"Your approach is on the beam," the island personality informed them over the microwave channel. "Please land on pad eighteen." A purple and yellow flight vector diagram appeared on the console's holoscreen.

“Acknowledged, Pernik,” Walter Harman said.

A three-dimensional simulacrum of the island materialized inside Lewis’s skull, an image far sharper than the porno holographs he used to peddle back in Messopia. He automatically knew which pad eighteen was. A burst of doubt and anxiety blossomed in his mind, which he did his best to prevent from leaking back down the affinity bond to the island personality. This Edenist consensual set-up was so smooth. He worried that they might be taking on more than they could reasonably expect to accomplish.

The island personality had accepted his explanation that he was representing his merchant family enterprise from Jospool. Not every Edenist used the voidhawks to carry freight, there simply weren’t enough to go round.

Lewis studied the mental simulacrum. Pad eighteen was close to the rim and the floating quays, there would be machinery there. It would be easy.

Pernik’s coating of moss made the two-kilometre disk a black hole in the faintly phosphorescent ocean. Pale yellow radiance shone from a few windows in the accommodation towers, and floodlights illuminated all the quays. It was 4 a.m. local time, most of the inhabitants were asleep.

Walter Harman set the spaceplane down on pad eighteen with only a minor wobble.

Welcome to Pernik, the personality said formally.

Thank you, Lewis replied.

Eysk is approaching. His family runs one of our premier fishing enterprises. He should be able to fill your requirements.

Excellent, Lewis said. **My thanks again for receiving me so promptly. I have spent weeks on that Adamist starship; it was becoming somewhat claustrophobic.**

I understand.

Lewis wasn’t sure, but he thought there was a mild dose of puzzlement in the personality’s tone. Too late now, though, they were down. Excitement was spilling into his blood. His part of the scheme was by far the most important.

The airlock opened with a couple of jerky motions as the actuators suffered power surges. Lewis went down the aluminium stairs.

Eysk was walking across the polyp apron towards pad eighteen. A ridge of electrophorescent cells circling the pad were casting an austere light over the spaceplane. Lewis could see very little of the island beyond; there was one accommodation tower forming a slender black rectangle against the night sky, and the sound of waves sloshing against the rim came from the other side of the spaceplane.

"Keep him busy," Lewis ordered Walter Harman as the pilot followed him down the stairs.

"No problem, I've got a thousand dumb questions lined up. Atlantis hadn't been discovered when I was alive."

Lewis reached the landing pad and tensed—this was it, make or break time. He had altered his facial features considerably during the starflight; that old journalist back on Lalonde had given him a nasty moment. He waited for the approaching Edenist to shout an alarm to the island.

Eysk gave a slight bow in greeting, and directed an identity trait at Lewis. He waited politely for Lewis to return the punctilio.

Lewis didn't have one. He hadn't known. His only source of data on Edenist customs was far beyond his grasp.

Deep down at the centre of his brain there was a presence, the soul which used to own the body he now possessed. A prisoner held fast by the manacle bonds of Lewis's thoughts.

All of the possessors had a similar prisoner, visualized as a tiny homunculus contained within a sphere of cephalic glass. They pleaded and they begged to be let out, to come back; annoying background voices, a gnat's buzz across consciousness. The possessed could use them, torment them with glimpses of reality in return for information, learning how to blend in with the modern, starkly alien society into which they had come forth.

But the centre of Lewis's mind contained only a heavy

darkness. He hadn't told the others that, they were all so boastful of how they controlled their captives, so he just brazened it out. The soul he had usurped as he came to this body neither entreated nor threatened. Lewis knew it was there, he could sense the surface thoughts, cold and hard, formidable with resolution. Waiting. The entity frightened him, he had come to possess the body the same way he had walked Messopia's corridors, The King of Strut—thinking he could handle it. Now the first fractures of insecurity in his hyped-up confidence were multiplying. The usurped soul's personality was far stronger than him; he could never have withstood such dread isolation, not simply beyond sensation, but knowing sensation was possible. What kind of person could?

Are you all right? Eysk asked kindly.

I'm sorry. I think it may have been something I ate. And the ride down was a god-fucking bitch.

Eysk's eyebrow rose. **Indeed?**

Yeah, feel like I'm gonna puke. Be all right in a minute.

I do hope so.

"This is Walter Harman," Lewis said out loud, knowing he was making a colossal balls-up of things. "A pilot, so he claims. After that flight, think I'm going to ask the captain for a dekko at his licence." He laughed at his witticism.

Walter Harman smiled broadly, and put out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you. This is one hell of a planet. I've never been here before."

Eysk seemed taken aback. "Your enthusiasm is most gratifying. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Thanks. Say, I tasted some gollatail a year back, have you got any round here?"

I'm just going for a walk, get some air, Lewis said. Down in his memories were a thousand hangovers; he gathered together the phantom sensation of nausea and cranial malaise, then broadcast them into the affinity band. **It ought to clear my head.**

Eysk flinched at the emetic deluge. **Quite.**

"I'd like to try some again, maybe take back a stock of my own," Walter Harman prompted. "Old Lewis here can tell you what our ship's rations are like."

"Yes," Eysk said. "I believe we have some." His gaze never left Lewis's back.

"Great, that's just great."

Lewis stepped over the half-metre ridge of electrophorescent cells around the pad, and headed towards the island's rim. There was one of the floating quays ahead, a twenty-metre crane to one side for lifting smaller boats out of the water.

Sorry about this, Lewis told the island personality. A flight has never had this effect before.

Do you require a medical nanonic package?

Let's leave it a minute and see. Sea wind always was the best cure for headaches.

As you wish.

Lewis could hear Walter Harman chattering away inanely behind him. He reached the metal railing that guarded the rim, and stood beside the crane. It was a spindly column and boom arrangement made from monobonded carbon struts, lightweight and strong. But heavy enough for his purpose. He closed his eyes, focusing his attention on the structure, feeling its texture, the rough grain of carbon crystals held together with hard plies of binding molecules. Atoms glowed scarlet and yellow, their electrons flashing in tight fast orbits.

Miscreant energetic pulses raced up and down the struts, sparking between molecules. He felt the others in the spaceplane cabin lending their strength, concentrating on a point just below the boom pivot. The carbon's crystalline lattice began to break down. Spears of St Elmo's fire flickered around the pivot.

A tortured creaking sound washed across the rim of the island. Eysk looked round in confusion, peering against pad eighteen's glare.

Lewis, move now please, the island personality said.

Unidentified static discharge on the crane. It is weakening the structure.

Where? He played it dumb, looking round, looking up.

Lewis, move.

The compulsion almost forced his legs into action. He fought it with bursts of mystification, then panic. Remembering the power blade as it descended, the sight of blood and chips of bone spewing out of the wound. It hadn't happened to him, it was some horror holo he was watching on the screen. Distant. Remote.

Lewis!

Carbon shattered with a sudden thunderclap. The boom jerked, then began to fall, curving down in that unreal slow motion he'd seen once before. And nothing had to be faked any more. Fear staked him to the ground. A yell started to emerge from his lips—

—Mistake. Your greatest and your last, Lewis. When this body dies my soul will be free. And then I can return to possess the living. And when that happens I will have the same power as you. After that we shall meet as equals, I promise you—

—as the edge of the boom smashed into his torso. There was no pain, shock saw to that. Lewis was aware of the boom finishing its work, crushing him against the polyp. Body ruined.

His head hit the ground with a brutish smack, and he gazed up mutely at the stars. They started to fade.

Transfer, Pernik ordered. The mental command was thick with sympathy and sorrow.

His eyes closed.

Pernik awaited. Lewis saw it through a long dark tunnel, a vast bitek construct glowing with the gentle emerald aura of life. Colourful phantom shapes slithered below its translucent surface, tens of thousands of personalities, at once separate and in concord: the multiplicity. He felt himself drifting towards it along the affinity bond, his energis-

tic nexus abandoning the mangled body to infiltrate the naked colossus. Behind him the dark soul rose as smoothly as a shark seeking wounded prey to re-inherit the dying body. Lewis's tightly whorled thoughts quaked in fright as he reached the island's vast neural strata. He penetrated the surface, and diffused himself throughout the network, instantly surrounded by a babble of sights and sounds. The multiplicity murmuring amongst itself, autonomic sub-routines emitting pulses of strictly functional information.

His dismay and disorientation was immediately apparent. Ethereal tentacles of comfort reached out to reassure him.

Don't worry, Lewis. You are safe now . . .

—

What are you?

The multiplicity recoiled from him, a tide of thoughts in swift retreat, leaving him high and dry. Splendidly alone. Emergency autonomic routines to isolate him came online, erecting axon blockades around the swarm of neural cells in which he resided.

Lewis laughed at them. Already his thoughts were spread through more cells than the body which he'd abandoned had contained. The energistic flux resulting from such possession was tremendous. He thought of fire, and began to extend himself, burning through the multiplicity's simplistic protection, seeping through the neural strata like a wave of searing lava, obliterating anything in his path. Cell after cell fell to his domination. The multiplicity shrieked, trying to resist him. Nothing could. He was bigger than them, bigger than worlds. Omnipotent. The cries began to die away as he engulfed them, receding as though they were falling down some shaft that pierced clean to the planet's core. Squeezing. Compressing their fluttering panicked thoughts together. The polyp itself was next, contaminated by swaths of energy seething out of the transdimensional twist. Organs followed, even the thermal potential cables dangling far below the surface. He possessed every living cell of Pernik. At the heart of his triumphant mind the multiplicity lay silent, stifled.

He waited for a second, savouring the nirvana-high of absolute mastery. Then the terror began.

Eysk had started to run towards the rim as the crane creaked and groaned. Pernik showed him the boom starting to topple down. He knew he was too late, that there was nothing he could do to save the strangely idiosyncratic Edenist from Jospool. The boom picked up speed, slamming into the apparently dumbfounded Lewis. Eysk closed his eyes, mortified by the splash of gore.

Calm yourself, the personality said. His head survived the impact. I have his thoughts.

Thank goodness. Whatever caused the crane to fail like that? I've never seen such lightning on Atlantis before.

It . . . I . . .

Pernik?

The mental wail which came down the affinity link seemed capable of bursting Eysk's skull apart. He dropped to his knees, clamping his hands to his head, vision washed out by a blinding red light. Steel claws were burrowing up out of the affinity link, ripping through the delicate membranes inside his brain, shiny silver smeared with blood and viscid cranial fluid.

"Poor Eysk," a far-off chorus spoke directly into his mind—so very different to affinity, so very insidious. "Let us help you." The promise of pain's alleviation hummed in the air all around.

Even numbed and bruised he recognized the gentle offer for the Trojan it was. He blinked tears from his eyes, closing his mind to affinity. And he was abruptly alone, denied even an echo of the emotional fellowship he had shared for his entire life. The grotesque mirage of the claw vanished. Eysk let out a hot breath of relief. The polyp below his trembling hands was glowing a sickly pink—that was real.

"What—"

Hairy cloven feet shuffled into view. He gasped and looked up. The hominid creature with a black-leather

wolf's head howled victoriously and reached down for him.

Laton opened his eyes. His crushed, faltering body was suffused with pain. It wasn't relevant, so he ignored it. There wasn't going to be much time before oxygen starvation started to debilitate his reasoning. Physical shock was already making concentration difficult. He quickly loaded a sequence of localized limiter routines into the neuron cells buried beneath the polyp on which he was pinned by the twisted crane boom. Developed for his Jantrit campaign, their sophistication was orders of magnitude above the usual diversionary orders juvenile Edenists employed to avoid parental supervision. Firstly he regularized the image which the surrounding sensitive cells were supplying to the neural strata, freezing the picture of his body.

At that point his heart gave its last beat. He could sense the desperate attempts by the multiplicity to ward off Lewis's subsumption of the island. Laton was banking everything on the primitive street boy using brute force to take over. Sure enough Lewis's eerily potent, but crude, thought currents flowed through the neural strata below, flushing every other routine before him; though even his augmented power failed to root out Laton's subversive routines. They were symbiotic rather than parasitic, working within the controlling personality not against it. It would take a highly experienced Edenist bitek neuropathologist to even realize they were there, let alone expunge them.

Laton's lips gave a final quirk of contempt. He cleared a storage section in the neuron cells, and transferred his personality into it. His final act before consciousness and memory sank below the polyp was to trigger the proteanic virus infecting every cell in his body.

Mosul dreamed. He was lying in bed in his accommodation tower flat, with Clio beside him. Mosul woke. He looked down fondly at the sleeping girl; she was in her early twen-

ties with long dark hair and a pretty flattish face. The sheet had slipped from her shoulders, revealing a pert rounded breast. He bent over to kiss the nipple. She stirred, smiling dreamily as his tongue traced a delicate circle. A warm overflow of gently erotic images came foaming out of her drowsy mind.

Mosul grinned in anticipation, and woke. He frowned down in puzzlement at the sleeping girl beside him. The bedroom was illuminated by a sourceless rosy glow. It shaded Clio's silky skin a dark burgundy colour. He shook the sleep from his head. They had been making love for hours last night, he was entitled to some lassitude after that.

She responded eagerly to his kisses, throwing aside the sheet so he could feast on the sight of her. Her skin hardened and wrinkled below his touch. When he looked up in alarm she had become a cackling white-haired crone.

The pink light shifted into bright scarlet, as though the room was bleeding. He could see the polyp walls palpitating. In the distance a giant heartbeat thudded.

Mosul woke. The room was illuminated by a sourceless rosy glow. He was sweating, it was intolerably hot.

Pernik, I'm having a nightmare . . . I think. Am I awake now?

Yes, Mosul.

Thank goodness. Why is it so hot?

Yes, you are having a nightmare. My nightmare.

Pernik!

Mosul woke, jerking up from the bed. The bedroom walls were glowing red; no longer safe hard polyp but a wet meat traced with a filigree of purple-black veins. They oscillated like jelly. The heartbeat sounded again, louder than before. A damp acrid smell tainted the air.

Pernik! Help me.

No, Mosul.

What are you doing?

Clio rolled over and laughed at him. Her eyes were featureless balls of jaundiced yellow. "We're coming for you,

Mosul, you and all your kind. Smug arrogant bastards that you are.”

She elbowed him in the groin. Mosul shouted at the vicious pain, and tumbled off the raised sponge cushion which formed his bed. Sour yellow vomit trickled out of his mouth as he writhed about on the slippery floor.

Mosul woke. It was real this time, he was sure of that. Everything was dangerously clear to his eyes. He was lying on the floor, all tangled up in the sheets. The bedroom glowed red, its walls raw stinking meat.

Clio was locked in her own looped nightmare, hands raking the top of the bed, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. Unformed screams stalled in her throat, as though she was choking. Mosul tried to get up, but his feet slithered all over the slimed quaking floor. He directed an order at the door muscle membrane. Too late he saw its shape had changed from a vertical oval to a horizontal slash. A giant mouth. It parted, giving him a brief glimpse of stained teeth the size of his feet, then thick yellow vomit discharged into the bedroom. The torrent of obscenely fetid liquid hit him straight on, lifting him up and throwing him against the back wall. He didn't dare cry out, it would be in his mouth. His arms thrashed about, but it was like paddling in glue. There seemed no end to the cascade, it had risen above his knees. Clio was floundering against the wall a couple of metres away, her body spinning in the hard current. He couldn't reach her. The vomit's heat was powerful enough to enervate his muscles, and the stomach acid it contained was corroding his skin. It had risen up to his chest. He struggled to stay upright. Clio had disappeared below the surface, not even waking from her nightmare. And still more poured in.

As far as Lewis Sinclair was aware, Laton's corpse lay perfectly still under the crumpled crane boom. Not that he bothered to check. Pernik Island was big, much larger than his imagination had ever conceived it, and for someone with his background difficult to comprehend. Every second yelled

for his attention as he sent out phobic fantasies through his affinity bonds with the slumbering populace, invading their dreams, breaking their minds wide open with insane fear so more souls could come through and begin their reign of possession. He ignored the bitek's tedious minutiae—autonomic organ functions, the monitoring routines which the old multiplicity employed, enacting muscle membrane functions. All he cared about was eliminating the remaining Edenists; that task received his total devotion.

The island's cells glimmered a faint pink as a result of the energetic arrogation, even the shaggy coat of moss shone as though imbued with firefly luminescence. Pernik twinkled like a fabulous inflamed ruby in the funereal gloom of Atlantis's moonless night, sending radiant fingers probing down through the water to beckon curious fish. An observer flying overhead would have noticed flashes of blue light pulsing at random from the accommodation tower windows, as though stray lightning bolts were being flung around the interior.

Long chill screams reverberated around the borders of the park, emerging from various archways at the base of the towers. By the time they reached the rim they had blended into an almost musical madrigal, changes in pitch matching the poignant lilt of the waves washing against the polyp.

Housechimps scampered about, yammering frantically at each other. Their control routines had been wiped clean by Lewis's relentless purge of the multiplicity and all its subsidiaries, and long-suppressed simian tribal traits were surfacing. Fast, violent fights broke out among them as they instinctively fled into the thicker spinneys growing in the park.

The remaining sub-sentient servitor creatures, all eighteen separate species necessary to complement the island's static organs, either froze motionless or performed their last assigned task over and over again.

Unnoticed amid the bedlam and horror, Laton's corpse was quietly dissolving into protoplasmic soup.

Edenist biotechnicians examining the wreckage of Jantrit had called the process Laton used to doctor the habitat's neural strata a proteanic virus. In fact, it was far more complex than that. Affinity-programmable organic molecules was a term one researcher used.

Deeply disturbed by the technology and its implications, the Jovian consensus released little further information. Research continued, a classified high-priority project, which concentrated on developing methods to warn existing habitats of the sub-nanonic weapon being deployed against them, and a means of making future habitats (and people) immune. Progress over the intervening forty years was slow but satisfactory.

Of course, unknown to the Edenists, at the same time Laton was equally busy on Lalonde refining his process, and meeting with considerable success.

In its passive state, the updated proteanic virus masqueraded as inert organelles within his body cells—no matter what their nature, from liver to blood corpuscles, muscles to hair. When his last affinity command activated them, each organelle released a batch of plasmids (small, artificially synthesized DNA loops) and a considerable quantity of transcription factors, proteins capable of switching genes on or off. Once the plasmids had been inserted into the cell's DNA, mitosis began, forcing the cells to reproduce by division. Transcription factors switched off the human DNA completely, as well as an entire series of the new plasmids, leaving them to be carried passively while just one type of plasmid was activated to designate the function of the new cell. It was a drastic mutation. Hundreds of thousands of Laton's cells were already dying, millions more were killed by the induced mitosis; but over half fissioned successfully, turning into specialist diploid gametes.

They spilled out of the arms, legs, and collar of his one-piece ship-suit in a magenta sludge, draining away from stubborn clusters of dead cells that retained their original pattern—kernels of lumpy organs, slender ribs, a rubbery

dendritic knot of veins. As they spread across the polyp they started to permeate the surface, slipping through microscopic gaps in the grainy texture, seeping down towards the neural stratum four metres below. Pernik's nutrient capillaries and axon conduits speeded their passage.

Four hours later, when dawn was breaking over the condemned island, the majority of the gametes had reached the neural stratum. Stage two of the proteanic virus was different. A gamete would penetrate a neural cell's membrane and release the mission-specific plasmid Laton had selected (he had four hundred to choose from). The plasmid was accompanied by a transcription factor which would activate it.

Mitosis produced a neuron cell almost identical to the original it replaced. Once begun, the reproduction cycle was unstoppable; new cells started to supplant old at an ever-increasing rate. A chain reaction of subtle modification began to ripple out from the rim of the island. It went on for a considerable time.

Admiral Kolhammer was almost correct about Time Universe beating the Edenists to inform the Confederation about Laton. Several dozen star systems heard the news from the company first. Governments were put in an embarrassing position of knowing less than Time Universe until the voidhawks carrying diplomatic fleks from Admiral Aleksandrovich and the Confederation Assembly President arrived, clarifying the situation.

Naturally enough, public perception was focused almost exclusively on Laton: the threat from the past risen like the devil's own phoenix. They wanted to know what was being done to track him down and exterminate him. They were quite vociferous about it.

Presidents, kings, and dictators alike had to release statements assuring their anxious citizens that every resource was being deployed to locate him.

Considerably less attention was drawn to the apparent persona sequestration of Lalonde's population. Graeme

Nicholson hadn't placed much emphasis on the effect, keeping it at the rumour level. It wasn't until much later that news company science editors began to puzzle about the cost-effectiveness of sequestering an entire backward colony world, and question exactly what had happened in the Quallheim Counties. Laton's presence blinded them much as it did everyone else. He was on Lalonde, therefore Lalonde's uprising problem was instigated by him. QED.

Privately, governments were extremely worried by the possibility of an undetectable energy virus that could strike at people without warning. Dr Gilmore's brief preliminary report on Jacqueline Couteur was not released for general public access.

Naval reserve officers were called in, warships were placed on combat alert and brought up to full flight-readiness status. Laton gave governments the excuse to instigate rigorous screening procedures for visiting starships. Customs and Immigration officers were told to be especially vigilant for any electronic warfare nanonics.

There was also an unprecedented degree of cooperation between star systems' national groupings to ensure that the warning reached everybody and was taken seriously. Within a day of a flek courier voidhawk arriving, even the smallest, most distant asteroid settlement was informed and urged to take precautions.

Within five days of Admiral Lalwani dispatching the voidhawks, the entire Confederation had been told, with just a few notable exceptions. Most prominent of these were starships in transit.

Oenone raced in towards Atlantis at three gees. There were only sixty cases of Norfolk Tears left clamped into its lower hull cargo bay. Since leaving Norfolk, *Syrinx* had flown to Auckland, a four-hundred-light-year trip. Norfolk Tears increased in price in direct proportion to the distance from Norfolk, and Auckland was one of the richer planets in its sector of the Confederation. She had sold sixty per cent of her cargo to a planetary retailer, and another thirty per cent

to a family merchant enterprise in one of the system's Edenist habitats. It was the first shipment the Auckland system had seen for fifteen months, and the price it raised had been appropriately phenomenal. They had already paid off the Jovian Bank loan and made a respectable profit. Now she was back to honour her deal with Eysk's family.

She looked through Oenone's sensor blisters at the planet as they descended into equatorial orbit. Cool blues and sharp whites jumbled together in random splash patterns. Memories played below her surface thoughts, kindled by the sight of the infinite ocean. Mosul's smiling face.

We're not going to stay very long, are we? *Oenone* asked plaintively.

Why? she teased. **Don't you like talking to the islands? They make a change from habitats.**

You know why.

You stayed in Norfolk orbit for over a week.

I had lots of voidhawks to talk to. There are only fifteen here.

Don't worry. We won't stay long. Just enough time to unload the Norfolk Tears, and for me to see Mosul.

I like him.

Thank you for the vote of confidence. While we're here, would you ask the islands to see if anyone has a cargo they need shipping outsystem.

I'll start now.

Can you give me a link through to Mosul first, please. It is midnight on Pernik. The personality says Mosul is unobtainable at the moment.

Oh dear. I wonder what her name is?

Syrinx.

Yes?

Pernik is wrong.

What do you mean? Mosul is available?

No, I mean the personality is different, altered. There is no joy in its thoughts.

Syrinx opened her eyes and stared round the contoured

walls of her cabin. Familiar trinkets she had picked up on her voyages were lined up in glass-fronted alcoves. Her eyes found the fifteen-centimetre chunk of whalebone carved into a squatting Eskimo which Mosul had given her. But *Oenone's* unease was too unsettling for the crude statue to register the way it usually did, bringing forth a warm recollection intrinsic to both of them.

Perhaps there has been an accident on one of the fishing boats, she suggested.

Then the grief should be shared, as is proper.

Yes.

Pernik hides behind a facade of correctness.

Is Eysk available?

One moment.

Syrinx felt the voidhawk's mind reach out, then Eysk was merging his thoughts with her. Still the same old kind-hearted family elder, with that deeper layer of toughness that made him such a shrewd businessman.

Syrinx, he exclaimed happily, we were wondering where you had got to.

Did you think I'd skipped out on you?

Me? He projected mock horror. **Not at all. The arrest warrant we had drawn up was a mere precaution.**

She laughed. **I've brought your cases of Norfolk Tears.**

How many?

Sixty.

Ah well, my family will be through that lot before the week's out. Are you coming down tonight?

Yes, if it's not too late.

Not at all. I'll have some servitors lined up to unload your flyer by the time you get down.

Fine. Is everything all right on the island?

There was a moment's hesitation, a thought-flash of bemused incomprehension. **Yes. Thank you for asking.**

Is Mosul there?

Sex, that's all you young people think of.

We learn by example. Is he there?

Yes. But I don't think Clio will welcome an interruption right now.

Is she very pretty?

Yes. He generated an image of a girl's grinning face, half hidden by long dark hair. **She's bright, too. They are on the point of formalizing the arrangement.**

I'm happy for him, for both of them.

Thank you. Don't tell Mosul I said so, but she'll make a splendid addition to the family.

That's nice. I'll see you in a couple of hours.

I'll look forward to it. Just remember, Mosul learnt everything he knows from me.

As if I could forget. She broke the contact.

Well? *Oenone* asked.

I don't know. Nothing I could put my finger on, but he was definitely stilted.

Shall I ask the other islands?

Goodness, no. I'll find out what's troubling them once I'm down. Mosul will tell me, he owes me that much.

Hooked into the flyer's sensors, Syrinx couldn't be sure, but Pernik appeared aged somehow. Admittedly it was darkest night, but the towers had a shabby look, almost mouldered. They put her in mind of Earth's Empire State Building, now carefully preserved in its own dome at the centre of the New York arcology. Structurally sound, but unable to throw off the greying weight of centuries.

Thirty-two years old, and you see everything in such jaded terms, she told herself wearily. Pity that Mosul had formed a permanent attachment, though. He would have made a good father.

She clucked her tongue in self-admonition. But then her mother had conceived two children by the time she was thirty.

There's always Ruben, *Oenone* suggested.

It wouldn't be fair to him, not even to ask. He'd feel obligated to say yes.

I would like you to have a child. You are feeling incomplete. It upsets you. I don't like that.

I am not feeling incomplete!

You haven't even prepared any zygotes for my children yet. You should think about these things.

Oh goodness. You're starting to sound like Mother.

I don't know how to lie.

Rubbish!

Not to you. And it was you who was thinking of Mosul in that light.

Yes. Syrinx stopped trying to argue, it was stupidly blinkered. **What would I do without you?**

Oenone wrapped her thoughts with a loving embrace, and for a moment Syrinx imagined the flyer's ion field had leaked inside the cabin, filling it with golden haze.

They landed on one of the pads in the commercial section. The electrophorescent-cell ridge around the metal grid shone with a strong pink radiance. Few of the accommodation tower windows were lit.

It looks like they're in mourning, Syrinx said to Oxley in singular engagement mode as she walked down the aluminium stair. They had flown down alone so that the little flyer could carry more cargo, but it was still going to take three trips to bring all sixty cases down.

Yes. He glanced about, frowning. **There aren't many fishing boats in dock, either.**

Eysk and Mosul walked out of the shadows beyond the ridge.

Syrinx forgot everything else as Mosul sent out a burst of rapturous greeting, mingled with mischievously erotic subliminals.

She put her arms around him and enjoyed a long kiss.

I'd like to meet her, she told him. **Lucky thing that she is.**

You shall.

They stood about on the pad, chatting idly, as the island's lizard-skinned housechimps unloaded the first batch of cases under Oxley's careful direction and stacked them

on a processor-controlled flat-top trolley. When all eighteen cases were on, the drone trundled off towards one of the low warehouse domes ringing the park.

Do you want me to bring the rest down tonight? Oxley asked.

Please, Eysk said. **I have already organized sales with other families.**

The pilot nodded, winked at Syrinx, who was still standing with Mosul's arm around her shoulder, and went back into the flyer. Sitting in the command seat he linked his mind with the controlling processor array.

Something was affecting the coherent magnetic-field generation. It took a long time to form, and he had to bring compensator programs on-line. By the time he finally lifted from the pad the fusion generator was operating alarmingly close to maximum capacity.

He almost turned back there and then. But once he rose above a hundred metres the field stabilized rapidly. He had to cut the power levels back. Diagnostic programs reported the systems were all functioning flawlessly.

With a quick curse directed at all Kulu-produced machinery, he ordered the flight computer to design an orbital-injection trajectory that would bring him to a rendezvous with *Oenone*.

See you in three hours, Syrinx called as the sparkling artificial comet performed a tight curve around the accommodation towers before soaring up into the night sky.

Three hours! Oxley let his groan filter back down the affinity link.

You're professionals. You can handle it.

He put the flyer into a steep climb. One thing about an oceanic world, there was no worry about supersonic-boom footprints stomping all over civic areas. He was doing Mach two by the time he was fifteen kilometres away.

Pernik vanished from his affinity perception. Ordinarily a contact would simply fade with distance until it was no more. But this was different, like steel shutters slamming into place. Oxley was over a hundred and fifty years old,

in his time he'd visited almost ninety per cent of the Confederation, and he had never known an Edenist habitat to react in such a manner. It was alien to the whole creed of consensual unity.

He switched in the aft sensors. A luminous red pearl haunted the horizon, sending shimmer-spears of light dancing across the black water.

"What is . . ." The words dried up at the back of his throat.

Pernik? he demanded. **Pernik, what is going on? What is that light?**

The silence was total. There wasn't the slightest trace of the personality's thoughts left anywhere in the affinity band.

Syrinx?

Nothing.

Oenone, something's happening on Pernik, can you reach Syrinx?

She is there, the worried voidhawk answered. **But I cannot converse with her. Something is interfering.**

Oh, heavens. He banked the flyer round, heading back for the island.

Affinity broadened out from the single tenuous thread to the orbiting voidhawk, offering him the support of innumerable minds combining into a homogenized entity, buoying him up on a tide of intellect. He wasn't alone, and he wasn't anxious any more. Doubts and personal fears bled away, exchanged for confidence and determination, a much-needed reinforcement of his embattled psyche. For a moment, flying over the gargantuan ocean in a tiny machine, he had been horribly lonely; now his kind had joined him, from the eager honoured enthusiasms of sixteen-year-olds up to the glacial thoughts of the islands themselves. He felt like a child again, comforted by the loving arms of an adult, wiser and stronger. It was a reconfirmation of Edenism which left him profoundly grateful for the mere privilege of belonging.

This is Thalia Island, Oxley, we are aware of Pernik's

withdrawal from affinity and we are summoning a planetary consensus to deal with the problem.

That red lighting effect has me worried, he replied. The flyer had dropped below subsonic again. Pernik gleamed a sickly vermilion eight kilometres away.

Around the planet, consensus finalized, bringing together every sentient entity in an affinity union orchestrated by the islands. Information, such as it had, was reviewed, opinions formed, discussed, discarded, or elaborated. Two seconds after considering the problem the consensus said: **We believe it to be Laton. A ship of the same class as the *Yaku* arrived last night and sent a spaceplane down to the island. From that time onward Pernik's communication has declined by sixty per cent.**

Laton? The appalled question came from *Oenone* and its crew.

Yes. The Atlantean consensus summarized the information that had been delivered by a voidhawk two days earlier. **As we have no orbital stations our checks on arriving ships were naturally less than ideal, depending solely on civil traffic control satellite-platform sensors. The ship has of course departed, but the spaceplane remained. Pernik and its population must have been sequestered by the energy virus.**

Oh no, Oxley cried brokenly. **Not him. Not again.**

Ahead of him, Pernik issued a brilliant golden light, as though sunrise had come to the ocean. The flyer gave a violent lurch to starboard, and began to lose height.

Syrinx watched the little flyer disappear into the east. The night air was cooler than she remembered from her last visit, bringing up goosebumps below her ship-tunic. Mosul, who was dressed in a baggy sleeveless sweatshirt and shorts, seemed completely unaffected. She eyed him with a degree of annoyance. Macho outdoors type.

This Clio was a lucky woman.

Come along, Eysk said. **The family is dying to meet**

you again. You can tell the youngsters what Norfolk was like.

I'd love to.

Mosul's arm tightened that bit extra round her shoulder as they headed for the nearest tower. Almost proprietary, she thought.

Mosul, she asked on singular engagement, **what's wrong down here? You all seem so tense.** It was a struggle to convey the emotional weight she wanted.

Nothing is wrong. He smiled as they passed under the archway at the foot of the tower.

She stared at him, dumbfounded. He had answered on the general affinity band, an extraordinary breach of protocol.

Mosul caught her expression, and sent a wordless query.

This is . . . she began. Then her thoughts flared in alarm. *Oenone*, she couldn't perceive *Oenone*! "Mosul! It's gone. No, wait. I can feel it, just. Mosul, something is trying to block affinity."

"Are they?" His smile hardened into something which made her jerk away in consternation. "Don't worry, little Syrinx. Delicate, beautiful little Syrinx, so far from home. All alone. But we treasure you for the gift you bring. We are going to welcome you into a brotherhood infinitely superior to Edenism."

She spun round, ready to run. But there were five men standing behind her. One of them—she gasped—his head had grown until it was twice the size it should be. His features were a gross caricature, cheeks deep and lined, eyes wide and avian; his nose was huge, coming to a knife edge that hung below his black lips, both ears were pointed, rising above the top of his skull.

"What are you?" she hissed.

"Don't mind old Kincaid," Mosul said. "Our resident troll."

It was getting lighter, the kind of liquid redness creeping across the island's polyp which she associated with Duchess-night on Norfolk. Her legs began to shake. It was

shameful, but she was so alone. Never before had she been denied the community of thoughts that was the wonder of Edenism. **Oenone!** The desperate shout crashed around the confines of her own skull. **Oenone, my love. Help me!**

There was an answer. Not coherent, nothing she could perceive, decipher. But somewhere on the other side of the blood-veiled sky the voidhawk cried in equal anguish.

“Come, Syrinx,” Mosul said. He held out his hand. “Come with us.”

It wasn't Mosul. She knew that now.

“Never.”

“So brave,” he said pityingly. “So foolish.”

She was physically strong, her genes gave her that much. But there were seven of them. They half carried, half pushed her onwards.

The walls became strange. No longer polyp but stone. Big cubes hewn from some woodland granite quarry; and old, the age she thought she had seen on the approach flight. Water leaked from the lime-encrusted mortar, sliming the stone.

They descended a spiral stair which grew narrower until only one of them could march beside her. Syrinx's ship-tunic sleeve was soon streaked with water and coffee-coloured fungus. She knew it wasn't real, that it couldn't be happening. There was no “down” in an Atlantean island. Only the sea. But her feet slipped on the worn steps, and her calves ached.

There was no red glow in the bowels of the island. Flaming torches in black iron brands lighted their way. Their acrid smoke made her eyes water.

The stairway came out onto a short corridor. A sturdy oak door was flung open, and Syrinx shoved through. Inside was a medieval torture chamber.

A wooden rack took up the centre of the room; iron chains wound round wheels at each end, manacles open and waiting. A brazier in one corner was sending out waves of heat from its radiant coals. Long slender metal instruments were plunged into it, metal sharing the furnace glow.

The torturer himself was a huge fat man in a leather jerkin. Rolls of hairy flesh spilled over his waistband. He stood beside the brazier, cursing the slender young woman who was bent over a pair of bellows.

"This is Clio," Mosul's stolen body said. "You did say you wanted to meet her."

The woman turned, and laughed at Syrinx.

"What is the point?" Syrinx asked weakly. Her voice was very close to cracking.

"This is in your honour," the torturer said. His voice was a deep bass, but soft, almost purring. "You, we shall have to be very careful with. For you come bearing a great gift. I don't want to damage it."

"What gift?"

"The living starship. These other mechanical devices for sailing the night gulf are difficult for us to employ. But your craft has elegance and grace. Once we have you, we have it. We can bring our crusade to new worlds with ease after that."

FLEE! Flee, *Oenone*. Flee this dreadful world, my love. And never come back.

"Oh, Syrinx." Mosul's handsome face wore the old sympathetic expression she remembered from such a time long ago now. "We have taken affinity from you. We have sent Oxley away. We have taken everybody from you. You are alone but for us. And believe me, we know what being alone does to an Edenist."

"Fool," she sneered. "That wasn't affinity, it is love which binds us."

"And we shall love the *Oenone* too," a musical chorus spoke to her.

She refused to show any hint of surprise. "*Oenone* will never love you."

"In time all things become possible," the witching chorus sang. "For are we not come?"

"Never," she said.

The corpulent paws of Kincaid the troll tightened around her arms.

Syrinx closed her eyes as she was forced towards the rack. This is not happening therefore I can feel no pain. This is not happening therefore I can feel no pain. Believe it!

Hands tore at the collar of her ship-tunic, ripping the fabric. Hot rancid air prickled her skin.

This is NOT happening therefore I can feel no pain. Not not not—

Ruben sat at his console station in Oenone's bridge along with the rest of the crew. There were only two empty seats. Empty and accusing.

I should have gone down with her, Ruben thought. Maybe if I could have provided everything she needed from life she wouldn't have gone running to Mosul in the first place.

We all share guilt, Ruben, the Atlantean consensus said. And ours is by far the larger failing for letting Laton come to this world. Your only crime is to love her.

And fail her.

No. We are all responsible for ourselves. She knows that as well as you do. All individuals can ever do is share happiness wherever they can find it.

We're all ships that pass in the night?

Ultimately, yes.

Consensus was so large, so replete with wisdom, he found it easy to believe. An essential component of the quiddity.

She is in trouble down there, he said. Frightened, alone. Edenists shouldn't be alone.

I am with her, *Oenone* said. **She can feel me even though we cannot converse.**

We are doing what we can, the consensus said. But this is not a world equipped for warfare.

The part of Ruben which had joined with the consensus was suddenly aware of Pernik igniting to solar splen-

dour—and he was sitting strapped into a metal flea that spun and tossed erratically as it fell from the sky.

SYRINX! *Oenone* cried. **Syrinx. Syrinx. Syrinx. Syrinx. Syrinx.**

The voidhawk's affinity voice was a thunderclap roar howling through the minds of its crew. Ruben thought he would surely be deafened. Serina sat with her mouth gaping wide, hands clamped over her ears, tears streaming down her face.

Oenone, restrain yourself, the consensus demanded.

But the voidhawk was beyond reason. It could feel its captain's pain, her hopelessness as the white-hot metal seared into her flesh with brutal intricate skill while in her heart she thought of nothing but their love. Lost in helpless rage its distortion effect twisted and churned like a frenzied captured beast pummeling at its cage bars.

Gravity rammed Ruben down into his seat, then swung severely. His arms outside the webbing were sucked up towards the ceiling, their weight quadrupling. *Oenone* was tumbling madly, its energy patterning cells sending out vast random surges of power.

Tula was yelling at the voidhawk to stop. Loose pieces of junk were hurtling round the bridge—cups and plastic meal trays, a jacket, cutlery, several circuit wafers. Gravity was fluctuating worse than a roller-coaster ride. One moment they appeared to be hanging upside-down, the next they were at right angles, and always weighing too much. A spinning circuit wafer sliced past Edwin, nicking his cheek. Blood squirted out.

Ruben could just make out the calls of the other voidhawks in orbit above Atlantis, trying to calm their rampant cousin. They all started to alter course for a rendezvous. Together their distortion fields could probably nullify *Oenone's* supercharged flailings.

Then the most violent convulsion of all kicked the crew toroid. Ruben actually heard the walls give a warning creak. One of the consoles buckled, big skinlike creases appearing in its composite sides as it concertinaed down

towards the decking. Coolant fluid and sparks burst out of the cracks. He must have blacked out for a second.

Gravity was at a forty-degree angle to the horizontal when he came to, and holding steady.

I'm coming. I'm coming. I'm coming, *Oenone* was braying.

Horried, Ruben linked into the voidhawk's sensor blisters. They were heading down towards Atlantis at two and a half gees. Reaction to the berserker power thundering through the energy patterning cells made the muscles in his arms and legs bunch like hot ropes.

Fast-moving specks were rising above the hazy blue-white horizon, skimming over the atomic fog of the thermosphere like flat stones flung across a placid sea. The other voidhawks: their calls redoubled in urgency. But *Oenone* was immune to them, to the Atlantean consensus' imperious orders. Rushing to help its beloved.

They're too far away, Ruben realized in dismay, they won't reach us in time.

The consensus relaxed its contact with Oxley, allowing him complete independence to pilot the floundering flyer, letting his instinct and skill attempt to right the craft unencumbered. He shot order after order into the bitek processors, receiving a stream of systems information in return. The coherent magnetic generators were failing, databuses were glitched, the fusion generator was powering down, electron-matrix crystal power reserves were dropping. Whatever electronic warfare techniques Pernik had, they were the best he had ever encountered, and they were trying to kill him.

He concentrated on the few control channels which remained operational, reducing the spin and flattening out the dive. The faltering magnetic fields squeezed and pushed at glowing ion streams, countering the corkscrew trajectory. Black ocean and lustrous island chased each other round the sensor images at a decreasing rate.

There was no panic. He treated it as though it was just

another simulation run. An exercise in logic and competence set by the CAB to try and trip him.

At the back of his mind he was aware of further pandemonium breaking out amid the consensus. A ghost image lying across the flyer's sensor input visualization showed him *Oenone* plummeting towards the planet.

With only a kilometre of altitude left the flyer lost its spin. The nose was dangerously low. He poured the final power reserves into raising it, using the craft's ellipsoid surface as a blunt wing, gaining a degree of lift in an attempt to glide-curve away from the island. Distance was his only chance of salvation now. Streaks of reflected starlight blurred on the sable water below, growing closer. There was no sign of the electronic warfare assault abating.

Pernik's resplendent silhouette winked out. Silence detonated into the affinity consensus, absorbing the entire planet's mental voice.

Into the emptiness came a single devastating identity trait.

Your attention, please, Laton said. We don't have much time. *Oenone*, resume your orbit now.

The flyer's crashed systems abruptly sprang back into zealous life. And a shock-numbered Oxley was pressed deep into his seat as it vaulted back into the sky.

Lewis Sinclair watched keenly as the torturer manipulated Syrinx's mangled leg with a pair of ruddy glowing tongs and a mallet. She wasn't screaming so loudly now. The fight was going out of her. But not the spirit, he suspected. She was one tough lady. He had seen the type before back in Mes-sopia; cops mainly, the special forces mob, hard-eyed and dedicated. A pusher Lewis worked for had captured one once, and it didn't matter what was done to the man, they couldn't get him to tell them anything.

Lewis didn't think the possessed were going to gain control of the voidhawk through Syrinx. But he didn't say anything, let them sweat it. It wasn't so much his problem,

possessing the island gave him a measure of security a mere human body could never offer. The range of physical sensations and experiences available to him was truly astonishing.

The sensitive cells woven through the polyp were fantastically receptive; people with their mundane eyes and ears and nose were almost insensate by comparison. His consciousness roved at random through the huge structure, tasting and sampling. He was getting the hang of splitting himself into multiples, supervising a dozen actions at once.

Syrinx groaned again as the souls from beyond sang into her mind with their strange icy promises. And Lewis saw a girl standing at the back of the dungeon. The quake her presence sent through his psyche perceptibly rocked the entire island, as though it had ridden over a tidal wave. It was her! The girl from Messopia, Thérèse, the one he'd fought and died over.

Thérèse was tall for thirteen, skinny, with breasts that had been pushed into maturity by a course of tailored growth hormones. Long raven hair, brown eyes, and a pretty, juvenile face with just the right amount of cuteness; everybody's girl next door. She was wearing black leather shorts to show off her tight little arse, and her breasts were almost falling out of a scarlet halter top. Her pose was indolent, chewing at her gum, one hand on her hip.

Where the hell did she come from? Lewis asked.

What? the possessed Eysk asked.

Her. Thérèse. There, behind you.

Eysk turned round, then frowned angrily at the ceiling.

Very funny. Now fuck off.

But—

Thérèse gave a bored sigh and sauntered out of the dungeon.

Can't you see her?

None of them answered him. He knew she was real, he could hear her *clicking* walk, feel the weight of her black stilettos on his polyp, olfactory cells picked up the sugary whiff of gum on her exhaled breath. She walked away

from the dungeon, down a long corridor. For some reason it was difficult to keep his perception focused on her. She was only walking, but she seemed to be moving so fast. He barely noticed as the polyp of the corridor gave way to concrete. The light became a harsh electric yellow coming from bulbs on the ceiling, each one cupped by a protective wire cage. She hurried on ahead of him, feet sending out that regular *click click click* as her stilettos rapped the ground. His filthy jeans restricted his movements, clinging to his legs as he trailed after her. The air was cooler here, he could see his breath emerging as white streamers.

Thérèse slipped through a big set of grey-painted metal doors ahead. Lewis followed her into the empty subterranean warehouse in Messopia five hundred and fifty years ago. He gagged. It was a square chamber, sixty metres to a side, twenty metres high, rough poured concrete ribbed with steel beams coated in red-oxide paint. Striplights cast a feeble moon-white glow from on high. As before, leaking sewage pipes dripped rank liquids onto the floor.

She stood in the middle of the floor, looking at him expectantly.

He glanced down, seeing his body for the first time. “Oh no,” he said in a desperate voice. “This isn’t happening.”

Loud, positive footsteps sounded from the far end of the warehouse. Lewis didn’t wait to see who was emerging from the gloom, he spun round. There was no door any more, just a concrete wall. “Jesus Almighty. Fuck!”

“Hello, Lewis.”

His body was compelled to turn, leg muscles working like dead meat fired by a cattle prod. He bit hard on his trembling lip.

Thérèse had gone. The person walking towards him was the body he had possessed on Lalonde.

“You’re dead,” Lewis whispered through a fear-knotted throat.

Laton merely smiled his superior smile. “Of all the people resident in this universe today, Lewis, you should know there is no such thing as death.”

"I'm in charge here," Lewis yelled. "I am Pernik." He tried to fling the white fire, to conjure up energistic devastation, to flay the zombie to its stinking corrupt bones and beyond.

Laton halted five metres away. "You were Pernik. I told you once that we would meet again as equals. I lied. You cannot even begin to conceive the processes involved in your manifestation within this universe. You are a Neanderthal out of time, Lewis. You believed brute force was the key to conquest. Yet you failed to even think about the source of your energistic power. I know, I've been analysing your tiresomely sluggish thoughts ever since you possessed my body."

"What have you done to me?"

"Done? Why, Lewis, I have made you a part of me. Possession of the possessor. It is possible given the right circumstances. In this case I simply corrupted Pernik's neural stratum with my biological weapon. The neuron cells and nerve paths only conduct my thought impulses now. You can kill the cells, but you can't subvert them. It's a question of coding, you see. I know the codes, you don't. And please don't ask me for them, Lewis, it's nothing as simple as a number. You now operate only as a subsidiary part of me, you only think because I allow you to. That is how I summoned you here."

"I think because I am! I have been me for centuries, you bastard."

"And were you to go back there to the beyond, you would be you again. Free and independent. Do you want to go, Lewis? That is your escape from my bondage. In this universe you require a physical, living biological matrix in which to function. You may depart now if you wish."

A weight pulled at Lewis's belt. When he looked down he saw it was the power-blade knife hanging in its sheath. "No." He shook his head feebly, quailing at the prospect. "No, I won't. That's what you want. Without me Pernik would be free again. I'm going to stop that, I'm going to beat you."

“Don’t flatter yourself, Lewis. I will never allow you to resume your barbaric act of sodomy. You think of yourself as strong, as purposeful. You are entirely incorrect. You and the other returners have a nebulous plan to re-establish yourselves permanently in this physical universe. You do so because of your own quite pathetic psychological weaknesses.”

Lewis snarled at his tall tormentor. “So fucking smart, aren’t you. Let’s see what you’re like after a hundred fucking years of nothing; no food, no breathing, no touch, just fucking nothing. You’ll be begging to join us, shithead.”

“Really?” Laton’s smile no longer contained even a vestige of humour. “Think what you are, Lewis. Think what all the returners are. Then ask yourself, where is the rest of the human race? The hundreds of billions who have died since the day our ancestors first struck two flints together, from the time we watched the glaciers retreating as we battled with mammoths.”

“They’re with me, billions of them. They’re waiting for their chance. And when they get into this universe they’re gonna come gunning for you, shithead.”

“But they’re not with you in the beyond, Lewis, there are nothing like enough souls to account for everyone. You cannot lie to me, you are part of me. I know. They’re not there. Ask yourself who and why, Lewis.”

“Fuck you.” Lewis drew the knife from its scabbard. He thumbed the switch in a smooth motion and the silver blade emitted a dangerous buzz.

“Lewis, kindly behave yourself; this is my perceptual reality, after all.”

Lewis watched the solid blade curve round towards his fingers. He dropped the knife with a yell. It vanished before it reached the floor, making as little fuss as a snowflake landing on water. “What do you want with me?” He raised his clenched fists, knowing that it was all futile. He wanted to pound his knuckles into the concrete.

Laton took another few paces towards him. And Lewis

came to realize just how imposing the big Edenist was. It was all he could do not to back away.

“I want to make amends,” Laton said. “At least part way. I doubt I will ever be fully forgiven in this universe, not for my crime. And it was a crime, I admit that now. You see, from you I have learnt how wrong I was before. Immortality is a notion we all grasp at because we can sense that there is continuity beyond death. It is an imperfect realization due to the weakness of the fusion between this continuum and the state of emptiness which follows. So much of our misunderstanding of life is rooted in this, so many wasted opportunities, so much religious claptrap born. I was wholly wrong to try and achieve a physical life extension, when corporeal life is but the start of existence. I was no better than a monkey trying to grasp a hologram banana.”

“You’re mad!” Lewis shouted recklessly. “You’re fucking mad!”

Laton became pitying. “Not mad, but very human. Even in this hiatus state I have emotions. And I have weaknesses. One of them is the desire for revenge. But then you know all about that, don’t you, Lewis? Revenge is a prime motivator; glands or no glands, chemical fury or otherwise. You burnt for it in the empty beyond, revenge on the living for the crime of living.

“Well, now I shall have my revenge for the agonies and degradations you so joyfully submitted my kind to. My kind being the Edenists. For I am one. At the end. Flawed, but proud of them, their silly pride and honour. They are a basically peaceful people, those of Pernik more than most, and you delighted in shattering their sanity. You also destroyed my children, and you revelled in it, Lewis.”

“I still do! I hope it fucking hurt you watching! I hope the memory makes you scream at nights. I want you in pain, you shit, I want you weeping. If I’m part of your memories then you won’t ever be able to forget, I won’t let you.”

“Oh, Lewis, haven’t you learnt anything yet?” Laton

drew his own knife from a scabbard he brought into existence. Its wickedly thrumming power-blade was half a metre long. "I'm going to free Syrinx and warn the Atlantean consensus as to the exact nature of the threat they face. However, the remaining possessed do present a slight problem. So I need you to overcome them, Lewis. I shall consume you, completely."

"Never! I won't help."

Laton took a pace forwards. "It isn't a question of choice. Not on your part."

Lewis tried to run. Even though he knew it was impossible. The concrete closed in, shrinking the warehouse to the size of a tennis court, a room, a cube five metres across.

"I require control of the energistic spillover, Lewis. The power which comes from colliding continua. For that I must have the you which is you. I must complete my possession."

"No!" Lewis raised his arms as the blade came whistling down. Once again there was the dreadful grinding sound as bone was pierced and fragmented. A flash of intolerable pain followed by the devastating numbness. His blood spilled onto the floor in great spurts from his elbow stump.

"Goodbye, Lewis. It may be some time before we encounter one another again. But none the less I wish you luck in your search for me."

Lewis had collapsed twitching into a corner, soles of his boots slipping on his own blood. "Bastard," he spat through white lips. "Just do it. Get it over with and laugh, you shithead prick sucker."

"Sorry, Lewis. But like I told you, I shall consume you in your entirety. It's almost a vampiric process, really—though I expect that particular irony is sadly lost on you. And in order for the transfer to work you must remain conscious for the entire feast." Laton gave him a lopsided, half-apologetic smile.

The true meaning of what the Edenist was saying finally

sank in. Lewis started to scream. He was still screaming when Laton picked up his severed arm and bit into it.

Pernik's illumination returned to normality with eye-jarring suddenness. The accommodation towers blazed with diamond-blue light from every window, winding pathways through the park were set out by orange fairy lanterns, circular landing pads glowed hotly around the entire rim, the floating quays were like fluorescent roots radiating out into the opaque glassy water.

Oxley thought it looked quite magnificent. So cruelly treacherous, that a creation of such beauty could play host to the most heinous evil.

Land immediately please, Oxley, Laton said. **I don't have much time. They are resisting me.**

Land? Oxley felt his throat snarl up as outrage vied with a shaky form of laugh. **Show me where you are, and I'll come to you, Laton. I'll be doing around Mach twenty when we embrace. Show yourself!**

Don't be a fool. I am Pernik now.

Where's Syrinx?

She lives. Oenone will confirm that. But you must pick her up now, she requires urgent medical attention.

Oenone? He sent the querying thought lancing upwards, while at the back of his mind he was aware of Laton delivering a vast quantity of information to the Atlantean consensus.

The voidhawk registered as a subdued jumble of thoughts. It had stopped its crazed descent; now it was rising laboriously up out of the mesosphere, its distortion effect generating barely a tenth of a gee.

Oenone, is she alive?

Yes.

The emotional discharge in the voidhawk's thought brought tears to his eyes.

Oxley, Ruben called, **if there's any chance . . . please.**

OK. He studied the island. Pinpricks of light were blooming and dying right across it, stars with a lifetime

measurable in fractions of a second. It looked quite magical, though he didn't like to dwell too hard upon what their cause would be.

Consensus, should I go in?

Yes. No other spaceplanes can reach Pernik in time. Trust Laton.

That was it, the universe had finally gone totally insane. **Oh, shit. OK, I'm taking the flyer down.**

Fires had taken hold in the central park when Oxley piloted the flyer down onto one of the pads. He could see a spaceplane further along the row, wings retracted, lying on its side with its undercarriage struts sticking up in the air and its fuselage cracked open around the midsection. Bodies were sprawled on the polyp around the base of the nearest accommodation tower; most of them looked as though they had been caught in a firestorm, skin blackened, faces unrecognizable, clothes still smoking.

An explosion sounded in the distance, and a ball of orange flame rolled out of a window on the other side of the park.

They are learning, Laton said impassively. Grouped together they can ward off my energistic assaults. It won't do them any good in the long run, of course.

Oxley's nerves were raw edged. He still thought this was some giant trap. The steel-clad jaws would snap shut any second; conversation might just be the trigger. **Where's Syrinx?**

Coming. Open the flyer airlock.

He felt the consensus balance his insecurities with an injection of urbane courage. Somehow he was giving the order to cut the ion field and open the airlock.

Faint shouts and the drawn out screeching of metal under tremendous stress penetrated the cabin. Oxley sniffed the air. Mingled with the brine was a frowsty putrescence which furred the roof of his mouth. With his hand clamped firmly over his nose he made his way aft.

Someone was walking towards the flyer. A giant, three

metres tall, hairless, naked skin a frail cream colour, virtually devoid of facial features. It was holding a figure in its outstretched arms.

“Syrinx,” he gasped. He could feel *Oenone* pushing behind his eyes, desperate to see.

Three-quarters of her body was engulfed by green medical nanonic packages. But even that thick covering couldn’t disguise the terrible damage inflicted on her limbs and torso.

The nanonic packages do not function well in this environment, Laton said as the giant mounted the flyer’s airstairs. **Once you are airborne their efficiency will recover.**

Who did this?

I do not know their names. But I assure you the bodies they possessed have been rendered nonfunctional.

Oxley backed into the cabin, too shaken to offer further comment. Laton must have loaded an order into the flight-control processors, because the front passenger seat hinged open to form a flat couch. It was the one designed for transporting casualty cases. Basic medical monitor and support equipment slid out from recesses in the cabin wall above it.

The giant laid Syrix down gently, then stood, its head touching the cabin ceiling. Oxley wanted to rush over to her, but all he could do was stare dumbly at the hulking titan. Its blank face crawled as though the skin was boiling. Laton looked down at him.

“Go to the Sol system,” the simulacrum said. “There are superior medical facilities available there in any case. But the Jovian consensus must be informed of the true nature of the threat these returning souls pose to the Confederation; indeed to this whole section of the galaxy. That is your priority now.”

Oxley managed to jerk a nod. “What about you?”

“I will hold the possessed off until you leave Pernik. Then I will begin the great journey.” The big lips pressed together in compassion. “If it is of any comfort, you may

tell our kind I am now truly sorry for Jantrit. I was utterly and completely wrong.”

“Yes.”

“I do not ask forgiveness, for it would not be in Edenism’s power to grant. But tell them also that I came good in the end.” The face managed a small, clumsy smile. “That ought to set the cat among the pigeons.”

The giant turned and clumped out of the cabin. When it reached the top of the airlock stairs it lost all cohesion. A huge gout of milky white liquid sloshed down onto the metal grid of the landing pad, splattering the flyer’s landing gear struts.

The flyer was five hundred kilometres from Pernik and travelling at Mach fifteen up through the ionosphere when the end came.

Laton waited until the diminutive craft was beyond any conceivable blast range, then used his all-pervasive control to release every erg of chemical energy stored in the island’s cells simultaneously. It produced an explosion to rival an antimatter planetbuster strike. Several of the tsunamis which raced out from the epicentre were powerful enough to traverse the world.

7

It was a quiet evening in Harkey's Bar. Terrance Smith's bold little fleet had departed the previous day, taking with it a good many regulars. The band audibly lacked enthusiasm, and only five couples were dancing on the floor. Gideon Kavanagh sat at one table; the medical nanonic package preparing his stump for a clone graft was deftly covered by a loose-fitting purple jacket. His companion was a slim twenty-five-year-old girl in a red cocktail dress who giggled a lot. A group of bored waitresses stood at one end of the bar, talking among themselves.

Meyer didn't mind the apathetic atmosphere for once. There were some nights when he really didn't feel like maintaining the expected image of combination raconteur, bon viveur, ace pilot, and sex demon—the qualities that independent starship captains were supposed to possess in abundance. He was too old to be keeping up that kind of nonsense.

Leave it to the young ones like Joshua, he thought. Although with Joshua it was hardly an act.

Nor was it always an artificial pose for you, *Udat* said.

Meyer watched one of the young waitresses swish past the end of the booth, an oriental with blonde hair whose long black skirt was split up to her hips. He didn't even feel remotely randy, just appreciative of the view. **Those days seem to be long gone,** he told the blackhawk with an irony that wasn't entirely insincere.

Cherri Barnes was sitting in the booth with him; the two of them sharing a chilled bottle of imported white Valencay wine. Now there was a woman he felt perfectly com-

fortable with. Smart, attractive, someone who didn't feel compelled to talk into any silences, a good crew member too; and they'd been to bed on several occasions over the years. No incompatibility there.

Her company lightens you, *Udat* proclaimed. That makes me happy.

Oh, well, as long as you're happy . . .

We need a flight. You are growing restless. I am eager to leave.

We could have gone to Lalonde.

I think not. Such missions do not sit well with you any more.

You're right. Though Christ knows I would have liked a crack at that bastard Laton. But I suppose that's something else best left to Joshua and his ilk. Though what he wanted to go for after the money he pulled in on the Norfolk run beats me.

Perhaps he feels he has something to prove.

No. Not Joshua. There's something odd going on there. And knowing Joshua, money is at the root of it. But no doubt we'll hear about it in due course. In the meantime the Lalonde mission has left a pleasing shortage of starships docked here. Finding a charter should be relatively easy.

There were those Time Universe charters available. Claudia Dohan specifically wanted blackhawks to deliver the fleks of Graeme Nicholson's sensewise. Time was of the essence, she said.

Those charters were all rush and effort.

It would have been a challenge.

If I'd wanted my mother as a permanent companion rather than a blackhawk I would never have left home.

I am sorry. I have upset you.

No. It's this Laton business. It has me worried. Fancy him turning up again after all this time.

The navy will find him.

Yeah. Sure.

"What are you two talking about?" Cherri asked.

"Huh? Oh, sorry," he grinned sheepishly. "It's Laton, if you must know. Just thinking of him running round free again . . ."

"You and fifty billion others." She picked up one of the menu sheets. "Come on, let's order. I'm starving."

They chose a chicken dish with side salad, along with a second bottle of wine.

"The trouble is, where can you travel to that's guaranteed safe?" Meyer said after the waitress departed. "Until the Confederation Navy finds him, the interstellar cargo market is going to be very jumpy. Our insurance rates are going to go through the roof."

"So shift to data-courier work. That way we don't have to physically dock with any stations. Alternatively, we just fetch and carry cargo between Edenist habitats."

He shifted his wineglass about on the table, uncomfortable with the idea. "That's too much like giving in, letting him win."

"Well, make up your mind."

He managed a desultory smile. "I dunno."

"Captain Meyer?"

He glanced up. A smallish black woman was standing at the end of the booth's table, dressed in a conservative grey suit; her skin was black enough to make Cheri seem white. He guessed she was in her early sixties. "That's me."

"You are the owner of the *Udat*?"

"Yes." If it had been anywhere else but Tranquillity, Meyer would have pegged her as a tax inspector.

"I am Dr Alkad Mzu," she said. "I wonder if I could sit with you for a moment? I would like to discuss some business."

"Be my guest."

He signalled to a waitress for another wineglass, and poured out the last of the bottle when it arrived.

"I require some transportation outsystem," Alkad said.

"Just for yourself? No cargo?"

"That is correct. Is it a problem?"

“Not for me. But the *Udat* doesn’t come cheap. In fact, I don’t think we’ve ever carried just one passenger before.”

We haven’t, *Udat* said.

Meyer quashed a childish grin. “Where do you want to travel? I can probably give you a quote straight away.”

“New California.” She sipped her wine, peering at him over the rim of the glass.

Out of the corner of his eye, Meyer could see Cherri frowning. There were regular commercial flights to the New Californian system from Tranquillity three or four times a week, and more non-scheduled charter flights on top of that. The Laton scare hadn’t stopped any departures yet. He was suddenly very curious about Alkad Mzu.

OK, let’s see how badly she wants to get there. “That would be at least three hundred thousand fuseodollars,” he told her.

“I expected it to be about that,” she replied. “Once we arrive, I may wish to pick up some cargo to carry on to a further destination. Could you supply me with the *Udat*’s performance and handling parameters, please?”

“Yes, of course.” He was only slightly mollified. Taking a cargo on somewhere was a viable excuse for an exclusive charter. But why not travel to New California on a regular civil flight, then hire a starship after she arrived? The only reason he could think of was that she specifically wanted a blackhawk. That wasn’t good, not good at all. “But *Udat* is only available for civil flights,” he stressed the word lightly.

“Naturally,” Alkad Mzu said.

“That’s all right then.” He opened a channel to her neural nanonics and datavised the blackhawk’s handling capacity over.

“What sort of cargo would we pick up?” Cherri asked. “I’m the *Udat*’s cargo officer, I may be able to advise on suitability.”

“Medical equipment,” Alkad said. “I have some type-definition files.” She datavised them to Meyer.

The list expanded in his mind, resembling a three-di-

mensional simulacrum of magnified chip circuitry, with every junction labelled. There seemed to be an awful lot of it. "Fine," he said, slightly at a loss. "We'll review it later." Have to run it through an analysis program, he thought.

"Thank you," Alkad said. "The journey from New California will be approximately two hundred light-years, if you'd care to work out a quote based on the cargo's mass and environmental requirements. I will be asking other captains for quotes."

"We'll be tough to beat," he said smoothly.

"Is there any reason why we can't know where we're going?" Cherri asked.

"My colleagues and I are still in the preliminary planning stage of the mission. I'd prefer not to say anything more at this time. But I shall certainly inform you of our destination before we leave Tranquillity." Alkad stood up. "Thank you for your time, Captain. I hope we see each other again. Please datavise your full quote to me at any time."

"She hardly touched her wine," Cherri said as the doctor departed.

"Yes," Meyer said distantly. Five other people were leaving the bar. None of them space industry types. Merchants? But they didn't look rich enough.

"Are we putting in a formal bid?"

"Good question."

I would like to visit New California, Udat said hopefully.

We've been before. You just want to fly.

I do. It is boring sitting on this ledge. Udat relayed an image of whirling stars as seen from Tranquillity's docking-ledge, speeded up, always tracing the same circles. The edge of the habitat's spaceport disk started to grey, then crumbled and broke apart with age.

Meyer grinned. **What an imagination you have. I'll get us a charter soon. That's a promise.**

Good!

“I think we need to know a little bit more about this Mzu woman,” he said out loud. “No way is she on the level.”

“Oh, really?” Cherri cooed; she cocked her head on one side. “You noticed that, did you?”

Ione let go of the image. Her apartment rematerialized around her. Augustine was walking determinedly across the dining-room table towards the remains of the salad she had pushed away, moving at a good fifty centimetres a minute. At the back of her mind she was aware of Alkad Mzu standing in the vestibule of the thirty-first floor of the StMartha starscraper waiting for a lift. There were seven Intelligence agency operatives hanging around in the park-level foyer above her, alerted by their colleagues in Harkey’s Bar. Two of them—a female operative from New Britain, and the second-in-command of the Kulu team—resolutely refused to make eye contact. Strange really. For the last three weeks they had spent most of their off-duty hours in bed together screwing each other into delirious exhaustion.

In my history courses I recall an incident in the twentieth century when the American CIA tried to get rid of a Caribbean island’s Communist president by giving him an exploding cigar, Ione said.

Yes? Tranquillity asked loyally.

Six hundred years of progress—human style.

Would you like me to inform Meyer that Alkad Mzu will not be granted an exit visa?

Informing him I’ll blow him and the *Udat* out of existence if he leaves with her would be more to the point. But no, we won’t do anything yet. How many captains has she contacted now?

Sixty-three in the last twenty months.

And every contact follows the same pattern, she mused. A request for a charter fee quote to carry her to a star system, then picking up a cargo to take onwards. But never the same star system; and it was Joshua who was asked to quote for Garissa. Ione tried not to consider the implications of that. It *had* to be coincidence.

I am sure it is, Tranquillity said.

I was leaking. Sorry.

There was never any follow-up to her meeting with Joshua.

No. But what is she doing, I wonder?

I have two possible explanations. First, she is aware of the agency observers—and it would be hard to believe she is not—and she is simply having fun at their expense.

Fun? You call that fun? Threatening to recover the Alchemist?

Her home planet has been annihilated. If the humour is somewhat rough, that is to be expected.

Of course. Go on.

Secondly, she is attempting to produce a range of escape options which exceed the observers' ability to keep track of. Sixty-three is an excessive number of captains to contact even for a warped game.

But she must know it isn't possible to confuse you.

Yes.

Strange woman.

A very intelligent woman.

Ione reached over to her discarded plate, and began shredding one of the lettuce leaves. Augustine crooned adoringly as he finally reached the pile of shreds, and started to munch at them.

Is it possible for her to circumvent your observation? Apparently Edenists can induce localized blindspots in their habitats' perception.

I would say it is extremely unlikely. No Edenist has ever succeeded in evading me, and there were many attempts in your grandfather's day.

Really? She perked up.

Yes, by their Intelligence agency operatives. All failed. And I acquired some valuable information on the nature of localized circumvention patterns they employed. Fortunately I do not use quite the same thought

routines as Edenist habitats, so I am relatively unsusceptible. And Alkad Mzu does not have affinity.

Are we sure? She was missing for some time between Garissa's destruction and turning up here, four years. She could have had neuron symbionts implanted.

She did not. A complete medical body scan is required for health-insurance coverage for all Laymil project staff when they start work. She has neural nanonics, but no affinity symbionts. Nor any other implants, for that matter.

Oh. I'm still unhappy over these continual encounters with starship captains. Perhaps if I had a private word with her . . . explain how upsetting it is.

That might work.

Did Father ever meet her?

No.

I'll think about what to say then, I don't want to come over all heavy handed. Perhaps I could invite her for a meal, keep it informal.

Certainly. She always maintains her social propriety.

Good. In the meantime, I'd like you to double the number of serjeants we keep in her immediate vicinity. With Laton running loose in the Confederation, we really don't want to add to Admiral Aleksandrovich's troubles right now.

Meyer and Cherri Barnes took a lift up from Harkey's Bar to the StMartha's foyer. He walked with her down a flight of stairs to the starscraper's tube station, and datavised for a carriage.

"Are we going back to the hotel or *Udat*?" Cherri asked. "My hotel flat has a double bed."

She grinned, and tucked his arm round hers. "Mine too."

The carriage arrived, and he datavised the control processor to take them to the hotel. There was a slight surge of acceleration as it got under way. Meyer sank

deeper into his cushioning; Cherri still hadn't let go of him.

His neural nanonics informed him a file stored in one of the memory cells was altering. Viral safeguard programs automatically isolated the cell. According to the menu, the file was the cargo list Alkad Mzu had datavised to him.

The viral safeguard programs reported the change had finished; tracer programs probed the file's new format. It wasn't hostile. The file had contained a time-delay code which simply re-arranged the order of the existing information into something entirely different. A hidden message.

Meyer accessed the contents.

"Holy shit," he muttered fifteen seconds later.

Now that would be a real challenge, *Udat* said excitedly.

Ombey was the newest of Kulu's eight principality star systems. A Royal Kulu Navy scoutship discovered the one terracompatible planet in 2457, orbiting a hundred and forty-two million kilometres from its G2 star. After an ecological certification team cleared its biosphere as non-harmful, it was declared a Kulu protectorate and opened for immigration by King Lukas in 2470. Unlike other frontier worlds, such as Lalonde, which formed development companies and struggled to raise investment, Ombey was funded entirely by the Kulu Royal Treasury and the Crown-owned Kulu Corporation. Even at the beginning it couldn't be described as a stage one colony. It couldn't even be said to have gone through a purely agrarian phase. A stony iron asteroid, Guyana, was manoeuvred into orbit before the first settler arrived, and navy engineers immediately set about converting it into a base. Kulu's larger astroengineering companies brought industry stations to the system to gain a slice of the military contracts involved, and to take advantage of the huge start-up tax incentives on offer. The Kulu Corporation began a settlement on an asteroid orbiting the gas giant Nonoiut, which assembled a cloudscoop to mine

He₃. As always within the Kingdom, the Edenists were excluded from germinating a habitat and building an adjunct cloudscoop, a prohibition rationalized by the Saldanas on religious grounds.

By the time the first wave of farmers arrived, the already substantial government presence produced a large ready-made consumer base for their crops. Healthcare, communications, law enforcement, and didactic education courses, although not quite up to the level of the Kingdom's more developed planets, were provided from day one. Forty hectares of land were given to each family, along with a generous low-interest loan for housing and agricultural machinery, with the promise of more land for their children. Basic planetary industrialization was given a high priority, and entire factories were imported to provide essentials for the engineering and construction business. Again, government infrastructure contracts provided a massive initial subsidy. The company and civil workers arriving during the second ten-year period was equal to the number of farmers.

In 2500 its population rose above the ten million mark, and it officially lost its protectorate status to become a principality, governed by one of the King's siblings.

Ombey was a meticulously planned endeavour, only possible to a culture as wealthy as the Kulu Kingdom. The Saldanas considered the investment costs more than worthwhile. Although the Principality didn't start to show a return for over ninety years, it allowed them to expand their family dynasty as well as their influence, both physical (economic and military) and political, inside the Confederation. It made their position even more secure, although by that time a republican revolution was virtually impossible. And it was all done without conflict or opposition with neighbouring star systems.

By 2611 there were twelve settled asteroids in orbit and two more on their way. Planetary population was a fraction under two hundred million, and the twelve settled asteroids in the system's dense inner belt were home to another two million people. Subsidies and loans from Kulu had long

since ended, self-sufficiency both industrially and economically had been reached in 2545, exports were accelerating. Ombey was a thriving decent place to live, bristling with justified optimism.

Captain Farrah Montgomery had expected the flight from Lalonde to take four days. By the time the *Ekwan* finally jumped into the Ombey system, emerging two hundred thousand kilometres above the planet's surface, they had been in transit for eight. The big colonist-carrier had endured a multitude of irritating systems failures right from the very first minute of getting underway. Mechanical components had broken down, electrical circuits suffered a rash of surges and drop-outs. Her crew had been harried into short-tempered despair as they attempted patchwork repairs. Most worrying, the main fusion tubes produced erratic thrust levels, adding to the difficulty of reaching plotted jump coordinates, and increasing the flight duration drastically.

Fuel levels, while not yet critical, were uncomfortably low.

Sensors slid out of their jump recesses, and Captain Montgomery performed a preliminary visual orientation sweep. Ombey's solitary moon, Jethro, was rising above the horizon, a large grey-yellow globe peppered with small deep craters, and streaked with long white rays. They were above the planet's night side; the Blackdust desert continent straddling the equator was a huge ebony patch amid oceans that reflected jaundiced moonlight. On the eastern side of the planet the coastline of the Espartan continent was picked out by the purple-white lights of towns and cities; there were fewer urban sprawls in the interior, declining to zero at the central mountain range.

After Captain Montgomery had cleared their arrival with civil flight control, Ralph Hiltch contacted the navy base on Guyana, and requested docking permission along with a code four status alert. *Ekwan* closed on the asteroid at one and a quarter gravities, holding reasonably steady.

The base admiral, Pascoe Farquar, after receiving Ralph's request, backed by Sir Asquith, authorized the alert. Non-essential personnel were cleared from the habitation cavern the navy used. Commercial traffic was turned away. Xenobiology, nanonic, and weapons specialists began to assemble an isolation confinement area for Gerald Skibbow.

The *Ekwan* docked at Guyana's non-rotating spaceport amid a tight security cordon. Royal Marines and port personnel worked a straight five-hour shift to bring the *Ekwan's* three thousand grumbling, bewildered colonists out of zero-tau and assign them quarters in the navy barracks. Ralph Hiltch and Sir Asquith spent most of that time in conference with Pascoe Farquar and his staff. After he accessed sensorium recordings Dean Folan made during the jungle mission, as well as the garbled reports of Darcy and Lori claiming Laton was on Lalonde, the admiral decided to raise the alert status to code three.

Ralph Hiltch watched the last of the fifty armour-suited marines floating into the *Ekwan's* large zero-tau compartment. They were all muscle boosted and qualified in free fall combat routines; eight of them carried medium-calibre automatic recoilless projectile carbines. The sergeants followed Cathal Fitzgerald's directions and started positioning them in three concentric circles surrounding Gerald Skibbow's zero-tau pod, with five on the decks either side in case he broke through the metal grids. Extra lights had been attached to the nearby support girders, beams focused on the one pod in the compartment which was still encased by an absorptive blackness, casting a weird jumble of multiple shadows outside the encircling ring of marines.

Ralph's neural nanonics were relaying the scene to the admiral and the waiting specialists. It made him slightly self-conscious as he anchored himself to a girder to address the marine squad.

"This might look excessive for one man," he said to the marines, "but don't drop your guard for an instant. We're not entirely sure he is human, certainly he has some lethal

energy-projecting abilities that come outside anything we've encountered before. If it's any comfort, free fall does seem to unnerve him slightly. Your job is just to escort him down to the isolation area that's been prepared. Once he's there, the technical people will take over. They think the cell they've prepared will be able to confine him. But getting him there could get very messy."

He backed away from the pod, noting the half-apprehensive faces of the first rank of marines.

God, they look young. I hope to hell they took my warning seriously.

He checked his own skull-helmet, and took a deep breath. "OK, Cathal, switch it off."

The blackness vanished from the pod revealing the smooth cylindrical composite sarcophagus. Ralph strained to hear the manic battering which Skibbow had been giving the pod before the zero-tau silenced him. The compartment was quiet apart from the occasional scuffling of the marines as they craned for a glimpse.

"Open the lid."

It began to slide back. Ralph braced himself for Skibbow to burst out of the opening like a runaway combat wasp with a forty-gee drive. He heard a wretched whimpering sound. Cathal gave him a puzzled glance.

God, did we get the right pod?

"All right, stay back," Ralph said. "You two," he indicated the marines with the carbines, "cover me." He pulled himself cautiously across the grid towards the pod, still expecting Skibbow to spring up. The whimpering grew louder, interspersed with low groans.

Very, *very* carefully, Ralph eased himself up the side of the pod, and peeked in. Ready to duck down fast.

Gerald Skibbow was floating listlessly inside the curving cream-white composite coffin. His whole body was trembling. He clutched his shattered hand to his chest. Both eyes were red rimmed, blood was still oozing from his mashed nose. The smell of jungle mud and urine clogged in Ralph's nose.

Gerald continued his weak gurglings, bubbles of saliva forming at the corner of his mouth. When Ralph manoeuvred himself right over the pod there was no reaction from the unfocused eyes.

“Shit.”

“What’s happened?” Admiral Farquar datavised.

“I don’t know, sir. It’s Skibbow all right. But it looks like he’s gone into some kind of shock.” He waved a hand in front of the colonist’s filthy, bloody face. “He’s virtually catatonic.”

“Is he still dangerous, do you think?”

“I don’t see how he could be, unless he recovers.”

“All right, Hiltch. Have the marines take him down to the isolation area as quickly as possible. I’ll have an emergency medical team there by the time you arrive.”

“Yes, sir.” Ralph pushed himself away, allowing three marines to pull the still unresisting Skibbow from the zero-tau pod. His neural nanonics informed him the asteroid was being stood down to code six status.

I don’t understand, he thought bleakly, we brought a walking nuke on board, and wind up with a pants-wetting vegetable. Something wiped that sequestration from him. What?

The marine squad departed the compartment noisily, joking and catcalling. Relieved they hadn’t been needed after all. With one hand holding idly on a girder, Ralph hung between the two decking grids long after the last of them left, staring at the zero-tau pod.

Three hours after Guyana’s alert status was reduced to code six, life inside had almost returned to normal. Civilians with jobs in the military-run cavern were allowed to resume their duties. Restrictions on communication and travel were lifted from the other two caverns. Spaceships were permitted to dock and depart, although the spaceport where the *Ekwan* was berthed was still off-limits to anything but navy ships.

Three and a half hours after the marines delivered a virtually comatose Gerald Skibbow to the isolation cell, Cap-

tain Farrah Montgomery walked into the small office Time Universe maintained on Guyana and handed over Graeme Nicholson's flek.

It was an hour after the maids had served Cricklade's breakfast, and Duke was already rising across a sky that was ribbed with slender bands of flimsy cloud. Duchess-night had seen the first sprinkling of rain since the midsummer conjunction. The fields and forests glimmered and shone under their glaze coating of water. Aboriginal flowers, reduced to wizened brown coronets after discharging their seeds, turned to a pulpy mess and started to rot away. Best of all, the dust had gone from the air. Cricklade's estate labourers had started their morning in a cheerful mood at the omen. Rain this early meant the second crop of cereals should produce a good heavy harvest.

Louise Kavanagh didn't care about the rain, nor the prospect of an impending agricultural bounty. Not even Genevieve's playful enthusiasm could summon her for their usual stroll in the paddock. Instead, she sat on the toilet in her private bathroom with her panties round her ankles and her head in her hands. Her long hair hung lankly, tasselled ends brushing her shiny blue shoes. It was stupid to have hair so long, she thought, stupid, snobbish, impractical, a waste of time, and insulting.

Why should I have to be preened and groomed like I'm a pedigree show horse? It's a wicked, filthy tradition treating women like that. Just so that I look the classic-beauty part for some ghastly clot-head young "gentleman". What do looks matter, and especially looks that come from a pseudo-mythical past on another planet? I already have my man.

She clenched her stomach muscles again, squeezing her guts hard as she held her breath. Her nails dug into her palms painfully with the effort. Her head started to shake, skin reddening.

It didn't make the slightest difference. She let the air out of her straining lungs in a fraught sob.

Angry now, she squeezed again. Let out her breath.

Squeezed.

Nothing.

She wanted to cry. Her shoulders were shivering, she even had the hot blotches round her eyes, but there were no tears left. She was all cried out.

Her period was at least five days overdue. And she was so regular.

She was pregnant with Joshua's baby. It was wonderful. It was horrible. It was . . . a wretched great mess.

"Please, Jesus," she whispered. "What we did wasn't really a sin. It wasn't. I love him so. I really do. Don't let this happen to me. Please."

There was nothing in the world she wanted more than to have Joshua's baby. But not *now*. Joshua himself still seemed like a gorgeous fantasy she had made up to amuse herself during the long hot months of Norfolk's quiescent summer. Too perfect to be real, the kind of man who melted her inside even as he set her on fire with passion. A passion she didn't quite know she had before. Previous daydreams of romance had all sort of blurred into vague unknowns after her tall, handsome champion kissed her. But lying in bed at night the memory of Joshua's cunning hands exploring her naked body brought some most unladylike flushes below the sheets. There hadn't been a day gone by when she didn't visit their little glade in Wardley Wood, and the smell of dry hay always kindled a secret glow of arousal as she thought of their last time together in the stable.

"Please, my Lord Jesus."

Last year one of the girls at the convent school, a year older than Louise, had moved away from the district rather abruptly. She was from one of Stoke County's more important families, her father was a landowner who had sat on the local council for over a decade. Gone to stay with a wealthy sheep-farming relative on the isle of Cumbria, the Mother Superior had told the other pupils, where she will learn the practical aspects of house management which

will adequately prepare her for the role of marriage. But everyone knew the real reason. One of the Romany lads, in Stoke for the rose crop, had tumbled her in his caravan. The girl's family had been more or less shunned by decent folk after that, and her father had to resign his council seat, saying it was due to ill health.

Not that anyone would dare do that to any branch of the Kavanagh family. But the whispers would start if she took a sudden holiday; the tarnish of shame would never be lifted from Cricklade. And Mummy would cry because her daughter had let her down frightfully badly. And Daddy would . . . Louise didn't like to think what her father would do.

No! she told herself firmly. Stop thinking like that. Nothing terrible is going to happen.

"You know I'm coming back," Joshua had told her as they lay entwined by the side of the sun-blessed stream. And he said he loved her.

He would return. He *promised*.

Everything would be all right after that. Joshua was the one person in the galaxy who could face up to her father unafraid. Yes, everything would be fine just as soon as he arrived.

Louise brushed her—fearsomely annoying—hair from her face, and slowly stood up. When she looked in the mirror she was an utter ruin. She started to tidy herself up, pulling up her panties, splashing cold water on her face. Her light flower-pattern dress with its long skirt was badly creased. Why couldn't she wear trousers, or even shorts? She could just imagine Nanny's reaction to that innocent suggestion. Legs on public display? Good grief! But it would be so much more practical in this weather. Lots of the women working in the groves did; girls her age, too. She started to plait her hair. That would be something else which changed after she was married.

Married. She grinned falteringly at her reflection. Joshua was going to be in for a monumental shock when he returned and she told him the stupendous news. But, ul-

timately, he would be happy and rejoice with her. How could he not? And they would be married at the end of summer (which was as quick as decency versus a swelling belly could allow), when the Earth flowers were at their peak and the granaries were full from the second harvest. Her bulge probably wouldn't show, not with an adequately designed dress. Genevieve would adore being chief bridesmaid. There would be huge marquees on the lawns for the reception. Family members she hadn't seen for years. It would be the biggest celebration in Stoke County for decades, everyone would be happy and they would dance under the neon-red night sky.

People might guess because of the speed. But Joshua was going to be her father's business partner in this exciting mayope venture. He was rich, of good blood (presumably—how else would he inherit a starship?), a fine manager able to take on Cricklade. An eminently suitable (if unusual) match for the Cricklade heir. Their marriage wouldn't be that extraordinary. Her reputation would remain intact. And the Kavanaghs' respectability would remain unblemished.

After the wedding they could travel Norfolk's islands for their honeymoon. Or maybe even to another planet in his starship. What was important was that she wouldn't have the baby here, with everyone noting the date of birth.

Real life could match up to her most fantastical daydreams. With a fabulous husband, and a beautiful baby.

If Joshua . . .

Always, *if Joshua* . . .

Why did it have to be like that?

The lone Romany caravan stood beside a tall Norfolk-aboriginal pine in a meadow which until recently had been a site for more than thirty similar caravans. Rings of flat reddish stones confined piles of ash, cold now. Grass along the bank of the little stream was trampled down where horses and goats had drunk and people had scooped water into pails. Several piles of raw earth marked the latrines, their conical

sides scored with fresh runnels, evidence of last Duchess-night's rain.

The caravan, a hybrid of traditional design riding modern lightweight wheels, had seen more prosperous times. Its jaunty and elaborate paintwork was fading, but the wood was sound. Three goats were tethered to its rear axle. Two horses waited outside, one a mud-spotted piebald shire-horse with a wild shaggy mane which was used to pull the caravan, the other a black riding stallion, its coat sleek and glossy, the expensive leather saddle on its back polished to a gleam.

Grant Kavanagh stood inside the caravan, stooping so he didn't knock his head on the curving ceiling. It was dark and faintly dusty, smelling of dried herbs. He enjoyed that, it brought back sharp memories of his teenage years. Even now, the sight of the Romany caravans winding their way through Cricklade's wolds as midsummer approached always made him feel incredibly randy.

The girl pulled back the heavy curtains hanging on a cord across the middle of the caravan. Her name was Carmitha, twenty years old, with a big broad-shouldered body, which, Grant knew with depressing instinct, would be horribly overweight in another six or seven years. Rich black hair hanging below her shoulders harmonized with dark, smooth skin. She had changed into a flimsy white skirt and loose-fitting top.

"That looks fantastic," he said.

"Why, thank you, kind sir." She curtsied, and giggled effusively.

Grant drew her closer and started to kiss her. His hands fumbled with the buttons down the front of her blouse.

She pushed him away gently, and removed his hands, kissing the knuckles lightly. "Let me do that for you," she said coquettishly. Her fingers moved down to the top button in a slow, taunting caress. He looked in delight as her body was exposed. He pulled her down onto the bed, immensely gratified by her ardour.

The caravan squeaked as it started rocking. A hurricane

lantern hanging from a brass chain on the ceiling clanged loudly as it swayed gently to and fro. He barely heard it above Carmitha's exuberant whoops of joy.

After a time which was nowhere near long enough, he came in drastic shudders, his spine singing raptures. Carmitha quickly squealed, claiming multiple orgasms were nearly making her swoon.

He collapsed onto the bed, prickly blankets scratching his back. Dust mingled with sweat and trickled among the curly hair on his chest.

By God but summer conjunction makes life worth living, he thought. A time when he could prove himself again and again. The Tear crop had been one of the best ever; the estate had made its usual financial killing. He had tumbled nearly a dozen young girls from the grove teams. The meteorological reports were predicting a humid month ahead, which meant a good second harvest. Young Joshua's audacious mayope proposal could only add to the family's wealth and influence.

The only blot on the horizon was the reports coming out of Boston on the disturbances. It looked like the Democratic Land Union was stirring up trouble again.

The Union was a motley collection of reformists and political agitators, a semi-subversive group who wanted to see land distributed "fairly" among the People, the foreign earnings from the sale of Norfolk Tears invested with social relevance, and full democracy and civil rights awarded to the population. And free beer on Friday nights, too, no doubt, Grant thought caustically. The whole blessing of a Confederation of eight hundred plus planets was that it gave people a massive variety of social systems to choose from. What the Democratic Land Union activists failed to appreciate was that they were free to leave for their damned Communistic workers' paradise as soon as the workshy little buggers earned enough cash to pay their passage. But oh no, they wanted to liberate Norfolk, no matter how much damage and heartache they caused in the process of peddling their politics of envy.

A chapter of the Democratic Land Union had tried to spread its sedition in Stoke County about ten years ago. Grant had helped the county's chief constable round them up. The leaders had been deported to a Confederation penal planet. Some of the nastier elements—the ones found with home-made weapons—had been handed over to a squad of special operations constables from the capital, Norwich. The rest, the pitiful street trash who handed out leaflets and drank themselves into a coma on the Union-supplied beer, had been given fifteen years' hard labour in the polar work gangs.

There hadn't been sight or sign of them on Kesteven ever since. Some people, he thought sagely, just never learn. If it works, don't try and fix it. And Norfolk worked.

He kissed the crown of Carmitha's head. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow. Most of my family has already left. There is fruit-picking work in Hurst County. It pays well."

"And after that?"

"We'll winter over in Holbeach. There are many deep caves in the cliffs above the town. And some of us get jobs in the harbour market gutting fish."

"Sounds like a good life. Don't you ever want to settle down?"

She shrugged, thick hair sloshing about. "Be like you, tied to your cold stone palace? No thanks. There might not be much to see in this world, but I want to see it all."

"Better make the most of the time we've got, then."

She crawled on top of him, calloused hands closing round his limp penis.

There was a pathetic scratching knock on the caravan's rear door. "Sir? Are you there, sir?" William Elphinstone asked. The voice was as quavery as the knock.

Grant chopped back on an exasperated groan. *No, I'm not in here, that's why my bloody horse is outside.* "What do you want?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but there's an urgent phone call

for you at the house. Mr. Butterworth said it was important, it's from Boston."

Grant frowned. Butterworth wasn't going to send anyone after him unless it was genuinely important. The estate manager knew full well what he was up to at a slack time like this. He was also wily enough not to come looking himself.

I wonder what young Elphinstone has done to annoy him, Grant thought irreverently.

"Wait there," he shouted. "I'll be with you in a minute." He deliberately took his time dressing. No damn way was he going to come dashing out of the caravan tucking his shirt into his trousers and give the lad something to tell all the other junior estate managers.

He straightened his tweed riding jacket, smoothed down his muttonchops with his hands, and settled his cap. "How do I look?"

"Masterful," Carmitha said from the bed.

There was no detectable irony. Grant fished around in his pocket and found two silver guineas. He dropped the gratuity into a big china bowl sitting on a shelf beside the door as he went out.

Louise watched her father and William Elphinstone ride up to the front door. Grooms appeared, and took charge of the horses. From the way the animals were sweating it had been a hard ride. Her father hurried into the house.

Poor old Daddy, always busy.

She strolled over to where William was talking to the grooms, both boys younger than her. He saw her coming and dismissed them. Louise stroked the black stallion's flank as the big animal was led past her.

"Whatever is all the fuss about?" she asked.

"Some call from Boston. Mr. Butterworth thought it important enough to send me out looking for your father."

"Oh." Louise started to move away. Rather annoyingly, William walked in step with her. She wasn't in the mood for company.

"I've been asked to the Newcombes' bash on Saturday evening," he said. "I thought it might be rather fun. They're not quite our people, but they set a decent table. There will be dancing afterwards."

"That's nice." Louise always hated it when William tried to put on graces. "Our people" indeed! She went to school with Mary Newcombe.

"I hoped you would come with me."

She looked at him in surprise. Eagerness and anxiety squabbled over his face. "Oh, William, that's jolly nice of you to ask. Thank you. But I really can't. Sorry."

"Really can't?"

"Well, no. The Galfords are coming to dinner on Saturday. I simply must be there."

"I thought that perhaps now he's left, you might find more time for my company."

"Now who's left?" she asked sharply.

"Your friend, the gallant starship captain."

"William, you really are talking the most appalling tosh. Now I've said I can't attend the Newcombes' party with you. Kindly leave the subject."

He stopped and took hold of her arm. She was too surprised to say anything. People simply did not take such liberties.

"You always found plenty of time for him," he said in a flat tone.

"William, desist this instant."

"Every day, it was. The two of you galloping off to Wardley Wood."

Louise felt the blood rising to her cheeks. What did he know? "Remove your hand from me. Now!"

"You didn't mind his hands."

"William!"

He gave her a humourless smile and let go. "I'm not jealous. Don't get me wrong."

"There is nothing to be jealous of. Joshua Calvert was a guest and friend of my father's. That is the end of the matter."

“Some fiancés would think otherwise.”

“Who?” she squawked.

“Fiancés, my dearest Louise. You must be aware there is some considerable speculation upon whom you are to marry. All I’m saying is that there are some Kesteven families of good breeding, and eligible sons, who would take exception to your . . . shall we call it, indiscretion.”

She slapped him. The sound rang across the lawn as her palm struck his cheek. “How dare you!”

He dabbed at his cheek with the fingers of his right hand, a look of distaste on his face. The imprint of her palm was clearly etched in pink. “What an impetuous creature you are, Louise. I had no idea.”

“Get out of my sight.”

“Of course, if that’s what you wish. But you might like to consider that should word get out, your currently enviable position may well become less than secure. I don’t want to see that happen, Louise, I really don’t. You see, I am genuinely very fond of you. Fond enough to make allowances.”

She seemed utterly incapable of movement, condemned to stand there in front of him, gaping in astonishment. “You . . .” It came out in a crushed gasp. For a distressing instant she thought she was going to faint.

William knelt in front of her.

No, she thought, oh no no no, this can’t be happening. Joshua bloody Calvert, where are you?

“Marry me, Louise. I can obtain your father’s approval, have no fear of that. Marry me, and we can have a wonderful future together here at Cricklade.” He held his hand out, face soft with expectancy.

She drew herself up into the most regal pose she could manage. And very clearly, very calmly said: “I would sooner shovel bullock manure for a living.” One of Joshua’s better expressions, though admittedly not verbatim.

William paled.

She turned on a heel and walked away. Her back held straight.

“This is not the last time we shall pursue this topic,” he called after her. “Believe me, dearest Louise, I will not be defeated in my suit for you.”

Grant Kavanagh sat himself down behind the desk in his study and picked up the phone. His secretary had put a call through to Trevor Clarke, Kesteven’s lord lieutenant. Grant didn’t like the implications of that one jot.

“I need you to bring Stoke’s militia to Boston,” Trevor Clarke said as soon as they had exchanged greetings. “A full turnout, please, Grant.”

“That might be difficult,” Grant said. “This is still a busy time here. The rosegroves need pruning, and there’s the second grain crop to drill. We can hardly take able men from the land.”

“Can’t be helped. I’m calling in all the county militias.”

“All of them?”

“’Fraid so, old chap. We’ve blacked it from the news, you understand, but the situation in Boston, frankly, doesn’t look good.”

“What situation? You’re not seriously telling me that bloody Union rabble worries you?”

“Grant . . .” Trevor Clarke’s voice dropped an octave. “Listen, this is totally confidential, but there are already five districts in Boston that have been completely taken over by this mob, rendered ungovernable. We have a state of open insurrection here. If we send the police in to re-establish order they don’t come out again. The city is under martial law, insofar as we can enforce it. I’m worried, Grant.”

“Dear Christ! The Democratic Land Union has done this?”

“We’re not sure. Whoever these insurrectionists are, they seem to be armed with energy weapons. That means offplanet complicity. But it’s hard to believe the Union could ever organize something like that. You know what

they're like, hotheads smashing up tractors and ploughs. Energy weapons break every letter in our constitution; they are everything this society was set up to avoid."

"An outside force?" Grant Kavanagh could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"It may be. I have asked the Chancellor's office in Norwich to request the Confederation Navy squadron extends its duty tour. Fortunately the personnel are all still here having their shore leave. The squadron commander is recalling them back up to orbit now."

"What good is that?"

"The navy starships can make damn sure nothing else is delivered to the insurrectionists from outsystem. And as a last resort they can provide our ground forces with strike power."

Grant sat perfectly still. Ground forces. Strike power. It was unreal. Through the windows he could see Cricklade's peaceful wolds, rich and verdant. And here he was calmly talking about virtual civil war. "But God's teeth, man, this is a city we're talking about. You can't use starship weapons against Boston. There are a hundred and twenty thousand people living there."

"I know," Trevor Clarke said mordantly. "One of the militia's major assignments will be to help evacuate the civilians. You will be minimizing casualties, Grant."

"Have you told the Chancellor what you're planning? Because if you haven't, I damn well will."

There was a silence which lasted for several seconds. "Grant," Trevor Clarke said gently, "it was the Chancellor's office that recommended this action to me. It must be done while the insurrectionists are concentrated in one place, before they have a chance to spread their damnable revolution. So many people are joining them. I . . . I never thought there was so much dissatisfaction on the planet. It has to be stopped, and stopped in a way that forbids repetition."

"Oh, my God," Grant Kavanagh said brokenly. "All right, Trevor, I understand. I'll call in the militia captains

this afternoon. The regiment will be ready for you by tomorrow.”

“Good man, Grant. I knew I could rely on you. There will be a train to collect you from Colsterworth Station. We’ll billet you in an industrial warehouse outside town. And don’t worry, man, the starships are only a last resort. I expect we’ll only need one small demonstration and they’ll cave in.”

“Yes. I’m sure you’re right.” Grant returned the pearl-handled phone to its cradle, a morbid premonition telling him it could never be that simple.

The train had six passenger carriages, room enough for all of the Stoke county militia’s seven hundred men. It took them twenty-five minutes to embark. The station was a scene of pure chaos; half of the town’s streets were clogged with carts, carriages, buses, and farm-ranger vehicles. Families took a long time saying goodbye. Men were shifty and irritable in their grey uniforms. Complaints about ill-fitting boots rippled up and down the platform.

Louise and Marjorie were pressed against the wall of the station with a pile of kitbags on one side, and olive-green metal ammunition boxes on the other. Some of the boxes had date stamps over ten years old. Three hard-faced men were guarding the ammunition, stumpy black guns cradled in their arms. Louise was beginning to regret coming, Genevieve hadn’t been allowed.

Mr Butterworth, in his sergeant-major’s uniform, marched up and down the platform, ordering people about. The train was gradually filled; work teams began to load the kitbags and ammunition into the first carriage’s mail compartment.

William Elphinstone came down the platform, looking very smart in his lieutenant’s uniform. He stopped in front of them. “Mrs Kavanagh,” he said crisply. “Louise. It looks like we’re off in five minutes.”

“Well, you mind you take great care, William,” Marjorie said.

“Thank you. I will.”

Louise let her gaze wander away with deliberate slowness. William looked slightly put out, but decided this wasn't the time to make an issue of it. He nodded to Marjorie and marched off.

She turned to her daughter. “Louise, that was extremely rude.”

“Yes, Mother,” Louise said unrepentantly. How typical of William to volunteer even though it wasn't his militia, she thought. He only did it to be covered in glory, so he would seem even more acceptable to Daddy. And he would never be in the front line sharing the risk with the poor common troops, not him. Joshua would.

Marjorie gave her daughter a close look at the unexpected tone, seeing the sulky stubborn expression on her usually placid face. So Louise doesn't like William Elphinstone. Can't say I blame her. But to be so public was totally out of character. Louise's decorum was always meticulously formal and correct, gratingly so. Suddenly, despite all the worry of Boston, she felt delighted. Her daughter wasn't the meek-minded little mouse any more. She wanted to cheer out loud. And I wonder what started this episode of independent thinking, though I've a pretty shrewd idea. Joshua Calvert, if you laid one finger on her . . .

Grant Kavanagh strode vigorously along the side of the train, making sure his troops were settled and everything was in place. His wife and daughter were waiting dutifully at the end of the platform. Both of them quite divine, Marjorie especially.

Why do I bother with those little Romany tarts?

Louise's face was all melancholic. Frightened, but trying not to show it. Trying to be brave like a good Kavanagh. What a wonderful daughter. Growing up a treat. Even though she had been a bit moody these last few days. Probably missing Joshua, he thought jovially. But that was just another reminder that he really would have to start thinking seriously about a decent bloodmatch for her. Not

yet though, not this year. Cricklade Manor would still echo with her laughter over Christmas, warming his heart.

He hugged her, and her arms wrapped round his waist. "Don't go, Daddy," she whispered.

"I have to. It won't be for long."

She sniffed hard, and nodded. "I understand."

He kissed Marjorie, ignoring the whistles and cheers which rang out from the carriages at the rear of the train.

"Now don't you try and prove anything," she said in that weary half-censorious way which meant she was scared to the core. So he said, "Of course I won't, I'll just sit in the command tent and let the youngsters get on with it."

Marjorie put her arm around Louise as they waved the train out of the station. The platform was a solid mass of women with handkerchiefs flapping from frantic wrists. She wanted to laugh at how silly they must all look to the men on the train. But she didn't because she was a Kavanagh, and must set an example. Besides, she might have started crying at the futility and stupidity of it all.

In the clear sky above, silver lights flashed and twisted as the navy squadron changed formation and orbital inclination so that Boston was always in range to one of their number.

Dariat was nerving himself up to commit suicide. It wasn't easy. Suicide was the culmination of failure, of despair. Since the return of the dead from the realm of emptiness, his life had become inspiring.

He watched the couple make their cautious way down the starscraper's fetid stairwell. Kiera Salter had done well seducing the boy, but then what fifteen-year-old male could possibly resist Marie Skibbow's body? Kiera didn't even have to enhance the physique she had possessed. She just put on a mauve tank top and a short sky-blue skirt and let nature wreak havoc on the boy's hormone balance—as she had done with Anders Bospoort.

The monitoring sub-routine assigned to observe Horgan flowed through the neural cells behind the stairwell's

polyp walls, spreading out through the surrounding sectors to interface with the starscraper's existing routines. An invisible, all-encompassing guardian angel. It was checking for threats, the possibility of danger. Horgan was another of Rubra's myriad descendants. Cosseted, privileged, and cherished; his mind silently, stealthily guided into the correct academic spheres of interest, and bequeathed a breathtaking arrogance for one so young. He had all the hallmarks of conceit endemic to Rubra's tragic protégés. Horgan was proud and lonely and foul tempered. A lanky youth with dark Asian skin, and giveaway indigo eyes, if his chromosomes had granted him the muscle weight to back up his narcissistic personality he would have been involved in as many fights as the young Dariat.

Naturally he admitted no surprise when Kiera/Marie confided her attraction to him. A girl like that was his due.

Kiera and Horgan stepped out of the stairwell onto the eighty-fifth-floor vestibule.

Dariat felt the monitoring routine flood into the apartment's stratum of neural cells and interrogate the autonomic routines within, reviewing local memories. This was the crux. It had taken him two days to modify the apartment's routines. None of his usual evasions had ever had to withstand examination by such a large personality sub-routine before, it was virtually sentient in its own right.

There was no alarm, no bugle for help to Rubra's principal consciousness. The monitor routine saw only an empty apartment waiting for Horgan.

"They are coming," Dariat told the others in Anders Bospoort's bedroom. All three possessed were with him. Ross Nash who rode in Bospoort's own body, a Canadian from the early twentieth century. Enid Ponter, from the Australian-ethnic planet Geraldton, dead for two centuries, who occupied Alicia Cochrane's mortal form. And Klaus Schiller, possessing Manza Balyuzi's body, a German who muttered incessantly about his Führer, and seemingly angered at having to take on an Asian appearance. The body

was now markedly different to the image contained in his passport flek the day he disembarked from the *Yaku*. His skin was blanching; jet-black hair streaked with expanding tufts of fine blond strands; the gentle facial features shifting to rugged bluntness, eyes azure blue. He had even grown a couple of centimetres taller.

“And Rubra?” Enid Ponter asked. “Does he know?”

“My disruption routines have worked. The monitor can’t see us.”

Ross Nash looked slowly round the bedroom, almost as though he was sniffing a trace of some exotic scent in the air. “I sense it. Behind the walls, there is a coldness of heart.”

“Anstid,” Dariat said. “That’s what you sense. Rubra is just an aspect of him, a servant.”

Ross Nash made no attempt to hide his disgust.

None of them really trusted him, Dariat knew. They were strong enemies who had agreed a precarious truce because of the damage they could each inflict on the other. Such a stand-off could never last long. Human doubts and insecurities gnawed at such restraints, chafing at reasonableness. And the stakes on both sides were high, accelerating the devout need to see treachery in every hesitant breath and wary footstep.

But he would prove his worthiness as few had done before. Entrusting them with not merely his life, but his death as well. It was all so absurdly logical.

He needed their awesome powers of manifestation, and at the same time retain his affinity. Their power came from death, therefore he must die and possess a body with the affinity gene. So simple when you say it quick. And completely mad. But then what he had seen these last few days defied sanity.

Horgan and Kiera entered the apartment. They were kissing even as the door closed.

Dariat concentrated hard, his affinity strumming the new neural routines alive with a delicate harmony of deceit. The image of the twined figures was incorporated into one

of them. An illusive fallacy; generated by a misappropriated section of the habitat's neural cells massing ten times that of the human brain. Small in relation to the total mass of the neural strata, but enough to make the illusion perfect, giving the phantom Horgan and Kiera weight and texture and colour and smell. Even body heat. The sensitive cells registered that as they started to tug each other's clothes off with the typical impatience of teenagers in lust.

Most difficult of all for Dariat to mimic was the constant flow of emotion and feeling Horgan emitted unconsciously into the affinity band. But he managed it, by dint of careful memory and composition. The monitor routine looked on with tranquil disinterest.

There was a split in Dariat's mind, like alternative quantum-cosmology histories, two realities diverging. In one, Horgan and Kiera raced for the bedroom, laughing, clothes flying. In the other . . .

Horgan's eyes blinked open in surprise. The kiss had delivered every promise her body made. He was primed for the greatest erotic encounter of his life. But now she was sneering contemptuously. And four other people were coming into the lounge from one of the bedrooms. Two of the men were huge, in opposite directions.

Horgan barely paid them any attention. He had heard of deals like this, whispered terrors amongst the kids in the day clubs. Snuffsense. The bitch had set him up as the meat they would rape to death. He turned, his leg muscles already taut.

Something—strange, like a hard ball of liquid—hit him on the back of the head. He was falling, and in the distance a choir of infernal angels was singing.

Dariat stood aside as Ross Nash hauled the semiconscious Horgan into the bedroom. He tried not to stare at the boy's feet, they were floating ten centimetres in the air.

"Are you ready?" Kiera asked, her tone dripping with disdain.

He walked past her into the bedroom. "Do we get to screw afterwards?"

Dariat had favoured an old-fashioned capsule you swallowed rather than a transfusion pad or medical package. It was black—naturally—two centimetres long. He had acquired it from his regular narkhal supplier. A neurotoxin, guaranteed painless, she promised. As if he could complain if it wasn't.

He grinned at that. And swallowed, almost while his conscious mind was diverted. If it did hurt she was due for some very pointed lessons on consumer rights from an unexpected direction.

"Get on with it," he told the figures grouped round the bed. Tall and reedy, they were now, mud-brown effigies a sculptor had captured through a blurred lens. They bent over the spread-eagled boy and sent cold fire writhing up and down his spine.

The poison was fast acting. Guaranteed. Dariat was losing all feeling in his limbs. Sight greyed out. His hearing faded, which was a relief. It meant he didn't have to listen to all that screaming. "Anastasia," he muttered. How easy it would be to join her now. She only had a thirty-year head start, and what was that compared to infinity? He could find her.

Death.

And beyond.

A violent jerk of both body and mind. The universe blew away in all directions at once, horrifying in its immensity. Silence shrouded him; a silence he considered only possible in the extremity of intergalactic space. Silence without heat or cold, without touch or taste. Silence singing with thoughts.

He didn't look around. There was nothing to look with, nowhere to look, not in this, the sixth realm. But he knew, was aware of, what shared this state with him, the spirits Anastasia had told him about as they sat in her tepee so long ago.

Nebulous minds wept tears of emotion, their sorrow and lamentation splashing against him. And whole spectra of

hatreds; jealousy and envy, but mostly self-loathing. They were spirits, all of them, lost beyond redemption.

Outside of this was colour, all around, but never present. Untouchable and taunting. A universe he was pleased to call real. The realm of the living. A wondrous, beautiful place, a corporeality crying out for belonging.

He wanted to beat against it, to demand entry. He had no hands, and there was no wall. He wanted to call to the living to rescue him. He had no voice.

“Help me!” his mind shrieked.

The lost spirits laughed cruelly. Their numbers pressed against him, vast beyond legion. He had no single defined location, he found, no kernel with a protective shell. He was everywhere at once, conjunctive with them. Helpless against their invasion. Lust and avarice sent them prising and clawing at his memories, suckling the sweet draught of sensations he contained. A poor substitute for intrinsicity, but still fresh, still juicy with detail. The only sustenance this arcane continuum boasted.

“Anastasia, help me.”

They adored his most shameful secrets, for they carried the strongest passion—stolen glances at women through the habitat sensitive cells, masturbating, the hopeless yearning for Anastasia, impossible promises made in the depth of night, hangovers, gluttony, glee as the club smashed against Mersin Columba’s head, Anastasia’s vital body hot against him, limbs locking together. They drank it all, deriding him even as they idolized him for the glimpse of life he brought.

Time. Dariat could sense it going by outside. Seconds, mere seconds had elapsed. Here, though, it had little relevance. Time was the length of every memory, governed by perception. Here it was defied as his rape went on and on. A rape which wasn’t going to end. Not ever. There were too many of them for it to end.

He would have to abide by it, he realized in dread. And join in. Already he craved the knowledge of warmth, of

touch, of smell. Memories of such treasures were all around. He had only to reach out—

The bedroom was damp and cold, its furniture cheap. But he couldn't afford anything more. Not now. The dismissal papers were still in his jacket pocket. The last pay packet was in there with it, but slim now. It had been fatter this afternoon. Before he went to the bar, doing what any man would.

Debbi was rising from the bed, blinking drowsily up at him. Voice like a fucking cat, complaining complaining complaining. Where had he been with his no-good friends? Did he know what time it was? How much had he drunk? Like she always did.

So he told the bitch to shut up, because for once he was utterly pissed off with all the grief she gave him. And when she didn't quieten down he hit her. Even that didn't do it. She was shrieking real loud now, waking up the whole goddamn neighbourhood. So he hit her again, harder this time.

—to devour the pitiful echoes of sensation.

“Holy Anstid, help me your eternal servant. For pity's sake. Help!”

Laughter, only laughter. So he raged back and lost himself from the mockery in—

The sun glinting off the Inca temple that rose unchallenged into the sky. It was greater than any cathedral he had ever seen. But its builders were now a nation quelled before Spain's might. And the wealth inside the broken city was beyond that of kings. A life of glory awaited its conquerors.

His armour acted like a furnace in the heat. And the gash on his leg was host to strange brown pustular styes, spores of accursed jungle. Already he was frightened he wouldn't live to see Spain's shores again.

—which wasn't an answer. Calamity and pain were thin substitutes for the explosion of experience which lay in the vaguely perceived extrinsic universe.

Ten seconds. That was all the time that had passed there since he died. And how long had some of the spirits been here? How could they stand it—

Centuries which ache like a lover's heart laid still. To leech and leech what is new to find only that which is stale. Yet even such an insipid taste surpasses the hell which lies further from the taunting glimmer of the lost home of our flesh. Madness and dragons lie in wait for those that venture away from what we discern. Safer to stay. Safer to suffer the known rather than the unknown.

—Dariat could distinguish bursts of Horgan's pain, flashing into the nothingness of the sixth realm like flames licking through black timber. They came from where the spirits were clustered thickest, as though they were dogs fighting for scraps of the rarest steak.

Colours were stronger there, oozing through cracks that curved across dimensions. And the lost spirits howled in a unison of hatred, tempting and taunting Horgan to accede, to surrender. Maidens promised oceans of pleasure while malefactors threatened eternities of torment.

The cracks from which the rich slivers of pain emerged were growing wider as Kiera, Ross, Enid, and Klaus exerted their power.

"Mine," Dariat proclaimed in defiance. "He is mine. Prepared for me. He belongs to me."

"No, mine."

"Mine."

"Mine."

"Mine," rose the cry.

"Kiera, Ross, help me. Let me come back." He knew he could not stay here. Cool quiet darkness called, away from the universe of birth. Where Anastasia had gone, where they would meet again. To linger here with only the memories of yesterday's dreams as a reason was insanity. Anastasia was brave enough to venture forth. He could follow in her wake, unworthy though he was.

“Stop it, I beg,” Horgan called. “Rescue me.”

The uniformity in which Dariat was suspended began to warp. A tight narrow funnel resembling a cyclone vortex that led down into the fathomless unknowable heart of a gas giant. Spirits were compelled towards it, into it. Dariat was one of them, pressed ever tighter against—

A poorly cobbled street with cottages on either side. It was raining hard. His bare feet were numb with cold. Wood smoke hung in the air, wisps from the chimneys swirled low by the wind. Water was soaking his ragged coat and making his cough worse. His thin chest vibrated as the air bucked in his throat. Ma had taken to giving him sad smiles whenever he told her how bad it felt inside.

Beside him his little sister was sniffing. Her face was barely visible below her woollen bonnet and above her coat collar. He held her hand in his as she tottered along unquestioningly. She looked so frail, worse than him. And winter was only just beginning. There never seemed to be enough broth; and the portions they had were made mostly from vegetables. It didn't fill the belly. Yet there was meat in the butchers.

Townsfolk walked along with them as the church bell pealed incessantly, summoning them. His sister's wooden clogs made dull rapping sounds against the cobbles. They were full with water, swelling her small white feet, and making the sores worse.

Da earned a good wage labouring in the squire's fields. But there was never extra money to spend on food.

The worn penny piece with Queen Victoria's face was clutched in his free hand. Destined for the smiling, warmly dressed pastor.

It just didn't seem right.

“Please,” Horgan called, weaker now, thoughts bruised by the pain.

Dariat slid in towards the boy. “I'll help, I'll help,” he lied. Light trickled through from the far end of the tunnel,

flickering and shifting, glowing like sunlight shining through stained glass into a dusty church. But the other spirits were promising the boy salvation as well—

Cold claimed the whole world. There was no such thing as warmth, not even inside his stiff, stinking furs. In the distance the ice wall glared a dazzling silver-white as the sun beat upon it. The others of the tribe were spread out across the grassy plain, sloshing their way through ice-mushed puddles. And glimpsed up ahead through the tall, swaying spires of grass was the mammoth.

“Come then, Dariat,” Ross Nash called.

Dariat saw his thoughts take form, become harder, as groping fingers of energy reached for him. He was strengthened from the touch, given weight, given volume; hurtling past the other spirits, victory rapturous in his mind. They howled and cursed as he was sucked down and down. Faster—in.

Even midnight-blackness was a sight to rejoice.

Eyelids blinked away tears of joy. Pain was glorious because it was real. He moaned at the wounds scored across his thin body, and felt a strange sensation of dry fluid bathe his skin. It flowed where his mind directed. So he put forth his will and watched the lacerations close. Yes!

Oh, my darling Anastasia, you were right all along. And always I doubted, at the core, in my secret spirit. What have I done?

Kiera smiled scornfully down at him. “Now you will forget your feeble quest for revenge against Rubra, and work with us to capture Magellanic Itg’s blackhawks with your affinity so we may spread ourselves across the stars. Because to lose now will mean returning to the incarceration of the beyond. You were there for fifteen seconds, Dariat. Next time it will be for ever.”

Ione didn’t sleep. Her body was drowsy, and her eyelids were heavy enough to remain closed. But her mind floated

at random through the habitat's perception images. She reacquainted herself with favourite slices of landscape, checking on the residents as they slumbered or partied or worked their way through the small hours. Young children were already stirring, yawning staff arrived at the restaurants which served breakfast. Starships came and (a lower number than normal) went from the spaceport outside. A couple of odd-ball scavenger craft were rising slowly out of the Ruin Ring along Hohmann transfer orbits which would bring them to an eventual rendezvous with the habitat. Mirchusko was ninety per cent full, its ochre-on-saffron storm-bands bold against the starfield. Five of its seven major moons were visible, various lacklustre crescents strung out across the ring plane.

Far inside the gossamer ribbon of the Ruin Ring two dozen blackhawks were rushing towards the gas giant's equator on a mating flight. Three eggs had already been ejected into Mirchusko's thick inner rings. She listened to their awed, inquisitive exchanges with the blackhawks who had helped stabilize them; whilst racing on ahead their dying parent radiated sublime gratification.

Life goes on, Ione thought, even in dire times like these.

A sub-routine pervading the lakeside house warned her Dominique was approaching the bedroom. She dismissed the habitat perception and opened her eyes. Clement was lying on the furred air mattress beside her, mouth open, eyes tight shut, snoring softly.

Ione recalled the night fondly. He was a good lover, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, slightly selfish—but that was most likely due to his age. And for all the enjoyment, he wasn't Joshua.

The muscle membrane door opened to allow Dominique in. She was dressed in a short royal-purple robe, carrying a tray. "So how was my little brother?" She leered down at the two naked bodies.

Ione laughed. "Growing up big and strong."

"Really? You should abolish incest, I could find out for myself then."

“Ask the bishop. I only do civil and financial laws. Morals are all down to him.”

“Breakfast?” Dominique asked, perching on the end of the bed. “I’ve got juice, toast, coffee, and quantat slices.”

“Sounds fine.” Ione nudged Clement awake, and ordered the window to clear. The glass lost its deep hazel tint to reveal the placid lake at the foot of the cliff. Tranquillity’s axial light-tube was just starting to fluoresce its way up through the orange spectrum.

“Any word in about Laton?” Dominique asked. She sat cross-legged facing Ione and Clement, pouring juice and handing round toast.

“Nothing to add to what the navy voidhawk brought yesterday,” Ione said. It was one of the reasons she had turned to Clement, for the comfort of physical contact, the need to be wanted. She had accessed the Confederation Navy’s classified report on the energy virus with growing concern.

As soon as Tranquillity reported the contents of Graeme Nicholson’s flek she had placed an order for another ten strategic-defence platforms from the industrial stations orbiting outside the spaceport, supplementing the thirty-five which already protected the habitat. The companies were glad of the work, starship component manufacturing was slowing along with the declining number of flights. It didn’t take a military genius to work out that Laton was going to try and spread his revolution; and Tranquillity was almost on a direct line between Lalonde and Earth, the core of the Confederation. The first pair of new platforms were nearly ready to deploy, with the rest being completed over another six days. And she was already wondering if she should order more.

Within an hour of the navy voidhawk delivering the warning flek from Trafalgar, she had hired twelve black-hawks to act as close-range patrol vessels, and equipped them with nuclear-armed combat wasps from Tranquillity’s reserve stocks. She was thankful there were enough of the bitek craft available to charter. But then since her grandfather opened the habitat as a base for mating flights

the blackhawks and their captains had been pretty loyal to Tranquillity and the Lord of Ruin.

What with the extra defences and the patrols, the habitat was developing a siege mentality in the wake of Terrance Smith's departure.

But were her precautions enough?

"How is the alert hitting the Vasilkovsky Line?" Ione asked.

Dominique took a drink of juice. "Hard. We've got twenty-five ships idle in Tranquillity's dock right now. No merchant is going to risk sending cargo until they know for sure Laton isn't at the destination. Three of our captains arrived yesterday, all from different star systems. They all said the same thing. Planetary governments are virtually quarantining incoming starships, asteroid governments too. Give it another week, and interstellar trade will have shut down altogether."

"They'll find the *Yaku* by then," Clement said, tearing a corner off his toast. "Hell, they've probably found it already. The navy voidhawk said it was a Confederationwide alert. No ship is ever more than ten days from a star system. I bet a navy squadron is blowing it to smithereens right now."

"That's what gets me the most," Ione said. "No knowing, having to wait for days for any news."

Dominique leant forwards and squeezed her knee. "Don't worry. The 7th Fleet squadron will stop him from becoming involved. They'll all be back here in a week with their tails between their legs complaining they didn't get a chance to play soldier."

Ione looked up into deep, surprisingly understanding eyes. "Yeah."

"He'll be all right. He's the only man I know who could lie his way out of a supernova explosion. Some leftover megalomaniac isn't going to be a problem."

"Thanks."

"Who?" Clement asked around a full mouth, looking from one girl to another.

Ione bit into a slice of her orange-coloured quantat. It had the texture of a melon, but tasted like spicy grapefruit. Dominique was grinning roguishly at her over a coffee-cup.

“Girls’ talk,” Dominique said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Clement threw a quantat rind at her. “It’s Joshua. You’ve both got the hots for him.”

“He’s a friend,” Ione said. “And he’s in way over his silly little head, and we’re worried about him.”

“Don’t be,” Clement said briskly. “Joshua showed me round the *Lady Macbeth*. She’s got more combat potential than a front-line frigate, and Smith armed her with combat wasps before they left. Anyone damn stupid enough to go up against that starship is dead meat.”

Ione gave him a kiss. “Thank you, too.”

“Any time.”

They ate the rest of their breakfast in companionable peace. Ione was debating what to do for the rest of the day when Tranquillity called. That was the thing with being the absolute ruler of a bitek habitat, she reflected, you don’t really have to do anything, thoughts were acted on instantly. But there was the human side to consider. The Chamber of Trade was nervous, the Financial and Commerce Council more so, ordinary people didn’t know what was going on. Everybody wanted reassurance, and they expected her to provide it. She had done two interviews with news companies yesterday, and there were three delegations who wanted personal audiences.

Parker Higgins is requesting an immediate interview, Tranquillity told her as she was finishing her coffee. I recommend you grant it.

Oh, you do, do you? Well, I think there are more important things for me to attend to right now.

I believe this to be more important than the Laton crisis.

What? It was the ambiguity which made her sit up straighter on the furry bed. Tranquillity was emitting a

strong impression of discomfort, as if it was unsure of a subject. Unusual enough to intrigue her.

There has been some remarkable progress with the Laymil sensorium recordings in the last seventy hours. I did not wish to trouble you with the project while you were involved with upgrading my defence and soothing the residents. That may have been my mistake. Last night some of the researchers made an extremely important find.

Which is? she asked avidly.

They believe they have located the Laymil home planet.

The path leading from the tube station to the octagonal Electronics Division building was littered with ripe bronze berries fallen from the tall chuantawa trees. They crunched softly as Ione's shoes helped flatten them further into the stone slabs.

Project staff emerging from the stations gave her the faintly guilty glance of all workers arriving early and finding the boss already in.

Oski Katsura greeted her at the entrance, dressed in her usual white lab smock, one of the few people in the habitat who never seemed perturbed by Ione's escort of sergeants. "We haven't made an announcement yet," she said as they went inside. "Some of the implications are only just sinking in."

The hall where the Laymil stack was kept had changed considerably since Ione's first visit. Most of the experimental electronic equipment had been cleared out. Processor blocks and AV projectors were lined up along the benches, forming individual research stations, each with a rack of fleks. Workshop cubicles behind the glass wall had been converted into offices. The impression was one of academic endeavour rather than out and out scientific pioneering.

"We use this mainly as a sorting centre now," Oski Katsura said. "As soon as they have been decrypted, the sen-

sorium memories are individually reviewed by a panel of experts drawn from every discipline we have here at the project. They provide a rough initial classification, cataloguing incidents and events depicted, and decide if there is anything which will interest their profession. After that the relevant memory is datavised to an investigatory and assessment committee which each division has formed. As you can imagine, most of it has been sent to the Cultural and Psychology divisions. But even seeing their electronics used in the intended context of mundane day-to-day operation has been immensely useful to us here. And the same goes for most of the physical disciplines—engineering, fusion, structures. There’s something in most memories for all of us. I’m afraid a final and exhaustive analysis is going to take a couple of decades at least. All we are doing for now is providing a preliminary interpretation.”

Ione nodded silent approval. Tranquillity’s background memories were revealing how hard the review teams were working.

There were only five other people in the hall, as well as Lieria. They had all been working through the night, and now they were clustered round a tray from the canteen, drinking tea and eating croissants. Parker Higgins rose as soon as she came in. His grey suit jacket was hanging off the back of one of the chairs, revealing a crumpled blue shirt. All-night sessions were obviously something the old director was finding increasingly difficult to manage. But he proffered a tired smile as he introduced her to the other four. Malandra Sarker and Qingyn Lin were Laymil spaceship experts, she a biotechnology systems specialist, while his field was the mechanical and electrical units the xenocs employed in their craft. Ione shook hands while Tranquillity silently supplied profile summaries of the two. Malandra Sarker struck her as being young for the job at twenty-eight, but she had her doctorate from the capital university on Quang Tri, and references which were impeccable.

Ione knew Kempster Getchell, the Astronomy Divi-

sion's chief; they had met during the first round of briefings, and on several formal social occasions since then. He was in his late sixties, and from a family which lacked any substantial geneering. But despite entropy's offensive, leaving him with greying, thinning hair, and a stoop to his shoulders, he projected a lively puckish attitude, the complete opposite to Parker Higgens. Astronomy was one of the smallest divisions in the Laymil project, concerned mainly with identifying stars which had Laymil-compatible spectra, and searching through radio astronomy records to see if any abnormality had ever been found to indicate a civilization. Despite frequent requests, no Lord of Ruin had ever agreed to fund the division's own radio-telescope array. They had to make do with library records from universities across the Confederation.

Kempster Getchell's assistant was Renato Vella, a swarthy thirty-five-year-old from Valencia, on a four-year sabbatical from one of its universities. He acted both excited and awed when Ione greeted him. She wasn't quite sure if it was her presence or their discovery which instigated his jitters.

"The Laymil home planet?" Ione asked Parker Higgens, permitting a note of scepticism to sound.

"Yes, ma'am," the director said. The joy that should have been present at making the announcement was missing, he seemed more apprehensive than triumphant.

"Where is it?" she asked.

Parker Higgens traded a pleading glance with Kempster Getchell, then sighed. "It used to be here, in this solar system."

Ione counted to three. "Used to be?"

"Yes."

Tranquillity? What is going on?

Although it is an extraordinary claim, the evidence does appear to be slanted in their favour. Allow them to complete their explanation.

All right. "Go on."

"It was a recording that was translated two days ago,"

Malandra Sarker said. “We found we had got the memory of a Laymil spaceship crew-member. Naturally we were delighted, it would give us a definite blueprint for one of their ships, inside and out, as well as the operating procedures. Up until now all we’ve had is fragments of what we thought were spaceship parts. Well we found out what a Laymil ship looks like all right.” She datavised one of the nearby processor blocks; its AV pillar shone an image into Ione’s eyes.

The Laymil ship had three distinct sections. At the front were four white-silver metal ovoids; the large central unit was thirty metres long, with the three twenty-metre units clustered around it—obviously life-support cabins. The midsection was drum shaped, its sides made up from interlaced stone-red pipes packed so tightly there was no chink between them, an almost intestinal configuration. Five black heat-radiation tubes protruded at right angles from its base, spaced equally around the rim. At the rear was a narrow sixty-metre-long tapering fusion tube, with slim silver rings running along its length at five-metre intervals. Right at the tip, around the plasma exhaust nozzle, was a silver foil parasol.

“Is it organic?” Ione asked.

“We think about eighty per cent,” Qingyn Lin said. “It matches what we know of their use of biotechnology.”

Ione turned away from the projection.

“It is a passenger ship,” Malandra Sarker said. “From what we can make out, the Laymil didn’t have commercial cargo ships, although there are some tankers and specialist industrial craft.”

“This would seem to be correct,” Lieria said, speaking through the small white vocalizer block held in one of her tractamorphic arms. “The Laymil at this cultural stage did not have economic commerce. Technical templates and DNA were exchanged between clan units, but no physical or biotechnology artefacts were traded for financial reward.”

“The thing is,” Malandra Sarker said, sinking down into

a chair, "it was leaving a parking orbit around their home planet to fly to Mirchusko's spaceholms."

"We always wondered why the ship fuel tanks we found were so large," Qingyn Lin said. "There was far too much deuterium and He₃ stored for simple inter-habitat voyages, even if they made fifteen trips in a row without refuelling. Now we know. They were interplanetary spaceships."

Ione gave Kempster Getchell a questioning look. "A planet? Here?"

A wayward smile formed on his lips, he appeared indecently happy about the revelation. "It does look that way. We checked the star and planet positions gathered from the spacecraft's sensor array most thoroughly. The system we saw is definitely this one. The Laymil home planet used to orbit approximately one hundred and thirty-five million kilometres from the star. That does put it rather neatly between the orbits of Jyresol and Boherol." He pouted sadly. "And here I've spent thirty years of my life looking at stars with spectra similar to this one. All the time it was right under my nose. God, what a waste. Still, I'm back on the cutting edge of astrophysics now, and no mistake. Trying to work out how you make a planet disappear . . . ho, boy."

"All right," Ione said with forced calm. "So where is it now? Was it destroyed? There isn't an asteroid belt between Jyresol and Boherol. There isn't even a dust belt as far as I know."

"There is no record of any extensive survey being made of this system's interplanetary medium," Kempster said. "I checked our library. But even assuming the planet had literally been reduced to dust, the solar wind would have blown the majority of particles beyond the Oort cloud within a few centuries."

"Would a survey now help?" she asked.

"It might be able to confirm the dust hypothesis, if the density is still higher than is usual. But it would depend on when the planet was destroyed."

"It was here two thousand six hundred years ago," Renato Vella said. "We know that from analysing the position

of the other planets at the time the memory was recorded. But if we are to look for proof of the dust I believe we would be better off taking surface samples from Boherol and the gas giant moons.”

“Good idea, well done, lad,” Kempster said, patting his younger assistant on the shoulder. “If this wave of dust was expelled outwards then it should have left traces on all the airless bodies in the system. Similar to the way sediment layers in planetary core samples show various geological epochs. If we could find it, we would get a good indication of when it actually happened as well.”

“I don’t think it was reduced to dust,” Renato Vella said.

“Why not?” Ione asked.

“It was a valid idea,” he said readily. “There aren’t many other ways you can make something that mass disappear without trace. But it’s a very theoretical solution. In practical terms the energy necessary to dismantle an entire planet to such an extent is orders of magnitude above anything the Confederation could muster. You have to remember that even our outlawed antimatter planetbuster bombs don’t harm or ablate the mass of a terracompatible-sized planet, they just wreck and pollute the biosphere. In any case an explosion—multiple explosions even—wouldn’t do the trick, they would just reduce it to asteroidal fragments. To turn it into dust or preferably vapour you would need some form of atomic disrupter weapon, probably powered by the star—I can’t think what else would produce enough energy. That or a method of initiating a fission chain reaction in stable atoms.”

“Perfect mass-energy conversion,” Kempster muttered, his eyebrows beetled in concentration. “Now there’s an idea.”

“And why wasn’t the same method used against the Laymil habitats?” Renato Vella said, warming to his theme. “If you have a weapon which can destroy a planet so thoroughly as to eradicate all traces of it, why leave the remnants of the habitats for us to find?”

“Yes, yes, why indeed?” Kempster said. “Good point, lad, well done. Good thinking.”

His assistant beamed.

“We still think the habitats destroyed themselves,” Parker Higgens said. “It fits what we know, even now.” He looked at Ione, visibly distressed. “I think the memory may show the start of the planet’s destruction. There is clearly some kind of conflict being enacted on the surface as the ship leaves orbit.”

“Surely that was an inter-clan dispute, wasn’t it?” Qingyn Lin asked dubiously. “That’s what it sounded like to me.”

“You are all mistaken in thinking of this problem purely in terms of the physical,” Lieria said. “Consider what we now know. The planet is confirmed to have been in existence at the same time the habitats were broken. The Laymil entity whose memory we have accessed is concerned about the transformation in the life-harmony gestalt which is being propagated across an entire continent. A drastic metaphysical change which threatens nothing less than the entire Laymil racial orientation. Director Parker Higgens is correct, these events cannot be discounted as coincidence.”

Ione glanced round the group. None of them looked as though they wished to contradict the Kiint. “I think I’d better review this memory myself.” She sat in the chair next to Malandra Sarker. **Show me.**

As before, the Laymil body hardened around her own, an exoskeleton which did not—could never—fit. The recording quality was much higher than before. Oski Katsura and her team had been working long hours on the processors and programs required to interpret the stored information. There were hardly any of the black specks which indicated fragmentary data drop-outs. Ione relaxed deeper into the chair as the sensorium buoyed her along.

The Laymil was a shipmaster, clan-bred for a life traversing the barren distance between the spaceholm constellation and Unimeron, the prime lifehost. It hung at the

hub of the ship's central life-support ovoid as the drive was readied for flight. There was nothing like the human arrangement of decks and machinery, present even in void-hawks. The protective metal shell contained a biological nest-womb, a woody growth honeycombed with chambers and voyage-duration pouches for travellers, creating an exotic organic grotto. Chambers were clustered together without logic, like elongated bubbles in a dense foam; the walls had the texture of tough rubber, pocked with hundreds of small holes to restrain hoofs, and emitting a fresh green radiance. Organs to maintain the atmosphere and recycle food were encased in the thicker partitions.

The all-pervasive greenness was subtly odd to Ione's human brain. Tubular buttress struts curved through the chamber around the Laymil body, flaring out where they merged with a wall. Its three hoofs were pushed into holes, buttocks resting on a grooved mushroom-stool; its hands were closed on knobby protrusions. A teat stalactite hung centimetres from the feeding mouth. The position was rock solid and immensely comfortable, the nest-womb had grown into a flawlessly compatible layout with the shipmaster's body. All three heads slid around in slow weaving motions, observing small opaque composite instrument panels that swelled out of the wall. Ione found it hard to tell where the plastic began and the cells ended; the cellular/mechanical fusion was seamless, as though the womb-nest was actually growing machinery. Panel-mounted lenses projected strange graphics into the Laymil's eyes, in a fashion similar to human AV projectors.

As the heads moved they provided snatched glimpses into other chambers through narrow passageways. She saw one of the Laymil passengers cocooned in its voyage-duration pouch. It was swaddled in translucent glittery membranes that held it fast against the wall, and a waxy hose supplying a nutrient fluid had been inserted into its mouth, with a similar hose inserted into its anus, maintaining the digestive cycle. A mild form of hibernation.

The Laymil shipmaster's thoughts were oddly twinned,

as though the recording was of two separate thought patterns. On a subsidiary level it was aware of the ship's biological and mechanical systems. It controlled them with a processor's precision, preparing the fusion tube for ignition, maintaining attitude through small reaction thrusters, computing a course vector, surveying the four nest-wombs. There was a similarity here to the automatic functions a human's neural nanonics would perform; but as far as she could ascertain the shipmaster possessed no implants. This was the way its brain was structured to work. The ship's biotechnology was sub-sentient, so, in effect, the shipmaster was the flight computer.

On an ascendant level its mind was observing the planet below through the ship's sensor faculty. Unimeron was remarkably similar to a terracompatible world, with broad blue oceans and vast white cloud swirls, the poles home to smallish ice-caps. The visual difference was provided by the continents; they were a near-uniform green, even the mountain ranges had been consumed by the vegetation layer. No piece of land was wasted.

Vast blue-green cobweb structures hung in orbit, slightly below the ship's thousand-kilometre altitude. These were the skyhavens, most two hundred kilometres in diameter, some greater, rotating once every five or more hours, not for artificial gravity but simply to maintain shape. They were alive, conscious with vibrant mentalities, greater than that of a spaceholm even. A combination of spaceport and magnetosphere energy node, with manufacturing modules clumped around the hub like small bulbous tangerine barnacles. But the physical facets were just supplementary to their intellectual function. They formed an important aspect of the planet's life-harmony, smoothing and weaving the separate continental essence thoughts into a single unified planetwide gestalt. Mental communication satellites, though they contributed to the gestalt as well, sang to distant stars. That voice was beyond Ione completely, both its message and its purpose, registering as just a vague cadence on the threshold of perception. She felt a little darker

for its absence, the Laymil shipmaster considered it magnificent.

The skyhavens were packed close together, with small variants in altitude, allowing them to slide along their various orbital inclinations without ever colliding. No segment of the planet's sky was ever left open. It was an amazing display of navigational exactitude. From a distance it looked as though someone had cast a net around Unimeron. She tried to gauge the effort involved in their growth, a planet-girdling structure, and failed. Even for a species with such obvious biotechnology and engineering supremacy the skyhavens were an awesome achievement.

"Departure initiation forthcoming," the shipmaster called.

"Venture boldness reward," the skyhaven essence replied. **"Anticipate hope."**

Unimeron's terminator was visible now, blackness biting into the planet. Nightside continents were studded with bright green lightpoints, smaller than human cities, and very regular. One southern continent, curving awkwardly around the planet's mass away from the ship's sensors, had delicate streamers of phosphorescent red mist meandering along its coastal zones with exploratory tendrils creeping further inland. The edges were visibly palpitating like the fringes of a terrestrial jellyfish as they curled and flowed around surface features, yet all the while retaining a remarkable degree of integrity. There was none of the braiding or churning of ordinary clouds. Ione considered the effect quite delightful, the mist looked alive, as though the air currents were infected with biofluorescent spores.

But the Laymil shipmaster was physically repelled by the sight. **"Galheith clan essence asperity woe."** His heads bobbed around in agitation, letting out low hoots of distress. **"Woe. Folly acknowledgement request."**

"No relention," the skyhaven essence answered sadly.

As their orbits took them over the continent, the skyhavens would hum in dismay. The life-harmony of Unimeron was being disrupted, with the skyhavens refus-

ing to disseminate the Galheith clan essence into the gestalt. It was too radical, too antagonistic. Too different. Alien and antithetical to the harmony ethos that had gone before.

A tiny flare of sharp blue-white light sprang out of the red mist, dying down quickly.

“Reality dysfunction,” the shipmaster called in alarm.

“Confirm.”

“Horror woe. Galheith research death essence tragedy.”

“Concord.”

“Impetuosity woe release. Reality dysfunction exponential. Prime lifehost engulfed fear.”

“Reality dysfunction counter. Spaceholm constellation prime essence continuation hope.”

“Confirm. Hope carriage.” The shipmaster quickly reviewed the other Laymil hibernating in the nest-wombs; both mental traits converging for the evaluation. **“Essencemasters condition satisfactory. Hope reality dysfunction defeat. Hope Galheith atonement.”**

“Hope joined. Rejoice unity commitment.”

Where the flare of light had sprung, the jungle was now alight. Ione realized the glimmer of orange must be a firestorm easily over ten kilometres wide.

The spaceship was crossing the terminator. Skyhavens ahead glowed a fragile platinum as the Van Allen radiation belt particles gusted across their web strands.

“Departure initiation,” the shipmaster announced. Ionized fuel was fired into the fusion drive’s magnetic pinch. A jet of plasma slowly built up. Information streamed into the Laymil’s brain, equations were performed, instructions were pushed into the nest-womb’s neurons and the coincident hardware’s circuits. There was never any doubt, any self-questioning. The terms did not apply.

Unimeron began to shrink behind the ship. The shipmaster focused his attention on the spaceholm constellation, and the frail song of welcome it emitted, so much quieter than the prime lifehost’s joyous spirit.

And the memory expired.

Ione blinked free of the stubbornly persistent, green-polluted images. Emotions and sensations were harder to discard.

“What is a reality dysfunction?” she asked. “The shipmaster seemed frightened half to death by it.”

“We don’t know,” Parker Higgins said. “There has never been any reference to it in any of the other memories.”

“Ione Saldana, I believe the term reality dysfunction refers to a massive malevolent violation within the Laymil life-harmony essence,” Lieria said. “The nature of the Galheith clan was being radically altered by it. However, the impression conveyed by the memory is that it is more than a mental reorientation, it also incorporated a distortion within the local physical matrix. Example: the energy flare.”

“It was a weapon?” She shot a tense glance at the two astronomers.

Kempster scratched at his shadow of stubble. “That flare definitely started a fire, so I would have to say yes. But one forest fire is a little different from something which can cause a planet to vanish.”

“If it went on to spread through the entire planet’s life essence, as seems more than likely,” Malandra Sarker said, “then it would have Unimeron’s entire technical resources at its disposal. Placed on a war footing, a race like that would have a frightening armaments-production where-withal.”

“I disagree,” Renato Vella said. “Granted they could build fleets of ships, and hundreds of thousands of nukes, probably antimatter too. But they are not that much further advanced than us. I still maintain the energy required to destroy a planet is beyond this level of technology.”

I was just thinking of the Alchemist, Ione said to Tranquillity. She was almost afraid to mention it in case Lieria could intercept the thought. **What was it Captain Khanna said? One idea in a lifetime is all it takes. The Laymil**

might not have had the initial physical resources, but what about the mental potential of a planetary mind devoted to weapons design?

The possibility is an alarming one, Tranquillity agreed. But why would they turn it on themselves?

Good question. “Even if they built a weapon, why would they turn it on themselves?”

The group regarded her with puzzled faces—a child innocently flooring adult logic with a simple question. Then Renato Vella smiled suddenly. “We’ve been assuming it was destroyed, how about if they just moved it instead?”

Kempster Getchell chuckled. “Oh my boy, what a wonderful notion.”

“I bet it would require less energy than obliteration.”

“Good point, yes.”

“And we’ve seen they can build massive space structures.”

“We are evading the point,” Parker Higgins said sternly. “We believe this reality dysfunction, whatever it is, is behind both the removal of the Laymil planet and the suicide of the spaceholms. Our priority now has to be to establish what it was, and if it still exists.”

“If the planet was moved, then the reality dysfunction is still around,” Renato Vella said, refusing to be deflected. “It is wherever the planet is.”

“Yes, but what is it?” Oski Katsura asked with some asperity. “It seems to be many things, some kind of mental plague and a weapon system at the same time.”

“Oh shit,” Ione said out loud as she and Tranquillity made the connection simultaneously. “Laton’s energy virus.”

Tranquillity allowed the group to access the report from Dr Gilmore through the hall’s communication net processors, giving the images direct to Lieria via affinity.

“My God,” Parker Higgins said. “The similarities are startling.”

“Similarities, hell,” Kempster half-shouted. “That fucker’s come back!”

The director flinched at the astronomer's coarse anger. "We can't be sure."

"I'm sorry, Parker, but I cannot in all sincerity consider this to be a coincidence," Ione told him.

"I concur," Lieria said.

"The Confederation, specifically the First Admiral, must be informed immediately," Ione said. "That goes without question. The navy must understand that they are not facing Laton himself but something far more serious. Parker, you will act as my representative in this matter; you have both the authority and knowledge necessary to convey the severity of this reality dysfunction to the First Admiral."

He looked shocked at first, then bowed. "Yes, ma'am."

"Oski, prepare copies of every Laymil memory we have. The rest of you put down what observations you can for the navy staff, whatever you think may help. Tranquillity is recalling one of the patrol blackhawks now, it will be ready to leave for Avon in an hour. I will ask the Confederation Navy office to provide an officer to escort you, Parker, so you had better get ready. Time is important here."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ione Saldana, I also request a blackhawk to convey one of my colleagues home to Jobis, Lieria said. I judge these events to be of sufficient portent to warrant informing my race.

Yes, of course. She was aware of Tranquillity summoning a second armed blackhawk back to the docking-edges even as she acknowledged the Kiint's request. All the remaining resident blackhawks would have to be conscripted for patrol duties now, she thought tersely, probably the independent traders too. Then a stray thought struck. **Lieria, did the Kiint ever hear the skyhavens' starsong?**

Yes.

The finality of the tone stopped Ione from enquiring further. But only for now, she promised herself. I've had enough of this mystic superiority crap they keep peddling.

“Kempster, that red mist over Unimeron’s southern continent, was that a part of the reality dysfunction, do you think? There’s no mention of it being present on Lalonde.”

“Its nature would suggest so,” Kempster said. “I can’t see that it’s a natural phenomenon, not even on that planet. Possibly a secondary effect, a by-product of the interaction with Unimeron’s life essence, but definitely connected. Wouldn’t you agree, lad?”

Renato Vella had been lost in deep contemplation ever since he accessed Dr Gilmore’s report. Now he nodded briefly. “Yes, it is likely.”

“Something on your mind?” the old astronomer asked, his cheerfulness reasserting itself.

“I was just thinking. They could build living space structures that completely encircled their world, yet this reality dysfunction still defeated them. Their spaceholms were so frightened of it they committed suicide rather than submit. What do you think is going to happen to us when we confront it?”

8

“Jesus, what’s all that red gunk in the air? I don’t remember that from the last time we were here. It’s almost as if it’s glowing. The bloody stuff’s covering the whole of the Juliffe tributary network, look.” Joshua abandoned the *Lady Mac*’s sensor input and turned to Melvyn Ducharme on the acceleration couch next to his.

“Don’t look at me, I’m just a simple fusion engineer. I don’t know anything about meteorology. Try the mercs, they’re all planet-bred.”

“Humm,” Joshua mused. Relations between the *Lady Mac*’s crew and the mercenary scout team they were carrying hadn’t been exactly optimal during the voyage. Both sides kept pretty much to themselves, with Kelly Tirrel acting as diplomatic go-between—when she was out of the free-fall sex cage. That girl had certainly lived up to her side of the bargain, he thought contentedly.

“Anybody care to hazard a guess?” he called.

The rest of the crew on the bridge accessed the images, but no one volunteered an opinion.

Amarisk was slowly turning round into their line of sight as they closed on the planet. Nearly half of the continent was already in daylight. From where they were, still a hundred thousand kilometres out, the Juliffe and most of its tributaries were smothered in a nebulous red haze. At first inspection it had looked as though some unique refraction effect was making the water gleam a bright burgundy. But once the *Lady Mac*’s long-range optical sensors were focused on Lalonde, that notion had quickly been dispelled. The effect was caused by thousands of long narrow

cloud bands in the air above the surface of the water, clinging to the tributary network's multiple fork pattern with startling accuracy. Although, Joshua realized, the bands were much broader than the actual rivers themselves; where the first band started, just inland from the mouth of the Juliffe, it was almost seventy kilometres across.

"I've never seen anything like it on any planet," Ashly said flatly. "Weird stuff; and it is glowing, Joshua. You can see it stretching beyond the terminator, all the way to the coast."

"Blood," Melvyn intoned solemnly. "The river's awash with blood, and it's starting to evaporate."

"Shut it," Sarha snapped. The idea was too close to the thoughts bubbling round in her own mind. "That's not funny."

"Do you think it's hostile?" Dahybi asked. "Something of Laton's?"

"I suppose it must be connected with him," Joshua admitted uneasily. "But even if it is hostile, it can't harm us at this distance. It's strictly lower atmosphere stuff. Which means it may be a hazard for the merc scouts, though. Sarha, tell them to access the image, please." They were less likely to insult a woman.

A grumbling Sarha requested a channel to the lounge in capsule C where the seven mercenary scouts and Kelly Tirrel were lying on acceleration couches as the *Lady Mac* accelerated in towards Lalonde. There was a gruff acknowledgment from her AV pillar, and Joshua grinned in private.

The flight computer alerted him that a coded signal was being transmitted from the *Gemal*. "We've detected an unknown atmospheric phenomenon above Amarisk," Terrance Smith said pedantically.

"Yeah, those red clouds sticking to the tributaries," Joshua answered. "We see it too. What do you want us to do about it?"

"Nothing yet. As far as we can make out it is simply polluted cloud, presumably coming from the river itself. If a

sensor sweep shows it to be radioactive then we will reassess the landing situation. But until then, proceed as ordered."

"Aye, aye, Commodore," Joshua grunted when the channel was closed.

"Polluted cloud," Melvyn said in contempt.

"Biological warfare," Ashly suggested in a grieved tone. "Not nice. Typical of Laton, mark you. But definitely not nice."

"I wonder if it's his famed proteanic virus?" Dahybi said.

"Doubt it, that was microscopic. And it didn't glow in the dark, either. I'd say it has to be radioactive dust."

"Then why isn't the wind moving it?" Sarha asked. "And how did it form in the first place?"

"We'll find out in due course," Warlow said with his usual pessimism. "Why hurry the process?"

"True enough," Joshua agreed.

The *Lady Mac* was heading in towards the planet at a steady one gee. As soon as each ship in the little fleet had emerged from its final jump into the Lalonde system, it had accelerated away from the coordinate, the whole fleet spreading out radially at five gees to avoid presenting an easy target grouping. Now they were holding a roughly circular formation twenty thousand kilometres wide, with *Gemal* and the cargo ships at the centre.

The six blackhawks were already decelerating into low orbit above Lalonde to perform a preliminary threat assessment. Bloody show-offs, Joshua thought. *Lady Mac* could easily match their six gee manoeuvres if she wasn't encumbered with escort duties.

Even with naval tactics programs running in primary mode, Terrance Smith was ever cautious. The lack of any response from Durringham was extremely bad news, although admittedly half anticipated. What had triggered the fleet commander's paranoia was the total absence of any orbital activity. The colonist-carrier starships had gone, along with the cargo ships. The inter-orbit craft from

Kenyon were circling inertly in a five-hundred-kilometre equatorial parking orbit, all systems powered down—even their navigation beacons, which was contrary to every CAB regulation in the flek. Of the sheriff's office's ageing observation satellite there was no trace. Only the geosynchronous communication platform and civil spaceflight traffic monitoring satellites remained active, their on-board processors sending out monotonously regular signals. He lacked the transponder interrogation code to see if the navy ELINT satellites were functional.

After a quick appraisal, Smith had ordered a descent into a thousand-kilometre orbit. His fleet moved in, the combat-capable starships dumping small satellites in their wake to form an extensive high-orbit gravitonic-distortion-detector network. If any starship emerged within five hundred thousand kilometres of the planet, the satellites would spot it.

The blackhawks released a quintet of military-grade communication satellites as they raced towards the planet. Ion engines pushed the comsats into geostationary orbit, positioning them to give complete coverage of the planet, with overlapping reception footprints covering Amarisk in its entirety.

Twenty thousand kilometres out from Lalonde, the blackhawks split into two groups and swept into a seven-hundred-kilometre orbit at differing inclinations. Each of them released a batch of fifteen observation satellites, football-sized globes that decelerated further, lowering themselves into a two-hundred-kilometre orbit; their parallel tracks provided a detailed coverage sweep over a thousand kilometres wide. The blackhawks themselves, with their powerful sensor blisters augmented by electronic scanner pods, were integrated into the effort to reconnoitre Durringham and the Juliffe tributary basin. The intention was to compile a comprehensive survey with a resolution below ten centimetres for the mercenary scouts to use.

"It's virtually impossible," Idzerda, the captain of the blackhawk *Cyanea*, told Terrance Smith after the first pass.

“That red cloud is completely opaque, except for the edges where it thins out, and even there the images we’re receiving of the land below are heavily distorted. I’m not even sure cloud is the word for it. It doesn’t move like cloud should. It’s almost as if a film of electrophorescent cells has been solidified into the air. Spectrographic analysis is useless with that light it emits. One thing we have noticed; we ran a comparison with the old cartography memory from the sheriff’s observation satellite which you supplied. The cloud is brightest over towns and villages. Durringham shines like there’s a star buried under there. There is no way of telling what is going on below it. The only villages we can even see are the ones furthest up the tributaries where the glow peters out. And they are wrong.”

“Wrong?” Terrance Smith asked.

“Yes. They’re the most recently settled, the most primitive ones, right?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve seen stone houses, gardens, domelike structures, metalled roads, heck, even windmills. None of it was there on the old images you gave us, and they were only recorded a month ago.”

“That can’t possibly be correct,” Terrance said.

“I know that. So either the whole lot are holograms, or it’s an illusion loaded directly into the observation satellite processors by this electronic warfare gimmick you warned us about. Although we can’t see how it disrupts the black-hawks’ optical sensors as well. The people who put up that cloud have got some startlingly potent projection techniques. But why bother? That’s what we don’t understand. What’s the point of these illusions?”

“What about power emission centres?” Terrance Smith asked. “It must take a lot of energy to generate a covering layer like that red cloud.”

“We haven’t found any. Even with their electronic jamming we should be able to spot the flux patterns from a medium-sized fusion generator. But we haven’t.”

“Can you locate the jamming source?”

“No, sorry, it’s very diffuse. But it’s definitely ground based. It only affects us and the satellites when we’re over Amarisk.”

“Is the red cloud radioactive?”

“No. We’re fairly sure of that. No alpha, beta, or gamma emission.”

“What about biological contamination?”

“No data. We haven’t attempted to sample it.”

“Make that your priority,” Terrance said. “I have to know if it’s safe to send the combat scout teams down.”

On its following pass, the *Cyanea* released two atmospheric probes. The vehicles were modified versions of the marque used by planet-survey missions, three-metre delta-wing robots with the central cylindrical fuselage crammed full of biological sampling and analysis equipment.

Both of them pitched up to present their heatshield bellies to the atmosphere, curving down towards the surface as they aerobraked. Once they had fallen below subsonic velocity, air scoop intake ramps hinged back near the nose, and their compressor engines whirred into silent life. A preprogrammed flight plan sent them swooping over the first fringes of the red cloud, fifteen kilometres to the south-east of Durringham. Encrypted data pulsed up to the newly established bracelet of communication satellites.

The air was remarkably clear, with humidity thirty per cent down on Lalonde’s average. Terrance Smith accessed the raw image from a camera in the nose of one probe. It looked as though it was flying over the surface of a red dwarf star. A red dwarf with an azure atmosphere. The cloud, or haze—whatever—was completely uniform, as though, finally, an electromagnetic wavefront had come to rest and achieved mass, then someone had polished it into a ruby surface. There was nothing to focus on, no perspective, no constituent particles or spores; its intensity was mechanically constant. An optically impenetrable layer floating two kilometres above the ground. Thickness unknown. Temperature unknown. Radiating entirely in the bottom end of the red spectrum.

"No real clouds anywhere above it," Joshua murmured. Like most of the fleet's crews he had accessed the datavise from the atmospheric probes. Something had bothered him about that lack; ironically, more than the buoyant red blanket itself. "Amarisk always had clouds."

Sarha quickly ran a review of the images the fleet had recorded on their approach, watching the cloud formations. "Oh my Lord, they split," she said disbelievingly. "About a hundred kilometres offshore the clouds split like they've hit something." She ran the time-lapse record for them, letting the tumbling clouds sweep through their neural nanonics' visualization. Great billowing bands of cumulus and stratocumulus charged across the ocean towards Amarisk's western shoreline, only to branch and diverge, raging away to the north and south of the Juliffe's mouth.

"Jesus. What would it take to do that? Not even Kulu tries to manipulate its climate." Joshua switched back to a real-time view from *Lady Mac's* sensor clusters. A cyclone was being visibly sawed into two unequal sections as it pirouetted against the invisible boundary. He ordered the flight computer to open a channel to the *Gemal*.

"Yes, we've seen it," Terrance Smith said. "It has to be tied in with the red cloud cover. Obviously the invaders have a highly sophisticated method of energy manipulation."

"No shit? The point is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Destroy the focal mechanism."

"Jesus, you can't mean that. This fleet can't possibly go into orbit now. With that kind of power available they'll be able to smash us as soon as we're within range. Hell, they can probably pull us down from orbit. You'll have to abort the mission."

"It's ground based, Calvert, we're sure of that. It can't be anywhere else. The blackhawks can sense the mass of anything larger than a tennis ball in orbit, you can't disguise mass from their distortion fields. All we have to do is send in the combat scout teams to locate the invader's

bases. That's what we planned on doing all along. You knew that when you signed on. Once we find the enemy, the starships can bombard them from orbit. That's what you're here for, Calvert. Nobody promised you an easy ride. Now hold formation."

"Oh, Jesus." He looked round the bridge to make sure everyone shared his dismay. They did. "What do you want to do? At five gees I can get us to a suitable jump coordinate in twelve minutes—mark."

Melvyn looked thoroughly disgusted. "That bloody Smith. His naval programs must have been written by the most gung-ho admiral in the galaxy. I say jump."

"Smith has a point," Warlow rumbled.

Joshua glanced over at the big cosmonik in surprise. Of everyone, Warlow had been the least eager to come.

"There is nothing hostile in orbit," the bass voice proclaimed.

"It can chop up a bloody cyclone," Ashly shouted.

"The red cloud is atmospheric. Whatever generates it affects lower atmospheric weather. It is planet based, centred on Amarisk. The blackhawks have not been destroyed. Can we really desert the fleet at this juncture? Suppose Smith and the others do liberate Lalonde? What then?"

Jesus, he's right, Joshua thought. You knew you were committed after you took the contract. But . . . Instinct. That bloody obstinate, indefinable mental itch he suffered from—and trusted. Instinct told him to run. Run now, and run fast.

"All right," he said. "We stay with them, for now. But at the first—and I really mean *first*, Warlow—sign of the shit hitting the fan, then we are out of orbit at ten gees. Commitment or no commitment."

"Thank God somebody's got some sense," Melvyn murmured.

"Sarha, I want a constant monitor of all the observation satellite data from now on. Any other shit-loopy atmospheric happenings pop up and I want to be informed immediately."

“Yes, Captain.”

“Also, Melvyn, set up a real-time review program of the grav-detector satellite’s data. I don’t intend us to be dependent on the *Gemal* informing us whether we’ve got company.”

“Gotcha, Joshua,” Melvyn sang.

“Dahybi, nodes to be charged to maximum capacity until further notice. I want to be able to jump within thirty seconds.”

“They aren’t designed for long-term readiness—”

“They’ll last for five days in that state. It’ll be settled one way or another by then. And I have the money for maintenance.”

Dahybi shrugged his shoulders against the couch webbing. “Yes, sir.”

Joshua tried to relax his body, but eventually gave up and ordered his neural nanonics to send overrides into his muscles. As they began to slacken he accessed the fleet’s command communication channels again, and started to format a program which would warn him if one of the ships dropped out of the network unexpectedly. It wasn’t much, but it might be worth a couple of seconds.

The atmospheric probes began to lose height, sliding down towards the surface of the red cloud. “Systems are functioning perfectly,” the flight’s controlling officer reported. “There’s no sign of the electronic warfare effect.” She flew them to within five metres of the top, then levelled them out. There was no reaction from the serene red plain. “Air analysis is negative. Whatever holds the boundary together seems to be impermeable. None of it is drifting upwards.”

“Send the probes in,” Terrance ordered.

The first probe eased its way towards the surface, observed by cameras on the second. As it touched the top of the layer a fan of red haze jetted up behind it, arcing with slow smoothness, like powder-fine dust in low gravity.

“It is a solid!” Terrance exclaimed. “I knew it.”

“Nothing registering, sir, no particles. Only water vapour, humidity rising sharply.”

The probe sank deeper, vanishing from its twin’s view. Its data transmission began to fissure.

“High static charge building up over the fuselage,” the control officer reported. “I’m losing it.”

The probe’s datavise dissolved into garbage, then cut off. Terrance Smith ordered the second one down. They didn’t learn anything new. Contact was lost twenty-five seconds after it ploughed into the cloud.

“Static-charged vapour,” Terrance said in confusion. “Is that all?”

Oliver Llewelyn cancelled the datavise from *Gemal*’s flight computer. The bridge was dimly lit, every officer lying on an acceleration couch, eyes closed as they helped coordinate the fleet’s approach. “It reminds me of a gas giant’s rings,” the captain said. “Minute charged particles held together with a magnetic flux.”

“The blackhawks say there is no magnetic flux, only the standard planetary magnetic field,” Terrance corrected automatically. “Was there any sign of biological activity?” he asked the flight control officer on the *Cyanea*.

“No, sir,” she said. “No chemicals present either. Just water.”

“Then why is it glowing?”

“I don’t know, sir. There must be a light-source of some kind deeper inside, where the probes can’t reach.”

“What are you going to do?” Oliver Llewelyn asked.

“It’s a screen, a canopy; they’re covering up whatever they’re doing below. It’s not a weapon.”

“It might only be a screen. But it’s beyond our ability to create. You can’t commit your forces against a total unknown, and certainly not one of that magnitude. Standard military doctrine.”

“There are over twenty million people down there, including my friends. I can’t leave without at least making one attempt to find out what’s going on. Standard military doctrine is to scout first. That’s what we’ll do.” He drew a

breath, entering the newly formatted data from the probes into his neural nanonics and letting the tactics program draw up a minimum-risk strategy for physical evaluation of the planetary situation. "The combat scout teams go in as originally planned, although they land well clear of the red cloud. But I'm altering the search emphasis. Three teams into the Quallheim Counties to find the invader's landing site and base; that section of the mission hasn't changed. Then nine teams are to be distributed along the rest of the Juliffe tributaries to appraise the overall status of the population and engage targets of opportunity. And I want the last two teams to investigate Durringham's spaceport; they now have two objectives. One, find out if the McBoeing spaceplanes are still available to effect a landing for the general troops we're carrying in the *Gemal*. Secondly, I want them to access the records in the flight control centre and find out where the starships went. And why."

"Suppose they didn't go anywhere?" Oliver Llewelyn said. "Suppose Captain Calvert is right, and your invaders can just reach up and obliterate ships in orbit?"

"Then where is the wreckage? The blackhawks have catalogued every chunk of matter above the planet, there's nothing incongruous this side of Rennison's orbit."

Oliver Llewelyn showed him a morbid grin. "Lying in the jungle below that red cloud."

Terrance was becoming annoyed with the captain's constant cavils. "They were unarmed civil ships, we're not. And that makes a big difference." He put his head back down on the couch's cushioning, closed his eyes, and began to datavise the revised landing orders through the secure combat communication channels.

The fleet decelerated into a one-thousand-kilometre orbit, individual ships taking up different inclinations so that Amarisk was always covered by three of them. Repeated sweeps by the swarm of observation satellites had revealed no new information on ground conditions below the red

cloud. The six blackhawks rose up from their initial seven-hundred-kilometre orbit to join the rest of the starships, their crews quietly pleased at the extra distance between them and the uncanny aerial portent.

After one final orbit, alert for any attack from the invaders, the mercenary scout teams clambered into the waiting spaceplanes, and Terrance Smith gave the final go ahead to land. As each starship crossed into the umbra its spaceplane undocked and performed a retro-burn which pushed it onto an atmosphere interception trajectory. They reached the mesosphere nine thousand kilometres west of Amarisk and aerobraked over the nightside ocean, sending a multitude of hypersonic booms crashing down over the waves.

Brendon couldn't keep his attention away from the red cloud. He was piloting the spaceplane from the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, taking the six-strong mercenary scout team down to their designated drop zone a hundred kilometres east of Durringham. The cloud had been visible to the forward sensors when they were still six hundred kilometres offshore. From there it hadn't been so bad, a colossal meteorological marvel. Now though, up close, the sheer size was intimidating him badly. The thought that some entity had constructed it, deliberately built a lightway of water vapour in the sky, was acutely disconcerting. It hung twenty kilometres off the starboard wing, inert and immutable. Far ahead he could just see the first fork as it split to follow one of the tributaries. That more than anything betrayed its artificiality, the fact that it had intent.

As the spaceplane eased down level with it he could see the land underneath. Unbroken jungle, but dark, tinted a deep maroon.

"It's blocking a lot of light under there," said Chas Paske, the mercenary team's leader.

"Oui," Brendon agreed, without looking round. "The computer estimates it's about eight metres thick at the edge, getting thicker deeper in, though," he reported.

“Probably three or four hundred metres at the centre, over the river itself.”

“What about the electronic warfare field?”

“It’s there all right, I’m having some trouble with the flight control processors, and the communication channel is suffering from interference, the bit rate is way down.”

“As long as we can transmit the coordinates for the starships to bombard,” Chas Paske said. “That’s all we need.”

“*Oui*. Landing in three minutes.”

The spaceplane was approaching the natural clearing they had chosen. Brendon checked with the blackhawks, which were still supervising the observation. He was assured there was no human activity within at least two kilometres of the clearing.

Qualtook and baby gigantes ringed their allocated landing site. Inside them, burnt and broken stumps were still visible through the mantle of vines, evidence of the fire which had raged decades ago. The spaceplane nosed its way cautiously over the edge of the trees, as if afraid of what it might find. Birds took to the air in dismay at the huge predator shape and the clarion squealing it emitted. A radar pulse slashed across the ground, slicing straight through the vine leaves to uncover the extent of the stumps. Landing struts unfolded from the fuselage, and after a minute of jostling to avoid the more hazardous protrusions it settled gently on the ground, compressor nozzles blasting dusty fountains of dead leaves and twigs into the air.

Even as silence stole back into the clearing the outer airlock hatch was opening. Chas Paske led his team out. Five disc-shaped aerovettes swooped into the sky, rim-mounted sensors probing the encircling jungle for motion or infrared signatures.

The mercenaries began to unload their equipment from the open belly holds. They were all boosted, their appearance way outside the human norm. Chas Paske was bigger than any cosmonik, his synthetic skin the colour of

weather-worn stone. He didn't bother with clothes other than weapon belts and equipment straps.

"Hurry it up," Brendon said. "The jamming is getting worse, I can hardly get a signal through to the satellites."

Pods and cases began to accumulate on the battered carpet of vines. Chas was hauling down a portable zero-tau pod containing an affinity-bonded eagle when an aerovette datavised him that there was a movement among the trees. He picked up a gaussrifle. The aerovette was hovering a metre over the trees, providing him an image of heads bobbing about through the undergrowth. Nine of them, making no attempt to hide.

"Hey," a woman's voice shouted.

The mercenaries were fanning out, positioning the aerovettes to provide maximum coverage.

"The blackhawks said there was no one here," Chas Paske said. "For Christ's sake."

"It's the optical distortion," Brendon replied. "It's worse than we thought."

The woman emerged into the clearing. She shouted again and waved. More people came out of the trees behind her, women and a couple of boys in their early teens. All of them in dirty clothes.

"Thank God you're here," she said as she hurried over to Chas. "We waited and waited. It's terrible back there."

"Hold it," Chas said.

She didn't hear him, or ignored him. Looking down to pick her way over thick tangles of vines. "Take us away. Up to the starships, anywhere. But get us off this planet."

"Who the hell are you? Where do you come from?" At the back of his mind Chas thought how odd it was that his appearance didn't affect her. People normally showed at least some doubt when they saw his size and shape. This woman didn't.

His neural nanonics cautioned him that the gaussrifle's targeting processor was malfunctioning. "Stop," he belated when she was six metres away. "We can't take any

chances; you may have been sequestered. Now, where are you from?"

She jerked to a halt at the volume he poured into his voice. "We're from the village," she said, slightly breathless. "There's a whole group of them devils back there."

"Where?"

The woman took another pace forward and pointed over her shoulder. "There." Another step. "Please, you must help us." Her haggard face was imploring.

All five aerovettes fell out of the sky. The ground below Chas Paské's feet began to split open with a wet tearing sound, revealing a long fissure from which bright white light shone upwards. Neural nanonics overrode all natural human feelings of panic, enforcing a smooth threat response from his body. He jumped aside, landing beside the smiling woman. She hit him.

Terrance Smith had lost contact with three of the eleven spaceplanes which had landed, and the remaining three in the air were approaching the Quallheim Counties. The observation satellites were unable to provide much information on the fate of those that had been silenced, the images they produced of the drop zones were decaying by the minute. None of them had crashed, though, the blackout had come after they landed. Encouraged by his tactics program, which estimated forty per cent losses at the first landing attempt, Terrance assumed the worst, and contacted the last three spaceplanes.

"Change your principal drop zone to one of the backups," he ordered. "I want you to land at least a hundred and fifty kilometres from the red cloud."

"It's moving!" Oliver Llewelyn shouted as Terrance was receiving acknowledgements from the pilots.

"What is?"

"The red cloud."

Terrance opened a channel to the processor array which was correlating the observation satellite images. Whorls and curlicues were rippling along the edges of the red

bands, flat streamers, kilometres long, were shooting out horizontally, like solar prominences. The eerie symmetry of the velvet-textured clouds was rupturing, their albedo fluctuating as vast serpentine shadows skated erratically from side to side.

“It knows we’re here,” Oliver Llewelyn said. “We’ve agitated it.”

For one brutally nasty second Terrance Smith had the idea that the massive formation of forking cloud bands was alive, a gas-giant entity that had migrated across interplanetary space from Murora. Damn it, the thing did resemble the kind of convoluted storm braids which curled and clashed in week-long hostilities among the hydrogen and frozen ammonia crystals of gas-giant atmospheres. “Don’t be absurd,” he said. “Something is deliberately causing those disturbances. This may be our best chance yet to discover how they shape that thing. Get onto the blackhawk captains, I want every sensor we have available focused on it. There has to be some kind of energy modulation going on down there. Something has to register on some spectrum we’re covering.”

“Want to bet?” Oliver Llewelyn muttered under his breath. He was beginning to wish he had never agreed to fly the *Gemal* for Smith, and to hell with the legalities of refusing. Some things were more important than money, starting with his life. He grudgingly began datavising instructions round the blackhawks.

The communication links with another two spaceplanes dropped out. But three had landed their mercenary teams without incident and were already back in the air.

It is possible, Terrance told himself fiercely as the pearl-white specks soared to safety above the tangled tributary basin. We can find out what’s happening down there.

He observed the red cloud sending huge pseudostorm streamers boiling ferociously out across the jungle. A navigational graphics overlay revealed the position of the spaceplanes still on the ground. The largest swellings were heading for the landing zones with unerring accuracy.

"Come on," he urged them through clenched teeth. "Get up. Get out of there."

"Sensors report no energy perturbation of any kind," Oliver Llewelyn said.

"Impossible. It's being directed. What about the sensors the invaders used to track our spaceplanes, have we detected those?"

"No."

Five more spaceplanes were back in the air, streaking away from the grasping claws of red cloud. Two of them were ones they had lost contact with earlier. Terrance heard a cheer go round the *Gemal's* bridge, and added his own whoop of exhilaration.

Now the mission was starting to come together. With the combat scout teams on the ground they would have targets soon. They could start hitting back.

The last three spaceplanes landed in the Quallheim Counties. One of them was from the *Lady Macbeth*.

The *Villeneuve's Revenge* had the standard pyramid structure of four life-support capsules at its core. They were spherical, divided into three decks, with enough volume to make life for the crew of six very agreeable. Fifteen passengers could be accommodated with only a modest reduction in comfort. None of the six mercenaries they had brought to Lalonde had complained. The fittings, like the rest of the ship's systems, could be classed as passable with plenty of room for improvement, upgrading, or preferably complete replacement.

Erick Thakrar and Bev Lennon sailed headfirst through the ceiling hatch of the lounge deck above the spaceplane hangar. The compartment's surfaces were coated in a thin grey-green foam with stikpads at regular intervals, though most of them had lost their cohesiveness. Furniture was all lightweight composite that had been folded back neatly into alcoves, producing a floor made up of labelled squares, hexagons, and circles like some mismatched mosaic. Walls were principally storage lockers, broken by

hatchways into personal cabins, the red panels of emergency equipment cubicles, and inbuilt AV player blocks with their projector pillars. There was a watery vegetable smell in the air. Only two of the lightstrips were on. Several purple foil food wrappers were drifting through the air like lost aquatic creatures, with a couple more clamped against the roof grilles by the gentle air flow. A black flek was spinning idly. It all added up to lend the lounge a discarded appearance.

Erick slapped casually at the plastic-coated ladder stretching between floor and ceiling, angling for the floor hatch. His neural nanonics reported André Duchamp opening a direct communication channel.

“He’s docking now,” the captain datavised. “Or attempting to.”

“How is the communication link? Can you get anything from inside?”

“Nothing. It’s still a three per cent bit rate, just enough to correlate docking procedures. The processors must have been bollocksed up quite badly.”

Erick glanced over his shoulder at Bev, who shrugged. The two of them were armed; Bev with a neural jammer, Erick a laser pistol he hoped to God he wouldn’t have to use.

The spaceplane had emerged from the upper atmosphere and re-established contact with a weak signal from a malfunctioning reserve transmitter. Brendon claimed the craft had been subject to a ferocious electronic warfare attack which had decimated the on-board processors. They only had his word for it, the link had barely enough power to broadcast his message, a full-scale datavise to assess the internal electronic damage was impossible.

In view of the known sequestration ability of the invaders, André Duchamp wasn’t taking any chances.

“That *anglo* Smith should have anticipated this,” André grumbled. “We should have had an examination procedure set up.”

“Yes,” Erick agreed. He and Bev traded a grin.

“Typical of this bloody bodge-up mission,” André chuntered on. “If he wants proper advice he should have experienced people like me on his general staff, not that arsehole Llewelyn. I could have told him you need to be careful when it comes to sequestration. Fifty years of experience, that’s what I’ve got, that counts for a hell of a lot more than any neural nanonics tactics program. I’ve had every smartarse weapon in the Confederation thrown at me, and I’m still alive. And he goes and chooses a Celt who makes a living from flying the brain dead. *Merde!*”

Bev’s legs cleared the rim of the hatch into the lounge, and he datavisaged a codelock at it. The carbotanium hatch slid shut, its seal engaging with a solid clunk.

“Come on, then,” Erick said. He slipped through the floor hatch into the lower deck. His neural nanonics provided him with an image from the starship’s external sensor clusters. The spaceplane was floundering, just metres away from the hull. Without a full navigational datalink, Brendon was having a great deal of trouble inserting the spaceplane’s nose into the hangar’s docking collar. Novice pilots could do better, Erick thought, wincing as reaction-control thrusters fired hard, seconds before the radar dome tip scraped the hull. “Ye gods. We might not have anything left to inspect at this rate.”

The lower deck was severely cramped, comprising an engineering shop for medium-sized electromechanical components, a smaller workshop for electronic repairs, two airlocks, one for the spaceplane hangar, one for EVA work, storage bins, and space armour lockers. Its walls were naked titanium, netted with conduits and pipes.

“Collar engaged,” André said. “Madeleine is bringing him in now.”

The whine of actuators carried faintly through the starship’s stress structure into the lower deck. Erick accessed a camera in the hangar, and saw the spaceplane being pulled into the cylindrical chamber. A moth crawling back inside a silver chrysalis. The retracted wings had a clearance measured in centimetres.

He datavised orders into the hangar systems processors. When the spaceplane came to rest, power lines, coolant hoses, and optical cables plugged into umbilical sockets around its fuselage.

“There’s very little data coming out,” Erick said, scanning the docking operations console holoscreen to see the preliminary results of the diagnostic checks. “I can’t get any internal sensors to respond.”

“Is that the processors or the sensors themselves which are malfunctioning?” André asked.

“Difficult to tell,” Bev said, hanging from a grab hoop behind Erick to look over his shoulder. “Only ten per cent of the internal databuses are operational, we can’t access the cabin management processors to see where the fault lies. God knows how Brendon ever piloted that thing up here. He’s missing half of his control systems.”

“Brendon is the best,” Madeleine Collun said.

The console’s AV pillar bleeped, showing a single communication circuit was open from the spaceplane. Audio only.

“Anyone out there?” Brendon asked. “Or have you all bugged off to lunch?”

“We’re here, Brendon,” Erick said. “What’s your situation?”

“The atmosphere is really bad, total life-support failure as far as I can make out . . . I’m gulping oxygen from an emergency helmet . . . Get that airlock connected now . . . This is killing my lungs . . . I can smell some kind of plastic burning . . . Acid gas . . .”

“I can’t cycle the cabin atmosphere for him,” Erick datavised to André. “Our pumps are working and the hose seals are confirmed, but the spaceplane pressure valves won’t open, there’s no environmental circuit.”

“Get him into the airlock, then,” André said. “But don’t let him into the life-support cabin, not yet.”

“Aye, aye.”

“Come on!” Brendon shouted.

“On our way, Brendon.”

Bev ordered the airlock tube to extend. The spaceplane's fuselage shield panel slid back to reveal the circular airlock hatch below.

"Lucky that worked," Erick muttered.

Bev was staring into the AV pillar's projection, watching the airlock tube seal itself to the hatch rim. "It's a simple power circuit. Nothing delicate about that."

"But there's still a supervising processor— Hell." Environment sensors inside the airlock tube were picking up traces of toxic gases as the spaceplane's hatch swung open. The console holoscreen switched to a camera inside the metal tube. A curtain of thin blue smoke was wafting out of the hatch. A flickering green light shone inside the cabin. Brendon appeared, pulling himself along a line of closely spaced grab hoops. His yellow ship's one-piece was smeared with dirt and soot. The copper-mirror visor of the shell-helmet he was wearing covered his face, it was connected to a portable life-support case.

"Why didn't he put his spacesuit on?" Erick asked.

Brendon waved at the camera. "God, thanks, I couldn't have lasted much longer. Hey, you haven't opened the hatch."

"Brendon, we have to take precautions," Bev said. "We know the invaders can sequestrate people."

"Oh, sure, yes. One moment." He started coughing.

Erick checked the environmental readings again. Fumes were still pouring out of the spaceplane cabin; the airlock tube filters could barely cope.

Brendon opened his visor. His face was deathly white, sweating heavily. He coughed again, flinching at the pain.

"Christ," Erick muttered. "Brendon, datavise a physiological reading please."

"Oh God it hurts." Brendon coughed again, a hoarse croaking sound.

"We've got to get him out," Bev said.

"I don't get any response from his neural nanonics," Erick said. "I'm trying to datavise them through the airlock

tube's processor but there isn't even a carrier code acknowledgement."

"Erick, he's in trouble!"

"We don't know that!"

"Look at him."

"Look at Lalonde. They can build rivers of light in the sky. Faking up one injured crewman isn't going to tax them."

"For God's sake." Bev stared at the holoscreen. Brendon was juddering, one hand holding a grab loop as he vomited. Sallow globules of fluid burped out of his mouth, splashing and sticking to the dull-silver wall of the tube opposite.

"We don't even know if he's alone," Erick said. "The hatch into the spaceplane isn't shut. It won't respond to my orders. I can't even shut it, let alone codelock it."

"Captain," Bev datavised. "We can't just leave him in there."

"Erick is quite right," André replied regretfully. "This whole incident is highly suspicious. It is convenient for somebody who wants to get inside the ship. Too convenient."

"He's dying!"

"You may not enter the airlock while the hatch into the spaceplane remains open."

Bev looked round the utilitarian lower deck in desperation. "All right. How about this? Erick goes up into the lounge and codelocks that hatch behind him, leaving me in here. That way I can take a medical nanonic in to Brendon, and I can check out the spaceplane cabin to make sure there aren't any xenoc invaders on board."

"Erick?" André asked.

"I've no objection."

"Very well. Do it."

Erick swam up into the empty lounge, and poised himself on the ladder. Bev's face was framed by the floor hatch, grinning up at him. "Good luck," Erick said. He

datavised a codelock at the hatch's seal processor, then turned the manual fail-safe handle ninety degrees.

Bev twisted round as soon as the carbotanium square closed. He pulled a medical nanonic package from a first aid case on the wall. "Hold on, Brendon. I'm coming in." Red environmental warning lights were flashing on the panel beside the circular airlock tube hatch. Bev datavised his override authority into the management processor, and the hatch began to swing back.

Erick opened a channel into the lounge's communication net processor, and accessed the lower deck cameras. He watched Bev screw up his face as the fumes blew out of the open hatchway. Emerald green light flared out of the spaceplane's cabin, sending a thick, blindingly intense beam searing along the airlock tube to wash the lower deck. Caught full square, Bev yelled, his hands coming up instinctively to cover his eyes. A ragged stream of raw white energy shot along the centre of the green light, smashing into him.

The camera failed.

"Bev!" Erick shouted. He sent a stream of instructions into the processor. A visualization of the lower deck's systems materialized, a ghostly reticulation of coloured lines and blinking symbols.

"Erick, what's happening?" André demanded.

"They're in! They're in the fucking ship. Codelock all the hatches now. Now, God damn it!"

The schematic's coloured lines were vanishing one by one. Erick stared wildly at the floor, as if he could see what was happening through the metal decking. Then the lounge lights went out.

"Five minutes until we land at our new drop zone, and the tension in the cabin is really starting to bite," Kelly Tirrel subvocalized into a neural nanonics memory cell. "We know something has happened to at least five other spaceplanes. What everyone is now asking themselves is, will the extra

distance protect us? Do the invaders only operate below their protective covering of red cloud?"

She accessed the spaceplane's sensors to observe the magnificent, monstrous spectacle again. Thousand-kilometre-long bands of glowing red nothingness suspended in the air. Astounding. This far inland they were slim and complex, interwoven like the web of a drunken spider above the convoluted tributaries. When she had seen them from orbit, calm and regular, they had intimidated her; up close and churning like this they were just plain frightening.

Coiling belts were edge-on with the starboard wing, growing larger as they spun through the sky towards the spaceplane. It was an excellent image, a little bit too realistic for peace of mind. But then the spaceplane's sensor array was all military-grade. Long streamlined recesses on both sides of the fuselage belly were now holding tapering cylindrical weapons pods—maser cannons providing a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree cover, an electronic warfare suite, and a stealth envelope. They weren't quite an assault fighter, but neither were they a sitting duck like some of the spaceplanes.

Typical that Joshua would have a multi-role spaceplane. No! Thank God Joshua had a multi-role spaceplane.

Forty minutes into the descent, and already she missed him. You're so weak, she swore at herself.

Kelly was starting to have serious second thoughts about the whole assignment. Like all war correspondents, she supposed. Being on the ground was very different to sitting in the office anticipating being on the ground. Especially with the appearance of that red cloud.

The seven mercenaries had discussed that appearance ad nauseam the whole way in from the emergence point. Reza Malin, the team's leader, had seemed almost excited by the prospect of venturing below it. Such adverse circumstances were a challenge, he said. Something new.

She had taken time to get to know all of them reasonably well. So she knew what Reza said wasn't simple bravado.

He had been a Confederation Navy Marine at one time. An officer, she guessed; he wasn't very forthcoming about that period of his life, nor subsequent contracts as a marshal on various stage one colony planets. But he must have been good at the second oldest profession, money in large quantities had paid for a considerable number of physical enhancements and alterations. Now he was one of the elite. Like a cosmonik, blurring the line between machine and human. The kind of hyper-boosted composite the mundane troops stored in zero-tau on the *Gemal* aspired to become.

Reza Malin retained a basic humanoid shape, although he was now two metres tall, and proportionally broad. His skin was artificial, a tough neutral grey-blue impact-resistant composite with a built-in chameleon layer. He didn't bother with clothes any more, and there were no genitalia (rather, no external genitalia, Kelly recorded faithfully). Cybernetic six-finger claws replaced his natural hands. Both forearms were wide, with integral small-calibre gaussrifles, his skeleton rigged to absorb recoil. Like Warlow, his face was incapable of expression. Black glass bubble-shields covered both eyes; the nose was now a flat circular intake which could filter chemical and biological agents. The back and sides of his bald skull were studded with a row of five sensor implants, smooth centimetre-wide ulcerlike bulges.

Despite the lack of expression, she learned a lot from his voice, which was still natural. Reza wasn't easily flustered. That and a civilized competence, the way the other six followed his orders without question, gave her more confidence than she would otherwise have had in the scouting mission. In the final analysis, she realized, she trusted him with her life.

The spaceplane banked sharply. Kelly was aware of Ashly Hanson focusing the optical sensors on a small river three kilometres below. The silvery water had a curious speckling of white dots.

"What does he think he's doing?" Pat Halahan asked. The team's second in command was sitting in the seat next

to her. A ranger-scout, as he described himself, slimmer and smaller than Reza, but with the same blue-grey skin, and powerful adipose legs. Each forearm had twin wrists, one for ordinary hands, one a power data socket for plug-ins—weapons or sensors. His senses were all enhanced, with a raised rim of flesh running from the corner of his eyes right around the back of his skull.

“Hey, what’s happening, Ashly?” he called out. Electronic warfare was a thought all the mercenaries were sharing.

“I’m going to land us here,” Ashly said.

“Any particular reason?” Reza Malin asked with quiet authoritativeness. “The surveyed back-up landing site is another seventy kilometres south-east.”

“Listen, anyone who can create that damn cloud can intercept our communications without even trying. They’ll have every site Terrance Smith ever reviewed marked in a big red circle that says ‘hit this’.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Smart man,” Pat Halahan muttered to Kelly. “I wish we’d had him on the Camelot operation. Lost a lot of good people because the general hired too many virgins.”

“Go ahead,” Reza said.

“Thank you,” Ashly sang back. The spaceplane dived steeply, spiralling at an angle which sent Kelly’s stomach pressing up against her collar bones. “Are you quite sure you want to land?” the pilot asked. “You ask me, we’re in way over our heads. Terrance Smith couldn’t organize a gang-bang in a brothel.”

“If Smith is going to beat the invaders, the starships have to know where to hit them,” Reza said. “For that you need us. We always go in at the shit end. It’s what we’re good at.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Don’t worry about us. Ultra-tech never works well in jungle terrain, nature is just too damn messy. And I don’t think I’ve seen many jungles worse than this one. They can probably swat us with some energy blast, even lob a baby-

nuke on us if they're feeling particularly bitchy. But they've got to find us first. And rooting us out of that forest wilderness is going to be tricky, I'll make bloody sure of that. You just make sure you and young Joshua stay intact to pick us up afterwards."

"If I'm alive, I'll pick you up."

"Good, I'll hold you to that."

The spaceplane's yaw angle reversed as it performed an abrupt roll. Kelly clung to the armrests with white knuckles as the webbing shifted its hold around her body. This wasn't a clean aerodynamic dive, it was a death plummet.

"How you doing, Kell?" Sewell shouted, sounding hugely amused. Sewell was one of the team's three combat-adept types, and looked it. Standing two metres thirty, his leathery skin matt-black, and woven through with a web of energy absorption/dispersal fibres. His head was virtually globular, a glossy shell that protected his sensors, sitting on a short neck. Trunklike upper arms supported dual elbows; he had attached heavy-calibre gaussrifles to the top joints.

Chuckles went round the cabin. Kelly realized her eyes were tight shut, and forced herself to open them. The spaceplane was shaking.

"You should eat, take your mind off it," Sewell crowed. "I've got some big gooey slices of strawberry creamcake in my pack. Want some?"

"When you were boosted, the doctors wired your neural nanonics to your liver," she said. "It was one fuck of a lot smarter than your brain, bollockhead."

Sewell laughed.

A judder ran through the cabin as the wings began to sweep out.

"Irradiate the drop zone, Ashly, please," Reza said.

"Affirmative."

"There might be civilians down there," protested Sal Yong, another of the combat-adepts.

"Doubt it," Ashly said. "The nearest village is fifty kilometres away."

"We're not on a Red Cross mission, Sal," Reza said.

"Yes, sir."

The spaceplane twisted again.

Great swaths of maser radiation poured out of the unblemished sky around the small shallow river. Hundreds of birds dropped to the ground or splashed into the water, charred feathers smoking; vennals tumbled from the trees, limbs still twitching; sayce howled briefly as their hides wizened and cracked, then died as their brains broke apart from the intense heat; danderil nibbling at the vegetation collapsed, their long elegant legs buckling as their viscera boiled. The verdant emerald leaves of the trees and vines turned a darker, bruised shade of green. Flowers shrivelled up. Berries and fruit burst open in puffs of steam.

The spaceplane came down fast and level. It actually landed in the river, undercarriage struts crushing the stony bed, nose jutting over the grassy bank. Steam and spray erupted from the water as it was struck by the compressor jets, sending a large circular wave sloshing outwards over the bank.

Sewell and Jalal were first out, the two big combat-adept mercenaries didn't wait for the aluminium airlock stairs to extend. They jumped down into the lathery water, covering the quiet wilting trees with their gaussrifles, and sprinted ashore. The half-metre depth didn't even slow them down.

Reza released a couple of aerovettes, ordering them to scan the immediate jungle. The stealthed, disc-shaped aerial combat robots were a metre and a half wide, their central section a curving mesh-grid to protect the wide-cord contra-rotating fans in the middle. Five infrared lasers were mounted around their rim, along with a broad passive-sensor array. They hummed softly and slipped through the air, climbing up to traverse the top of the nearby trees.

Pat Halahan and Theo Connal were second to emerge, following the first two mercenaries ashore. Theo Connal had a short body, one and a half metres tall, boosted for jungle roving. His skin was the same tough chameleon envelope as Reza and Pat, but his legs and arms were dispro-

portionately long. Both feet were equipped with fingers instead of toes. He walked with an apeish stoop. Even his bald head portrayed simian characteristics, with a tiny button nose, squashed circle mouth, and slanted eyes, heavily lidded.

He activated the chameleon circuit when he landed in the water, and scrambled up the shallow incline of the bank. Only a faint mauve optical shimmer betrayed his silhouette. As soon as he reached a tree he seemed to embrace it, then levitated, spiralling round the trunk. At which point the spaceplane sensors lost him, even the infrared.

“My God,” Kelly said. She had wondered why Reza had included someone as basically harmless-looking as Theo on the team. A small buzz of excitement began in her belly. This kind of flawless professionalism was darkly enticing; it was easy to see how combat missions became so narcotic.

Another pair of aerovettes skimmed off over the trees.

Sal Yong and Ariadne, the second ranger, came down the airlock steps. Ariadne was the only other female on the team, although her gender was obscured like all the others. There was very little difference between her and Pat, maybe lacking just a few centimetres in height, and her sensor band was broader.

“Now or never, Kelly,” Reza said.

“Oh, now,” she said, and stood up. “Definitely.” The visor of her shell-helmet slid down. Collins had given her carte blanche on selecting her equipment back in Tranquility, so she had asked for Reza’s advice and bought what he suggested. After all, it was in his own interest not to have a liability tramping through the jungle with the scout team. “Keep it simple, and make it the best,” he’d said. “You’re not combat trained, so all you have to do is keep up with us and stay undetected.”

“I can load combat programs into my neural nanonics,” she’d offered generously.

Reza simply laughed.

She had wound up with a one-piece suit of rubbery

body-armour, produced in the New Californian system, that would protect her from a modest level of attack from both projectile and energy beam weapons. Reza had taken her to an armourer who serviced mercenary equipment, and had a chameleon layer added.

More aerovettes whirred overhead as she hurried down the airlock steps into the river. Steam hung in the air. She was glad of the shell-helmet's air filters, cremated birds bobbed around her ankles.

Pat Halahan and Jalal were unloading the gear from the forward cargo hold.

"Help them," Reza ordered Kelly. He was wading through the shallows, carrying some composite containers. A nylon harness held a black metallic sphere about twenty centimetres in diameter to his right side, just above his equipment belt. Kelly wondered what it was, her neural nanonics couldn't identify it, there were no visible features to assist the search and comparison program. None of the other mercenaries had one. She knew this wasn't the time to ask.

The spaceplane's steps were already folding back into the fuselage. She set to, stacking the metal cases and composite containers on the muddy grass of the bank.

Reza and Pat carried a trunk-sized zero-tau pod ashore. The black negating surface evaporated to reveal a white plastic cylinder. It split open, and a mahogany-coloured geneered hound lumbered out. Kelly thought its fangs could probably cut through her armour suit.

Reza knelt down beside the big beast and ruffled its head fondly with his hand. "Hello, Fenton. How are you, boy?"

Fenton yawned, pink tongue hanging limply between his front fangs.

"Go have a look round for me. Go on."

Reza patted his hindquarters as he rose. Fenton swung his neolithic head round to give his master a slightly maligning look, but trotted off obediently into the undergrowth.

Kelly had been standing perfectly still. "He's well trained," she said vaguely.

"He's well bonded," Reza replied. "I have affinity neuron symbionts fitted."

"Ah."

Pat and Jalal were wading ashore with a second zero-tau pod.

"*Adieux*," Ashly datavised.

The spaceplane lifted with a brassy shriek. Vigorous geysers of water sprouted under the compressor nozzles, splashing up against the carbotanium fuselage. Then it was above the trees, undercarriage folding up, and the geysers withering away to white-foam ripples.

Kelly tracked her shell-helmet sensors round the forbidding wall of water-basted jungle. Oh, crap, I'm committed now.

She watched the spaceplane pitch up nearly to the vertical and accelerate away into the eastern sky at high speed. Her neural nanonics said they had landed less than three minutes ago.

The explosion was large enough for the *Gemal's* ordinary sensor clusters to pick it up as the starship fell into the planet's umbra, leaving Amarisk behind. For the vastly more sensitive observation satellites in low orbit it registered as a savage multi-spectrum glare, overloading some scanners.

Terrance Smith's neural nanonics informed him it was the spaceplane from the blackhawk *Cyanea*, which had been landing a scout team in the Quallheim Counties. It had been on the ground when the blast happened. "What the hell did that?" he demanded.

"No idea," Oliver Llewelyn replied.

"Shit. It was over seventy kilometres from the nearest piece of red cloud. Did the scout team get clear?"

"No response from any of their personal communicator blocks," one of the bridge's communication officers reported.

"Bugger." His neural nanonics' strategic display showed

him the remaining four spaceplanes climbing into orbit. Seven more had already docked with their parent starships. Two were manoeuvring for a rendezvous.

“Do you want to divert a spaceplane for a rescue?” Oliver asked.

“Not without confirmation that someone is alive down there. It was a hell of an explosion. The electron matrices must have shorted out.”

“Neat trick if you can do it,” Oliver said. “They have a lot of safeguards built in.”

“Do you suppose that electronic warfare—”

“Sir, message from the *Villeneuve’s Revenge*,” the communications officer said. “Captain Duchamp says the invaders have boarded his ship.”

“What?”

“That was one of the spaceplanes we lost contact with,” Oliver said.

“You mean they’re up in orbit?” Terrance asked.

“Looks like it.”

“Christ.” He datavised the processor managing the command communication channels, ready to issue a general alert. But his neural nanonics informed him a couple of starships were leaving their assigned orbital slots. When he requested the strategic display it showed him *Datura* and *Gramine* under acceleration, rising out of the thousand-kilometre orbit. His fist hit the acceleration couch cushioning. “What is happening?”

“The spaceplanes from both the *Datura* and *Gramine* experienced communication difficulties,” Oliver said in a strained voice. He glanced over at Terrance Smith. The ordinarily prim bureaucrat looked haunted.

“Cut them out of our communication net,” Terrance ordered. “Now. I don’t want them to access our observation satellite data.”

“They’re running,” Oliver said. “They must be heading for a jump coordinate.”

“Not my problem.”

“The hell it isn’t. If they are xenocs, you’ll be letting them loose in the Confederation.”

“If they have the technology to put together that cloud, they already have bloody starships. My concern and mission is Lalonde. I’m not sending the blackhawks to intercept them, we don’t have the numbers to send ships off on wild-goose chases.”

“Their drives aren’t right,” Oliver said. “They aren’t burning the fuel cleanly. Look at the spectroscopic analysis.”

“Not now, fuck it!” Terrance shouted. He glared at Oliver. “Contribute something positive or shut up.” His neural nanonics linked him in to the communication processor, opening direct channels to the remaining starships. “This is an emergency warning,” he datavised. Even as the painful phrase emerged, he wondered how many listeners were still under his command.

The *Lady Macbeth*’s bridge was completely silent as Terrance Smith’s voice came out of the AV pillars.

“Oh, Jesus,” Joshua moaned. “This is all we need.”

“It looks like *Datura* and *Gramine* are preparing to jump,” Sarha said. “Sensor clusters and thermo-dump panels are retracting.” She frowned. “Most of them, anyway. Their thrust is very erratic. They should be above the five-thousand-kilometre gravity-field boundary in another four minutes.”

“This invasion force is too big, isn’t it,” Joshua said. “We’re not going to save Lalonde, not with what we’ve got.”

“Looks that way,” Dahybi said in a subdued tone.

“Right then.” Joshua’s mind was immediately full of trajectory graphics. A whole range of possible jump coordinates to nearby inhabited star systems popped up.

You’ll be abandoning Kelly, a voice in his head said.

It’s her choice.

But she didn’t know what was happening.

He instructed the flight computer to retract the thermo-

dump panels. Fully extended, the panels couldn't withstand high-gee acceleration. And if he was going to run, he wanted to do it fast.

"As soon as Ashly returns we're leaving," he announced.

"What about the merc team?" Warlow asked. "They are dependent on us knocking out the invader's bases."

"They knew the risks."

"Kelly is with them."

Joshua's mouth tightened into a hard line. The crew were looking at him with a mixture of sympathy and concern.

"I'm thinking of you, too," he said. "The invaders are coming up here after us. I can't order you to stay in these circumstances. Jesus, we gave it our best shot. There isn't going to be any mayope again. That's all we ever really came for."

"We can make one attempt to pick them up," Sarha said. "One more orbit. A hundred minutes isn't going to make much difference."

"And who's going to tell Ashly he has to go down there again? The invaders will know he's coming down for a pick-up."

"I'll pilot the spaceplane down," Melvyn said. "If Ashly doesn't want to."

"She's my friend," Joshua said. "And it's my spaceplane."

"If there's any trouble in orbit, then we'll need you, Joshua," Dahybi said. The slightly built node specialist was uncharacteristically firm. "You're the best captain I've ever known."

"This is both melodramatic and unnecessary," Warlow said. "You all know that Ashly will pilot it."

"Yes," Joshua said.

"Joshua!" Melvyn shouted.

But Joshua's neural nanonics were already feeding him an alarm. The gravitonic distortion warning satellites were recording nine large gaps in space being forcibly opened.

Thirty-five thousand kilometres above Lalonde, the voidhawks from Meredith Saldana's 7th Fleet squadron had arrived.

An electronic warfare technique that can knock out power circuits as well as processors? What the hell have we come up against?

A single gleam of bright pale green light shone up into the lounge through the inspection window in the middle of the floor hatch. There was movement below.

"Erick, what's happening?" André Duchamp datavised.

The channel to the lounge's net processor was thick with interference. Erick's neural nanonics had to run a discriminator program to make any sense of the captain's signal.

"We're getting power drop-outs all over the ship!" Madeleine called.

Erick pushed off from the ladder, and grasped the floor hatch's handle to steady himself. Very gingerly he edged his face over the fifteen centimetre diameter window and directly into the beam of light. A second later he was airborne, arms and legs cycling madly as a twisted shout burst from his lips. He hit the ceiling. Bounced. Grabbed at the ladder as his body spasmed in reaction.

Erick had looked into hell. It was occupied by goblin-esque figures with hideous bone faces, long, reedy limbs, large arthritis-knobbed hands. They dressed in leather harnesses sewn together with gold rings. A dozen at least, boiling out of the airlock tube. Grinning with tiny pointed teeth.

Three of them had clung to Bev, yellow talon fingers slashing rents in his ship-suit. His head had been flung back, mouth open in black horror as the abdominal gashes spewed entrail strands of translucent turquoise jelly. And suicide-terror shone in his eyes.

"Did you see that?" Erick wailed.

"See what? *Merde!* The net is screwed, our databuses are glitched. I'm losing all control."

"Dear God, they're xenocs. They're fucking xenocs!"

“Erick, *enfant*, dear child, calm down.”

“They’re killing him! They love it!”

“Calm! You are an officer on my ship. Now calm. Report!”

“There’s twelve—fifteen of them. Humanoid. They’ve got Bev. Oh, God, they’re chopping him to pieces.” Erick shifted a stored sedative program into primary mode, and immediately felt his breathing regularize. It seemed heartless, callous even, wrapping Bev’s suffering away behind an artificial cliff of binary digits. But he needed to be calm. Bev would understand.

“Are they heavily armed?” André asked.

“No. No visible weapons. But they must have something in the spaceplane, that light I saw—”

All six electronically operated bolts on the floor hatch thudded back together. The metallic bang rang clear across the lounge.

“God . . . André, they just cracked the hatch’s codelock.” He stared at it, expecting the manual bolts to slide open.

“But none of the systems processors are working in that capsule!”

“I know that! But they cracked it!”

“Can you get out of the lounge?”

Erick turned to the ceiling hatch and datavised the code at it. The bolts remained stubbornly in place. “The hatch won’t respond.”

“Yet they can open it,” André said.

“We can cut through it,” Desmond Lafoe suggested.

“Our hatches and the capsule decking have a monobonded carbon layer sandwiched in,” Erick replied. “You’d never get a fission blade through that stuff.”

“I can use a laser.”

“That will allow them into the other capsules, and the bridge,” André said. “I cannot permit that.”

“Erick’s trapped in there.”

“They will not take my ship.”

“André—” Madeleine said.

“*Non*. Madeleine, Desmond, both of you into the

lifeboats. I will stay. Erick, I am so sorry. But you understand. This is my ship.”

Erick thumped the ladder, grazing his knuckles. This life-support capsule’s lifeboats were accessed from the lower deck. “Sure.” You murdering pirate bastard. What the fuck do you know about honour?

Someone started hammering on the floor hatch.

They’ll be through soon, Erick thought, monobonded carbon or not. Count on it.

“Call Smith for help,” Desmond said. “Hell, he’s got five thousand troops on the *Gemal*, armed and itching to kill.”

“It will take time.”

“You got an alternative?”

Erick looked round the lounge, inventorying everything in sight—cabins, lockers filled with food and clothes, emergency equipment cubicles. All he had was a laser pistol.

Think!

Open the floor hatch and pick them off one at a time as they come through?

He aimed the laser at a cabin door, and pressed the trigger stud. A weak pink beam stabbed out, then flickered and died. Several small blisters popped and crackled where it had struck the composite.

“Bloody typical,” he said out loud.

Look round again. Come on, there must be something. Those dreary months spent on CNIS initiative courses. Adapt, improvise. Do something.

Erick dived across the intervening space to a wall of lockers, catching a grab loop expertly. There wasn’t much in the emergency cubicle: medical nanonics, pressure patches, tools, oxygen bottles and masks, torch, processor blocks with ship’s systems repair instructions, fire extinguishers, hand-held thermal sensor. No spacesuit.

“Nobody said it was going to be easy.”

“Erick?” André asked. “What is happening?”

“Got an idea.”

“Erick, I have spoken with Smith. Several other ships have been hijacked. He is taking some of his troops out of zero-tau, but it will be at least another thirty minutes before anyone can rendezvous with us.”

The lounge was getting lighter. When Erick looked over his shoulder he saw a ring of small hemispherical blue flames chewing at a patch of the hard grey-green foam on the floor decking. Little twisters of smoke writhed out from the edge. When a circle of titanium roughly a metre in diameter had been exposed it began to glow a dull orange. “No good, Captain. They’re coming through the decking, some sort of thermal field. We haven’t got five minutes.”

“Bastards.”

Erick opened the tool-box, and took out a fission-blade knife. Please, he prayed. The blade shone a cool lemon when he thumbed the actuator. “Sweet Jesus, thank you.”

He flew cleanly through the air. A stikpad anchored him near the middle of the ceiling. He pushed the fission blade into the reinforced composite conditioning duct, and started to saw a circle about thirty centimetres wide.

“Madeleine? Desmond?” he datavised. “Are you in spacesuits yet?”

“Yes,” Desmond replied.

“You want to do me a *real* big favour?”

“Erick, they cannot stay on board,” André warned.

“What do you want, Erick?” Desmond asked.

“Hauling out of here. Soon.”

“I forbid it,” André said.

“Stuff you,” Desmond retorted. “I’m coming down, Erick. You may count on me, you know you can.”

“Desmond, if they break into the lounge I will scuttle the ship,” André datavised. “I must do it before they glitch the flight computer.”

“I know. My risk,” Desmond replied.

“Wait to see if they break out of the lounge first,” Erick said. “That’ll give Desmond a chance to get clear if this doesn’t work.”

There was no answer.

“You owe me that! I’m trying to save your ship, damn you.”

“*Oui, d’accord.* If they get out of the lounge.”

The yellow patch on the floor had turned white. It started to hiss, bulging up in the centre, rising into a metre-high spike of light. A ball of fire dripped off the end, gliding up to hit the ceiling where it broke into a cluster of smaller globes that darted outwards.

Erick ducked as several rushed past. He finished cutting a second circle out of the duct and moved along.

Another ball of fire dripped off the spike. Then another. The patch was spreading out over the floor decking, scorching away more of the foam.

“I’m by the hatch, Erick,” Desmond datavised.

The empty lounge was awl with small beads of white fire. They had stung Erick several times now, vicious skewers of pain that charred out a centimetre-wide crater of skin. He glanced at the ceiling hatch’s inspection window to see the sensor-studded collar of an SII spacesuit pressed against it, and waved.

Erick had cut eight holes in the duct when he heard a shrill creaking sound rise above the hiss. When he glanced down he saw the floor decking itself had started to distend. The metal was cherry red, swelling and distorting like a cancerous volcano.

He watched, mesmerized, as the top burst open.

“Erick,” a voice called out of the rent. “Let us out, Erick. Don’t make it hard on yourself. It’s not you we want.”

The triangular rips of radiant metal began to curl back like petals opening to greet the dawn. Shapes scuttled about in the gloom below.

Erick kicked away from the stikpad that was holding him to the ceiling. He landed beside the floor hatch.

“We want the ship, Erick, not you. You can go in peace. We promise.”

A big bloodshot eye with a dark green iris was looking

at him through the floor hatch's inspection window. It blinked, and the lounge lights came back on.

Erick gipped the manual lock handle, twisted it ninety degrees, and pulled up.

The possessed came up through the open hatch, cautiously at first, glancing round the sweltering smoky lounge with wide eyes. Their skin was as white as bleached bone, stretched tight over long wiry muscles. Oily black hair floated limply. They started to advance towards him, grinning and chittering.

"Erick," they cooed and giggled. "Erick, our friend. So kind to let us in when we knocked."

"Yeah, that's me," Erick said. He had positioned himself beside one of the cabin doors, a silicon-fibre strap round his waist tethering him to a grab hoop. Level with his shoulder, the environment control panel's cover swung free. Erick's right hand rested on a fat red lever inside. "Your friend."

"Come with us," the one in front said as they floated sedately towards him. "Come join us."

"I don't think so." Erick yanked the atmosphere-vent lever down.

The vent system on board a starship was included as a last resort to extinguish fire. It dumped the affected life-support capsule's air straight out of the hull, cutting off oxygen to the flames and killing them dead. And because of the danger a fire represented inside the confined cabin space of a starship, the vent was designed to be quick acting, evacuating an entire deck within a minute.

"NO!" The leader of the possessed screamed in fury and panic. His hands were flung forwards towards Erick in a futile belated attempt to stop the lever clicking home. Spears of white fire arced out of his fingertips.

The panel, its lever, the circuitry behind, Erick's hand, and a half metre circle of wall composite flamed into ruin. Molten metal and a fount of incendiary composite blasted outwards.

Erick cried out in agony as his entire right arm was

flayed down to the bone. His neural nanonics responded instantly, erecting an analgesic block. But the shock was too much, he lurched away from consciousness, only to have stimulant programs bully him back. Menus and medical physiological schematics appeared inside his dazed fragile mind. Options flashed in red. Demands for drugs and treatments to be administered at once. And a single constant pressure alarm.

The very air itself howled like a tormented banshee in its rush to escape from the lounge. Thin, layered sheets of smoke drifting around the ruddy cone torn in the floor condensed to form airborne whirlpools underneath the five ceiling grilles. They spun at a fantastic rate, betraying the speed of the air molecules as they were sucked into the duct.

The possessed were in turmoil, clinging desperately at grab hoops and each other, their assumed shapes withering like glitched AV projections to reveal ordinary bodies underneath. All of them were buffeted savagely by the tempest force drawing them inexorably towards the ceiling. One flew up through the hatch from the lower deck, curving helplessly through the air to slam against a ceiling grille. Suction held him there, squirming in pain.

Another lost hold of a grab hoop, to be sucked backwards up to a grille. Both of them tried to push their way off, only to find it was impossible. The strength that the external vacuum exerted was tremendous. They could feel themselves being pulled through the narrow metal bands of the grille. Sharp edges cut their clothes and began shredding the flesh underneath. Ripples of blue and red energy shimmered around their bodies for a short time, delaying the inevitable; but the exertion proved too much, and the ghostlight quickly faded. The bands of metal sawed down to their ribs. Strips of lacerated flesh were torn off. Blood burst free from a hundred broken veins and arteries, foaming away down the conduit. Organs started to swell through the gaps between the ribs.

Erick activated the Confederation Navy's emergency

vacuum-survival program stored in his neural nanonics. His heart began to slow; muscles and organs were shut down, reducing the amount of oxygen they took from his blood, extending the time which the brain could be kept alive. He hung inertly from the strap fastening him to the wall, limbs pulled towards the ceiling. The charred remnant of his right hand broke off and smacked against a grille.

Blood oozed from the blackened meat of his upper arm.

Scraps of paper, clothing, tools, miscellaneous litter, and personal items from the cabins and lower deck plunged through the lounge to crash into the grilles. There might have been enough material to block them, at least long enough for the possessed to rally and try and shut down the vent or retreat back into the spaceplane. But the extra holes Erick had cut into the duct allowed an unrestricted flow of smaller articles into space. Tattered ribbons of water from the shower and taps in the bathroom poured through the open door to streak through the nearest hole.

The uproarious torrent of air began to abate.

Through pain-hazed eyes, Erick had watched the group's leader turn from semi-naked ogre to a podgy forty-year-old man in dungarees as the micro-storm raged. He was hanging onto a grab loop two metres away, legs pointing up rigidly at the nearest grille, trousers and shirt flapping madly. His mouth worked, bellowing curses and obscenities that were snatched away. A red glow grew around his hand, bloodlight shining through the skin, illuminating the bones within. Mucus and saliva streamed from his nose, joining the flood of debris and liquids vanishing into the duct. The seepage began to turn pink, then crimson.

Now the glow from his hand was fading along with the sound and the fury of the evacuating air. He fixed Erick with a disbelieving stare as tears began to bubble and boil from the surface of his eyes. Balls of blood were spitting out of his nostrils with each beat of his heart.

The last wisp of air vanished.

Erick swung round as the force waned, rotating languidly on the end of the tether strap. The physiological medical schematic his neural nanonics were displaying appeared to be a red statue, except for the right arm which was completely black. Each turn swept the lounge into view. He saw the surviving possessed struggling through the solid cloud of junk that filled the aching silent compartment. It was difficult to tell which of them were alive. Corpses—two badly mutilated—floated and tumbled and collided with the ones trying to reach the floor hatch. Dead or alive, everyone was weeping blood from their pores and orifices as capillaries ruptured and membranes tore from the immense pressure gradient. They were acting out a bizarre three-dimensional wrestling match in slow motion, with the hatch as their prize. It was macabre. It swam from his view.

Next time round there were fewer movements. Their faces—those he would remember without any help from his neural nanonics image-storage program. Turning.

They were slowing, running down like mechanoids suffering a power drain. The vacuum was turning foggy with fluid. He realized some of it was his own. Red. Very red.

Turning.

All purposeful movement had ceased within the lounge. There was only the gentle stirring of soggy dross.

Around and around. And the redness was fading to grey with the ponderous solemnity of a sunset.

Around.

Ilex and its eight cousins flew into a standard defence sphere formation two and a half thousand kilometres wide. Their distortion fields flared out to sample the masses and structure of local space. In their unique perceptive spectrum Lalonde hung below them like a deep shaft bored into the uniformity of space, radiating weak gravity streams to bind its three smaller moons and Kenyon, as it in turn was bound to the bright blue-white star. The interplanetary medium was rich with solar and electromagnetic energy; Van Allen belts

encircling the planet shone like sunlight striking an angel's wings. Starships and spaceplanes were revealed in orbit, dense knots in the fabric of space-time, pulsing hotly with electrical and magnetic forces.

Electronic sensors detected a barrage of narrow-beam maser radiation flying between small high-orbit sensor satellites, communication-relay satellites, and the starships. Terrance Smith was being informed of their presence, but there was no hostile response. Satisfied there was no immediate threat, the voidhawks maintained their relative positions for another ninety seconds.

Near the centre of the formation a zone of space the size of a quark warped to an alarming degree as its mass leapt towards infinity, and the first frigate emerged. The remaining twenty warships jumped insystem over the next six minutes. It was a textbook-sharp manoeuvre, giving Admiral Meredith Saldana the widest possible number of tactical options. All he needed was the relevant data to evaluate.

The normal background murmur of voices on Arikara's bridge died away into a shocked hush as the first sensor scans came in. Amarisk occupied the centre of the planet's daylight hemisphere, the red cloud bands above the Juliffe resembling a jagged thunderbolt captured in mid-discharge.

"Was there ever anything like that on this God-blighted planet before?" Meredith Saldana asked in a voice that strained for reasonableness.

"No, sir," Kelven replied.

"Then it is part of the invasion, a new phase?"

"Yes, sir. It looks that way."

"Captain Hinnels, do we know what it is?" the Admiral asked.

The staff science officer looked round from a discussion with two of the sensor evaluation team. "Haven't got a clue, Admiral. It's definitely optically radiant, but we're not picking up any energy emission. Of course, we're still

a long way off. It's rearranging the local weather patterns, too."

Meredith datavised for the sensor image again, and grunted when he saw the clouds being parted like candyfloss curtains. "How much power would that take?"

"It would depend on the focal accuracy—" Hinnels broke off at the Admiral's gaze. "Controlling the weather over a quarter of a continent? A hundred, two hundred gigawatts at least, sir; I can't be more specific, not until I understand how they apply it."

"And they have that much power to spare," Meredith mused out loud.

"More importantly, where's it coming from?" Kelven said. "Durringham had thirty-five fusion generators in the dumpers, and three smaller units in the navy office. Their entire power output didn't add up to more than twenty megawatts."

"Interesting point, Commander. You think there has been a massive landing operation since you left?"

"Shipping generators in would be the logical answer."

"But?"

"I don't believe it. The amount of organization necessary to set it up would be incredible, not to mention the number of starships involved. And you saw the flek of Jacqueline Couteur, she can summon up energy from nowhere."

The admiral gave him a dubious stare. "There is a difference between flinging fireballs and this." His hand waved expansively at one of the big bridge holoscreens showing the planet.

"A difference of scale, sir. There are twenty million people on Lalonde."

Meredith didn't like either alternative. Both implied forces immeasurably superior to that available to his squadron. Probably superior to the whole damn navy, he thought in apprehension. "Hinnels? Give me an evaluation. Is it safe to move the squadron closer?"

"Given the capability the invaders are demonstrating,

I'd say it's not safe even being here, Admiral. Moving into low orbit will obviously increase the risk, but by how much I wouldn't like to say."

"Thank you," Meredith said acidly. He knew he shouldn't take out his anxiety on the crew. But damn, that red cloud was unnerving. The size of it.

"Very well, we shall attempt to accomplish the First Admiral's orders and halt any use of force by Smith's starships, with the proviso that at the first sign of aggression from the invaders we withdraw at once. I'm not committing the squadron to fight that . . . whatever it is." He was aware of the relieved looks flashing round the bridge, and diplomatically ignored them. "Lieutenant Kanuik, have you completed a status review of the mercenary ships?"

"Yes, sir."

Meredith datavised the computer for a tactical situation display. The mercenary starships seemed to be in considerable disarray, with three under power, heading out of orbit. Probably running for a jump coordinate. Small VTOL spaceplanes were docked to five of the blackhawks. The Adamist craft left in orbit all had their hangar doors open. Another two spaceplanes were rising up from the planet. He cursed silently. They must have landed their scout teams already.

One of the Adamist starships was venting heavily, a grey jet of atmospheric gas shooting out of the hull. Its ion thrusters glowed bright blue to compensate the wayward thrust.

He saw a blackhawk's purple vector line begin to curl up like a corkscrew. Long-range optical sensors showed him the bitek starship tumbling and twisting hectically.

"Sir!"

He cancelled the datavise. Lieutenant Rhoecus, his staff voidhawk coordination officer, was wincing. "One of the blackhawks, it's . . ." The Edenist puffed his cheeks out and jerked up from his acceleration couch as though someone had thumped him in the belly. "Its captain is being attacked . . . tortured. There are voices. Singing. The

blackhawk's frightened." He closed his eyes, teeth gritted. "They want the captain."

"Who does?"

Rhoecus shook his head. "I don't know. It's fading. I had the impression of thousands speaking to the captain. It was almost like a habitat multiplicity."

"Signal from the *Gemal*, Admiral," a communications rating said. "Terrance Smith wants to talk to you."

"Does he now? Put him on."

Meredith looked into his console's AV projection pillar, seeing an exceptionally handsome man with perfectly arranged black hair. Corporate clone, the Admiral thought. Although the usual smooth flair of competence endemic to the type was in danger of crumbling. Terrance Smith looked like a man under a great deal of pressure.

"Mr Smith, I am Admiral Saldana, commander of this squadron; and under the authority invested in me by the Confederation Assembly I am now ordering you to suspend your military operation against Lalonde. Recall all your personnel from the planetary surface and do not attempt to engage the invader's forces. I also require you to hand over all combat wasps and nuclear devices to the navy. The starships currently under your command are free to leave this system once they have complied with my instructions, except for the *Lady Macbeth*, which is now under arrest. Do you understand?"

"They're up here."

"Pardon me?"

Terrance Smith's eyes flicked to one side, glancing at someone out of pick-up range. "Admiral, the invaders are up here. They came up in the spaceplanes that took my scout teams down. They're sequestering my crews."

Meredith took a second to compose himself. Four minutes into the mission, and already it was catastrophe. "Which crews? Which starships?" He suddenly looked across the bridge at Lieutenant Rhoecus. "Is that what was happening to the blackhawk captain? Sequestration?"

"It could be, yes," the startled Edenist replied.

“I want two voidhawks on that blackhawk, now. Restrain it, I don’t want it to leave this system. They are authorized to engage it with combat wasps if it resists. Deploy the remaining voidhawks to prevent any of the Adamist starships from leaving. Commander Kroeber.”

“Sir?”

“Squadron to move in now. Full interception duties, I want those starships neutralized. Alert the marine squads, have them stand by for boarding and securement.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

He turned back to the AV pillar. “Mr Smith.”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“Which ships have been taken over?”

“I don’t know for certain. The only ones which haven’t sent spaceplanes down to the surface are the *Gemal*, the *Lythral*, the *Nicol*, and the *Inula*. But the *Cyanea*’s spaceplane never made it back.”

“Admiral,” Kelven interjected.

“Yes, Commander?”

“We don’t know the *Gemal* didn’t send a spaceplane down. There is no visible evidence of sequestration, certainly not over a communication channel.”

Gravity returned to the *Arikara*’s bridge as the fusion drive came on, building swiftly. The Admiral squirmed his shoulders, trying to get completely comfortable before the high gees squashed him. “Point taken, Commander Solanki, thank you. Commander Kroeber, all starships are to be intercepted, no exceptions.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Meredith checked the tactical situation display again. There was only one spaceplane which hadn’t rendezvoused with its parent starship now. “And tell that spaceplane to remain where it is. It is not to dock. Solanki, start working out how we are going to restrain any starship crew-members that have been sequestered.”

“Sir, if this sequestration produces the same energy-control ability in the crews that it has in Jacqueline Couteur, I recommend the marines aren’t sent into the ships at all.”

"I'll bear that in mind. However, we will certainly have to make at least one attempt."

"Admiral," Lieutenant Rhoecus called through gritted teeth. "Another blackhawk captain is being sequestered."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant." Meredith reviewed the tactical display again, observing the blackhawk's crazed course, a moth caught in a tornado. "Send a voidhawk to intercept, full interdiction authority." That was a third of his voidhawk force committed already. He needed the rest to contain the Adamist starships. If any more blackhawks were taken over he would have to order a combat wasp launch. They would probably fight back.

With his options diminishing before his eyes, Meredith let out a pained hiss of breath as the *Arikara* accelerated past six gees. Sensors reported another mercenary starship's fusion drive igniting.

Ashly Hanson came through the airlock tube from the spaceplane and drifted straight into the barrel of a laser rifle. Warlow was holding it, aiming it directly at his forehead.

"Sorry," the hulking cosmonik boomed. "But we have to be sure."

Ashly realized there was a fission saw plugged into his spare left elbow socket, a glowing saffron blade nearly a metre long.

"Sure of what?"

Warlow rotated his principal left arm around the blade. He held a processor block in his hand. "Datavise something into this."

"Like what?"

"Anything, doesn't matter."

Ashly datavised a copy of the spaceplane's maintenance record.

"Thanks. It was Joshua's idea. From the reports we've had it looks like they can't use their neural nanonics."

"Who can't?"

"Spaceplane pilots who have been sequestered."

“Oh, God. I knew it, they can intercept our communications.”

“Yes.” Warlow executed a perfect mid-air roll, and headed for the airlock tube. “I’m going to check the spaceplane’s cabin, make sure you didn’t bring any up. Nothing personal.”

Ashly eyed the deck’s ceiling hatch. It was locked, red LEDs blinking to show the manual bolts were engaged on the other side. “The invaders are up in orbit?”

“Yes. Busy hijacking starships.”

“What’s Smith doing about it?”

“Nothing. A naval squadron has arrived, it is in their hands now. They have aborted our mission. Oh, and we’re under arrest, too.” His diaphragm rattled a metallic approximation of a chuckle.

“The whole fleet? They can’t do that. We’re operating under *bona fide* contract to the Lalonde government.”

“No, just the *Lady Mac*.”

“Why us?” But he was talking to a pair of disappearing horned feet.

“Erick? Erick, are you receiving this?”

“His organs are critical, heading for all-out cellular collapse. For God’s sake cancel that suspension program.”

“Got it. Physiological data coming through.”

“Program the nanonic packages for total cranial function support. We have to sustain the brain. André, where the hell’s that plasma? He’s lost litres of blood.”

“Here, Madeleine. Erick, you wonderful crazy *Anglo*. You got them, do you hear me? You got them!”

“Mesh the infuser with his carotid.”

“It was magnificent. Pull one little lever and all of them, *baboom*, dead.”

“Shit. Desmond, slap a nanonic package on that stump, the epithelium membrane isn’t strong enough, he’s leaking plasma everywhere.”

“His lungs are filling up too, they must be ruptured. Up

the oxidization factor. His brain is still showing electrical activity.”

“It is? Oh, thank God.”

“Erick, don’t try and datavise. We’ve got you. We won’t let you go.”

“Do you want to put him in zero-tau?”

“Hell, yes. We’re days from a decent hospital. Just let me try and get him stabilized first.”

“Erick, my dear one, don’t you worry about a thing. For this I will buy you the best, the greatest, clone body in Tranquillity. I swear. Whatever the cost.”

“Shut *up*, Captain. He’s in enough shock as it is. Erick, I’m going to put you back under. But don’t worry, everything is going to be just fine.”

The last of the six aerovettes stopped transmitting. Reza Malin upped his cranial audio receptors to full sensitivity, trying to hear the noise of the little vehicle’s impact. The sounds of the jungle invaded his brain—insect chirps, animal warbles, leaves crackling—filtered and reduced by discrimination programs. He counted to ten, but there was no crash.

“We’re on our own now,” he said. The aerovettes had been sent off to the west at a fast walking pace as a decoy, giving the scout team time to melt away into the jungle. He had guessed the invaders could track anything electronic; as Ashly said, if they could create the cloudbands, they could do almost anything. They weren’t invincible though, the fact that the team had landed was proof of that. But they were definitely going to provide a formidable challenge. Possibly the greatest Reza would ever face. He liked that idea.

His two hounds, Fenton and Ryall, were slinking through the undergrowth two hundred metres ahead of the scout team, sniffing out people. So far the jungle had been deserted. Pat Halahan’s affinity-bonded harpy eagle, Octan, was skimming the treetops, retinal implants alert for the slightest motion below the fluttering leaves. The

animals provided a coverage almost as good as the aerovettes.

The team was following a danderil track, heading roughly north-east towards its operational target, the Quallheim Counties. Sal Yong was leading, brushing through the dense vines with barely a sound. With his chameleon circuit activated it looked as though a heavy miniature breeze was whirling along the track. The other six followed quickly (Theo was up overhead somewhere), all of them loaded down with packs, even Kelly. He was pleased to see she was keeping up. If she didn't, it would be a maser pulse through her brain, which would upset some of the team. But he wasn't having a liability of a reporter holding them back. He wondered if she realized that, if it lent a note of urgency to her steps. Probably. She was smart enough, and her bureau chief would certainly have known the deal. So would Joshua, for all his youth, wise beyond his years.

Fenton arrived at a river, and peered out of the bushes lining the steep bank. Reza requested a chart from his inertial-guidance block, and confirmed their position.

"Pat, there's a river one eighty metres ahead, it leads into the Quallheim eventually. Send Octan along it to check for any boat traffic."

"Right." The voice seemed to emerge from a small qual-took tree.

"Are we going to use it?" Ariadne asked, a clump of knotted tinnus vines.

"Yes, providing Octan says nobody else is. It's narrow enough, good tree cover. We can cut a day off our time." He called silently to his hounds, and ordered them to cut back behind the team, covering their rear.

They reached the river three minutes later, and stood at the top of the four-metre bank.

"What is that stuff?" Jalal asked.

The water was clotted with free-floating fleshy leaves, pure white discs a couple of metres in diameter, a tiny purple star in their centre. Each had an upturned rim of a few

centimetres, natural coracles. They bobbed and spun and sailed calmly along with the current, undulating with the swell. Some overlapped, some collided and rebounded, but they all kept moving along. Upstream or downstream, whichever way the team looked, the river was smothered in them.

Kelly smiled inside her shell-helmet as the daylight dream of her Lalonde didactic course came slithering into her conscious thoughts. "They're snowlilies," she said. "Quite something, aren't they? Apparently they all bloom at the same time then drift downstream to drop their kernel. It really screws up the Juliffe basin for boat traffic while they're in season." She tracked her retinal implants along the river. It was all going into a neural nanonics memory cell, scenes of Lalonde. Capturing the substance of a place was always important, it gave the report that little edge, adding to reality.

"They're a bloody nuisance," Reza said curtly. "Sewell, Jalal, activate the hovercraft; Pat, Ariadne, point guard."

The two combat-adepts unslung the big packs they were carrying, and took out the programmed silicon craft, cylinders sixty centimetres long, fifteen wide. They slithered down the bank to the water's edge.

Kelly focused on the sky downstream. At full magnification the northern horizon was stained a pale red. "It's close," she said.

"An hour away," Reza said. "Maybe two. This river winds a crooked course."

Sewell shoved a couple of snowlilies aside and dropped his cylinder into the clear patch of water. The hovercraft began to take shape, its gossamer-thin silicon membrane unfolding in a strict sequence, following the pattern built into its molecules. A flat boat-shaped hull was activated first, five metres long, fifteen centimetres thick. Water was pumped into its honeycomb structure, ballast to prevent it from blowing away. The gunwales started to rise up.

Theo Connal dropped lightly to the ground beside

Kelly. She gave a slight start as he turned off his chameleon circuit.

“Anything interesting?” Reza asked.

“The cloud is still shifting about. But it’s slower now.”

“Figures, the spaceplanes have gone.”

“All the birds are flying away from it.”

“Don’t blame ’em,” Pat said.

Kelly’s communication block reported that a signal was being beamed down from the geostationary satellites, coded for their team. It was a very powerful broadcast, completely non-directional.

“Kelly, Reza, don’t respond to this,” Joshua said. “It looks like our communications are wide open to the invaders, which is why I’m transmitting on a wide footprint, a directional beam will pinpoint you for them. OK, situation update; we’ve got big problems up here. Several spaceplanes were taken over while they were on the ground, the invaders are now busy hijacking starships, but nobody can tell which ones. You know Ashly wasn’t sequestered, so that means you should be able to trust me. But don’t take orders from anyone else, especially don’t broadcast your location. Problem two, a navy squadron has just arrived and shut down the strike mission. Jesus, it’s a total fucking shambles in orbit right now. Some of the hijacked ships are trying to run for a jump coordinate, I’ve got voidhawks blocking the *Lady Mac*’s patterning nodes, and two of my fellow combat-capable trader starships are heading up to intercept the navy squadron.

“Your best bet is to turn round from that cloud and just keep going, out into the hinterlands somewhere. There’s no point in trying to locate the invader’s bases any more. I’ll do my best to pick you up in a day or two, if this cock-up gets sorted by then. Stay alive, that’s all you have to worry about now. I’ll keep you informed when I can. Out.”

The two hovercraft had finished erecting themselves.

Sewell and Jalal were unpacking the energy matrices and superconductor fan motors ready to slot them into place.

“Now what?” Ariadne asked. The team had all gathered around Reza.

“Keep going,” he said.

“But you heard what Joshua said,” Kelly exclaimed. “There’s no point. We have no orbital fire-power back-up, and no mission left. If we just manage to survive for the next few days it’s going to be a bloody miracle.”

“You still haven’t grasped it yet, have you, Kelly?” Reza said. “This is bigger than Lalonde; this isn’t about doing a dirty job for money, not any more. These invaders are going to challenge the entire Confederation. They have the power. They can change people, their minds, their bodies; mould whole planets into something new, something that we have no part in. Some time soon those ships in orbit are going to have to try and attack, to put a stop to it all. It doesn’t matter whether it is Smith or the navy squadron. If the invaders aren’t stopped here, they’ll keep on coming after us. Sure we can run, but they’ll catch us, if not out in the hinterlands than back at Tranquillity, or even Earth if you want to run that far. But not me. Everyone has to make a stand eventually, and mine is right here. I’m going to find a base and let the ships know.”

Kelly held her tongue, she could well imagine how Reza would react to her wheedling.

“More like it!” Sal Yong proclaimed.

“OK,” Reza said. “Finish fitting out the hovercraft, and get our gear stowed.”

It took a surprisingly short five minutes to complete their preparations and clamber in. Fully assembled the hovercraft was a simple affair, with a big fan at the rear and two cycloidal impellers filling the skirt with air. It was steered mechanically, by vanes behind the fan.

Kelly sat on a bench at the rear of her craft, riding with Sal Yong, Theo Connal, and Ariadne. Now the decision

had been made, she was quite glad to be free of the pack and walking through the jungle.

Reza's lead hovercraft moved out from the bank, skimming easily over the snowlilies, and turned downstream. Fenton and Ryall sat in the prow, blunt heads thrust out into the wind as they picked up speed.

9

One thing Princess Kirsten had always insisted on after ascending to the throne of the Principality of Ombey was keeping breakfast a family affair. Crises could come and go, but giving the children quality time was sacrosanct.

Burley Palace, where she ruled from, was situated at the top of a gently sloping hill in the middle of Ombey's capital, Atherstone. Its pre-eminent location gave the royal apartments at the rear of the sprawling stone edifice a grand view over the parks, gardens, and elegant residential buildings which made up the city's eastern districts. Away in the distance was the haze-blurred line of deeper blue that was the ocean.

Atherstone was only fifteen degrees south of the equator, putting it firmly in the tropical climate belt, but the early morning breeze coming in off the ocean kept the temperature bearable until about ten o'clock. So Kirsten had the servants set the table on the broad, red-tiled balcony outside her bedroom, where she could sit amid the yellow and pink flowers of the aboriginal tolla vines that choked the back of the palace, and have a leisurely hour with her husband and three natural-born children.

Zandra, Emmeline, and Benedict were aged seven, five, and three respectively, the only naturally conceived children she and Edward had produced. Their first five offspring had been gestated in exowombs after the zygotes had been carefully geneered to the latest physiological pinnacle which the Kulu geneticists had achieved. It was the Saldana family way; incorporating the freshest advances into each new generation, or at least that part of it destined

to actually hold high office. Always the elder children, following the old Earth European aristocratic tradition.

Kirsten's first five children would probably live for around two hundred years, whereas she herself and the natural-born three could only hope for about a hundred and eighty years. She had been sixty-six in 2608, when she was crowned in Atherstone Cathedral, two months after her brother Alastair II had assumed the throne on Kulu. As the ninth child, she had always been destined (barring an accident among her older brothers and sister) to rule Ombey, the newest principality.

Like all her nine exowomb siblings, and the five natural-born children of her mother and father, she was tall and physically robust; geneering gave her dark red hair and an oval face with well-rounded cheeks—and of course a thin nose with a tip that curved down.

But geneering could only provide the physical stamina necessary for the stresses resulting in a century of wielding the supreme authority vested in a reigning monarch. She had been in training for the intellectual challenge from birth; first loaded up with the theory, endless politics and economics and management didactic courses, then five years at Nova Kong University learning how to apply them. After serving a twelve-year naval commission (compulsory for all senior Saldanas) she was given divisional management positions in the Kulu Corporation, the massive kingdom-wide utilities, transport, engineering, energy, and mining conglomerate founded by Richard Saldana when he settled Kulu (and still owned solely by the king), graduating up to junior cabinet posts. It was career designed with the sole intent of giving her unrivalled experience on the nature and use of power for when she came to the throne.

Only the siblings of the reigning monarch ruled the Kingdom's principalities on his behalf, keeping the family in direct command. The hierarchy was long established and extraordinarily successful in binding together nine star systems which were physically spread over hundreds of

light-years. The only time it had ever come near to failure was when Crown Prince Michael germinated Tranquillity; and the Saldana family would never let anything like that happen again.

Kirsten came out onto the balcony the morning after the *Ekwan's* arrival feeling distinctly edgy. Time Universe had been triumphantly broadcasting its Laton exclusive since yesterday evening. She had given the news programmes a quick scan after she woke, and the deluge hadn't yet abated. Speculation over the *Ekwan* and Guyana's code two alert was red hot. For the first time since her coronation she found herself considering censorship as an option for calming the mounting media hysteria. Certainly there would have to be some sort of official statement before the day was over.

She pushed up the voluminous sleeves of her rising robe and looked out over the superb lawns with their mixture of terrestrial and xenoc flower-beds, and the artificial lakes graced by black swans. The sky was a deep indigo, without any cloud. Another gorgeous, balmy day; if not in paradise, then as close as she would ever see. But the sunshine panorama left her unmoved. Laton was a name which carried too many adolescent fear-images with it. Her political instinct was telling her this wasn't a crisis that would blow over in the night. Not this one.

That same political instinct which had kept the Saldana family securely on their various thrones for four hundred years.

The children's nanny brought her excitable charges out of the nursery, and Kirsten managed to smile and kiss them all and make a fuss. Edward lifted little Benedict into his lap, while she seated Emmeline next to her own chair. Zandra sat at her place and reached eagerly for the jug of dorze juice.

"Grace first," Kirsten admonished.

"Oh, Mummy!"

"Grace."

Zandra sighed woundedly, clasped her hands together and moved her lips. "Now can I eat?"

"Yes, but don't bolt it." She signalled one of the four attendant footmen to bring her own tea and toast.

Edward was feeding Benedict slim slices of bread along with his boiled egg. "Is the news still all Laton?" he asked over Emmeline's head.

"Yes," Kirsten said.

He pulled a sympathetic face, and dangled another bread soldier in front of a cheerful Benedict.

They had been married forty years. A good marriage by any reasonable standards, let alone an institution as odd as a royal marriage. Edward was old money, titled as well, and an ex-navy officer who had served with some distinction. He was also geneered, which was a big plus; the court liked matches with the same range of life expectancy—it made things tidy. They hadn't quite been pushed into it by the family, but the pressure had been there for someone like him. All the senior Saldanas displayed for public consumption the Christian monogamy ideal. Divorce was, of course, out of the question. Alastair was head of Kulu's Church, Defender of the Faith throughout the Kingdom. Royalty didn't break the commandments, not publicly.

However, she and Edward enjoyed a relationship of mutual respect, and trust, and even considerable fondness. Maybe love had been there too at the start of it, forty years ago. But what they had now was enough to carry them through the next century together without bitterness and regret. Which was an achievement in itself. When she thought of her brother Claude's marriage . . .

"Mummy's thinking again," Emmeline announced loudly.

Kirsten grinned. "Thinking what to do with you."

"What?" Emmeline squealed.

"Depends what you've done wrong."

"Nothing! Ask Nanny, I've been good. All day."

"She pinched Rosy Oldamere's swimming towel yester-

day," Zandra said. Emmeline burst into giggles. "You said you wouldn't tell."

"It was so funny. Miss Eastree had to lend Rosy hers, she was shivering all over."

"Her skin was turning blue," Emmeline said proudly.

"Who's Laton?" Zandra asked.

"A bad man," Edward said.

"Is he on Ombey?"

"No," Kirsten said. "Now eat your rice chips."

Her neural nanonics gave a silent chime, which warned her from the start it was going to be bad news; her equerry would never allow a datavised message through unless it was serious, not at breakfast. She accessed the Defence and Security Council datapackage.

"Trouble," she said resentfully.

Edward glanced over as she rose.

"I'll help get them ready for day club," he said.

"Thanks." He was a good man.

She walked through the private apartments and emerged into the wide marbled corridor which led to the cabinet offices, drawing startled looks and hurried bows from staff who were in early. She was still dressed in her turquoise and grey rising robe.

The official reception room was a decagonal chamber with a vaulting roof that dripped chandeliers. A horizontal sheet of sunlight was pouring in through a ring of azure windows halfway up the walls. Pillars were inlaid with gold and platinum under a lofriction gloss which kept the metal permanently agleam. Holoprints of impossibly violent stellar events alternated with oil paintings around the walls. There were no modern dreamphase or mood-effusion works; the Saldanas always favoured antiquity for the intimation of timeless dignity it gave.

Three people were waiting for her in the middle of the black tushkwood tile floor. Sylvester Geray was at their head; her equerry, a thirty-six-year-old captain wearing his Royal Kulu Navy dress uniform. Hopelessly formal, she

always thought, but he hadn't put a foot wrong since he took up the post three months after her coronation.

The other two, both wearing civilian suits, were a less welcome sight. Roche Skark, the director of the ESA office on Ombey, smiled politely at his princess and inclined his head. Despite geneering, he was a rotund man, in his eighties, and twenty centimetres shorter than Kirsten. He had held his post for thirteen years, dealing with threats and perceived threats throughout the sector with pragmatism and a judicious application of abstruse pressure on the people who counted. Foreign governments might grumble endlessly about the ESA and its influence and meddling in local internal politics, but there was never any solid proof of involvement. Roche Skark didn't make the kind of elementary mistakes which could lead to the diplomatic embarrassment of his sovereign.

Jannike Dermot, on the other hand, was quite the opposite of the demure ESA director. The fifty-year-old woman wore a flamboyant yellow and purple cord stripe suit of some expensive silk-analogue fabric, with her blonde hair arranged in a thick, sweep-back style. It was the kind of consummate power dressing favoured by corporate executives, and she looked the part. However, her business was strictly the grubbier side of the human condition: she was the chief of the Internal Security Agency on Ombey, responsible for the discreet maintenance of civil order throughout the principality. Unlike its more covertly active sister agency, the ISA was mostly concerned with vetting politicians and mounting observations on subversives or anyone else foolish enough to question the Saldana family's right to rule. Ninety-five per cent of its work was performed by monitor programs; fieldwork by operatives was kept to a minimum. Also within its province was the removal of citizens deemed to be enemies of the state; which—contrary to popular myth—was actually a reasonably benign affair. Only people who advocated and practised violence were physically eliminated, most were

simply and quietly deported to a Confederation penal planet from which there was never any return.

Quite where the boundaries of the respective agencies' operational fields were drawn tended to become a little blurred at times, especially in the asteroid settlements or the activities of foreign embassy personnel. Kirsten, who chaired Ombey's Defence and Security Council, often found herself arbitrating such disputes between the two. It always privately amused her that despite the nature of their work the agencies were both basically unrepentant empire-building bureaucracies.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am," Sylvester Geray said. "The matter was deemed urgent."

"Naturally," Kirsten said. She datavised a code at one set of high double doors, and gestured for them to follow. "Let's get on with it."

The doors opened into her private office. It was a tastefully furnished room in white and powder blue, though lacking in the ostentation of the formal State Office next door where she received diplomats and politicians. French windows looked out into a tiny walled garden where fountains played in a couple of small ornamental ponds. Glass-fronted cabinets and bookshelves stood around the walls, heavy with exquisite gifts from visitors and institutions who enjoyed her patronage. A malachite bust of Alastair II sat on a pedestal in an alcove behind her desk (Allie looking over her shoulder, as always). A classic Saldana face, broadly handsome, with a gravity the sculptor had captured perfectly. She remembered her brother practising that sombre poise in the mirror when he was a teenager.

The doors swung shut and Kirsten datavised a codelock at them. The processor in her desk confirmed the study was now physically and electronically secure.

"The datapackage said there has been a new development in the *Ekwan* case," she said as she sat in her high-backed chair behind the desk.

"Yes, ma'am," Jannike Dermot said. "Unfortunately there has."

Kirsten waved a hand for them to sit. "I didn't think it would be good news."

"I'd like to bring in Admiral Farquar," Sylvester Geray said.

"Of course." Kirsten datavised the processor for a security level one sensenviron conference and closed her eyes.

The illusion was of a curving featureless white chamber with a central oval table; Kirsten sat at the head, with Roche Skark and Pascoe Farquar on one side, and Jannike Dermot and Sylvester Geray on the other. Interesting that the computer should be programmed to seat the two agency directors opposite each other, she thought.

"I would like to formally request a system-wide code two defence alert," the Admiral said as his opening gambit.

Kirsten hadn't been expecting that. "You believe Laton will attack us?" she asked mildly. Only she could issue a code two alert, which allowed the military to supersede all civil administration, and requisition whatever personnel and materials it required. Basically it was a declaration of martial law. (A code one alert was a full declaration of war, which only Alastair could proclaim.)

"It's a little more complicated than that, ma'am," the Admiral said. "My staff have been reviewing the whole Lalonde-Laton situation. Now this reporter Graeme Nicholson has confirmed Laton was present on the planet, we have to begin to consider other factors, specifically this energy virus which the Edenists reported."

"I find it quite significant they wanted their findings to be known," Roche Skark said. "In fact they actually requested that we should be told. Which is an unusual step given the Kingdom's standard relationship with Edenism. They obviously considered the threat dangerous enough to exceed any political differences. And considering what happened to our G66 troops in Lalonde's jungle I believe they were totally justified."

"Our analysis of both Jenny Harris's jungle mission and subsequent events on Lalonde suggests that the energy virus and this prevalent sequestration are the same thing,"

said the Admiral. "What we are dealing with is an invisible force that can take over human thought processes and bestow an extremely advanced energy manipulation ability. Sophisticated enough to act as an electronic warfare field, and construct those white fireballs out of what appears to be thin air."

"I reviewed parts of the jungle mission," Kirsten said. "The physical strength those people had was phenomenal. Are you suggesting anyone who is infected will acquire similar capabilities?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How is the energy virus transmitted?"

"We don't know," the Admiral admitted. "Though we do consider the fact that Laton called it a virus to be significant. The very nature of the term virus, whether employed in the biological or software sense, implies a pattern that can reproduce itself within its host, usually at an exponential rate. But again, I'm not sure. We really are working in the dark on this one, putting together appraisals from observed data. There has to be a priority to discover its exact nature."

"We can find out relatively easily," Jannike Dermot said. "The answer is in Gerald Skibbow's memory—how he was infected and sequestered, how the energy virus behaves, what its limits are. I consider him to be the key to alleviating our lack of knowledge."

"Has he recovered yet?" Kirsten asked.

"No. The doctors say he is suffering from a case of profound trauma; it's touch and go if he ever will recover his full intellectual faculties. I want him to undergo a personality debrief."

"Is that wise, in his state?"

The ISA director showed no emotion. "Medically, no, not making him relive the events. But a debrief will provide us with the information we require."

It was a responsibility Kirsten could have done without; Skibbow was somebody's child, probably had children of his own. For a moment she thought of Benedict sitting in

Edward's lap. "Proceed," she said, trying to match the ISA director's impersonality.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"The report from Lalonde said it was Laton himself who warned the Edenists of this energy virus? He claimed he was being attacked by it."

"That's right, ma'am," Admiral Farquar said. "Which is what makes our current problem even more acute."

"You think he was telling the truth, that it is a xenoc incursion?"

"Under the circumstances, I have to give it strong consideration. Which is why I want a code two alert. It will give me the resources to defend the Ombey system should they back up the virus with a physical invasion."

Kirsten felt her palms tingle, that earlier unsettling notion that this wasn't just an ordinary crisis was abruptly resumed. "What do you mean: back up the virus?"

The Admiral flicked a glance at Roche Skark. "It is a possibility that the *Ekwan* brought it to Ombey," he said.

"Oh, dear God. Do you have any proof?"

"We are ninety per cent convinced Gerald Skibbow has been purged, although none of the science team can offer an explanation as to how that happened. However, in their haste to get him here, the Lalonde Embassy's Intelligence team may have overlooked the fact that some of their own people were carrying it. After all, Graeme Nicholson's report confirms that Laton—presumably a sequestered Laton—was in Durringham the day they left. We have to assume the virus was also present in the city's population at that time."

"When the Admiral's staff informed me of this probability, my Guyana operatives immediately tried to round up the *Ekwan*'s crew and all the embassy staff," the ISA director said. "Three embassy people were unaccounted for: Angeline Gallagher, Jacob Tremarco, and Savion Kerwin. We subsequently found that all three took a spaceplane down to Ombey as soon as the code three restrictions were lifted. We know they landed at Pasto Spaceport seven

hours ago. The spaceplane which brought them down suffered from several systems failures and processor glitches during the flight.”

“*Ekwan*’s flight from Lalonde was one long list of malfunctions. But since it docked at Guyana its systems have functioned smoothly,” the Admiral said.

“And the spaceplane?” Kirsten asked, guessing.

“When my people arrived at the spaceport it was in the line company’s engineering hangar,” Jannike Dermot said. “The maintenance crews couldn’t find a thing wrong with it.”

“And there was some difficulty with the zero-tau pod when Gerald Skibbow was put in it,” Roche Skark added. “The implication is that this energy virus isn’t quite under control, it interferes with nearby electronic equipment on a permanent basis.”

“So what you’re telling me is that they’re down here,” Kirsten said.

“Yes, ma’am,” the ISA director acknowledged. “I’m afraid we have to assume they are. We’re hunting them, of course. I’ve already alerted the police.”

“What about the others who were on board the *Ekwan*?”

“As far as we can tell, they have not been infected.”

“Exactly how do you tell?”

“Those that have neural nanonics can use them. We thought that if the energy virus does have an unrestrained capacity to interfere with circuitry then implants would be the first to suffer a loss of efficiency.”

“Good idea,” she said.

“The rest of *Ekwan*’s complement of colonists are being brought into close proximity with delicate electronics. So far none of the processor arrays have been affected, but we’re repeating the procedure every few hours just to be sure.”

“What about people the three from the embassy came into contact with while they were in Guyana?”

“We have reviewed the spaceport crews,” the Admiral said. “And we’re drawing up a schedule now to run the en-

tire asteroid population through these assessments. Including myself, no exceptions.”

“I see.”

“Will you declare a code two alert, ma’am?”

“I would point out that a code two alert will allow me to quarantine the Xingun continent,” Jannike Dermot said. “It is unlikely that Gallagher, Tremarco and Kerwin have left yet. I can shut down all air transport to and from the rest of Ombey. I can also order all road traffic to be suspended, though it may prove difficult to enforce in practice. We might get lucky and trap them in Pasto City itself.”

Kirsten summoned up the emergency statutes file from a memory cell and began to review it. Her neural nanonics started to chart a course of action, balancing necessity against the chaos that would come with an attempt to suspend all Ombey’s civil and industrial activities. “Without direct evidence of a physical threat I cannot issue a code two alert,” she said. “However, I am declaring a code three alert, and a biohazard isolation order for the orbiting asteroids. I want them insulated from each other, from the planet, and from incoming starships. Our orbital facilities are essential to our defence, and I agree that they must be safeguarded against the carriers of this virus. Admiral Farguar, you are to order and enforce a complete quarantine as of now. All civil spacecraft in transit to return to their port of origin.

“Your primary military task is the defence of Ombey and the orbital asteroids with their associated strategic-defence systems. A code three alert will give you the authority to mobilize our resident naval reserve forces; although if it is to mean anything the quarantine order must apply equally to the fleet. Crews will have to be rearranged to ensure that personnel from different asteroid bases are not mixed together. The navy’s secondary role will be guarding against further risk of infiltration within the star system as a whole. That means all incoming starships to be refused docking permission.

“As to Xingu, I agree that it should be segregated from

the rest of the planet. Sylvester, you are to inform the Xingun continental parliament's speaker that there is now a state of civil emergency in existence. Shut down its air transport links now. And I do mean now, all planes in the air to return to their departure airport. Admiral, if any refuse to comply you are ordered to shoot them out of the sky. Use the low-orbit strategic-defence platforms."

"Yes, ma'am."

Kirsten watched Sylvester Geray's image freeze as he started to datavise her orders into the secure government communication net. "Roche, do you believe the embassy three are going to try and spread the virus among our population?"

"Their actions so far indicate that is their main goal, yes, ma'am."

"So it's not just them we're looking for, we're going to have to round up anyone they came into contact with?"

"Yes, ma'am. Speed in this instance is going to be essential; the faster they are caught, the fewer possible contamination cases we will have to worry about. It's an exponential problem again. If they go free for too long then it may well escalate beyond our ability to contain, as it did on Lalonde."

"Jannike, do the police on Xingu have sufficient resources to track them down?"

"I believe so, ma'am," the ISA director said.

"May I suggest we use someone more familiar with people who have been sequestered by the virus?" Roche Skark said smoothly. "I'm sure the civil authorities are capable, Jannike, but I feel hands-on experience will be of immense benefit in this instance. Someone who is perfectly aware of the urgency, and knows how to react should things turn ugly. And judging by Lalonde that may well happen."

The ISA director stared at him levelly. "One of your agents, you mean?"

"It is a logical appointment. I recommend Ralph Hiltch is sent to Xingu to oversee the search."

"Him? The man who didn't even know Laton was on Lalonde, the greatest criminal psychopath the Confederation has ever known!"

"I feel that's slightly unfair, Madam Director. The Confederation and the Edenists believed Laton was dead after the navy destroyed his blackhawks. How many corpses are you currently investigating?"

"Enough," Kirsten said. "That will do, both of you. In this situation I think every resource has to be deployed without prejudice; I'd like to believe we can deal with this incident better than a stage one colony planet. That was a good suggestion, Roche; have Ralph Hiltch sent to Pasto immediately. He is to liaise with the civil authorities there, with a brief to advise and assist with the capture of the embassy personnel and identification of anyone else who has been sequestered."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll inform him at once."

"I just hope he can contain them," she said, allowing her deeper worries to surface momentarily. "If not, he could be facing a one-way trip."

The cloudband which lay over the Quallheim was a muddy rouge colour when seen from the underside, streaked with long rusty gold ridges as though it was reflecting the twilight rays of a sinking sun. It grew ever broader, the frayed edges stirring and flexing in disquiet as it swam out lazily over the sweltering jungle.

Kelly, casually accustomed to the enormousness of Tranquillity, was dumbfounded by its size. To the west and east there was no visible end, the band could encircle the world for all those sitting in the hovercraft knew. Straight ahead, to the north, there might have been a hairline of blue sky above the black treetops. Amarisk was slipping gently into a deep luminous cavern.

Thunder, strident bass rumbles that echoed strangely, taking a long time to fade, had been audible for the last twenty minutes as the two hovercraft eased their way towards the Quallheim over the buoyant mass of snowlilies

coating the unnamed tributary. There was no sign of any lightning.

The hovercraft slipped under the tempestuous lip of cloud, and red-tinged darkness tightened around them like a noose. With the morning sun high in the sky, the transition into shadow was abrupt, leaving none of the scout team in any doubt of the change. Kelly couldn't help a shiver inside her armour even though the suit kept her skin temperature at a comfortable constant.

Reza's communication block reported it had lost the geosynchronous communication-satellite's beacon. They were cut off from Smith, Joshua, and the navy squadron.

Trees lining the bank became dark and sullen, even the flowers which eternally sprouted from the vines lost their perky glimmer. Snowlilies were the rancid colour of drying blood. High overhead large flocks of birds were embarking on their first ever migration, flapping and gliding towards the brightness sleeting down beyond the cloud.

"The cloud stretches across the heavens like the Devil's own wedding veil. It is the coming of an immortal penumbra as Lalonde is eclipsed by a force before which nature trembles in fear. The planet is being forcibly wedded to a dark lord, and the prospect of cold alien offspring issuing forth is one which gnaws menacingly at the team's fragile spirit."

"Please!" Sal Yong protested loudly. "I want to eat sometime today." The big combat-adept mercenary was sitting on the bench ahead of Kelly, shoulders slewed so the front of his rounded, dull-gloss head was aligned on her.

"Sorry," she said. She hadn't been aware she was talking out loud. "This is crazy, you know. We should be running the opposite way."

"Life is crazy, Kell. Don't let that stop you from enjoying it." He swung his doughty shoulders back.

"The problem is, I'd like to go on enjoying it, preferably for decades."

"Then why come here?" Ariadne asked. She was sitting

next to Sal Yong, steering the hovercraft with a small joystick.

“Born stupid, I guess.”

“I’ve been with Reza for a decade now,” the female ranger scout said. “I’ve seen atrocities and violence even your scoop-happy company would never show for public consumption. We’ve always made it home. He’s the best combat scout team leader you’ll ever meet.”

“On a normal mission, yes. But this bloody thing—” Her arm rose to take in the cloud and gloomy jungle with an extravagant sweep. “Look at it, for Christ’s sake. Do you really think a couple of well-placed maser blasts from orbit are going to knock it out? We need the whole Confederation Navy armed with every gram of antimatter they’ve ever confiscated.”

“Still got to have somewhere to shoot that antimatter down at,” Sal Yong said. “The navy would have to send the marines in if we weren’t already here shovelling shit. Think of the money we’re saving the Confederation taxpayer.”

Beside Kelly, Theo broke into a high-pitched chuckle. He even sounds like a monkey, she thought.

“Regular marines couldn’t handle this,” Ariadne said cheerfully, guiding the hovercraft round a rock. “You’d need the Trafalgar Greenjackets. Special-forces types, boosted like us.”

“Bunch of knuckle shufflers, all theory and drills,” Sal Yong said witheringly. The two of them started arguing over the merits of various regiments.

Kelly gave up. She just couldn’t get through to them. Perhaps that was what made mercenaries so different, so fascinating. It wasn’t just the physical supplement boosting, it was the attitude. They really didn’t care about the odds, staking their life time and again. That would make a good follow-up story back at Tranquillity; interview some ex-mercs, find out why they had quit. She loaded a note in her neural nanonics. The pretence of normality. Keep the mind busy so it doesn’t have time to brood.

The hovercraft arrived at the Quallheim itself after another forty minutes. It was four or five times the width of the tributary, over two hundred and fifty metres broad. Both banks were overrun with tall trees that leant over the river at sharp angles, plunging aerial roots and thick vines into the water. Snowlilies lay three deep on the surface, moving at an infinitesimal pace. Where the tributary emptied into the Quallheim they formed a mushy metre-high dune on top of the water.

Now the scout team headed upriver, keeping close to the northern bank and the paltry cover of the trees. Reza seemed more concerned about lying exposed to the cloud than proximity to possible hostiles on the land. With nothing but the lightly furrowed carpet of snowlilies opening out like an empty ten-lane motorway ahead, the hovercraft began to pick up speed.

It was dark on the river, under the centre of the cloud-band, an occultation which made all the team switch to infrared vision. The trees blocked any sight of the natural sunlight beyond it. Thunder was a constant companion, booms slithering up and down the river like the backwash of some vast creature burrowing its way through the vermilion vapour above. Big insects, similar to terrestrial dragonflies but without wings, skipped across the snowlilies, only to be hurled tumbling by the wind of the hovercraft's passage. Vennals, burning with a pink-blue radiance of charcoal embers, hung in the branches of the trees, watching the small convoy rush past with wide, soft eyes.

Towards the middle of the morning, Reza stood up and signalled the second hovercraft towards the northern bank where there was a break in the trees. Ariadne rode the craft up the lush grass to a halt next to its twin. Fenton and Ryall were already bounding off into the undergrowth.

"I didn't want to datavise," Reza said when they all gathered round. "And from now on we'll operate a policy of minimal electronic emission. Ariadne, have you detected any broadcasts from the invaders?"

“Not yet. I’ve had our ELINT blocks scanning since we landed. The electromagnetic spectrum is clean. If they’re communicating it’s either by ultra-tight beam, or fibre optics.”

“They could be using affinity, or an analogue,” Pat said.

“In that case, you can forget homing in on them,” she said. “Nobody can intercept that kind of transmission.”

“What about the blackhawks?” Jalal asked. “Could they detect it?”

“No good,” Pat said. “They can’t even detect the bond between me and Octan, let alone some xenoc variant.”

“Never mind,” Reza said. “The Quallheim Counties were the origin of the invasion. There has to be a large base station around here somewhere. We’ll find it. In the meantime, there is a village called Pamiers a couple of kilometres ahead. Pat says Octan has located it.”

“That’s right,” Pat Halrahan said. “He’s circling it now, at a reasonable distance. The whole place is illuminated with white light, yet there is no break in the cloud overhead. There are houses there as well, about thirty or forty proper stone buildings alongside the wood shacks the colonists build.”

“Smith said there were buildings like that in villages the observation satellites did manage to view,” Reza said.

“Yeah, but I can’t see where they came from,” Pat said. “There are no roads at all, no way to bring the stone in.”

“Air or river,” Sewell suggested.

“Invade a planet then airlift in stone houses for the population?” Pat said. “Come on, this is weird, but not insane. Besides, there is no sign of any construction activity. The grass and paths haven’t been churned up. And they should have been, the houses have only been here a fortnight at most.”

“They could be something like our programmed silicon,” Kelly said, and rapped a gloved knuckle on the hard gunwale behind her. “Assembled in minutes, and easily airlifted in.”

“They look substantial,” Pat said with vague unease. “I

know that's not an objective opinion, but that's the way it feels. They're solid."

"How many people?" Reza asked.

"Twenty or twenty-five walking about. There must be more inside."

"OK, this is our first real chance to obtain serious Intelligence data as to what's going on down here," Reza said. "We're going to deactivate the hovercraft and cut through the jungle around the back of Pamiers. After we've reached the river again and set up a retreat option, I'll take Sewell and Ariadne with me into the village, while the rest of you provide us with some cover. Assume anyone you meet is hostile and sequestered. Any questions?"

"I'd like to come into Pamiers with you," Kelly said.

"Your decision," Reza said indifferently. "Any real questions?"

"What information are we looking for?" Ariadne asked.

"Intent and capability," Reza said. "Also physical disposition of their forces, if we can get it."

Hackles raised inside her armour, Kelly let the team shove a couple of hovercraft electron matrices into her pack before they all set off again. Reza didn't want them to walk in single file, for fear of ambush; instead they fanned out through the trees with chameleon circuits on, avoiding animal paths. There was a method of trekking through the raw jungle, Kelly learnt, and for her it was always walking where Jalal walked. He seemed to instinctively find the easiest way around trees and thick undergrowth, avoiding having to force his way against the clawing branches and heavy loam. So she kept her helmet sensors focused on the low-power UV pin-point light at the nape of his neck, and bullied her legs to keep up.

It took them fifty minutes to skirt the village and wind up back at the river. Sewell and Jalal set to activating the hovercraft at the top of a short slope above the water. Kelly dumped her pack into the locker at the rear of the second craft, and felt as though she could fly without the extra weight. With equipment stowed, the team fitted their

weapons, checked power and projectile magazines, and set off back towards Pamiers.

Reza found the first corpse two hundred metres short of the village clearing. It was Ryall who smelt it for him, a sharp tang of dead flesh which even the jungle's muggy air couldn't disguise. He sent the hound veering off towards it. Ryall promptly smelt another corpse, causing Reza to hurriedly damped down his reception of the hound's olfactory sense.

It was a child, about five or six, he guessed. Ryall had found it sitting huddled up at the foot of a mayope tree. Age was hard to determine; there wasn't a lot left, so he had to go by size. Insects and humidity had accelerated the decomposition, though it was strange no animal had disturbed it. According to his didactic memory, sayce were supposed to be fairly brutal carnivores.

He led Sewell, Kelly, and Ariadne through the trees to the body, and dispatched Ryall to the second.

"It's a girl," Ariadne said after examining the remains. She held up a nondescript length of filthy, dripping-wet fabric. "This is a skirt."

Reza wasn't going to argue. "How did she die?" he asked.

"There are no broken bones, no sign of violence. Judging by the way she's curled up between the roots I'd say she crawled here to die. Poisoned? Starving? No way of knowing now."

"Scared of the invaders," Reza said thoughtfully. "They probably didn't bother to sequestrate the children."

"You mean the adults just ignored her?" Kelly asked in disgust.

"Ignored her, or drove her away. A child like this wouldn't walk around in the jungle by herself. The village had been established long enough for her to pick up basic jungle lore."

Ryall trotted up to the second corpse, emitting a warm feeling of satisfaction as his muzzle touched the putrefying flesh. Reza picked up the sense of accomplishment and expanded the affinity band allowing himself to see through

the hound's enhanced retinas. "It's another kid," he told them. "A bit older, there's a baby in its arms." Ryall could scent more decaying meat in the humid air, three or four blends, all subtly different. Closer to the river, Fenton had picked up a further series of traces. "My God," Reza growled in a dismayed whisper. "They're everywhere, all around."

A village like Pamiers would start off with a population of about five hundred. Say two hundred families, and they've been here a couple of years. That would mean about a hundred and fifty children.

He stood, scanning the jungle. Slender yellow target graphics slid up over the black and red image in an uncomplicated, unprogrammed reflex. He wanted to shoot something dead. His neural nanonics ordered a slight endocrine effusion, stabilizing the sudden hormonal surge.

"Come on, she can't help us any more," he said, and began pushing briskly through the bushes and vines towards the village. He turned his chameleon circuit off, and after a few paces the others followed suit.

Pamiers followed the standard configuration of settlements along the Juliffe's tributaries. A semicircular clearing chopped out of the jungle along the side of the river. Crude single-storey houses clustered together in no particular order at the centre, along with larger barns, a church, a meeting hall, an Ivet compound. Wooden jetties ventured ten or fifteen metres into the water, with a few fishing skiffs tied up. Fields and plots ringed the outside, a surfeit of crops pushing out of rich black loam.

However, Pamiers' layout was all that remained recognizable as the four of them stepped out of the trees.

"Where is this light coming from?" Kelly asked, looking round in surprised confusion. As Pat had reported, the village bathed luxuriantly in a bright pool of sunlight, and yellow pollen was thick in the air. She scanned the cloud overhead, but there was no break. Thunder, muted while they were in the trees, rolled insistently around them once more.

Ariadne walked on a few paces, activating her full implant sensor suite as well as the specialist blocks clipped to her belt. She turned a complete circle, sampling the environment. "It's omnidirectional. We're not even leaving shadows. See?"

"Like an AV projection," Reza said.

"Yes and no. The spectrum matches Lalonde's sun."

"Let's go see what those new houses are made of," he said.

Pamiers' fields had been left untended. Terrestrial plants were fighting a fierce battle for light and height with the vines that had surged out of the jungle to reclaim their native territory. Fruit was hanging in mouldy white clusters.

Yet inside the ring of fields, the grass around the houses was short and tidy, studded with what looked suspiciously like terrestrial daisies. When he had studied the sheriff's satellite images on the flight from Tranquillity Reza had seen the way the village clearings were worn down and streaked with muddy runnels. Grass and weeds grew in patchy clumps. But this was an even, verdant carpet that matched Tranquillity's parkland for vitality.

Stranger still were the houses.

Apart from three burnt-out ruins, the original wooden shacks had been left standing, their planks bleached a pale grey, shuttered windows open to the weather, bark slates slipping and curling, solar-cell panels flapping loosely. They were uninhabited, that was obvious at a glance. Mosses, tufts of grass, and green moulds were tucked into corners and flourishing promisingly. But jammed at random between the creaky cabins were the new structures. None of them was the same, with architectural styles ranging across centuries—a beautiful two-storey Tudor cottage, an Alpine lodge, a Californian millionaire's cinderblock ranch, a circular black landcoral turret, a marble and silverglass pyramid, a marquee which resembled a cross between a Bedouin tent and a medieval European pavilion, complete with heraldic pennants fluttering on tall poles.

“Having some trouble with my blocks,” Ariadne said. “Several malfunctions. Guido and communications are right out.”

“If it begins to affect the weapons we’ll pull back,” Reza cautioned. “Keep running diagnostic programs.”

They cleared the fields and started to walk over the grass. Ahead of them a woman in a long blue polka-dot dress was pushing a waist-high gloss-black trolley that had a white parasol above it, and huge spindly wheels with chrome wire spokes. Whatever it was, it was impossibly primitive. Reza loaded the image’s pixel pattern into his neural nanonics with an order to run a comparison search program through his encyclopaedia. Three seconds later the program reported it was a European/North American style pram *circa* 1910–50.

He walked over to the woman, who was humming softly. She had a long face that was crudely painted in so much make-up it was almost a clown’s mask, with dark brown hair worn in a severe bun, encased by a net. She smiled up happily at the four members of the team, as though their weapons and equipment and boosted form were of no consequence.

That simpleton smile was the last straw for Reza, whose nerves were already stretched painfully thin. Either she was retarded, or this whole village was an incredibly warped trap. He activated his short-range precision sensors, and scanned her in both electromagnetic and magnetic spectrums, then linked the return into a fire-command protocol. Any change in her composition (such as an implant switching on or a neural nanonics transmission) and his forearm rifle would slam five EE rounds into her. The rest of his sensors were put into a track-while-scan mode, allowing his neural nanonics to keep tabs on the other villagers he could see walking about among the buildings behind her. He had to use four back-up units, several principal sensors had packed up altogether. The overall resolution was way down on the clarity he was used to.

“What the fucking hell’s going on here?” he demanded.

“I have my baby again,” she said in a lilting tone. “Isn’t he gorgeous?”

“I asked you a question. And you will now answer.”

“Do as he says,” Kelly said hastily. “Please.”

The woman turned to her. “Don’t worry, my dear. You can’t hurt me. Not now, not any more. Would you like to see my baby? I thought I’d lost him. I lost so many back then. It was horrible, all those dead babies. The midwives tried to stop me seeing them; but I looked just the same. They were all perfect, so beautiful, my babies. An evil life it was.” She bent forwards over the pram and lifted out a squirming bundle draped in lacy white cloth. The baby cooed as she held it out.

“Where have you come from?” Reza asked. “Are you the sequestration program?”

“I have my life back. I have my baby back. That’s what I am.”

Ariadne stepped forward. “I’m going to get a sample from one of those buildings.”

“Right,” Reza said. “Sewell, go with her.”

The two of them walked round the woman and started off towards the nearest house, a whitewashed Spanish hacienda.

The baby let out a long gurgle, smiling blithely, feet kicking inside the wrap. “Isn’t he just adorable,” the woman said. She tickled his face with a finger.

“One more time,” Reza said. “What are you?”

“I am me. What else could I be?”

“And that?” He pointed to the cloud.

“That is part of us. Our will.”

“Us? Who is us?”

“Those who have returned.”

“Returned from where?”

She rocked the baby against her chest, not even looking up. “From hell.”

“She’s either nuts, or she’s lying,” Reza said.

"She's been sequestered," Kelly said. "You won't get anything out of her."

"So sure of yourselves," the woman said. She gave Kelly a sly look as she cuddled the baby. "So stupid. Your starships have been fighting among themselves. Did you know that?"

Reza's neural nanonics' optical-monitor program reported more people were appearing from the houses. "What do you know about it?"

"We know what we feel, the pain and the iron fire. Their souls weeping in the beyond."

"Can we check?" Kelly asked urgently.

"Not from here."

The woman laughed, a nervous cackle. "There aren't many left to check, my dear. You won't hear from them again. We're taking this planet away, right away. Somewhere safe, where the ships can never come to find us. It will become paradise, you know. And my baby will be with me always."

Reza regarded her with a chill of foreboding. "Yes, you are a part of this," he said quietly. The yellow target graphics locked on to her torso. "What is happening here?"

"We are come, and we are not going to leave. Soon the whole world will be hiding from the sky. From *heaven*. And we shall live on in peace for ever."

"There will be more of this red cloud?"

The woman slowly tilted her head back until she was staring straight up. Her mouth fell open as though in wonder. "I see no clouds." She started to laugh wildly.

Reza saw Ariadne had reached the hacienda. The ranger scout was bending over, scraping at the wall with some kind of tool. Sewell was standing behind her, the long gaussrifle barrels he had plugged into his lower elbow sockets swivelling from side to side in an automatic sweep pattern.

"Ariadne," Reza bellowed. "Get back here. We're leaving now."

The woman's laughter chopped off. "No, you're not." She dropped the baby.

It was Reza's infrared sensors which caught the change. A wave of heat emerged right across her body and started to flow like a film of liquid, rushing along her arms as she brought them up, becoming denser, hotter.

His left forearm's gaussgun fired five electron explosive rounds just as a white light ignited around her hands. There was three metres between them. Impact velocity alone would have been enough to tear her body apart, with the EEs detonating as well there was nothing left for the last three rounds to hit.

Kelly's armour hardened protectively as the blast wave slammed into her. Then she screamed as a jet of spumescent gore slopped across the front of the paralysed fabric.

"Sewell, zero the area!" Reza shouted.

The twin heavy-calibre gaussrifles the big combat-adept mercenary carried began to blaze, squirting out a barrage of EE projectiles. Emerald-green laser beams emerging from Reza and Ariadne snapped on and off, traversing the clearing in a strobe waltz as their lighter weapons picked off targets.

Kelly's armour unlocked. She fell to her knees, centimetres from the baby. Her hand went out instinctively, twitching the blood-soaked lace aside to see if it was still alive.

There was a vennai inside the wrap. The little xenoc creature had been distorted, its vulpine skull swollen and moulded into a more globular shape, scales melded together and stretched. They were losing their distinctive blue-green pigmentation, fading to pale pink. Its forepaws had become chubby, tiny human hands scrabbled feebly at the air. Squeals of terror emerged from its toothless mouth.

Her neural nanonics were unable to quell her stomach spasm in time. An emergency program triggered the shell-helmet's quick-release seal, and the visor sprang open. She vomited onto the neatly mown grass.

Sewell ran backwards across the grass, making almost

as much speed as he could travelling forward. An automatic locomotion program took care of that, guiding his feet round possible obstacles, leaving his conscious thoughts free to assist with target selection.

The first fire sequence had ripped into the houses, smashing them apart in plumes of ionic flame and smoke. Even Sewell, who was aiming for maximum destruction, was surprised by the devastating effect the rifles inflicted. As soon as the first EE projectile hit the buildings their bright colours switched off, leaving behind a neutral grey. The rifles laid down a comprehensive fire pattern. Walls and roofs buckled and collapsed, sending out billowing clouds of thick dust, support timbers splintered then seemed to crumble. Within seconds the whole area had been reduced to pulverized rubble. The old shacks bent and bowed before the pressure blasts; they were far sturdier than the new houses. Several keeled over, wood twisting and shrieking. Slate-tile roofs somersaulted, intact walls slewed through the air rippling like giant mantas.

Sewell switched to the people, concentrating on coordinates where the target-allocation program had located individuals. The feed tubes from his backpack magazine hummed smoothly as they supplied the gaussrifles with fresh ammunition. There had been eighteen people visible to his sensors before Reza's shouted order. He pumped air-burst shrapnel rounds after them as they dived for cover amid the shattered houses.

Infrared sensors showed him eccentric waves of heat shimmering amid the expanding dust. White fire, like an earthbound comet, streaked towards him. Boosted muscles flung him aside. The gaussrifles swung round to the origin, compensating for his dive. EE projectiles pummelled the area.

"Up, you bitch!" Reza yelled at Kelly. "Back to the hovercraft."

She rolled over, seeing a fermenting red cloudscape sky lit by green lasers and white fireballs. Fear and hatred fired her limbs and she jerked to her feet. The houses were a

flattened circle belching smoke and dust. White fire raged in a spiral maelstrom above them, slinging out splinters that arced overhead. Trees fell and fire bloomed where they struck the wall of jungle. Sewell and Ariadne were charging towards her, both firing back into the rubble.

Kelly took three paces towards the trees then stopped. She pulled her nine-millimetre automatic pistol from her holster in one smooth movement. The gun's familiarization and targeting program went into primary mode, and she fired two bullets into the mutated vernal. Then she sprinted after Reza, neural nanonics releasing a torrent of adrenalin and amphetamines into her bloodstream.

Pain stabbed into the back of Ariadne's left thigh as the fireball struck her. Neural nanonics erected an analgesic block straight away. Compensator programs shifted her balance, favouring her right leg, activating those left thigh muscles which remained functional. Valves in the veins and arteries of her pelvis and knee sealed, limiting the blood loss. Her speed was barely reduced. She caught up with Kelly just as a fireball hit the reporter in the side of her ribs.

Kelly's armour gleamed an all-over ruby as it tried to disperse the energy. A circle of the suit flared as it melted. The fire lingered round the rent, chewing at the exposed skin. She stumbled and fell, rolling on the damp loam of an overgrown strawberry patch, beating wildly at the flame with her gauntlets.

"Keep going," Ariadne shouted. Her targeting program located another figure moving through the thinning dust cloud. The TIP pistol plugged into her wrist socket fired a burst of energy at it.

The entire left side of Kelly's ribs had gone numb, frightening her at a deeper level than programs or chemicals could relieve. None of the mercenaries were slowing down. *They're not going to help me!*

Kelly ordered her neural nanonics to override her trembling muscles and scrambled to her feet. Her integral medical program was signalling for attention. She ignored it

and ran on. The clearing's sourceless sunlight went out, plunging her back into the stark red and black landscape of the infrared image.

It took her eight minutes to reach the hovercraft. Eight minutes of furiously punching vines out of her way and skidding on mud while the three mercenaries hurled out a barrage of fire through the jungle to cover their retreat. Eight minutes of white fireballs twisting and swerving round trunks, pursuing the team with the tenacity of smart seeker missiles. Of thunder roaring overhead and flinging down stupendous lightning bolts that rocked the ground. Sudden impossible gusts of wind rising from nowhere to slap her around like a lightweight doll. Of neural nanonic programs and endocrine implant effusions assuming more and more control of her body as its natural functions faltered under the unrelenting demands of her flight.

One hovercraft was already rushing down the slope into the snowlily-congested river when she arrived at the little glade.

"Bastards!" she yelled weakly.

Lightning struck twenty metres behind her, sending her sprawling. Reza was sitting behind the second hovercraft's control panel, hand playing over the switches. The impeller fans began to spin, forcing air into the skirt. It began to rise slowly upwards; Sewell and Sal Yong stood on either side of it, their gaussrifles blasting away at unseen targets.

Kelly started to crawl. The first of the white fireballs shot out of the trees, curving round to drop on the hovercraft. Lightning flashed down again. A mayope tree toppled over with a sepulchral splintering. It crashed down ten metres behind her, one of the upper boughs coming down straight on top of her legs. Her armour stiffened, and her bent knees were pushed sharply into the yielding loam.

"Wait!" Kelly begged in a rasp. "For fuck's sake, you shitheads. Wait!"

The hovercraft's skirt was fully inflated, twigs and

leaves were thrown out from under the thick rubbery fabric. Sewell hopped over the gunwale.

“Jesus God, I can’t move. Help me!” Her vision contracted to a tunnel with the hovercraft at the far end.

“Help me!”

Sewell was standing in the middle of the hovercraft. One of his gaussrifles turned towards her. Leaves and small branches rustled and slithered like serpents over her legs, she could feel them coiling round her calves. Then Sewell fired. The explosions sent her cartwheeling over the ground. She slammed into something hard. It grated along the side of her armour suit. Moving. Hovercraft! Her hands scrabbled with animal passion against it. And she was being lifted effortlessly into the air. Rationality ended there and she kicked and flailed against the air. “No! No! No!”

“Easy there, Kell, I’ve got you.”

Her world spun round as the big mercenary dumped her unceremoniously on the floor of the hovercraft. She gagged, limbs juddering as the neural nanonics stopped sending out compulsive overrides. After a minute she began to sob, the quivering muscle motions starting deep in her belly and emerging through her mouth.

“You made it,” Sal Yong said later. How much later Kelly didn’t know, her mind was furred with tranquillizers, thoughts slow. She tried to sit up, and winced at the bands of pain tightening around her ribs. A medical diagram unfolded inside her skull. Her body’s decay in unwelcome detail.

“The tree!” she barked hoarsely.

“We got it,” Sewell said. “Shitfire, but that was weird.”

“You were going to leave me!” Panic set her skin crawling. Blue lights flashed silently around the physiological display. More tranquillizers.

“You’re going to have to learn to keep up, Kell,” Reza said in his normal level tones. “We’re on a combat mission. I told you when we started, I can’t spare anyone for baby-sitting duties.”

“Yes.” She flopped back down. “So you did. I’m sorry.”

I simply didn't realize you were serious, that you would leave a fellow human being behind, to face . . . that.

"Hey, you did all right," Sal Yong said. "Lotsa people would have screwed up, they had all that shit thrown at them."

"Oh, thanks."

There were mechanical clunks from somewhere behind her as Sewell detached his gaussrifles. "Let's see about getting that armour off you, Kell. You look like you could do with some field aid." She felt him touch the suit's seal catch, and then humid sticky air was sliding over her skin. Her helmet came off, and she blinked dizzily.

Sewell was sitting on a bench above her, holding a couple of medical nanonic packages. Kelly avoided looking at her ribs; the physiological display was bad enough.

"Looks like I'm not the only one," she said, smiling bravely. His artificial skin was pitted with small deep blackened craters where the white fire had struck, including a long score on the side of his glossy head. Blood and fluid dribbled out of the cracks each time he moved. "Or are you going to say they're just flesh wounds?"

"Nothing critical."

"Oh, crap, I'm drowning in macho culture."

"You can put your gun down now, Kell."

The nine-millimetre pistol was still in her hand, fingers solidified round its grip. She gave it a bewildered stare. "Right. Good idea."

He tilted her gently on her right side, then peeled the covering off the nanonic package. It moulded itself to her left side, curving round to cover her from her navel to her spine. The colours of her physiological display changed, reds diluting to amber, as it began knitting itself to her wound.

"Where are we going?" she asked. The hovercraft was moving faster than it had before. Humidity was making her sweat all over, the smell of vegetation was rank, itching her throat. Lying half-naked racing through a xenoc jungle being chased by monsters and cut off from any hope of res-

cue. She knew she ought to be reduced virtually to hysterics, yet really it was almost funny. You wanted a tough assignment, my girl.

"Aberdale," Reza said. "According to the LDC's chief sheriff, that's where the first reported trouble started."

"Of course," Kelly answered. There was a strange kind of strength on the far side of utter despair, she found, or maybe it was just the tranquilizers.

"Kell?"

She closed her leaden eyelids. "Yes."

"Why did you shoot the baby?"

"You don't want to know."

The navy squadron closed on Lalonde at seven gees, crews prone on their acceleration couches with faces screwed up against the lead-weighted air which lay on top of them. When they were seventeen thousand kilometres out, the fusion flames died away and the starships rotated a hundred and eighty degrees in a virtuoso display of synchronization, ion thrusters crowning them in a triumphant blue haze. The *Arikara* and the *Shukyo* released twenty combat communication-relay satellites, streaking away at ten gees to englobe the planet. Then the warships began to decelerate.

As the merciless gee force returned to *Arikara*'s bridge Meredith Saldana accessed the tactical display. The voidhawks had performed small swallow manoeuvres, taking them to within two and a half thousand kilometres of the planet and curving into orbit ahead of the Adamist warships to which such short-range precision jumps were impossible. But the mercenary fleet was leading the bitek starships a merry dance. Three blackhawks were racing away from Lalonde, striving for the magic two thousand kilometre altitude where they would be outside the influence of the planet's gravitational field, allowing them to swallow away. Voidhawks were in pursuit. Four of the nine combat-capable independent traders were also under acceleration. Two of them, *Datura* and *Cereus*, were heading on a vector straight towards the squadron at two and a half

gees. They wouldn't respond to any warning calls from the *Arikara*, nor Terrance Smith.

"*Haria*, *Gakkai*, go to defensive engagement status, please," Meredith datavised. The situation display showed him the two frigates end their deceleration burn, flip over, and accelerate ahead of the rest of the squadron.

"What is the state of the remaining mercenary ships?" the Admiral enquired.

"Smith claims the starships remaining in orbit are obeying his orders, and therefore haven't been hijacked," said Lieutenant Franz Grese, the squadron Intelligence officer.

"What do you think?"

"I think Commander Solanki was right, and we'd better be very careful, Admiral."

"Agreed. Commander Kroeber, we'll send a marine squad into the *Gemal* first. If we can verify that Smith himself hasn't been hijacked or sequestered it may just make our job that bit easier."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The tactical situation warned him the *Datura* and *Cereus* were launching combat wasps. Meredith observed in astonishment as each of them released a salvo of thirty-five; according to the accompanying identification codes the starships were small vehicles, forty to forty-five metres in diameter. They couldn't have held back any reserves—what absurd tactics. The drone armaments began to accelerate from their launch craft at twenty gees.

"No antimatter, Admiral," datavised Second Lieutenant Clark Lowie, the *Arikara's* weapons officer. "Fusion drives only."

That's something, Meredith thought. "What's their storage capacity?"

"Best estimate would be forty combat wasps maximum, Admiral."

"So they haven't left any for their own defence?"

"Looks that way, sir."

Haria and *Gakkai* launched a counter salvo; eighty combat wasps leaping ahead to intercept the incoming hostiles

at twenty-seven gees. Purple, red, and green vector lines sprang up in Meredith's mind, as if someone was performing laser acupuncture right across his skull. The combat wasps started to squirt megawatt electronic warfare pulses at each other. Active and kinetic submunitions began to scatter. Two disc-shaped swarms formed, five hundred kilometres across, alive with deceitful impulses and infrared signatures. Electron beams flashed out, perfectly straight lightning bolts glaring against the starfield. The first explosions flared. Kiloton nuclear devices were detonated on each side. Smaller explosions followed as combat wasps blew apart under the prodigious energy impact.

A second, smaller, salvo was launched by the frigates, compensating for the loss.

"Admiral, the *Myoho* reports the blackhawk it's chasing is about to swallow outsystem," Lieutenant Rhoecus called. "Request permission to follow."

"Granted. Follow and interdict; it is not to come into contact with inhabited Confederation territory."

"Aye, aye, sir."

A vast circle of space burst into pyrotechnic oblivion as the two antagonistic combat wasp swarms collided, as though a giant wormhole had been torn open into the heart of a nearby star. The annular plasma storm eddied violently, radiating down through the visible spectrum in seconds until only nebulous violet mists were left.

Arikara's sensor clusters struggled to burn through the conflagration and present an accurate representation of events through the tactical situation display. Some submunitions from both sides had survived. Now they were accelerating towards their intended targets. All four combatant ships began high-gee evasive manoeuvres.

Myoho and its blackhawk disappeared from the display. *Granth* and *Ilex* both fired a volley of combat wasps at their respective prey.

Haria's masers began to fire as the remaining submunitions closed on it. Small vivid explosions peppered nearby space. Rail guns thumped out a stream of steel spheres

which formed a last-ditch kinetic umbrella. Eight surviving submunitions drones detected it, three of them were gamma-pulse lasers. A second before they struck the umbrella they fired.

Large oval sections of the frigate's hull turned cherry red under the radiation assault. Molecular-binding generators maxed out as they fought to keep the monobonded silicon's structure intact. The energy-dispersal web below the silicon struggled to absorb and redistribute the intense influx. All the sensor clusters either melted or had their electronics burnt out by the gamma-ray deluge. Replacement clusters rose immediately; but the starship was blind for a period of three seconds.

In that time the remaining five submunitions hit the kinetic umbrella. They disintegrated instantly, but hypervelocity fragments kept coming. With the sensors unable to see them and direct the frigate's close-range weapons they struck the hull and vaporized. The binding generators, already heavily stressed, couldn't handle the additional loading. There were half a dozen localized punctures. Fists of plasma punched inwards. Internal systems melted and fused as they were exposed. Fuel tanks ripped open sending hundred-metre fountains of vaporizing deuterium shooting out.

"*Bellah*, assist, please," Commander Kroeber ordered. "Rescue and recovery." The stricken frigate's emergency beacon was howling across the distress bands. The life-support capsules should have easily withstood the strike. Even as he requested more information from the computer the sensor image showed him ion thrusters firing to slow the frigate's wayward tumble.

With all of their combat-wasp stocks exhausted in the first salvo, *Datura* and *Cereus* were left with only short-range masers to defend themselves against the assault from the frigates' drones. The electronic warfare barrage was unrelenting as the drones closed at twenty gees, defeating the starships' sensors. The two mercenary starships exploded within seconds of each other.

A cheer went round the *Arikara*'s bridge. Meredith felt like joining in.

"Admiral, another blackhawk is leaving orbit," Lieutenant Rhoecus said.

Meredith cursed, he really couldn't spare another voidhawk. A quick check on the tactical display revealed little information, the blackhawk was on the other side of Lalonde from the squadron. "Which is the nearest voidhawk?"

"The *Acacia*, Admiral."

"Can they hit it with combat wasps?"

"They have a launch window, but estimate only a thirty per cent chance of success."

"Tell them to launch, but remain in orbit."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"*Bellah* reports survivors from the *Haria* have been detected, Admiral," Commander Kroeber said. "They're matching velocities."

"Good. Hinnels, has there been any reaction from the Juliffe cloud bands?"

"Nothing specific, sir. But they've been growing wider at a constant rate, the area they're covering has increased by one and a half per cent since we arrived. It adds up to a respectable volume."

Another combat-wasp battle raged high above Lalonde's terminator as the drones from the *Granth* encountered defences fired by their prey. Then the blackhawk vanished down a wormhole interstice. Three seconds later *Granth* followed.

"Damn," Meredith muttered.

But the *Ilex* was having better luck. Its combat-wasp salvo had forced the blackhawk it was chasing to flee back down towards the planet.

The Admiral requested a channel to the *Gemal*. "We shall be boarding you first, Smith. Any resistance and the marines will shoot to kill, understood?"

"Yes, Admiral," Terrance Smith replied.

“Have you received any updates from the teams you landed?”

“Not yet. I expect most of them were sequestered,” he added gloomily.

“Tough. I want you to broadcast a message that their mission is over. We will pick up any survivors if at all possible. But none of them is to attempt to penetrate under the cloud, no hunting of enemy bases. This is now a Confederation Navy problem. I don’t want the invaders antagonized unduly.” Not while my squadron is so close to that bloody cloud, he finished silently. It was the sheer quantity of power involved again. Frightening. And the berserk way the hijacked ships were behaving didn’t help.

“I’m not sure I can guarantee that, Admiral,” Smith said.

“Why not?”

“I issued the team leaders with kiloton nukes. It would give them a fall-back in case the starships were unable to provide strike power. I was worried the captains might balk at bombarding a planetary surface.”

If it hadn’t been for the fierce gee force Meredith would have put his head in his hands. “Smith, if you get out of this with your life, it won’t be on my account.”

“Well, fuck you!” Terrance Smith yelled. “You Saldana bastard, why do you think I had to hire these people in the first place? It’s because Lalonde is too poor to rate decent navy protection. Where were you when the invaders landed? You would never have come to help us put down that first insurrection, because it didn’t affect your precious financial interests. Money, that’s what you shits respect. What the hell would you know about ordinary people suffering? You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth that’s so big it’s sticking out through your arse. The only reason you’re here now is because you’re frightened the invasion might spread to worlds you own, that it might hit your credit balance. I’m doing what I can for *my* people.”

“And that includes nuking them, does it?” Meredith asked. He’d been subject to anti-Saldana bigotry for so

long now the insults never even registered. “They’re sequestered, you cretin, they don’t even know they’re your people any more. This invasion isn’t going to be beaten by brute force. Now, you will broadcast that message, make the mercenary teams turn back.”

The tactical display sounded an alarm. A broad fan of curving purple vector lines were rising high over Wyman, Lalonde’s small arctic continent. Someone behind the planet had launched a salvo of fifty-five combat wasps.

“My God,” Meredith muttered. “Lowie, what are they aimed at?”

“Unclear, Admiral. There is no single target, it’s a rogue salvo. But from the vectors I’d say they were seeking to engage anything in the thousand-kilometre orbit . . . Bloody hell.”

A second salvo, of equal size, was curving round the south pole.

“Jesus, that’s a neat pincer movement,” Joshua said. At some ridiculous private level he was delighted he didn’t need any intervention from his neural nanonics to remain calm. He felt his mind function with that same cool reserve which had manifested itself back in the Ruin Ring when Neeves and Sipika appeared.

This is me, what I am: a starship captain.

The *Lady Mac*’s three fusion drives came on almost without conscious thought. “Stand by for combat gees,” he warned.

“How many?” Sarha asked nervously.

“How high is up?”

Other starships were getting under way, retracting their thermo-dump panels. Three of them launched combat wasps in a defensive cluster formation.

“Remain in orbit,” Smith ordered over the command net. “The navy squadron will provide us with protective cover from the salvo.”

“Like bollocks they will,” Joshua said. The squadron was still four minutes from orbital injection. A sensor scan

revealed blackhawks and voidhawks alike racing up for a higher altitude; the slower Adamist starships were following, with three exceptions, *Gemal* one of them.

The gee force in *Lady Mac*'s bridge passed five gees. Ashly groaned in dismay. "My bones can't take this."

"You're younger than me," Warlow countered.

"I'm more human, too."

"Wimp."

"Castrated mechanoid."

Sarha suddenly noticed the trajectory Joshua had loaded into the flight computer. "Joshua! Where the hell are you taking us?"

Lady Mac was rising above the equatorial plane at seven gees, decreasing altitude at the same time.

"We're going under them."

"This trajectory is going to graze the atmosphere!"

He watched more of the mercenary starships launching combat wasps. "I know." It had been an instinctive manoeuvre, opposing every tactic program in the flight computer's memory core; they all said altitude was the key in orbital combat situations, giving you more room to manoeuvre, more flexibility. Everyone else in the little mercenary fleet was clinging to that doctrine, escaping from Lalonde with fusion drives operating way out on the limit. "Dad was always telling me about this one," he said in what he hoped was a confident manner. "He always used it in a scrape. *Lady Mac*'s still about, isn't she?"

"Your bloody father isn't!" Sarha had to datavise, she couldn't expel enough air from her lungs to talk. The acceleration had reached nine gees. She hadn't known even *Lady Mac* could produce that kind of drive level. Every internal membrane supplement had turned rock hard. An arterial implant at the base of her neck was injecting oxygen into her bloodstream, making sure her brain didn't starve. She couldn't ever remember having to use it before. Joshua Calvert, we are not a bloody combat wasp!

"Look, it's very simple," he explained, trying to sort out the logic in his own mind. As usual, rationality was trail-

ing well behind impetuosity. "Combat wasps are designed for deep-space operations. They can't operate in the atmosphere."

"We are designed for deep-space operations!"

"Yes, but we're spherical."

Sarha couldn't snarl, she would have dislocated her jaw bone; but she managed to grate her teeth together.

Lady Macbeth flew over the Sarell continent in forty-five seconds, arching down sharply towards the brown and yellow volcanic deserts. She was three hundred kilometres in altitude when she passed over the northern coastline; the north pole was two and a half thousand kilometres ahead. Seven hundred kilometres above, and four thousand kilometres ahead, the combat wasp salvo spotted her. Six of them abruptly altered course and dived down.

"Here they come," Joshua said. He fired eight of *Lady Mac*'s combat wasps, programming them for a tight defence-shield formation. The drones leapt upwards at twenty gees, scattering submunitions almost immediately.

Aft sensors showed the starships in orbit behind and above were releasing more and more combat wasps. Even the *Gemal* was breaking out of its thousand-kilometre orbit, the old colonist-carrier could only make one and a half gees. And there was no escort, Joshua saw sadly. Far away to the east, barely above the horizon, there was a volley of explosions followed by the unmistakable larger smeared detonation of a starship. Wonder who that was? It didn't seem to matter much, only that it wasn't him.

"Melvyn, keep monitoring the grav-detector satellite data. I want to know if any ships start jumping outsystem, and if possible where to."

"I'm on it, Joshua."

"Dahybi, I can't believe the voidhawks can keep jamming our nodes with all this going on, the second they slip I want to know."

"Yes, Captain."

The sensors showed Joshua the attacking combat wasps releasing their submunitions. Particle beams lanced out

from both swarms. "OK, everybody, here we go." He shot an order directly into the drive deflector coils, and *Lady Mac* lurched downwards.

Meredith Saldana caught the crazy flight vector developing and datavised a request into the tactical situation computer for confirmation. The vector was recomputed and verified. Half of the squadron's frigates would be unable to produce a nine-gee thrust. "Who's that idiot?" he asked in reflex.

"*Lady Macbeth*, sir," Lieutenant Franz Grese said. "None of the others have triple-fusion drives."

"Well, if they all suicide on us I shall be a very happy man."

It wasn't looking good. He had already changed the squadron's operational orbit from one thousand kilometres to two thousand three hundred, which would give them a superior look-down shoot-down position—but only if the mercenary ships stayed put. Injection was in ninety seconds. Combat wasps were being launched at a prodigious rate from the mercenary fleet. Intelligence and tactics programs couldn't say which were defensive and who was attacking whom. Each of his squadron's ships had launched a defence cluster salvo.

One of the voidhawks exploded with appalling savagery, and the victorious blackhawk skirted its roiling debris plume to vanish into a wormhole interstice.

"Who?" he asked Rhoecus.

"*Ericra*, but they saw the combat-wasp barrage approaching. *Ilex* has their memory patterns safe."

Even now, after all the truths he had seen in his cosmopolitan life, Meredith felt the old twang of prejudice. Upon death, souls departed this life for ever. It was the Christian way. They were not to be ensnared in a mockery of God's living creatures.

You can leave the Kingdom, he acknowledged jadedly, but it never leaves you.

Go in peace, he prayed silently for the dead Edenists. *Wherever you roam.*

On a more pertinent level he was down to six void-hawks.

“Combat wasps have locked on to the *Gemal*, sir,” Clarke Lowie reported.

The gee force on the bridge was reducing rapidly as the *Arikara* slid into orbit.

Thank Christ for small mercies, Meredith thought. “Commander Kroeber, squadron to engage all combat wasps launched by the mercenary fleet. We’ll sort out who’s friendly and who isn’t when events become a little less immediate.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Arikara trembled as a salvo was fired.

“Issue a blanket order for all mercenary starships to cease acceleration and evasive manoeuvres as soon as the combat wasps have been cleared. Failure to comply will result in naval fire.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

When the *Lady Mac* reached one hundred kilometres’ altitude Joshua withdrew all but five sensor clusters. Wyman’s fjord-etched coastline was directly below. Three hundred kilometres overhead, the two combat-wasp swarms were firing a fusillade of kinetic missiles and coherent radiation at each other. They clashed at a closing speed of over seventy kilometres per second. A patch of sky burst into pure white atomic fury, bringing a transient dawn to the arctic continent’s month-long night underneath.

Eleven submunitions broke through to descend on the *Lady Macbeth* with cybernetic mayhem in their silicon brains. Two of them were one-shot gamma pulsers. They tracked the hurtling starship as it buffeted its way through the upper atmosphere, then discharged the energy in their electron matrices with one swift burst. The resulting gamma-ray beam lasted for a quarter of a second.

A sheath of ions had already built up around the *Lady Macbeth*’s hull, a tangerine florescence that radiated away from the forward fuselage in hypersonic ripples. But they

were swiftly lost against the incandescent streams of energized helium emerging from the fusion tubes. The stratosphere reeled from the unrestrained tumult of the starship's passage. Her exhaust stretched out over a hundred and fifty kilometres behind her, evanescing into titanic electrical storms which lashed the sharp icy steppes seventy-five kilometres below with a vigour that threatened to split the glaciers open to the bedrock. Insubstantial green and scarlet borealis spectres cavorted over the ice-encrusted continent in a display which rivalled the bands over the Juliffe in scale.

"Breakthrough!" Warlow cried.

Systems schematics filled Joshua's mind, laced with red symbols. The hull's molecular-binding generators, already labouring with the burden imposed by the ion sheath, had overloaded in half a dozen places as the gamma pulses drilled into the monobonded silicon.

He switched back to the flight management display. The thrust from one of the fusion tubes was reducing. "Any physical violation?" The thought of needles of blazing atmospheric gases searing in over the delicate modules and tanks at this velocity was terrifying. Neural nanonics effused an adrenalin antidote into his bloodstream.

"Negative, it's all energy seepage. But there's some heavy component damage. Losing power from generator two, and I've got cryogenic leakages."

"Compensate, then, just keep us functional. We'll be through the atmosphere in another twenty seconds."

Sarha was already datavising a comprehensive list of instructions into the flight computer, closing pipes and tanks, isolating damaged sub-components, pumping vaporized coolant fluid from the malfunctioning generator into emergency dump stores. Warlow began to help her, prioritizing the power circuits.

"Three nodes are out, Joshua," Dahybi reported.

"Irrelevant." He took the starship down to sixty kilometres.

The nine remaining kinetic missile drones followed.

They were, as Joshua said, intended for deep space operation: basically a sensor cluster riding on top of fuel tanks and a drive unit. There was no streamlining, no outer fuselage; in a vacuum there was no need for such refinements. All they had to do was collide with their victim, mass and velocity would obey Newton's equations and combine to complete the task. But now they were flying through the mesosphere, a medium implacably alien and hostile. Ionization started to accumulate around their blunt circular sensor heads as the gas thickened, turning to long tongues of violet and yellow flame which licked back along the body. Sensors burnt away in seconds, exposing the guidance electronics to the radiant incoming molecules. Blinded, crippled, subject to intolerable heat and friction pressures, the kinetic drones detonated in garish starburst splendour twenty kilometres above the *Lady Macbeth*.

The *Arikara*'s tactical situation display showed their vectors wink out almost simultaneously. "Very smart," Meredith said grudgingly. It took a hell of a nerve to pilot a starship like that—nerve and egomaniacal self-confidence. I doubt I would have that much gumption.

"Stand by. Evasive manoeuvring," Commander Kroeber said.

And Meredith had no more time to reflect on the singular antics of Joshua Calvert. Punishing gravity returned abruptly to the flagship's bridge. A third salvo of combat wasps leaped out of their launch-tubes.

Lady Macbeth soared out of the mesosphere, throwing off her dangerous cloak of glowing molecules. Behind her, Wyman's ice-fields glimmered under eerie showers of ethereal light. Combat-sensor clusters rose out of their hull recesses on short stalks, their golden-lensed optical scanners searching round.

"We're in the clear. Thank you, sweet Jesus." Joshua reduced the thrust from the fusion drives until it was a merely uncomfortable three gees. Their trajectory was taking them straight away from the planet at a high inclination. There were no combat wasps within four thousand

kilometres. I *knew* the old girl could do it. "Told you so," he sang at the top of his voice.

"Awesome," Ashly said, and meant it.

On the couch next to Joshua, Melvyn shook his head in dazed admiration despite the gee force.

"Thanks, Joshua," Sarha said gently.

"My pleasure. Now, damage assessments please. Dahybi, can we jump?"

"I'll need time to run more diagnostics. But even if we can jump it isn't going to be far. Those three nodes were physically wrecked by the gamma pulses. Our energy patterns will have to be recalculated. Ideally, we need to replace the nodes first."

"We're only carrying two spares. I'm not made of money. Dad always jumped with nodes damaged and—"

"Don't," Sarha pleaded. "Just for once, Joshua. Let's deal with the present, OK?"

"Somebody's jumped outsystem," Melvyn said. "The grav-detector satellites registered at least two distortions while we were performing our dodo impersonation, I think there may have been a wormhole interstice opened as well. I can't tell for sure, half of the satellites have dropped out."

"There is no jamming from the voidhawks any more," Dahybi said.

"OK, great. Warlow, Sarha, how are our systems coping?"

"Number two generator's out," Warlow said. "I've shut it down. It took the main strike from the gamma rays. Lucky really, most of the energy was absorbed by its casing. We'll have to dump it when we dock, it's got a half-life longer than some geological eras now."

"And I'd like you to stop using the number one fusion-drive tube," Sarha said. "The injection ionizers are damaged. Other than that, nothing serious, we've got some leaks and some component glitches. But none of the life-support capsules were breached, and our environmental-maintenance equipment is fully functional."

"Got another jumper," Melvyn called out."

Joshua reduced thrust to one gee, cutting drive tube one altogether, then accessed the sensors. "Jesus, will you look at that?"

Lalonde had acquired its own ring, gloriously radiant stripes of fusion fire twining together to form a platinum amulet of immense complexity. Over five hundred combat wasps were in flight, and thousands of submunitions wove convoluted trajectories. Starships initiated high-gee evasive manoeuvres. Nuclear explosions blossomed.

The *Lady Macbeth's* magnetic and electromagnetic sensors were recording impulses nearly off the scale. It was a radiative inferno.

"Two more wormhole interstices opening," Melvyn said. "Our bitek comrades are leaving in droves."

"I think we'll join them," Joshua said. Just for once in her life, Sarha might be right, he conceded. It was the now which counted. *Lady Mac* was already two thousand kilometres in altitude, and rising steeply from the pole; he shifted their inclination again, carrying them further north of the ecliptic and away from the conflict raging above the planet's equatorial zones. Another three thousand kilometres and they would be out of the influence of Lalonde's gravity field, and free to jump. He made a mental note to travel an additional five hundred clicks—no point in stressing the nodes, given their state. About a hundred seconds at their current acceleration. "Dahybi, how is the patterning coming?"

"Reprogramming. Another two minutes. You really don't want to rush me with this one, Joshua."

"Fine, the further we are from the gravity field the better."

"What about the mercs?" Ashly said. It wasn't loud, but his level voice carried the bridge easily.

Joshua banished the display showing him possible jump coordinates. He turned his head and glared at the pilot. Why was there always one awkward bastard? "We can't! Jesus, they're killing each other back there."

"I promised them, Joshua. If they were alive I said I

would go down and pick them up. And you said something similar in your message.”

“We’ll come back.”

“Not in this ship, not in a week. If we dock at a port, it’ll take a month to refit. That’s without any hassle from the navy. They won’t be alive in two days, not down there.”

“The navy said they’d pick up any survivors.”

“You mean that same navy which right now is shooting at our former colleagues?”

“Jesus!”

“There isn’t going to be a combat wasp left in thirty minutes,” the pilot said reasonably. “Not at the rate they’re expending them. All we have to do is sit tight for a couple of hours out here.”

Instinct pushed Joshua, *repelled* him from Lalonde and the red cloud bands. “No,” he said. “I’m sorry, Ashly, but no. This is too big for us.” The coordinate display flipped up in his mind.

Ashly looked desperately round the bridge for an ally. His eyes found Sarha’s guilty expression.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Joshua?”

“Now what!”

“We should jump to Murora.”

“Where?” His almanac file produced the answer, Murora was the largest gas giant in the Lalonde system. “Oh.”

“Makes sense,” she said. “There’s even an Edenist station in orbit to supervise their new habitat’s growth. We can dock there and replace the failed nodes with our spares. Then we can jump back here in a day or so and do a fast fly-by. If we get an answer from the mercs, and the navy doesn’t shoot us on sight, Ashly can go down to pick them up. If not, we just head straight back to Tranquillity.”

“Dahybi, what do you think?” Joshua asked curtly. Most of his anger was directed at himself; he should have thought of Murora as an alternative destination.

“Gets my vote,” the node specialist said. “I really don’t

want to try an interstellar jump unless we absolutely have to.”

“Anybody else object? No? OK, nice idea, Sarha.” For the third time, the jump coordinate display appeared in his mind. He computed a vector to align the *Lady Mac* on the gas giant, eight hundred and fifty-seven million kilometres distant.

Ashly blew Sarha a kiss across the bridge. She grinned back.

Lady Macbeth's two remaining fusion drives powered down. Ion thrusters matched her course to the Murora jump coordinate with tiny nudges. Joshua fired a last coded message at the geostationary communications satellites, then the dish antenna and various sensor clusters started to sink down into their jump recesses.

“Dahybi?” Joshua asked.

“I've programmed in the new patterns. Look at it this way, if they don't work, we'll never know.”

“Fucking wonderful.” He ordered the flight computer to initiate the jump.

Two kinetic missiles hammered into the frigate *Neanthe*, almost severing it in half. When the venting deuterium and glowing debris cleared, *Arikara*'s sensors observed *Neanthe*'s four life-support capsules spinning rapidly. Still intact. Kinetic missiles found two of them while a one-shot pulser discharged eighty kilometres away, stabbing another with a beam of coherent gamma radiation.

Admiral Saldana clenched his teeth in helpless fury. The battle had rapidly escalated out of all control, or even sanity. All the mercenary ships had fired salvos of combat wasps, there was simply no way of telling which were programmed to attack ships (or which ships) and which were for defence.

The tactical situation computer estimated over six hundred had now been launched. But communications were poor even with the dedicated satellites, and sensor data was degraded by the vast amount of electronic warfare sig-

nals emitted by everybody's combat wasps. One of the bridge ratings had said they'd be better off with a periscope.

When it came, the explosion was intense enough to outshine the combined photonic output of the six hundred-plus fusion drives whirling round above Lalonde. An unblemished radiation nimbus expanded outwards at a quarter of the speed of light, engulfing starships, combat wasps, submunitions, and observation satellites with complete dispassion; hiding their own detonation behind a shell of scintillating molecules. When it was five hundred kilometres in diameter it began to thin, swirling with secondary colours like a solar soap bubble. It was three thousand kilometres ahead of the *Arikara*, yet it was potent enough to burn out every one of the sensors which the flagship had orientated on that sector of space.

"What the hell was that?" Meredith asked. The fear was there again, as always. Antimatter.

Seven gees slammed him down in his couch as the starship accelerated away from the planet and the dwindling explosion.

Clark Lowie and Rhys Hinnels reviewed the patchy tactical situation data leading up to the explosion. "It was one of their starships which imploded, sir," Clarke Lowie said after a minute's consultation. "The patterning nodes were activated."

"But it was only three thousand kilometres above Lalonde."

"Yes, sir. They must have known that. But they took out the *Shukyo* and the *Bellah*. I'd say it was deliberate."

"Suicide?"

"Looks that way, sir."

Five ships. He had lost five ships, and God knows how much damage inflicted on the rest of them. Mission elapsed time was twenty-three minutes, and most of that had been spent flying into orbit from the emergence point.

"Commander Kroeber, withdraw all squadron ships

from orbit immediately. Tell them to rendezvous at the jump coordinate for Cadiz.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

A direct repudiation of the First Admiral’s orders, but there was no mission left, not any more. And he could save some crews by retreating now. He had that satisfaction, for himself.

The gravity plane shifted slightly as the *Arikara* came round onto its new vector, then reduced to five gees. Another salvo of combat wasps was fired as enemy drones curved round to intercept them.

Madness. Utter madness.

The river was one of the multitude of smaller unnamed tributaries that covered the south-western region of the colossal Juliffe basin. Its roots were the streams wandering round the long knolls which made up the land away to the south of Durringham, merging and splitting a dozen times until finally becoming a single steadfast river two hundred kilometres from the Juliffe itself.

At the time the spaceplanes brought down the mercenary scout teams there was still a respectable current running through it, the deflected rains hadn’t yet begun to affect the flow of water. In any case, the lakes and swamps which accounted for a third of its length formed a considerable reservoir, capable of sustaining the level for months.

The snowlilies, too, were relatively unaffected. The only difference the red cloud made was to extend the period it took for the aquatic leaves to ripen and break free of their stems. But where it ran through the thickest jungle that made up the majority of the Juliffe basin, the snowlilies seemed almost as numerous as always. Certainly they managed to cover the river’s thirty-metre width, even if they weren’t layered two or three deep as they had been in previous seasons.

Where the tributary ran through a quiet section of deepest jungle, one of the snowlilies five metres from the bank bulged up near the centre, then tore. A fist with grey water-

resistant artificial skin punched through and began to widen the tear. Chas Paske broke the surface, and looked round.

The banks on either side of him were steep walls made from the knotted roots of cherry oak trees. Tall trunks straddled the summit, their white bark stained magenta from the light filtering through the tenebrous canopy far overhead. As far as the combat-boosted mercenary could see there was nobody around. He struck out for the shore.

His left thigh had been badly damaged by the white fire flung by the women who'd ambushed them. It was one reason for diving into the river as his team fled from the spaceplane's landing zone. Nothing else seemed to extinguish the vile stuff.

Their shrill, delighted laughter had reverberated through the trees as the mercenaries crashed through the undergrowth. If he had just been granted another minute to unload their gear, establish a perimeter defence formation, the outcome would have been so very different. They had enjoyed it, those vixen women, that was the terrifying part of it, calling happily to each other as the mercenaries ran in panic. It was a game to them, exhilarating sport.

They weren't people as he understood. Chase Paske was neither a superstitious nor religious man. But he knew that whatever evil had befallen Lalonde had nothing to do with Laton, nor was it going to be solved by Terrance Smith and his rag-tag forces.

He reached the bank and started to climb. The roots were atrociously slippery, his left leg dangled uselessly, and his arms and back were badly burnt, debilitating the boosted muscles. It was a slow process, but by jamming his elbows and right knee into crannies he could lever and pull himself upwards.

The women, it appeared, hadn't understood the feats a boosted metabolism was capable of. He could survive for an easy four hours underwater without taking a breath. A useful trait when chemical and biological agents were being used.

Chas scrambled up the last couple of metres to the top of the woody bank, and rolled into the lee of a crooked trunk. Only then did he start to review the bad news his neural nanonics medical program was supplying.

The shallow flesh burns he could ignore for now—although they would need treating eventually. Almost half of his outer thigh had been burnt away, and the dull glint of his silicolithium femur was visible through the minced and charred muscle tissue. Nothing short of a total rebuild was going to get his leg functioning again. He started picking long white worm-analogues from the lairs they were burrowing into the naked wound.

He didn't even have his pack with him when the women attacked. There was only his personal equipment belt. Which was better than nothing, he thought phlegmatically. It contained two small neural nanonic packages, which he wrapped round the top of his thigh like an old-fashioned bandage. They didn't cover half the length of the wound, but they would stop poisoned blood and aboriginal bacteria from getting into the rest of his circulatory system. The remainder of it was going to fester, he realized grimly.

Taking stock, he had a first aid kit, a laser pistol with two spare power magazines, a small fission-blade knife, a hydrocarbon analyser to tell him which vegetation contained toxins his metabolism couldn't filter, a palm-sized thermal inducer, and five EE grenades. He also had his guido block, a biological/chemical agent detector block, and an electronic warfare detector block. No communications block, though, which was a blow; he couldn't check in with Terrance Smith to request evacuation, or even find out if any other members of his team had survived.

Finally there was the kiloton fusion nuke strapped to his side in its harness. A black carbotanium sphere twenty centimetres in diameter, thoroughly innocuous looking.

Chas did nothing for five minutes while he thought about his situation; then he began to cut strips of wood from the cherry oaks to form a splint and a crutch.

Hidden behind its event horizon, the singularity came into being two hundred and twenty thousand kilometres above Murora, its intense mass density bending the course of nearby photons and elementary particles in tight curves. It took six milliseconds to expand from its initial subatomic size out to fifty-seven metres in diameter. As it reached its full physical dimensions the internal stresses creating the event horizon ceased to exist.

Lady Macbeth fell in towards the gas giant, ion thrusters squirting out long spokes of cold blue fire to halt the slight spin caused by venting coolant gases. Thermo-dump panels stretched wide to glow a smoky cardinal red as they disposed of the excess thermal energy acquired during the starship's frantic flight through Lalonde's polar atmosphere. Sensor clusters swept the local environment for hazards while star trackers fixed their exact position.

Joshua exhaled loudly, allowing his relief to show. "Well done, Dahybi. That was good work under pressure."

"I've been in worse situations."

He refused to rise to the bait. "Sarha, have you locked down those malfunctioning systems yet?"

"We're getting there," she said blandly. "Give me another five minutes."

"Sure." After the harsh acceleration of Lalonde orbit, free fall was superbly relaxing. Now, if she'd just give him a massage . . .

"That was one hell of a scrap back there," Melvyn said.

"We're well out of it," Warlow rumbled.

"Feel sorry for the scout teams, trapped on a planet full of people who behave like that." Melvyn stopped and winced, then gave Joshua a cautious glance.

"She knew what she was going down to," Joshua said. "And I meant what I said about going back to check."

"Reza Malin knew what he was about," Ashly said. "She'll be safe enough with him."

"Right." The flight computer datavised an alarm into Joshua's neural nanonics. He accessed the sensor array.

Murora's storm bands were smears of green and blue,

mottled with the usual white ammonia cyclones. A thick whorl of ochre and bronze rings extended from the cloud tops out to a hundred and eighty thousand kilometres, broken by two major divisions. The gas giant boasted thirty-seven natural satellites, from a quartet of hundred-kilometre ring-shepherds up to five moons over two thousand kilometres in diameter; the largest, M-XI, named Keddie, had a thick nitrogen methane atmosphere.

Aethra had been germinated in a two hundred thousand kilometre orbit, far enough outside the fringes of the ring to mitigate any danger of collision from stray particles. The seed had been brought to the system in 2602 and attached to a suitable mineral-rich asteroid; it would take thirty years to mature into a structure capable of supporting a human population, and another twenty years to reach its full forty-five-kilometre length. After nine years of untroubled development it was already three and a half kilometres long.

In the same orbit, but trailing five hundred kilometres behind the young habitat, was the supervisory station, occupied by fifty staff (it had accommodation for a thousand). The Edenists didn't use bitek for such a small habitational environment; it was a carbotanium wheel seven hundred and fifty metres in diameter, eighty metres wide, containing three long gardens separated by blocks of richly appointed apartments. Its hub was linked to a large non-rotating cylindrical port, grossly under-used, but built in anticipation of the traffic which would start to arrive once the habitat reached its median size and He₃ cloud-scoop mining began in Murora's atmosphere. During the interim there were just two inter-orbit vessels docked, which the station staff used to commute to Aethra on their inspection tours.

Lady Macbeth had emerged forty thousand kilometres away from the solitary Edenist outpost, a jump accuracy Joshua was entirely satisfied with considering the conditions. Her sensors focused on the station in time to see it break apart. The rim had been sliced open in several

places, allowing the atmosphere to jet out. Small thrusters were still firing in a useless attempt to halt the ominous wobble which had developed. Optical sensors revealed trees, bushes, and oscillating slicks of water rushing out of the long gashes.

“Like the Ruin Ring,” Joshua whispered painfully.

Small circular spots on the carbotanium shell glowed crimson. The tough metal was visibly undulating as the structure’s seesaw fluctuations increased. Then one of the cryogenic fuel-storage tanks in the non-rotating port exploded, which triggered another two or three tanks. It was hard to tell the exact number, the entire station was obscured by the white vapour billowing out.

As the cloud dispersed large sections of the wheel tumbled out of the darkening centre.

A hundred kilometres away, two fusion drives burnt hotly against the icy starscape, heading for the immature habitat. One of the ships was emitting a steady beat of microwaves from its transponder.

“They’re here already,” Melvyn said. “Bloody hell. They must have jumped before we did.”

“That is the *Maranta*’s transponder code,” Warlow said without any notable inflection. “Why would Wolfgang leave it transmitting?”

“Because he’s not the captain any more,” Ashly said. “Look at the vectors. Neither of them is maintaining a steady thrust. Their drives are unstable.”

“They’re going to kill the habitat, aren’t they?” Sarha said. “Just like Laton did all those years ago. Those bastards! It can’t hurt them, it can’t hurt anybody. What kind of sequestration is this?”

“A bad one,” Warlow grumbled at an almost subliminal volume. “Very bad.”

“I’m picking up lifeboat beacons,” Melvyn said with a rush of excitement. “Two of them. Somebody escaped.”

Joshua, who had felt eager triumph at their successful jump to Murora and anger at the station’s violation, was left empty, leaving his mind in an almost emotion-free

state. His crew was looking at him. Waiting. Dad never mentioned this part of captaining a ship.

“Melvyn, Sarha; recalibrate the injection ionizers for the number one fusion tube. Whatever thrust we can get, please. I’m going to need it. Ashly, Warlow, get down to the airlock deck. We won’t have much time to bring them on board, make sure they come through as fast as possible.”

Warlow’s couch webbing peeled back immediately. The cosmonik and the pilot went through the floor hatch as though they were in a race.

“Dahybi, recharge the nodes. I’ll jump outsystem as soon as we have them on board.” *If* we get them on board.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Stand by for combat gees. Again!”

On the other side of hugely complex schematic diagrams, Sarha smiled knowingly at the hard-used martyred tone.

Lady Macbeth’s fusion drives ignited, driving the ship towards the twirling wreckage of the station. Thermo-dump panels hurried back into their recesses as the gee force climbed. The starship’s sensors tracked the two fusion drives forty thousand kilometres ahead. Joshua was wondering how long it would take for them to spot the rescue attempt. If they use the sensors the way they do the fusion drives they may never see us. *Maranta* was only accelerating at half a gee.

Melvyn and Sarha finished their work on fusion tube number one, and gave him control, warning it wouldn’t last for long. Joshua brought *Lady Mac* up to five gees, and held her there.

“They’re launching combat wasps,” Dahybi said.

Joshua observed the flight computer plotting purple vector lines. “That’s odd.” The six combat wasps were flying around Aethra, forming a loose ring. Their drives went off when they were two hundred kilometres from the habitat, coasting past it. Submunitions burst out from two, and accelerated towards the slowly rotating cylinder.

“Kinetic missiles,” Joshua said. “What the hell are they doing?”

Bright orange explosions rippled across the rust-red polyp surface.

“Injuring it,” Sarha said with terse determination. “That kind of assault won’t destroy it, but they’ll inflict a lot of harm. Almost as if they’re deliberately mutilating it.”

“Injuring it?” Dahybi asked. The normally composed node specialist was openly incredulous. “What for? People injure. Animals injure. Not habitats. You can’t hurt them like you can a mammal.”

“That’s what they’re doing,” Sarha insisted.

“It does look that way,” Joshua said.

The *Maranta*’s drive came on again, followed a few seconds later by the second ship.

“They’ve seen us,” Joshua said. It had taken eight minutes, which was appallingly sloppy detection work. *Lady Mac* was over halfway towards the lifeboats. Less than twenty thousand kilometres away now. The other ships were barely five hundred kilometres distant from the squealing beacons. “This is where it gets interesting.” He launched eight combat wasps and upped the *Lady Mac*’s acceleration to seven gees. The drones shot ahead at twenty-five gees. An answering salvo of twelve emerged from the two starships.

“Shit,” Joshua exclaimed. “They’re running for Aethra.”

“Clever,” Melvyn said. “We can’t use the nukes when they’re close to it.”

“No, but I can still use the gamma pulsers for offence.” He fired off a string of coded instructions to the combat wasps. “And it may give us the time we need to pick up the lifeboats. None of their combat wasps are targeting them.” He thought for a moment. “Sarha, broadcast a tight-beam warning to the lifeboats. Tell them to deactivate their beacons now. Anyone warped enough to maim a habitat won’t think twice about snuffing refugees.”

The first combat-wasp conflict took place five thousand kilometres from Aethra, a ragged rosette of plasma sprawl-

ing across six hundred kilometres. Joshua watched several attackers come through unscathed and launched another salvo of five drones, programming three to form a defence-shield formation. The bridge's gravity plane shifted sharply as he initiated an evasion manoeuvre.

The children were crying with their voices and minds. Gaura broadcast a soothing harmonic in the general affinity band, adding to the compulsion of the other adults. What I need, he thought, is someone to calm me.

The lifeboat was a sturdy cylinder ten metres long and four wide. It had no propulsion system apart from the solid-fuel booster to fire it clear of any conceivable emergency, and reaction thrusters to hold it stable while the refugees waited for rescue. Like all the systems on the station it was spacious and well equipped. There were eight seats, lockers with enough food for a fortnight, and a month-long oxygen supply. For Edenists, even disasters would be inconvenient rather than dangerous.

Such arrogance, he cursed inside the confines of his own skull, such stupid blind faith in our technological prowess.

Right now there were fourteen adults and five children crammed inside. There hadn't been time for them to reach another lifeboat. With a hubris which hindsight revealed to be quite monstrous, the disasters which the designers anticipated had all been natural. Even a meteorite strike would leave most of the wheel intact, and evacuation would be a calm rational process.

What had never been even a theoretical contingency was insane Adamist starships slicing the station apart with lasers.

It had all happened so fast. Now little Gatje and Haykal hugged Tiya, their mother, faces distraught as she kept them anchored. The air was too hot, it stank of vomit. Aethra couldn't hide its torment over the kinetic missile attack that bit deep into its shell from the young impressionable minds. Candre's death convulsions as she went through explosive decompression was still causing wintry

shivers along Gaura's spine. The combined psychological stresses of the last fifteen minutes was going to leave a trauma scar that would take a long time to heal even for the well-balanced psyche of an Edenist.

And it was all his fault. As station chief he should have taken precautions. He had known about the civil strife on Lalonde. Yet he had done nothing.

It is not your fault, Aethra said softly into his mind. Who could have anticipated this?

I should have.

From the information you had, this was not predictable.

I had enough data from *Ilex*. It was chaos on the planet when they left.

These starships did not come from Lalonde. They are mercenaries, recruited elsewhere.

I could still have done something. Put people into apartments closer to the lifeboats. Something! How are Candre and the others?

I have them. But now is not a good time to begin raising my consciousness to multiplicity status.

No. And you? How are you?

I was angry, frightened. Now I feel sorrow. It is a sad universe where such wanton acts can take place.

I'm sorry we brought you into existence. You have done nothing to deserve this.

I am glad I live. And I may yet continue to live. None of the craters is more than twenty metres deep. I have lost a lot of nutrient fluid though, and my mineral-digestion organs have been damaged from the shock-waves.

Gaura's hand squeezed the grab hoop he was holding. Fury and helplessness were alien to him, but he felt them now with a daunting strength. **The physical damage can be repaired. It will be repaired, never doubt that. Not as long as one Edenist remains alive.**

Thank you, Gaura. You are a fine supervisor. I am privileged to have you and your staff attend the dawn

of my intellect. And one day Gatje and Haykal shall run around in my park. I will enjoy their laughter.

A solid beam of intolerable white light stabbed into the lifeboat through its one small, heavily shielded port. Space was being devastated by another hail of fusion explosions. The children started crying again.

Through Aethra's much-degraded perception he saw the long white fusion exhaust of the third Adamist starship decelerating towards them. With its tremendous velocity it had to be a warship, but there had been no contact apart from the curt woman telling them to switch off the beacon. Who were they? Who were the other two? Why had they attacked Aethra?

Not knowing was difficult for an Edenist.

You will soon be safe, Aethra said. It widened its broadcast to include the Edenists on both lifeboats. **All of you will be safe.**

Gaura met his wife's frightened stubborn eyes. **I love you,** he said for her alone.

The blast light was fading. He looked out of the port, his mind welcoming inquisitive contacts, showing the children their solidly real rescuer approaching.

Whoever the pilot was, he was coming very close. And moving far too fast.

Space directly outside the lifeboat was filled with the brilliant fusion exhaust. Gaura flinched, jerking back from the port. **It's going to hit!**

There were screams behind him. Then the exhaust vanished, and a huge spherical starship was a hundred metres away, small sensor clusters sticking out of its dark silicon hull like metallized insect antenna. Its equatorial ion thrusters exhaled fountains of sparkling blue ions, halting its minute drift.

Bloody hell! It was a collective sentiment from the adults.

The starship rolled towards the lifeboat as though there was a solid surface below it. And its extended airlock tube was suddenly coming round to clang against the hatch.

Gaura took a moment to recover his poise. A voidhawk would be very hard put to match that display of precision manoeuvring.

The lifeboat's bitek processors reported the short-range inter-ship channel was picking up a transmission.

"You people in the lifeboat, as soon as the hatch opens we want you through the tube and into the lounge," commanded the female voice they'd heard earlier. "Make it fast! We're running out of combat wasps and we've got to pick your friends up as well."

The hatch seal popped and it swung back. Little Gatje squealed in alarm as one of the biggest cosmoniks Gaura had ever seen floated in the airlock tube.

It's all right, he told his dismayed daughter. **He's a . . . friend. Really.**

Gatje clutched at the fabric of her mother's suit. **Promise, Daddy?**

"Shift your bastard arses through here now!" Warlow bellowed.

The children gulped into fearful silence.

Gaura couldn't help it, after all the horror they'd been through to be greeted by such utter normality, he started to laugh. I promise.

"Oh, Jesus, they've cracked it," Joshua told the three crewmembers left on the bridge when *Lady Mac* rendezvoused with the second lifeboat. Another combat wasp was curving round over Aethra's bulk, accelerating sharply. "I knew they'd work out the numbers game eventually." He fired a salvo of three drones in defence. It was a terrible ratio. One which the *Lady Mac* could only ever lose. Three defenders was an absolute minimum to guarantee an attacker didn't get through. If he could just have flown evasive manoeuvres, or attacked, or been able to run, the numbers would have shifted back towards something near favourable.

"Jesus!" The fourth solo combat wasp appeared from behind Aethra. He had to launch another three from *Lady Mac*'s diminishing reserves.

“Fifteen left,” Sarha said with morbid cheerfulness.

The starship’s maser cannons fired at a kinetic missile that was sixty kilometres away. Five nuclear-tipped submunitions exploded perilously close to Aethra, reducing the latest attacking combat wasp to its subatomic constituents.

“Did you have to tell us that?” Melvyn said laboriously.

“You mean you didn’t know?”

“Yes. But I could always hope I was wrong.”

Joshua accessed a camera on the airlock deck. Warlow had anchored himself to a stikpad beside the airlock tube. He was grabbing people as they came out and slinging them into the chamber. Ashly and one of the Edenist men were on a stikpad below the ceiling hatch, catching then shoving the human projectiles up into the lounge above.

“How many more to come, Warlow?” Joshua datavised.

“Six. That makes forty-one in total.”

“Wonderful. Stand by for combat acceleration the second the airlock seals.” He sounded the audio warning so the Edenists would know. The flight computer showed his plot of an open-ended vector heading away from Murora. At eight gees they could outrun the other starships easily, and jump outsystem. That kind of prolonged acceleration would be tough on the Edenists (no sinecure for the crew, either), but it was one hell of a lot better than staying here.

“Joshua, Gaura has asked me to say some of the children are very young, they can’t possibly survive high gees,” Warlow datavised. “Their bones aren’t strong enough.”

“Jesus shit! Kids? How old? How many gees?”

“One girl was about three. There were a couple of five-year-olds as well.”

“Fuck it!”

“What is it?” Sarha asked, real concern darkening her sea-green eyes for the first time since they’d entered the Lalonde system.

“We’re not going to make it.”

The fifth solo combat wasp appeared from behind Aethra. Seven of the *Lady Mac*’s submunition drones det-

onated their nuclear explosives in immediate response. Joshua launched two more.

“Even if we jump without an alignment trajectory, from here, it’ll take us fifteen seconds to retract the sensors and prime the nodes,” he said. “We’ll be blind for ten seconds. It’s not long enough.”

“So run,” Sarha said. “Fire every last combat wasp at them and go. *Lady Mac* can make eight gees even with tube one down. *Maranta* can’t make more than four gees. We can get clear.”

“That vector’s already loaded. But we’ve got kids on board. Shit! Shit! Shit!” He saw the last Edenist being yanked out of the airlock tube by Warlow. The flight computer was shutting the hatch before his feet were fully clear.

Do something, and do it now, Joshua Calvert, he told himself. Because you’re going to be dead in twenty seconds if you don’t.

His mind ordered the flight computer to start the fusion tube ignition sequence.

Another whole two seconds to think in.

There was nothing in the tactics programs, even Dad had never dug himself a hole this deep in the shit.

Can’t run, can’t fight, can’t jump out, can’t hide . . .

“Oh yes I can!” he whooped.

The fusion drives came on, and the *Lady Mac* accelerated down the vector plot that sprang from Joshua’s mind even as the idea unrolled. Three gees, heading straight in towards the gas giant.

“Joshua!” Dahybi complained. “We can’t jump if you take us inward.”

“Shut up.”

Dahybi settled back and started into a recital of a scripture he remembered from his youth. “Yes, Captain.”

“Warlow, activate the three zero-tau pods we’ve got in capsule C, and cram the children in. You’ve got four minutes maximum before we start accelerating properly.”

“Right, Joshua.”

The sensors reported that four combat wasps were pursuing them. Joshua fired an answering salvo of five. He could hear Dahybi muttering something that sounded like a prayer, it had the right dirge-like resonance.

“They’re coming after us,” Melvyn said a minute later.

Maranta and its cohort were accelerating away from Aethra.

“That’s the *Gramine*,” Sarha said after studying the image. “Look at the angle its drive is deflected through. There isn’t another starship that can do that. Wissler was always boasting about their combat agility.”

“Just wonderful, Sarha, thanks,” Joshua proclaimed. “You got any other morale boosters for us?”

Warlow climbed the ladder into the lounge deck, boosted muscles lifting him easily against the heavy gravity. Carbon composite rungs creaked in dismay under his tripled weight. There were Edenists packed solid across the lounge floor, none of the acceleration couches had been activated—not that there were enough anyway. They didn’t have neural nanonics, the cosmonik realized. And because of it their children whimpered and snivelled in wretched distress without any cushioning below them.

He walked over to the smallest girl, who was lying wide-eyed and terribly pale beside her mother. “I’m putting her into zero-tau,” he announced shortly, and bent down. He had plugged a pair of cargo-handling arms into his elbow sockets before coming up the ladder, they had wide metal manipulator forks which would act as a good cradle. The girl started crying again. “There will be none of this acceleration in the pod. Explain to her. She must not squirm when I pick her up. Her spine will break.”

Be brave, Tiya told her daughter. He will take you to a safe place where you won’t hurt so.

He’s horrible, Gatje replied as the metal prongs slid underneath her.

You will be all right, Gaura said, reinforcing the pacific mental subliminal Tiya was radiating.

Warlow took care to keep Gatje's spine level, supporting her head with one set of forks while the other three arms were positioned under her torso and legs. He lifted gingerly.

"Can I help?" Gaura asked, levering himself onto his elbows. His neck felt as though it was being slowly compressed in a hydraulic vice.

"No. You are too weak." Warlow clumped out of the lounge, an outlandish faerie-legend figure walking amongst the prone hurting bodies with a grace completely at variance with his cumbersome appearance.

There were seven children under ten years old. It took him nearly five minutes to shift them from the lounge to the zero-tau pods. His neural nanonics monitored their flight on a secondary level. The attacking starships were matching *Lady Mac's* three-gee acceleration. Combat-wasp submunitions produced a continual astral fire of plasma between them.

Lady Mac swept over the fringes of the ring, two thousand kilometres above the ecliptic as Warlow lowered the last child into the zero-tau pod.

"Thank Christ for that," Joshua said when the pod was enveloped by the black field. "OK, people, stand by for high acceleration."

Lady Mac's thrust increased to seven gees, tormenting the Edenists in the lounge still further. For all the stamina of their geneered bodies they had never been supplemented to withstand the onerous burden of combat spaceflight.

Maranta and *Gramine* began to fall behind. Sensors showed three more combat wasps eating up the distance.

"Jesus, how many of the fucking things have they got left?" Joshua asked as he launched four of the *Lady Mac's* remaining six drones in response.

"I estimate ten," Melvyn datavised. "Possibly more."

"Wonderful." Joshua angled the *Lady Mac* down sharply towards the rings.

The slow moving pack of dusty ice chunks reflected an unaccustomed radiance as the three starships streaked past.

After millennia of stasis, stirred only by the slow heartbeat of the gas giant's magnetosphere, the ring's micrometre dust was becoming aroused by the backwash of electromagnetic pulses from the fusion bombs exploding above it. Dark snowflake-crystal patterns rippled elegantly over its surface. The temperature rose by several fractions of a degree, breaking up the unique and fantastically delicate valency bonds between disparate atoms which free fall and frigidity had established. Behind the starships, the rings quivered like a choppy sea before the storm was unleashed.

Those on board the *Lady Macbeth* able to receive the sensor images watched with numbed fascination as the ring particles grew larger, changing from a grainy mist to a solid plain of drifting mud-yellow boulders. It took up half of the image; they were close enough now to make it seem like the floor of the universe.

The penultimate combat wasp darted out of the *Lady Macbeth's* launch-tubes. Submunitions ejected almost at once, scattering like a shoal of startled fish. A hundred kilometres behind her, twenty-seven fusion bombs arrayed in an ammonite maculation detonated simultaneously, throwing up a temporary visual and electronic barrier. She turned, unseen by her pursuers, triple drive exhausts scoring vast arcs across the stars. Then the three barbs of superenergized helium were searing into the ice and rock of the ring. No physical structure was capable of withstanding that starcore temperature. The agitated surface cratered and geysered as though a depth charge had been set off far below.

Lady Macbeth dived straight into the rings, decelerating at eleven gees.

10

The watchers were there when Alkad Mzu arrived at the shoreline of Tranquillity's circumfluous salt-water sea. As always they remained several hundred metres behind, innocuous fellow hikers enjoying the balmy evening, even a couple on horses trekking along the wilder paths of the habitat. She counted eight of them as she walked along the top of the steep rocky escarpment to the path which led down to the beach. This cove was one of the remoter stretches of the northern shoreline; a broad curve of silver-white sand two kilometres long, with jutting headlands of polyp-rock cliffs. Several small islands were included within the bay's sweeping embrace, tenanted by willowy trees and a fur of colourful wild flowers. A river emptied over the escarpment two hundred metres from the path where she stood, producing a foaming waterfall which fell into a rock pool before draining away over the sands. Overhead, the giant habitat's light-tube had languished to an apricot ember strung between its endcap hubs. Vitric water caught the final rays to produce a soft-focus copper shimmer across the wavelets.

Alkad picked her way carefully along the shingle-strewn path. An accident now would be the ultimate irony, she thought. There was the familiar nagging ache in her left leg, exacerbated by the rough incline.

Her retinal implants located a pair of adolescent lovers in the dunes at the far end of the beach. Craving solitude amid the deepening shadows, their dark entwined bodies were oblivious to the world, and nearly invisible. The girl's baby-blond hair provided a rich contrast to her ebony skin, while the boy reminded Alkad of Peter as he stroked

and caressed his willing partner. An omen, though Alkad Mzu no longer really believed in deities.

She reached the warm, dry sands and adjusted the straps of her lightweight backpack. It was the one she had brought with her to the habitat twenty-six years ago; it contained the cagoule and flask and first aid kit which she carried unfailingly on every ramble through the interior. By now the routine of her hike was scribed in stone. If she hadn't worn it, the Intelligence agencies would have been suspicious.

Alkad cut across the dunes at an angle, aiming for the middle of the beach, her feet leaving light imprints in the powdery sand. Three watchers made their way down the path behind her, the rest carried on walking along the top of the escarpment. And—a recent development, this—a couple of Tranquillity serjeants stood impassively at the foot of the escarpment beside the waterfall. She only saw them against the craggy polyp because of their infrared emission. They must have been positioned there in anticipation of her route.

It wasn't entirely unexpected. Tranquillity would have informed Ione Saldana about all those agency-teasing meetings with starship captains. The girl was erring on the side of caution, which was quite acceptable. She did have the rest of the population to think about, after all.

Alkad peered ahead, out over the huge grey valley of water to the southern shore, searching. There, to the right, twenty degrees up the curve. The Laymil project campus was a unique splash of opal light on the darkened terraces of the southern endcap. Such a shame, really, she thought with a tinge of regret. The work had been an interesting challenge, interpreting and extrapolating xenoc technology from mere fragments of clues. She had made friends there, and progress. And now the whole campus was animated with the discovery of the Laymil sensorium memories that young scavenger had found. It was an exciting time to be a project researcher, full of promise and reward.

In another life she could easily have devoted herself to it.

Alkad reached the water's edge as the light-tube cooled to a smirched platinum. Ripples sighed contentedly against the sand. Tranquillity really was a premium place to live. She shrugged out of her backpack, then touched the seal on her boots and started to pull them off.

Samuel, the Edenist Intelligence operative, was six metres from the foot of the scarp path when he saw the lone figure by the water bend over to take her boots off. That wasn't part of the humdrum formula which governed Mzu's activities. He hurried after Pauline Webb, the CNIS second lieutenant, who had reached the beach ahead of him. She dithered in the grove of palm trees which huddled along the base of the escarpment, debating whether to break cover and walk openly on the sands.

"It looks like she's going for a swim," he said.

Pauline gave him a cursory nod. The CNIS and the Edenists cooperated to a reasonable degree in their observation.

"At night?" she said. "By herself?"

"The doctor is a solitary soul, but I concede this isn't the most sensible thing she's ever done." Samuel was thinking back to that morning when the news of Omuta's sanctions being lifted had appeared in the AV projection at Glover's restaurant.

"So what do we do?"

Monica Foulkes, the ESA operative, caught up with them. She increased the magnification factor of her retinal implants just as Alkad Mzu pulled her sweatshirt off over her head. "I don't know what you two are panicking over. Nobody as smart as Dr Mzu would choose drowning as a method of suicide. It's too prolonged."

"Maybe she is just going for a quick swim," Pauline suggested, without much hope. "It's a pleasant enough evening."

Samuel kept watching Mzu. Now her boots and clothes were off she was removing the contents of her backpack

and dropping them on the sand. It was the casual way she did it which bothered him; as if she was without a care. "I somehow doubt it."

"We're going to look particularly stupid charging over there to rescue her if all she's doing is taking a dip to cool off," Monica grouched.

The middle-aged Edenist's lips pursed in amusement. "You think we don't look stupid anyway?"

She scowled, and ignored him.

"Does anyone have any relevant contingency orders?" Pauline asked.

"If she wants to drown herself, then I say let her," Monica said. "Problem solved at long last. We can all pack up and go home then."

"I might have known you'd take that attitude."

"Well, I'm not swimming after her if she gets into trouble."

"You wouldn't have to," Samuel said, without shifting his gaze. "Tranquillity has affinity-bonded dolphins. They'll assist any swimmers that get into difficulties."

"Hoo-bloody-rah," Monica said. "Then we can have another twenty years of worrying about who the daft old biddy will talk to and what she'll say."

Alkad datavised a code to the processor in her empty backpack. The seal around the bottom opened, and the composite curled up revealing the hidden storage space. She reached in to remove the programmable silicon space-suit which had lain there undisturbed for twenty-six years.

Ione, Tranquillity said urgently. **We have a problem developing.**

"Excuse me," Ione said to her cocktail party guests. They were members of the Tranquillity Banking Regulatory Council, invited to discuss the habitat's falling revenue which the massive decrease in starship movements was causing. Something needed to be done to halt the stock market's wilder fluctuations, so she had thought an informal party was the best way of handling it. She turned instinctively to face her apartment's window wall and the

shoals of yellow and green fish nosing round the fan of light it threw across the dusky sand. **What?**

It's Alkad Mzu. Look.

The image fizzed up into her mind.

Samuel frowned as Mzu drew some kind of object from deep inside her backpack. It looked ridiculously like a football, but with wings attached. Even with his retinal implants on full magnification he couldn't quite make it out. "What is that?"

Mzu fastened the collar round her neck, and bit down on the nozzle of the respirator tube. She datavised an activation code into the suit's control processor. The black ball flattened itself against her upper chest and started to flow over her skin.

Both the other Intelligence operatives turned to look at the sharpness in Samuel's voice. The two serjeants began to walk forwards over the beach.

lone! Tranquillity's thoughts rang with surprise, turning to alarm. **I can sense a gravitonic-distortion zone building.**

So? she asked. Every starship emerging above Mirchusko registered in the habitat's mass-sensitive organs. There was no requirement for the usual network of strategic warning grav-distortion-detector satellites which guarded ordinary asteroid settlements and planets, Tranquillity's perception of local space was unrivalled, making threat response a near-instantaneous affair. **Is the starship emerging too close? Arm the strategic-defence platforms.**

No use. It's—

At first Samuel mistook it for a shadow cast by an evening cloud. There was still enough pearly radiance coming from the light-tube to give the circumfluous sea a sparse shimmer, a cloud would produce exactly that patch of darkness. But there was only one patch of darkness; and when he glanced up the air was clear. Then the noise began, a distant thunderclap which lasted for several seconds, then chopped off abruptly. A brilliant star shone at

the centre of the darkness, sending long radials of frigid white light into the habitat.

Mzu was silhouetted perfectly against the white blaze reflected off the sea, encased in the black skin of the space-suit, a consummate monochrome picture.

Shock immobilized Samuel's body for a precious second. Out of the centre of the fading star a blackhawk came skimming silently over the sea towards Mzu; a compressed ovoid one hundred and thirty metres long, with a horse-shoe life-support section moulded round the rear dorsal bulge. Its blue polyp hull was marbled with an imperial-purple web.

"Jesus wept!" Pauline said in an aghast whisper. "It jumped inside. It's come right into the fucking habitat!"

"Get her!" Monica cried. "For Christ's sake stop the bitch!" She ran forwards.

"No, stop! Come back," Samuel yelled. But Pauline was already charging out of the trees after the ESA agent, boosted muscles accelerating her to a phenomenal speed. "Oh, shit." He started to run.

Meyer saw the small spacesuited woman standing at the water's edge, and *Udat* obligingly angled round towards her. Tension had condensed his guts into a solid lump. Swallowing *inside* a habitat, it had to be the craziest stunt in the history of spaceflight. Yet they'd done it!

We are in, *Udat* observed sagely. That's halfway.

And don't I know it.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Tranquillity's outraged broadcast thundered into the blackhawk's mind.

Meyer winced. Even *Udat's* calm thoughts fluttered.

The woman is a political dissident being persecuted by the Kulu ESA, Meyer replied with shaky bravado. Of all people, lone Saldana should sympathize with that. We're taking her where she will be safe.

STOP IMMEDIATELY. I WILL NOT PERMIT THIS. UDAT, SWALLOW OUT NOW. The force of the mental compulsion which the habitat personality exerted was incredible. Meyer felt as though someone had smashed a

meat hook into his skull to pull his brain out by the roots. He groaned, clutching at the cushioning of his acceleration couch, heart pounding in his ears.

STOP!

"Keep going," he gasped. His nose started to bleed. Neural nanonics sent out a flurry of metabolic overrides.

Alkad waded through the shallows as the blackhawk descended, gliding fastidiously round one of the cove's small islands. She hadn't grasped how big the bitek creature was. To see that almighty bulk suspended so easily in the air was an uncanny marvel. Its rounded nose was streaked with long frost rays as the sea's humidity gusted over polyp which was accustomed to the radiative chill of deep space. A huge patch of water below the hull began to foam and churn as the distortion field interacted with it. She suddenly felt as though the horizontal was rolling. *Udat* turned through ninety degrees, and tilted sharply, bringing the portside wing of its life-support horseshoe down towards the water. An airlock slid open. Cherri Barnes stood inside, wearing her spacesuit. Orange silicon-fibre straps tethered her securely to the sides of the small chamber. She threw a rope-ladder down.

On the beach five figures were racing over the dunes.

Ione said: **Kill her.**

The serjeants pulled laser pistols from their holsters. Alkad Mzu already had her foot on the first rung.

Udat's maser cannon fired.

Monica Foulkes pounded hard across the sand, neural nanonics commands and boosted muscles meshing so that her body ate the distance effortlessly, a hundred and fifty metres in nine seconds. The prime order of the ESA's Tranquillity operation was to prevent Mzu from leaving, that took precedence over everything. It didn't look like Monica was going to get to the blackhawk in time, Mzu had started to claw her way up the rocking ladder. She reviewed which of her weapon implants would have the best chance; the trouble was most of them were designed for unobtrusive close-range work. And that bloody Lunar SII

spacesuit didn't help. It would have to be a microdart, and hope the tip penetrated. She was aware of the serjeants off to her left pulling out their laser pistols.

A metre-wide column of air fluoresced a faint violet, drawing a line from a silver bubble on the blackhawk's lower hull to a serjeant. The bitek servitor blew apart in an explosion of steam and carbon granules. Fifteen metres behind it, where the beam struck the beach, a patch of sand became a puddle of glass, glowing a vivid rose-gold.

Over-hyped nerves sent Monica diving for cover the instant the beam appeared. She hit the loose sand, momentum ploughing a two and a half metre long furrow. There were two near-simultaneous thuds behind her as Samuel and Pauline flung themselves down. The second serjeant erupted into a black-grain mist with a loud burping sound as the maser hit it. Monica's mind gibbered as she waited, head buried in the sand. At least with that power rating it'll be quick . . .

A wind began howling over the dunes.

Samuel raised his head to see his worst expectation confirmed. A wormhole interstice was opening around the nose of the blackhawk. Alkad Mzu was halfway up the rope-ladder.

You must not take her from here, he pleaded with the starship. **You must not!**

The interstice widened, a light-devouring tunnel boring through infinity. Air streamed in.

"Hang on!" Samuel shouted to the two women agents.

COME BACK! Tranquillity commanded.

Meyer, his mind twinned with the blackhawk, quailed under the habitat's furious demand. It was too much, the storm voice had raged inside his skull for what seemed like days, bruising his neurons with its violence. Welcome surrender beckoned—to hell with Mzu, nothing was worth this. Then he felt local space twisting under the immense distortion which *Udat*'s energy patterning cells exerted. A pseudoabyss leading into freedom opened before him. **Go,**

he ordered. The cold physical blackness outside invaded his mind, plunging him into glorious oblivion.

A small but ferocious hurricane set Alkad spinning like a runaway propeller at the end of her precarious silicon-fibre ladder. "Wait!" she datavised in mounting terror. "You're supposed to wait till I'm in the airlock." Her digitalized vehemence made no impression on *Udat*. The air buoyed her up as though she had become weightless, swinging her round until the ladder was horizontal. Oscillating gravity was doing terrible things to her inner ears. Screaming air tried to tear her from the ladder. Neural nanonics pumped muscle-lock orders into her hands and calves to reinforce her grip. She could feel ligaments ripping. Collar sensors showed her the fuzzy rim of the wormhole interstice sliding inexorably along the hull towards her. "No. In the name of Mary, wait!" And then Dr Alkad Mzu was suddenly presented with every physicist's dream opportunity: observing the fabric of the universe from the outside.

Monica Foulkes heard Samuel's shouted warning and instinctively grabbed a tuft of reedy dune grass. The wind surged with impossible strength. Gravity shifted round until the beach was above her. Monica wailed fearfully as sand fell up into the sky. She felt herself following it, feet pulled into the air and sliding round to point at the interstice surrounding the blackhawk's nose. The grass clump made an awful slow tearing sound. Her hips and chest left the ground. Sand was blasting directly into her face. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe. The grass clump moved several centimetres. "OhdearGodpreservemeee!"

A long-fingered hand clamped around her free wrist. The grass clump left the sand with a sharp sucking noise, its weight wrenching her arm out towards the blackhawk. For an eternal second Monica hung splayed in the air as the sand scudded around her. Someone groaned with pained effort.

The wormhole interstice closed behind *Udat*.

Sand, water, mangled vegetation, and demented fish

cascaded down out of the sky. Monica landed flat on her belly, breath knocked out of her. “Oh my God,” she wheezed. When she looked up, the haggard Edenist was crouched on his knees, panting heavily as he clutched his wrist. “You”—the words were difficult to form in her throat—“you held on to me.”

He threw her a nod. “I think my wrist is broken.”

“I would have . . .” She shuddered, then gave a foolish jittery laugh. “God, I don’t even know your name.”

“Samuel.”

“Thank you, Samuel.”

He rolled onto his back and sighed. “Pleasure.”

Are you all right? Tranquillity asked the Edenist.

My wrist is very painful. She’s heavy.

Your colleagues are approaching. Three of them are carrying medical nanonic packages in their aid kits. They will be with you shortly.

Even after all this time spent in Tranquillity, he couldn’t get used to the personality’s lack of empathy. Habitats were such an essential component of Edenism. It was disconcerting to have one treat him in this cavalier fashion.

Thank you.

“I didn’t think voidhawks and blackhawks could operate in a gravity field,” Monica said.

“They can’t,” he told her. “This isn’t gravity, it’s centrifugal force. It’s no different to the docking-ledges they use outside.”

“Ah, of course. Have you ever heard of one coming inside a habitat before?”

“Never. A swallow like that requires phenomenal accuracy. From a strictly chauvinistic point of view I hate to say this, but I think it would be beyond most voidhawks. Even most blackhawks, come to that. Mzu made an astute choice. This was a very well thought out escape.”

“Twenty-six years in the making,” Pauline said. She climbed slowly to her feet, shaking her cotton top, which had been soaked by the falling water. A fat blue fish, half a metre long, was thrashing frantically on the sand by her

shoes. "I mean that woman had us fooled for twenty-six goddamn years. Acting out the role of a flekhead physics professor with all the expected neuroses and eccentricities slotting perfectly into place. And we believed it. We patiently watched her for twenty-six years and she behaved exactly as predicted. If my home planet had been blown to shit, I'd behave like that. She never faltered, not once. But it was a twenty-six-year charade. Twenty-six goddamn years! What kind of a person can do that?"

Monica and Samuel exchanged an anxious look.

"Someone pretty obsessive," he said.

"Obsessive!" Pauline's face darkened. She leant over to pick the big fish up, but it squirmed out of her hands. "Keep bloody still," she shouted at it. "Well, God help Omuta now she's loose in the universe again." She finally succeeded in grabbing hold of the fish. "You do realize that thanks to our sanctions they haven't got a defensive system which can even fart loudly?"

"She won't get far," Monica said. "Not with this Laton scare closing down all the starship flights."

"You hope!" Pauline staggered off towards the waterline with her wriggling burden.

Monica clambered to her feet and brushed the sand off her clothes, shaking it out of her hair. She looked down at the lanky Edenist. "Dear me, CNIS entrance standards have really gone downhill lately."

He grinned weakly. "Yeah. But you know she's right about Mzu. The good doctor had us all fooled. Clever lady. And now there's going to be hell to pay."

She put her hand under his shoulder and helped him up. "I suppose so. One thing's for certain, there's going to be a mad scramble to catch her. Every government is going to want her tucked away on their own planet in order to safeguard democracy. And, my new friend, there are some democrats in this Confederation I don't ever want to find her."

"Us, for instance?"

Monica hesitated, then gave her head a rueful shake. “No. But don’t tell my boss I said that.”

Samuel watched the two agents on horseback galloping across the beach toward them. Right now he couldn’t even remember which services they belonged to. Not that it mattered. In a few hours they’d all be going their separate ways again. “Damn, Tranquillity really was the only place for her, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Come on, let’s see if these two have got anything for your wrist. I think that’s Onku Noi on the second horse. The Imperial Oshanko mob are always loaded down with gadgets.”

According to his neural nanonics’ timer function it was high noon. But Chas Paske wasn’t sure how to tell any more. There hadn’t been any fluctuation in the red cloud’s lambent emission since he started walking—hobbling, rather. The black and red jungle remained mordantly uninviting. Every laboured step was accompanied by the incessant hollow rolls and booms of thunder from high above.

He had managed to splint his leg, after a fashion: five laths of cherry oak wood that stretched from his ankle to his pelvis, lashed into place by ropy vines. The thigh wound was still a real problem. He had bound it with leaves, but every time he looked it seemed to be leaking capacious amounts of ichor down his shin. And it was impossible to keep the insects out. Unlike what appeared to be every other living creature, they hadn’t abandoned the jungle. And devoid of other targets, they massed around him—mosquito-analogues, maggot-analogues, things with legs and wings and pincers that had no analogue. All of them suckling at his tender flesh. Twice now he’d changed the leaves, only to find a seething mass of tiny black elytra underneath. Flies crawled round his skin burns as though they were the only oases of nourishment in a barren world.

According to his guidance block he had come two and a half kilometres in the last three hours. It was hard going through the virgin undergrowth which lay along the side of

the river. His crutch kept getting snagged by the thick cords that foamed over the loam. Slender low-hanging branches had a knack of catching the splint laths.

He picked the small wrinkled globes of abundant vine fruit as he went, chewing constantly to keep his fluid and protein levels up. But at this rate it was going to take him weeks to get anywhere.

Durringham was his ultimate goal. Whatever resources and wealth existed on this misbegotten planet, they resided in the capital. Scouting it had been his team's mission. He saw no reason to abandon that assignment. Sitting waiting to die in the jungle wasn't a serious option. Recovery and evacuation was obviously out of the question now. So, there it was, an honourable solution; one which would keep him occupied and motivated, and, should he achieve the impossible and make it, might even accomplish something worthwhile. Chas Paske was going to go down swinging.

But for all his determination he knew that he was going to have to find an easier way to travel. The medical program was releasing vast amounts of endocrines from his implants, analgesic blocks had been thrown across a good twenty per cent of his nerve fibres. Boosted metabolism or not, he couldn't keep expending energy at this rate.

He accessed his guidance block and summoned up the map. There was a village called Wryde fifteen hundred metres downstream on the other bank. According to the LDC file it had been established nine years ago.

It would have to do.

He plucked another elwisie fruit, and limped on. One advantage of the thunder was that no one would hear the racket he made ploughing through the vegetation.

The light was visible long before the first of the houses. A welcome gold-yellow nimbus shrouding the river. Snowlilies glinted and sparkled with their true opulence. Chas heard a bird again, the silly surprised warble of a chikrow. He lowered himself in tricky increments, and started to slither forward on his belly.

Wryde had become a thriving, affluent community, far beyond the norm for a stage one colony planet. The town nestled snugly in a six-square-kilometre clearing that had been turned over to dignified parkland. It was comprised of large houses built from stone or brick or landcoral, all of them the kind of elegantly sophisticated residence that a merchant or wealthy farmer would own. The main street was a handsome tree-lined boulevard, bustling with activity: people wandering in and out of the shops, sitting at the tables of pavement cafés. Horse-drawn cabs moved up and down. An impressive red-brick civic hall stood at one end, four storeys high, with an ornate central clock tower. He saw some kind of sports field just outside the main cluster of houses. People dressed all in white were playing a game he didn't know while spectators picnicked round the boundary. Close to the jungle at the back of the park, five windmills stood alongside a lake, their huge white sails turning steadily even though there was very little breeze. Grandiose houses lined the riverbank, lawns extending down to the water. They all had boat-houses or small jetties; rowing-boats and sailing dinghies were moored securely against the sluggish tide of snowlilies. Larger craft had been drawn up on wooden slipways.

It was the kind of community every sane person would want to live in; small-town cosiness, big-city stability. Even Chas, lying in muddy loam under a bush on the opposite bank, felt the subtle attraction of the place. By simply existing it offered the prospect of belonging to a perpetual golden age.

His retinal implants showed him the sunny, happy faces of the citizens as they went about their business. Scanning back and forth he couldn't see anyone labouring in the pristine gardens, or sweeping the streets; no people, no bitek servitors, no mechanoids. The nearest anyone came to work was the café proprietors, and they seemed cheerful enough, chatting and laughing with their customers. All generals and no privates, he thought to himself. It isn't real.

He accessed the guidance block again. A green reference grid slipped up over his vision and he focused on a jetty at the far end of the town's clearing. The block calculated its exact coordinate and integrated it into the map.

When he checked his physiological status, the neural nanonics reported his haemoglobin reserve was down to half an hour. His metabolism wasn't producing it with anything like its normal efficiency. He ran through the guidance block's display one last time. Half an hour ought to be enough.

Chas started to crawl forwards again, easing himself down the muddy slope and into the water like an arthritic crocodile.

Twenty minutes later he judiciously parted a pair of snowlilies and let his rigid moulded face stick up out of the water. The guidance block had functioned flawlessly, delivering him right beside the jetty. A trim blue-painted rowing-boat was pulling gently against its mooring two metres away. There was nobody anywhere near. He reached up and cut the pannier with his fission blade, grabbing the end as it fell into the water.

The boat started to drift with the snowlilies. Chas dropped below the surface.

He waited as long as he dared. The neural nanonics' physiological monitor program was flashing dire warnings of oxygen starvation into his brain before he risked surfacing.

Wryde was out of sight round a curve, although the ordinary light which clung to its rolling parkland was spilling round the trees on the bank. When he looked at his prize it had changed from the well-crafted skiff he had stolen to a dilapidated punt that was little more than a raft. Tissue-thin gunwales, which had been added in what must have been a surreal afterthought, were crumbling like rotten cork before his eyes. They left a wake of dark mushy dust on the snowlilies.

Chas waited a minute to see if any other drastic changes were going to occur. He rapped experimentally on the

wood which was left. It seemed to be solid enough. So with a great deal of effort, and coming dangerously near to capsizing, he managed to half-clamber, half-roll into the shallow bottom of the boat.

He lay there inertly for a long time, then ponderously raised himself onto his elbows. The boat was drifting slowly into the bank. Long slippery ribbons of foltwine were trailing from his splint. River beetles crawled over his thigh wound. Both the medical nanonic packages were approaching overload trying to screen the blood from the lower half of his leg.

"Apart from that, fine," he said. His grating voice provided a harsh discord to the persistent fruity rumble of thunder.

He crushed or swept away as many of the beetles and other insects as he could. Naturally there weren't any oars. He cut through the vines holding his splint together, and used one of the laths to scull away from the bank and back into the main current. It took a while, with the snowlilies resisting him, but when he was back in the middle of the river the boat began to move noticeably swifter. He made himself as comfortable as possible, and watched the tall trees go past with an increasing sense of eagerness. A keen amateur student of military history, Chas knew that back on old Earth they used to say all roads led to Rome. Here on Lalonde, all the rivers led to Durringham.

A bubble of bright white light squatted possessively over Aberdale. From the air it appeared as though the village was sheltering below a translucent pearl dome to ward off the perverse elements assailing the jungle. Octan circled it at a respectable distance, wings outstretched to their full metre and a half span, riding the thermals with fluid ease, contemptuous of gravity. The jungle underneath him was the same discoloured maroon as the sky. But away to the south a single narrow horizontal streak of bright green shone with compulsive intensity. Instinctively he wanted to soar towards it, to break out into the cleanliness of real light.

Tandem thoughts circulated through the bird's brain, his kindly master's wishes directing his flight away from the purity, and tilting his head so that he looked at the buildings in the middle of the illuminated clearing. Enhanced retinas zoomed in.

"It's virtually the same as Pamiers," Pat Halahan said. "They've got maybe fifty of those fancy houses put up. The ground is all lawns and gardens, right out to the jungle. No sign of any fields or groves." He leaned forwards blindly. Octan casually curved a sepia wing-tip, altering his course by a degree. "Now that is odd. Those trees along the riverbank look like terrestrial weeping willows. But they're big, twenty metres plus. Got to be thirty years old."

"Don't count on it," Kelly muttered in a surly undertone, covering subtler emotions. "In any case, this is the wrong climate."

"Yeah, right," Pat said. "Switching to infrared. Nope. Nothing. If there's any installation underground, Reza, then they're dug in way deep."

"OK," the team commander said reluctantly. "Have Octan scout further east."

"If you want. But it doesn't look like there are any more inhabited clearings in the jungle that way. He can see the light from Schuster quite plainly from his altitude. There's nothing like that eastwards."

"They aren't going to advertise with hundred-kilowatt holograms, Pat."

"Yes, sir. East it is."

A crucial urge to explore the as-yet-unseen land beyond the village flowed through Octan's synapses, and the big eagle wheeled abruptly, reducing landscape and injured sky to chaotic smears.

The mercenary team were also marching eastwards, but they were on the Quallheim's northern shore, keeping roughly parallel to the water, a kilometre inland. They had come ashore west of Schuster where deirar trees covered the ground as thoroughly as though they were a plantation.

Such regularity made the team's journey much easier than their first venture ashore when they had bypassed Pamiers.

The deirars' thick smooth boles rose straight up for twenty-five metres then opened into an umbrella of vegetation that formed a near-solid roof. Together they formed a sylvestral cathedral of enormous proportions. Everywhere the mercenaries looked they could see sturdy jet-black bark pillars supporting the dovetailing leaf domes. On this side of the river the usual deluge of vines and undergrowth was little more than a wispy clutter of straggly sun-starved weeds, long stemmed and pale, heavy with grey mould.

It was Reza who led the march, although he had sent Theo scampering across the treetop canopy on the lookout for hostiles. Few of them had escaped from Pamiers uninjured. He counted himself among the fortunate, with a burn on the rear of his skull that had scorched a couple of sensor warts down to the monobonded carbon reinforced bone; torso scores, and a spiral weal on his right leg. Of all of them, Kelly had borne the worst injury; but the medical packages had resuscitated her to mobile status. She walked with a small cylindrical shoulder-bag carrying her kit; her armour trousers protected her legs from thorns, and an olive-green T-shirt which the red light had turned a raw umber covered the bulge of medical packages on her side.

Pamiers had delivered a deft lesson, bruising their pride as well as their skin. But an important lesson, to Reza's mind. The team had learnt to give the sequestered population a proper degree of respect. He wasn't going to risk probing a village again.

Fenton and Ryall padded tirelessly through the jungle on the southern bank, skirting Aberdale by a wide margin. Jungle sounds filled their ears in the short gaps between the red cloud's perpetual thunder peals. The organic perfume of a hundred different flowers and ripening vine fruits trickled through the muggy air, a vital living counterpoint to the stink of dead children.

Reza nudged the hounds further south, away from the

now-foreign village, from the smell of the small decaying bodies, its voodoo fence, away from the terrible price Lalonde's populace had paid under the invaders' regime. Narrow leaves, mottled with fungal furs, parted round the hounds' muzzles. Chilly distaste and shame—almost inevitably, shame—wormed its trenchant way into their minds along the affinity bond; they shared their master's susceptibilities, becoming as keen as he to leave the heart-breaker calamity behind.

New scents rode the air: sap dripping from snapped vine strands, crushed leaves, loam ruffled by footprints and wheel tracks. The hounds raced ahead, guided by primal senses. People had been this way recently. Some, but not many.

Reza saw a path through the jungle. An old animal track running north-south, enlarged some time ago—branches cut back by fission blades, bushes hacked away—only to fall into disuse again. Almost, but not quite. Somebody still used it. Someone had used it less than two hours ago.

Nerves and instinct fired now, Fenton and Ryall loped through the moist grass towards the south. After two kilometres they found a scent trail branching off into the jungle. One person, male. His clothes smearing the leaves with sweat and cotton.

“Pat, bring Octan back. I think we've got our man.”

Reza kept the snatch mission simple. The team activated their hovercraft again when they were back on the Quallheim east of Aberdale and started searching for a tributary fork on the south bank. According to the map stored in his guidance block there was a modest river which ran south through the jungle, coming from the mountains on the far side of the savannah. It took them five minutes to find it, and the hovercraft nosed over the clot of snowlilies guarding its mouth. Plaited tree boughs formed an arched screen overhead.

“After the snatch we'll keep going up this river and out onto the savannah,” Reza said when they had left the

Quallheim behind. "I want to get him and us out from under this bloody cloud as quickly as possible. We should be able to access the communication satellites as well once we're clear of it. That way if we can extract any useful information it can be delivered straight up to Terrance Smith."

If Smith is still up there, Kelly thought. She couldn't forget what the woman in Pamiers had said about the starships fighting. But Joshua had promised to stay and pick them up. She gave a cynical little sniff. Oh yes, the Confederation's Mr. Dependable himself.

"You all right?" Ariadne asked, raising her voice above the steady propeller whine and the rambling thunder booms.

"My analgesic blocks are holding," Kelly said. "It was just the size of the burn which shocked me." She resisted the urge to scratch the medical nanonic packages.

"Adds a bit of spice to the recording, a bit of drama," Ariadne said. "Speaking of which, you're not going to blow us out, are you? I mean, we are the good guys."

"Yeah. You're the good guys."

"Great, always wanted to be a sensewise star."

Kelly accessed her Lalonde sensewise report memory cell file and turned her head until Ariadne was in the centre of her vision field (wishing the combat-boosted could produce some halfway decent facial expressions). "What did you learn from the sample you took from the houses?"

"Nowt. It was dust, that's all. Literally, dry loam."

"So these ornamental buildings are just an illusion?"

"Half and half. It isn't a complete fiction; they've moulded the loam into the shape you see and cloaked it with an optical illusion. It's similar to our chameleon circuit, really."

"How do they do that?"

"No idea. The closest human technology can come is the molecular-binding generators starships use to strengthen their hulls. But they're expensive, and use up a lot of power. Be cheaper to build a house, or use programmed

silicon like you suggested. Then again”—she tilted her head back to focus her sensors on the cloudband above the trees—“logic doesn’t seem to be playing a large part in life on Lalonde right now.”

The hovercraft eased in against the crumbling loam bank. Ryall was standing among the qualtook trees above the water, waiting for them. Reza jumped ashore and ruffled the big hound’s head. It pressed against his side in complete devotion.

“Jalal and Ariadne, with me,” Reza said. “The rest of you stay here and keep the hovercraft ready. Pat, monitor us through Octan. If we blow the snatch, I suggest you keep heading south. There’s a Tyrathca farming settlement on the other side of the savannah. It’s as good a place as any to hide out. This snatch is our last stab at completing the mission. Don’t waste yourselves trying to gather further Intelligence, and don’t attempt a rescue. Got that?”

“Yes, sir,” Pat said.

Jalal and Ariadne joined Reza on the top of the bank. The big combat-adept mercenary had plugged a gaussrifle into one elbow socket and a TIP rifle into the other; power cables and feed tubes looped round into his backpack.

“Kelly?” Reza asked ingenuously. “Not wanting to come with us this time?”

“It took eight generations of cousins marrying to produce you,” she told him.

The three mercenaries on the bank activated their chameleon circuits. Laughter floated down to the hovercraft out of unbroken jungle.

Fenton watched the little clearing from under the sloping lower branches of an infant gigantea. The light here wasn’t the pure solar white of the villages, but the universal redness had veered into a pale pink shade. A log cabin had been built in the centre, not the kind of frame and plank arrangement favoured by the colonists but a rugged affair that could have come straight from some Alpine meadow. A stone chimney-stack formed almost all of one side, smoke wound drowsily upwards. A lot of trouble had

been taken to transform the clearing; undergrowth had been trimmed back, animal hides were stretched drying over frames, timber had been cut and stacked, a vegetable plot planted.

The man who had done it was a well-built thirty-five-year-old with inflamed ginger hair, wearing a thick red and blue check cotton shirt and mud-caked black denim jeans. He was working at a sturdy table outside his front door, sawing up wood with old-fashioned manual tools. A half-completed rocking chair stood on the ground behind him.

Fenton moved forwards surreptitiously out of the shaggy gigantea's shade, but keeping to the cover provided by bushes and smaller trees ringing the clearing. Between thunder broadsides he could hear the regular stifled ripping sound as the man planed a piece of wood on the table. Then the sound stopped and his shoulders stiffened.

Reza wouldn't have thought it possible. The man was a good fifty metres away, with his back to the hound, and the thunder was unrelenting. Even his enhanced senses would have difficulty picking out Fenton under such circumstances. He and the other two mercenaries were still four hundred metres away. Nothing else for it . . . Fenton cantered eagerly into the clearing.

The man looked round, bushy eyebrows rising. "What's this, then? My, you're a roguish looking brute." He clicked his fingers, and Fenton trotted up to him. "Ah, you'll not be on your own, then. That's a shame, a crying shame. For all of us. Your master won't be far behind, I'll warrant. Will you? Came down on the spaceplanes this morning no doubt, didn't you? That must have been a trip and a half. Aye, well, I'll not be finishing my chair this afternoon then." He sat down on a bench beside the table, and started to change, his shirt losing colour, hair fading, thinning, stature diminishing.

By the time Reza, Jalal, and Ariadne walked into the clearing he had become an undistinguished middle-aged man with brown skin and thin features, wearing an ageing LDC one-piece jump suit. Fenton was noisily lapping up

water out of a bowl at his feet, mind radiating contentment with his new friend.

Reza walked over cautiously. His retinal implants scanned the man from head to toe, and he datavised the pixel sequence into his processor block for a search and identify program. Although the earlier phantom lumberjack image had vanished, Reza saw the roots of the man's black hair were a dark ginger. "Afternoon," he said, not quite sure how to react to this display of passivity.

"Good afternoon to you. Not that I've seen anything like you before, mind. Not outside a kinema, and perhaps not even there."

"My name is Reza Malin. We're part of a team employed by the LDC to find out what's going on down here."

"Then with every ounce of sincerity I own, I wish you good luck, my boy. You're going to need it."

An ounce was an ancient unit of measure, Reza's neural nanonics informed him (there was no reference to kinema in any file). "Are you going to help me?"

"It doesn't look to me like I've got a lot of choice, now does it? Not with your merry gang and their big, big weapons."

"That's true. What's your name?"

"My name? Well, now, that'd be Shaun Wallace."

"Bad move. According to the LDC files you're Rai Molvi, a colonist who settled Aberdale."

The man scratched his ear and gave Reza a bashful grin. "Ah now, you've got me there, Mr. Malin. I must admit, I was indeed old Molvi. Charmless soul he is, too."

"OK, smartarse, game over. Come on."

Reza led the way back to the hovercraft, with Jalal walking right behind their captive, gaussrifle trained on the back of his skull. A couple of minutes after they left the clearing the pink light began to dim back into the same lustreless burgundy of the surrounding jungle. As if immediately aware of the abandonment, playful vennals slithered into the trees around the edge of the clearing. The more

venturesome among them dared to scamper over the grass to the cabin itself, searching for titbits. After quarter of an hour the cabin emitted a vociferous creak. The vennals fled *en masse* back into the trees.

It was another couple of minutes before anything else happened. Then, with the tardiness of a sinking moon, its surface texture leaked away to reveal a starkly primitive mud hut. Tiny arid flakes moulted from the roof, resembling a sleet of miniature autumn leaves as they scattered over the grass below; rivulets of dust trickled down the walls. Within twenty minutes the entire edifice had dissolved like a sugar cube in soft, warm rain.

Forget discovering Ione Saldana existed, forget discovering Laton was still alive, this was the ultimate interview. For *this* Collins would make her their premier anchorwoman for the rest of time. For this she would be respected and lionized across the Confederation. Kelly Tirrel was the first reporter in history to interview the dead.

And as the dead went, Shaun Wallace was agreeable enough. He sat on the rear bench of the lead hovercraft, facing Kelly, and stroking Fenton the whole while. Jalal kept a heavy-calibre gaussrifle levelled at him. On the front bench beside her, Reza was listening intently, making the occasional comment.

The trees were thinning out as they raced for the end of the jungle. She could see more of the red cloudband through the black filigree of leaves overhead. It too was becoming flimsier; there were definite fast-moving serpentine currents straining its uniformity. Strangely, for there was no wind at ground level.

Shaun Wallace claimed he had lived in Northern Ireland during the early twentieth century. "Terrible times," he said softly. "Especially for someone with my beliefs." But he had just shaken his head and smiled distantly when she asked what those beliefs were. "Nothing a lady like yourself would want to know." He died, he said, in the mid-1920s, another martyr to the cause, another victim of

English oppression. The reason the soldiers shot him was not volunteered. He claimed he hadn't died alone.

"And after?" Kelly said.

"Ah, now, Miss Kelly, afterwards is the work of the Devil."

"You went to hell?"

"Hell is a place, so the good priests taught me. This beyond was no place. It was dry and empty, and it was cruel beyond physical pain. It was where you can see the living wasting their lives, and where you drain the substance from each other."

"Each other? You weren't alone?"

"There was millions of us. Souls beyond the counting of a simple Ballymena lad like myself."

"You say you can see the living from the other side?"

"From the beyond, yes. 'Tis like through a foggy window. But you strive to make out what it is that's happening in the living world. All the time you strive. And you yearn for it, you yearn for it so hard, lass, that you feel your heart should be bursting apart. I saw wonders and I saw terrors, and I could touch neither."

"How did you come back?"

"The way was opened for us. Something came through from this side, right here on this sodden hot planet. I don't know what the creature was. Nothing Earthly, though. After that, there was no stopping us."

"This xenoc, the creature you say let you through; is it still here, still bringing souls back from the beyond?"

"No, it was only here for the first one. It vanished after that. But it was too late, the trickle was already becoming a flood. We bring ourselves back now."

"How?"

Shaun Wallace gave a reluctant sigh. He was quiet for so long Kelly thought he wasn't going to answer; he even stopped stroking Fenton.

"The way the devil-lovers of yesterday always tried to do it," he said heavily. "With their ceremonies and their pagan barbarism. And God preserve me for doing such

things, I used to think what I did before was sinful. But there's no other way."

"What is the way?"

"We break the living. We make them want to be possessed. Possession is the end of torment, you see. Even with our power we can only open a small gateway to the beyond, enough to show the lost souls the way back. But there has to be somewhere waiting for them, some host. And the host has to be willing."

"You torture them into submission," Reza said bluntly.

"Aye, that we do. That we do, indeed. And, mark you, there's no pride in me for saying it."

"You mean, Rai Molvi is still there? Still alive inside you?"

"Yes. But I keep his soul locked away in a dark, safe place. I'm not sure you could call it living."

"And this power you mentioned." Kelly pressed the point. "What is your power?"

"I don't know for sure. Magic of a kind. Though not a witch's magic with its spells and potions. This is a darker magic, because it's there at a thought. So easy, it is. Nothing like that should be given easily to a man. The temptations are too strong."

"Is that where the white fire comes from?" Reza asked. "This power you have?"

"Aye, indeed it is."

"What's its range?"

"Ah now, Mr. Malin, that's difficult to say. The more of you that fling it, the further it will go. The more impassioned you are, the stronger it will be. For a cool one such as yourself, I doubt it would be far."

Reza grunted and shifted back on the bench.

"Could you demonstrate the power for me, please?" Kelly asked. "Something I can record and show people. Something that will make them believe what you say is true."

"I've never known a newspaper gal before. You did say you were from a newspaper, now didn't you?"

“What newspapers eventually became, yes.” She ran a historical search request through her neural nanonics. “Something like the Movietone and Pathé reels at the cinema, only with colour and feeling. Now, that demonstration?”

“I normally prefer gals with longer hair, myself.”

Kelly ran her hand self-consciously over her scalp. She had shaved her hair to a blueish stubble so she could wear the armour’s shell-helmet. “I normally have longer hair,” she said resentfully.

Shaun Wallace winked broadly, then leant over the gunwale and scooped up one of the long-legged insects scampering over the snowlilies. He held it up in the palm of his hand; a long spindly tube body, dun brown, with a round bulb of a head sprouting unpleasant pincer mandibles. It was quivering, but stayed where it was as though glued to his skin. He brought his other hand down flat on top of it, making a show of pressing them together, squashing the insect. Kelly’s eyes never wavered.

When he parted his hands the prince of butterflies was revealed, wings almost the size of his palms, patterned in deep turquoise and topaz and silver, colours resistant to the red light of the cloud, shining in their own right. Its wings flexed twice, then it flew off, only to be kicked about in the air by the wash of the hovercraft’s powerful slipstream.

“There, you see?” Shaun Wallace said. “We don’t always destroy.”

Kelly lost sight of the delightful apparition. “How long will it stay like that?”

“Mortality is not something you measure out like a pint of ale, Miss Kelly. It will live its life to the full, and that’s all that can be said.”

“He doesn’t know,” Reza muttered curtly.

Shaun Wallace practised a knowing, slightly condescending smile.

It was growing lighter around the hovercraft. Up ahead, Kelly could see the wonderfully welcome glare of pure sunlight striking emerald foliage. A colour that wasn’t red!

She had begun to believe that red was all there ever was, all there ever had been.

The hovercraft skimmed out from under the chafed edge of the cloudband. All of the mercenaries broke into a spontaneous cheer.

“What is that thing?” Kelly shouted above the rebel whoops, pointing up at the cloud.

“A reflection of ourselves, our fear.”

“What do you fear?”

“The emptiness of the night. It reminds us too much of the beyond. We hide from it.”

“You mean you’re making that?” she asked, scepticism warring with astonishment. “But it covers thousands of kilometres.”

“Aye, that it does. ’Tis our will that creates it; we want shelter, so shelter we have. All of us, Miss Kelly, even me who shuns the rest of them, we all pray for sanctuary with every fibre of being. And it’s growing, this will of ours, spreading out to conquer. One day soon it will cover all of this planet. But even that is only the first chapter of salvation.”

“What’s the second?”

“To leave. To escape the harsh gaze of this universe altogether. We’ll withdraw to a place of our own making. A place where there is no emptiness hanging like a sword above the land, no death to claim us. A place where your butterfly will live for ever, Miss Kelly. Now tell me that isn’t a worthy goal, tell me that isn’t a dream worth having.”

Reza watched the last of the jungle’s trees go past as the hovercraft reached the savannah. The lush green grassland seemed to unroll on either side of the river as though it was only just coming into existence. He wasn’t really paying much attention; the strange (supposed) Irishman was a captivating performer. “A closed universe,” he said, and the earlier scorn was lacking.

Kelly gave him a surprised glance. “You mean it is possible?”

“It happens thousands of times a day. The blackhawks and voidhawks open interstices to travel through wormholes every time they fly between stars. Technically they’re self-contained universes.”

“Yes, but taking a planet—”

“There are twenty million of us,” Shaun Wallace purred smoothly. “We can do it, together, we can pull open the portal that leads away from mortality.”

Kelly’s neural nanonics faithfully recorded the silver chill tickling her nerves at the naked conviction in his voice. “You’re really planning to generate a wormhole large enough to enclose the whole of Lalonde? And keep it there?”

Shaun Wallace wagged his finger at her. “Ah, now there you go again, Miss Kelly, putting your fine, elegant words in my mouth. Plans, such a grand term. Generals and admirals and kings, now they have plans. But we don’t, we have instinct. Hiding our new world from this universe God created, that comes as naturally as breathing.” He chuckled. “It means we can go on breathing, too. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to stop me from doing that, would you now? Not a sweet lass like yourself.”

“No. But what about Rai Molvi? Tell me what happens to him afterwards?”

Shaun Wallace scratched his chin, looked round at the savannah, shifted the jump-suit fabric round his shoulders, pulled a sardonic face.

“He stays, doesn’t he?” Kelly said stiffly. “You won’t let him go.”

“I need the body, miss. Real bad. Perhaps there’ll be a priest amongst us I can visit for absolution.”

“If what you’re saying is true,” Reza said charily, focusing an optical sensor on the cloudband behind, “then we really don’t want to be staying here any longer than we have to. Wallace, when is this planetary vanishing act supposed to happen?”

“You have a few days’ grace. But there are none of your starships left to sail away on. Sorry.”

“Is that why you didn’t resist, because we can’t escape?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Malin, you’ve got me all wrong. You see, I don’t want much to do with my fellows. That’s why I live out in the woods, there. I prefer being on my own, I’ve had a bucketful of their company. Seven centuries of it, to be precise.”

“So you’ll help us?”

He gathered himself up and threw a glance over his shoulder at the second hovercraft. “I won’t hinder you,” he announced magnanimously.

“Thank you very much.”

“Not that it will do you much good, mind.”

“How’s that?”

“There’s not going to be many places you can run to, I’m afraid. Quite a few of us have sailed away already.”

“Fucking hell,” Kelly gasped.

Shaun Wallace frowned in disapproval. “To be sure, that’s no word for a lady to be going and using.”

Kelly made sure he was in perfect focus. “Are you telling me that what’s happening on Lalonde is going to happen on other planets as well?”

“Indeed I am. There’s a lot of very anguished souls back there in the beyond. They’re all in dire need of a clean handsome body, every one of them. Something very much like the one you’ve got there.”

“This is occupied, to the hilt.”

His eyes flashed with black amusement. “So was this one, Miss Kelly.”

“And all these worlds the possessed have gone to, are you going to try and imprison them in wormholes?”

“That’s a funny old word you’re using there: wormholes. Little muddy tunnels in the ground, with casts on top to show the fishermen where they are.”

“It means chinks in space, gaps you can fall through.”

“Does it now? Well, then, I suppose that’s what I mean, yes. I like that, a gap in the air which leads you through to the other side of the rainbow.”

Surreal. The word seemed to be caught on some repeater

program in Kelly's neural nanonics, flipping up in hologram violet over the image of a mad, dead Irishman sitting in front of her, grinning in delight at her discomfort. Worlds snatched out of their orbits by armies of the dead. Surreal. Surreal. Surreal.

Fenton rose growling to his feet, fangs barred, hackles sticking up like spikes. Shaun Wallace gave the hound an alarmed look, and Kelly's retinas caught the minutest white static flames twinkle over his fingertips. But Fenton swung his head round to the prow and barked.

Jalal's gaussrifle was already coming round. He saw the huge creature crouched down in the long grass at the side of the water thirty-five metres ahead of the hovercraft. The Lalonde generalist didactic memory called it a kroclion, a plains-dwelling carnivore which even the sayce ran from. He wasn't surprised, the beast must have been nearly four metres long, weighing an easy half-tonne. Its hide was a sandy yellow, well suited to the grass, making visual identification hard (infrared was, thankfully, a furnace flame). The head—like a terrestrial shark—had been grafted on, all teeth and tiny killer-bright eyes.

Blue target graphics locked on. He fired an EE round.

Everyone ducked, Kelly jamming her hands over her ears. A dazzling explosion sent a pillar of purple plasma and mashed soil spouting twenty metres into the air. Its vertex flattened out, a ring of soot-choked orange flame rolling across the river. The ululate crack was loud enough to drown out the tattoo of thunder chasing them from the red cloud.

Kelly lifted her head carefully.

"I think you got him," Theo said drily, as he steered the hovercraft away from the quaking water sloshing round the new crater. A semicircle of grass on the bank was burning.

"They're vicious bastards," Jalal protested.

"Not that one, not any more, as anyone within five kilometres will tell you," Ariadne said.

"And you could have dealt with it better?"

“Forget it,” Reza said. “We’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“You believe what this dickhead has been telling us?” Ariadne asked, jerking a thumb at Shaun Wallace.

“Some of it,” Reza said noncommittally.

“Why thank you, Mr. Malin,” Shaun Wallace said. He watched the burning crater closely as the hovercraft sped past. “Fine shooting there, Mr. Jalal. Those old kroclions, they put the wind up me and no mistake. Old Lucifer was on form the day he made them.”

“Shut up,” Reza said. The one optical sensor he had left focused on the edge of the red cloud showed him a lone tendril starting to swell out, extending along the line of the narrow river behind them. Too slow to catch them, he estimated, but it was a graphically disturbing demonstration that the cloud and the possessed inhabitants were aware of the team’s presence.

He opened a channel to his communication block and datavised a sequence of orders in. It began scanning the sky for communication-satellite beacons. Two of the five satellites the blackhawks had delivered into geosynchronous orbit were above the horizon and still broadcasting. The block aimed a tight beam at one, requesting contact with any of Terrance Smith’s fleet. No ship was left in the command net, the satellite’s computer reported, but there was a message stored in its memory. Reza datavised his personal code.

“This is a restricted access message for Reza’s team,” Joshua Calvert’s voice said from the communication block. “But I have to be sure it is you and only you receiving it. The satellite is programmed to transmit it on a secure directional beam. If there is any hostile within five hundred metres of you who can intercept then do not request access. In order to access the recording, enter the name of the person who came between me and Kelly last year.”

The tip of the cloud tendril was a couple of kilometres

away. Reza turned to face Shaun Wallace. "Can any of your friends intercept a radio transmission?"

"Well, now, there's some of them living in one of the old savannah homesteads. But they're a few miles from here, yet. Is that more than five hundred metres?"

"Yes. Kelly, the name please."

She gave him a stonefaced smile. "Aren't you glad you didn't leave me behind at Pamiers?"

Jalal laughed. "She got you there, Reza."

"Yes," Reza said heavily. "I'm glad we didn't leave you behind. The name?"

Kelly opened a channel to his communication block and datavised: "Ione Saldana."

There was a moment's silence while the satellite's carrier wave emitted a few electronic bleeps.

"Well remembered, Kelly. OK, this is the bad news: the hijacked starships have started fighting us and the navy. There's a real vicious battle going on in orbit right now. *Lady Mac* got clear, but we've taken a bit of punishment in the process. Another story for you sometime. I'm about to jump us out to Murora. There's an Edenist station in orbit there, and we're hoping to dock with it to make our repairs. We estimate the damage can be patched up in a couple of days, after which we'll come back for you. Kelly, Reza, the rest of you; we're only going to make one fly-by. Hopefully you took my earlier advice and are now heading hell for leather away from that bloody cloud. Keep going, and leave your communication block scanning for my transmission. If you want to be picked up then you'll have to stay away from any hostiles. That's about it, we're battenning down to jump now. Good luck, I'll see you in two, maybe three days."

Kelly rested her head in her hands. Just hearing his voice again was a fantastic tonic. And he was alive, smart enough to elude a battle. And he was going to come back for them. Joshua, you bloody splendid marvel. She wiped tears from her cheeks.

Shaun Wallace patted her shoulder tenderly. "Your young man, is it?"

"Yes. Sort of." She sniffed, and brushed away the last of the tears in a businesslike manner.

"He sounds like a fine boy to me."

"He is."

Reza datavised a summary of events to the second hovercraft. "I'm in complete agreement with Joshua about keeping clear of the cloud and the possessed. As of now our original mission is over. Our priority now is just to stay alive and make sure what information we have gets back to the Confederation authorities. We'll keep going up this river to the Tyrathca farmers and hope that we can hold out there until the *Lady Macbeth* comes back for us."

It was the rygar bush which had brought the Tyrathca farmers to Lalonde.

When they were searching for their initial backing, the LDC sent samples of Lalonde's aboriginal flora to both of the xenoc members of the Confederation; it was standard practice to try and attract as wide a spectrum of support as possible for such ventures. The Kiint, as always, declined to participate. But the Tyrathca considered the small berries of the rygar bush a superlative delicacy. Ripe berries could be ground up to produce a cold beverage, or mixed with sugar to form a sticky fudge; LDC negotiators claimed it was the Tyrathcan equivalent of chocolate. The normally cloistered xenocs were so enamoured at the prospect of wholesale rygar cultivation they agreed to a joint colony enterprise with their merchant organization taking a four per cent stake in the LDC. It was only the third time since joining the Confederation that they had ever participated in a colony, a fact which lent the hard-pressed LDC considerable badly needed respectability. Even better for the LDC board: to a human palate the rygar berries tasted like oily grapes, so there would never be any conflict of interest arising.

Five years after the dumpers had dropped out of the sky

to form the nucleus of Durringham the first batch of Tyrathcan breeder pairs arrived and settled in the foothills of the mountain range which made up the southern border of the Juliffe basin where the rygar bushes flourished. The LDC's long-range economic plans foresaw both the human and Tyrathcan settlements expanding from their respective centres until they met at the roots of the tributaries. By the time that happened both groups would have risen above their initial subsidence level and be prosperous enough to trade to their mutual enrichment. But that date was still many years in the future. The human villages furthest from Durringham were all as poor as Aberdale and Schuster, while the Tyrathcan plantations had barely cultivated enough rygar to fill the holds of the starships their merchants sent twice a year. Contact had so far been minimal.

It was late afternoon, and the savannah was already giving way to low humpbacked foothills when the mercenary team saw their first Tyrathcan house. There was no mistaking it, a dark cinnamon-coloured tower twenty-five metres high with slightly tapering walls, and circular windows sealed over with ebony blisters. The design had evolved on the abandoned Tyrathcan homeworld, Mastrit-PJ, over seventeen thousand years ago, and was employed on every planet their arkships had colonized right across the galaxy. They never used anything else.

This one stood like a border sentry castle overlooking the river. Octan glided round it a couple of times, seeing the vague outlines of fields and gardens reclaimed by grass and small scrub bushes. Moss and weeds were growing around the inside of the roof's turret wall where soil and dust had drifted.

"Nothing moving," Pat reported to Reza. "I'd say it was deserted three or four years ago."

They had gathered together on the riverbank just downstream from the tower house, hovercraft drawn up on the grass. The river was getting narrower, little more than a stream, down to about eight metres wide, and littered with

boulders which made it virtually unnavigable. For the first time since they had landed that morning there were no snowlilies in sight, only the broken tips of their stems trailing limply.

“The Tyrathca do that,” Sal Yong said. “A house is only ever used once. When the breeders die it’s sealed up as their tomb.”

Reza consulted his guidance block. “There’s a plantation village called Coastuc-RT six kilometres south-east of here. The other side of that ridge,” he pointed, datavisaging the map image to them. “Ariadne, can the hovercraft take it?”

She focused her optical sensors on the rolling land which skirted the mountains. “Shouldn’t be a problem, the grass is a lot shorter here than the savannah and there isn’t much stone about.” When she looked west she could see another three of the dark towers sticking out of the bleak countryside. They were all in shadow; thick black rainclouds were surging towards them along the side of the mountains. The wind had freshened appreciably since they had left the jungle. Looking back to the north she could see the red cloud over the Quallheim forging the entire northern horizon; it was almost edge on, they had climbed steadily since leaving it behind. The sky above it was a perfect unblemished blue.

Kelly felt the first smattering of the drizzle on her bare arms as she clambered back into the hovercraft. She dug into her cylindrical kitbag for a cagoule, her burnt armour-suit jacket had been left behind in the jungle—in that state it wouldn’t have been any use anyway. “I’m sorry,” she told Shaun Wallace as he sat beside her. “I’ve only got the one, and the others don’t need them.”

“Ah now, don’t you go worrying yourself over me, Miss Kelly,” he said. The jump suit he wore turned a rich indigo, then the fabric became stiffer. He was wearing a cagoule which was identical to the one in her hands, right down to the unobtrusive Collins logo on the left shoulder. “There, see? Old Shaun can look after himself.”

Kelly gave him a flustered nod (thankful her memory cell was still recording), and hurriedly struggled into her own cagoule as the warm drizzle thickened. "What about food?" she asked the Irishman as Theo goaded the hovercraft over the summit of the riverbank and started off towards the Tyrathca village.

"Don't mind if I do, thanks. Nothing too rich mind, not for me. I likes me pleasures simple."

She dug round in the bag and found a bar of tarrit-flavoured chocolate. None of the mercenaries had brought any food, with their metabolisms they could graze off the vegetation indefinitely, potent intestinal enzymes breaking up anything with proteins and hydrocarbons.

Shaun Wallace chewed in silence for a minute. "That's nice," he said, "reminds me a little of bilberries on a cold morning," and he grinned.

Kelly found she was smiling back at him.

The hovercraft moved a lot slower over the land than on water. Cairnlike clusters of weather-smoothed stone and sudden pinched gullies made the pilots' task a demanding one. The rain, which was now a solid downpour of heavy grey water, added to the difficulty.

Pat had sent Octan northward to avoid the worst of the deluge. Back out on the savannah it was still dry and sunny, a buffer zone between nature and supernature. Reza dispatched Fenton and Ryall to survey the ground ahead. Lightning began to spear down.

"I think I preferred the river," Jalal said glumly.

"Ah, Mr. Jalal, buck up now, this is nothing for Lalonde," Shaun Wallace said. "A little shower, that's all. It was much worse than this before we returned from beyond."

Jalal ignored the casual reference to the power of the possessed; Shaun Wallace, he thought, was playing a subtle war of nerves against them. Sowing the seeds of doubt and despondency.

"Hold it," Reza datavised to Theo, and Sal Yong, who was piloting the second hovercraft. "Deflate the skirts."

The hovercraft sank onto their hulls with flagging whines, crushing the sturdy grass tufts, settling at awkward angles. Rain had reduced visibility to less than twenty-five metres even with enhanced sight. Kelly could just make out Ryall up ahead. The hound was shifting about uneasily in front of a big sandy-brown boulder.

Reza took off his magazine belt, and left the TIP carbine he'd been carrying with it. He hopped over the gunwale and started to trudge towards the restive animal. Kelly had to wipe a slick film of water from her face. The rain was worming its way round her cagoule hood to run down her neck. She toyed with the idea of putting on her shell-helmet again—anything to stop this insidious clammy invasion.

Reza stopped five metres short of the brown lump, and slowly opened his arms, rain dripping from his grey-skinned fingers. He shouted something even Kelly's studio-grade audio-discrimination program couldn't catch above the wind and rain. She squinted, the rain suddenly chilling inside her T-shirt. The boulder rose up smoothly on four powerful legs. Kelly gasped. Her Confederation generalist didactic memory identified it immediately: a soldier-caste Tyrathca.

"Oh bugger," Jalal muttered. "They're clan creatures, it won't be alone." He started to scan around. It was hopeless in the rain, even infrared was washed out.

The soldier-caste Tyrathca was about as big as a horse, although the legs weren't as long. Its head, too, was faintly equine, tilted back at a shallow angle at the end of a thick muscular neck. There were no visible ears, or nostrils; the mouth had a complex double-lip arrangement resembling overlapping clam shells. The sienna hide, which Kelly had thought solid like an exoskeleton, was actually scaled, with a short-cropped chestnut-brown mane running along its entire spine. Two arms extended from behind the base of its neck, ending in nine-fingered circular hands. A pair of slender antennae also protruded from its shoulder joints, swept back along the length of its body.

Although it had a strong animal appearance, it was holding a large very modern-looking rifle. A broad harnesslike belt hung round its neck, with grenades and power magazines clipped on.

It held out a processor block, and a slim AV projection pillar telescoped out. "Turn your vehicles around," a synthetic voice clanged through the rain. "Humans are no longer permitted here."

"We need somewhere to shelter for the night," Reza replied. "We can't go back north; you must have seen the red cloud."

"No humans."

"Why not? We must have somewhere to stay. Tell me, why?"

"Humans have become—" The block gave a melodic cheep. "No direct translation available; similarity to: *elemental*. Coastuc-RT has suffered damage, merchant spaceplane has been stolen. Breeders and other castes have been killed by amok humans. You are not permitted entry."

"I know about the disturbances in the human villages. I have been sent by the Lalonde Development Corporation to try and restore order."

"Then do that. Go to your own race's villages and bring order."

"We have tried, but the situation was beyond our capability to resolve. There has been a major invasion of an unknown origin." He just couldn't bring himself to say possession. The processor block was quiet; he guessed he was talking to a breeder, the soldier caste were only marginally sentient—not that he'd like to go up against one. "I would like to discuss what can be done to protect you from further attack. My team are combat trained and well equipped, we should be able to augment whatever defences you have."

"Acceptable. You may enter Coastuc-RT by yourself to view the situation. If you believe you are able to increase our defences your team will be allowed to enter and stay."

“Reza,” Kelly datavised. “Ask if I can come with you, please.”

“I will need to bring two others to assess the area around Coastuc-RT with any degree of accuracy before nightfall,” he said out loud, then datavised: “That makes us quits now.”

“Absolutely,” she replied.

“Two only,” the synthetic voice agreed. “None may carry weapons. Our soldiers will provide protection.”

“As you wish.” He turned and walked back to the first hovercraft, feet sinking up to his ankles in slimy puddles. The processor block AV projection pillar began to emit the reverberative whistles and hoots which were the Tyrathcan speech. Answering calls shrilled through the rain, causing the mercenaries to up their sensor resolution to the maximum in a vain attempt to locate the other soldier castes.

“Ariadne, you come with me and Kelly,” Reza said. “I’ll need someone who can review the area properly. The rest of you wait here. We’ll try and get back before dusk. I’ll leave Fenton and Ryall on picket duty for you.”

Two seemingly tireless soldiers ran alongside the hovercraft all the way to the village, antennae whipping back and forth (they were tail-analogues, helping with balance, according to Kelly’s didactic memory). Kelly wasn’t sure whom they were supposed to be protecting. The guns still appeared incongruous; for creatures that had evolved during the pre-technology tribal era to fight the Tyrathcan version of rough and tumble against enemy tribe soldiers bows and arrows would be more suited.

When she reviewed the entire didactic memory she found that the breeders (the only fully sentient Tyrathca) secreted what amounted to chemical control programs in specialist teats. A breeder would think out a sequence of orders—which plants were edible, how to operate a specific power tool—that would be edited into a chain of molecules by the teat gland. Once instructions were loaded in the brain of a vassal-caste species (there were six types) they could be activated by a simple verbal command

whenever required. The chemicals were also used to educate young breeders, making the process a natural equivalent to Adamist didactic imprints and Edenist educational affinity lessons.

The rain was easing off when the hovercraft cleared the crest above Coastuc-RT. Kelly looked down on a broad, gentle valley with extensively cultivated terraces on both sides. An area of nearly twenty square kilometres had been cleared of scrub and grass, rebuilt into irrigated ledges, and planted with young rygar bushes. Coastuc-RT itself sat on the floor of the valley, several hundred identical dark brown towers regimented in concentric rings around a central park space.

Reza steered the hovercraft onto a rough switchback track and set off down the slope. Numerous farmer-caste Tyrathca were out tending the emerald-green bushes—pruning, weeding, patching up the shallow drainage ditches. The farmers were slightly smaller than the soldiers but with thicker arms, endowed with the kind of plodding durability associated with oxen or shire-horses. They saw one or two hunter caste skulking among the bushes, about the same size as Reza's hounds, but with a streamlined fury that could probably give a kroclion a nasty fright. The escort soldiers whistled and hooted every time the hunters appeared, and they turned away obediently.

The first signs of damage were visible when the hovercraft reached the valley floor. Several towers in the village's outer ring were broken, five had been reduced to jagged stumps sticking up out of the rubble. Scorch marks formed barbarous black graffiti across the tower walls.

Fields on either side of the road had been churned up by fresh craters. EE explosives, Reza guessed, the village soldier caste had put up a good fight. The road itself had been repaired in several places. An earth rampart had been thrown up around the perimeter, a hundred metres from the outer turret houses. Farmers were still working around its base, using shovels which even Sewell would have been hard pressed to raise.

“Leave your vehicle now,” the synthesized voice from the processor block told them when they were twenty metres away from the barricade of raw loam.

Reza cut the fans and codelocked the power cells. The soldiers waited until they had climbed out, then walked them into the village.

Up close the tower houses were utilitarian, each with four floors, their windows arranged at precise levels. They were made by the builder caste, the largest of all the vassals, who chewed soil and mixed it with an epoxy chemical extravasated in their mouth ducts, producing a strong cement. It gave the walls a smooth, extruded feel, as though the towers had come intact from some giant kiln. There were some modern amenities, bands of solar cell panels tipped most of the turret walls; metal water pipes lay bent and tangled among the rubble. The windows were all glazed.

Arable gardens encircled every tower, trellises and stakes supporting the grasping yellow confusion of native Tyrathcan vegetation. Fruit trees lined the paved roads, huge leaves providing ample shade.

Smaller rounded silos and workshops were spaced between the towers, each with a single semicircular door. Carts and even small power trucks were parked outside.

“I don’t know who is jumper, us or them,” Kelly subvocalized into her neural nanonics memory cell. “The Tyrathcan soldiers are clearly immensely capable, to say nothing of the hunter caste. Yet the possessed have hurt them badly. The vassal-caste bodies you can see half buried in the rubble of the outer towers have been left untended in the haste to fortify Coastuc-RT. A large breach of the Tyrathcan internment ritual, they obviously consider the threat humans present to be of more pressing importance.

“But now we are inside the village I can see very little activity apart from those vassals working on the rampart. The roads are empty. No breeder has appeared. The soldiers seem certain of their destination, leading us deeper

into the village. I can now hear a great many Tyrathca away towards the park at the centre of Coastuc-RT. Yes, listen, a whistle that rises and falls in a slow regular beat. There must be hundreds of them doing it in unison to achieve that effect.”

The soldiers led them out onto one of the village’s radial roads, cutting straight down past the tower houses into the central park. Right in the middle was a vast impossible dull-silver edifice. At first glimpse it looked like a hundred-metre-wide disc suspended fifty metres in the air by a central conical pillar whose tip only just touched the ground; another, identical, cone rose from the top of the disc. It was perfectly symmetrical, shining a lurid red-gold under the sinking sun. Six elaborate flying buttresses arched down from the rim of the disc, preventing the top-heavy structure from falling over.

The three humans stared in silence at the imposing artefact. Big builder-caste Tyrathca walked ponderously along the buttresses and over the surface of the disc. The pinnacle of the upper cone wasn’t quite finished, showing a geodesic grid of timber struts which a rank of builder caste clung to as they slowly covered it with their organic cement. Another team were following them up, spraying the drying cement with a gelatin mucus that shimmered with oil-slick marquetry until it hardened into the distinctive silverish hue.

Kelly took the structure in with one swift professional sweep, then focused on the park. It had been reduced to a shallow clay quarry in the haste to extract soil for the disc and its buttresses. This was where the Tyrathca breeders had gathered; several thousand of them, circling round the outside of the disc. They sat on their hindquarters in the mud, short antennae standing proud, whistling in a long slow undulation. It sounded poignant, imploring even. Entities that had been needlessly hurt questioning the reason, the same the galaxy over.

Kelly’s didactic memory didn’t have any reference to a Tyrathcan religion. A more comprehensive search program

running through her neural nanonics said the Tyrathca didn't have a religion, and there was no explanation for the disc, either.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say they were at prayer," Reza datavised.

"Could be the local version of the town meeting," Ariadne suggested. "Trying to decide what to do about us wild humans."

"They're not talking about anything," Kelly said. "It's more like a song."

"The Tyrathca don't sing," Reza replied.

"What's that disc for? There's no way in at the bottom of the cone pillar, not from this side, but it's definitely hollow. Nothing solid like that would be able to stand up, it's almost like a mock-up. I can't find any record of them ever building anything like it before. And why build it now for Christ's sake, when they need all the builder caste to construct defences? Something that size has taken a hell of a lot of effort to put up."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Looks as if you'll be able to ask in a minute."

The soldiers halted when they came level with the innermost ring of house towers. All of the buildings had been sealed up, black lids capping the windows, cement slabs erected over the door arches. Colourful flowering plants swamped their gardens.

A lone breeder was walking towards them from the park. Male or female, Kelly couldn't tell, not even comparing it to the images stored in a memory cell—females were supposed to be slightly larger. It was bigger than the soldiers by about half a metre, the scale hide several shades lighter, dorsal mane neatly trimmed. Apart from its stumpy black antennae, the one physiological aspect which most distinguished it from the vassal castes was a row of small chemical program teats dangling flaccidly from its throat like empty leather pouches, although the long supple fingers intimated it was a sophisticated tool user.

She saw an almost subliminal hazy film twinkling

briefly on the road behind it. Superfine bronze powder, similar to the dusting on a terrestrial moth, was sprinkling down from its flanks.

The Tyrathca breeder stopped beside the soldier carrying the processor block. Its outer mouth hinged back, allowing it to whistle a long tune.

Flute music, Kelly thought.

"I am Waboto-YAU," the processor block voice translated. "I will mediate with you on behalf of Coastuc-RT."

"I'm Reza Malin, combat scout team leader, under contract to the LDC."

"Are you able to assist in our defence?"

"You'll have to tell me what happened, first, give us some idea of what we're up against."

"Starship *Santa Clara* arrived yesterday. Spaceplane landed, bringing new Tyrathca, new equipment. Much needed. Collect rygar crop. Amok *elemental* humans attacked; stole spaceplane. No provocation. No reason. Twenty-three breeder-caste killed. One hundred and ninety vassal castes killed. Extensive damage. You can see this."

Reza wondered how he would react if it was xenocs who had attacked a human village in a similar fashion. Allow a group of those same xenocs in afterwards to talk? Oh no, no way. The human response would be far more basic.

He felt mortally humbled as the breeder's glassy hazel eyes stared at him. "How many humans took part in this attack?" he asked.

"Numbers not known with accuracy."

"Roughly, how many?"

"No more than forty."

"Forty people did all this?" Ariadne muttered.

Reza waved her quiet. "Did they use a kind of white fire?"

"White fire. Yes. Not true fire. *Elemental* fire. Tyrathca have not been told of human *elemental* ability before. Many times witnessed delusion of form on attacking humans. *Elemental* changes of colour and shape confused

soldier caste. Some amok humans stole Tyrathca hunter-caste form. Much damage before repelled.”

“On behalf of the LDC I apologize profoundly.”

“What use apology? Why not told of human *elemental* ability? Breeder ambassador family assigned to Confederation Assembly will be informed. Denouncement of humans in Assembly. Tyrathca would never have joined Confederation if had known.”

“I’m sorry. But these humans have been taken over by an invading force. We don’t normally possess this ability. It’s as foreign to us as it is to you.”

“Lalonde Development Company must remove all *elemental* humans from planet. Tyrathca will not inhabit same planet.”

“We’d love to. But right now it’s all we can do just to stay alive. These *elemental* humans now control the entire Juliffe basin. We need somewhere to stay until a starship can lift us off and we can inform the Confederation what is happening.”

“Starships battle in orbit this day. Double sun in sky. No starships left.”

“One is coming back for us.”

“When?”

“In a few days.”

“Does starship have the power to kill *elemental* cloud? Tyrathca scared of cloud over rivers. We cannot defeat it.”

“No,” Reza said forlornly. “The starship can’t kill the cloud.” Especially if Shaun Wallace is telling the truth. The thought was one he had been firmly suppressing. The implications were too frightening. Just how would we actually go about fighting them?

The Tyrathca let out a clamorous hoot, almost a wail. “Cloud will come here. Cloud will devour us; breeders, children, vassals. All.”

“You could leave,” Kelly said. “Keep ahead of the cloud.”

“Nowhere is ahead of the cloud for long.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked, raising her arm

to point at the park, the congregation of breeders. "What is that structure you have built?"

"We are not strong. We have no *elementals* among us. Only one can now save us from *elemental* humans. We call to our Sleeping God. We show our belief by our homage. We call and call, but the Sleeping God does not yet awake."

"I didn't know you had a God."

"The family of Sireth-AFL is a custodian of the memory from the days of voyage on flightship Tanjuntic-RI. He shared the memory with us all after attack by *elemental* humans. Now we are united in prayer. The Sleeping God is our hope for salvation from *elemental* humans. We build its idol to show our faith."

"This is it?" she asked. "This is what the Sleeping God looks like?"

"Yes. This is the memory of shape. This is our Sleeping God."

"You mean the Tyrathca on the Tanjuntic-RI actually saw a God?"

"No. Another flightship passed the Sleeping God. Not Tanjuntic-RI."

"The Sleeping God was in space, then?"

"Why you want to know?"

"I want to know if the Sleeping God can save us from the *elementals*," she said smoothly. "Or will it only help Tyrathca?" Christ, this was beautiful, the story to end all stories; human dead and secrets the Tyrathca had kept since before Earth's ice age. How long had their arkships been in flight? Thousands of years at least.

"It will help us because we ask," Waboto-YAU said.

"Do your legends specifically say it will return to save you?"

"Not legend!" the breeder hooted angrily. "Truth. Humans have legends. Humans lie. Humans become *elemental*. The Sleeping God is stronger than your race. Stronger than all living things."

"Why do you call it 'Sleeping'?"

“Tyrahtca say what is. Humans lie.”

“So it was Sleeping when your flightship found it?”

“Yes.”

“Then how do you know it is strong enough to ward off the *elementals*?”

“Kelly!” Reza said with edgy vexation.

Waboto-YAU hooted again. The soldiers shifted restlessly in response, eyes boring into the obsessed reporter.

“Sleeping God strong. Humans will learn. Humans must not become *elemental*. Sleeping God will awaken. Sleeping God will avenge all Tyrahtca suffering.”

“Kelly, shut up, now. That’s an order,” Reza datavisaged when he saw her gathering herself for more questions. “Thank you for telling us of the Sleeping God,” he said to Waboto-YAU.

Kelly fumed in moody silence.

“Sleeping God dreams of the universe,” the breeder said. “All that happens is known to it. It will hear our call. It will answer. It will come.”

“The human *elementals* may attack you again,” Reza warned. “Before the Sleeping God arrives.”

“We know. We pray hard.” Waboto-YAU twittered mournfully, head swinging round to gaze at the disk. “Now you have heard the fate of Coastuc-RT. Are you able to assist soldier caste in defence?”

“No.” Reza heard Kelly’s hissed intake of breath. “Our weapons are not as powerful as those of your soldiers. We cannot assist in your defence.”

“Then go.”

Vast tracts of electric, electromagnetic, and magnetic energy seethed and sparked across a roughly circular section in the outermost band of Murora’s rings, eight thousand kilometres in diameter. Dust, held so long in equilibrium, exploited its liberation to squall in microburst vortices around the solid imperturbable boulders and jagged icebergs which made up the bulk of the ring, their gyrations mirroring the rowdy cloudscape a hundred and seventy thousand kilome-

tres below. The epicentre, where the *Lady Macbeth* had plunged into the drive-fomented particles, was still glowing a nervous blue as brumal waves of static washed through the thinning molecular zephyr of vaporized rock and ice.

The total energy input from the starship's fusion drives and the multiple combat-wasp explosions was taking a long time to disperse. Their full effect would take months if not years to sink back to normality. Thermally and electromagnetically, the rippling circle was the equivalent of an Arctic whiteout to any probing sensors.

It meant the *Maranta* and the *Gramine* knew little of what was going on below the surface. They kept station ten kilometres above the fuzzy boundary where boulders and ice gave way first to pebbles and then finally dust; all sensor clusters extended, focused on the disquieted strata of particles under their hulls. For the first couple of kilometres the image was sharp and reasonably clear, below that it slowly disintegrated until at seven kilometres there was nothing but a sheet of electronic slush.

The possessed who commanded the starships now had started their search right at the heart, the exact coordinate where *Lady Macbeth* had entered. Then *Maranta* had manoeuvred into an orbit five kilometres lower, while the *Gramine* had raised its altitude by a similar amount. They slowly drifted apart, *Maranta* edging ahead of the phosphorescent blue splash, *Gramine* falling behind.

There had been no sign of their prey. Nor any proof to confirm the *Lady Macbeth* had survived her impact with the rings. No wreckage had been detected. Although it was a slim chance any ever would. If she had detonated when she hit, the blowout of her drive tubes' escaping plasma would probably have vaporized most of her. And any fragments which did survive would have been flung over a huge area. The ring was eighty kilometres thick, enough volume to lose an entire squadron in.

They were further hindered by the way their energistically charged bodies interfered with on-board systems. Sensors already labouring at the limit of their resolution to

try and unscramble the chaos suffered infuriating glitches and power surges, producing gaps in the overall coverage.

But the crews persevered. Debris was virtually impossible to locate, but an operating starship emitted heat, and electromagnetic impulses, and a strong magnetic flux. If she was there, they would find her eventually.

The soldier-caste vassals stayed with them until the hovercraft reached the top of the Coastuc-RT's valley. More tumid rain-clouds were approaching fast from the east, borne by the obdurate breeze. Reza judged they should just about reach the other hovercraft by the time they arrived. Both land and sky ahead were grey. Northwards, the red cloud cast a dispiriting corona, looking for all the world as though magma was floating, light as thistledown, through the air.

"But *why*?" Kelly demanded as soon as the soldiers were left behind. "You saw how well armed they were, we would have been safe there."

"Firstly, Coastuc-RT is too close to the Juliffe basin. As your friend Shaun Wallace said, the cloud is spreading. It would reach the valley long before Joshua gets back. Secondly, that valley is tactical suicide. Anyone who gets onto the high ground above the village can simply bombard it into submission, or more likely destruction. There aren't enough soldier and hunter vassals to keep the slopes clear. Right now Coastuc-RT is wide open to anything the possessed care to throw at it. And all the Tyrathca are doing to defend themselves is building giant effigies of spacegods and having a pray-in. We don't need that kind of shit. By ourselves we stand a much better chance; we're mobile and well armed. So tomorrow at first light we start doing exactly what Joshua said: we run for it, through the mountains."

Violent rain made a mockery of the hovercraft's blazing monochrome headlight beams, chopping them off after five or six metres. It obscured the moons, the red cloud, it damn near hid the drooping, defeated grass below the gunwale.

The pilots navigated by guidance blocks alone. It took them forty minutes to retrace their route back to the first tower house above the river.

Sewell plugged a half-metre fission blade into his left elbow socket and confronted the blocked-up doorway. Water steamed and crackled as the blade came on. He placed the tip delicately against the wind-fretted cement, and pushed. The blade sank in, sending out a thick runnel of ginger sand which the rain smeared into the reeds at his feet. Relieved at how easy it was to cut, he started to slice down.

Kelly was fourth in. She stood in musty darkness shaking her arms and easing her cagoule hood back. "God, there's as much water inside this cagoule as out. I've never known rain like this."

"'Tis a bleak night, this one," Shaun Wallace said behind her.

Reza stepped through the oval Sewell had cut, carrying two bulky equipment packs, TIP carbines slung over his shoulder. "Pat, Sal, check this place out." Fenton and Ryall hurried in after their master, and immediately shook their coats, sending out a fountain of droplets.

"Great," Kelly muttered. The blocks clipped to her broad belt were slippery with water. She wiped them ineffectually on her T-shirt. "Can I come with you, please?"

"Sure," Pat said.

She turned the seal catch on her bag, and searched round until she found a light stick. Shadows fled away. Collins disapproved of infrared visuals unless absolutely unavoidable.

They were in a hall that ran the diameter of the tower. Archways led off into various rooms. A ramp at the far wall started to spiral upwards. Tyrathca didn't, or couldn't, use stairs, according to her didactic memory.

Pat and Sal Yong started down the hall, Kelly followed. She realized Shaun Wallace was a pace behind. He was back in his LDC jump suit. Completely dry, she noticed

enviously. Her armour-suit trousers squelched as she walked.

“You don’t mind if I tag along, do you, Miss Kelly? I’ve never seen one of these places before.”

“No.”

“That Mr. Malin there, he’s a right one for doing things by the book. This place has been sealed up for years. What does he expect us to find?”

“We won’t know till we look, will we?” she said coyly.

“Why, Miss Kelly, I do believe you’re running me a ragged circle.”

The house was intriguing: strange furniture, and startlingly human utensils. But there was little technology, the builders had obviously been given instructions on how to utilize wood. They were excellent carpenters.

Rain drummed on the walls, adding to the sense of isolation and displacement as they mounted the ramp. Vassal castes had their own rooms; Kelly wasn’t sure if they could be called stables. Some rooms, for the soldiers, she guessed, had furniture. There was only a thin layer of dust. It was as though the tower had been set aside rather than abandoned. Given her current circumstances, it wasn’t the most reassuring of thoughts. The neural nanonics drank it all in.

They found the first bodies on the second floor. Three housekeeper castes (the same size as a farmer), five hunters, and four soldiers. Desiccation had turned them into creased leather mummies. She wanted to touch one, but was afraid it would crumble to dust.

“They’re just sitting there, look,” Shaun Wallace said in a tamed voice. “There’s no food anywhere near them. They must have been waiting to die.”

“Without the breeders, they are nothing,” Pat said.

“Even so, ’tis a terrible thing. Like those old Pharaohs who had all their servants in their tombs with them.”

“Were there any Tyrathcan souls in the beyond?” Kelly asked.

Shaun Wallace paused at the bottom of the ramp to the

third floor, his brow crinkling. "Now there's a thing. I don't think there were. Or at least, I never came across one."

"Different afterworld, perhaps," Kelly said.

"If they have one. They seem heathen creatures to me. Perhaps the Good Lord didn't see fit to give them souls."

"But they have a god. Their own god."

"Do they now?"

"Well, they're hardly likely to have Jesus or Allah, are they? Not human messiahs."

"Ah, you're a smart one, Miss Kelly. I take my hat off to you. I'd never have thought of that in a million years."

"It's a question of environment and upbringing. I'm used to thinking in these terms. I'd be lost in your century."

"Oh, I can't see that. Not at all."

There were more vassal-caste bodies on the third floor. The two breeders were together on the fourth.

"Do they have love, these beasties?" Shaun Wallace asked, looking down at them. "They look like they do, to me. Dying together is romantic, I think. Like Romeo and Juliet."

Kelly ran her tongue round her cheeks. "You didn't strike me as the Shakespeare type."

"Now don't you go writing me off so quickly, you with your classy education. I'm a man of hidden depths, I am, Miss Kelly."

"Did you ever meet anyone famous in the beyond?" Pat asked.

"Meeting!" He wrung his hands together with fulsome drama. "You're talking about the beyond as if it's some kind of social gathering. Lords and ladies spending the evening together over fine wine and a game of bridge. It's not like that, Mr. Halahan, not at all."

"But did you?" the mercenary scout persisted. "You were there for centuries. There must have been someone important."

"Ah now, there was that, as I recall. A gentleman by the name of Custer."

Pat's neural nanonics ran a fast check. "An American army general? He lost a fight with the Sioux Indians in the nineteenth century."

"Aye, that's the one. Don't be telling me you've heard of him in this day and age?"

"He's in our history courses. How did he feel about it? Losing like that?"

Shaun Wallace's expression cooled. "He didn't feel anything about it, Mr. Halahan. He was like all of us, crying without tears to shed. You're equating death with sanity, Mr. Halahan. Which is a stupid thing to do, if you don't mind me saying. You've heard of Hitler now? Surely, if you've heard of poor damned George Armstrong Custer?"

"We remember Hitler. Though he was after your time, I think."

"Indeed he was. But do you think he changed after he died, Mr. Halahan? Do you think he lost his conviction, or his righteousness? Do you think death causes you to look back on life and makes you realize what an ass you've been? Oh no, not that, Mr. Halahan. You're too busy screaming, you're too busy cursing, you're too busy coveting your neighbour's memory for the bitter dregs of taste and colour it gives you. Death does not bestow wisdom, Mr. Halahan. It does not make you humble before the Lord. More's the pity."

"Hitler," Kelly said, entranced. "Stalin, Genghis Khan, Jack the Ripper, Helmen Nyke. The butchers and the warlords. Are they all there? Waiting in the beyond?"

Shaun Wallace gazed up at the domed ceiling partially lost amid a tapestry of shadows thrown by sparse alien architecture; for a moment his features portraying every year of his true age. "Aye, they're all there, Miss Kelly, every one of the monsters the good earth ever spawned. All of them aching to come back, waiting for their moment to be granted. Us possessed, we might be wanting to hide from the open sky, and death; but it's not paradise we're going to be making down here on this planet. It couldn't be, there'll be humans in it, you see."

It wasn't true daybreak, not yet. The sun was still half an hour from bringing any hint of grizzled light to the eastern horizon. But the rain-clouds had blown over, and night had sapped the wind's brawn. The northern sky glowed with a grievous fervour, blemishing the savannah grass a murky crimson.

Octan watched the dark speck moving along the side of the river, heading upstream towards the Tyrathcan tower house. Heavy moist air stroked the eagle's feathers as he dipped a wing, curving down in a giddy voluted dive. Pat Halahan gazed out at the lonely nocturnal wanderer through his affinity bonded friend's narrow peerless eyes.

Kelly came awake at the touch of a hand on her shoulder, and the sound of feet rapping on the hard dry floor of the second storey, where the team had rested up for the night. Neural nanonics accelerated her fatigue-soaked brain into full alertness.

The last of the combat-boosted mercenaries were disappearing down the ramp.

"Someone coming," Shaun Wallace said.

"Your people?"

"No. I'd know if it was. Not that Mr. Malin asked, mind you." He sounded cheerful.

"Good heavens, anyone would think he doesn't trust you." She shoved back the foil envelope she'd been sleeping in. Shaun Wallace offered his hand to help her to her feet. They made their way down the ramp to the ground-floor hall.

The seven mercenaries were clustered round the hole in the door, red light shining dully off their artificial skin. Fenton and Ryall were on their feet, growling softly as they were caught in the backwash of agitation coming from their master's mind.

Reza and Sewell slipped through the hole as Kelly reached them.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Horse coming," Pat told her. "Two riders."

Kelly peered round him just as Reza and Sewell acti-

vated their chameleon circuits and flicked into the landscape. For a few seconds she tracked them thanks to the circular medical nanonic package on the big combat-adept's leg, but even that was soon lost amongst the un-savoury coloured grass.

It was one of the plough horses favoured by the colonists. A young one, but clearly on its last legs; the neck was drooping as it plodded gamely along, mouth flecked with foam. Reza worked his way unobtrusively down the slope from the tower house towards the animal, leaving Sewell to cover him. His optical sensors showed him the two people on its back; both wore stained poncho capes cut from a canvas tarpaulin. The man was showing the first signs of age, stubble shading heavy jowls, temples touched with grey; and he'd recently lost a lot of weight by the look of him. But he had a vigour animating his frame which was visible even from Reza's position across the swaying grass. The young boy behind him had been crying at some time, he had also been soaked during the ride, and now he was shivering, clinging to the man in a wearied daze.

They didn't pose any threat, Reza decided. He waited until the horse was twenty metres away, then switched off his chameleon circuit. The horse took a few more paces before the man noticed him with a start. He reined in the lethargic animal and leaned over its neck to peer at Reza in bewilderment.

"What manner of . . . You're not a possessed, you don't have their emptiness." His fingers clicked. "Of course! Combat boosted, that's what you are. You came down from the starships yesterday." He smiled and whooped, then swung a leg over the horse and slithered to the ground. "Come on, Russ, down you come, boy. They're here, the navy marines are here. I said they'd come, didn't I? I told you, never give up faith." The boy virtually fell off the horse into his arms.

Reza went over to help. The man was none too steady on his feet, either, and one of his hands was heavily bandaged.

"Bless you, my son." Horst Elwes embraced the sur-

prised mercenary with tears of gratitude and supreme relief shining in his eyes. “God bless you. These weeks have been the sorest trial my Lord has ever devised for this weak mortal servant. But now you are here after all this time spent alone in the Devil’s own wilderness. Now we are saved.”

11

Boston had fallen to the possessed, not that the rapidly disintegrating convocation of Norfolk's martial authorities would admit it.

Edmund Rigby looked out of the hotel window, across the provincial city's steep slate rooftops. Fires were still burning in the outlying districts where the militia troops had tried to force their way in. The Devonshire market square had been struck by a navy starship's maser last Duchess-night. Its granite cobbles had transmuted to a glowing lava pool in less than a second. Even now, with its surface congealing and dimming, the heat was enough to barbecue food. Nobody had been in the square at the time; it was intended as a demonstration only. A show of naval might: you there, ant folk crawling on the filthy ground far below, we angels above have the very power of life and death over all of you. As one, the possessed had laughed at the circling starships, rendered impotent by their lack of targets. Yes, they had the physical power to destroy, but the fingers on the trigger were snared in the perpetual dilemma of the great and the good. Hostages had always struck a paralysing blow into the heart of governments. The starships wanted to pour sterilizing fire down from the sky, the officers yearning to burn the loathsome low-life crop of anarchists and revolutionaries from the pastoral idyll planet, but the city hadn't been cleaned of decent people, the women and children and frail, kindly grandparents. As far as the planetary authorities and navy officers knew this was just an uprising, a political revolt, they believed the

meek were still mingled with the wolves. The lofty orbiting angels had been castrated.

Even if they suspected, believed the rumours of atrocities and massacres fluttering from mouth to mouth through the nearby countryside, they could do nothing. Boston was no longer alone in its dissent, it was simply the first. Edmund Rigby had planted the germs of insurgency in every city across the planet's islands, cabals of possessed who were already annexing the populace. A captain in the Australian Marines, he had died from a landmine explosion in Vietnam in 1971; but he had studied military tactics, had even been sent to the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth for officer training. And this vast space empire of Confederated planets, for all its awesome technology, was no different to the Earth upon which he had once walked. Vietcong insurgency tactics from the past were just as applicable now, and he knew them by heart. Securing the entire planet had been his principal objective since the vast merchant fleet had left Norfolk after midsummer.

Since he arrived he had been busy indeed. Toiling in the squalor and the horror and the blood which soiled the heart of every human soul. Those living, and those dead . . . and the ones trapped between.

He closed his eyes as if to shut out the memories of recent weeks and what he had become. But there was no respite. The hotel took on substance in his mind, walls and floors woven from shadows. People, us and them, glided through it, dopplered laughs and screams ricocheting through the grand corridors and sumptuous rooms. And, always, there, on the other side of the shadows, on the other side of everything: the beyond. Chattering souls clamouring for existence, silky insidious promises to be his lover, his slave, his acolyte. Anything, anything at all to be brought back.

Edmund Rigby shuddered in revulsion. Please, God, when we hide Norfolk from this universe let it also be hidden from the beyond. Let me have peace, and an end to all this.

Three of his lieutenants—selected from the more stable among the newly possessed—were dragging a captive along the corridor outside to his room. He stiffened his shoulders, letting the power swell within, giving his new body grandeur and poise, as well as a Napoleonic uniform, and turned to face the door.

They burst in, cheering and jeering, young turks from the worst of the backstreets, believing swagger and noise was an easy substitute for authority. But he grinned welcomingly at them anyway.

Grant Kavanagh was flung on the floor, bleeding from cuts on his face and hands, smeared in dirt, his fine militia uniform torn. Even so, he refused to be cowed. Edmund Rigby respected that, amongst the sadness. This one, with his conviction in God and self, would be hard to break. The thought pained him. Why oh why can't they just give in?

"Present for you, Edmund," Iqabl Geertz said. He had assumed his ghoul appearance, skin almost grey, cheeks sunken, eyeballs a uniform scarlet; thin frame dressed all in black. "One of the nobs. Got some fight in him. Thought he might be important."

Don Padwick, in his lion-man state, growled suggestively. Grant Kavanagh twitched as the big yellow beast dropped onto all fours and padded over to him, tail whisking about.

"We captured his troops," Chen Tambiah informed Edmund quietly. "They were about the last militia roaming free. Inflicted heavy casualties. Eight of us winged back to the beyond." The dapper oriental, in ancient black and orange silks, cocked his head grudgingly towards Grant Kavanagh. "He's a good leader."

"Is that so?" Edmund Rigby asked.

Iqabl Geertz licked his lips with a long yellowed tongue. "It doesn't make any difference in the end. He's ours now. To do with as we like. And we know what we like."

Grant Kavanagh looked up at him, one eye swollen shut. "When this is over, you mincing shit, and the rest of your friends have been shot, I will take a great deal of pleasure

in ripping every one of your deviant chromosomes from your body with my own hands.”

“Now there’s a man’s man if ever I saw one,” Iqabl Geertz said, putting on an histrionically effeminate tone.

“Enough,” Edmund Rigby said. “You put up a good fight,” he told Grant, “now it’s over.”

“Like hell! If you think I’m going to let you Fascist scum take over the planet my ancestors sweated blood to build you don’t know me.”

“Nor shall we ever,” Edmund Rigby said. “Not now.”

“That’s right, takes bloody four of you.” Grant Kavanagh grunted in shock as Don Padwick put a paw on his ribs, talons extended.

Edmund Rigby rested his hand on Grant’s head. There was so much resilience and anger in the man. It enervated him, sending the pretentious uniform shimmering back into his ordinary marine fatigues. The souls of the beyond were clamouring as he began to gather his power, flocking to the beacon of his strength.

“Don’t fight me,” he said, more in hope than in expectation.

Grant snarled. “Screw you!”

Edmund Rigby heard the vile rapturous imploring chorus of the souls beginning. Weariness engulfed him, there had been so much of this since he had returned. So much pain and torment, so wilfully inflicted. At first he had laughed, and enjoyed the fear. Now, he simply wished it over.

He hesitated, and the captive soul stirred in the prison he had forged for it within his own mind.

“There are ways,” the other soul said, and showed, obedient as always to his captor. “Ways to make Grant Kavanagh submit quickly, ways no flesh can withstand for long.”

And the desire was there, oozing up out of the prison, corrupt and nauseous.

“But it’s a part of all of us,” the other soul whispered quickly. “We all share the shame of having the serpent

beast in our secret heart of hearts. How else could you have accomplished what you have the way you have if you did not let it free?"

Trembling, Edmund Rigby let the desire rise, let it supersede the loathing and revulsion that was his own. Then it was easy. Easy to make Grant hurt. Easy to commit the profanities which quietened his lieutenants. Easy to feed the desire. And go on feeding.

It was good, because it was freedom. Complete and utter freedom. Desire ruled as it should, unrestrained. It nurtured the psyche, these heinous abominations Grant Kavanagh was forced to endure. They were sublime.

Iqabl Geertz and Chen Tambiah were yelling at him to stop. But they were nothing, less than dirt.

The souls were in retreat, fearing what was leaking from him into the beyond.

"Weak, they are all weaker than us. Together we surpass them all."

Was that his own voice?

And still the savagery went on. It was impossible to stop. The other soul had gone too far, it had to be seen through now. To the terrible end.

Edmund Rigby rebelled in horror.

"But you did it yourself," said the captive soul.

"No. It was you."

"I only showed you how. You wanted it. The desire was yours, the yearning."

"Never! Not for this."

"Yes. You gave way to yourself for the first time. The serpent beast is in all of us. Embrace it and be at peace with yourself. Know yourself."

"I am not that. I am not!"

"But you are. Look. Look!"

"No." Edmund Rigby shrank from what he had done. Fleeing, hurtling, away, as though speed alone was proof of his innocence. Locking out the world and what he had been a party to, down in that empty vault waiting at the

centre of his mind. Where it was quiet, and dark, and tasteless. Sanctuary without form. It hardened around him.

“And there you will stay; a part of me for ever.”

Quinn Dexter opened his eyes. Before him the three possessed, their exotic appearances bleached off to reveal young men with ashen faces, backed away in consternation; their confidence in their supremacy jarringly fractured. Grant Kavanagh’s decimated body quivered amid the blood and piss curdling on the carpet as the soul it now hosted tried valiantly to repair the colossal tissue damage. Deep inside himself he heard Edmund Rigby’s soul whimpering quietly.

Quinn smiled beatifically at his rapt audience. “I have returned,” he said softly, and raised his hands in invocation. “Out of the half-night; *strengthened* by the darkness as only a true believer could be. I saw the weakness in my possessor, his fright of his serpent beast. He is in me now, weeping and pleading as he denies form to his true nature. As it should be. God’s Brother showed me the way, showed me the night holds no dread for those who love their real selves as He commands us to do. But so few obey. Do you obey?”

They tried then, Iqabl Geertz, Don Padwick, and Chen Tambiah, combining their energistic strength in a desperate attempt to blast the deranged usurper out of his body and into the beyond. Quinn laughed uproariously, steadfast at the calm centre of a fantastic lightning storm which filled the room. Dazzling whips of raw electricity slashed at the walls and floor and ceiling like the razor claws of a maddened gryphon. None of them could touch him, he was held inviolate in a cocoon of luminous violet silk mist.

The lightning stopped roaring, ebbing in spits and crackles to disappear behind charred furniture and back into the bodies of the would-be thunder gods. Smoke hazed the blackened room, small flames licking greedily at the cushions and tattered curtains.

Quinn wished for justice.

Their bodies fell, cells performing the refined pervers-

sions he dreamed of, turning against themselves. He watched impassively as the terrorized, humiliated souls fled from the glistening deformities he had created, back to the beyond crying in dire warning. Then the second souls, the ones held captive, abandoned the macerated flesh.

Grant Kavanagh's body groaned at Quinn's feet, the possessing soul looking up at him in numb trepidation. The worst of the lacerations and fractures had healed, leaving a crisscross scar pattern of delicate pink skin.

"What is your name?" Quinn asked.

"Luca Comar."

"Did you see what I performed on them, Luca?"

"Yes. Oh God, yes." He bowed his head, bile rising in his throat.

"They were weak, you see. Unworthy fuck-ups. They had no real faith in themselves. Not like me." Quinn took a deep breath, calming his euphoric thoughts. His marine fatigues billowed out into a flowing priest's robe, fabric turning midnight black. "Do you have faith in yourself, Luca?"

"Yes. I do. I have faith. Really I do."

"Would you like me to tell you of the serpent beast? Would you like me to show you your own heart and set you free?"

"Yes. Please. Please show me."

"Good. I think that is my role now the portents walk abroad. Now the dead are risen to fight the last battle against the living and the time of the Light Bringer draws near. I have been blessed, Luca, truly blessed with His strength. My belief in Him brought me back, me alone out of all the millions who are possessed. I am the one God's Brother has chosen as His messiah."

When the tributary river finally spilled into the Juliffe it was a hundred and thirty metres wide. Villages had claimed both banks, buildings gleaming inside their safe enclave bubbles of white light. By now Chas Paske was used to the striking fantasy images of halcyon hamlets dozing their life away.

He had passed eight or nine of them during his slow progress down the river. All of them the same. All of them unreal.

Warned by the twin coronae ahead he had sculled his little boat back into the middle of the river, fighting the thick gunge of melding snowlilies every centimetre of the way. Now he was in a narrow channel of vermilion light which fell between the two pools of native radiance, crouched down as best he could manage.

His body was in a poor way. The nanonic medical packages had been exhausted by the demand of decontaminating his blood some time ago; now it was all they could do to stop the blood vessels they had knitted with from haemorrhaging again. His neural nanonics still maintained their analgesic blocks, delivering him from pain. But that didn't seem to be enough any more. A cold lethargy was creeping into him through his damaged leg, syphoning his remaining strength away. Any movement was a complicated business now, and muscles responded with geriatric infirmity. Several times in the last few hours he had been stricken by spasms which vibrated his arms and torso. His neural nanonics seemed incapable of preventing or halting them. So he lay on the bottom of the boat gazing up at the throbbing red cloud waiting for the ignominious spastic twitches to run their course.

At these times he thought he could see himself, a tiny shrivelled black figure, spreadeagled on the bottom of a rowing dinghy (like the one he thought he had been stealing), being borne along a sticky white river that stretched out to a terrible length. There was nothing around the river, no banks or trees, it just wound through a red sky all by itself, a silk ribbon waving in the breeze, while far, far ahead a speck of starlight twinkled with elusive, enticing coyness. Skittering voices on the brink of audibility circled round him. He was sure they talked about him even though he could never quite make out whole words. The tone was there all right, dismissive and scornful.

Not quite a dream.

He remembered, as he sailed on gently, his past missions, past colleagues, old battles, victories and routs. Half the time never knowing who he was really fighting for or what he was fighting against. For the right side or the wrong side? And how was he supposed to know which was which anyway? Him, a mercenary, a whore of violence and destruction and death. He fought for the ones with the most money, for companies and plutocrats, and sometimes maybe even governments. There was no right and wrong in his life. In that respect he had it easy, none of the big decisions.

So the river carried him on, that white band flowing through the red sky, ever onwards. The voyage was his life. He could see where he had come from, and he could see where he was going. Destination and departure were no different. And there was no way to get off. Except to jump, to drown in the vast guileful sky.

That will come anyway, he thought, no need to hurry.

The old resolve was still there, among the superficial self-pity and growing concern over his physical state, still holding together. He was glad of that. Right to the bitter end, that's where he was heading. The star glinted strongly, virtually a heliograph. It seemed nearer.

No, not quite a dream.

Chas jerked up with a start, rocking the boat haz- ardously. The twin villages guarding the tributary mouth were behind him now. He was out on the Juliffe itself. There was no sign of the Hultain Marsh which made up the northern side. The river could have been an ocean for all he could tell. An ocean paved with snowlilies as far as his enhanced eyes could see. This was their meridian, the end of their continental crusade. They were packed four or five deep, crumpled up against each other; decaying now, but wadded so tight they formed a serried quilt. It was a perfect reflector for the carmine light falling from the cloud, turning his world to a dimensionless red nebula.

The flimsy boat creaked and shivered as the current forced it deeper into the floating pulp. Chas gripped the

gunwale in reflex. He had a nasty moment when something popped and splintered up at the prow, but the hull was so shallow it was squeezed up rather than in. He was sure it was riding on a patina of rotting leaves rather than actual water.

For all their stupendous mass, the snowlilies had no effect on the river's unflagging current. The boat began to pick up speed, moving further out from the southern bank with its near-continual chain of villages and towns.

Now he was sure he wasn't going to capsize, Chas relaxed his grip, and eased himself down again, breathing hard at the simple exertion of lifting himself. Up ahead the massive ceiling of red cloud became a bright tangerine cyclone with a concave heart, its apex hidden by distance. He could see the gravid billows of stratus being torn out of their constricted alignment, sucked over the lip to spiral upwards in a leisurely procession. It must have been twenty kilometres across at the base: an inverted whirlpool which drained away into the other side of the sky.

He realized its sharp living tangerine hue came from a fierce light shining down out of its secret pinnacle. Below it, the city of Durringham gleamed in empyrean glory.

Gaura floated through the floor hatch into the *Lady Macbeth's* bridge. He took care not to move his neck suddenly, or his arms come to that; his whole body was one giant ache. He had been lucky not to break anything in that last agonizing burst of deceleration. Even watching the starships attacking the station he hadn't felt as utterly helpless as he had then, lying flat on the groaning decking of the lounge feeling his ribs bowing in, while blackness tightened its grip on his vision. Three times he had heard bone splintering, accompanied by a mental howl—it was impossible to make any sound. Together the Edenists had toughed it out, their minds embraced, sharing and mitigating the pain.

When it was over he hadn't been alone in wiping tears from his eyes. Aethra had followed their entire heart-stopping plummet into the ring, showing it to them. He had

thought the end had surely come, for the second time in an hour. But the Adamist starship's exhaust had obliterated the ring particles as it crashed below the surface, eliminating any danger of collision; and the captain had matched velocities perfectly (for the second time in an hour), slotting them neatly into a circular orbit buried right in the middle of the ring. The swarm of pursuing combat wasps and their submunitions had impacted seconds behind them, kinetic explosions tossing out a ragged sheet of fire. None had penetrated more than a hundred metres below the surface.

It had been an astounding piece of flying. Gaura was very curious to meet the person who had such sublime control over a starship. It rivalled the union between a void-hawk and its captain.

There were three people standing on a stikpad around one of the consoles, two men and a woman, talking in low tones. It didn't help Gaura's composure to see that it was the youngest, a man with a flat-featured face, who had the captain's star on his ship-suit shoulder. He had been expecting someone . . . different.

Don't prejudge, Tiya admonished sternly. Most of the Edenists were using his senses to observe the scene. **Void-hawk captains are only eighteen when they start flying.**

I wasn't going to say a word, Gaura objected mildly. He swam past the ring of acceleration couches to touch his toes to a stikpad on the decking. "Captain Calvert?"

The young man shrugged. "It's Joshua, actually."

Gaura felt his bottled-up emotions come close to brimming over. "Thank you, Joshua. From all of us."

Joshua nodded shortly, the faintest blush colouring his cheeks. The woman beside him caught his discomfort and smiled secretively.

There, Tiya said in satisfaction. **A perfectly ordinary young man, if exceptionally talented. I like him.**

Joshua introduced Sarha and Dahybi then apologized for the acceleration. "But I had to stop us dead inside the ring," he said. "If we had gone through, south of the eclip-

tic, the other starships would have seen us, and come after us. Their drives could burn through the particles just as easily as *Lady Mac* did, then we would have been sitting ducks for their combat wasps.”

“I wasn’t complaining. In fact, we’re really all rather surprised that we’re still alive.”

“How are your people holding out?”

“Liatri, our doctor, says none of us have acquired any fatal internal injuries. Melvyn Ducharme is helping her review my people in your surgery cabin. Metabolic scanning has revealed several broken bones and a lot of pulled muscles. She was most concerned about internal membrane damage, it could prove a problem unless treated swiftly. But Melvyn Ducharme is rigging up a processor block that can interface her with your medical nanonic packages.”

Joshua blinked, nonplussed.

“Our own medical packages all use bitek processors,” Gaura explained.

“Ah, right.”

“Liatri says we’ll pull through. Mind you, it’s going to take a long fortnight for the bruising to fade.”

“You’re not the only one,” Sarha grimaced. “And you should take a look at where my bruises are.”

Joshua leered. “Promises, promises.”

“That was an awesome piece of flying you pulled off back there, Joshua,” Gaura said. “Eluding two starships . . .”

“It’s in the blood,” he said, not quite nonchalantly. “Glad to be of help, really. We certainly haven’t been much use to anybody else since we arrived in this star system.”

Go on, Tiya urged. Ask.

But suppose it’s an illegal flight? He was carrying combat wasps, don’t forget. We’d have to give evidence.

Then the law is an ass, and we’ll all develop amnesia. Ask.

Gaura smiled awkwardly. “Joshua, exactly who are you? I mean, why come to Lalonde?”

“Er . . . Good question. Technically, *Lady Mac* is part of

the Lalonde government's starship fleet, helping to restore civil order. The Confederation Navy squadron has other ideas, and according to them we're under arrest."

"Navy squadron?"

Joshua sighed theatrically, and started to explain.

The Edenists crowding the cabin in life-support capsule D, which doubled as the surgery, listened with a mixture of gloomy dismay and confusion.

"This sequestration ability sounds appalling," Gaura said, summarizing the Edenists' unified feelings.

"You should see the red cloud," Joshua told him. "That really gives me the creeps. It's an instinct thing with me, I know it's *wrong*."

Gaura gestured to the console they had been consulting; its holoscreen was alive with blue and yellow data displays. "What is our current situation?"

"I'm playing a waiting game," Joshua said, and datavised an order into the console processor. The holoscreen switched to an image from an external sensor cluster, showing a very dark expanse of crinkled rock. Scale was impossible to gauge. "See that? That's the largest ring particle I could find at such short notice, near-solid stone about two hundred and fifty metres in diameter. It's twenty-five kilometres inward from the northern surface. We're keeping station directly underneath it, and I do mean directly; *Lady Mac*'s forward hull is about three metres away. Right now Warlow and Ashly are outside drilling load pins into the rock so we can tether *Lady Mac* in place with silicon fibre. That way I won't have to use the thrusters to hold our position. *Maranta* and *Gramine* would be able to spot any ion plumes easily when the rings calm down. Our on-board electronic systems are designed for minimal emission anyway, but with that rock as a shield we'll make absolutely sure we're undetectable to their sensors. It can also absorb our thermal output as well; I've deployed the thermo-dump panels so that they're radiating all our excess heat directly at the rock, it will take months to seep through. All the drive tubes and the five

main fusion generators have been powered down, so our magnetic flux is negligible. We're operating on one auxiliary fusion generator which is well screened by the hull. All in all, it's a very reasonable position. As long as *Maranta* and *Gramine* stay north of the ring we'll be invisible to them."

"And if one of them moves to a southern inclination?"

"There is fifty-five kilometres' worth of particles between us and the southern surface. It's a risk I'm prepared to take, especially with the ring so electrically and thermally active right now."

"I see. How long do you think we'll be here?"

Joshua pulled a face. "Hard to say. Right now we're only a hundred and seventy thousand kilometres above Murora, *Lady Mac* needs to be at least two hundred thousand out before she can jump. So if we want to leave, we either wait until *Maranta* and *Gramine* decide to call it a day and quit, or hang on until their search pattern carries them far enough away to allow us to make a dash for a jump coordinate. Whichever one it is, I think we'll be here for some time. Weeks at least."

"I understand. Do you have enough fuel and supplies to last that long?"

"Yes, fuel's down to forty-seven per cent, those high-gee manoeuvres use up cryogenics at a hell of a rate, but what's left can supply our present consumption rate for years. So that's no problem. But we'll have to monitor our environmental systems closely given there's thirty-six of you. The limiting factor is going to be food; that'll have to be rationed pretty carefully. All of which means I really don't want you to take your children out of zero-tau just yet."

"Of course. They will be much better off in the pods anyway. But what about your mercenary scout team?"

Joshua exchanged a significant glance with Sarha. "Not a damn thing we can do about that. They're tough and they're mean. If anyone can survive down there, they can."

"I see. Well if the opportunity arises to go back, then please do not hesitate on our account."

"We'll see. It would be difficult jumping to Lalonde with *Maranta* and *Gramine* following us. Ideally I'd like to hang on until they leave Murora. Our major problem is going to be tracking them. When you came in we were discussing mounting a sensor cluster on the other side of the rock. Before we started hiding we caught a glimpse of their ion thrusters, so we know they're still out there. But we have the same problem as them, this ring is pure hell to see through. Without reliable data we're at a nasty disadvantage."

"Ah," Gaura smiled happily. "I think I may be able to help there." **Aethra? Can you see the two starships which attacked us?**

Yes, the habitat replied. **They are orbiting slightly above the ring's northern surface.**

An image formed in his mind, the dusky plain of the ring slicing across Murora, blanched of most colour. The habitat's external sensitive cells could just sense a broad zone agitated by heat and electricity. Two dull specks were poised slightly above it, ion thrusters firing intermittent tattoos to maintain their attitude.

Excellent. "Aethra can see them."

Joshua brightened. "Jesus, that's great news. They're both still here, then?"

"Yes."

"How is Aethra?" he asked belatedly.

"The shell was extensively damaged. However, there is no catastrophic internal injury, its main organs remain functional. It is going to require a considerable amount of repair work before it can resume its growth. My colleagues, the ones who were killed in the attack, their memories have been stored by the personality."

"That's something, then."

"Yes."

"Can Aethra work out the exact spacial locations of the other starships for me? If we can keep updated I'll know

when we can risk breaking cover and flying for a jump coordinate.”

“I can go one better than that.” Gaura slipped a processor block from his breast pocket. The slim palm-sized plastic rectangle had produced a spectacular gold and blue bruise on his pectoral muscle during the flight. “Aethra can communicate through the bitek processor, and if you can interface this with your flight computer you’ll be able to receive the images directly. And the starships hunting us will never know, affinity is undetectable.”

“Wonderful.” Joshua accepted the block. It was slightly smaller than the Kulu Corporation model he used. “Sarha, get to work on an interface. I want Aethra tied in to our navigation processor array pronto.”

“Consider it done.” She plucked it from his fingers and datavised her systems memory core for appropriate electronic module specifications and adaptor programs.

Joshua thought the Edenist station chief still looked wrecked. “You know, we come from Tranquillity,” he said. “It’s *Lady Mac*’s home port.”

Gaura looked at him, a surprised light showing in his worn eyes. “Yes?”

“Yeah. I’ve lived there all my life, I was born there, so I know how beautiful habitats are, and I don’t just mean their physical structure either. So I suppose I can empathize with what you’re feeling more than most Adamists. Don’t worry. We’ll get out of this and bring help back for Aethra, and Lalonde too. All we need now is time, and we’re home free. Fortunately time is one thing we have plenty of.”

“So you’re not Confederation Navy marines then?” Horst asked, trying to hide his disappointment.

“No, I’m sorry, Father,” Reza said. “The LDC hired us to scout round the Quallheim Counties and find out what was going on down here. I believe you can say we’ve certainly done that.”

“I see.” Horst looked round the simplicity of the Tyrath-

can tower house's hall, its smooth curves illuminated by the light stick, solid shadows blending seamlessly with dark-grey arches. The red light outside was kept at bay, silhouetting the hole sliced into the doorway. In spite of the warmth he felt chilled.

"How did you know we were here?" Pat asked.

"I didn't, not that you were in this particular tower. We saw the starships arrive yesterday morning, of course. Then in the afternoon there was an explosion on the river."

"The kroclion," Ariadne said.

"Could be," Reza said. "Go on."

"Young Russ saw it," Horst said. "I thought it best that we keep a watch on the savannah; that morning was the first time the red cloud appeared, and with the starships as well—it seemed sensible. By the time I got my optical intensifier band on there was only the smoke left. But it didn't look like anything the possessed do, so I rode out to see. I thought—I prayed—that it might have been the marines. Then that damned kroclion was skulking about in the grass. I just kept going up the river to keep ahead of it. And here we are. Delivered up to you by God's hand." He lifted his lips in a tired victorious smile. "Mysterious ways His wonders to perform."

"Certainly does," Reza said. "That kroclion was probably the mate of the one we killed."

"Yes. But tell me of the starships. Can they take us off this terrible planet? We saw an almighty battle in orbit before the red cloud swelled over the sky."

"We don't know much about the events in orbit. But that was a fight between some of our starships and a Confederation Navy squadron."

"Your starships? Why did they fight the navy?"

"Some of them. The possessed got into orbit on the spaceplanes which brought us down, they hijacked the starships and took over the crew."

"Merciful Lord." Horst crossed himself. "Are there any starships left now?"

"No. Not in orbit."

Horst's shoulders sagged. He sipped listlessly at the car-

ton of hot coffee they had given him. This was the cruellest blow of all, he thought wretchedly, to be shown salvation shining so close and then to have it snatched away as my fingers close around it. The children cannot be made to suffer any more, merciful Lord hear me this once, they cannot.

Russ was sitting in Kelly's lap. He seemed shy of the combat-boosted mercenaries, but was content to let her spray a salve on his saddle sores. She smoothed down the damp hair on his forehead, and grinned as she offered him one of her chocolate bars. "You must have been through a lot," she said to Horst.

"We have." He eyed Shaun Wallace, who had kept to the back of the hall since he had arrived. "The Devil has cursed this planet to its very core. I have seen such evil, foul, foul deeds. Such courage too. I'm humbled, the human spirit is capable of quite astonishing acts of munificence when confronted by fundamental tests of virtue. I have come to believe in people again."

"I'd like to hear about it some time," she said.

"Kell's a reporter," Sewell said mockingly. "Someone else who makes you sign contracts in blood."

She glared at the big mercenary. "Being a reporter isn't a crime. Unlike some people's occupation."

"I shall be happy to tell you," Horst said. "But later."

"Thank you."

"You'll be safe enough now you're hooked up with us, Father," Reza said. "We're planning to head south, away from the cloud. And the good news is that we're expecting a starship to come back for us in a couple of days. There's plenty of room for you and Russ on our hovercraft. Your ordeal's over."

Horst let out an incredulous snort, then put the coffee carton down ruing his slowness. "Oh, my Lord, I haven't told you yet, have I? I'm sorry, that ride must have addled my brain. And I've had so little sleep these last days."

"Told us what?" Reza asked edgily.

"I gathered what children I could after the possession

began. We are all living together in one of the savannah homesteads. They must be terrified. I never intended to be away all night.”

There was complete silence for a second, even the red cloud’s hollow thunder was hushed.

“How many children?” Reza asked.

“Counting young Russ here, twenty-nine.”

“Fucking hell.”

Horst frowned and glanced pointedly at Russ who was staring at the mercenary leader with apprehensive eyes over his half-eaten chocolate. Kelly held him a fraction tighter.

“Now what?” Sal Yong asked bluntly.

Horst looked at him in some puzzlement. “We must go back to them in your hovercraft,” he said simply. “I fear my poor old horse can travel no further. Why? Have you some other mission?”

The combat-adept mercenary kept still. “No.”

“Where exactly is this homestead?” Reza asked.

“Five or six kilometres south of the jungle,” Horst replied. “And forty minutes’ walk east from the river.”

Reza datavised his guidance block for a map, and ran a search through LDC habitation records, trying to correlate. “In other words, under the red cloud.”

“Yes, that abomination spread at a fearsome rate yesterday.”

“Reza,” Jalal said. “The hovercraft can’t possibly carry that many people. Not if we’re going to keep ahead of the cloud.”

Horst looked at the hulking combat adept in growing amazement. “What is this you are saying? Can’t? Can’t? They are children! The eldest is eleven years old! She is alone under that Devil’s spew in the sky. Alone and frightened, holding the others to her as the sky turns to brimstone and the howling demon horde closes in. Their parents have been raped by unclean spirits. They have nothing left but a single thread of hope.” He stood abruptly, clamping down on a groan as his ride-stiffened

muscles rebelled against the sharp movement, face reddening in fury. "And you, with your guns and your mechanoid strength, you sit here thinking only of saving your own skin. You should run to embrace the possessed, they would welcome you as their own. Come along, Russ, we're going home."

The boy started sobbing. He struggled in Kelly's grip.

She climbed to her feet, keeping her arms protectively around his thin frame. Quickly, before she lost all courage, she said: "Russ can have my place on the hovercraft. I'll come with you, Father." Retinas switched to high resolution, she looked at Reza. Recording.

"I knew you'd be trouble," he datavised.

"Tough," she said out loud.

"For a reporter you have very little understanding of people if you think I'd desert his children after all we've seen."

Kelly pouted her lips sourly and switched her visual focus to Jalal. That exchange would have to be edited out.

"Nobody is going to leave the children behind, Father," Reza said. "Believe me, we have seen what happens to children driven away by the possessed. But we are not going to help them by rushing in blindly." And he stood, rising a good thirty centimetres higher than the priest. "Understand me, Father?"

A muscle twitched on Horst's jaw. "Yes."

"Good. Now they obviously can't stay at the savannah homestead. We have to take them south with us. The question is how. Are there any more horses at the homestead?"

"No. We have a few cows, that's all."

"Pity. Ariadne, can the hovercraft carry fifteen children apiece?"

"Possibly, if we ran alongside. But it would put a hell of a strain on the skirt impellers. And it would definitely drain the electron matrices inside of six or seven hours."

"Running like that would drain us too," Pat said.

"I can't even recharge the matrices, not under this

cloud,” Ariadne said. “The solar-cell panels don’t receive anything like enough photonic input.”

“We might be able to build some kind of cart,” Theo suggested. “Hitch it up to the cows. It would be better than walking.”

“It would take time,” Sal Yong said. “And there’s no guarantee it would work.”

“Tow them,” Sewell said. “Slap together a couple of rafts, and tow them back up the river. All you need is planks, we can get them from the homestead itself if need be.”

Ariadne nodded her rounded head. “Might just work. The hovercraft could handle that. We could certainly get back here by the middle of the afternoon.”

“Then what?” Jalal said. “Look, I’m not being a downer. But just getting them back here isn’t the solution. We have to keep going. Wallace says the cloud is going to cover the whole planet, we have to find a way to outrun it, or this will all be for nothing.”

Reza turned to look at the possessed man who had kept silent and unobtrusive up until now. “Mr Wallace, will your kind know if we return to the homestead?”

“Aye, Mr. Malin,” he said sorrowfully. “That they will. The cloud and the land are becoming one with us. We can feel you moving inside us. When you pass back under the cloud the sensation will be like treading on a nail.”

“How will they react?”

“They’ll come after you, Mr. Malin. But then they’ll do that anyway if you stay on this world.”

“I think he’s speaking the truth,” Horst said. “One of them came to the homestead two days ago. She wanted me and the children. Our bodies, anyway.”

“What happened?” Kelly asked.

Horst forced a vapid smile. “I exorcised her.”

“What?” Kelly blurted in greedy delight. “Really?”

The priest held up his bandaged hand. The dark strips of cloth were stained with blood. “It wasn’t easy.”

“Shit Almighty. Shaun, can you be exorcised?”

Shaun Wallace had locked his gaze to that of the priest. "If it's all the same to you, Miss Kelly, I'd be obliged if you didn't try."

"He can," she subvocalized into her neural nanonics memory cell, "he really can! You can see it in his eyes. He fears the priest, this ageing worn-out man in shabby clothes. I can barely believe it. A ceremony left over from medieval times that can thwart these almost-invincible foes. Where all our fantastic technology and knowledge fails, a prayer, a simple anachronistic prayer could become our salvation. I must tell you of this, I must find a way to get a message out to the Confederation." Damn, that sounded too much like Graeme Nicholson's recording.

For a moment she wondered what had happened to the old hack.

"Interesting," Reza said. "But it doesn't help our present dilemma. We have to find a way of keeping ahead of the cloud until Joshua comes back for us."

"Christ, we don't even know when he's coming back," Sal Yong said. "And taking a bunch of children through these mountains isn't going to be easy, Reza, there are no roads, no detailed map image. We've got no camping equipment, no boots for them, no food supplies. It's going to be wet, slippery. I mean, God! I don't mind giving it a go if there's even a remote chance of pulling it off, but this . . ."

"Mr Wallace, would your kind consider letting the children go?" Reza asked.

"Some would, I would, but the rest . . . No, I don't think so. There are so few living human bodies left here, and so many souls trapped in the beyond. We hear them constantly, you know, they plead with us to bring them back. Giving in is so easy. I'm sorry."

"Shit." Reza flexed his fingers. "OK, we'll take it in stages. First we bring the children back here, get them and us out from under that bloody cloud today. That's what is important right now. Once we've done that we can start concentrating on how to get them through the mountains. Maybe the Tyrathca will help."

“No chance,” Ariadne said flatly.

“Yeah. But all of you keep thinking. Mr. Wallace, can you tell me what sort of opposition we’ll be facing? How many possessed?”

“Well now, there’s a good hundred and fifty living in Aberdale. But if you race in on those fancy hover machines of yours you ought to be away again before they reach you.”

“Great.”

Shaun Wallace held up his hand. “But there’s a family of ten living in one of the other homesteads not far from the children. They can certainly cause you problems.”

“And you believe him?” Sewell asked Reza.

Shaun Wallace put on a mournfully injured expression. “Now then, Mr. Sewell, that’s no way to be talking about someone who’s only doing his best to help you. I didn’t stick out my thumb and hitch here, you know.”

“Actually, he’s right about the homestead family,” Horst said. “I saw them a couple of days ago.”

“Thank you, Father. There now, you have the word of a man of the cloth. What more do you want?”

“Ten of them on open ground,” Reza said. “That’s nothing like as bad as Pamiers. I think we can take care of them. Are you going to add your fire-power to ours, Mr. Wallace?”

“Ah now, my fire-power is a poor weak thing compared to yours, Mr. Malin. But even if it were capable of shifting mountains, I would not help you in that way.”

“That makes you a liability, Mr. Wallace.”

“I don’t think much of a man who asks another to kill his cousins in suffering, Mr. Malin. Not much at all.”

Horst took a pace forwards. “Perhaps you could mediate for us, Mr. Wallace? Nobody wants to see any more death on this world, especially as those bodies still contain their rightful souls. Could you not explain to the homestead family that attacking the mercenaries would be foolhardy in the extreme?”

Shaun Wallace stroked his chin. "Aye, now, I could indeed do that, Father."

Horst glanced expectantly at Reza.

"Suits me," the mercenary leader said.

Shaun Wallace grinned his wide-boy grin. "The priests back in Ireland were all wily old souls. I see nothing's changed in that department."

Nobody had noticed the balmy smile growing on Kelly's face during the exchange. She let go of Russ, and slapped her hands together with surefire exultation. "Yes! I can get Joshua back here. I think. I'm sure I can."

They all looked at her.

"Maybe even by this afternoon. We won't have to worry about going through the mountains. All we'll have to do is get clear of the red cloud so that Ashly can land."

"Spare us how wonderful you are, Kelly," Reza said. "How?"

She dived into her bag and pulled out her communication block, brandishing it as though it were a silver trophy. "With this. The LDC's original geosynchronous communication platform had a deep-space antenna to keep in touch with the Edenist station orbiting Murora. If the platform didn't get hit in the orbital battle, we can just call him up. Send a repeating message telling him how badly we need him. Murora is about nine hundred million kilometres away, that's less than a light-hour. If he leaves as soon as he receives it, he could be here inside three or four hours. *Lady Mac* might not be able to jump outsystem, but if she can jump to Murora she can jump back again. At least we'd be safely off Lalonde."

"Can you get the platform computer to send a message?" Reza asked. "Terrance Smith never gave us any access codes for it."

"Listen, I'm a bloody reporter, there's nothing I don't know about violating communication systems. And this block has quite a few less than legal chips added."

She waited for an answer, her feet had developed a life of their own, wanting to dance.

“Well, get on with it then, Kelly,” Reza said.

She ran for the hole in the door, startling Fenton and Ryall lying on the grass outside. The sky over the savannah was split into two uneven portions of redness as the cloud band clashed with the dawn sun. She datavised an instruction into the block and it started scanning across the dissonant shades above for the platform’s beacon.

Joshua dozed fitfully in his cabin’s sleep cocoon. The envelope was a baggy lightweight spongy fabric, big enough to hold him without being restrictive. Sarha had offered to sleep with him, but he’d tactfully declined. He was still feeling the effects of that eleven-gee thrust. Even his body hadn’t been geneered with that much acceleration in mind. There were long bruise crinkles on his back where the creases on his ship-suit had pressed into his skin, and when he looked into the mirror his eyes were bloodshot. He and Sarha wouldn’t have had sex anyway, he really was tired. Tired and stressed out.

Everyone had been so full of praise for the way he had flown *Lady Mac*. If only they knew the emotional cold turkey that hit him once the danger was over and he stopped operating on nerve energy and arrogance. The fear from realizing what one—just one—mistake would have spelt.

I should have listened to Ione. What I had before was enough.

He held her image in his mind as he fell asleep, she made it a lot easier to relax, floating away on the rhythm of night. When he woke, drowsy, warm, and randy, he accessed a memory of their time back in Tranquillity. Out in the parkland, lying on the thick grass beside a stream. The two of them clinging together after sex; Ione on top, sweaty and dreamily content, light glinting an opulent gold off her hair, skin warm and soft against him, kissing him oh so slowly, lips descending along his sternum. Neither spoke, the moment was too perfect for that.

Then her head lifted and it was Louise Kavanagh, all

trusting and adoring in that way only the very innocent can achieve. She smiled hesitantly as she rose up, then laughed in rapturous celebration as she was impaled once again, luscious dark hair tossed about as she rode him. Thanking him. Praising him. Promising herself for ever his.

And loving a girl hadn't been that sweet since he was her age.

Jesus! He cancelled the memory sequence. Even his neural nanonics were playing him dirty.

I do not need reminding. Not right now.

The flight computer datavisd that Aethra was requesting a direct channel. Joshua acknowledged the distraction with guilty relief. Space warfare was easy.

Sarha had done a good job interfacing the bitek processor to *Lady Mac's* electronics. He had talked to the habitat yesterday, which was engrossing; it came across as a mixture of child and all-knowing sage. But it had been very interested in hearing about Tranquillity. The images he received from its shell's sensitive cells were different to the *Lady Mac's* sensor clusters. They seemed more real, somehow, bestowing a texture of depth and emptiness which space had always lacked before.

Joshua unsealed the side of the sleep cocoon and swung his legs out. He opened a locker for a fresh ship-suit. There were only three left. Sighing, he started to pull one on. "Hello, Aethra," he datavisd.

"Good morning, Joshua. I hope you slept well."

"Yeah, I got a few hours."

"I am picking up a message for you."

He was instantly alert, without any stimulus from his neural nanonics. "Jesus. Where from?"

"It is a microwave transmission originating from the civil communication platform orbiting Lalonde."

He was shown the starfield outside. The sun was a white glare point, nine hundred and eighty-nine million kilometres distant; to one side Lalonde shone steadily, if weakly, a sixth-magnitude star. It had now become a binary, twinned with a violet glint.

“You can see microwaves?” he asked.

“I sense, eyes see. It is part of the energy spectrum which falls upon my shell.”

“What is the message?”

“It is a voice-only transmission to you personally from a Kelly Tirrel.”

“Jesus. Let me hear it.”

“This is Kelly Tirrel calling Captain Joshua Calvert. Joshua, I hope you’re receiving this OK; and if not, could someone at Aethra’s supervisory station please relay this to him immediately. It’s really important. Joshua, I’m not sure if the possessed can overhear this, so I won’t say anything too exact, OK? We got your message about returning. And the time-scale you mentioned is no use to us. Joshua, virtually everyone down here has been possessed. It’s like the worst of the Christian Bible gospels are coming true. Dead people are coming back and taking over the living. I know that sounds crazy to you; but believe me it isn’t sequestration, and it isn’t a xenoc invasion. I’ve talked to someone who was alive at the start of the twentieth century. He’s real, Joshua. So is their electronic warfare ability, only it’s more like magic. They can do terrible things, Joshua, to people and animals. Truly terrible. Shit, I don’t suppose you believe any of this, do you? Just think of them as an enemy, Joshua. That’ll help make them real for you. And you saw the red cloud-bands over the Juliffe basin, you know how powerful that enemy is.

“Well, the red cloud is swelling, Joshua, it’s spreading over the planet. We were heading away from it. Just like you said we should, remember? But we’ve found someone who has been in hiding since the possession started, a priest. He’s been looking after a bunch of young children. There’s twenty-nine of them. And now they’re trapped under that cloud. They’re near the village that was our original target, so that gives you a rough idea where we are. We’re going back for them, Joshua, we’ll be on our way by the time this message reaches you. They’re only children, for Christ’s sake, we can’t leave them. The trou-

ble is that once we've got them we won't be able to run far, not with our transport. But we're pretty sure we can get the children out from under the cloud by this afternoon. Joshua . . . you have to pick us up. Today, Joshua. We won't be able to hold out for long after sunset. I know your lady friend wasn't feeling too well when you left, but bandage her up as best you can, as soon as you can. Please. We'll be waiting for you. Our prayers are with you. Thank you, Joshua.' ”

“It is repeating,” Aethra said.

“Oh, Jesus.” Possession. The dead returned. Child refugees on the run. “Jesus fucking wept. She can't do this to me! She's mad. Possession? She's fucking flipped.” He stared aghast at the ancient Apollo computer, arms half in his sleeves. “No chance.” His arms were rammed into the ship-suit sleeves. Sealing up the front. “She needs locking up for her own good. Her neural nanonics are looped on a glitched stimulant program.”

“You said you believed the red cloud effect was fundamentally wrong,” Aethra said.

“I said it was a little odd.”

“So is the notion of possession.”

“When you're dead, you're dead.”

“Twelve who died when the station was destroyed are stored within me. You make continual references to your deity, does this not imply a degree of belief in the nature of spirituality?”

“Je— Shit! Look, it's just a figure of speech.”

“And yet humans have believed in gods and an afterlife since the day you gained sentience.”

“Don't you fucking start! Your lot are supposed to be atheists, anyway.”

“I apologize. I can sense you are upset. What are you going to do about rescuing the children?”

Joshua pressed his fingers to his temple in the vain hope it would halt the dizzy sensation. “Buggered if I know. How do we know there really are any children?”

“You mean it is just a bluff to trick you into returning to Lalonde?”

“Could be, yeah.”

“That would imply that Kelly Tirrel has been possessed.”

Very calmly, he datavised: “Sequestered. It implies she has been sequestered.”

“Whatever has befallen her, you still have a decision to make.”

“And don’t I know it.”

Melvyn was alone on the bridge when Joshua came gliding through the hatch from his cabin.

“I just heard the message,” the fusion expert said. “She can’t mean it.”

“Maybe.” Joshua touched his feet to a stikpad beside his acceleration couch. “Call the crew in, and Gaura as well. I suppose the Edenists are entitled. It’s their arses on the line as well.”

He tried to think in the short time it took for them to drift into the bridge, make some kind of sense out of Kelly’s message. The trouble was she had sounded so convincing, she believed what she said. If it was her. Jesus. And it was a very strange sequestration. He couldn’t forget the chaos in orbit.

He accessed the navigation display to see just how practical any sort of return flight was. It didn’t look good. *Maranta* and *Gramine* had confined their search to the section of ring which was electrically charged, which meant one of them was always within three thousand kilometres of *Lady Mac*. The jump coordinate for Lalonde was a third of the way round the gas giant, over two hundred and seventy thousand kilometres from their present position. Out of the question. He started to hunt round for options.

“I think it’s a load of balls,” Warlow said when they were all assembled. “Possession! Kelly’s cracked.”

“You said it yourself,” Ashly said. “It’s a bad form of sequestration.”

“Do you believe in the dead coming back?”

The pilot grinned at the huge ochre cosmonik clinging to a corner of an acceleration couch. "It would make life interesting. Admit it."

Warlow's diaphragm issued a sonic boom snort.

"It doesn't matter what name we choose to call the process," Dahybi said. "The sequestration ability exists. We know that. What we have to decide is whether or not Kelly has been taken over by it." He glanced at Joshua and offered a lame shrug.

"If she hasn't then we're all in a great deal of trouble," Sarha said.

"If she *hasn't*?" Melvyn asked.

"Yes. That will mean there are twenty-nine children we have to get off that planet by this afternoon."

"Oh, hell," he mumbled.

"And if she has been sequestered then she knew we were coming back anyway. So why try and get us to come back earlier? And why include all that crap about possession, when all it would do was make us more cautious?"

"Double bluff?" Melvyn said.

"Come on!"

"Sarha's right," Ashly said. "We always planned to go back; as far as Kelly knew, in a couple of days. There's no logical reason to hurry us. And we know they try and hijack the spaceplanes which land. It's not as if we wouldn't have taken precautions. All this has done is make us even more cautious. My vote says she is in trouble, and they have found these stray children."

"And me," Dahybi said. "But it's not our decision. Captain?"

It was the kind of oblique compliment about his status Joshua could really have done without. "Kelly would never call unless she really was desperate," he said slowly. "If she has managed to avoid sequestration, or whatever, she would never have mentioned possession unless it was true. You all know what she's like: facts no matter what it costs. And if she had been possessed, she wouldn't tell us."

Oh, Jesus, be honest, I know she's in deep shit. "They need to be picked up. Like she said: today."

"Joshua, we can't," Melvyn said. He looked desperately torn. "I don't want to abandon a whole bunch of kids down there any more than you. Even if we don't know exactly what's going on below those bloody cloudbands, we've seen and heard enough to know it ain't good. But we're never going to get past the *Maranta* and the *Gramine*. And I'll give you good odds they've picked up Kelly's message as well. They'll be extra vigilant now. Face it, we've got to wait. They'll spot us the second we turn our drive on."

"Maybe," Joshua said. "Maybe not. But first things first. Sarha, can our environmental systems cope with thirty kids and the mercenaries as well as the Edenists?"

"I dunno how big the kids are," Sarha said, thinking out loud. "Kelly did say young. There's probably room for four more in the zero-tau pods if we really cram them in. We can billet some in the spaceplane and the MSV, use their atmospheric filters. Carbon dioxide build-up is our main problem, the filters could never scrub the amount seventy people produce. We'd have to vent it and replace it from the cryogenic oxygen reserve." Neural nanonics ran a best and worst case simulation. She didn't like the margins on the worst case, not one bit. "I'll give you a provisional yes. But thirty is the absolute limit, Joshua. If the mercenaries run into any other worthy cause refugees, they're just going to have to stay down there."

"OK. That leaves us with picking them up. Ashly?"

The pilot gave one of his engaging grins. "I told you, Joshua, I promised them I'd go down again."

"Fine. That just leaves you, Gaura. You've been very quiet."

"It's your ship, Captain."

"Yes, but your children are on board, and your friends and family. They'll be exposed to a considerable risk if *Lady Mac* attempts to go back to Lalonde. That entitles you to a say."

"Thank you, Joshua. We say this: if it was us stranded on

Lalonde right now, we would want you to come and pick us up.”

“Very well. That’s settled then. We’ll try and rescue the mercenaries and the children.”

“One small point, Joshua,” Melvyn said loudly. “We’re stuck in the rings, with one combat wasp left, forty thousand kilometres from the edge of Murora’s gravity field. If we stick our heads up, they’ll be shot to buggery.”

“I was in a similar situation to this a year ago.”

“Joshua!” Sarha chided.

He ignored her. “It was the Ruin Ring, when Neeves and Sipika were coming after me. Look at where the *Maranta* and the *Gramine* are right now.”

They all accessed the navigational display, neon-sharp graphics unfurling in their minds. The two searching starships extruded curved yellow orbital trajectory plots paralleling the thick gauzy green slab of the ring which filled the bottom half of the projection. *Lady Macbeth* lurked below the ring surface like some outlandish slumbering marine creature.

“*Maranta* and *Gramine* are now six thousand kilometres apart,” Joshua said. “They’ve got a reasonable idea of the general area where we have to be hidden, and they’ve changed altitude twice in the last fifteen hours to cover different sections of the ring. If they stick to that pattern they’ll change again in another four hours.” He ordered the display to extrapolate their positions. “*Gramine* will be about three hundred kilometres from us, she actually passes over us in another ninety minutes; and *Maranta* is going to be right out at the extreme, about seven and a half thousand kilometres away. After that they’ll swap orbital tracks and begin a new sweep.

“So if we can break out when *Maranta* is seven and a half thousand clicks away, we’ll be far enough ahead of it to escape.”

“And *Gramine*?” Melvyn asked. He didn’t like Joshua’s quiet tone, as if the young captain was afraid of what he was going to say.

“We know where it’s going to be, we can leave one of the megaton nukes from the combat wasp waiting for it. Mine the ring where it will pass overhead, attach the nuke to a large rock particle. Between them, the emp pulse, the plasma wave, and the rock fragments should disable it.”

“How do we get it there?” Melvyn asked.

“You know bloody well how we get it there,” Sarha said. “Someone’s got to carry it using a manoeuvring pack, right Joshua? That’s what you did in the Ruin Ring, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. They can’t detect one person fifteen kilometres deep in the ring, not using cold gas to manoeuvre.”

“Wait a minute,” Dahybi said. He had been running flight trajectory simulations in the navigation display. “Even if you did knock out the *Gramine*, and that’s a bloody long shot, we’re still no better off. *Maranta* will just launch her combat wasps straight at us. There’s no way we can out-run them, they’ll get us before we’re halfway to the edge of Murora’s gravity field, let alone Lalonde’s jump coordinate.”

“If we accelerate at eight gees, we’ll have seven minutes fifteen seconds before the *Maranta*’s combat wasps will catch us,” Joshua said. “Distance-wise that works out at about sixteen thousand kilometres.”

“That still won’t get us outside Murora’s gravity field. We couldn’t even jump blind.”

“No, but there is one place we can jump from. It’s only fifteen thousand kilometres away; we would have a twenty-second safety margin.”

“Where?” Melvyn demanded.

Joshua datavisaged an instruction into the flight computer. The navigational display drew a violet trajectory line from the *Lady Mac* towards the edge of the ring, sliding round in a retrograde curve to end at one of the four tiny ring-shepherd moonlets.

“Murora VII,” Joshua said.

A terrible realization came to Dahybi; his balls retracted as though he’d dived into an icy lake. “Oh, Christ, *no*, Joshua. You can’t be serious, not at that velocity.”

“So give me an alternative.”

“An alternative to what?” Sarha asked petulantly.

Still looking at Joshua, Dahybi said: “The Lagrange point. Every two-body system has them. It’s where the moonlet’s gravity is balanced by Murora’s, which means you can activate a starship’s nodes inside it without worrying about gravitonic stress desynchronization. Technically, they’re points, but in practice they work out as a relatively spherical zone. A *small zone*.”

“For Murora VII, about two and a half kilometres in diameter,” Joshua said. “Unfortunately, we’ll be travelling at about twenty-seven kilometres per second when we reach it. That gives us a tenth of a second to trigger the nodes.”

“Oh, shit,” Ashly grunted.

“It won’t be a problem for the flight computer,” Joshua said blandly.

“But where will the jump take us?” Melvyn asked.

“I can give us a rough alignment on Achillea, the third gas giant. It’s on the other side of the system now, about seven billion kilometres away. We’ll jump a billion kilometres, align *Lady Mac* properly on one of its outer moons, then jump again. No way will *Maranta* be able to follow us through those kind of manoeuvres. When we get to Achillea we slingshot round the moon onto a Lalonde trajectory and jump in. Total elapsed time eighty minutes maximum.”

“Oh, God . . . well, I suppose you know what you’re talking about.”

“Him?” Sarha exclaimed. “You must be joking.”

“It has a certain degree of style,” Dahybi said. He nodded approvingly. “OK, Joshua, I’ll have the nodes primed. But you’re going to have to be staggeringly accurate when we hit that Lagrange point.”

“My middle name.”

Sarha studied the bridge decking. “I know another one,” she muttered under her breath.

“So who’s the lucky one that gets to EVA in the rings and blow up the *Gramine*?” Melvyn asked.

“Volunteers can draw lots,” Joshua said. “Put my name in.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sarha said. “We all know you’re going to have to fly the *Lady Mac*, no one else could hit that moonlet, let alone its Lagrange point. And Ashly has to take the spaceplane down, I expect that flight’s going to need a professional. So the rest of us will draw for it.”

“Kindly include twenty of us,” Gaura said. “We are all qualified in EVA work, and we have the added advantage of being able to communicate with Aethra in case the starship should alter course.”

“Nobody is volunteering, nobody is drawing lots,” Warlow said, using excessive volume to obliterate any dissent. “This is my job. It’s what I’m designed for. And I’m the oldest here. So I qualify on all counts.”

“Don’t be so bloody morbid,” Joshua said, annoyance covering his real concern. “You just plant the nuke on a rock particle and come straight back.”

Warlow laughed, making them all wince. “Of course, so easy.”

Now, finally, under the slowly spinning inferno and looking up into a glaring formless void. Journey’s end. Chas Paske had to turn down his optical sensors’ receptivity, the light was so bright. At first he had thought some kind of miniature sun lurked up there at the centre of the flaming vortex of cloud, but now the boat had carried him faithfully under the baleful cone he could see the apex had burst open like a malignant tumour. The rent was growing larger. The cyclone was growing larger, deeper and wider.

He knew its purpose at last, that knowledge was inescapable where he was, pressed down in the bottom of the flat boat under the sheer pressure of the light. It was a mouth, jaws opening wide. One day—soon—it would devour the whole world.

He gave a wild little giggle at the notion.

That heavy, heavy light was migrating from whatever (wherever?) lay on the other side. Weighty extrinsic pho-

tons sinking slowly downwards like snow to smother the land and river in their own special frost. Whatever they touched, gleamed, as though lit from within. Even his body, shoddy, worthless thing it was now, had acquired a dignified lustre.

Above the gashed cloud was a sheer plane of white light, a mathematical absolute. The ocean into which his white silk dream river emptied. A universal ocean into which Lalonde was destined to fall like a pearl droplet, and lose itself for evermore. He felt himself wanting to rise up towards it, to defy gravity and soar. Into the perpetual light and warmth which would cleanse him and banish sorrow. It would ripple once as he penetrated the meniscus, throwing out a polished wave crown, a single ephemeral spire rising at the centre. After that there would be no trace. To pass through was to transcend.

His remoulded face was incapable of smiling. So he lay there gladly on the boat, mind virtually divorced from his body, looking up at his future, awaiting his moment of ascension. His physical purpose long since abandoned.

Even though the red cloud's thunder had retreated to a muffled rumbling he never heard the starting gun being fired, so the first cannonball shattered his serenity with shocking abruptness.

They had known he was there, the possessed, they had been aware of him all along. From the moment he'd passed under the aegis of the red cloud he had registered in their consciousness, as an orbiting gnat might impinge upon a man's peripheral vision. His hapless journey down the river was of no consequence to them; in his miserable degenerative state he was simply not worth their attention nor a moment's effort. The river was bringing him surely to their bosom, they were content to let him come in his own time.

Now he was here, and they had assembled down by the docks to provide a maliciously frolicsome reception. It was a black-hearted jamboree suitable to celebrate the last possession before Lalonde escaped the universe for good.

The iron ball whistled low over Chas's boat with a backlash crack that set the insecure craft rocking, then splattered into the snowlily mush thirty metres away. Purple smoke and ten-metre magnesium flames squirted joyously into the air like a jumbo Roman candle.

Chas shunted round on his elbows, looking in disbelief at the chromatic blaze. The snowlilies started to melt away around his boat, lowering it into sparkling clear blue water. Whoops and catcalls wafted over the river from the shore. He twisted round.

Durringham with all of its white towers and onion-dome spires and lofty castles and lush hanging gardens formed a magnificent backdrop to the armada racing to collect him. There were Polynesian war canoes with flower-garlanded warriors digging their paddles into the clear water; rowing eights with lean young men sweating under the cox's belloyed orders; triremes, their massed oars flashing in immaculate unison; Viking marauders sporting resplendent scarlet and gold sun-god sails; dhows whose lateens strained ahead of the fresh breeze; junks, sampans, ketches, sloops . . . and riding fast and proud out in front was a big three-masted buccaneer, its crew in striped shirts scrambling over the rigging. A quarter of the city's population crowded the circular harbours (now ancient solid stone) cheering on their chosen team in a boisterous rollicking carnival atmosphere.

Chas gagged at the sight of it all; the nightmare dormant in every human brain *the entire world is out to get me*. The whole city was chasing him, wanted him, hated him. He was their new toy, the day's amusement.

His body spasmed in massive quakes, implants faltering. Intolerable waves of pain from his leg crashed past the crumbling analgesic blocks. "Bastards!" he roared. "You shit-eating bastards. You don't play with me. I am your enemy. I am not a joke. Fear me. Fear me, God damn you!"

A dainty ring of smoke puffed out of the buccaneer's forward gun. Chas screamed, fury and terror in one incoherent blast of sound.

The cannon-ball hit the water ten metres away, sending up a sheet of steaming white water. Wavelets rushed out, slapping his boat.

“Bastards.” It wasn’t even a whisper. Adrenalin and nerves could do nothing more for him, he was devoid of strength. “I’ll show you. Freaks. Zoo people. I am not a joke.” Somewhere far away a soprano chorus was singing black canticles.

Chas datavised the activation code into the kiloton bomb strapped in its harness at his side. Good old faithful bomb. Stuck to him the whole time. That’ll wipe the smile off their faces.

Nothing happened, his neural nanonics had shut down. Pain was burning through him, leaving only numbness in its wake. Fingers scrabbled feebly at the bomb’s small manual control panel, prising open the cover. His head flopped to one side to follow the movement. He eventually managed to focus an optical sensor. The panel keyboard was dark, inert. It had failed. He had failed.

Almost forgotten natural tear glands squeezed out their very last drops as he slowly knocked a fist on the wooden planking in utter futility.

A couple of the triremes were gaining on the buccaneer. It was developing into a three-boat race, though one of the war canoes refused to give up, warriors pounding the water with their paddles, skin gleaming as though they were sweating oil. Back on the harbours the elated cheering mixed with songs and chants from across five millennia.

The buccaneer crew fired another cannon to terrorize their crushed victim.

“You won’t have me!” Chas cried in defiance. He put a hand on each gunwale and started to rock the boat as the cannon-ball’s wavelets broke against the hull. “Never. Never. I won’t be a part of it, not of you.”

Pain and numbness had gorged on his torso. His arms began to fail as the swaying reached a peak. Water slopped in over the narrow gunwale. The flimsy boat turned turtle, dumping him into the Juliffe. He saw bubbles churning

past. The crumpled silver foil of the surface receded. Neural nanonics told him his lungs were filling with water. Pain diminished. His implants were working again. They couldn't reach him under water, he was beyond them here. He focused every sensor he had on the bomb whose weight was dragging him down.

On shore the audience had stopped cheering when their prey (so unsportingly) capsized himself. A groan went up. He'd pay for that.

Boat crews stopped rowing and slumped over their oars, exhausted and angry. The buccaneer's sails calmly rolled themselves up as the sailors hung like listless spiders in the rigging. They stared morosely at the tiny half-sunken boat bobbing about ahead of them.

Together Durringham's possessed exerted their power. The river around the hull of Chas Paske's boat began to ripple energetically.

"Hey look, it's Moses!" someone yelled from the harbour wall. A laugh ran along the spectators. They clapped their hands and stomped their feet, a stadium crowd demanding their sporting hero appear. "Moses! Moses! Moses!"

The waters of the Juliffe parted.

Chas felt it happening. His surroundings were getting lighter, pressure was reducing. Below his fingers the bomb's keyboard was a glowing ruby chessboard. He typed in the code, refusing to hurry, watching the numbered squares turn green. There was a loud gurgling sound building all around. Fast-conflicting currents sucked at him, twisting his lifeless legs about. Then the rucked surface came rushing down to seek him out. Too late.

The kiloton nuke detonated at the bottom of a twenty-metre crater in the river. Its initial blast pulse was punched straight up into the core of the transplanarity ferment raging above. A solar fireball arose from the water with splendid inevitability, and the entire river seemed to lift with it. Energy in every spectrum poured outwards, smashing solid matter apart. None of those lining the harbour wall really

knew what was happening. Their stolen bodies disintegrated before the nerve impulses could reach the brain. Only after annihilation, when the possessing souls found themselves back in the bestial beyond, did the truth dawn.

Two seconds after the bomb exploded, a forty-metre wall of water moving at near-sonic speed slammed into Durringham. And the dead, ensconced in their beautiful new mansions and fanciful castles, died again in their tens of thousands beneath the usurping totem of the radiant mushroom cloud.

12

With his enhanced retinas switched to full sensitivity it appeared as though Warlow was flying through a dry iridescent mist. Ring particles still crawled with wayward spurts of energy; micrometre dust flowed in slow streams around the larger boulders and ice chunks. Despite the shimmering phosphorescence he was basically flying blind. Occasionally he could catch a glimpse of stars flickering past his feet, short-lived embers skipping from an invisible bonfire.

After leaving the *Lady Macbeth* he had moved twelve kilometres out from Murora, an orbit which saw him falling behind the sheltering starship. The big dark sphere, upper hull glinting in the livid red glow from its own thermo-dump panels, had been lost from sight in three minutes. Isolation had tightened its bewitching fingers almost immediately. Strangely enough, here, where he could barely see ten metres, a realization of the universe's vastness was all too strong.

The ten-megaton bomb was strapped to his chest, a fat ovoid seventy-five centimetres high. Weightless, yet weighing heavily in his heart—titanium and composite device though it was.

Sarha had given him one of the Edenist bitek processor blocks which she had modified with augmentation modules. The idea was to provide him with a link to Aethra in case the *Gramine* should unexpectedly alter track.

Makeshift, like this whole mission.

“Can I speak with you alone?” he datavised.

“Of course,” the habitat answered. “I would be glad to keep you company. Yours is a fraught task.”

"But it is mine alone."

"You are the best qualified."

"Thank you. I wanted to ask you a question on the nature of death."

"Yes?"

"It involves a small story."

"Go on. I am always interested to hear of human events. I understand very little of your species so far, even though I have inherited a wealth of data."

"Ten years ago I was a crew-member in the starship *Harper's Dragon*. It was a line cargo ship, nothing special, although the pay was comfortably regular. We had a new cadet lieutenant join us on Woolsey, called Felix Barton. He was only twenty, but he had assimilated his didactic courses well. I found him competent, and a reasonable messmate. He was no different to any other young man starting his career. Then he fell in love with an Edenist woman."

"Ah; this is, perhaps, a Shakespearian tragedy?"

Warlow saw thin ribbons of orange dust winding corkscrew fashion around an ice chunk straight ahead; a bird-kite's tail, he thought. They sparked pink on his carbontanium space armour as he splashed through. Then he was past them and curving round a mealy boulder, guidance and optical interpretation programs operating in tandem to steer him automatically around obstacles. "Not at all. It is a very straightforward story. He simply became besotted. I admit she was beautiful, but then every geneered human seems to be. *Harper's Dragon* had a regular contract to supply her habitat with specialist chemicals for one of their electronics manufacturing stations. After four trips, Felix declared he could not bear to be parted from her. And he was lucky, she felt the same way about him."

"How fortunate."

"Yes. Felix left *Harper's Dragon* and became an Edenist. He had neuron symbionts implanted to give him general affinity, and underwent specialist counselling to help him adapt. The last time *Harper's Dragon* visited, I

spoke with him, and he was extremely happy. He said he had fitted in perfectly and that she was expecting their first child.”

“That is nice. There are something like a million and a half Adamists who become Edenists every year.”

“So many? I didn’t know.”

“Seventy per cent are love cases similar to your friend, the rest join because it attracts them intellectually or emotionally. Over half of the love cases are Adamists who form relationships with voidhawk crew-members, which is only to be expected given that they have the most contact with Adamists. It leads to many jokes about the voidhawk families having wild blood.”

“So tell me, is the conversion absolute, do these new-found Edenists transfer their memories into the habitat when they die?”

“Of course.”

His neural nanonics displayed a guidance plot, updating his position. Purple and yellow vectors slithered through his head, temporarily displacing his view of the irradiated dust. He was on course. His course. “Then my question is this. Is it possible to transfer a person’s memories into a habitat if that person has neural nanonics rather than affinity?”

“I have no record of it ever having been done. Although I can see no reason why not; the process would take longer, however, datavising is not as efficient as affinity.”

“I want to become an Edenist. I want you to accept my memories.”

“Warlow, why?”

“I am eighty-six, and I am not geneered. My shipmates do not know, but all that is left of my real body is the brain and a few nerve cords. The rest of me perished long ago. I spent far too much time in free fall, you see.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It has been a full life. But now my neurons are dying at a rate which is beyond even Confederation gene therapy’s ability to replace. So, understandably, I

have come to think a lot about death recently. I had even considered downloading my memories into a processor array, but that would simply be an echo of myself. You on the other hand are a living entity, within you I too could continue to live.”

“I would be happy and honoured to accept your memories. But, Warlow, the transference must take place at death, only that way can continuity be achieved. Anything less would be that echo of self which you spoke of. Your personality would know it was not complete because its conclusion was missing.”

He flew along a cliff of charcoal-textured rock. A virtual mountain of a particle, worn and abraded by aeons of murmuring dust, the lethal knife-blade spires unsheathed by its fractured formation now a moorland landscape of undulations, barrows of its youthful virility. “I know.”

“Are you worried then that Captain Calvert will not be able to escape through the Lagrange point?”

“No. Joshua will be able to fly that manoeuvre with ease. My concern is that he is given the chance to fly it.”

“You mean eliminating the *Gramine*?”

“I do. This mission to mine the rings is the weakest link in Joshua’s plan to escape. It assumes the *Gramine* will not deviate its orbit by more than five hundred metres in the next two hours. It assumes too much. I propose to position the warhead accurately on *Gramine*’s orbital track, and detonate it while it passes. That way I can be sure.”

“Warlow, neither *Gramine* nor *Maranta* have deviated their track by more than a hundred metres since the search began. I urge you to reconsider this action.”

“Why? I have only a few years to live at best. Most of those would be spent with my memories and rationality slipping away. Our medical science has achieved too much in that direction. My synthetic body can keep pumping blood through my comatose brain for decades yet. Would you wish that on me when you know you yourself can provide me with a worthwhile continuance?”

“That is, I believe, a loaded question.”

“Correct. My mind is made up. This way I have two chances of cheating death. There are few who can say that.”

“Two? How so?”

“Possession implies an afterlife, somewhere a soul can return from.”

“You believe that is the fate which has befallen Lalonde?”

“Do you know what a Catholic is?” A solid glacier wall of ice appeared out of the dust. The cold-gas nozzles of his manoeuvring pack fired heavily. For a moment he saw the splay of waxen vapour shiver as it was siphoned away into the blue and emerald phosphenes of dust.

“Catholicism is one of the root religions which made up the Unified Christian Church,” Aethra said.

“Almost. Officially, by decree of the Pope, Catholicism was absorbed. But it was a strong faith. You cannot modify and dilute such an intense devotion simply by compromising prayers and services to achieve unity with other Christian denominations. My home asteroid was Forli, an ethnic-Italian settlement. It kept the faith, unofficially, unobtrusively. Try as I might, I cannot throw away the teachings of my childhood. Divine justice is something I think all living things will have to face.”

“Even me?”

“Even you. And Lalonde looks to confirm my belief.”

“You think Kelly Tirrel was telling the truth?”

Warlow’s manoeuvring pack was nudging him gingerly round the rimed iceberg, loyally following the ins and outs of its gentle contours. Its surface was true crystal, but eventually it sank into total blackness, as though a wormhole interstice had frozen open at its core. When his armour-suit sensors scanned round they showed him the constellations returning to their full majesty through the attenuating dust. “I do. I am convinced of it.”

“Why?”

“Because Joshua believes her.”

“A strange rationale.”

“Joshua is more than a superlative captain. In all my years I have never come across anyone quite like him. He behaves execrably with women and money, and even his friends on occasion. But, if you will excuse my clumsy poetry, he is in tune with the universe. He knows truth. I put my faith in Joshua, I have done so ever since I signed on with the *Lady Macbeth*, and I will continue to do so.”

“Then there is an afterlife.”

“If not, I will live on as part of your multiplicity. But Kelly Tirrel has been convinced that there is. She is a tough, cynical person, she would take a lot of convincing such a thing could be. And, as now appears likely, if there is an afterlife, I have an immortal soul and death is not to be feared.”

“And do you fear death?”

He rose out of the iceberg’s umbra cloak. It was similar to emerging from a dark layer of rain-cloud into clear evening sky, there was only a remote diaphanous shimmer of dust left above him. *Gramine* shone like a second-magnitude star, forty kilometres away and drifting towards him. “Very much.”

The hovercraft slewed and bucked on the river, tossed about by white-water waves swelling over semi-submerged stones. Theo was concentrating hard on keeping them straight and level, but it was tough going. Kelly didn’t remember yesterday’s journey up this same river as being so difficult. She and Shaun Wallace were sitting on the rear bench, clinging on grimly as they were slung about. The propeller droned behind her.

“Already I feel wearied by the journey, daunted by what we are attempting. This is not even snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, although it might be termed a last vain attempt to salvage the team’s dignity. We came to this planet with such confidence and high ideals; we were going to vanquish the evil invader and restore order and stability to twenty million people, give them their lives

back. Now all we dare hope for is to escape with thirty children. And even that will tax us to the limit.”

“Such a worrier, Miss Kelly.” Shaun smiled congenially.

The hovercraft swerved, pushing her against him—for the briefest second the channel to her sensorium flek recorder block dropped out—and he smiled politely as they righted themselves. “You mean I shouldn’t be worrying?”

“Now I never said that. But worry is the Devil’s disciple, it rots the soul.”

“Well, you’d certainly be the one to know all about souls.”

Shaun chuckled softly.

Kelly glanced up at the red cloud. They had been under it for half an hour now. It was thicker than it had been yesterday, its constituent tresses twirling sluggishly. Somehow she was aware of its weight, a heaviness necessary to blot out not just the sight of space but the physical laws governing existence. A complex intertwining of associated emotions defeated her, as though she was sensevising some obscure xenoc ceremony. “That cloud means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” she asked.

“Not the cloud itself, Miss Kelly, that’s nothing, but what it represents, yes. That’s like seeing your aspirations take form. To me, to all of us damned souls, it means freedom. A precious commodity when you’ve been denied it for seven hundred years.”

Kelly switched her attention to the second hovercraft, with Horst Elwes and Russ sitting on the bench behind Ariadne, faces ploughed up against the biting slipstream wind. Cannonades of thunder thrashed overhead, as if the cloud was the taut skin of some gigantic drum. She saw Russ push himself closer against the priest. The simple act of trust was immensely poignant.

The privation dropped upon Shaun Wallace without the slightest warning. He experienced the dreadful exodus, the flight of souls expelled from the universe exerting a tidal force on his own precarious possession. Their lamentations

and enmity spilled back from the beyond in that eerily pervasive chorus, and then came venomous anger of those who accompanied them on their expulsion, those they had possessed. All of them, preying on each other, hating each other. The conflict permeated his skull, wrenching at his thoughts. He gagged, eyes widening in shock. His face betrayed an emotion of uttermost despair, then he flung his head back and howled.

Reza never wanted to hear a cry like it again. The outpouring of anguish compressed into that one cataclysmic bawl spoke for an entire planet. Grief paralysed him, and loss, loss so profound he wanted the universe to end so he could be spared.

It finished as Shaun ran out of breath. Unsteadily, Reza twisted round on the front bench. Tears were streaming down the possessed man's cheeks. He drew breath and howled again.

Kelly's hands were clasped against her puckered lips. "What?" she wailed. "What is it?" Her eyes shut instinctively at the next outburst.

Reza tried to block it all out and project some comfort to Fenton and Ryall. "Pat?" he datavised. "Can Octan see anything happening?"

"Not a thing," the second-in-command answered from the other hovercraft. "What's going on? Wallace frightened the shit out of us."

"I've no idea."

Kelly shook Shaun's arm imploringly. "What's wrong? What is it? Speak to me!" Panic was giving her voice a shrill edge. "Shaun!"

Shaun gulped down a breath, his shoulders shivering. He lowered his head until he was staring at Reza. "You," he hissed. "You killed them."

Reza looked at him through a cross-grid of yellow target graphics, his forearm gaussrifle was aimed directly at the possessed man's temple. "Killed who?"

"The city, the whole city. I felt them go, thousands upon thousands blown back to the beyond like so much ash.

Your devil bomb, it went off. No, it was set off. What kind of creatures are you to slaughter so indiscriminately?"

Reza felt a grin reflex coming on, which his restructured face portrayed as a moderate widening of his mouth slit. "Someone got through, didn't they? Someone hit back."

Shaun's head sagged brokenly. "One man. That's all, one bloody man."

"So you're not so invincible, after all. I hope it pains you, Mr. Wallace, I hope it pains all your kind. That way you may begin to know something of the horror we felt when we found out what you did to this planet's children."

The flash of guilt on the man's face proved the barb had hit home.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Wallace, we know. Even if Kelly here is too tactful to mention it. We know the barbarism we are dealing with."

"What bomb?" Kelly asked. "What are you two talking about?"

"Ask him," Shaun said, and sneered at Reza. "Ask him how he was intending to help the poor people of this planet he was hired to save."

"Reza?"

The mercenary leader swayed as the hovercraft banked around a boulder. "Terrance Smith was concerned we might not get all the fire support we needed from the starships. He gave each team leader a nuke."

"Oh, Christ." Kelly looked from one man to the other. "Do you mean you've got one as well?"

"You should know, Kelly," Reza said. "You're sitting on it."

She tried to jump to her feet, only to have Shaun grab her arm and keep her sitting.

"Have you learned nothing of him yet, Miss Kelly? There's no human part left in that mockery of a body."

"Point to your body, Mr. Wallace, the one you were born with," Reza said. "After that I'll talk morality and ethics with you all day long."

They stared at each other.

Darkness began to fall. Kelly looked up to see the red light bleeding from the cloud, leaving behind a swollen slate-grey mantle massing sinisterly low overhead. A blade of purple-white lightning screwed down on the savannah to the east.

“What’s happening?” Kelly shouted as thunder crashed over the hovercraft.

“You are happening, Miss Kelly. They sense you. They fear and hate you now your true nature and power has been exposed. This is the last mercenary team left, you see. None of the others survived.”

“So what will they do?”

“Hunt you down, whatever the cost below the muzzles of your weapons.”

Two hours after Warlow had left *Lady Mac* Joshua was accessing the flight computer’s memory cores, looking for records of starships jumping from inside a Lagrange point. He and Dahybi had gone through the small amount of available data on Murora VII, using it to refine their computations of the Lagrange point’s size and position, locking the figures into the trajectory plot. He could pilot *Lady Mac* right into its heart—no doubt about that: now he wanted to know what would happen when the energy patterning nodes were activated. There was a lot of theory in the physics files about how it should be possible, but no actual verified ZTT jump.

Who’s going to be stupid enough to take part in an experiment like that? he asked himself. But he was lying on his acceleration couch, and Dahybi, Ashly, and Sarha were on the bridge with him, so he kept any qualms to himself. He was just wondering if there would be a reference in a history file, surely the ZTT pioneers would want to know the limits of their craft, when Aethra datavised him.

“Warlow wants to talk with you,” the habitat said.

He cancelled the link to the memory cores. “Hello, Warlow. How’s it going?”

“Superbly,” Warlow said.

“Where are you?” The cosmonik ought to be back on board in another twenty minutes if everything was running on schedule. Joshua had helped draw up the flight vector through the ring.

“Twenty kilometres from *Gramine*.”

“What?”

“I can see it.”

“Jesus shit, Warlow. What the fuck are you playing at? The schedule doesn’t have any margin for error.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here. I’m going to make certain that *Gramine* is destroyed by the blast. I shall detonate it when the ship is in an optimum position.”

“Oh, Jesus, Warlow, get your iron arse back here now!”

“Sorry, Captain. *Maranta* will only be seven thousand three hundred kilometres away when *Gramine* is eliminated. But that will still give you an eighteen-second lead on the combat wasps. That’s easily enough time.”

“Warlow, stop this. We can wait until the end of the next sweep and position the bomb again. That’s only another five hours. We’ll still be at Lalonde before Amarisk’s evening.”

“Joshua, you have six minutes before I detonate. Make sure everyone is strapped down, please.”

“Don’t do it. Jesus, Warlow, I’m begging you.”

“You know this has to be done properly. And I can ensure it is.”

“Not like this. Please, come back.”

“Don’t worry about me, Joshua. I’ve thought it out, I will be quite all right.”

“Warlow!” Joshua’s face was crushed into a mask of anger and desperation. He jerked round to look at Ashly. The pilot was moving his lips silently, eyelashes sticky with tears. “Say something,” Joshua commanded. “Get him back.”

“Warlow, for Heaven’s sake come back,” Ashly datavised. “Just because you can’t navigate properly there’s no need for this. I’ll do it next time, and do it right.”

“I would like you to do me a favour, Ashly.”

“What?”

“Next time you come out of zero-tau, in fifty years or so, I want you to come back here and visit me.”

“Visit you?”

“Yes. I am transferring my memories to Aethra. I’m going to become one of the multiplicity. I won’t die.”

“You crazy old bastard.”

“Gaura!” Joshua shouted. “Can he do that? He’s not an Edenist.”

“The datavise has already begun,” Gaura replied. “He is doing it.”

“Oh, Jesus wept.”

“Is everyone in their acceleration couches?” Warlow asked. “I’m giving you the chance you really need to escape the rings. You’re not going to waste that, are you, Joshua?”

“Shit.” A hot steel band was constricting Joshua’s chest, far worse than any gee force. “They’re getting onto the couches, Warlow.” He datavised the flight computer for an image from the cabin cameras, watching Edenists tighten the webbing around themselves. Melvyn was swimming about, checking they had done it properly.

“And what about the thermo-dump panels, have you retracted them? There’s only five minutes left.”

Joshua datavised the flight computer to retract the thermo-dump panels. Systems schematics appeared as he prepped the generators and drive tubes; mostly green, some amber. The old girl was in good shape. Sarha started to help him with the checklist.

“Please, Warlow?”

“Fly the bastards into the ground, Joshua. You can do it.”

“Jesus, I don’t know what to say.”

“Promise me something.”

“Yes.”

“Gotcha. You should have asked me what it was first.”

Joshua coughed. Laughed painfully. It made his vision all blurred for some unfathomable reason. “What is it?”

“Hard luck, you committed. I want you to be more considerate to your girls. You never see the effect you have on them. Some of them get hurt, Joshua.”

“Jesus, cosmonik and social worker.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“You were a good captain, Joshua. *Lady Macbeth* was a great way to finish. I wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

Sarha was sobbing on her acceleration couch. Ashly was clenching and unclenching his fists.

“I would,” Joshua said silently.

Aethra showed them *Gramine*. The starship was traversing the ring surface with the suavity of a maglev train, straight and sure. Three thermo-dump panels were extended to the full, shining a dull vermilion. A long, narrow flame of blue ions flickered for an instant.

“Who’d have thought it,” Warlow datavised. “Me, an Edenist.”

Joshua had never felt so pathetically worthless as he did then. He’s *my* crewman.

The bomb exploded. It sent a flat circle of sheer white light flaring out across the ring surface. *Gramine* was a tiny dark speck above its centre.

Joshua fired the restraint bolts. Taut silicon-fibre cables tethering the *Lady Macbeth* to its rock shield recoiled from the hull, writhing in serpentine coils. Lights inside the four life-support capsules dimmed and sputtered as the one active auxiliary generator powered up the four remaining primary generators. Ion thrusters fired, hosing the dark rock with unaccustomed turquoise luminosity.

A sphere of plasma inflated at the centre of the white shroud thrown across the ring, fast at first, then slowing when it was five kilometres across, diminishing slightly. Black phantoms migrated across its surface. *Gramine*’s lower hull shone brighter than a sun as it reflected the diabolical corona seething four kilometres below.

Thousands of fragmented rock splinters flew out of the heart of the fusion blast, overtaking the disbanding plasma

wave. They had the same riotous glow of doomed meteorites caught by an atmosphere. Unlike the plasma they left behind, their velocity didn't fall off with distance.

"Generators on-line," Sarha called out. "Power output stabilizing."

Joshua closed his eyes. Datavised displays filled his head with technicolour dragonfly wings. *Lady Mac* cleared the rock. Her radar started to fire hard microwave pulses at the loose shoal of ring particles, evaporating snowflakes and inflaming carbonaceous motes. Beams of blue-white radiance shone out of the secondary reaction-drive nozzles, rigid as lasers.

They started to rise up through the ring. Dust currents splashed over the monobonded-silicon hull, producing short-lived surf-bloom patterns. Pebbles and larger stones hit and bounced. Ice splattered and stuck, then slipped downwards to fall away in the turbulent glare of the drive exhaust.

A rock chunk crashed into the *Gramine*, shattering its hull open and decimating the internal systems. Cryogenic tanks ruptured, white gases scintillating from the dying fusion bomb's energy barrage. Four life-support capsules raced out of the destruction, charred nultherm foam flaking away, emergency beacons blaring.

Lady Mac cleared the ring surface. Fifty kilometres above her a wave of scarlet meteors streaked across the starfield.

"Stand by for high gees," Joshua said. The fusion drives came on, tormenting the abused ring still further. *Lady Mac* tilted round, and started chasing down the inside of the tapering orange vector tube in Joshua's mind. He monitored the displays to ensure their course was aligned correctly as the gee forces built, then datavised an extra order into the flight computer.

"Joshua, what—" Ashly's startled voice faded away as the bridge trembled softly.

The last combat wasp left its launch-tube.

"Watch it coming, shitheads," Joshua purred. Jesus, but

it felt good to see the vector lines emerge as the submunitions separated. Purple threads linking *Lady Mac* with the tumbling wreckage.

It took eight seconds for the submunitions to reach the *Gramine's* life-support capsules. A stipple of kinetic explosions boiled above the ring for a few scant seconds before the vacuum absorbed them as effortlessly as it did all human-born pollution.

The inside of the homestead cabin was even worse than Jay Hilton imagined hell must be like. She wouldn't let any of the other children go outside, so they had to use buckets in the small second bedroom when they wanted to go to the toilet. The smell was atrocious, and it got viler every time they opened the door. To add to their woes, the heat had reached a zenith which even Lalonde had never matched before. They had opened all the shutters as well as the door, but the air was solid, motionless. The cabin's timber creaked and popped as the frame expanded.

The physical ordeal was bad enough, but Jay felt so agonizingly lonely too. It was stupid, there were twenty-seven children crammed in around her so tight you couldn't move without nudging someone. But she didn't want other kids, she wanted Father Horst. He had never done this before, not leave them alone for a whole day, and certainly not at night. Jay suspected Father Horst was as scared by the night as she was.

All this wretchedness had started when the starships had appeared, and with them the red cloud. Yesterday, just yesterday. It should have been a wonderful time. Rescue was here, the navy marines would come and take them all away and make everything right again. The long dragging miserable days out here on the unchanging savannah were over.

The idea was a little bit scary, because there was always some comfort in routine, even one as difficult as the homestead. But that didn't matter, she was leaving Lalonde. And

nobody was ever going to make her come back. Not even Mummy!

They had spent a happy morning outside, keeping watch over the savannah for the first sign of their rescuers. Though the growing red cloud had been a bit frightening.

Then Russ had seen what he claimed was an explosion, and Father Horst had ridden off to investigate.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," were his last words to her as he'd left.

They had waited and waited. And the red cloud had slid over the sky above, bringing its horrible noise with it, as though it was hiding an avalanche of boulders.

She had done what she could, organizing meals and rotas. Things to do, things to keep them busy. And still he hadn't come back.

Her watch had told her when it was night. She would never have known otherwise. They had closed the shutters and the door, but red light from the cloud seemed to slide in through every crack and cranny. There was no escape. Sleep was difficult, the boomy thunder-noise kept going the whole time, mingling with the higher pitched sounds of crying.

Even now the youngest children remained tearful, the older ones subdued. Jay leant on the window-sill, gazing off in the direction Father Horst had gone. If he didn't come back very soon, she knew she wouldn't be able to hold her own tears back. Then everything would be lost.

I must try not to.

But she had been badly shaken by the way the red light had vanished ninety minutes ago. Now ghastly black clouds swept low and silent over the savannah, turning everything to funereal greys. At first she had tried to play the shapes game, to make them less sinister, but her mind's eye could only conjure up witches and monsters.

Jay turned round from the window, registering the frightened faces. "Danny, the fridge should have done some more ice by now. Make everyone some orange juice."

He nodded, happy to be given some task. Usually he was a real moaner. "Jay!" Eustice squealed. "Jay, there's something out there." She backed away from her window, hands pressed to her cheeks.

There was an outbreak of crying and wails behind Jay. Furniture was kicked and scraped as the children instinctively made for the rear wall.

"What was it?" Jay asked.

Eustice shook her head. "I don't know," she said wretchedly. "Something!"

Jay could hear the cows mooing plaintively, sometimes the bleating of a goat. It might just be a sayce, she thought. Several had gone by yesterday, driven from the jungle by the red cloud. She gave the open door a nervous glance, she'd have to shut it. With shivers in each limb she shuffled back to the window and peeked round the frame.

Lightning was playing along the horizon. The savannah's darkling grass was perfectly still, which made the movement easy to spot. Two ebony blobs jutting up above the blade tips. They were growing steadily larger. She heard a humming noise. Mechanical.

It had been so long since she'd heard any kind of motor that it took a moment to place the sound; and even longer for her to bring herself to believe. Nobody on this planet had ground transport.

"Father!" she shrieked. "He's back!" Then she was out of the open door and running towards the hovercraft, heedless of the stiff, dry grass slapping and scratching her bare legs.

Horst saw her coming and jumped off the hovercraft as Ariadne slowed to a halt fifteen metres from the homestead. He had told himself all through the trip that nothing had happened to them, that they would be all right. Praying and praying that it would be so. But actually seeing Jay alive and in one piece was too much, and the repressed guilt and instituted fear burst out, overwhelming him. He fell to his knees and opened his arms.

Jay hit him as if she was giving a rugby tackle. "I

thought you were dead," she blubbed. "I thought you'd left us."

"Oh, Jay, darling Jay. You know I never would." He cradled her head and rocked her gently. Then the other children came streaming down the homestead's ramshackle steps, squealing and shouting. He smiled at them all and held out his arms once more.

"We were scared," Eustice said.

"The sky's gone real funny."

"It's so hot."

"Nobody collected the eggs."

"Or milked the cows."

Bo narrowed her eyes as the mercenaries climbed out of the hovercraft. "Are these the marines you promised?" she asked sceptically.

"Not quite," Horst said. "But they're just as good."

Danny goggled up at Sewell. The big combat-adept had gaussrifles plugged into both elbow sockets. "What is he?" the boy asked.

Horst grinned. "He's a special sort of soldier. Very strong, very clever. Everything is going to be all right now. He'll look after you."

Kelly had kept her retinas on wide-field focus, scanning the whole reunion scene. There was a big dry lump forming in her throat.

"Holy Jesus, will you look at it all," Shaun Wallace said in a small demoralized voice. "What kind of a God could do this to us? Not the one I was taught about, that's for sure. Look at them all, little children. Crying their bloody damn eyes out. And all for what?"

Kelly turned round at the unaccustomed savagery and bitterness in his tone. But he was already striding towards Reza, who was watching Horst and the children impassively.

"Mr Malin?"

"Yes, Mr. Wallace?"

"You have to move these children away now."

"I intend to."

“No, I mean right now. My kind, they’re over there in the edge of the jungle. There’s a couple of hundred of them, if not more. They’re meaning to get you, Mr. Malin, to end the threat once and for all.”

Reza focused his sensors on the first rank of stunted, scraggy trees four or five kilometres away. The cloud over the jungle was still glowing a sombre red, giving the leaves a coral tinge. Heat shimmer and fluttering leaves defeated him, he couldn’t tell. “Pat, what can Octan see?”

“Nothing much. But there’s definitely a few people roving round in there, and . . . Oh my God.”

The pages emerged first, young boys, ten or twelve years old, holding their heraldic banners high. Then the drums started up, and the pikemen marched out of the cover of trees. It was a long solid black line, almost as if the trees themselves were advancing. Following, and holding a tight formation at the centre, came the mounted knights. Silver armour shone by its own accord under the unbroken veil of leaden clouds.

The army assembled itself in front of the trees to the order of the drummer. Knight commanders rode up and down, organizing stragglers. Then when the ranks were neatly laid out, a single bugle note rang across the savannah. They started to tramp over the uneven grassland towards the homestead.

“OK,” Reza said equably. “Time to go.”

Along with all the other children Jay found herself being hurriedly lifted into one of the hovercraft by a mercenary and told to hang on. Boxes and equipment were being tossed out to accommodate them. Father Horst was in the other hovercraft; Jay wanted to be with him, but she didn’t think the mercenaries would listen if she asked. Shona was plonked down beside her, and Jay smiled timidly, reaching for the disfigured girl’s hand. Their fingers pressed together urgently.

There was a lot of shouting going on all around. Everyone was moving at such a rush. One of the big (really big)

mercenaries dashed into the homestead and came out half a minute later carrying Freya.

“Put her in my hovercraft,” Horst said. “I’ll look after her.” The limp girl was laid on the front bench, and he eased a bundle of cloth under her head.

Through all the confusion and bustle Jay saw one of the mercenaries strap a dark globe to the neck of a huge dog. A man (who she thought looked a bit like Rai Molvi) and a lady who had come with the mercenaries were arguing hotly in front of the cabin. It ended when she made a slashing motion with one arm and climbed into the pilot’s seat of the second hovercraft. The other mercenaries were ransacking the ammunition boxes that lay on the ground, slotting magazines into their backpacks. Then the impellers on Jay’s hovercraft began to spin and the decking wobbled as it rose up. She wondered where the mercenaries were going to fit, her hovercraft had seventeen children packed in between the pilot’s seat and the fan at the rear. But when both vehicles swung round and began to pick up speed she realized they were jogging alongside.

“Where are we going?” Shona shouted above the teeth-grating buzz of the fans.

The small hairless pilot didn’t seem to hear.

Aethra watched the *Lady Macbeth* streak across the ring. Triple fusion exhausts twining into a single braid of near-pure radiation that stretched for over two hundred kilometres behind the fleeing starship.

Murora VII was a thousand kilometres ahead of her. A battered sphere of grey-brown rock not quite a hundred and twenty kilometres in diameter. Along with the other three shepherd moonlets it brought a certain degree of order to the edge of the ring, creating a tidy boundary line. Dust, iceflakes, and pebbles extended out across the gas giant’s ecliptic plane far past the immature habitat’s orbit, although their density slowly dropped away until at a million kilometres it was no different to interplanetary space. But none of the larger particles, the flying mountains and

icebergs, were to be found beyond the hundred and eighty thousand kilometre limit where the shepherds orbited.

Lady Macbeth's exhaust plume yawed a degree, then straightened out again, honing her trajectory. Three thousand kilometres behind her, five combat wasps, arranged in a precise diamond configuration, were accelerating at twenty gees. It had taken the *Maranta* a long time to respond to the break-out, its possessed crew wasting seven expensive seconds before launching the combat wasps—though they couldn't know that. Now the drones could never catch her.

Aethra had never known emotional tension before. Always, it had reflected the feelings of the supervisory station staff. Now though, as it watched the starship curving over the moonlet, it knew—understood—the meaning of trepidation. It *willed* the starship to succeed.

The station staff were lying on their acceleration couches, that wicked gee force squeezing them relentlessly. Aethra could see the ceiling of the cabin through a dozen sets of pained eyes, feeling the cushioning give below overstressed back muscles.

Three seconds away from the Lagrange point. *Lady Macbeth's* fusion drives reduced to four gees as she skimmed eight kilometres above Murora VII, tracing a slight parabola around its minuscule gravity field. A couple of ion thrusters fired. The pursuing combat wasps cleared the edge of the ring.

Aethra prepared thirty-three storage areas in its neural strata. Ready to receive the memories of the Edenists on board. Although it would be so quick . . .

An event horizon eclipsed the *Lady Macbeth*.

Her fusion plume lingered briefly like a broken-hearted wraith before melting away. Then there was no physical evidence left of her ever having existed.

Five combat wasps converged on the Lagrange point. Their courses intersected, drive exhausts a dazzling asterisk, and they sped outwards on divergent vectors, electronic brains crashing in program overload confusion.

"I told you Joshua could fly that manoeuvre," Warlow said.

Aethra tasted smugness in the subsidiary mentality's thoughts. It wasn't used to that, but then the last twenty-four hours had contained a lot of unknowns. "Yes, you did."

"You should have more faith."

"And you're the one to teach me?"

"About faith? Yes, I could try. I think we both have the time now."

The hovercraft battered its way through the tall, heavy savannah grass. It had never been designed with this particular terrain in mind. The grass was too high, too resilient for the skirt to surmount; it all had to be ridden down. That took power, and they were overladen with the children as well.

Kelly datavised the vehicle's electron-matrix-management processor for a status review. Reserves were down to thirty-five per cent; not nearly enough to make it past the end of the cloud. Impeller monitor programs were flashing amber cautions into her brain as they struggled to maintain skirt inflation. Burnout wasn't imminent, though it was something she'd have to watch for.

A long mound arose out of nowhere, and she tilted the joystick exactly right to veer round its base. The piloting program Ariadne had datavised to her was operating in primary mode, enabling her to steer with the same consummate skill the mercenary had owned. Her weight—or rather lack of it—made her the ideal choice. Theo piloted the other hovercraft, and the priest was sitting behind her, but apart from them the team ran alongside. Even Shaun Wallace, though the few times she glimpsed him he was as red faced as a marathon runner on the home straight.

The mounted knights were pushing them hard, keeping a steady three kilometres behind, just enough to put them beyond the range of the gaussrifles. One or two would occasionally break rank for a charge. Then Sewell or Jalal would fire a few EE rounds to ward them off. Thankfully

the sturdy pikemen were unable to match the boosted mercenaries' physical endurance (so how come Shaun could?); they had been left nearly seven kilometres behind. So far so good, but the situation couldn't hold stable for long.

Fenton was racing ahead of the hovercraft, scouting the land, his mass and brawn making easy work of the bristling grass blades. Reza looked through the hound's eyes, leaving a locomotion program to guide his own body down the trail left by the two hovercraft. He was developing a feel for the land beneath the rhythmic pounding of the hound's paws, anticipating the folds and abrupt rises which belied the savannah's facade of interminable mellow ground.

There was a small but certain change in the texture of the grass whipping against Fenton's blunt muzzle. The dead mat of decaying blades covering the flinty soil becoming thicker, springier. Water, and close by. Fenton slowed to smell the air.

"Kelly," Reza datavised. "There's a small stream two hundred metres ahead, steep gully sides. Head for it. Part of the bank has collapsed, you can take the hovercraft down."

A guidance plot filled her mind, all close-packed brown and blue contour lines, a computer image of how the earth would look stripped of vegetation. Neural nanonics integrated it with the piloting program, and she tweaked the joystick.

"Where does it lead?" she asked. So far all they had done was build distance between them and the homestead cabin, heading due south without any attempt to get back on the river which led to the mountains.

"Nowhere. It's cover for us, that's all. The knights are trying to wear us down; and the bastards are succeeding. We can't keep this pace going for ever, and the hovercraft electron matrices are being drained. Once we're immobile the pikemen will catch up, and it'll all be over. They know we can't fight off that many of them. We have to regain the initiative."

Kelly didn't like the implications leaping round inside

her skull at that statement. But she did her best to ignore them. Hunted beasts couldn't afford scruples, especially ones that knew exactly what lay in store if they were caught.

She datavised a query at her communication block. Since they left the homestead cabin it had been broadcasting a continuous signal up to the geosynchronous platform and the secure satellites Terrance Smith had brought with him. There was no need for secrecy now. But the darkened cloud was still blocking the directional beam very effectively.

Theo's hovercraft slowed as it neared the stream, then the nose fell and it went into a controlled slither down the scree of crumbling earth. The gully was three metres deep, with tall reed-grass growing along the top. Smooth grey stones filled the flat bottom, with a trickle of water running down the middle. A muddy pool had built up behind the scree.

Kelly followed the first hovercraft down, juggling the fan deflectors frantically to stop them from sliding into the opposite bank. She turned upstream keeping ten metres behind Theo. He reached the deepest part of the gully and killed the lift.

The mercenaries were jumping down from the top of the bank.

"Everybody out of the hovercraft," Reza said. "And sit with your backs to the gully here." He pointed.

Northern side, Kelly thought. She stood up—*don't think about it*—and helped to hand the children over the gunwale. They looked round in bewilderment, young faces lost and doleful. "It's all right," she kept saying. "Everything's all right." Don't think about it. She kept smiling too, so they wouldn't catch her anxiety.

Octan glided down into the gully, and perched himself on Pat Halahan's broad shoulder, wings folding tightly. Fenton was already nosing round Reza's legs.

Don't think about it. Kelly sat beside Jay. The little girl obviously knew something terrible was about to happen.

“It’s all right,” Kelly whispered. “Really.” She winked, though it was more like a nervous tic. Flints in the gully wall were sharp on her back. Water gurgled round her boots.

“Joshua,” Kelly datavised into her communication block. “Joshua, answer me, for Christ’s sake. Joshua!” All she was given in reply was the oscillating ghost-wind of static.

There was a scuttling sound as the mercenaries sat down on the stones. Several children were sniffing.

“Shut your eyes, and keep them shut,” Reza said loudly. “I shall smack anyone who I see with open eyes.”

The children hurriedly did as they were told.

Kelly closed her eyes, took a breath, and slowly folded her shaking arms over her head.

As soon as the event horizon collapsed, Joshua accessed the image supplied by the short-range combat sensors. *Lady Mac* had emerged from her jump six thousand kilometres above Lalonde. There was nothing within two thousand kilometres. He datavised the full sensor-suite deployment, and triggered the fusion drives. They moved in at a cautious two gees, aiming for a thousand-kilometre orbit.

No starships were left in orbit, the sensors reported, even the inter-orbit craft from Kenyon had vanished. Victim of a combat wasp, Joshua assumed. There was a lot of metallic wreckage, most of it in highly eccentric elliptical orbits, and all of it radioactive.

“Melvyn, access the communication satellites, see if there’s any data traffic for us. And Sarha, see if there are any low-orbit observation satellites left, their memories might hold something useful.”

They both acknowledged their orders and datavised instructions to the flight computer. The starship’s main dish found one of the secure communication satellites, and beams of microwave radiation sprang up to enmesh the planet in a loose web. *Lady Macbeth* started to receive data from the various observation systems left functional.

Everybody seemed to be working smoothly. Their flight to Achillea and the slingshot round its moon had passed off flawlessly. Jubilation at the successful jump from Murora had temporarily balanced out the loss of Warlow. Certainly Joshua experienced none of the sense of accomplishment which should have accompanied the Lagrange-point stunt. The most fantastic piece of flying in his life.

Gaura said he wasn't sure, but he thought the transference had worked, certainly a large quantity of the old commonik's memories had been datavised successfully into Aethra. The habitat had been integrating them when *Lady Mac* jumped.

The prospect of him living on as part of the multiplicity helped ease the grief—to a degree. Joshua felt a lot of regrets bubbling below his surface thoughts; things he'd said, things he should have said. Jesus, did Warlow have a family? I'll have to tell them.

"Nothing from the communication satellites, Joshua," Melvyn said heavily. "Thanks." The idea that Kelly and the mercenaries had been caught was unbearable. That would mean their own flight had been for nothing, and Warlow—"Stand by to broadcast a message from *Lady Mac*'s main dish, we'll see if we can break through the cloud with sheer power. Sarha, what have you got?"

"Not much. There are only seven low-orbit observation satellites left. They took a real pounding in the battle yesterday. But, Joshua, someone detonated a nuke down there earlier this morning."

"Jesus. Where?"

"I think it was at Durringham. The satellite only saw the blast as it fell below the horizon."

Joshua accessed the main sensor image. The red cloud-bands over the tributaries had expanded dramatically. Individual strands had blended together producing a homogenized oval smear that covered the entire Juliffe basin. He realized the bright flame-glimmer Durringham had produced before was missing.

Then he noticed a large circular section of cloud in the

south-east had lost its red nimbus altogether, becoming a malaised grey. Interest stirred at the back of his mind; it almost looked as if the red cloud was being ruined by some cancerous growth. He datavised the flight computer for a guidance grid.

"It's south of the Quallheim villages," he said with a sense of growing confidence.

"That grey patch?" Sarha asked.

"Yeah. Exactly where Kelly said they were going."

"Could be," Dahybi said. "Maybe the mercenaries have found a way of damaging the cloud."

"Perhaps. Melvyn, focus our dish on it, and start transmitting. See if you can punch through and raise Kelly directly." Joshua centred an optical sensor on the area and upped the magnification. The hoary amorphous cloudscape rushed out to fill his mind. It wasn't giving any clues away, there were no breaks, no glimpses of the ground below. "Ashly, have you been following this?"

"Yes, Joshua," the pilot answered from the spaceplane cabin.

"We'll be in orbit in another three minutes. I want you to launch as soon as we finish decelerating. Loiter above those mountains in the south, and we'll see if the mercenary team can get out from under the cloud. Under no circumstances are you to go under it."

"No fear."

"Good." He datavised the flight computer to open the spaceplane hangar doors. "Anything from Kelly, yet?"

"Sorry, Joshua, only static."

"She said they wouldn't be out from under the cloud until the afternoon," Sarha pointed out. "It isn't quite noon there yet."

"I know. But that cloud is still growing, even the grey section. If it reaches the mountains they'll be in serious trouble. The hovercraft won't be able to handle that sort of country. They'll be trapped between the two."

"We can wait," Dahybi said. "For a week if we have to."

Joshua nodded vaguely, eyes tight shut as he flipped

through sensor inputs, desperate for any sort of hint. "Come on, Kelly," he murmured. "Show us you're there."

Ryall padded stealthily through the long grass. The scent of humans was strong in the air. Many had passed by very recently. But none were near him now.

After leaving his master he had run swiftly east, the big weight fastened round his neck jouncing about uncomfortably. After a couple of kilometres the masterlove thoughts in his brain had guided him to one side. He had traced a wide curve over the savannah, now he was heading back to his starting point.

When he reached a wide swath of grass, beaten down by many tramping feet, Ryall waited at the edge for a moment—listening, sniffing. Instinct told him he was alone. Satisfied, the masterlove thoughts urged him out. The swath led all the way back to the jungle, he turned the other way. Five hundred metres ahead of him, the homestead cabin jutted up out of the grassland. He hurried towards it, a hungering sensation racing through his blood.

The grass was beaten down all around the cabin. Fences had been broken. Cows wandered about, grazing placidly, paying no attention to him. Goats saw him coming and ran jerkily until they realized he wasn't chasing them. Chickens escaped from their smashed pen were scratching in the dirt; they scattered squawking when he trotted up to the cabin.

Height. The masterlove thoughts wanted him to have height. Ryall swung his big head from side to side, viewing the back wall of the cabin; then loped over to a pile of composite pods stacked at one corner. He jumped, bounding up the pods, then sprang for the eaves. Paws skated unsteadily on the solar-cell panels nailed to the roof, but he found his footing on the ginger qualtook-bark tiles and scampered his way up to the apex.

His master used his eyes to peer out across the savannah. The line of men carrying pikes were a kilometre away. And

almost lost in the gloaming ahead of them the band of knights on horseback galloped after their prey.

Ryall felt a curious mix of excitement and sorrow. But the masterlove thoughts were full of gentle praise. He thumped his tail on the qualtook tiles in response.

Then the masterlove thoughts were guiding his left forepaw to the heavy weight hanging from his neck. He bent his head round and watched attentively as his extended nails caught the edge of a small hinged panel and eased it open. Glowing squares were revealed.

Masterlove adoration flowed through him. Very carefully his nail touched one of the squares. Once. Twice. Thrice—

The spaceplane stopped shaking as it dropped to subsonic velocity. It had been a fast, steep descent, Ashly had made the little craft stand almost on its tail to aerobrake. Now he levelled out and datavised the wings into their forward-sweep position. Nose-mounted sensors showed him the mountains rolling past below; the fringe of the cloud was fifty kilometres to the north. Short puffy fronds extended out from the main bulk, snaking through the air like blind searching insect antennae towards the foothills.

He datavised the flight computer for a channel up to *Lady Macbeth*. “Any word yet?”

“Nothing,” Joshua replied. “Sarha says the observation satellites recorded that patch of cloud turning grey immediately after the Durringham nuke. We’re not too sure what that means, but then I don’t think normal logic applies here.”

“Too right. I’ve got enough power in the electron matrices for a five-hour flight before I have to come back up and recharge. If you want that extending I could land on one of these peaks, they’re fairly isolated.”

“No. You keep airborne, Ashly. Frankly, if they’re not out of there in five hours I don’t think we’ll see them again. And I’ve already lost one crewman today.”

“You didn’t lose him, Joshua. Silly old fart. Now I’ve

got to come back and wander through Aethra's parkland talking to the trees. Hell, he'll love that. Kill himself laughing I expect."

"Thanks, Ashly."

The pilot loaded a course into the computer, a patrol circuit along the length of the grey cloud section, staying at eight thousand metres. Thermals shooting up off the rocky slopes rocked the wings in agitated rhythms as the spaceplane flew overhead.

Jay thought it was a lightning bolt. Blackness suddenly and silently turned to bright scarlet. She sucked in a breath—it must have been frightfully close. But there was no thunderclap. Not at first.

The redness faded away. She risked opening her eyes. Everything seemed normal, except it was a lot lighter than it had been before. As if the sun was finally rising behind her back. Then the noise started, a dry roar which built and built. She heard some of the children start to whimper. The ground began to tremble, the gully wall vibrating her back. And the brightness behind her kept growing. A sheet of white light sprang across the top of the gully, throwing the floor into deep shadow. It began to tilt downwards, turning the opposite bank unbearably bright. Jay could just hear the lady beside her shouting what sounded like a prayer at the top of her voice. She closed her eyes again, little squeaks of fear escaping from her throat.

Lady Macbeth was passing over Amarisk's western coast, a hundred kilometres north of Durringham, when Reza detonated the nuke. The sensors caught its initial flash, a concussion of photons turning the grey clouds momentarily translucent.

"Jesus Christ," Joshua gasped. He datavised the flight computer for a secure communication channel to the spaceplane. "Ashly, did you see that?"

"I saw it, Joshua. The spaceplane sensors registered an emp pulse equivalent to about a kiloton blast."

“Are your electronics OK?”

“Yes. Couple of processor drop-outs, but the back-ups are on line.”

“It’s them. It has to be.”

“Joshua!” Sarha called. “Look at the cloud.”

He accessed the sensor image again. A four hundred metre circle of the cloud looked as if it was on fire below the surface. As he watched it rose up into a lofty incandescent fleuron. The tip burst open. A ragged beam of rose-gold light shone through.

Lady Mac’s flight computer datavised a priority signal from one of the communication satellites direct into Joshua’s neural nanonics.

“Joshua?” Kelly called. “This is Reza’s team calling *Lady Mac*. Joshua, are you up there?”

Tactical graphics immediately overlaid the optical sensor image, pinpointing her communications block to within fifteen centimetres. Close to the blast point, very close. “I’m here, Kelly.”

“Oh, Christ, Joshua! Help us. Now!”

“Spaceplane’s on its way. What’s your situation, have you got the children?”

“Yes, damn it. They’re with us, all of them. But we’re being chased to hell and back by the fucking Knights of the Round Table. You’ve got to get us out of here.”

Vast strips of rank grey cloud were peeling back from the centre of the blast. Joshua could see down onto the savannah. It was a poor angle, but a vivid amber fireball was ascending from the centre of a calcinated wasteland.

“Go,” Joshua datavised to Ashly. “Go go go.”

Reza stood on top of the gully, bracing himself against the baked wind driving out from the blast. A mushroom cloud was roiling upwards from the cemetery of the homestead, alive with gruesome internal energy surges. It had gouged a wide crater, uneven curving sides spouting runnels of capricious magma.

He brought a series of filter programs on-line, and

scanned the savannah. A firestorm was raging for two kilometres around the crater. Pixels from the section of ground where the marching pikemen had been were amplified. He studied the resulting matrix of square lenses. There were no remnants, not even pyres; none of them had survived. He tracked back. Knights and horses had been hurled indiscriminately across the smouldering grass two and a half kilometres away. Encased in that metal armour human bodies should have first been triturated by the blast wave then fried by the infrared radiation.

He watched one silver figure struggle to its knees, then use a broadsword shoved into the ground to clamber to its feet.

Ye Gods, what will kill them?

A horse kicked its legs and rolled over, surging upwards. It trotted obediently over to its fallen rider. Slowly but surely the entire band was remounting.

Reza jumped back into the gully. Children were being packed back into the hovercraft.

“Joshua’s here,” Kelly yelled over the trumpeting wind. Her tear-stained face framed a radiant smile. “*Lady Mac*’s in orbit. The spaceplane’s on its way. We’re safe, we’re out of here!”

“How long?”

“Ashly says about ten minutes.”

Not enough, Reza thought. The knights will be here by then, they’ll hit the spaceplane with their white fire, if they don’t just switch off its circuitry with that black magic. “Kelly, you and Theo take off south. The rest of you, with me. We’re going to arrange a small delay.”

“No, Reza!” Kelly implored. “You can’t, not now. It’s over. Ashly will get here.”

“That was an order, Kelly. We’ll catch up with you when we’ve finished off these mounted pricks.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Hey, Kell, stop fretting,” Sewell said. “You’ve got the wrong attitude for this game. Win some or lose some, who

cares, you've just gotta have fun playing." He laughed and vaulted up to the top of the gully.

Horst made the sign of the cross to Reza. "Bless you, my son. May the Lord watch over you."

"Get in the bloody hovercraft, Father, take the kids somewhere they can have a life. Theo, blast some grass, get them clear."

"Yes, boss." The jungle-rover mercenary fed power into the impellers even as Horst was scrambling on board. With the skirt bouncing against the gully wall the hovercraft turned in a tight curve and sped back up the scree.

Reza joined his team on the top of the bank. Out on the savannah the knights were mustering into a V-shaped battle phalanx.

"Move out," Reza said. There was a strange kind of glee running loose in his mind. Now we'll show you babykillers what happens when you face a real enemy, one that can fight back. See how you like that.

The six mercenaries started to march over the grass towards the waiting knights.

Sunlight and rain poured down on the hovercraft, surrounding them with a fantastic exhibition of rainbows. The clouds were breaking up, losing their supernatural cohesion. They were just ordinary rain-clouds again.

The rain sprayed against Kelly's face as she battled the hovercraft's inertia against the wind and damp cloying grass. Speed tossed them about like a dinghy on a storm-swollen sea.

"How big are the children?" Joshua asked.

"Small, they're mostly under ten."

"Ashly will probably have to make two trips. He can bring the children up first then come back for you and the mercenaries."

She tried to laugh, but all that emerged was a gullet-rasping cough. "No, Joshua, there's only going to be one flight. Reza's team won't be coming. Just the children, and me and the priest if the spaceplane can handle our mass."

“The way you diet to keep your image, you’re into negative mass, Kelly. I’ll tell Ashly.”

She heard the first fusillade of EE projectiles exploding behind her.

Sewell and Jalal stood four metres apart, facing the apex of the charging knights. The reverberant thud of the horses galloping over the savannah rose above the hot squalls spinning off from the chthonic maelstrom of the blast’s epicentre.

“I make that forty-nine,” Jalal said.

“The lead is mine, you take the right flank.”

“Sure thing.”

The knights lowered their lances, spurring on their horses. Sewell waited until his rangefinder put the lead knight a hundred and twenty metres away, and fired both heavy-calibre gaussrifles plugged into his elbow sockets. Feed tubes from his backpack hummed efficiently. He laid down three fragmentation rounds over the knight’s plumed helmet, and followed it up with twenty-five EE shells into the ground ahead of the left flank.

Jalal was laying down a similar fire pattern across the right flank, his two gaussrifles traversing the line, guided by a targeting program. Pamiers had shown that the possessed were capable of defending themselves against almost anything short of a direct hit by an EE round; he was going for the horses. Kill the mounts, chop the legs out from under them, slow them down. More fragmentation bursts saturated the air. The knights were veiled by smoke, fountains of soil, and riotous static webs.

Streaks of white fire ripped out of the carnage. Sewell and Jalal leaped aside. Four knights sped towards them out of the furore. Sewell spun round as he hit the ground, white fire was gnawing into his left leg. His targeting program locked on to the first knight; one of his gaussrifles was responding sluggishly, the other fired ten EE rounds. The knight and his horse vanished inside a tangled screen of rampaging electrons. Gore spat outwards.

Sewell’s optical sensors were tracking more knights rid-

ing out from the first assault point. Several bodies were scattered on the crushed grass behind them. His neural nanonics automatically fired a salvo of fragmentation rounds at the renewed charge.

He tried to get up, but there was no response from his leg. One of the gaussrifles had packed up completely. Some of his sensor inputs were wavering. Horses were charging at him from three directions. His functional gaussrifle blasted at one. Another knight aimed a lance at his head, and fire squirted out of its tip.

Sewell rolled desperately. He flung a grenade as the fire caught him on the shoulder, punching him round. The grenade went off beneath the horse, lifting it clear of the ground. It crashed down, the knight tumbling through the air before landing with a bonebreaker smash.

The horse's outline imploded into an amalgam of purple flesh and pumping organs. Eight or nine sayce had been moulded together, like living dough, into a rough sculpture of the terrestrial animal. Heads stuck out of its sides and haunches, encased in thick vein-laced membranes, jaws working silently beneath the naked protoplasm.

Neither of Sewell's gaussrifles were working. He swivelled them down, and used them as crutches to lever himself upright. His medical program was flashing red caution warnings into his mind. He cancelled it completely, and drew a TIP carbine from its holster. The fallen knight was rising to his feet, crumpled armour straightening out. Sewell flicked the TIP carbine to continuous fire with his thumb, and pulled the trigger. It was like using a battering ram. The energy pulses kept smacking into the armour with jackhammer blows, knocking him down and kicking him across the ground. A violet corona seethed around the silver metal. Sewell pulled a grenade from his belt and lobbed it at the limp figure.

A lance caught him in the middle of his back, splitting his ribs apart then puncturing his lungs and an oxygenated-blood-reserve bladder before sliding out of his chest. The blow flung him three metres across the grass. He landed

awkwardly, the lance jarring round violently and causing more internal damage.

The knight who had speared him reigned his horse round and dismounted. He drew his broadsword and walked towards the crippled mercenary.

Sewell managed to achieve a precarious balance on his knees. His right hand closed on the lance, boosted fingers exerting their full power, crushing the wood. It snapped off, leaving a splintered twenty-centimetre stump sticking out of his chest. A huge quantity of blood coursed down into the grass.

“Not good enough, my friend,” the knight said. He ran his broadsword through Sewell’s short neck.

Sewell reached out with his left arm and grabbed the knight’s shoulder, pulling him even closer. There was a sharp grunt of surprise from the knight. Little crackles of energy skated over the surface of his armour. The broadsword penetrated up to the hilt, but Sewell opened his mouth slit wide.

The knight got out one frantic “No!” before Sewell’s silicon carbide teeth clamped round his neck, slicing cleanly through the chain-mail.

The northern horizon was an uncompromising clash of turquoise and red, both colours textured as fine as silk, pressing smoothly against each other. Both unyielding. Beautiful, from a distance. Directly in front of the spaceplane, filth and fire was belching from a widening fissure in the rain-clouds.

Ashly altered the camber of the wings, and sent the spaceplane on a steep dive through the dank clouds. Water slicked the pearl-white fuselage, misting the optical sensor images. Then he was through, levelling out.

It was a small confined world of darkness and squalor into which he had come. At the centre, clouds reflected the diseased irradiation of the crater, tarnishing the land with the flickers of dying atoms. Wildfire scoured the malaised savannah around its base, eating its way outwards.

Twisters roamed the scorched earth, scattering soot and ash all around to form a greasy crust of embers over the flattened grass.

But further out the rain was falling, cleansing the land. Spears of sunlight wrested their way past the shredding clouds, returning cool natural colours to the fractal wilderness of greys.

Sensors locked on to Kelly's communication block. Ashly banked the spaceplane in a swift high-gee turn, riding the signal to its source. Ahead and below, two tiny hovercraft bounced and jerked their way across the uneven countryside.

Reza counted twenty-one knights escaping from the small holocaust Sewell and Jalal unleashed. That was good, he had expected it to be more. He and Pat Halahan were next. His sensors showed him the spaceplane sinking fast out of the sky a couple of kilometres behind him.

"Five minutes, that's all they need."

"They've got it," Pat said urbanely.

Reza fired his forearm gaussrifle. Targeting-program-controlled muscles shifted the barrel round as his sensors went into a track-while-scan mode. All his conscious thoughts had to do was designate.

He picked off three knights with EE rounds, and brought a further two horses down before the gaussrifle malfunctioned. Some of his processor blocks were glitched as well. Sensor resolution was falling off. He dumped the gaussrifle and switched to a ten-millimetre automatic pistol. Chemical bullets which produced a scythe of kinetic death, and nothing the possessed could do to stop it. Two more knights were down when he ran out of spare magazines. White fire hit his shoulder, blowing his left arm off. A two-metre jet of blood squirted out until his neural nanonics closed artery valves.

Pat was still sluicing bullets at a pair of knights off to Reza's left. Stimulant and suppressor programs were working hard to eliminate shock. Reza saw a mounted

knight thundering towards him, whirling a mace around. A momentum prediction program went into primary mode. The horse was three metres away when Reza took one step back. His remaining hand came up inside the slashing arc of the mace. He grabbed, pulled, twisted. His carbon-fibre skeleton twanged at the severe loading as the inertia of the spiked iron club yanked him off his feet. Glossy armour shrieked a metallic protest as the knight was catapulted backwards out of the saddle, then clanged like a bell as he landed.

They climbed to their feet together. Reza raised the mace and started to walk forwards, a locomotion auto-balance program compensating for his lost arm.

The knight saw him coming and pointed his broadsword like a rifle. White flame raced down the blade.

“Cheat,” Reza said. He detonated the fragmentation grenades clipped to his belt. Both of them vanished inside a dense swarm of furious black silicon micro-blades.

A hurricane squall of rain stung Kelly’s face as the spaceplane swooped fifteen metres overhead. Its compressor nozzle efflux nearly overturned the hovercraft. She engaged the fan deflector and killed the impellers. They skidded to a rumbustious halt.

The spaceplane slipped round sideways in the air then landed hard, undercarriage struts pistoning upwards. Rain pattered loosely on its extended wings, dribbling off the flaps.

Kelly turned around in her seat. The children were huddled together on the hard silicon deck, clothes soaked, hair straggly. Terrified, crying, peeing in their shorts and pants. Wide eyes stared at her, brimming with incomprehension. There were no clever words left to accompany the scene for the recording. She simply wanted to put her arms round every one of them, pour out every scrap of comfort she owned. And that was far less than they deserved.

Three kilometres behind the hovercraft, EE explosions strobed chaotically, while antagonistic streamers of white fire curled and thrashed above the blood-soaked grass.

We did it, she thought, the knights can't reach us now. The children are going to live. Nothing else mattered, not the hardships, not the pain, not the sickening fear.

"Come on," she said to them, and the smile came so easily. "We're leaving now."

"Thank you, lady," Jay said.

Kelly glanced up as a figure hiked out of the rain. "I thought you'd left," she said.

Shaun Wallace grinned. His sodden LDC one-piece was shrunk round his body, mud and grass clung to his boots, but the humour in his eyes couldn't be vanquished. "Without saying goodbye? Ah now, Miss Kelly, I wouldn't be wanting you to think the worst of me. Not you." He lifted the first child, a seven-year-old girl, over the gunwale. "Come along then, you rabble. You're all going on a long, beautiful trip to a place far away."

The spaceplane's outer airlock hatch slid open, and the aluminium stairs telescoped out.

"Get a move on, Kelly, please," Ashly datavised.

She joined Shaun at the side of the hovercraft and began lifting the exhausted, bedraggled children out.

Horst stood at the bottom of the stairs, harrying his small charges along. A word here, a smile, pat on the head. They scooted up into the cabin where Ashly cursed under his breath as he tried to work out how on earth to fit them all in.

Kelly had the last boy in her arms, a four-year-old who was virtually asleep, when Theo started up his hovercraft. "Oh no, Theo," she datavised. "Not you as well."

"They need me," he replied. "I can't leave them. I'm a part of them."

Great bands of sunlight were raking the savannah. The fighting was over. Kelly could see three or four knights on horseback milling about. None of them showed any interest in the spaceplane now. "But they're dead, Theo."

"You don't know that, not for sure. In any case, haven't you heard, there's no such thing, not any more." He stuck his arm up and waved.

“Hell.” She tipped her head back, letting the sweet rain wash her face.

“Come along now, Miss Kelly.” Shaun leant over and gave her cheek a platonic kiss. “Time you was leaving.”

“I don’t suppose it would do any good asking you to come?”

“Would I ask you to stay?”

She put a foot on the bottom rung, the drowsy child heavy in her arms. “Goodbye, Shaun. I wish it could have been different.”

“Aye, Miss Kelly. Me too.”

Kelly sat in the cabin with one eight-year-old boy on her lap and her arms round a pair of girls. The children squirmed round, fidgeting, excited and nervous, asking her about the waiting starship. Lalonde was already half-forgotten, yesterday’s nightmare.

If only, she wished.

The compressor whine permeated the overcrowded cabin as Ashly fed power into the fans. Then they were airborne, the deck tilting up, a press of acceleration. Kelly closed her eyes and accessed the spaceplane’s sensor suite. A lone figure was trudging over the savannah, a well-built man with tousled ginger hair, wearing a thick red and blue check cotton shirt, collar up against the rain as he headed for home.

A minute later a stentorian sonic boom broke across the vast grass plain. Fenton raised his great head at the sound, but there was nothing in the sky apart from rain and clouds. He lowered his gaze again, and resumed his earth-bound search for his lost masterlove.

PETER F. HAMILTON

**THE
NEUTRONIUM
ALCHEMIST**

ASPECT®



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For information address Warner Books, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

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ISBN 0-7595-6034-X

A mass market edition of this book was published in two parts in 1998 by Warner Books.

First eBook edition: November 2000

Visit our Web site at www.iPublish.com

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

SHIPS

LADY MACBETH

Joshua Calvert	Captain
Melvyn Ducharme	Fusion specialist
Ashly Hanson	Pilot
Sarha Mitcham	Systems specialist
Dahybi Yadev	Node specialist
Beaulieu	Cosmonik

OENONE

Syrinx	Captain
Ruben	Fusion systems
Oxley	Pilot
Cacus	Life support
Edwin	Toroid systems
Serina	Toroid systems
Tyla	Cargo officer

VILLENEUVE'S REVENGE

André Duchamp	Captain
Desmond Lafoe	Fusion specialist
Madeleine Collum	Node specialist
Erick Thakrar	Systems specialist/CNIS undercover agent

UDAT

Meyer	Captain
Cherri Barnes	Cargo officer

FAR REALM

Layia	Captain
Furay	Pilot
Endron	Systems specialist
Tilia	Node specialist

ARIKARA

Meredith Saldana	Rear-Admiral, squadron commander
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Grese	Lieutenant, squadron intelligence officer
Rhoecus	Lieutenant, voidhawk liaison
Kroeber	Commander

BEEZLING

Kyle Prager	Captain
Peter Adul	Alchemist team physicist

HABITATS

TRANQUILLITY

Ione Saldana	Lord of Ruin
Dr Alkad Mzu	Inventor of the Alchemist
Parker Higgins	Director Laymil project
Oski Katsura	Laymil project electronics division chief
Kempster Getchell	Laymil project astronomer
Monica Foulkes	ESA agent
Lady Tessa	ESA head of station
Samuel	Edenist intelligence agent
Pauline Webb	CNIS agent
Father Horst Elwes	Priest, refugee
Jay Hilton	Refugee
Kelly Tirrel	Rover reporter
Lieria	Kiint
Haile	Juvenile Kiint

VALISK

Rubra	Habitat personality
Dariat	Horgan's possessor
Kiera Salter	Marie Skibbow's possessor
Stanyon	Council member
Rocio Condra	Possessor blackhawk Mindor
Bonney Lewin	Hunter
Tolton	Fugitive
Tatiana	Fugitive

ASTEROIDS

TRAFALGAR

Samual Aleksandrovich Lalwani	First Admiral Confederation Navy
Maynard Khanna	Admiral, CNIS chief
Motela Kolhammer	Captain, First Admiral staff officer
Dr Gilmore	Admiral, 1st Fleet commander
Jacqueline Couteur	CNIS research division director
Murphy Hewlett	Possessor Confederation Marine lieutenant

KOBLAT

Jed Hinton	Deadnight
Beth	Deadnight
Gari Hinton	Jed's sister
Navar	Jed's half sister

AYACUCHO

Ikela	Owner of T'Opingtu company, partizan leader
Liol	Owner of Quantum Serendipity
Voi	Ikela's daughter
Prince Lambert	Captain starship <i>Tekas</i>
Dan Malindi	Partizan leader
Kaliua Lamu	Partizan leader
Feira Ile	Ayacucho SD commander, partizan leader
Cabral	Media magnate, partizan leader
Mrs Nateghi	Lawyer
Lodi Shalasha	Garissan radical
Eriba	Garissan radical
Kole	Socialite
Shea	Prince Lambert's girlfriend

JESUP

Quinn Dexter	Messiah of the Light Bringer sect
Lawrence Dillon	Disciple
Twelve-T	Gang lord
Bonham	Disciple
Shemilt	Disciple, SD commander
Dwyer	Disciple, systems specialist

PLANETS

NORFOLK

Louise Kavanagh	Refugee
Genevieve Kavanagh	Refugee
Luca Comar	Grant Kavanagh's possessor
Marjorie Kavanagh	Louise's mother
Mrs Charlsworth	Kavanagh sisters' nanny
Carmitha	Romany
Titreano	Possessor
Celina Hewson	Louise's aunt
Roberto Hewson	Louise's cousin

OMBEY

Ralph Hiltch	ESA head of station, Lalonde
Cathal Fitzgerald	Ralph's deputy
Dean Folan	ESA G66 division
Will Danza	ESA G66 division
Kirsten Saldana	Princess of Ombey
Roche Skark	ESA director
Jannike Dermot	ISA director
Landon McCulloch	Police commissioner
Diana Tiernan	Police technology division chief
Admiral Farquar	Royal Navy, Ombey commander
Nelson Akroid	Armed Tactical Squad captain
Finnuala O'Meara	Rover reporter
Hugh Rosler	DataAxis technician
Neville Latham	Exnall's chief inspector
Janne Palmer	Royal Marine colonel
Annette Ekelund	Possessor
Gerald Skibbow	Refugee
Dr Riley Dobbs	Royal Navy personality debrief psychology expert
Jansen Kovak	Royal Navy medical institute nurse
Moyo	Possessor
Stephanie Ash	Possessor
Cochrane	Possessor
Rana	Possessor
Tina Sudol	Possessor

NEW CALIFORNIA

Jezzibella

Leroy Octavius

Libby

Al

Avram Harwood III

Emmet Mordden

Silvano Richmann

Mickey Pileggi

Patricia Mangano

Gus Remar

Kingsley Pryor

Luigi Balsmao

Cameron Leung

Oscar Kern

Mood Fantasy artist

Jezzibella's manager

Jezzibella's dermal technology expert

Brad Lovegrove's possessor

Mayor of San Angeles

Organization lieutenant

Organization lieutenant

Organization lieutenant

Organization lieutenant

Rover reporter

Lieutenant commander,
Confederation Navy

Commander Organization fleet

Possessor blackhawk *Zahan*

Captain Organization frigate
Urschel

KULU

Alastair II

Simon, Duke of Salion

Lord Kelman Mountjoy

Lady Phillipa Oshin

Admiral Lavaquar

Prince Howard

Prince Noton

The King

Chairman security commission

Foreign Office minister

Prime minister

Defence chief

Kulu Corporation president

Ex-president Kulu Corporation

NYVAN

Gelai

Ngong

Omain

Richard Keaton

Baranovich

Adrian Redway

Possessor, Garissa genocide victim

Possessor, Garissa genocide victim

Possessor, Garissa genocide victim

Data security expert

Organization lieutenant

ESA head of station

OTHERS

CONFEDERATION

Olton Haaker

Jeeta Anwar

Mae Ortlieb

Cayeaux

Sir Maurice Hall

Assembly President

Chief presidential aide

Presidential science aide

Edenist ambassador

Kulu Kingdom ambassador

EDENISTS

Wing-Tsit Chong

Athene

Astor

Sinon

Edenism's founder

Syrinx's mother

Ambassador to the Kulu Kingdom

Syrinx's father

1

It seemed to Louise Kavanagh as though the fearsome mid-summer heat had persisted for endless, dreary weeks rather than just the four Duke-days since the last meagre shower of rain. "Air from the devil's cookhouse," the old women of the county called this awful unbreathable stillness which blanketed the wolds. It complemented Louise's mood perfectly. She didn't feel much of anything these days. Destiny had apparently chosen her to spend her waking hours doing nothing but wait.

Officially, she was waiting for her father, who was away leading the Stoke County militia to help quell the insurrection which the Democratic Land Union had mounted in Boston. The last time he'd phoned was three days ago, a quick, grim call saying the situation was worse than the Lord Lieutenant had led them to believe. That had made Louise's mother worry frantically. Which meant Louise and Genevieve had to creep around Cricklade manor like mice so as not to worsen her temper.

And there had been no word since, not of Father or any of the militia troops. The whole county was crackling with rumours, of course. Of terrible battles and beastly acts of savagery by the Union irregulars. Louise tried hard to close her ears to them, convinced it was just wicked propaganda put about by Union sympathisers. Nobody really knew anything. Boston could have been on another planet as far as Stoke County was concerned. Even bland accounts of "disturbances," reported on the nightly news programs, had ceased after the county militias encircled the city—censored by the government.

All they could do was wait helplessly for the militias to triumph as they surely would.

Louise and Genevieve had spent yet another morning milling aimlessly around the manor. It was a tricky task; sitting about doing nothing was so incredibly boring, yet if they drew attention to themselves they would be given some menial domestic job to do. With the young men away, the maids and older menservants were struggling with the normal day-to-day running of the rambling building. And the estate farms outside, with their skeleton workforce, were falling dismayingly far behind in their preparations for the summer's second cereal crop.

By lunchtime, the ennui had started to get to Louise, so she had suggested that she and her sister go riding. They had to saddle the horses themselves, but it was worth it just to be away from the manor for a few hours.

Louise's horse picked its way gingerly over the ground. Duke's hot rays had flayed open the soil, producing a wrinkled network of cracks. The aboriginal plants which had all flowered in unison at midsummer were long dead now. Where ten days ago the grassland had been dusted with graceful white and pink stars, small shrivelled petals now skipped about like minute autumn leaves. In some hollows they had drifted in loose dunes up to a foot deep.

"Why do you suppose the Union hates us so?" Genevieve asked querulously. "Just because Daddy's got a temper doesn't mean he's a bad man."

Louise produced a sympathetic smile for her younger sister. Everyone said how alike they were, twins born four years apart. And indeed it was a bit like looking into a mirror at times; the same features, rich dark hair, delicate nose, and almost Oriental eyes. But Genevieve was smaller, and slightly chubbier. And right now, brokenly glum.

Genevieve had been sensitive to her moodiness for the last week, not wanting to say anything significant in case it made big sister even more unaccountably irritable.

She does idolize me so, Louise thought. Pity she couldn't have chosen a better role model.

"It's not just Daddy, nor even the Kavanaghs," Louise said. "They simply don't like the way Norfolk works."

"But why? Everybody in Stoke County is happy."

"Everybody in the county is provided for. There's a differ-

ence. How would you feel if you had to work in the fields all day long for every day of your life, and saw the two of us riding by without a care in the world?"

Genevieve looked puzzled. "Not sure."

"You'd resent it, and you'd want to change places."

"I suppose so." She gave a sly grin. "Then I'd be the one who resented them."

"Exactly. That's the problem."

"But the things people are saying the Union is doing . . ."

Genevieve said uncertainly. "I heard two of the maids talking about it this morning. They were saying horrible things. I ran away after a minute."

"They're lying. If anybody in Stoke County knew what was going on in Boston, it would be us, the Kavanaghs. The maids are going to be the last to find out."

Genevieve shone a reverent smile at her sister. "You're so clever, Louise."

"You're clever too, Gen. Same genes, remember."

Genevieve smiled again, then spurred her horse on ahead, laughing gladly. Merlin, their sheepdog, chased off after her, kicking up whirling flurries of brown petals.

Louise instinctively urged her own horse into a canter, heading towards Wardley Wood, a mile ahead. In summers past the sisters had claimed it as their own adventure playground. This summer, though, it held an added poignancy. This summer it contained the memory of Joshua Calvert. Joshua and the things they'd done as they lazed by the side of the rock pools. Every outrageous sexual act, acts which no true well-born Norfolk lady would ever commit. Acts which she couldn't wait for them to do again.

Also the acts which had made her throw up for the last three mornings in a row. Nanny had been her usual fuss the first two times. Thankfully, Louise had managed to conceal this morning's bout of nausea, otherwise her mother would have been told. And Mother was pretty shrewd.

Louise grimaced forlornly. *Everything will be fine once Joshua comes back.* It had become almost a mantra recently.

Dear Jesus, but I hate this waiting.

Genevieve was a quarter of a mile from the woods, with Louise a hundred yards behind her, when they heard the train.

The insistent tooting sound carried a long way in the calm air. Three short blasts, followed by a long one. The warning signal that it was approaching the open road crossing at Collyweston.

Genevieve reined her horse in, waiting for Louise to catch up with her. "It's coming into town!" the younger girl exclaimed.

Both of them knew the local train times by heart. Colsterworth had twelve passenger services a day. This one wasn't one of them.

"They're coming back!" Genevieve squealed. "Daddy's back!"

Merlin picked up on her excitement, running around the horse, barking enthusiastically.

Louise bit her lip. She couldn't think what else it could be. "I suppose so."

"It is. It is!"

"All right, come on then."

• • •

Cricklade manor lurked inside its picket of huge geneered cedars, an imposing stone mansion built in homage to the stately homes of an England as distant in time as in space. The glass walls of the ornate orangery abutting the east wing reflected Duke's brilliant yellow sunlight in geometric ripples as the sisters rode along the greensward below the building.

When she was inside the ring of cedars, Louise noticed the chunky blue-green farm ranger racing up the long gravel drive. She whooped loudly, goading her horse to an even faster gallop. Few people were allowed to drive the estate's powered vehicles. And nobody else drove them as fast as Daddy.

Louise soon left Genevieve well behind, with an exhausted Merlin trailing by almost a quarter of a mile. She could see six figures crammed into the vehicle's seats. And that was definitely Daddy driving. She didn't recognise any of the others.

Another two farm rangers turned into the drive just as the first pulled up in front of the manor. Various household staff and Marjorie Kavanagh hurried down the broad steps to greet it.

Louise tumbled down off her horse, and rushed up to her father. She flung her arms around him before he knew what was happening. He was dressed in the same military uniform as the day he left.

“Daddy! You’re all right.” She rubbed her cheek against the coarse khaki-green fabric of his jacket, feeling five years old again. Tears were threatening to brim up.

He stiffened inside her manic embrace, head slowly tipping down to look at her. When she glanced up adoringly she saw a look of mild incomprehension on his strong ruddy face.

For a horrible moment she thought he must have found out about the baby. Then a vile mockery of a smile came to his lips.

“Hello, Louise. Nice to see you again.”

“Daddy?” She took a step backwards. What was wrong with him? She glanced uncertainly at her mother who had just reached them.

Marjorie Kavanagh took in the scene with a fast glance. Grant looked just awful; tired, pale, and strangely nervous. Gods, what had happened in Boston?

She ignored Louise’s obvious hurt and stepped up to him. “Welcome home,” she murmured demurely. Her lips brushed his cheek.

“Hello dear,” Grant Kavanagh said. She could have been a complete stranger for all the emotion in his voice.

He turned, almost in deference, Marjorie thought with growing bewilderment, and half bowed to one of the men accompanying him. They were all strangers, none of them even wore Stoke County militia uniforms. The other two farm rangers were braking behind the first, also full of strangers.

“Marjorie, I’d like you to meet Quinn Dexter. Quinn is a . . . priest. He’s going to be staying here with some of his followers.”

The young man who walked forwards had the kind of gait Marjorie associated with the teenage louts she glimpsed occasionally in Colsterworth. Priest, my arse, she thought.

Quinn was dressed in a flowing robe of some incredibly black material; it looked like the kind of habit a millionaire monk would wear. There was no crucifix in sight. The face which smiled out at her from the voluminous hood was coldly

vulpine. She noticed how everyone in his entourage was very careful not to get too close to him.

“Intrigued, Father Dexter,” she said, letting her irony show.

He blinked, and nodded thoughtfully, as if in recognition that they weren’t fooling each other.

“Why are you here?” Louise asked breathlessly.

“Cricklade is going to be a refuge for Quinn’s sect,” Grant Kavanagh said. “There was a lot of damage in Boston. So I offered him full use of the estate.”

“What happened?” Marjorie asked. Years of discipline necessary to enforce her position allowed her to keep her voice level, but what she really wanted to do was grab hold of Grant’s jacket collar and scream in his face. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Genevieve scramble down off her horse and run over to greet her father, her delicate face suffused with simple happiness. Before Marjorie could say anything, Louise thrust out an arm and stopped her dead in her tracks. Thank God for that, Marjorie thought; there was no telling how these aloof strangers would react to excitable little girls.

Genevieve’s face instantly turned woeful, staring up at her untouchable father with widened, mutinous eyes. But Louise kept a firmly protective arm around her shoulder.

“The rebellion is over,” Grant said. He hadn’t even noticed Genevieve’s approach.

“You mean you rounded up the Union people?”

“The rebellion is over,” Grant repeated flatly.

Marjorie was at a loss what to do next. Away in the distance she could hear Merlin barking with unusual aggression. The fat old sheepdog was lumbering along the greensward towards the group outside the manor.

“We shall begin straightaway,” Quinn announced abruptly. He started up the steps towards the wide double doors, long pleats of his robe swaying leadenly around his ankles.

The manor staff clustering with considerable curiosity on top of the steps parted nervously. Quinn’s companions surged after him.

Grant’s face twitched in what was nearly an apology to Marjorie as the new arrivals clambered out of the farm rangers to hurry up the steps after their singular priest. Most

of them were men, all with exactly the same kind of agitated expression.

They look as if they're going to their own execution, Marjorie thought. And the clothes a couple of them wore were bizarre. Like historical military costumes: grey greatcoats with broad scarlet lapels and yards of looping gold braid. She strove to remember history lessons from too many years ago, images of Teutonic officers hazy in her mind.

"We'd better go in," Grant said encouragingly. Which was absurd. Grant Kavanagh neither asked nor suggested anything on his own doorstep, he gave orders.

Marjorie gave a reluctant nod and joined him. "You two stay out here," she told her daughters. "I want you to see to Merlin, then stable your horses." While I find out just what the hell is going on around here, she completed silently.

The two sisters were virtually clinging together at the bottom of the steps, faces heavy with doubt and dismay. "Yes, Mother," Louise said meekly. She started to tug on Genevieve's black riding jacket.

Quinn paused on the threshold of the manor, giving the grounds a final survey. Misgivings were beginning to stir his mind. When he was back in Boston it seemed only right that he should be part of the vanguard bringing the gospel of God's Brother to the whole island of Kesteven. None could stand before him when his serpent beast was unleashed. But there were so many lost souls returning from the beyond; inevitably some dared to disobey, while others wavered after he had passed among them to issue the word. In truth he could only depend upon the closest disciples he had gathered.

The sect acolytes he had left in Boston to tame the returned souls, to teach them the real reason why they had been brought back, agreed to do his bidding simply from fear. That was why he had come to the countryside, to levy the creed upon all the souls, both the living and the dead, of this wretched planet. With a bigger number of followers inducted, genuinely *believing* the task God's Brother had given them, then ultimately their doctrine would triumph.

But this land which Luca Comar had described in glowing terms was so empty, kilometre after kilometre of grassland

and fields, populated by dozing hamlets of cowed peasants; a temperate-climate version of Lalonde.

There had to be more to his purpose than this. God's Brother would never have chosen him for such a simple labour. There were hundreds of planets in the Confederation crying out to hear His word, to follow Him into the final battle against the false gods of Earth's religions, where Night would dawn forevermore.

After this evening I shall have to search myself to see where He guides me; I must find my proper role in His plan.

His gaze finished up on the Kavanagh sisters who were staring up at him, both trying to be courageous in the face of the strangeness falling on their home as softly and inexorably as midwinter snow. The elder one would make a good reward for disciples who demonstrated loyalty, and the child might be of some use to a returned soul. God's Brother found a use for everything.

Content, for the moment, Quinn swept into the hall, relishing the opulence which greeted him. Tonight at least he could indulge himself in decadent splendour, quickening his serpent beast. For who did not appreciate absolute luxury?

The disciples knew their duties well enough, needing no supervision. They would flush out the manor's staff and open their bodies for possession: a chore repeated endlessly over the last week. His work would come later, selecting those who were worthy of a second chance at life, who would embrace the Night.

• • •

"What—!" Genevieve began hotly as the last of the odd adults disappeared inside the manor's entrance.

Louise's hand clamped over her mouth. "Come on!" She pulled hard on Genevieve's arm, nearly unbalancing the younger girl. Genevieve reluctantly allowed herself to be steered away.

"You heard Mother," Louise said. "We're to look after the horses."

"Yes, but . . ."

"I don't know! All right? Mother will sort everything out." The words brought scant reassurance. What *had* happened to Daddy?

Boston must have been truly terrible to have affected him so.

Louise undid the strap on her riding hat, and tucked it under an arm. The manor and its grounds had become very quiet all of a sudden. The big entrance-hall doors swinging shut had acted like a signal for the birds to fall still. Even the horses were docile.

The funereal sensation was broken by Merlin who had finally reached the gravel driveway. He barked quite piteously as he nosed around Louise's feet, his tongue lolling out as he wheezed heavily.

Louise gathered up the reins of both horses and started to lead them towards the stables. Genevieve grabbed Merlin's collar and hauled him along.

When they reached the stable block at the rear of the manor's west wing there was nobody there, not even the two young stable lads Mr Butterworth had left in charge. The horses' hooves made an almighty clattering on the cobbles of the yard outside, the noise reverberating off the walls.

"Louise," Genevieve said forlornly, "I don't like this. Those people with Daddy were really peculiar."

"I know. But Mother will tell us what to do."

"She went inside with them."

"Yes." Louise realized just how anxious Mother had been for her and Genevieve to get away from Daddy's friends. She looked around the yard, uncertain what to do next. Would Mother send for them, or should they go in? Daddy would expect to talk with them. The old daddy, she reminded herself sadly.

Louise settled for stalling. There was plenty to do in the stables; take the saddles off, brush the horses down, water them. She and Genevieve both took off their riding jackets and set to.

It was twenty minutes later, while they were putting the saddles back in the tack room, when they heard the first scream. The shock was all the more intense because it was male: a raw-throated yell of pain which dwindled away into a sobbing whimper.

Genevieve quietly put her arm around Louise's waist.

Louise could feel her trembling and patted her softly. "It's all right," she whispered.

The two of them edged over to the window and peered out. There was nothing to see in the courtyard. The manor's windows were black and blank, sucking in Duke's light.

"I'll go and find out what's happening," Louise said.

"No!" Genevieve pulled at her urgently. "Don't leave me alone. *Please*, Louise." She was on the verge of tears.

Louise's hold tightened in reflex. "Okay, Gen, I won't leave you."

"Promise? Really truly promise?"

"Promise!" She realized she was just as frightened as Genevieve. "But we must find out what Mother wants us to do."

Genevieve nodded brokenly. "If you say so."

Louise looked at the high stone wall of the west wing, sizing it up. What would Joshua do in a situation like this? She thought about the layout of the wing, the family apartments, the servants' utility passages. Rooms and corridors she knew better than anyone except for the chief housekeeper, and possibly Daddy.

She took Genevieve by the hand. "Come on. We'll try and get up to Mother's boudoir without anyone seeing us. She's bound to go there eventually."

They crept out into the courtyard and scuttled quickly along the foot of the manor's wall to a small green door which led into a storeroom at the back of the kitchens. Louise expected a shouted challenge at any moment. She was panting by the time she heaved on the big iron handle and nipped inside.

The storeroom was filled with sacks of flour and vegetables piled high in various wooden bays. Two narrow window slits, set high in the wall, cast a paltry grey light through their cobweb-caked panes.

Louise flicked the switch as Genevieve closed the door. A couple of naked light spheres on the roof sputtered weakly, then went out.

"Damnation!" Louise took Genevieve's hand and threaded her way carefully around the boxes and sacks.

The utility corridor beyond had plain white plaster walls

and pale yellow flagstones. Light spheres every twenty feet along its ceiling were flickering on and off completely at random. The effect made Louise feel mildly giddy, as if the corridor were swaying about.

“What’s doing that?” Genevieve whispered fiercely.

“I’ve no idea,” she replied carefully. A dreadful ache of loneliness had stolen up on her without any warning. Crick-lade didn’t belong to them anymore, she knew that now.

They made their way along the disconcerting corridor to the antechamber at the end. A cast-iron spiral staircase wound up through the ceiling.

Louise paused to hear if anyone was coming down. Then, satisfied they were still alone, she started up.

The manor’s main corridors were a vast contrast to the plain servant utilities. Wide strips of thick green and gold carpet ran along polished golden wood planks, the walls were hung with huge traditional oil paintings in ostentatious gilt frames. Small antique chests stood at regular intervals, holding either delicate objets d’art or cut crystal vases with fragrant blooms of terrestrial and xenoc flowers grown in the manor’s own conservatory.

The outside of the door at the top of the spiral stairs was disguised as a wall panel. Louise teased it open and peeped out. A grand stained-glass window at the far end of the corridor was sending out broad fans of coloured light to dye the walls and ceiling with tartan splashes. Engraved light spheres on the ceiling were glowing a lame amber. All of them emitted an unhealthy buzzing sound.

“Nobody about,” Louise said.

The two of them darted out and shut the panel behind them. They started edging towards their mother’s boudoir.

A distant cry sounded. Louise couldn’t work out where it came from. It wasn’t close, though; thank sweet Jesus.

“Let’s go back,” Genevieve said. “Please, Louise. Mummy knows we went to the stables. She’ll find us there.”

“We’ll just see if she’s here, first. If she’s not, then we’ll go straight back.”

They heard the anguished cry again, even softer this time.

The boudoir door was twenty feet away. Louise steeled herself and took a step towards it.

“Oh, God, *no!* No, no, no. Stop it. Grant! Dear God, help me!”

Louise’s muscles locked in terror. It was her mother’s voice—Mother’s scream—coming from behind the boudoir door.

“Grant, no! Oh, please. *Please*, no more.” A long, shrill howl of pain followed.

Genevieve was clutching at her in horror, soft whimpers bubbling from her open mouth. The light spheres right outside the boudoir door grew brighter. Within seconds they glared hotter than Duke at noon. Both of them burst apart with a thin *pop*, sending slivers of milky glass tinkling down on the carpet and floorboards.

Marjorie Kavanagh screeched again.

“Mummy!” Genevieve wailed.

Marjorie Kavanagh’s scream broke off. There was a muffled, inexplicable thud from behind the door. Then: “**RUN! RUN, DARLING. JUST RUN, NOW!**”

Louise was already stumbling back towards the concealed stairway door, holding on to a distraught, sobbing Genevieve. The boudoir door flew open, wood splintering from the force of the blow which struck it. A solid shaft of sickly emerald light punched out into the corridor. Spidery shadows moved within it, growing denser.

Two figures emerged.

Louise gagged. It was Rachel Handley, one of the manor’s maids. She looked the same as normal. Except her hair. It had turned brick-red, the strands curling and coiling around each other in slow, oily movements.

Then Daddy was standing beside the chunky girl, still in his militia uniform. His face wore a foreign, sneering smile.

“Come to Papa, baby,” he growled happily, and took a step towards Louise.

All Louise could do was shake her head hopelessly. Genevieve had slumped to her knees, bawling and shaking violently.

“Come on, baby.” His voice had fallen to a silky coo.

Louise couldn’t stop the sob that burped from her lips. Soon it would become a mad scream which would never end.

Her father laughed delightedly. A shape moved through the liquid green light behind him and Rachel.

Louise was so numbed she could no longer even manage a solitary gasp of surprise. It was Mrs Charlsworth, their nanny. Various: tyrant and surrogate mother, confidante and traitor. A rotund, middle-aged woman, with prematurely greying hair and an otherwise sour face softened by hundreds of granny wrinkles.

She stabbed a knitting needle straight at Grant Kavanagh's face, aiming for his left eye. "Leave my girls alone, you bloody fiend," she yelled defiantly.

Louise could never quite remember exactly what happened next. There was blood, and miniature lightning forks. Rachel Handley let out a clarion shriek. Shattered glass erupted from the frames of the oil paintings down half the length of the corridor as the blazing white lightning strobed violently.

Louise crammed her hands over her ears as the shriek threatened to crack open her skull. The lightning died away. When she looked up, instead of her father there was a hulking humanoid shape standing beside Rachel. It wore strange armour, made entirely of little squares of dark metal, embossed with scarlet runes, and tied together with brass wire. "Bitch!" it stormed at a quailing Mrs Charlsworth. Thick streamers of bright orange smoke were belching out of its eye slits.

Rachel Handley's arms turned incandescent. She clamped her splayed fingers over Mrs Charlsworth's cheeks, teeth bared in exertion as she pushed in. Skin sizzled and charred below her fingertips. Mrs Charlsworth mewed in agony. The maid released her. She slumped backwards, her head lolling to one side; and she looked at Louise, smiling as tears seeped down her ruined cheeks. "Go," she mouthed.

The grievous plea seemed to kick directly into Louise's nervous system. She pushed her shoulders into the wall, levering herself upright.

Mrs Charlsworth grinned mirthlessly as the maid and the burly warrior closed on her to consummate their vengeance. She raised the pathetic knitting needle again.

Ribbons of white fire snaked around Rachel's arms as she grinned at her prey. Small balls of it dripped off her fingertips, flying horizontally towards the stricken woman, eating ea-

gerly through the starched grey uniform. A booming laugh emerged from the clinking armour, mingling with Mrs Charlsworth's gurgles of pain.

Louise put her arm under Genevieve's shoulder and lifted her bodily. Flashes of light and the sounds of Mrs Charlsworth's torture flooded the corridor behind her.

I mustn't turn back. I mustn't.

Her fingers found the catch for the concealed door, and it swung open silently. She almost hurled Genevieve through the gap into the gloom beyond, heedless of whether anyone else was on the stairs.

The door slid shut.

"Gen? Gen!" Louise shook the petrified girl. "Gen, we have to get out of here." There was no response. "Oh, dear Jesus." The urge to curl into a ball and weep her troubles away was strengthening.

If I do that, I'll die. And the baby with me.

She tightened her grip on Genevieve's hand and hurried down the spiral stairs. At least Genevieve's limbs were working. Though what would happen if they met another of those . . . people-creatures was another question altogether.

They'd just reached the small anteroom at the bottom of the spiral when a loud hammering began above. Louise started to run down the corridor to the storeroom. Genevieve stumbled along beside her, a low determined humming coming from her lips.

The hammering stopped, and there was the brassy thump of an explosion. Tendrils of bluish static shivered down the spiral stairs, grounding out through the floor. Red stone tiles quaked and cracked. The dimming light spheres along the ceiling sprang back to full intensity again.

"Faster, Gen," she shouted.

They charged into the storeroom and through the green door leading to the courtyard. Merlin was standing in the wide-open gateway of the stable block, barking incessantly. Louise headed straight for him. If they could take a horse they'd be free. She could ride better than anyone else at the manor.

They were still five yards short of the stables when two

people ran out of the storeroom. It was Rachel and her father (except it's not really him, she thought desperately).

"Come back, Louise," the dark knight called. "Come along, sweetie. Daddy wants a cuddle."

Louise and Genevieve dashed around the gates. Merlin stared out at the yard for a second, then turned quickly and followed them inside.

Globules of white fire smashed into the stable doors, breaking apart into complex webs which probed the woodwork with the tenacity of a ghoul's fingers. Glossy black paint blistered and vaporised, the planks began to blaze furiously.

"Undo the stall doors," Louise called above the incendiary roar of the fire and the braying, agitated horses. She had to say it again before Genevieve fumbled with the first bolt. The horse inside the stall shot out into the aisle which ran the length of the stable.

Louise rushed for the far end of the stables. Merlin was yapping hysterically behind her. Fire had spread from the doors to straw bundled loosely in the manger. Orange sparks were flying like rain in a hurricane. Thick arms of black smoke coiled insidiously along the ceiling.

The voices from outside called again, issuing orders and promises in equal amounts. None of them were real.

Screams were adding to the clamour in the courtyard now. Quinn's disciples had inevitably gained the upper hand; Cricklade's few remaining free servants were being hunted and possessed without any attempt at stealth.

Louise reached the stall at the end of the stables, the one with Daddy's magnificent black stallion, a bloodline geneered to a perfection which nineteenth-century sporting kings could only dream of. The bolt slid back easily, and she grabbed the bridle before he had a chance to arrow into the aisle. He snorted furiously at her, but allowed her to steady him. She had to stand on a bale of hay in order to mount him. There was no time for a saddle.

The fire had spread with horrendous speed. Several of the stalls were burning now, their stout old timber walls shooting out wild sulphurous flames. Merlin was backing away from them, his barking fearful. Over half a dozen horses were milling in the aisle, whinnying direly. Flames had cut them off

from the stable doors, the noisy inferno pressing them back from their one exit. She couldn't see Gen.

"Where are you?" she shouted. "Gen!"

"Here. I'm here." The voice was coming from an empty stall.

Louise urged the stallion forwards down the aisle, yelling wildly at the panicking horses in front of her. Two of them reared up, alarmed by this new, unexpected threat. They began to move en masse towards the flames.

"Quick!" Louise yelled.

Genevieve saw her chance and sprinted out into the aisle. Louise leaned over and grabbed her. At first she thought she'd miscalculated the girl's weight, feeling herself starting to slide downwards. But then Genevieve snatched at the stallion's mane, causing it to neigh sharply. Just as Louise was sure her spine would snap, or she'd crash headfirst onto the aisle's stone flagging, Genevieve levered herself up to straddle the base of the stallion's neck.

The stable doors had been all but consumed by the eerily hot fire. Their remaining planks sagged and twisted on the glowing hinges, then lurched onto the cobbles with a loud bang.

With the intensity of the flames temporarily reduced, the horses raced for the door and their chance of freedom. Louise dug her heels into the stallion's flanks, spurring it on. There was an exhilarating burst of speed. Yellow spires of flame splashed across her left arm and leg, making her cry out. Genevieve squealed in front of her, batting frantically at her blouse. The stench of singed hair solidified in her nostrils. Thin layers of smoke stretching across the aisle whipped across her face, stinging her eyes.

Then they were through, out of the gaping door with its wreath of tiny flames scrabbling at the ruined frame, chasing after the other horses. Fresh air and low sunlight washed over them. The hefty knight in the dark mosaic armour was standing ahead of them. Streamers of bright orange smoke were still pouring from his helmet's eye slits. Sparks of white fire danced across his raised gauntlets. He started to point a rigid forefinger at them, the white fire building.

But the posse of crazed horses couldn't be deflected. The

first one flashed past stark inches from him. Alert to the danger they presented, even to someone with energetic power, he began to jump aside. That was his mistake. The second horse might have missed him if he'd stayed still. Instead, it struck him almost head on. The screaming horse buckled on top of him, forelegs snapping with an atrocious *crack* as inertia sent it hurtling forwards regardless. The knight was flung out sideways, spinning in the air. He landed bonelessly, bouncing a full foot above the cobbles before coming to a final rest. His armour vanished immediately, revealing Grant Kavanagh's body, still clad in his militia uniform. The fabric was torn in a dozen places, stained scarlet by the blood pumping from open wounds.

Louise gasped, instinctively pulling the reins to halt the stallion. Daddy was hurt!

But the flowing blood swiftly stanchd itself. Ragged tears of flesh started to close up. The uniform was stitching itself together. Dusty, grazed leather shoes became metallic boots. He shook his head, grunting in what was little more than dazed annoyance.

Louise stared for a second as he started to raise himself onto his elbows, then spurred the horse away.

"Daddy!" Genevieve shouted in anguish.

"It's not him," Louise told her through clenched teeth. "Not now. That's something else. The devil's own monster."

Rachel Handley stood in front of the arched entrance to the courtyard. Hands on hips, aroused wormlet hair thrashing eagerly. "Nice try." She laughed derisively. A hand was raised, palm towards the sisters. The awful white fire ignited around her wrist, wispy talons flaring from her fingers. Her laugh deepened at the sight of Louise's anguish, cutting across Merlin's miserable barking.

The bullet-bolt of white fire which caught Rachel Handley an inch above her left eye came from somewhere behind Louise. It bored straight through the maid's skull, detonating in the centre of the brain. The back of her head blew off in a gout of charred gore and rapidly dissipating violet flame. Her body remained upright for a second, then the muscles spasmed once before losing all tension. She pitched forwards.

Bright arterial blood spilled out of her ruined, smoking brainpan.

Louise twisted around. The courtyard was empty apart from the woozy figure of her father still clambering to his feet. A hundred empty windows stared down at her. Faint screams echoed over the rooftops. Long swirls of flame churned noisily out of the stable block's wide doors.

Genevieve was shaking violently again, crying in convulsive gulps. Concern for the little girl overcame Louise's utter confusion, and she spurred the stallion once more, guiding it around the vile corpse and out through the courtyard's entrance.

• • •

From where he was standing beside the window of the third-floor guest suite, Quinn Dexter watched the girl riding the superb black horse hell-for-leather over the manor's greensward and towards the wolds. Not even his awesome energetic strength could reach the fleeing sisters from this distance.

He pursed his lips in distaste. Someone had aided them. Why, he couldn't think. The traitor must surely know they would never go unpunished. God's Brother saw all. Every soul was accountable in the end.

"They'll head for Colsterworth, of course," he said. "All they're doing is postponing the inevitable for a couple of hours. Most of that poxy little town already belongs to us."

"Yes, Quinn," said the boy standing behind him.

"And soon the whole world," Quinn muttered. And then what?

He turned and smiled proudly. "It is so nice to see you again. I never thought I would. But He must have decided to reward me."

"I love you, Quinn," Lawrence Dillon said simply. The body of the stable lad he had possessed was completely naked, the scars from the act of possession already nothing more than faint, fading pink lines on the tanned skin.

"I had to do what I did on Lalonde. You know that. We couldn't take you with us."

"I know, Quinn," Lawrence said devoutly. "I was a liability. I was weak back then." He knelt at Quinn's feet, and

beamed up at the stern features of the black-robed figure. "But I'm not anymore. Now I can help you again. It will be like before, only better. The whole universe will bow before you, Quinn."

"Yeah," Quinn Dexter said slowly, savouring the thought. "The fuckers just might."

• • •

The datavised alert woke Ralph Hiltch from a desultory sleep. As an ESA head of station, he'd been assigned some temporary quarters in the Royal Navy officers' mess. Strange impersonal surroundings, and the emotional cold turkey from bringing Gerald Skibbow to Guyana, had left his thoughts racing as he lay on the bunk after a three-hour debrief session last night. In the end he'd wound up accessing a mild trunk program to relax his body.

At least he hadn't suffered any nightmares; though Jenny was never very far from the surface of his mind. A final frozen image of the mission: Jenny lying under a scrum of man-apes, datavising a kamikaze code into the power cell at her side. The image didn't need storing in a neural nanonics memory cell in order to retain its clarity. She'd thought it was preferable to the alternative. But was she right? It was a question he'd asked himself a lot during the voyage to Ombey.

He swung his legs over the side of his bunk and ran fingers through hair that badly needed a wash. The room's net processor informed him that Guyana asteroid had just gone to a code three alert status.

"Shit, now what?" As if he couldn't guess.

His neural nanonics reported an incoming call from Ombey's ESA office, tagged as the director, Roche Skark, himself. Ralph opened a secure channel to the net processor with a sense of grim inevitability. You didn't have to be psychic to know it wasn't going to be good.

"Sorry to haul you back to active status so soon after you arrived," Roche Skark datavised. "But the shit's just hit the fan. We need your expertise."

"Sir?"

"It looks like three of the embassy personnel who came

here on the *Ekwan* were sequestered by the virus. They've gone down to the surface."

"What?" Panic surged into Ralph's mind. Not that abomination, not loose here in the Kingdom. Please God. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. I've just come out of a Privy Council security conference with the Princess. She authorized the code three alert because of it."

Ralph's shoulders slumped. "Oh, God, and I brought them here."

"You couldn't have known."

"It's my job to know. Goddamn, I grew slack on Lalonde."

"I doubt any of us would have done anything different."

"Yes, sir." Pity you couldn't sneer with a datavise.

"In any case, we're right behind them. Admiral Farquar and my good colleague Jannike Dermot over at the ISA have been commendably swift in implementing damage limitation procedures. We estimate the embassy trio are barely seven hours ahead of you."

Ralph thought about the damage one of those *things* could inflict in seven hours and put his head in his hands. "That still gives them a lot of time to infect other people." Implications began to sink through his crust of dismay. "It'll be an exponential effect."

"Possibly," Roche Skark admitted. "If it isn't contained very quickly we may have to abandon the entire Xingu continent. Quarantine procedures are already in place, and the police are being told how to handle the situation. But I want you there to instill a bit of urgency, kick a bit of arse."

"Yes, sir. This active status call, does that mean I get to go after them in person?"

"It does. Technically, you're going down to advise the Xingu continent's civil authorities. As far as I'm concerned you can engage in as much fieldwork as you want, with the proviso that you don't expose yourself to the possibility of infection."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ralph, I don't mind telling you, what this energy virus can do scares the crap out of me. It has to be a precursor to something, some form of invasion. And safeguarding the Kingdom

from such threats is my job. Yours too, come to that. So stop them, Ralph. Shoot first, and I'll whitewash later if need be."

"You've got it, sir."

"Good man. The admiral has assigned a flyer to take you down to Pasto city spaceport, it's leaving in twelve minutes. I'll have a full situation briefing datapackage assembled ready for you to access on the way down. Anything you want, let me know."

"I'd like to take Will Danza and Dean Folan with me, and have them authorized to fire weapons on the surface. They know how to deal with people who have been sequestered. Cathal Fitzgerald too; he's seen the virus at work."

"They'll have the authorization before you land."

• • •

Duchess had risen above the horizon by the time Colsterworth came into view. The red dwarf sun occupied a portion of the horizon diametrically opposite Duke, the two of them struggling to contaminate the landscape below with their own unique spectrum.

Duchess was winning the battle, rising in time to Duke's fall from the sky. The eastward slopes of the wolds were slowly slipping from verdant green to subdued burgundy. Aboriginal pine-analogue trees planted among the hedgerows of geneered hawthorn became grizzled pewter pillars. Even the stallion's ebony hide was darkening.

Duke's golden glow withdrew before the strengthening red tide.

For the first time in her life, Louise resented the primary's retreat. Duchess-night was usually a magical time, twisting the familiar world into a land of mysterious shadows and balmy air. This time the red stain had a distinctly ominous quality.

"Do you suppose Aunty Daphnie will be home?" Genevieve asked for what must have been the fifth time.

"I'm sure she will," Louise replied. It had taken Genevieve a good half hour to stop crying after they'd escaped from Cricklade. Louise had concentrated so hard on comforting her sister, she'd almost stopped being afraid herself. Certainly it was easy to blank what had happened from her mind. And she

wasn't quite sure exactly what she was going to say to Aunt Daphnie. The actual truth would make her sound utterly mad. Yet anything less than the truth might not suffice. Whatever forces of justice and law were dispatched up to Cricklade would have to be well armed and alert. The chief constable and the mayor had to believe what they faced was deadly real, not the imaginings of a half-hysterical teenage girl.

Fortunately she was a Kavanagh. People would have to listen. And please, dear Jesus, make them believe.

"Is that a fire?" Genevieve asked.

Louise jerked her head up. Colsterworth was spread out along a couple of miles of a shallow valley, growing up from the intersection of a river and the railway line. A somnolent little market town with ranks of neat terrace houses set amid small, pretty gardens. The larger homes of the important families occupied the gentle eastern slope, capturing the best view over the countryside. An industrial district of warehouses and small factories cluttered the ground around the wharf.

Three tall spires of filthy smoke were twisting up from the centre of the town. Flames burned at the base of one. Very bright flames. Whatever the building was, it glowed like molten iron.

"Oh, no," Louise gasped. "Not here, too." As she watched, one of the long river barges drifted past the last warehouse. Its decks were alight, the tarpaulin-covered cargo hold puffing out mushrooms of brown smoke. Louise guessed the barrels it carried were exploding. People were jumping off the prow, striking out for the bank.

"Now what?" Genevieve asked in a woeful voice.

"Let me think." She had never considered that anywhere other than Cricklade was affected. But of course her father and that chilling young priest had stopped at Colsterworth first. And before that . . . A midwinter frost prickled her spine. Could it all have started at Boston? Everyone said an insurrection was beyond the Union's ability to mount. Was the whole island to be conquered by these demons in human guise?

And if so, where do we go?

"Look!" Genevieve was pointing ahead.

Louise saw a Romany caravan being driven at considerable

speed along one of the roads on the edge of town below them. The driver was standing on the seat, striking at the cob horse's rump with a whip. It was a woman, her white dress flapping excitably in the wind.

"She's running away," Genevieve cried. "They can't have got to her yet."

The notion that they could join up with an adult who would be on their side was a glorious tonic for Louise. Even if it was just a simple Romany woman, she thought uncharitably. But then didn't Romanies know about magic? The manor staff said they practised all sorts of dark arts. She might even know how to ward off the devils.

Louise took in the road ahead of the racing caravan with a keen sweep, trying to work out where they could meet it. There was nothing directly in front of the caravan, but three quarters of a mile from the town was a large farmhouse.

Frantic animals were charging out of the open farmyard gate into the meadows: pigs, heifers, a trio of shire-horses, even a Labrador. The house's windows flashed brightly, emitting solid beams of blue-white light which appeared quite dazzling under the scarlet sky.

"She's heading straight for them," Louise groaned. When she checked the careering caravan again it had just passed the last of Colsterworth's terraced houses. There were too many trees and bends ahead for the driver to see the farmhouse.

Louise sized up the distance to the road, and snapped the bridle. "Hang on," she told Genevieve. The stallion charged forwards, dusky red grass blurring beneath its hooves. It jumped the first fence with hardly a break in its rhythm. Louise and Genevieve bounced down hard on its back, the younger girl letting out a yap of pain.

A jeering crowd had emerged on the road behind the caravan, milling beneath the twin clumps of geneered silver birch trees which marked the town's official boundary. It was almost as if they were unwilling, or unable, to venture out into the open fields. Several bolts of white fire were flung after the fleeing caravan—glinting stars which dwindled away after a few hundred yards.

Louise wanted to weep in frustration when she saw people walking out of the farmhouse and start down the road towards

Colsterworth. The Romany woman still hadn't noticed the danger ahead.

"Shout at her! Stop her!" she cried to Genevieve.

They covered the last three hundred yards bellowing wildly.

It was to no avail. They were close enough to the caravan to see the foam coating the nose of the piebald cob before the Romany woman caught sight of them. Even then she didn't stop, although the reins were pulled back. The huge beast started to slow its frantic sprint to a more reasonable trot.

The stallion cleared the hedge and the ditch running alongside the road in an easy bound. Louise whipped it around to match the caravan's pace. There was a tremendous clattering coming from inside the wooden frame with its gaudy paintwork, as if an entire kitchen's worth of pots and pans were being juggled by malevolent clowns.

The Romany woman had long raven hair streaming out behind her, a brown face with round cheeks. Her white linen dress was stained with sweat. Defiant, wild eyes stared at the sisters. She made some kind of sign in the air.

A spell? Louise wondered. "Stop!" she begged. "Please stop. They're already ahead of you. They're at that farmhouse, *look*."

The Romany woman stood up, searching the land beyond the cob's bobbing head. They had another quarter of a mile to go until they reached the farmhouse. But Louise had lost sight of the people who had come out of it.

"How do you know?" the woman called out.

"Just *stop*!" Genevieve squealed. Her small fists were bunched tight.

Carmitha looked the little girl over, then came to a decision. She nodded, and began to rein back.

The caravan's front axle snapped with a prodigious crunching sound.

Carmitha just managed to grab hold of the frame as the whole caravan pitched forwards. Sparks flew out from underneath her as the world tilted sharply. A last wrenching *snap* and the caravan ground to a halt. One of the front wheels trundled past her cob horse, Olivier, then rolled down into the dry ditch at the side of the road.

“Shit!” She glared at the girls on the big black stallion, their soot-stained white blouses and grubby desolate faces. It must have been them. She’d thought they were pure, but you just couldn’t tell. Not now. Her grandmother’s ramblings on the spirit world had been nothing more than campsite tales to delight and scare young children. But she did remember some of the old woman’s words. She raised her hands *so* and summoned up the incantation.

“What are you *doing*?” the elder of the two girls yelled down at her. “We have to get out of here. Now!”

Carmitha frowned in confusion. The girls both looked terrified, as well they might if they’d seen a tenth of what she had. Maybe they were untainted. But it if wasn’t them who wrecked the caravan . . .

She heard a chuckle and whirled around. The man just appeared out of the tree standing on the other side of the road from the ditch. Literally out of it. Bark lines faded from his body to reveal the most curious green tunic. Arms of jade silk, a jacket of lime wool, big brass buttons down the front, and a ridiculous pointed felt hat sprouting a couple of white feathers.

“Going somewhere, pretty ladies?” He bowed deeply and doffed his hat.

Carmitha blinked. His tunic really was green. But it shouldn’t have been, not in this light. “Ride!” she called to the girls.

“Oh, no.” His voice sounded indignant, a host whose hospitality has proved inadequate. “Do stay.”

One of the small kittledove birds in the tree behind him took flight with an indignant squawk. Its leathery wings folded back, and it dived towards the stallion. Intense blue and purple sparks fizzed out of its tail, leaving a contrail of saffron smoke behind it. The tiny organic missile streaked past the stallion’s nose and skewered into the ground with a wet thud.

Louise and Genevieve both reached out instinctively to pat and gentle the suddenly skittish stallion. Five more kittledoves were lined up on the pine’s branches, their twittering stilled.

“In fact, I insist you stay,” the green man said, and smiled charmingly.

“Let the girls go,” Carmitha told him calmly. “They’re only children.”

His eyes lingered on Louise. “But growing up so splendidly. Don’t you agree?”

Louise stiffened.

Carmitha was about to argue, maybe even plead. But then she saw four more people marching down the road from the farmhouse and the fight went out of her. Taking to her heels would do no good. She’d seen what the white fireballs could do to flesh and bone. It was going to be bad enough without adding to the pain.

“Sorry, girls,” she said lamely.

Louise gave her a flicker of a smile. She looked at the green man. “Touch me, *peasant*, and my fiancé will make you eat your own balls.”

Genevieve twisted around in astonishment to study her sister. Then grinned weakly. Louise winked at her. Paper defiance, but it felt wonderful.

The green man chortled. “Dearie me, and I thought you were a fine young lady.”

“Appearances can be deceptive,” she told him icily.

“I will enjoy teaching you some respect. I will personally see to it that your possession takes a good many days.”

Louise glanced briefly in the direction of the four men from the farmhouse who were now standing beside the placid cob. “Are you quite sure you have mustered sufficient forces? I don’t want you to be too frightened of me.”

The green man’s laboured smile vanished altogether, as did his debonair manner. “Know what, bitch? I’m going to make you watch while I fuck your little sister in half.”

Louise flinched, whitening.

“I believe this has gone far enough.” It was one of the men who’d arrived from the farm. He walked towards the green man.

Louise noticed how his legs bowed outward, making his shoulders rock slightly from side to side as he walked. But he was handsome, she acknowledged, with his dark skin and wavy jet-black hair tied back in a tiny ponytail. Rugged;

backed up by a muscular build. He couldn't have been more than about twenty, or twenty-one—the same age as Joshua. His dark blue jacket was dreadfully old-fashioned, it had long tails which came to a point just behind his knees. He wore it over a yellow waistcoat, and a white silk shirt that had a tiny turned-down collar complemented with a black ruff tie. Strange apparel, but elegant, too.

“What's your problem, boy?” the green man asked scornfully.

“Is that not apparent, sir? I find it difficult to see how even a gentleman of your tenor can bring it upon himself to threaten three frightened ladies.”

The green man's mouth split into a wide smile. “Oh, you do, do you?” White fire speared out of his fingers. It struck the newcomer's blue jacket and flared wide into clawing braids. He stood calmly as the coils of incandescence scabbled ineffectively across him, as if he wore an overcoat of impervious glass.

Unperturbed by his failure, the green man swung a fist. It didn't connect. His opponent ducked back with surprising speed. A fist slammed into the side of the green man's torso. Three ribs shattered from the enhanced blow. He had to exert some of his own energistic strength to stave off the pain and repair the physical damage. “Fuck,” he spat, shocked by this inexplicable recalcitrance on the part of someone who was supposed to be a comrade. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I would have thought that obvious, sir,” the other said from behind raised fists. “I am defending the honour of these ladies.”

“I don't believe this,” the green man exclaimed. “Look, let's just get them possessed, and forget it. Okay? Sorry I mouthed off. But that girl has the devil's own tongue.”

“No, sir, I will not forget your threat to the child. Our Lord may have deemed me unworthy to join Him in Heaven. But, still, I count myself as more than a beast who would commit rapine upon such a delicate flower.”

“Delicate . . . You have got to be fucking joking.”

“Never, sir.”

The green man threw his hands in the air. He turned to the other three who had accompanied his opponent from the

farm. "Come on, together we can boil his crazy brain and send him back to the beyond. Or maybe you can ignore them pleading to be let back into the world," he added significantly.

The three men exchanged an uneasy glance.

"You may indeed best me," the man in the blue jacket said. "But if I have to return to that accursed nowhere, I will take at least one of you with me, possibly more. So come then, who will it be?"

"I don't need any of this," one of the three muttered. He pushed his way past the other two and started to walk down the road towards the town.

The man in the blue jacket gave the remaining two an inquiring look. Both of them shook their heads and set off down the road.

"What is it with you?" the green man shouted furiously.

"I believe that is a rhetorical question."

"Okay, so who the hell are you?"

For a moment his handsome face faltered in its resolution. Pain burned in his eyes. "They called me Titreano, once," he whispered.

"Okay, Titreano. It's your party. For now. But when Quinn Dexter catches up with you, it's going to be the morning after like you've never fucking believed."

He turned on a heel and stalked off along the road.

Carmitha finally remembered to breathe again. "Ohmy-God!" Her knees gave out, and she sat down fast. "I thought I was dead."

Titreano smiled graciously. "You would not have been killed. What they bring is something far worse."

"Like *what*?"

"Possession."

She gave him a long, mistrustful stare. "And you're one of them."

"To my shame, my lady, I am."

Carmitha didn't know what the hell to believe.

"Please, sir?" Genevieve asked. "What should we do now? Where can Louise and I go?"

Louise patted Gen's hands in caution. This Titreano was one of the devils after all, no matter how friendly he appeared to be.

"I do not know this place," Titreano said. "But I would advise against yonder town."

"We know that," Genevieve said spryly.

Titreano smiled up at her. "Indeed you do. And what is your name, little one?"

"Genevieve. And this is my sister, Louise. We're Kavanaghs, you know."

Carmitha groaned and rolled her eyes. "Christ, that's all I need right now," she mumbled.

Louise gave her a puzzled frown.

"I regret I have not heard of your family," Titreano said in what sounded like sincere regret. "But from your pride, I venture it is a great one."

"We own a lot of Kesteven between us," Genevieve said. She was beginning to like this man. He'd stood up to the horrors, and he was polite. Not many grown-ups were polite to her, they never seemed to have the time to talk at all. He was very well spoken, too.

"Kesteven?" Titreano said. "Now that is a name I do know. I believe that it is an area of Lincolnshire. Am I correct?"

"Back on Earth, yes," Louise said.

"Back on Earth," Titreano repeated incredulously. He glanced over at Duke, then switched to Duchess. "Exactly what is this world?"

"Norfolk. It's an English-ethnic planet."

"The majority," Carmitha said.

Louise frowned again. What ever was wrong with the Roman woman?

Titreano closed his eyes, as if he felt some deep pain. "I sailed upon oceans, and I thought no challenge could be greater," he said faintly. "And now men sail the void between stars. Oh, how I remember them. The constellations burning so bright at night. How could I ever have known? God's creation has a majesty which lays men bare at His feet."

"You were a sailor?" Louise asked uncertainly.

"Yes, my lady Louise. I had the honour to serve my King thus."

"King? There's no royal family in the Earth's English state any more."

Titreano slowly opened his eyes, revealing only sadness. "No King?"

"No. But our Mountbatten family are descended from British royalty. The Prince guards our constitution."

"So nobility has not yet been overthrown by darkness. Ah well, I should be content."

"How come you didn't know about old England?" Genevieve asked. "I mean, you knew about Kesteven being a part of it."

"What year is this, little one?"

Genevieve considered protesting about being called "little one," but he didn't seem to mean it in a nasty way. "Year 102 since settlement. But those are Norfolk years; they're four Earth years long. So back on Earth it's 2611."

"Twenty-six hundred and eleven years since Our Lord was born," Titreano said in awe. "Dear Heaven. So long? Though the torment I endured felt as if it were eternal."

"What torment?" Genevieve asked with innocent curiosity.

"The torment all us damned souls face after they die, little one."

Genevieve's jaw dropped, her mouth forming a wide O.

"You've been dead?" Louise asked, not believing a word of it.

"Yes, Lady Louise. I was dead, for over eight hundred years."

"That's what you meant by possession?" Carmitha said.

"Yes, my lady," he said gravely.

Carmitha pinched the top of her nose, wrinkling her brow. "And how, exactly, did you come back?"

"I do not know, except a way was opened into this body's heart."

"You mean that's not your body?"

"No. This is a mortal man by the name of Eamon Goodwin, though I now wear my own form above his. I hear him crying inside me." He fixed Carmitha with a steady eye. "That is why the others pursue you. There are millions of souls lost in the torment of beyond. All seek living bodies so they may breathe again."

"Us?" Genevieve squeaked.

"Yes, little one. You. I'm sorry."

“Look, this is all very interesting,” Carmitha said. “Complete drivel, but interesting. However, just in case you haven’t caught hold, right now we are drowning in deep shit. I don’t know what you freaks really are, possessed zombies or something nice and simple like xenocs with psychic powers. But when that green bastard reaches Colsterworth he’s going to be coming back with a lot of friends. I’ve got to unhitch my horse, and we three”—her gesture took in the sisters—“have got to be long gone.” She arched an eyebrow. “Right, Miss Kavanagh?”

“Yes.” Louise nodded.

Titreano glanced at the passive cob, then the stallion. “If you are serious in your intent, you should travel together in your caravan. None of you has a saddle, and this mighty beast has the look of Hercules about him. I’ll wager he can maintain a steady pace for many hours.”

“Brilliant,” Carmitha snorted. She hopped down onto the hard-packed dirt of the road and slapped the side of her ruined caravan. “We’ll just wait here for a wheelwright to come along, shall we?”

Titreano smiled. He walked over to the ditch where the wheel had fallen in.

Carmitha’s next acidic phrase died unspoken as he righted the wheel and pushed it (one-handed!) up out of the ditch, treating it as though it were a child’s hoop. The wheel was five feet in diameter, and made of good, heavy tythorn wood. Three strong men would struggle to lift it between them.

“My God.” She wasn’t sure if she should be thankful or horrified at such a demonstration. If all of them were like him, then hope had deserted Norfolk long ago.

Titreano reached the caravan and bent down.

“You’re not going to . . .”

He lifted it by the front corner—two, three feet off the road. Carmitha watched as the broken axle slowly straightened itself. The splintered fracture in the middle blurred, then for a brief moment the wood appeared to run like a liquid. It solidified. And the axle was whole again.

Titreano jemmied the wheel back onto the bearing.

“What are you?” Carmitha whispered weakly.

“I have already explained, my lady,” Titreano said. “What

I can never do is bring you to believe what I am. That must come of its own accord, as God wills.”

He went over to the stallion and held his arms up. “Come on, little one, down you come.”

Genevieve hesitated.

“Go on,” Louise said quietly. Plainly, if Titreano had wanted to harm them, he would have done it by now. The more she saw of these strange people, the more her heart blackened. What could possibly fight such power?

Genevieve smiled scampishly and swung a leg over the stallion. She slithered down his flank into Titreano’s grip.

“Thank you,” she said as he put her down. “And thank you for helping us, too.”

“How could I not? I may be damned, but I am not devoid of honour.”

Louise got most of the way down the stallion before she accepted his steadying hand. She managed a fast, embarrassed grin of thanks.

“I’m sore all over,” Genevieve complained, hands rubbing her bottom.

“Where to?” Louise asked Carmitha.

“I’m not sure,” the Romany replied. “There should be a lot of my folk in the caves above Holbeach. We always gather there if there’s any kind of trouble abroad. You can hold those caves for a long time; they’re high in the cliffs, not easy to reach.”

“It would be a short siege this time, I fear,” Titreano said.

“You got a better idea?” she snapped back.

“You cannot stay on this island, not if you wish to escape possession. Does this world have ships?”

“Some,” Louise said.

“Then you should try to buy passage.”

“To go where?” Carmitha asked. “If your kind really are after bodies, exactly where would be safe?”

“That would depend on how swiftly your leaders rally. There will be war, many dreadful battles. There can be nothing less. Both our kinds are fighting for their very existence.”

“Then we must go to Norwich, the capital,” Louise said decisively. “We must warn the government.”

“Norwich is five thousand miles away,” Carmitha said. “A ship would take weeks.”

“We can’t hide here and do nothing.”

“I’m not risking myself on some foolhardy errand, girl. Fat lot of good you precious landowners will be, anyway. What has Norfolk got which can fight off the likes of him?” She waved a hand towards Titreano.

“The Confederation Navy squadron is still here,” Louise said, her voice raised now. “They have fabulous weapons.”

“Of mass destruction. How’s that going to help people who have been possessed? We need to break the possession, not slaughter the afflicted.”

They glared at each other.

“There’s an aeroambulance based at Bytham,” Genevieve said brightly. “That could reach Norwich in five hours.”

Louise and Carmitha stared at her. Then Louise broke into a grin and kissed her sister. “Now who’s the clever one?”

Genevieve smiled around pertly. Titreano made a face at her, and she giggled.

Carmitha glanced down the road. “Bytham’s about a seven hour journey from here. Assuming we don’t run into any more problems.”

“We won’t,” Genevieve said. She took hold of Titreano’s hand. “Not with you with us.”

He grinned halfheartedly. “I . . .”

“You’re not going to leave us alone,” a suddenly stricken Genevieve asked.

“Of course not, little one.”

“That’s that, then.”

Carmitha shook her head. “I must be bloody mad even thinking of doing this. Louise, tether your horse to the caravan.”

Louise did as she was told. Carmitha climbed back up on the caravan, regarding it suspiciously as she put her weight on the driver’s seat. “How long is that repair going to last for?”

“I’m not quite sure,” Titreano said apologetically. He helped Genevieve up beside Carmitha, then hoisted himself up.

When Louise clambered up, the narrow seat was cramped. She was pressed against Titreano, and not quite sure how she

should react to such proximity. If only it were Joshua, she thought wistfully.

Carmitha flicked the reins, and Olivier started forwards at an easy trot.

Genevieve folded her arms in satisfaction and cocked her head to look up at Titreano. "Did you help us at Cricklade as well?"

"How's that, little one?"

"One of the possessed was trying to stop us from riding away," Louise said. "She was hit by white fire. We wouldn't be here otherwise."

"No, Lady Louise. It was not I."

Louise settled back into the hard seat, unhappy the mystery hadn't been solved. But then by today's standards it was one of the lesser problems confronting her.

Olivier trotted on down the road as Duke finally disappeared below the wolds. Behind the caravan, more of Colsterworth's buildings had started to burn.

• • •

Guyana's navy spaceport was a standard hollow sphere of girders, almost two kilometres in diameter. Like a globular silver-white mushroom on a very thin stalk, it stuck out of the asteroid's rotation axis; the massive magnetic bearings on the end of the connecting spindle allowed it to remain stationary while the colossal rock rolled along its orbital track. The surface was built up from circular docking bays linked together by a filigree of struts and transit tubes. Tanks, generators, crew stations, environmental maintenance machinery, and shark-fin thermo dump panels were jumbled together in the gaps between bays, apparently without reference to any overall design logic.

Narrow rivers of twinkling star-specks looped around it all, twining in elaborate, interlocked figure-eights. The rivers had a current, their points of light drifting in the same direction at the same speed; cargo tugs, personnel commuters, and MSVs, firing their reaction drives to maintain the precise vectors fed to them by traffic control. Ombey's code three defence alert had stirred the spaceport into frantic activity for the second time in twenty-four hours. But this time instead of preparing

to receive a single craft, frigates and battle cruisers were departing. Every few minutes one of the big spherical Royal Kulu Navy ships would launch from its docking bay, rising through the traffic lanes of smaller support craft with an arc-bright glare of secondary fusion drives. They were racing for higher orbits, each with a different inclination; Strategic Defence Command positioned them so they englobed the entire planet, giving full interception coverage out to a million kilometres. If any unidentified ship emerged from a ZTT jump within that region, it would be engaged within a maximum of fifteen seconds.

Amid the departing warships a lone navy flyer rose from the spaceport. It was a flattened egg-shape fuselage of dark blue-grey silicolithium composite, fifty metres long, fifteen wide. Coherent magnetic fields wrapped it in a warm golden glow of captured solar wind particles. Ion thrusters fired, manoeuvring it away from the big frigates. Then the fusion tube in the tail ignited, pushing it down towards the planet seventy-five thousand kilometres below.

The one-gee acceleration sucked Ralph Hiltch gently back into his seat, making the floor stand to the vertical. On the seat next to him, his flight bag rolled over once to lie in the crook of the cushioning.

"This vector will get us to Pasto spaceport in sixty-three minutes," Cathal Fitzgerald datavised from the pilot's seat.

"Thanks," Ralph replied. He widened the channel to include the two G66 troopers. "I'd like you all to access the briefing that Skark gave me. This kind of information could be critical, and we need all the breaks we can get around here."

That earned him a grin and a wave from Dean Folan, a non-committal grimace from Will Danza. They were both sitting on the other side of the aisle. The sixty-seater cabin seemed deserted with just the four of them using it.

None of his little team had complained or refused to go. Privately he'd made it quite clear they could pull out without any indiscipline action being entered on their file. But they'd all agreed, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Even Dean who had the best excuse of all. He'd been in surgery for seven hours last night; the asteroid's navy clinic had to rebuild sixty

per cent of his arm. The boosted musculature, ruined by the hit he'd taken in Lalonde's jungle, had to be completely replaced with fresh artificial tissue, along with various blood vessels, skin, and nerves. The repair was still wrapped in a green sheath of medical nanonic packaging. But he was looking forward to levelling the score, he'd said cheerfully.

Ralph closed his eyes and let the briefing invade his mind, neural nanonics tabulating it into a sharply defined iconographic matrix. Details of the Xingu continent: a sprawl of four and a half million square kilometres in the northern hemisphere, roughly diamond-shaped, with a long mountainous ridge of land extending out from its southern corner. The ridge crossed the equator; and Ombey's broad tropical zones meant the entire continent was an ideal farming region, with the one exception of the semi-desert occupying the centre. So far only two-fifths of it was inhabited, but with a population of seventy million, it was the second-most prosperous continent after Esparta, where the capital Atherstone was situated.

After Xingu came the embassy trio, Jacob Tremarco, Savion Kerwin, and Angeline Gallagher. Their career files contained nothing exceptional, they were all regular Kulu Foreign Office staffers: loyal, boring bureaucrats. Visuals, family histories, medical reports. It was all there, and none of it particularly useful apart from the images. Ralph stored them in a neural nanonics memory cell, and spliced them with a general characteristics recognition program. He hadn't forgotten that strange image-shifting ability the sequestered had demonstrated back on Lalonde. The recognition program might give him a slight edge if one of them attempted a disguise, though he didn't hold out much hope.

The most promising part of the datapackage was the series of measures Admiral Farquar and Leonard DeVille, Xingu's Home Office minister, had implemented to quarantine the continent and trace the embassy trio. All civil traffic was being systematically shut down. Search programs were being loaded into the continent's data cores, watching for a trail of unexplained temporary glitches in processors and power circuits. Public-area security monitor cameras had been given the visual pattern of the trio, and police patrols were also being briefed.

Maybe they'd get lucky, Ralph thought. Lalonde was a backwards colony on the arse edge of nowhere, without any modern communications or much in the way of civil authority. But Ombey was part of the Kingdom, the society he'd sworn to defend with his life if need be. Years ago at university, when he'd discreetly been offered a commission in the agency, he'd considered Kulu a worthwhile society. The richest in the Confederation outside Edenism, it was strong economically, militarily; a technology leader. It had a judicial system which kept the average citizen safe on the streets, and was even reasonably fair by modern standards. Medical care was socialized. Most people had jobs. Admittedly, ruled by the Saldanas, it was hardly the most democratic of systems, but then short of the Edenist Consensus few democratic societies were truly representative. And there were a lot of planets which didn't even pretend to be egalitarian. So he'd swallowed any niggling self-suspicion of radicalism, and agreed to serve his King until his death.

What he'd seen of the galaxy had only served to strengthen his conviction that he'd done the right thing in taking the oath. The Kingdom was a *civilized* place compared to most; its citizens were entitled to lead their lives without interference. And if that meant the ESA occasionally having to get its hands dirty, then so be it, as far as Ralph was concerned. A society worth having is worth protecting.

And thanks to its own nature, Ombey should definitely be able to cope better than Lalonde. Although the very systems which made it more able also gave the enemy a greater opportunity to spread its subversion. The virus carriers had been slow to travel on Lalonde. Here they would suffer no such restrictions.

Cathal Fitzgerald cut the flyer's fusion drive when they were two hundred kilometres above Xingu. Gravity took over, pulling the flyer down. Its magnetic field expanded, applying subtle pressures to the tenuous gases pushing against the fuselage. Buoyant at the centre of a sparkling cushion of ions, the flyer banked to starboard and began a gentle glide-spiral down towards the spaceport below.

They were a hundred and fifty kilometres high when the

flight computer datavised a priority secure signal from Roche Skark into Ralph's neural nanonics.

"We might have a problem developing," the ESA director told him. "A civil passenger flight from Pasto to Atherstone is having trouble with its electronic systems, nothing critical but the glitches are constant. I'd like to bring you in on the Privy Council security committee to advise."

"Yes, sir," Ralph acknowledged. The datavise broadened to a security level one sensenviron conference. Ralph appeared to be sitting at an oval table in a plain white bubble room with walls at an indeterminate distance.

Admiral Farquar was sitting at the head of the table, with Roche Skark and the ISA director Jannike Dermot flanking him. Ralph's neural nanonics identified the other three people present. Next to the ISA director was Commander Deborah Unwin, head of Ombey's Strategic Defence network; Ryle Thorne, Ombey's national Home Office minister, was placed next to her. Ralph found himself with Roche Skark on one side, and Leonard DeVille on the other.

"The plane is seven minutes from Atherstone," Deborah Unwin said. "We have to make a decision."

"What is the plane's current status?" Ralph asked.

"The pilot was instructed to turn back to Pasto by my flight controllers as part of the quarantine procedures. And that's when he reported his difficulties. He says he'll be endangering the passengers if he has to fly all the way back to Pasto. And if it's a genuine malfunction he will be."

"We can hardly go around using our SD platforms on civil aircraft just because they have a dodgy processor," Ryle Thorne said.

"On the contrary, sir," Ralph said. "In this situation we have to maintain a policy of guilty until proven innocent. You cannot allow that plane to land in the capital, not under any circumstances. Not now."

"If he has to fly back to Xingu he may well kill everyone on board," the minister protested. "The plane could be downed in the ocean."

"Atherstone has a high proportion of military bases in the surrounding district," Admiral Farquar said. "If necessary the plane can simply sit on a landing pad surrounded by marines

until we work out a satisfactory method of detecting if the virus is present.”

“Is the pilot using his neural nanonics to communicate with flight control?” Ralph asked.

“Yes,” Deborah said.

“Okay, then it’s a reasonable assumption that he’s not been sequestered. If you can guarantee a landing pad can be guarded securely, I say use it. But the plane must remain sealed until we find out what’s happened to the embassy trio.”

“Good enough,” Admiral Farquar said.

“I’ll put the marines at Sapcoat base on active status as of now,” Deborah said. “That’s over a hundred kilometres from Atherstone. The plane can reach it easily enough.”

“A hundred kilometres is a safe enough distance,” Ryle Thorne said smoothly.

Ralph didn’t like the minister’s attitude; he seemed to be treating this as if it were a minor natural incident, like a hurricane or earthquake. But then the minister had to go back to his constituents every five years and convince them he was acting in their best interests. Ordering SD platforms to fire on their fellow citizens might be hard to explain away in public relations terms. That was one of the reasons the royal Saldanas had a parliament to advise them. An insulating layer around the blame. Elected politicians were always culpable and replaceable.

“I’d also suggest that once the plane’s landed you use an orbital sensor satellite to mount a permanent observation on it,” Ralph said. “Just in case there’s any attempt to break out. That way we can use the SD platforms as a last resort; sterilize the entire area.”

“That strikes me as somewhat excessive,” Ryle Thorne said with elaborate politeness.

“Again, no, sir. On Lalonde the enemy were able to use their electronic warfare capability to interfere with the LDC’s observation satellite from the ground; they fuzzed the images to quite a degree. I’d say this fallback option is the least we should be doing.”

“Ralph was brought in because of his experience in combating the virus,” Roche Skark said, smiling at the minister.

“He got off Lalonde precisely because he instigated these kinds of protective measures.”

Ryle Thorne gave a short nod.

“Pity he didn’t protect *us* from the virus,” Jannike muttered. Except in a sensenviron context nothing was really sotto voce; all utterances were deliberate.

Ralph glanced over at her, but the computer-synthesised image of her face gave nothing away.

• • •

Chapman Adkinson was getting mighty tired of the continual stream of datavises he was receiving from flight control. Worried, too. He wasn’t dealing with civil flight control at Atherstone anymore; they’d gone off-line eight minutes ago. Military protocols were being enforced now, the whole planet’s traffic control being routed through the Royal Navy operations centre on Guyana. And they were none too sympathetic to his condition.

Esparta was rolling by below the plane, one of the lush national parks which surrounded the capital. A jungle scarred only by the occasional Roman-straight motorway and dachas belonging to the aristocracy. The ocean was five minutes behind them.

His neural nanonics were accessing the external sensors, but the visual image was only being analysed in secondary mode, mainly to back up the inertial guidance system which he no longer wholly trusted. He was concentrating on schematics of the plane’s systems. Twenty per cent of the on-board processors were suffering from random dropouts. Some had come back on-line after a few seconds, others remained dead. The diagnostic programs he ran simply couldn’t pinpoint the problem. And, even more disturbing, in the last fifteen minutes he’d been experiencing spikes and reductions in the power circuits.

That was what had made him argue with the military controllers. Processor glitches were an acceptable menace; there was so much redundancy built into the plane’s electronic architecture it could survive an almost total shutdown; but power loss was in a different hazard category altogether. Chapman Adkinson had already decided that if they did try to force him to fly back over the ocean he was going to ditch

there and then, and to hell with the penalties they'd load into his licence. The biohazard in Xingu couldn't be that lethal, surely?

"Chapman, stand by for some updated landing coordinates," Guyana's flight controller datavised. "We're diverting you."

"Where to?" Chapman asked sceptically.

"Sapcoat base. They're prepping a clean reception area for you. Looks like the passengers are going to have to stay on board for a while once you're down."

"As long as we get down."

The coordinates came through, and Chapman fed them directly into the flight computer. Twelve minutes to Sapcoat. He could accept that. The plane banked gently to port, and began to curve away from the city which lay somewhere beyond the horizon's black and silver heat shimmer.

It was a signal for the glitches to quadruple. Circuits began to drop out at a frightening rate. A quarter of the system's schematics flicked to a daunting black, leaving only ghostly colourless outlines where functional hardware had been a moment before. Power to the two rear starboard compressors failed completely. He could hear the high-pitched background whine deepening as the blades slowed. The flight computer's compensation program went primary, but too many control surfaces had shut down for it to be truly effective.

"Mayday, mayday," Chapman datavised. Even his primary transmitter had failed. Backup processors were activated. The fuselage began to vibrate and judder, as if the plane were ploughing through a patch of choppy air.

His neural nanonics reported a stream of datavises from the passenger cabin, querying the shaking and sudden loss of in-flight entertainment processors. He called up a procedural file and shunted it into what was left of the plane's entertainment circuits. Seatback holoscreens should be playing a placebo message about clear air turbulence and the precautions their pilot was now instigating.

"What is it?" flight control asked.

"Losing power and height. Systems failure rate increasing. Shit! I just lost the tail rudder databus." He datavised an emergency code into the flight computer. A silvery piston slid out

of the horseshoe console in front of him, a dull chrome-red pistol grip on the end. It reached his lap and rotated silently through ninety degrees. Chapman grabbed it. Manual control. Christ, I've never used one outside of Aviation Authority simulations!

The datavise bandwidth to the flight computer started to shrink. He prioritized the schematic to display absolute essentials. Holographic displays on the console came alive, duplicating the information.

"Find me a flat patch of land, now, damn it!" How he was going to bring the plane down in VTOL configuration with both the starboard compressors out wasn't something he wanted to think about. Maybe a motorway, and use it like a runway?

"Request denied."

"What?"

"You may not land anywhere but the authorized coordinate."

"Fuck you! We're going to crash."

"Sorry, Chapman, you cannot land anywhere outside Sapcoat."

"I can't *reach* Sapcoat." His datavised control linkage to the flight computer began to fail. The pistol grip shifted slightly in his hand, and he felt the plane tilt in tandem.

Careful! he told himself. A firm pressure on the grip, and the nose began to edge back. The holographic horizon graphic showed he was still in a shallow dive. More pressure, and the descent rate slowed.

The door into the cockpit slid open. Chapman Adkinson was wired too tight to care. It was supposed to be codelocked, but the way hardware was crashing . . .

"Why have you altered course?"

Chapman shot a quick glance over his shoulder. The guy was dressed in a cheap suit, five years out-of-date. He wasn't just calm, he was serene. Incredible! He must feel the plane's buffeting.

"Technical problem," Chapman managed to gasp. "We're putting down at the nearest landing pad that can handle an emergency." The pistol grip was fighting his every movement. And now the holographic displays were wobbling. He

wasn't sure if he could trust them anymore. "Get back into your seat now, fella."

The man simply walked up behind the pilot's chair and slid his head over Chapman's shoulder, peering out of the narrow curving windscreen. "Where is Atherstone?"

"Look, pal—" Pain lanced deep into his thigh. Chapman grunted roughly at the shock of it. The man's left index finger was resting lightly on his leg, a small circle of his uniform's trouser fabric was burning around it.

Chapman swatted at the small blue flames, eyes blinking away sudden tears. His thigh muscle was smarting abominably.

"Where is Atherstone?" the man repeated. "I have to go there."

Chapman found his calmness more unnerving than the plane's failure. "Listen, I wasn't joking when I said we had technical problems. We're going to be lucky if we make it over this sodding jungle. Forget about Atherstone."

"I will hurt you again, harder this time. And I will keep on hurting you until you take me to Atherstone."

I'm being hijacked! The realization was as staggering as it was improbable. Chapman gagged at the man. "You have got to be kidding!"

"No joke, Captain. If you do not land in the capital, I will see to it you don't land anywhere."

"Holy Christ."

"Atherstone. Now where is it?"

"To the west somewhere. Christ, I'm not sure where. Inertial guidance has packed up."

A mirthless smile appeared on the man's face. "Then head west. It is a big city. I'm confident we'll see it from this height."

Chapman did nothing. Then winced as the man reached past him. He put his hand on the windscreen, palm flat. Horrifically deep white cracks splintered outward.

"Atherstone." It was an order.

"Okay. Just take your goddamn hand off that." The windscreen was artificial sapphire for God's sake. You couldn't crack it by *leaning* on it. A neural nanonics status check showed him half his synaptic augmentation had

crashed, and virtually all the memory cells had shut down. But there was enough capacity for a datavise. “Code F emergency,” he shot at the flight computer. Followed by a small prayer that it hadn’t glitched completely yet.

“ISA duty officer,” came the response. “What’s happening?”

Chapman used the last of his neural nanonics’ capacity to issue a metabolic override, keeping his face perfectly composed. He must not betray the silent conversation by a twitch of emotion. “Attempted hijacking. And the plane’s falling apart around me.”

“How many hijackers?”

“Just one, I think. Can’t access the cabin cameras.”

“What does he want?”

“He says he wants to go to Atherstone.”

“What sort of weapon is he using?”

“Not sure. Nothing visible. Some kind of implant. Maybe a thermal induction field generator. He burnt my leg and damaged the windscreen.”

“Thank you. Hold please.”

Like I can do something else, Chapman thought acidly. He flicked a curious glance at the man who was still standing to one side of the chair. His face was as emotionless as Chapman’s.

The plane rocked alarmingly. Chapman tried to damp it down by swaying the pistol grip to compensate for the erratic motion. On a plane with fully responsive control surfaces it might have worked, here it just slewed the tail around. He noticed the nose had dropped a couple of degrees again.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what’s so bloody important in Atherstone that you’ve got to pull this crazy stunt?”

“People,” the man said blandly.

Some of the man’s calmness was infiltrating Chapman’s own mind. He pulled back on the pistol grip, easing the nose up until they were level again. Nothing to it. At least there were no more systems dropping out, the malfunctions appeared to have plateaued. But landing would be a bitch.

“Chapman,” the ISA duty officer datavised. “Please try and give us a visual of the hijacker. It’s very important.”

“I’m down to about two kilometres altitude, here. Seventy

per cent of my systems have failed, and all you want is to see what he *looks* like?"

"It will help us evaluate the situation."

Chapman gave the man a sideways glance, loading the image into one of his remaining three functional memory cells. His datavise bit rate was now so low it took an entire second to relay the file.

Ralph Hiltch watched the pixels slowly clot together above the bubble room's table. "Savion Kerwin," he said, unsurprised.

"Without a doubt," Admiral Farquar acknowledged.

"That plane left Pasto ninety minutes after their spaceplane landed," Jannike Dermot said. "They obviously intend to spread the virus as wide as possible."

"As I've been telling you," Roche Skark said. "Ralph, do you think he's infected anyone else on the plane?"

"Quite possibly, sir. The flight computer and Chapman's neural nanonics are obviously being assaulted by a very powerful electronic warfare field. It might be several of them acting in unison, or it could just be Savion Kerwin's proximity to the electronic systems, after all the flight computer is housed below the cockpit decking. But we really can't take the chance."

"Agreed," Admiral Farquar said.

Chapman Adkinson waited for fifteen seconds after he'd datavised the visual file. The crippled flight computer reported the communications channel was being maintained. Nothing happened, there was no update from the ISA officer.

A Royal Kulu Navy reserve officer himself, Chapman knew of the response procedures for civil emergencies. Rule of thumb: the longer it took to come to a decision, the higher up the command structure the problem was being bumped. This one must be going right to the top. To the people authorized to make life or death decisions.

Intuition or just a crushing sense of doom, Chapman Adkinson started laughing gleefully.

The man turned to give him a strange look. "What?"

"You'll see, fella, soon enough. Tell me, are you the bio-hazard?"

"Am I a—"

The X-ray laser struck the plane while it was still eighty kilometres away from Atherstone. Ombey's low-orbit SD platform weapons could hit combat wasps while they were still two and a half thousand kilometres distant. The plane was a mere three hundred kilometres beneath the platform which Deborah Unwin activated. Oxygen and nitrogen atoms in the lower atmosphere simply cracked into their sub-atomic constituents as the X ray punched through the air, a searing purple lightning bolt eighty kilometres long. At its tip, the plane detonated into an ionized fog which billowed out like a miniature neon cyclone. Scraps of flaming, highly radioactive wreckage rained down on the pristine jungle below.

2

He was actually born in the United States of America, though few people ever liked to admit that particular fact, then or afterwards. His parents were from Naples; and Southern Italians were universally looked down on and despised even by other poor immigrant groups, let alone the superior intellectuals of the time who openly stated their hatred of such an inferior breed of humans. As a consequence, few biographers and historians ever admitted the simple truth. He was, above all, a bona fide made in America monster.

His birthplace was Brooklyn, on the chilly winter's day of January 17, 1899, the fourth son of Gabriele and Teresina. At that time the district was home to a seething mass of such burgeoning immigrant families trying to build fresh lives for themselves in this new land of promise. Work was hard, labour cheap, the infamous city political machine strong, and the street gangs and racketeers prominent. But among all these difficulties his father managed to earn enough to support his family. And as a barber he did so independently and honestly, rare enough in that time and place.

Gabriele's son never followed that route; there were just too many odds stacked against him. The whole Brooklyn environment seemed designed to turn its young male population from the good.

After being expelled from school at fourteen for fighting with his (female) teacher he began running errands for the local Association chief. He was one of the lowest of the low. But he learned: of men's vices and what they would do to obtain them, of the money to be made, of loyalty to his own, and most of all what people gave the Association's leader: respect. Respect was the key to the world, a commodity no one ever

showed him or his father. A man who was respected had everything, a prince among men.

It was during this criminal apprenticeship that the ultimate seeds of his destruction were sown, ironically by himself. He contracted syphilis in one of the many seedy brothels which local boys of his age and background visited on a regular basis. Like most people he survived the first stage, the boils on his tender genitalia healing within a couple of weeks. Nor did the second stage disturb him to any great extent; an equally short time spent suffering what he convinced himself was a bad case of flu.

Had he visited a doctor he would have been told that it is the tertiary stage which proves lethal in a fifth of those infected, eating away at the frontal lobes of the brain. But once the second stage has passed, the malicious disease becomes dormant for a long time, sometimes measurable in decades, lulling its victim into a false sense of security. He saw no reason to share the humiliating knowledge.

Paradoxically, it was this very disease which contributed to his inexorable rise over the next fifteen years. Because of the nature of its attack on the brain it amplified its victim's personality traits: traits which in his case had been forged in turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. They comprised contempt, hostility, anger in tandem with violence, greed, treachery, and guile. Excellent survival qualities for that particular dead-end district, but in a more civilized environment they set him apart. A barbarian in the city.

In 1920 he moved to Chicago. Within months he was heavily involved with one of the major syndicates. Until that era the syndicates ran the rackets and the brothels and the gambling joints, and raked in a good deal of hard currency. And at that relatively insignificant level they might well have remained. But that was the year when Prohibition came into effect throughout the nation.

The speakeasies opened, the back alley breweries flourished. Money flooded into the coffers of the syndicates, millions upon millions of easy, dirty dollars. It gave them a power base they had never dreamed of before. They bought the police, they owned the mayor and most of city hall, they intimidated the crusading newspapers and laughed at the law.

But money brought its own special problem. Everybody could see how vast the market was, how profitable. They all wanted a cut.

And that was where he finally came into his own. Whole districts of Chicago degenerated into war zones as gangs and syndicates and bosses fought like lions for territory. With the neurosyphilis gradually eroding his rationality he emerged from the ranks of his contemporaries as the most ruthless, the most successful, and the most feared gang boss of them all. Quirks became vainglorious eccentricities; he opened soup kitchens for the poor; for slain colleagues he threw funeral parades which brought the entire city to a halt; he craved publicity and held press conferences to promote his magnanimity in giving people what they really wanted; he sponsored broke jazz musicians. His flamboyance became as legendary as his brutality.

At its height his tyranny was sufficient to be raised at cabinet meetings in the White House. Nothing the authorities did ever seemed to make the slightest difference. Arrests, inquiries, indictments; he bought his way out with his money, while his reputation (and associates) kept witnesses silent.

So government did what government always does when confronted with an opposition which can't be brought down by fair and legal means. It cheated.

His trial for tax evasion was later described as a legal lynching. The Treasury made up new rules, and proved he was guilty of breaking them. A man who was both directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people was sentenced to eleven years in jail over delinquent taxes to the total of \$215,080.

His atrocious reign was ended, but his life took another sixteen years to wither. In his latter years, with the neurosyphilis raging in his head, he lost all grip on reality, seeing visions and hearing voices. His mind now roamed through a purely imaginary state.

His body ceased to function in a peaceful enough manner on January 25, 1947, in a big house in Florida, surrounded by his grieving family. But when you are already utterly insane, there is little noticeable difference from your very own delu-

sory universe and the distorted torment of the beyond into which your soul slips.

Over six hundred years passed.

The entity which emerged from the beyond into the fractured, bleeding body of Brad Lovegrove, fourth assistant manager (urban sanitation maintenance division) of the Tarosa Metamech Corp of New California, didn't even realize he was back in living reality. Not to start with, anyway.

The first possessed being to reach New California did so on a cargo starship from Norfolk, one of the twenty-two insurgents Edmund Rigby had helped possess in Boston. His name was Emmet Mordden, and as soon as he reached the planet's surface he began the process of conquest; snatching people off the streets and the autoways, inflicting agonizing injuries to weaken their spirits and open their minds to receive the souls in the beyond.

A small band of possessed filtered unobtrusively through the boulevards of San Angeles in the days which followed, slowly building up their own ranks. Like all of the possessed emerging across the Confederation they had no distinct strategy, simply a single driving impulse to bring more souls back from the beyond.

But this one among them was of no use to the cause. His mind shattered, he could relate to no external stimuli. He shouted hysterical warnings to his brother Frank, he wept, he delivered huge monologues about his shoe factory where he promised he'd give them all work, tiny spits of energy would fly from him without warning, he giggled constantly, he shat his pants and started slinging it about. Whenever they brought him food his energistic ability would turn it to the image of hot spicy pasta which gave off an appalling stink.

After two days, the growing cabal simply left him behind in the disused shop they'd been using as a base. Had they bothered to check him before they left they would have noticed that the behaviour was slightly more moderate, the talk more coherent.

Psychotic thought patterns which had formed in the early 1940s and run on unchecked for six centuries had finally begun to operate within a healthy neurone structure once more. There were no chemical imbalances, no spirochaete

bacteria, not even traces of mild alcohol toxicology, for Lovegrove didn't drink. His sanity gradually returned as thought processes began to move in more natural cycles.

He felt his mind and memories coming together as though he were emerging from the worst cocaine trip ever (his long-time vice back in the 1920s). For hours he simply lay on the floor trembling as events tumbled through his expanding consciousness. Events which sickened the heart, but which belonged to him nonetheless.

He never heard the shop's service door open, the surprised grunt of the realtor agent, the heavy footsteps marching towards him. A hand closed around his shoulder and shook him strongly.

"Hey, dude, how did you get in here?"

He flinched violently and looked up to see a man in a very strange helmet, as if glossy green beetle wings had folded over his skull. Blank, golden bubble eyes stared down at him. He screamed and spun over. The equally startled realtor took a pace backwards, reaching for the illegal nervejam stick in his jacket pocket.

Despite six hundred years of technological development he could still recognize a hand weapon when he saw one. Of course, the real giveaway was the expression of superiority and nervous relief on the realtor's face; the one every frightened man wears when a piece has suddenly swung the odds back in his favour.

He drew his own gun. Except it wasn't exactly a draw—no holster. One second he wanted a gun, the next his fingers were gripping a Thompson submachine gun. He fired. And the once-familiar roar of the weapon nicknamed a trench broom hammered his ears again. A curiously white flame emerged from the barrel as he trained it on the cowering figure of the realtor, fighting the upwards kick.

Next, all that was left was a mangled, jerking body pumping gallons of blood onto the bare carbon-concrete floor. The craterous wounds were smoking, as if the bullets had been incendiaries.

Bulge-eyed and horrified, he stared at the corpse for a moment, then vomited helplessly. His head was whirling as

though the eternal nightmare was returning to clasp him once more.

“Christ no,” he groaned. “No more of that crap. Please.” The Thompson submachine gun had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared. Ignoring the nausea which sent shivers down every limb he staggered out through the door and into the street. Crazy images mugged him. His head slowly tipped back to view the pulp-magazine fantasy into which he had emerged. Low wispy clouds scudding in from the ocean were sliced apart by the chromeglass sword-blade skyscrapers which made up downtown San Angeles. Prismatic light gleamed and sparkled off every surface. Then he saw the naked crescent of a small reddish moon directly overhead. Starship exhausts swarmed casually across the cobalt sky like incandescent fireflies. His jaw dropped in absolute bewilderment. “Goddamn, what the hell *is* this place?” demanded Alphonse Capone.

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Ombey’s rotation had carried the Xingu continent fully into the centre of the darkside as the Royal Navy flyer Ralph Hiltch was using passed over the outskirts of Pasto. The city was situated on the western coast, growing out from the Falling Jumbo seaport in a sustained hundred-year development spree. It was flat country, ideal for urbanization, placing minimal problems in the path of the ambitious civil engineers. Most of the level districts were laid out in geometric patterns, housing estates alternating with broad parks and elaborate commercial districts. Hills, such as they were, had been claimed by the richer residents for their chateaus and mansions.

Accessing the flyer’s sensor suite, Ralph could see them standing proud in their own lakes of illumination at the centre of large sable-black grounds. The narrow, brightly lit roads which wound around the hills were the only curves amid the vast grid of brilliant orange lines spread out below him. Pasto looked so beautifully crisp and functional, a grand symbol of the Kingdom’s economic prowess, like a merit badge pinned on the planet.

And somewhere down there, amid all that glittering regimented architecture and human dynamism, were people who

could bring the whole edifice crashing down. Probably within a couple of days, certainly no more than a week.

Cathal Fitzgerald angled the flyer towards the big cube-shaped building which was the Xingu police force headquarters. They landed on a roof pad, at the end of a row of small arrowhead-planform hypersonic planes.

Two people were waiting for Ralph at the bottom of the airstairs. Landon McCulloch, the police commissioner, was a hale seventy-year-old, almost two metres tall, with thick crew-cut ginger hair, dressed in a midnight-blue uniform with several silver stripes on his right arm. Beside him was Diana Tiernan, the police department's technology division chief, a fragile, elderly woman dwarfed by her superior officer, a contrast which tended to emphasise her scholarly appearance.

"I appreciate you coming down," Landon said as he shook hands with Ralph. "It can't have been an easy choice for you to face this thing again. The datapackage briefing I've had from Admiral Farquar gave me a nasty jolt. My people aren't exactly geared up to cope with this kind of incident."

"Who is?" Ralph said, a shade too mordantly. "But we coped on Lalonde; and we aim to do a little better here."

"Glad to hear it," Landon said gruffly. He nodded crisply to the other three ESA agents coming down the airstairs; Will and Dean carrying their combat gear in a couple of bulky bags. His lips twitched in a memory-induced smile of admiration as he eyed the two G66 division troopers. "Been a while since I was at that end of an operation," he murmured.

"Any update on the plane which was shot down?" Ralph asked as they all walked towards the waiting lift.

"Nobody survived, if that's what you mean," Diana Tierman said. She gave Ralph a curious look. "Was that what you meant?"

"They're tough bastards," Will said curtly.

She shrugged. "I accessed a recording of Adkinson's datavise. This energy manipulation ability Savion Kerwin demonstrated seemed quite extraordinary."

"He didn't show you a tenth of what he could do," Ralph said.

The lift doors closed, and they descended to the command centre. It had been designed to handle every conceivable civil

emergency, from a plane crash in the heart of the city to outright civil war, a windowless room which took up half of the floor. Twenty-four separate coordination hubs were arranged in three rows, circles of consoles with fifteen operators apiece. Their access authority to the continent's net was absolute, providing them with unparalleled sensor coverage and communications linkages.

When Ralph walked in every seat was taken, the air seemed almost solid with the laserlight speckles thrown off by hundreds of individual AV projection pillars. He saw Leonard DeVile sitting at Hub One, a raised ring of consoles in the middle of the room. The Home Office minister's welcoming handshake lacked the sincerity of McCullock's.

Ralph was quickly introduced to the others at Hub One: Warren Aspinall, the Prime Minister of the Xingu continental parliament; Vicky Keogh, who was McCullock's deputy; and Bernard Gibson, the police Armed Tactical Squad commander. One of the AV pillars was projecting an image of Admiral Farquar.

"All air traffic was shut down twenty minutes ago," said Landon McCullock. "Even police patrol flights are down to a complete minimum."

"And the crews of those that are still in the air have been required to datavise files from their neural nanonics to us here," Diana said. "That way we can be reasonably certain that none of them have been infected by Tremarco or Gallagher."

"There was an awful lot of traffic using the city roads when I flew over," Ralph said. "I'd like to see that shut down now. I can't emphasise enough that we must restrict the population's movement."

"It's only ten o'clock in Pasto," Leonard DeVile said. "People are still on their way home, others are out for the evening and will want to return later. If you shut down the city's ground traffic now you will cause an astounding level of confusion, one which would be beyond the police force's ability to resolve for hours. And we must have the police in reserve to deal with the embassy people when we detect them. We thought it made more sense to allow everyone to go home as normal, then introduce the curfew. That way, the vast ma-

majority will be confined to their houses come tomorrow morning. And if Tremarco and Gallagher have started infecting them, any outbreak will be localized, which means we should be able to isolate it relatively easily.”

Sit down and make an impact, why not? Ralph thought sourly. I’m supposed to listen and advise, not barge in and act like a loudmouth arsehole. Damn, but Kerwin and the plane has me hyped too hot.

Trying to hide how foolish he felt, he asked: “What time will you introduce the curfew?”

“One o’clock,” the Prime Minister said. “Only die-hard nightbirds will still be out and about then. Thank heavens it’s not Saturday night. We really would have been in trouble then.”

“Okay, I can live with that,” Ralph said. There was a quick victory smile on DeVille’s face, which Ralph chose to ignore. “What about the other cities and towns; and more importantly the motorways?”

“All Xingu’s urban areas are having their curfew enacted at one o’clock,” McCulloch said. “The continent’s got three time zones, so it’ll be phased in from the east. As for the motorways, we’re already shutting down their traffic; so cities and major towns are going to be segregated. That wasn’t a problem, all motorway vehicles are supervised by the Transport Department route and flow management computers. It’s the vehicles on the minor roads which are giving us a headache; they’re all switched to autonomous control processors. And even worse are the farm vehicles out there in the countryside, half of those bloody things have manual steering.”

“We estimate it will take another three hours to completely shut down all ground traffic movement,” Diana said. “At the moment we’re setting up an interface between Strategic Defence Command and our police traffic division. That way when the low-orbit SD sensor satellites locate a vehicle moving on a minor road they’ll perform an identification sweep and catalogue it. Traffic division will then datavise the control processor to halt. For manually operated vehicles we’ll have to dispatch a patrol car.” A hand waved lamely in the air. “That’s the theory, anyway. A continent-wide detection and

identification operation is going to tie up an awful lot of processing power, which we really can't spare right now. If we're not very careful we'll wind up with a capacity shortfall."

"I thought that was impossible in this day and age," Warren Aspinall interjected mildly.

Diana's humour became stern. "Under normal circumstances, yes. But what we're attempting to do has no precedent." She offered the others sitting at Hub One a reluctant shrug. "My team has got three AIs in the basement and two at the university which are attempting to access and analyse every single processor in the city simultaneously. It's a refinement of Admiral Farquar's idea of tracking the energy virus through the electronic distortion it generates. We've seen it demonstrated on Adkinson's plane, so we know the approximate nature of the beast. All we have to do is perform the most massive correlation exercise ever mounted. We find out which processors have suffered glitches during the last eight hours, and cross-reference the time and geographical location. If it happened to several unrelated processors in the same area at the same time, then it's a good chance the glitch was caused by someone who has the virus."

"Every processor?" Vicky Keogh queried.

"Every single one." Just for a moment, Diana's dried-up face wore an adolescent's smile. "From public net processors to streetlight timers, AV adverts, automatic doors, vending machines, mechanoids, personal communications blocks, household supervisor arrays. The lot."

"Will it work?" Ralph asked.

"No reason why not. As I said, there's a possible capacity problem, and the AIs might not manage to format the correlation program within the time frame we need. But when the program comes on-line it should provide us with the electronic equivalent of seeing footprints in snow."

"And then what?" Warren Aspinall asked quietly. "That's what you were really brought down here for, Ralph. What do we do with these people if we find them? There is something of a political dimension involved in using the SD systems every time we locate one of the afflicted. I don't dispute the necessity of eliminating Adkinson's plane. And people will certainly agree to us using force to obliterate the threat to start

with. But ultimately we have to find a method of eradicating the energy virus itself, and without damaging the victim. Not even the Princess can go on authorizing such destruction for ever, not when it's aimed against the Kingdom's own subjects."

"We're working on it," said Admiral Farquar. "Gerald Skibbow is going into personality debrief right now. If we can find out how he was infected, and how he was purged, then we ought to be able to come up with a solution, some kind of countermeasure."

"How long will that take?" Leonard DeVille asked.

"Insufficient information," the admiral answered. "Skibbow isn't very strong. They're going to have to go easy on him."

"Yet if our preparations are to mean anything," Landon McCulloch said, "we have to catch the embassy duo tonight, or tomorrow morning at the latest. And not just them, but anyone they've come into contact with. This situation could escalate beyond our ability to contain. We must have a policy ready for dealing with them. So far the only thing we know that works is overwhelming firepower."

"I've got two things to offer," Ralph said. He looked at Bernard Gibson, and gave him a penitent smile. "Your squads are going to have to take the brunt of this, especially to start with."

The police AT Squad commander grinned. "What we get paid for."

"Okay, here it is then. First off, contact with someone who is carrying the energy virus doesn't necessarily mean you contract it yourself. Will and Dean are excellent proof of that. They captured Skibbow, they manhandled him, they were in very close proximity to him for hours, and they're both fine. Also, I was on the *Ekwan* with the embassy trio for a week, and I wasn't infected.

"Secondly, despite their power they can be intimidated into submission. But you have to be prepared to use ultraviolence against them, and they have to know that. One hint of weakness, one hesitation, and they'll hit you with everything they've got. So when we do find the first one, it'll be me and my team which heads the actual assault. Okay?"

"I'm not arguing so far," Bernard Gibson said.

"Good. What I envisage is spreading the experience of an assault in the same fashion the virus is spread. Everyone who is with me on the first assault will be able to familiarise themselves with what has to be done. After that you assign them to head their own squads for the next round of captures, and so on. That way we have your whole division brought up to speed as swiftly as possible."

"Fine. And what do we do with them once we've subdued them?"

"Shove them into zero-tau."

"You think that's what got rid of Skibbow's virus?" Admiral Farquar asked sharply.

"I believe it's a good possibility, sir. He was extremely reluctant to enter the pod in *Ekwan*. Right up until then he was quite docile. When he found out we were going to put him in the pod, he became almost hysterical. I think he was frightened. And certainly when he came out of the pod at this end the virus was gone."

"Excellent." Warren Aspinall smiled at Ralph. "That course of action is certainly more palatable than lining them all up against a wall and shooting them."

"Even if zero-tau isn't responsible for erasing the virus, we know it can contain them the same way it holds ordinary people," Ralph said. "We can keep them in stasis until we do find a permanent solution."

"How many zero-tau pods have we got available?" Landon asked Diana.

The technology division chief had a long blink while her neural nanonics chased down the relevant files. "Here in the building there are three. Probably another ten or fifteen in the city in total. They tend to be used almost exclusively by the space industry."

"There's five thousand unused pods in the *Ekwan* right now," Ralph pointed out. "That ought to be enough if this AI correlation program works. Frankly, if we need more than that, we've lost."

"I'll get some maintenance crews to start disconnecting them straight away," Admiral Farquar said. "We can send them down to you in cargo flyers on automatic pilot."

“That just leaves us with forcing infected people into them,” Ralph said. He caught Bernard’s gaze. “Which is going to be even worse than capturing them.”

“Possible trace,” Diana announced without warning as she received a datavise from one of the AIs. Everyone sitting at Hub One turned their attention on her. “It’s a taxi which left the spaceport twenty minutes after the embassy trio’s spaceplane arrived. The vehicle’s processor array started suffering some strange glitches five minutes later. Contact was lost after a further two minutes. But it can’t have been a total shut-down, because traffic control has no record of a breakdown in that sector this afternoon. It simply dropped out of the route and flow control loop.”

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The warehouse which housed Mahalia Engineering Supplies was sealed up tight, one of twenty identical buildings lined up along the southern perimeter of the industrial park, separated from its neighbour by strips of ancient concrete and ranks of spindly trees planted to break the area’s harshness. It was seventy metres long by twenty-five wide, fifteen high; dark grey composite panels without a single window. From outside it looked inert; innocuous if somewhat spurned of late. Furry tufts of Ombey’s aboriginal vegetation were rooting in the gutters. Denuded chassis of ancient farm vehicles were stacked three or four deep along one wall, sleeting rust onto the concrete.

Ralph focused his shell helmet’s sensors on the broad roll-up door in the centre of the end-wall fifty meters in front of him. It had taken him and his team four minutes to get here from police headquarters in one of the force’s hypersonics, following the city-wide trail of route and flow processor dropouts located by Diana and the AIs. Three police Armed Tactical Squads had also been dispatched to the industrial park, under orders from Bernard Gibson. In total, eight of the little planes had landed, encircling the warehouse at a five-hundred-metre distance.

There wasn’t a single crack of light leaking around the door. No sign of life. Infrared didn’t reveal much, either. He scanned along the side of the building again.

“The conditioning unit is on,” Ralph observed. “I can see

the motor's heat, and the grille's venting. Someone's in there."

"Do you want us to infiltrate a nanonic sensor?" Nelson Akroid asked. He was the AT Squad's captain, a stocky man in his late thirties, barely coming up to Ralph's shoulder. Not quite the image one expected from someone in his profession, but then Ralph was used to the more bulky G66 troops. Ralph suspected Nelson Akroid would be a healthy opponent in any hand-to-hand fighting, though; he had the right kind of subdued competence.

"It's a big building, plenty of opportunities for ambush," Nelson Akroid said. "We'd benefit from positioning them exactly. And my technical operators are good. The hostiles would never know they'd been infiltrated." He sounded eager, which could be a flaw given this situation. Ralph couldn't imagine him and his squad seeing much active duty on Ombey. Their lot was more likely endless drills and exercises, the curse of any specialist field.

"No nanonics," Ralph said. "We could never depend on them anyway. I want the penetration team to deploy using standard search and seizure procedures. We can't believe any information from a sensor, so I want them going in fully alert."

"Yes, sir."

"Diana?" he datavisied. "What can the AIs tell me?"

"No change. There are no detectable glitches in the warehouse processors it can access. But there's very little electronic activity in there anyway, the office and administration systems are all switched off, so that doesn't mean much."

"What's the taxi's maximum capacity?"

"Six. And the Industry Department says Mahalia employs fifteen staff. They service and distribute parts for agricultural machinery right across the continent."

"Okay, we'll assume the worst case. A minimum of twenty-one possible hostiles. Thanks, Diana."

"Ralph, the AIs have discovered another two possible glitch traces in the city's route and flow network. I instructed them to concentrate on vehicle traffic around the spaceport in the period after the embassy trio arrived. Another taxi suffered a lot of problems, and the other's a freight vehicle."

“Shit! Where are they now?”

“The AIs are running search routines; but these two are proving harder to find than the first taxi. I’ll keep you updated.”

The channel closed. Ralph reviewed the AT Squad as they closed in on the warehouse, black figures who seemed more mobile shadows than solid people. They know their job, he admitted grudgingly.

“Everyone’s in place, sir,” Nelson Akroid datavised. “And the AIs have taken command of the security cameras. The hostiles don’t know we’re here.”

“Fine.” Ralph didn’t tell him that if Tremarco or Gallagher were in there they’d know for sure that the AT Squad was outside. He wanted the squad charged up and professional, not shooting at phantoms.

“Stand by,” Ralph datavised to the Squad. “Status of the assault mechanoids, please?”

“On-line, sir,” the AT Squad’s technical officer reported.

Ralph gave the roll-up door another scan. Like Pandora’s box, once it was open there would be no going back. And only he, Roche Skark, and Admiral Farquar knew that if the virus carriers got past the AT Squad, then the industrial park would be targeted by SD platforms.

He could *feel* the low-orbit observation satellite sensors focusing on him.

“Okay,” he datavised to the squad. “Go.”

• • •

The assault mechanoid which Ombey’s AT Squads employed looked as if the design team had been accessing too many horror sensevises for inspiration. Three metres high at full stretch, it had seven plasmatic legs, resembling tentacles with hooves, which could move it over the most jumbled terrain at a sprint that even boosted humans couldn’t match. Its body was a segmented barrel, giving it a serpentine flexibility. There were sockets for up to eight specialist limb attachments, varying from taloned climbing claws to mid-calibre gaussrifles. Control could be either autonomous, operating under a preloaded program, or a direct waldo datavise.

Five of them charged across the parking yard outside the

warehouse, covering the last thirty metres in two seconds. Long, whiplike cords lashed out from the top of their bodies, slashing against the door's centimetre-thick composite. Where they hit, they stuck, forming a horizontal crisscross grid four metres above the ground. A millisecond later the cords detonated; the shaped electron explosive charge was powerful enough to cut clean through a metre of concrete. The ruined door didn't even have time to fall. All five assault mechanoids slammed against it in a beautiful demonstration of synchronized mayhem. What was left of the door buckled and burst apart, sending jagged sections tumbling and bouncing down the warehouse's central aisle.

With a clear field of fire established, the mechanoids sent a fast, brutal barrage of short-range sense-overload ordnance blazing down the length of the building. Sensors instantly pinpointed the designated-hostile humans flailing around in panic, and concentrated their fire.

Behind the assault mechanoids, the AT Squad flashed through the smoking doorway. They scuttled for cover between the stacks of crates, scanning the deeper recesses of the warehouse for hidden hostiles. Then, with the mechanoids taking point duty down the central aisle, they began to fan out in their search and securement formation.

Mixi Penrice, proprietor of Mahalia Engineering Supplies, had been struggling to remove the linear motor from the stolen taxi's rear axle when the assault mechanoids crashed into the warehouse door. The noise of the shaped electron explosive charges going off was like standing next to a lightning strike.

Shock made him jump half a metre in the air, not an easy feat given he was about twenty kilos overweight. Terrible lines of white light flared at the far end of the warehouse, and the door bulged inwards briefly before it disintegrated. But he wasn't so numbed that he didn't recognize the distinctive silhouette of the assault mechanoids sprinting through the swirl of smoke and composite splinters. Mixi shrieked and dived for the floor, arms wrapping around his head. The full output of the sense-overload ordnance struck him. Strobing light which seemed to shine through his skull. Sound that was trying hard to shake every joint apart. The air turned to rocket

exhaust, burning his tongue, his throat, his eyes. He vomited. He voided both his bladder and his bowels; a combination of sheer fright and nerve short-out pulses.

Three minutes later, when pain-filled consciousness returned, he found himself lying flat on his back, shaking spasmodically, with disgustingly thick liquids cooling and crusting across his clothes. Five large figures wearing dark armour suits were standing over him, horribly big guns trained on his abdomen.

Mixi tried to clasp his hands together in prayer. It was the day which in his heart he'd always known would come, the day when King Alastair II dispatched all the forces of law and order in his Kingdom to deal with Mixi Penrice, car thief and trader in stolen parts. "Please," he babbled weakly. He couldn't hear his own voice; too much blood was running out of his ears. "Please, I'll pay it all back. I promise. I'll tell you who my fences are. I'll give you the name of the bloke who wrote the program which screws up the road network processors. You can have it all. Just, please, don't kill me." He started sobbing wretchedly.

Ralph Hiltch slowly pulled back his shell helmet's moulded visor. "Oh, *fuck!*" he yelled.

• • •

The white plaster and stone interior of Cricklade's family chapel was comfy and sober without the exorbitant lavishness prevalent throughout the rest of the manor. Its history was cheerful, anyone walking into it for the first time was immediately aware of that; you only had to close your eyes to see the innumerable christenings, the grand marriage ceremonies of the heirs, Christmas masses, choral evenings. It was as much a part of the Kavanaghs as the rich land outside.

Now though, its gentle sanctity had been methodically violated. Icon panels defaced, the dainty stained-glass windows broken, the statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary smashed. Every crucifix had been inverted; red and black pentagrams daubed on the walls.

The despoiling soothed Quinn as he knelt at the altar. Before him an iron brazier had been set up on top of the thick

stone slab. Avaricious flames were busy consuming the Bibles and hymn books it contained.

His body's lusts satiated by Lawrence, fed on gourmet food, and overindulged on the bottles of vintage Norfolk Tears from the cellar, he felt miraculously calm. Behind him, the ranks of novices stood to attention as they waited to be inducted into the sect. They would stand there, motionless, for all of eternity if necessary. They were that scared of him.

Luca Comar stood in front of them, like some masterful drill sergeant. His dragon armour glistened dully in the firelight, small plumes of orange smoke snorting from his helmet's eye slits. He had worn the guise almost continually since possessing Grant Kavanagh's body. Compensating for some deep psychological fracture, Quinn thought. But then everyone returning from beyond was flaky to some degree.

Quinn allowed his contempt to rise, the raw emotion bubbling into his brain. The hem of his robe gave a small flutter. Here on Norfolk such pitiful masquerades would triumph, but on few other worlds. Most Confederation planets would fight back against the incursions of the possessed, and those were the planets which counted. The planets where the real war would be fought, the universal war for belief and devotion between the two celestial brothers. Norfolk was irrelevant to that struggle, it could contribute nothing, no weapons, no starships.

He lifted his gaze above the flames darting out of the brazier. A vermillion sky was visible through the gaping rents in the broken window. Less than a dozen first magnitude stars twinkled above the wolds, the rest of the universe had been washed out in the red dwarf's sullied glow. The tiny blue-white lights seemed so delicate and pure.

Quinn smiled at them. His calling was finally revealed. He would bring his divine gift of guidance to the lost armies which God's Brother had seeded throughout the Confederation. It would be a crusade, a glorious march of the dead, folding the wings of Night around every spark of life and hope, and extinguishing it for ever.

First he would have to raise an army, and a fleet to carry them. A frisson of his own, very personal desire kindled in his mind. The serpent beast speaking right into his heart. Ban-

neth! Banneth was at the very core of the Confederation, where the greatest concentration of resources and weapons lay.

The obedient novices never moved when Quinn rose to his feet and turned to face them. There was an amused sneer on his snow-white face. He jabbed a finger at Luca Comar. "Wait here, all of you," he said, and stalked down the aisle. Dark magenta and woad moire patterns skipped across the black fabric of his robe, reflections of his newfound determination. A click of his fingers, and Lawrence Dillon scurried after him.

They passed quickly through the ransacked manor, and down the portico's stone steps to the farm rangers parked on the gravel. A smudge of smoke on the horizon betrayed Colsterworth's position.

"Get in," Quinn said. He was on the verge of laughter.

Lawrence clambered into the front passenger seat as Quinn switched the motor on. The vehicle sped down the drive, sending pebbles skidding onto the grass verge.

"I wonder how long they'll stay in there like that?" Quinn mused.

"Aren't we coming back?"

"No. This crappy little world is a dead end, Lawrence. There's nothing left for us here, no purpose. We have to get off; and there aren't many navy starships in orbit. We've got to reach one before they all leave. The Confederation will be waking to the threat soon. They'll recall their fleets to protect the important worlds."

"So where are we going if we do get a frigate?"

"Back to Earth. We have allies there. There are sects in every major arcology. We can gnaw at the Confederation from within, corrupt it completely."

"Do you think the sects will help us?" Lawrence asked, curious.

"Eventually. They might need a little persuading first. I'll enjoy that."

• • •

The AT Squad had the exclusive shop completely surrounded. Moyce's of Pasto occupied a more hospitable sec-

tion of the city than the Mahalia warehouse. The building's design was an indulgent neo-Napoleonic, overlooking one of the main parks. It catered to the aristocracy and the wealthy, trading mainly on snob value. The shop itself was only a fifth of the business; Moyce's main income came from supplying goods and delicacies to estates and the upwardly mobile clear across the continent. There were eight separate loading bay doors at the back of the building to accommodate the fleet of lorries which were dispatched every night. Their feed roads merged into a single trunk road which led down into a tunnel where it joined one of the city's three major underground ring motorways.

At ten past midnight its distribution centre was normally busy loading lorries with the day's orders. Nothing had emerged in the four minutes it had taken the AT Squad to deploy. However, there was one vehicle parked outside the end loading bay, obstructing the road: the taxi which the AI cores had traced from the spaceport. All its electrical circuits had been switched off.

Fifteen assault mechanoids dashed up the slope to the loading bay doors, their movements coordinated by the Squad's seven technical officers. Three of the doors were to be broken down, while the others were to be blocked and guarded. One had been assigned to the taxi.

Six of the assault mechanoids lashed out with their electron explosive whips. Squad members were already running up the feed roads behind them.

Not all of the whips landed on target. Several detonations chopped into support pillars and door joists. Brick-sized lumps of stone came flying back down the feed roads. Two of the assault mechanoids were hit by the chunks, sending them cartwheeling backwards. The entire central loading bay collapsed, bringing with it a large section of the first-storey floor. An avalanche of crates and cylindrical storage pods tumbled down onto the road, burying a further three assault mechanoids. They started to fire their sense-overload ordnance at random; flares and sonic shells punching out from the wreckage amid huge fountains of white packaging chips. Crumpled kitchen units and patio furniture skittered down the mound.

The AT Squad members dived for cover as another two mechanoids started to gyrate in a wild dance. Their ordnance sprayed out, slamming into walls and arching away over the park. Only three of the remaining assault mechanoids were actually firing ordnance into the two loading bays which had been broken open.

“Pull them back!” Ralph datavised to the technical officers. “Get those bloody mechanoids out of there.”

Nothing happened. Sense-overload ordnance was squirting out everywhere. The assault mechanoids continued their lunatic dance. One pirouetted, twining its seven legs together, and promptly fell over. Ralph watched a dozen flares shoot straight upwards, illuminating the whole area. Black figures were lying prone on the feed roads, horribly exposed. A sense-overload flare speared straight into one of them; then it expanded strangely, creating a web of rippling white light. The suited figure thrashed about.

“Shit,” Ralph grunted. It wasn’t a flare, it was the white fire. They were in the distribution centre! “Shut down those mechanoids now,” he datavised. His neural nanonics reported that several of his suit systems were degrading.

“No response, sir,” a technical officer replied. “We’ve lost them completely, even their fallback routine has failed. How did they do that? The mechanoids are equipped with military-grade electronics, a megaton emp couldn’t glitch their processors.”

Ralph could imagine the officer’s surprise. He’d undergone it himself back on Lalonde as the awful realization struck. He stood up from behind the parapet on top of the tunnel entrance, and lifted the heavy-calibre recoilless rifle. Targeting graphics flipped up over his helmet’s sensor image. He fired at an assault mechanoid.

It exploded energetically, its power cells and ordnance detonating as soon as the armour-piercing round penetrated its flexing body. The blast wave shifted half of the precariously tangled wreckage in front of the collapsed loading bay. More crates thumped down from the sagging first-storey floor. Three assault mechanoids were sent lurching back down the feed roads, plasmatic legs juddering in fast undulations.

Ralph shifted his aim and took out another one just as it started to lumber upright.

“Squad, shoot out the mechanoids,” he ordered. His communications block informed him that half of the command channels had shut down. He switched on the block’s external speaker and repeated the order, bellowing it out across the feed roads at a volume which could be heard above the detonating mechanoids.

A streak of white fire lanced down from one of Moyce’s upper windows. The threat response program in Ralph’s neural nanonics bullied his leg muscles with nerve impulse overrides. He was flinging himself aside before his conscious mind had registered the attack.

Two more mechanoids exploded as he hit the concrete behind the parapet. He thought he recognized the heavy-calibre gaussrifle which the G66 troops used. Then an insidious serpent of white fire was coiling around his knee. His neural nanonics instantly erected analgesic blocks across his nerves, blanking out the pain. A medical display showed him skin and bone being eaten away by the white fire. The whole knee joint would be ruined in a matter of seconds if he couldn’t extinguish it. Yet both Dean and Will said smothering it like natural flames made hardly any difference.

Ralph assigned his neural nanonics full control of his musculature, and simply designated the window which the white fire had emerged from. With detached interest he observed his body swivelling, the rifle barrel swinging round. His retinal target graphics locked over a window. Thirty-five rounds pummelled the black rectangle, a mixed barrage of high explosive (chemical), shrapnel, and incendiary.

Within two seconds the room had ceased to exist, its carved stone frontage disintegrating behind a vast gout of flame and showering down on the melee below.

The white fire around Ralph’s knee vanished. He pulled a medical nanonic package from his belt and slapped it on the charred wound.

Down on the feed roads most of the AT Squad had switched to their communications block speakers. Orders, warnings, and cries for help reverberated over the sound of multiple explosions. A vast fusillade of heavy-calibre rifle fire was

pounding into the loading bays. Comets of white fire poured out in retaliation.

“Nelson,” Ralph datavised. “For Christ’s sake, make sure the troops out front don’t let anyone escape. They’re to hold position and shoot to kill now. Forget the capture mission; we’ll try it back here, but nobody else is to attempt anything fancy.”

“Yes, sir,” Nelson Akroid answered.

Ralph went back to the speaker. “Cathal, let’s try and get in there. Isolation procedure. Separate them, and nuke them.”

“Sir.” The cry came back over the parapet.

At least he’s still alive, Ralph thought.

“Do you want stage two yet?” Admiral Farquar datavised.

“No, sir. They’re still contained. Our perimeter is holding.”

“Okay, Ralph. But the second there’s a status change, I need to know.”

“Sir.”

His neural nanonics reported the medical package had finished knitting to his knee. The weight load it could take was down forty percent. It would have to do. Ralph tucked the heavy-calibre rifle under his arm, then bending low, he ran for the end of the parapet and the steps down to the trunk road.

Dean Folan signalled his team members forward, scurrying around the side of the big mound of crates and into the loading bay area. Flames had taken hold amid the fragments piled outside.

It was dark inside the loading bays. Projectile impacts had etched deep pocks into the bare carbon-concrete walls. Rat-tail tangles of wire and fibre-optic cable hung down from the fissured ceiling, swaying gently. Through the helmet’s goggle lenses he could see very little, even with enhanced retinas on full sensitivity. He switched his shell helmet sensors to low light and infrared. Green and red images merged to form a pallid picture of the rear of the loading bay. Annoying glare spots flickered as small flames licked at the storage frames which lined the walls. Discrimination programs worked at eliminating them.

There were three corridors leading off straight back from the rear of the bay, formed by the storage frames. Metal grids containing crates and pods ready for the lorries, they looked

like solid walls of huge bricks. Cargo-handling mechanoids had stalled on their rails which ran along the side of the frames, plasmatic arms dangling inertly. Water was pouring out of five or six broken ceiling pipes, spilling down the crates to pool on the floor.

Nothing moved in the corridors.

Dean left his gaussrifle at the head of the middle corridor, knowing it would be useless at close range, the electronic warfare field would simply switch it off. Instead, he drew a semi-automatic rifle; it had a feed loop connected to his backpack, but the rounds were all chemical. The AT Squad had grumbled about that at the start, questioning the wisdom of abandoning their power weapons. Nobody had complained much after the mechanoids went berserk, and their suit systems suffered innumerable dropouts.

Three of the team followed him as he advanced down the corridor, also carrying semi-automatics. The rest of them spread out around the bay and edged down the other two corridors.

A figure zipped across the end of the corridor. Dean fired, the roar of the semi-automatic impressively loud in the confined space. Plastic splinters from the crates ricocheted through the air as the bullets chiselled into them.

Dean started running forwards. There was no corpse on the floor.

“Radford, did you see him?” Dean demanded. “He was heading towards your corridor.”

“No, Chief.”

“Anybody?”

All he got was a series of negatives, some shouted, some datavised. No doubt the hostiles were about, his suit blocks were still badly affected by the electronic warfare field. His injured arm was itchy, too.

He reached the end of the corridor. It was a junction to another three. “Hell, it’s a sodding maze back here.”

Radford arrived at the end of his corridor, semi-automatic sweeping the storage frames.

“Okay, we fan out here,” Dean announced. “All of you: keep two other squad members in visual range at all times. If

you lose sight of your partners, then stop immediately and re-establish contact.”

He picked one of the corridors leading deeper into the shop and beckoned a couple of the Squad to follow him.

A creature landed on top of Radford; half man, half black lion, features merged grotesquely. Its weight carried him effortlessly to the floor. Dagger claws scraped at Radford's armour suit. But the integral valency generators had stiffened the fabric right from the moment of impact, protecting the vulnerable human skin inside. The creature howled in fury, thwarted at the very moment of triumph.

Radford's suit systems as well as his neural nanonics began to fail. Even his shocked yell was cut off as the communications block speaker died. The suit's fabric started to give way, slowly softening. One of the claw tips screwed inwards, hungry for flesh.

Even amid his frantic twisting and bucking to throw off the creature Radford was aware of a whisper which bordered on the subliminal. It had surely been there all his life, but only now with the prospect of death sharpening his perception was he fully conscious of it. It began to expand, not in volume, but in harmony. A whole chorus of whispers. Promising love. Promising sympathy. Promising to help, if he would just—

Bullets smashed into the flanks of the creature, mauling the fur and long muscle bands. Dean kept his semi-automatic steady as the thing clung to Radford's body. He could see the armour suit fabric hardening again, the claws slipping and skidding.

“Stop!” one of the team was shouting. “You'll kill Radford.”

“He'll be worse than dead if we don't,” Dean snarled back. Spent casings were hurtling out of the rifle at an astounding rate. Still the beast wouldn't let go, its great head shaking from side to side, emitting a continual wail of pain.

The team was rushing en masse towards Dean down the narrow corridors between the storage frames. Two more were shouting at him to stop.

“Get back!” he ordered. “Keep watching for the rest of the bastards.” His magazine was down to eighty per cent. The rifle didn't have the power to beat the creature, all the thing

had to do was hang on. Blood was running down its hind legs, the fur where the bullets struck a pulped mass of raw flesh. Not enough damage, not nearly enough.

“Someone else fire at it for Christ’s sake,” Dean yelled frantically.

Another rifle opened up; the second stream of bullets catching the creature on the side of its lycanthrope head. It let go of Radford, to be flung against the storage frame. The rampant wail from its gaping fangs redoubled.

Dean boosted the communications block’s volume to its highest level. “Surrender or die,” he told it.

It might have had a beast’s form, but the look of absolute hatred came from an all-too-human eye.

“Grenade,” Dean ordered.

A small grey cylinder thumped into the bloody body.

Dean’s armour suit froze for a second. His collar sensors picked up the detonation: explosion followed by implosion. The outline of the beast collapsed into a middle-aged man, colour draining away. For a millisecond the man’s frame was captured perfectly, sprawled against the storage frame. Then the bullets resumed their attack. This time, he had no defence.

Dean had seen worse carnage, though the limited space between the storage frames made it appear terrible. Several of the AT Squad obviously didn’t have his experience, or phlegmatism.

Radford was helped to his feet and mumbled a subdued thanks. The sound of other teams from the AT Squad shooting somewhere in the building echoed tinnily down the corridors.

Dean gave them another minute to gather their composure, then resumed the sweep. Ninety seconds after they started, Alexandria Noakes was calling for him.

She’d discovered a man hunched up in a gap between two crates. Dean rushed up to find her prodding the captive out of his hiding place with nervous thrusts of her rifle. He levelled his own rifle squarely on the man’s head. “Surrender or die,” he said.

The man gave a frail little laugh. “But I am dead, señor.”

• • •

Eight police department hypersonics had landed in the park outside Moyce’s of Pasto. Ralph limped wearily towards the

one which doubled as a mobile command centre for the AT Squad. There wasn't that much difference from the rest, except it had more sensors and communications gear.

It could have been worse, he told himself. At least Admiral Farquar and Deborah Unwin had stood down the SD platforms, for now.

Stretchers with injured AT Squad members were arranged in a row below a couple of the hypersonics. Medics were moving among them, applying nanonic packages. One woman had been shoved into a zero-tau capsule, her wounds requiring immediate hospital treatment.

A big crowd of curious citizens had materialized, milling about in the park and spilling out across the roads. Police officers had thrown up barricades, keeping them well away.

Nine bulky fire department vehicles were parked outside Moyce's of Pasto. Mechanoids trailing hoses had clambered up the walls with spiderlike tenacity, pumping foam and chemical inhibitors into smashed windows. A quarter of the roof was missing. Long flames were soaring up into the night sky out of the gap. Heat from the inferno was shattering the few remaining panes, creating more oxygen inflows.

It was going to be a long time before Moyce's would be open for business again.

Nelson Akroid was waiting for him at the foot of the command hypersonic's airstairs. His shell helmet was off, revealing a haggard face; a man who has seen the ungodly at play. "Seventeen wounded, three fatalities, sir," he said in a voice close to breaking. His right hand was covered by a medical nanonic package. Scorch marks were visible on his armour suit.

"And the hostiles?"

"Twenty-three killed, six captured." He twisted his head around to stare at the blazing building. "My teams, they did all right. We train to cope with nutters. But they beat those *things*. Christ—"

"They did good," Ralph said quickly. "But, Nelson, this was only round one."

"Yes, sir." He straightened up. "The final sweep through the building was negative. I had to pull them out when the fire took hold. I've still got three teams covering it in case there

are any hostiles still in there. They'll do another sweep when the fire's out."

"Good man. Let's go see the prisoners."

The AT Squad was taking no chances; they were holding the six captives out on the park, keeping them a hundred metres apart. Each one stood in the centre of five squad members, five rifles trained on them.

Ralph walked over to the one Dean Folan and Cathal Fitzgerald were guarding. He datavised his communications block to open a channel to Roche Skark. "You might like to see this, sir."

"I accessed the sensors around Moyce's when the AT Squad went in," the ESA director datavised. "They put up a lot of resistance."

"Yes, sir."

"If that happens each time we locate a nest of them, you'll wind up razing half the city."

"The prospects for decontaminating them aren't too good, either. They fight like mechanoids. Subduing them is tricky. These six are the exception."

"I'll bring the rest of the committee in on the questioning. Can we have a visual please?"

Ralph's neural nanonics informed him that other people were coming on-line to observe the interview: the Privy Council security committee over in Atherstone, and the civil authorities in Pasto's police headquarters. He instructed his communications block to widen the channel's bandwidth to a full sensewise, allowing them to access what he could see and hear.

Cathal Fitzgerald acknowledged him with the briefest nod as he approached. The man he was guarding was sitting on the grass, pointedly ignoring the semi-automatics directed at him. There was a slim white tube in his mouth. Its end was alight, glowing dully. As Ralph watched, the man sucked his cheeks in, and the coal glow brightened. He removed the tube from his mouth and exhaled a thin jet of smoke.

Ralph exchanged a puzzled frown with Cathal, who merely shrugged.

"Don't ask me, boss," Cathal said.

Ralph ran a search program through his neural nanonics

memory cells. The general encyclopedia section produced a file headed: Nicotine Inhalation.

“Hey, you,” he said.

The man looked up and took another drag. “*Sí, señor.*”

“That’s a bad habit, which is why no one has done it for five centuries. Govcentral even refused an export licence for nicotine DNA.”

A sly, sulky smile. “After my time, *señor.*”

“What’s your name?”

“Santiago Vargas.”

“Lying little bastard,” Cathal Fitzgerald said. “We ran an ident check. He’s Hank Doyle, distribution supervisor for Moyce’s.”

“Interesting,” Ralph said. “Skibbow claimed to be someone else when he was caught: Kingsford Garrigan. Is that what the virus is programmed to do?”

“Don’t know, *señor.* Don’t know any virus.”

“Where does it come from? Where do you come from?”

“Me, *señor?* I come from Barcelona. A beautiful city. I show you around sometime. I lived there many years. Some happy years, and some with my wife. I died there.”

The cigarette glow lit up watery eyes which watched Ralph shrewdly.

“You died there?”

“*Sí, señor.*”

“This is bullshit. We need information, and fast. What’s the maximum range of that white fire weapon?”

“Don’t know, *señor.*”

“Then I suggest you run a quick memory check,” Ralph said coldly. “Because you’re no use to me otherwise. It’ll be straight into zero-tau with you.”

Santiago Vargas stubbed his cigarette out on the grass. “You want me to see how far I can throw it for you?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.” He climbed to his feet with indolent slowness.

Ralph gestured out over the deserted reaches of the park. Santiago Vargas closed his eyes and extended his arm. His hand blazed with light, and a bolt of white fire sizzled away. It streaked over the grass flinging out a multitude of tiny sparks as it went. At a hundred metres it started to expand and

dim, slowing down. At a hundred and twenty metres it was a tenuous luminescent haze. It never reached a hundred and thirty metres, evaporating in midair.

Santiago Vargas wore a happy smile. "All right! Pretty good, eh, señor? I practice, I maybe get better."

"Believe me, you won't have the opportunity," Ralph told him.

"Okay." He seemed unconcerned.

"How do you generate it?"

"Don't know, señor. I just think about it, and it happens."

"Then let's try another tack. Why do you fire it?"

"I don't. That was the first time."

"Your friends didn't have any of your inhibitions."

"No."

"So why didn't you join them? Why didn't you fight us?"

"I have no quarrel with you, señor. It is the ones with *passion*, they fight your soldiers. They bring back many more souls so they can be strong together."

"They've infected others?"

"Sí."

"How many?"

Santiago Vargas offered up his hands, palms upwards. "I don't think anyone in the shop escaped possession. Sorry, señor."

"Shit." Ralph glanced back at the burning building, just in time to see another section of roof collapse. "Landon?" he datavised. "We'll need a full list of staff on the nighttime shift. How many there were. Where they live."

"Coming up," the commissioner replied.

"How many of the infected left before we arrived?" he asked Santiago Vargas.

"Not sure, señor. There were many trucks."

"They left on the delivery lorries?"

"Sí. They sit in the back. You don't have no driver's seat these days. All mechanical. Very clever."

Ralph stared in dismay at the sullen man.

"We've been concentrating on stopping passenger vehicles," Diana Tiernan datavised. "Cargo traffic was only a secondary concern."

“Oh, Christ, if they got on to the motorways they could be halfway across the continent by now,” Ralph said.

“I’ll reassign the AI vehicle search priority now.”

“If you find any of Moyce’s lorries that are still moving, target them with the SD platforms. We don’t have any other choice.”

“I agree,” Admiral Farquar datavised.

“Ralph, ask him which of the embassy pair was in Moyce’s, please,” Roche Skark datavised.

Ralph pulled a processor block from his belt, and ordered it to display pictures of Jacob Tremarco and Angeline Gallagher. He thrust it towards Vargas. “Did you see either of these people in the shop?”

The man took his time. “Him. I think.”

“So we’ve still got to find Angeline Gallagher,” Ralph said. “Any more city traffic with glitched processors?”

“Three possibles,” Diana datavised. “We’ve already got two of them located. Both taxis from the spaceport.”

“Okay, assign an AT Squad to each taxi. And make sure there are experienced personnel in both of them. What was the third trace?”

“A Longhound bus which left the airport ten minutes after the embassy trio landed; it was a scheduled southern route, right down to the tip of Mortonridge. We’re working on its current location.”

“Right, I’m coming back to the police headquarters. We’re finished here.”

“What about him?” Nelson Akroid asked, jerking a thumb at the captive.

Ralph glanced back. Santiago Vargas had found another cigarette from somewhere and was smoking it quietly. He smiled. “Can I go now, señor?” he asked hopefully.

Ralph returned the smile with equal honesty. “Have the zero-tau pods from *Ekwan* arrived yet?” he datavised.

“The first batch are due to arrive at Pasto spaceport in twelve minutes,” Vicky Keogh replied.

“Cathal,” Ralph said out loud. “See if Mr Vargas here will cooperate with us for just a little longer. I’d like to know the limits of the electronic warfare field, and that illusion effect of theirs.”

“Yes, boss.”

“After that, take him and the others on a sightseeing trip to the spaceport. No exceptions.”

“My pleasure.”

• • •

The Loyola Hall was one of San Angeles’s more prestigious live-event venues. It seated twenty-five thousand under a domed roof which could be retracted when the weather was balmy, as it so frequently was in that city. There were excellent access routes to the nearby elevated autoway; the subway station was a nexus for six of the lines which ran beneath the city; it even had seven landing pads for VIP aircraft. There were five-star restaurants and snack bars, hundreds of rest rooms. Stewards were experienced and friendly. Police and promoters handled over two hundred events a year.

The whole site was an operation which functioned with silicon efficiency. Until today.

Eager kids had been arriving since six o’clock in the morning. It was now half past seven in the evening. Around the walls they were thronging twenty deep; scums outside the various public doors needed police mechanoids to maintain a loose kind of order, and even they were in danger of being overwhelmed. The kids had a lot of fun spraying them with soft drinks and smearing ice creams over the sensors.

Inside the hall every seat was taken, the tickets bought months ago. The aisles were filled with people, too, though how they had got in past the processor-regulated turnstiles was anyone’s guess. Touts were becoming overnight millionaires, those that weren’t being arrested or mugged by gangs of motivated fourteen-year-olds.

It was the last night of Jezzibella’s Moral Bankruptcy tour. The New California system had endured five weeks of relentless media saturation as she swept across the asteroid settlements and down to the planetary surface. Rumour, of AV projectors broadcasting illegal activent patterns during her concerts to stimulate orgasms in the audience (not true, said the official press release, Jezzibella has abundant sexuality of her own, she doesn’t need artificial aids to boost the Mood

Fantasy she emotes). Hyperbole, about the President's youngest daughter being completely infatuated after meeting her, then sneaking out of the Blue Palace to go backstage at her concert (Jezzibella was delighted and deeply honoured to meet all members of the First Family, and we are not aware of any unauthorized entry to a concert). Scandal, when two of the band, Bruno and Busch, were arrested for violating public decency laws in front of a senior citizens holiday group, their bail posted at one million New California dollars (Bruno and Busch were engaged in a very wonderful, sensitive, and private act of love; and that bunch of filthy old perverts used enhanced retinas to spy on them). Straight hype, when Jezzibella visited (as a private citizen—so no sensevises, please) a children's ward in a poor district of town, and donated half a million fuseodollars to the hospital's germ-line treatment fund. Editorial shock at the way she flaunted her thirteen-year-old male companion, Emmerson (Mr Emmerson is Jezzibella's second cousin, and his passport clearly states he is sixteen). A lot of spectator fun, and official police cautions, derived from the extraordinarily violent fights between her entourage's security team and rover reporters. The storm of libel writs issued by Leroy Octavius, her manager, every time anyone suggested she was older than twenty-eight.

And in all those five weeks she never gave an interview, never made a single public utterance outside of her stage routine. She didn't have to. In that time, the regional office of Warner Castle Entertainment datavised out thirty-seven million copies of her new MF album *Life Kinetic* across the planet's communications net to worshipful fans; her back catalogue sold equally well.

The starship crews who normally made a tidy profit from selling a copy of an MF album to a distributor in star systems where they hadn't been officially released yet cursed their luck when they arrived on planets where Jezzibella had passed through in the last eighteen months. But then that was the point of being a touring artist. A new album every nine months, and visit ten star systems each year; it was the only way you could beat the bootleggers. If you weren't prepared to do that, the only money you ever got was from your home star system. Few made the transition from local wonder to galactic mega-

star. It took a lot of money to travel, and entertainment companies were reluctant to invest. The artist had to demonstrate a colossal degree of professionalism and determination before they were worth the multimillion-fuseodollar risk. Once they'd breached the threshold, of course, the old adage of money making more money had never been truer.

High above the costly props and powerful AV stacks onstage, an optical-band sensor was scanning the crowd. Faces merged into a monotonous procession as it swept along the tiers and balconies. Fans came in distinct categories: the eager exhilarated ones, mostly young; boisterous and expectant, late teens; impatient, already stymied-out, nervous, fearfully worshipful, even a few who obviously wanted to be somewhere else but had come along to please their partner. Every costume Jezzibella had ever worn in an MF track was out there somewhere, from the simple to the peacock bizarre.

The sensor focused on a couple in matching leathers. The boy was nineteen or twenty, the girl at his side a bit younger. They had their arms around each other, very much in love. Both tall, healthy, vital.

Jezzibella cancelled the datavise from the sensor. "Those two," she told Leroy Octavius. "I like them."

The unpleasantly overweight manager glanced at the short AV pillar sticking out of his processor block, checking the two blithesome faces. "Roger dodger. I'll get on it."

There was no quibbling, not the faintest hint of disapproval. Jezzibella liked that; it was what made him such a good manager. He understood how it was for her, the things she required in order to function. She needed kids like those two. Needed what they'd got, the naivete, the uncertainty, the delight at life. She had none of that left, now, not the sweet side of human nature. The eternal tour had drained it all away, somewhere out among the stars; one energy which could leak out of a zero-tau field. Everything became secondary to the tour, feelings weren't allowed to interfere. And feelings suppressed long enough simply vanished. But she couldn't have that, because she needed an understanding of feelings in order to work. Circles. Her life was all circles.

So instead of her own emotions, she familiarised herself with this alien quality which others owned, examining it as if

she were performing a doctoral thesis. Absorbed what she could, the brief taste allowing her to perform again, to fake it through yet one more show.

“I don’t like them,” Emmerson said petulantly.

Jezzibella tried to smile at him, but the whole charade of pandering to him bored her now. She was standing, stark naked, in the middle of the green room while Libby Robosky, her personal image consultant, worked on her dermal scales. The bitek covering was a lot more subtle than a chameleon layer, allowing her to modify her body’s whole external texture rather than simply changing colour. For some numbers she needed to have soft, sensitive skin, a young girl who quivered at her first lover’s touch; then there was the untainted look, a body which was naturally graceful without workouts and fad diets (like the girl she’d seen through the hall’s sensor); and of course the athlete/ballerina body, supple, hard, and muscular—big favourite with the boys. It was the feel of her which everyone out there in the hall wanted to experience; Jezzibella in the flesh.

But the tiny scales had a short lifetime, and each one had to be annealed to her skin separately. Libby Robosky was an undoubted wizard when it came to applying them, using a modified medical nanonic package.

“You don’t have to meet them,” Jezzibella told the boy patiently. “I can take care of them by myself.”

“I don’t want to be left alone all night. How come I can’t pick someone out of the audience for myself?”

As the reporters had been allowed to discover, he really was only thirteen. She’d brought him into the entourage back on Borroloola, an interesting plaything. Now after two months of daily tantrums and broodiness the novelty value had been exhausted. “Because this is the way it has to be. I need them for a reason. I’ve told you a hundred times.”

“Okay. So why don’t we do it now, then?”

“I have a show in a quarter of an hour. Remember?”

“So what?” Emmerson challenged. “Skip it. That’ll cause a real publicity storm. And there won’t be any backlash ’cos we’re leaving.”

“Leroy,” she datavised. “Take this fucking brat away before I split his skull open to find out where his brain went.”

Leroy Octavius waddled back over to where she stood. His bulky frame was clad in a light snakeskin jacket that was an optimistic size and a half too small. The tough, thin leather squeaked at every motion. "Come on, son," he said in a gruff voice. "We're supposed to leave the artists to it this close to a show. You know how spaced out they get about performing. How about you and I have a look at the food they're laying on next door?"

The boy allowed himself to be led away, Leroy's huge hand draped over his shoulder, casually forceful.

Jezzibella groaned. "Shit. Why did I ever think his age made him exciting?"

Libby's indigo eyes fluttered open, giving her a quizzical look. Out of all the sycophants, hangers-on, outright parasites, and essential crew, Jezzibella enjoyed Libby the most. A grandmotherly type who always dressed to emphasise her age, she had the stoicism and patience to absorb any tantrum or crisis with only the vaguest disinterested shrug.

"It was your hormones which went a-frolicking at the sight of his baby dick, poppet," Libby said.

Jezzibella grunted, she knew the rest of the entourage hated Emmerson. "Leroy," she datavised. "I paid that hospital we visited enough fucking money; have they got a secure wing we could leave the juvenile shit in?"

Leroy gave a backwards wave as he left the green room. "We'll talk about what we're going to do with him later," he replied.

"You fucking finished yet?" Jezzibella asked Libby.

"Absolutely, poppet."

Jezzibella composed herself, and ordered her neural nanonics to send a sequence of encoded impulses down her nerves. There was an eerie sensation of wet leather slithering on the top of her rib cage, all four limbs shivered. Her shoulders straightened of their own accord, belly muscles tightened, sinuous lines hardened under skin that was turning a deeper shade of bronze.

She dug deep into her memory, finding the right sensation of pride and confidence. Combined with the physique it was synergistic. She was adorable, and knew it.

“Merrill!” she yelled. “Merrill, where the fuck’s my first-act costume?”

The flunky hurried over to the big travelling trunks lined up along a wall and began extracting the requisite items.

“And why haven’t you shitheads started warming up yet,” she shouted at the musicians.

The green room abruptly became a whirlwind of activity as everyone found legitimate employment. Private, silent datavises flashed through the air as they all discussed the impending frailty of Emmerson’s future. It diverted them from how precarious their own tenures were.

• • •

Ralph Hiltch accessed various reports as he flew back over the city. The priority search which Diana Tiernan’s department had initiated was producing good results. According to the city’s route and flow road processor network, fifty-three lorries had left Moyce’s that evening. The AIs were now chasing after them.

Within seven minutes of Diana assigning the lorries full priority, twelve had been located, all outside the city. The coordinates were datavised into the Strategic Defence Command up in Guyana, and sensor satellites triangulated the targets for low-orbit weapons platforms. A dozen short-lived violet starbursts blossomed across Xingu’s southern quarter.

By the time Ralph’s hypersonic landed another eight had been added to the total. He’d stripped off his damaged lightweight armour suit in the plane, borrowing a dark blue police fatigue one-piece. It was baggy enough to fit over his medical nanonic package without restriction. But for all the package’s support, he was still limping as he made his way over to Hub One.

“Welcome back,” Landon McCulloch said. “You did a good job, Ralph. I’m grateful.”

“We all are,” Warren Aspinal said. “And that’s not just a politician speaking. I have a family in the city, three kids.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ralph sat down next to Diana Tiernan. She managed a quick grin for him. “We’ve been checking up on the night shift at Moyce’s,” she said. “There were forty-five on duty this evening. As of now, the AT Squads have ac-

counted for twenty-nine during the assault, killed and captured.”

“Shit. Sixteen of the bastards loose,” Bernard Gibson said.

“No,” Diana said firmly. “We think we may have got lucky. I’ve hooked the AIs into the fire department’s mechanoids; their sensors are profiled for exploring high temperature environments. So far they’ve located a further five bodies in the building, and there’s still thirty per cent which hasn’t been covered. That accounts for all but eleven of the night shift.”

“Still too many,” Landon said.

“I know. But we’re certain that six of the lorries zapped so far contained a shift member. Their processors and ancillary circuits were suffering random failures. It matched the kind of interference which Adkinson’s plane suffered.”

“And then there were five,” Warren Aspinall said quietly.

“Yes, sir,” Diana said. “I’m pretty sure they’re in the remaining lorries.”

“Well I’m afraid ‘pretty sure’ isn’t good enough when we’re facing a threat which could wipe us out in less than a week, Chief Tiernan,” said Leonard DeVile.

“Sir.” Diana didn’t bother to look at him. “I wasn’t making wild assumptions. Firstly, the AIs have confirmed that there was no other traffic logged as using Moyce’s since Jacob Tremarco’s taxi arrived.”

“So they left on foot.”

“Again, I really don’t think that is the case, sir. That whole area around Moyce’s is fully covered by security sensors, both ours and the private systems owned by the companies in neighbouring buildings. We accessed all the relevant memories. Nobody came out of Moyce’s. Just the lorries.”

“What we’ve seen tonight is a continuing pattern of attempted widespread dispersal,” Landon McCulloch said. “The embassy trio have been constant in their attempt to distribute the energy virus as broadly as possible. It’s a very logical move. The wider it is spread, the longer it takes for us to contain it, and the more people can be infected, in turn making it more difficult for us to contain. A nasty spiral.”

“They only have a limited amount of time in the city,” Ralph chipped in. “And the city is where we have the greatest advantage when it comes to finding and eliminating them.”

So they'll know it's a waste of effort trying to spread the contamination here, at least initially. Whereas the countryside tilts the balance in their favour. If they win out there, then Xingu's main urban areas will eventually become cities under siege. Again a situation which we would probably lose in the long run. That's what happened on Lalonde. I imagine that Durringham has fallen by now."

Leonard DeVille nodded curtly.

"The second point," said Diana, "is that those infected don't seem able to halt the lorries. Short of them using their white fire weapon to physically destroy the motors or power systems the lorries aren't stopping before their first scheduled delivery point. And if they do use violence against a lorry the motorway processors will spot it straightaway. From the evidence we've accumulated so far it seems as though they can't use their electronic warfare field to alter a lorry's destination. It's powerful, but not sophisticated, not enough to get down into the actual drive control processors and tamper with on line programs."

"You mean they're trapped inside the lorries?" Warren Aspinal asked.

"Yes, sir."

"And none of the lorries have reached their destination yet," Vicky Keogh said, with a smile for the Home Office minister. "As Diana said, it looks like we got lucky."

"Well thank God they're not omnipotent," the Prime Minister said.

"They're not far short," Ralph observed. Even listening to Diana outline the current situation hadn't lifted his spirits. The crisis was too hot, too now. Emotions hadn't had time to catch up with events; pursuing the embassy trio was like space warfare, everything happening too quick for anything other than simplistic responses, there was no opportunity to take stock and think. "What about Angeline Gallagher?" he inquired. "Have the AIs got any further leads?"

"No. Just the two taxis and the Longhound bus," Diana said. "The AT Squads are on their way."

• • •

It took another twelve minutes to clear the taxis. Ralph stayed at Hub One while the interception operations were

running, receiving datavises from the two Squad commanders.

The first taxi was laid up beside one of the rivers which meandered through Pasto. It had stopped interfacing with the route and flow processors as it drew up next to a boathouse. Road monitor cameras had been trained on the grey vehicle for eleven minutes, seeing no movement from it or the boathouse.

The AT Squad members closed in on it, using standard leapfrog advancement tactics. Its lights were off, doors frozen half-open, no one inside. A technical officer opened a systems access panel and plugged his processor block into it. The police AI probed the vehicle's circuitry and memory cells.

"All clear," Diana reported. "A short circuit turned the chassis live, blew most of the processors, and screwed the rest. No wonder it showed up like one of our hostiles."

The second taxi had been abandoned in an underground garage below a residential mews. The AT Squad arrived just as the taxi company's service crew turned up to take it away on their breakdown hauler. Everyone at Hub One witnessed the scenes of hysterics and anger as the AT Squad took no chances with the three service crew.

After running an on-the-spot diagnostic, the crew discovered the taxi's electron matrix was faulty, sending huge power spikes through the on-board circuitry.

"Gallagher has to be on the bus," Landon McCulloch said as he cancelled his datavise to the AT Squad, the service crew's inventive obscenities fading from his borrowed perception.

"I can confirm that," Diana said. "The damn thing won't respond to the halt orders we're issuing via the motorway route and flow processors."

"I thought you said they couldn't alter programs with their electronic warfare technique," Leonard DeVille said.

"It hasn't altered its route, it just won't respond," she shot back. An almost uninterrupted three-hour stint spent interfacing with, and directing, the AIs, was beginning to fatigue her nerves.

Warren Aspinal gave his political colleague a warning frown.

“The AT Squad teams will be over the bus in ninety seconds,” Bernard Gibson said. “We’ll see exactly what’s going on then.”

Ralph datavised a tactical situation request into the hub’s processor array. His neural nanonics visualized a map of Xingu, a rough diamond with a downward curling cat’s tail. Forty-one of Moyce’s delivery lorries had been located and annihilated now, green and purple symbols displaying their movements, the locations when they were targeted. The bus was a virulent amber, proceeding down the M6 motorway which ran the length of Mortonridge, the long spit of mountainous land which poked southwards across the equator.

He switched to accessing the sensor suite on the lead hypersonic. The plane was just decelerating into subsonic flight. There was nothing any discrimination filter program could do about the vibration as it aerobraked. Ralph had to wait it out, impatience heating his blood feverishly. If Angeline Gallagher wasn’t on the bus, then they’d probably lost the continent.

The M6 was laid out below him in the clear tropical air. The hypersonic’s shaking damped out, and he could see hundreds of stationary cars, vans, buses, and lorries parked on the motorway’s service lanes. Headlights illuminated the lush verges, hundreds of people were milling around, some even settling down for midnight picnics by their vehicles.

The static pageant made the bus easy to spot, the one moving light source on the motorway, heading south at about two hundred kilometres an hour. It roared on past the riveted spectators lining the lane barrier, immune to the priority codes being fired into its circuitry from the motorway’s route and flow processors.

“What the hell is that thing?” Vicky Keogh voiced the unspoken question of everyone accessing the hypersonic’s sensor suite.

The Longhound Bus Company had a standardized fleet of sixty-seaters made on the Esparta continent, with a distinct green and purple livery. They were used all over Ombey, stitching together every continent’s cities and towns with an extensive, fast, and frequent service. The principality didn’t yet have the economy or population to justify vac train tubes

linking its urban areas like Earth and Kulu. So the Longhound buses were a familiar sight on the motorways; more or less everyone on the planet had ridden on one at some time in their lives.

But the runaway vehicle speeding down the M6 looked nothing like a normal Longhound. Where the Longhound's body was reasonably smooth and trim, this had the kind of sleek profile associated with the aerospace industry. A curved, wedge-shaped nose blending back into an oval cross-section body, with sharp triangular fin spoilers sprouting out of the rear quarter. It had a dull silver finish, with gloss-black windows. Greasy grey smoke belched out of a circular vent just behind the rear wheel set.

"Is it on fire?" a disconcerted Warren Aspinal asked.

"No, sir." Diana sounded ridiculously happy. "What you're seeing there is its diesel exhaust."

"A what exhaust?"

"Diesel. This is a Ford Nissan omnirover; it burns diesel in a combustion engine."

The Prime Minister had been running his own neural nanonics encyclopedia search. "An engine which burns hydrocarbon fuel?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's ridiculous, not to mention illegal."

"Not when this was built, sir. According to my files, the last one rolled off the Turin production line in 2043 AD. That's the city of Turin on Earth."

"Have you a record of any being imported by a museum or a private vehicle collector?" Landon McCullock asked patiently.

"The AIs can't find one."

"Jenny Harris reported a phenomenon similar to this back on Lalonde," Ralph said. "She saw a fanciful riverboat when I sent her on that last mission. They'd altered its appearance so it seemed old-fashioned, something from Earth's pre-technology times."

"Christ," Landon McCullock muttered.

"Makes sense," Diana said. "We're still getting a correct identification code from its processors. They must have thrown this illusion around the Longhound."

The hypersonic closed on the bus, sliding in over the motorway, barely a hundred metres up. Below it, the omniover was weaving from side to side with complete disregard for the lane markings. The ceaseless and random movement made it difficult for the pilot to stay matched directly overhead.

Ralph realized what had been bothering his subconscious, and requested a visual sensor to zoom in. "That's more than just a holographic illusion," he said after studying the image. "Look at the bus's shadow under those lights, it matches the outline."

"How do they do that?" Diana asked. Her voice was full of curiosity, with a hint of excitement bleeding in.

"Try asking Santiago Vargas," Vicky Keogh told her sharply.

"I can't even think of a theory that would allow us to manipulate solid surfaces like that," Diana said defensively.

Ralph grunted churlishly. He'd had a similar conversation back on Lalonde when they were trying to figure out how the LDC's observation satellite was being jammed. No known principle. The whole concept of an energy virus was a radical one.

"Possession," Santiago Vargas called it.

Ralph shivered. His Christian belief had never been that strongly rooted, but like a good Kingdom subject, it was always there. "Our immediate concern is what do we do about the bus. You might manage to land AT Squad teams on the thing if they were equipped with airpack flight suits, but they can hardly jump down from the hypersonic."

"Use the SD platforms to chop up the motorway ahead of it," Admiral Farquar suggested. "Force it to stop that way."

"Do we know how many people were on board?" Landon McCulloch asked.

"Full complement when it left Pasto spaceport, I'm afraid," Diana reported.

"Damn. Sixty people. We have to make at least an effort to halt it."

"We'd have to reinforce the AT Squads first," Ralph said. "Three hypersonics isn't enough. And you'd have to stop the bus precisely in the centre of a cordon. With sixty possible

hostiles riding on it, we'd have to be very certain no one broke through. That's wild-looking countryside out there."

"We can have reinforcements there in another seven minutes," Bernard Gibson said.

"Shit—" It was a datavise from the pilot. A big javelin of white fire streaked up from the bus, punching the hypersonic's belly. The plane quaked, then peeled away rapidly, almost rolling through ninety degrees. Bright sparkling droplets of molten ceramic sprayed out from the gaping hole in its fuselage to splash and burn on the motorway's surface. Its aerodynamics wounded, it started juddering continuously, losing height. The pilot tried desperately to right it, but he was already too low. He came to the same conclusion as the flight computer and activated the crash protection system.

Foam under enormous pressure fired into the cabin, swamping the AT Squad members. Valency generators turned it solid within a second.

The plane hit the ground, ploughing a huge gash through the vegetation and soft black loam. Nose, wings, and tailplane crumpled and tore, barbed fragments spinning off into the night. The bulky cylinder which was the cabin carried on for another seventy metres, flinging off structural spars and smashed ancillary modules. It came to a jarring halt, thudding into a steep earthen bluff.

The valency generators cut off, and foam sluiced out of the wreckage, mingling with the mud. Figures stirred weakly inside.

Bernard Gibson let out a painful breath. "I think they're all okay."

One of the other two hypersonics was circling back towards the crash. The second took up position a respectful kilometre behind the bus.

"Oh, Christ," Vicky Keogh groaned. "The bus is slowing. They're going to get off."

"Now what?" the Prime Minister demanded. He sounded frightened and angry.

"One AT Squad can't possibly contain them," Ralph said. It was like speaking treason. I betrayed those people. My failure.

“There are sixty people on that bus,” an aghast Warren Aspinal exclaimed. “We might be able to cure them.”

“Yes, sir, I know that.” Ralph hardened his expression, disguising how worthless he felt, and looked at Landon McCullock. The police chief obviously wanted to argue; he glanced at his deputy, who shrugged helplessly.

“Admiral Farquar?” Landon McCullock datavised.

“Yes.”

“Eliminate the bus.”

Ralph watched through the hypersonic’s sensor suite as the laser blast from low orbit struck the fantasm vehicle. Just for an instant he saw the silhouette of the real Longhound inside the illusory cloak, as if the purpose of the weapon was really to expose truths. Then the energy barrage incinerated the bus along with a thirty-metre-diameter circle of road.

When he looked around the faces of everyone sitting at Hub One, he saw his own dismay and horror bounced right back at him.

It was Diana Tiernan who held his gaze, her kindly old face crumpled up with tragic sympathy. “I’m sorry, Ralph,” she said. “We weren’t quick enough. The AIs have just told me the bus stopped at the first four towns on its scheduled route.”

3

Al Capone dressed as Al Capone had always dressed: with *style*. He wore a double-breasted blue serge suit, a paisley pattern silk tie, black patent leather shoes, and a pearl-grey fedora, rakishly aslant. Gold rings set with a rainbow array of deep precious stones glinted on every finger, a duck-egg diamond on his pinkie.

It hadn't taken him long to decide that the people in this future world didn't have much in the way of fashion sense. The suits he could see all followed the same loose silk design, although their colourful slimline patterns made them appear more like flappy Japanese pyjamas. Those not in suits wore variants on vests and sports shirts. Tight-fitting, too, at least for people under thirty-five. Al had stared at the dolls to start with, convinced they were all hookers. What kind of decent gal would dress like that, with so much showing? Skirts which almost didn't cover their ass, shorts that weren't much better. But no. They were just ordinary, smiling, happy, everyday girls. The people living in this city weren't so strung up on morality and decency. What would have given a Catholic priest apoplexy back home didn't raise an eyebrow here.

"I think I'm gonna like this life," Al declared.

Strange life that it was. He seemed to have been reincarnated as a magician: a real magician, not like the fancy tricksters he'd booked for his clubs back in Chicago. Here, whatever he wanted appeared out of nowhere.

That had taken a long while to get used to. Think and . . . *pow*. There it was, everything from a working Thompson to a silver dollar glinting in the hot sun. Goddamn useful for clothes, though. Brad Lovegrove had worn overalls of shiny dark red fabric like some kind of pissant garbage collector.

Al could hear Lovegrove whimpering away inside him,

like having a leprechaun nesting at the centre of his brain. He was bawling like a complete bozo, and making about as much sense. But there was some gold among the dross, twenty-four-karat nuggets. Like—when he first got his marbles together Al had thought this world was maybe Mars or Venus. Not so. New California didn't even orbit the same sun as Earth. And it wasn't the twentieth century no more.

Je-zus, but a guy needed a drink to help keep that from blowing his head apart.

And where to get a drink? Al imagined the little leprechaun being squeezed, as if his brain were one giant muscle. Slowly contracting.

A macromall on the intersection between Longwalk and Sunrise, Lovegrove squealed silently. There's a specialist store there with liquor from every Confederation planet, probably even got Earth bourbon.

Drinks from clear across the galaxy! How about that?

So Al started walking. It was a lovely day.

The sidewalk was so wide it was more like a boulevard in itself; there were no paving slabs, instead the whole strip had been made from a seamless sheet, a material which was a cross between marble and concrete. Luxuriant trees sprouted up through craters in the surface every forty yards or so, their two-foot sprays of floppy oval flowers an impossible shade of metallic purple.

He spotted a few trashcan-sized trucks trundling sedately among the walkers enjoying the late-morning sunshine, machinery smoother than Henry Ford had ever dreamed of. Utility mechanoids, Lovegrove told him, cleaning the sidewalk, picking up litter and fallen leaves.

The base of each skyscraper was given over to classy delis and bars and restaurants and coffee shops; tables spilled out onto the sidewalk, just like a European city. Arcades pierced deep into the buildings.

From what Al could see, it was the same kind of rich man's playground setup on the other side of the street, maybe a hundred and fifty yards away. Not that you could walk over to be sure, there was no way past the eight-foot-high glass and metal barrier which lined the road.

Al stood with his face pressed to the glass for some time,

watching the silent cars zoom past. Big bullets on wheels. All of them shiny, like coloured chrome. You didn't even have to steer them no more, Lovegrove told him, they did it themselves. Some kind of fancy electrical engine, no gas. And the speed, over two hundred kilometres an hour.

Al knew all about kilometres; they were what the French called miles.

But he wasn't too sure about using a car that he couldn't drive himself, not when it travelled that fast. And anyway, his presence seemed to mommick up electricity. So he stuck to walking.

The skyscrapers gave him vertigo they were so tall, and all you could see when you looked up at them was reflections of more skyscrapers. They seemed to bend over the street, imprisoning the world below. Lovegrove told him they were so high that their tops were designed to sway in the wind, rocking twenty-thirty metres backwards and forwards in slow motion.

"Shut up," Al growled.

The leprechaun curled up tighter, like a knotted snake.

People looked at Al—his clothes. Al looked at people, fascinated and jubilant. It was a jolt seeing blacks and whites mixing free, other types too, light-skinned Mediterranean like his own, Chinese, Indian. Some seemed to have dyed their hair completely the wrong colour. Amazing.

And they all appeared so much at ease with themselves, owning a uniform inner smile. They had a nonchalance and surety which he'd never seen before. The devil which drove so many people back in the twenties was missing, as if the city elders had abolished worry altogether.

They also had astonishingly good health. After a block and a half Al still hadn't seen anyone remotely overweight. No wonder they wore short clothes. A world where everyone was in permanent training for the big game, even the seventy-year-olds.

"You still got baseball, ain't you?" Al muttered under his breath.

Yes, Lovegrove confirmed.

Yep, paradise all right.

After a while he took off his jacket and slung it over his

shoulder. He'd been walking for a quarter of an hour, and it didn't look as if he'd got anywhere. The massive avenue of skyscrapers hadn't changed at all.

"Hey, buddy," he called.

The black guy—who looked like a prizefighter—turned and gave an amused grin as he took in Al's clothes. His arm was around a girl: Indian skin, baby blonde hair. Her long legs were shown off by a pair of baggy culottes.

Cutie pie, Al thought, and grinned at her. A real sweater girl. It suddenly struck him that he hadn't hit the sack with a woman for six centuries.

She smiled back.

"How do I call a cab around here?"

"Datavise the freeway processors, my man," the black guy said expansively. "City runs a million cabs. Don't make a profit. But then that's what us dumb taxpayers are for, to make up the shortfall, right?"

"I can't do the data thing, I ain't from around here."

The girl giggled. "You just get off a starship?"

Al tipped the rim of his fedora with two fingers. "Kind of, lady. Kind of."

"Neat. Where you from?"

"Chicago. On Earth."

"Hey, wow. I never met anyone from Earth before. What's it like?"

Al's grin lost its lustre. Je-zus, but the women here were forward. And the black guy's thick arm was still draped over her shoulder. He didn't seem to mind his girl making conversation with a total stranger. "One city's just like another," Al said; he gestured lamely at the silver skyscrapers, as if that was explanation enough.

"City? I thought you only had arcologies on Earth?"

"Look, you going to tell me how to get a fucking cab, or what?"

He'd blown it. The moment he saw the man's expression harden, he knew.

"You want us to call one for you, *buddy*?" The man was taking a longer, slower look at Al's clothes.

"Sure," Al bluffed.

"Okay. No problem. It's done." A phony smile.

Al wondered exactly what it was the man had actually done. He didn't have no Dick Tracy wrist radio to call for a cab or anything. Just stood there, smiling, playing Al for a sucker.

Lovegrove was filling Al's head with crap about miniature telephones in the brain. He had one fitted himself, he said, but it had packed up when Al possessed him.

"Going to tell me about Chicago now?" the girl asked.

Al could see how worried she was. Her voice, mannerisms, the way she had merged into her man's encircling arm. They all telegraphed it, and he knew how to read the signs. Fear in other people was wholly familiar.

He thrust his face forwards toward the black guy, snarling at the wiseass bastard. Just for an instant three long scars pulsed hotly on his left cheek. "Gonna remember you, cocksucker. Gonna find you again. Gonna teach you *respect*, and, buddy, it's gonna be the real hard way to learn." The old rage was burning in his body now, limbs trembling, voice rising to a thunderous roar. "Nobody shits on Al Capone! You got that? Nobody treats me like some dog turd you stepped in. I fuckin' ruled Chicago. I owned that city. I am not some asswipe street punk you can take for a ride. I. Deserve. RESPECT."

"Bastard Retro!" The man swung a punch.

Even if Lovegrove's body hadn't been enhanced with the energetic power which possessing souls exuded in the natural universe Al would probably have beaten him. His years in Brooklyn had pitched him into countless brawls, and people had quickly learned to steer clear of his awesome temper.

Al ducked instinctively, his right fist already coming up. The blow was focused, mentally and physically. He struck the man perfectly, catching him on the side of his jaw.

There was an ugly sound of bone shattering. Dead silence. The man flew backwards five yards through the air, hitting the sidewalk in a crumpled sprawl. He slid along the carbon concrete composite for another couple of yards before coming to rest, completely inert. Blood began to splatter from his mouth where serrated bone had punctured his cheek and lip.

Al stared, surprised. "Goddamn!" He started to laugh delightedly.

The girl screamed. She screamed and screamed.

Al glanced around, suddenly apprehensive. Everyone on the broad sidewalk was looking at him, at the injured black guy. "Shut up," he hissed at the loopy broad. "Shut up!" But she wouldn't. Just: scream, and scream, and scream. Like it was her profession.

Then there was another sound, cutting through her bawling, rising every time she took a breath. And Al Capone realized it wasn't just handguns he could recognize after six hundred years. Police sirens hadn't changed much either.

He started to run. People scattered ahead of him the way kittens ran from a pit bull. Cries and yells broke out all around.

"Stop him!"

"Move!"

"Stinking Retro."

"He killed that dude. One punch."

"No! Don't try to—"

A man was going for him. Beefy and hard-set, crouched low for a pro football tackle. Al waved a hand, almost casually, and white fire squirted into the hero's face. Black petals of flesh peeled back from the bone, sizzling. Thick chestnut hair flamed to ash. A dull agonized grunt, cutting off as pain overloaded his consciousness, and the man collapsed.

Then all hell really did hit the fan. Anxious people became a terrified mob. Stamping away from him. Fringe onlookers got caught and bowled over by thudding feet.

Al glanced back over his shoulder to see a section of the road barrier fold down. The squad car glided over it towards him. An evil-looking black and blue javelin-head, airplane-smooth fuselage. Dazzlingly bright lights flashed on top of it.

"Hold it, Retro," a voice boomed from the car.

Al's pace slackened. There was an arcade ahead of him, but its arching entrance was wide enough to take the squad car. Goddamn! Alive again for forty minutes and already running from the cops.

What else is new?

He stopped, and turned full square to face them, silver-plated Thompson gripped in his hands. And—oh, shit—another two squad cars were coming off the road, lining up directly towards him. Big slablike flaps were opening like

wings at their rear, and *things* came running out. They weren't human, they weren't animal. Machine animals? Whatever, they sure didn't look healthy. Fat dull-metal bodies with stumpy gun barrels protruding. Far too many legs, and all of those rubber, no knees or ankles.

Assault mechanoids, Lovegrove said. And there was a tinge of excitement in the mental voice. Lovegrove expected the things to beat him.

"They electric?" Al demanded.

Yes.

"Good." He glared at the one taking point, and cast his first sorcerer's spell.

Police patrol Sergeant Alson Loemer was already anticipating his promotion when he arrived at the scene. Loemer had been delighted as his neural nanonics received the updates from the precinct house. With his outlandish clothes, the man certainly looked like a Retro. The gang of history-costumed terrorists had been running the police department ragged for three days, sabotaging city systems with some new style of plasma weapon and electronic warfare field. Other acts too. Most officers had picked up strong rumours of snatches going down, people being lifted at random from the streets at night. And not one Retro had been brought to book. The news companies were datavisising hive loads of untamed speculation across the communications net: a religious group, a band of offplanet mercenaries, even wackier notions. The mayor was going apeshit, and leaning on the police commissioner. Smooth people from an unnamed government intelligence agency had been walking around the corridors at the precinct house. But they didn't know anything more than the patrol officers.

Now he, Sergeant Loemer, was going to nail one of those suckers.

He guided the patrol car over the folded barrier and onto the sidewalk. The crim was dead ahead, running for the base of the Uorestone Tower. Two more precinct cars were riding with Loemer, closing on the crim, hemming him in. Loemer deployed both of his patrol car's assault mechanoids, and datavisised in their isolate and securement instructions.

That was when the patrol car started to glitch, picking up

speed. The sensors showed him frightened citizens in front, racing to escape; one of the assault mechanoids wobbled past, shooting wildly. He fired shutdown orders into the drive processor. Not that it made much difference.

Then the Retro started shooting at the patrol cars. Whatever the gun was, it ripped straight through the armour shielding, smashing the axles and wheel hubs. Metal bearings screeched in that unique, and instantly recognizable, tone which heralded imminent destruction. Loemer thumped the manual safety cut out, killing power instantly.

The patrol car slewed around and bounced off the road barrier to smack straight into one of the Regree trees planted along the sidewalk. The internal crash alarm went off, half deafening an already dazed Loemer, and the emergency side hatch jettisoned. Loemer's bubble seat slid out along its telescoping rails. The translucent bubble's thick safety-restraint segments peeled back, allowing him to drop, wailing, to his knees as the air around him spewed out a terrible volley of sense overload impulses. His neural nanonics were unable to datavise a shutdown code into the crazed assault mechanoids. The last thing he saw as he fell onto the ground was the ruined Regree tree starting to keel over directly above him.

Even Al was bruised by the wild strafing of the sense-overload ordnance. The manic glee as he watched the patrol cars skid and smash was swiftly curtailed by the onslaught of light, sound, and smell. His energistic ability could ward off the worst of it, but he turned and began a stumbling run towards the arcade's entrance. Behind him the assault mechanoids continued to deluge the street with their errant firepower, lumbering about like drunks. Two ran into each other, and rebounded, falling over. Legs thrashed about in chaos, beetles flipped on their backs.

The sidewalk was littered with prone bodies. Not dead, Al thought, just terribly battered. Je-zus but those mechanical soldier contraptions were nasty pieces of work. And unlike real police, you wouldn't be able to buy them.

Maybe New California wasn't quite paradise after all.

Al staggered his way along the arcade, caught up in the flow of people desperate to escape the havoc. His suit faded

away, the sharp colour and cut reverting to Lovegrove's original drab overall.

He picked up a little girl whose eyes were streaming tears and carried her. It felt good to help. Those goddamn brainless pigs should have made sure she was out of the way before they came at him with guns blazing. It would never have happened back in Chicago.

Two hundred yards from the arcade entrance he stopped among a group of anxious, exhausted people. They'd come far enough from the sense-overload ordnance to be free of its effects. Families clung together, others were calling out for friends and loved ones.

Al put the little girl down, still crying, which he thought was due to the Kaiser gas rather than any kind of injury. Then her mother came rushing up and hugged her frantically. Al was given profuse thanks. A nice dame. Cared about her children and family. That was good, proper. He was sorry he wasn't wearing his fedora so he could tip it to her.

Just how did people express that kind of formal courtesy on this world anyhow? Lovegrove was puzzled by the question.

He carried on down the arcade. Cops would be swarming all over the joint in a few minutes. Another hundred and fifty yards, and he was out on the street again. He started walking. Direction didn't matter, just *away*. This time he kept Lovegrove's overalls on. No one paid him any attention.

Al wasn't entirely sure what to do next. Everything was so strange. This world, his situation. Mind, strange wasn't the word for it, more like overwhelming. Or just plain creepy. Bad to think that the priests had been right about the after-world, heaven and hell. He never went to church much, much to his momma's distress.

I wonder if I've been redeemed, paid my celestial dues. Is that why I'm back? But if you got reincarnated didn't you start off as a baby?

They weren't the kind of thoughts he was used to.

A hotel, he told Lovegrove, I need to rest up and think about what to do.

Most of the skyscrapers had some sort of rentable accommodation, apparently. But it would have to be paid for.

Al's hand automatically went to a leg pocket. He drew out

a Jovian Bank credit disk, a thick, oversize coin, sparkly silver on one side, magenta on the other. Lovegrove obediently explained how it worked, and Al put his thumb on the centre. A hash of green lines wobbled over the silver side.

“Goddamn!” He tried again, concentrating, wishing. Doing the magic.

The green lines began to form figures, crude at first, then sharp and regular. You could store an entire planet’s treasury in one of these disks, Lovegrove told him. Al’s ears pricked up at that. Then he was aware of something being not quite right. A presence, close by.

He hadn’t really thought about the others. Those who had been there when he came into Lovegrove’s body. The same ones who had deserted him in the disused shop. But if he closed his eyes, and shut out the sounds of the city, he could hear the distant babelesque clamour. It came from the nightmare domain, the pleas and promises to be brought forth, to live and breathe again.

That same perception gave him a most peculiar vision of the city. Walls of thick black shadow amid a universal grey-ness. People moved through it all, distorted whispers echoing all around, audible ghosts. Some *different* from others. Louder, clearer. Not many of them among the multitude.

Al opened his eyes and looked down the road. A section of the barrier was folding down neatly. One of the bullet cars drew to a halt beside it. The gull-wing door slid up, and inside was a proper car, a genuine American convertible wearing the streamlined image of the New California vehicle like a piece of clothing. It was low-slung, with a broad hood and lots of chrome trim. Al didn’t recognize the model, it was more modern than anything in the twenties, and his memory of the thirties and forties wasn’t so hot.

The man in the red leather driving seat nodded amicably. “You’d better get in,” he said. “The cops are going to catch you if you stay out on the street. They’re a mite worked up about us.”

Al glanced up and down the sidewalk, then shrugged and climbed in.

Inside, the image of the bullet car tinted the air like a stained soap bubble.

"The name's Bernhard Allsop," the man behind the steering column said. He swung the car out into the road. Behind them the barrier rose up smoothly. "I always wanted me an Oldsmobile like this beauty, never could afford it back when I was living in Tennessee."

"And this is real now?"

"Who knows, boy? But it sure feels real. And I'm mighty grateful for the opportunity to ride one. You might say I thought it had passed me by."

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

"Caused a bit of commotion back there, boy. Them pigs is riled good and proper. We were monitoring what passes for their radio band these days."

"I just wanted a cab, that's all. Someone tried to get smart."

"There's a trick to riding around this town without the police knowing. Be happy to show you how sometime."

"Appreciate it. Where are we going?"

Bernhard Allsop grinned and winked. "Gonna take you to meet the rest of the group. Always need volunteers, they're kinda hard to come by." He laughed, a high-pitched stuttering yodel reminding Al of a piglet.

"They left me behind, Bernhard. I don't have anything to say to them."

"Yeah, well. You know how it was. You weren't altogether there, boy. I said we should have taken you along with us. Kin is kin, even though it ain't exactly family here, know what I mean? Glad to see you came through in the end, though."

"Thank you."

"So what's your name, boy?"

"Al Capone."

The Oldsmobile swerved as Bernhard flinched. His knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the wheel; then he risked an anxious sideways glance at his passenger. Where before there had been a twenty-year-old man dressed in a set of dark red overalls, there was now a debonair Latin-ethnic character in a double-breasted blue suit and pigeon-grey fedora.

"You shitting me?"

Al Capone reached into his suit and produced a miniature baseball bat. A now highly apprehensive Bernhard Allsop

watched it grow to full size. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what the black stains around the end were.

"No," Al said politely. "I'm not shitting you."

"Holy Christ." He tried to laugh. "Al Capone."

"Yeah."

"Holy Christ. Al Capone in my car! Ain't that something?"

"That's certainly something, yeah."

"It's a pleasure, Al. Christ, I mean that. A real pleasure. Hell, you were the best, Al, the top man. Everybody knew that. Run a bit of moonshine in my day. Nothing much, a few slugs, is all. But you, you ran it for a whole city. Christ! Al Capone." He slapped the steering wheel with both hands, chortling. "Damn, but I can't wait to see their faces when I bring you in."

"Bring me in to what, Bernhard?"

"The group, Al, the group. Hey, you don't mind if I call you Al, do you? I don't want to give no offence, or nothing. Not to you."

"That's okay, Bernhard, all my friends call me Al."

"Your *friends*. Yes siree!"

"What does this group of yours do, exactly, Bernhard?"

"Why, get larger, of course. That's all we can do for now. Unity is strength."

"You a Communist, Bernhard?"

"Hey! No way, Al. I'm an American. I hate the filthy Reds."

"Sounds like you are to me."

"No, you got it all wrong. The more of us there are, the better chance we stand, the stronger we are. Like an army; a whole load of people together, they got the strength to make themselves felt. That's what I meant, Al. Honest."

"So what does the group have in mind for when they get big and powerful?"

Bernhard gave Al another sideways glance, puzzled this time. "To get out of here, Al. What else?"

"To get out of the city?"

"No. To take the planet away." He jabbed a thumb straight up. "From that. From the sky."

Al cast a sceptical eye upwards. The skyscrapers were flashing past on either side. Their size didn't bother him so

much now. Starship drives still speckled the azure sky, streaked flashbulbs taking a long time to pop. He couldn't see the odd little moon anymore. "Why?" he asked reasonably.

"Damn it, Al. Can't you feel it? The emptiness. Man, it's horrible. All that huge nothing trying to suck you up and swallow you whole." He gulped, his voice lowering. "The sky is like *there*. It's the beyond all over again. We gotta hide. Someplace where we ain't never going to die again, somewhere that don't go on for ever. Where there's no empty night."

"Now you're sounding like a preacher man, Bernhard."

"Well maybe I am a little bit. It's a smart man who knows when he's beat. I don't mind saying it to you, Al. I'm frightened of the beyond. I ain't never going back there. No siree."

"So you're going to move the world away?"

"Damn right."

"That's one fucking big ambition you've got there, Bernhard. I wish you a lot of luck. Now just drop me off at this intersection coming up here. I'll find my own way about town now."

"You mean you ain't going to pitch in and help us?" an incredulous Bernhard asked.

"Nope."

"But you gotta feel it, too, Al. Even you. We all can. They never stop begging you, all those other lost souls. Ain't you afraid of going back there?"

"Can't say as I am. It never really bothered me any while I was there first time around."

"Never bothered . . . ! Holy Christ, you are one tough sonofabitch, Al." He put his head back and gave a rebel yell. "Listen, you mothers, being dead don't bother Al Capone none! Goddamn!"

"Where is this safe place you're taking the planet to, anyhow?"

"Dunno, Al. Just follow Judy Garland over the rainbow, I guess. Anywhere where there ain't no sky."

"You ain't got no plans, you ain't got no idea where you're going. And you wanted me to be a part of that?"

"But it'll happen, Al. I swear. When there's enough of us, we can do it. You know what you can do by yourself now, one

man. Think what a million can do, two million. *Ten* million. Ain't nothing going to be able to stop us then."

"You're going to possess a million people?"

"We surely are."

The Oldsmobile dipped down a long ramp which took it into a tunnel. Bernhard let out a happy sigh as they passed into its harsh orange-tinged lighting.

"You won't possess a million people," Al said. "The cops will stop you. They'll find a way. We're strong, but we ain't no bulletproof superheroes. That stuff the assault mechanoids shoot nearly got me back there. If I'd been any closer I'd be dead again."

"Damn it, that's what I been trying to tell you, Al," Bernhard complained. "We gotta build up our numbers. Then they can't never hurt us."

Al fell silent. Part of what Bernhard said made sense. The more possessed there were, the harder it would be for the cops to stop them spreading. But they'd fight, those cops. Like wild bears once they realized how big the problem was, how dangerous the possessed were. Cops, whatever passed for the federal agents on this world, the army; all clubbing together. Government rats always did gang up. They'd have the starship weapons, too; Lovegrove burred about how powerful they were, capable of turning whole countries to deserts of hot glass within seconds.

And what would Al Capone do on a world where such a war was being fought? Come to that, what would Al Capone do on any modern world?

"How are you snatching people?" he asked abruptly.

Bernhard must have sensed the change in tone, in purpose. He suddenly got antsy, shifting his ass around on the seat's shiny red leather, but keeping his eyes firmly on the road ahead. "Well gee, Al, we just take them off the street. At night, when it's nice and quiet. Nothing heavy."

"But you've been seen, haven't you? That cop called me a Retro. They even got a name for you. They know you're doing it."

"Well, yeah, sure. It's kinda difficult with the numbers we're working, you know. Like I say, we need a *lot* of people.

Sometimes we get seen. Bound to happen. But they haven't caught us."

"Not yet." Al grinned expansively. He put his arm around Bernhard's shoulder. "You know, Bernhard, I think I will come and meet this group of yours after all. It sounds to me that you ain't organized yourselves too good. No offence, I doubt you people have much experience in this field. But me now . . ." A fat Havana appeared in his hand. He took a long blissful drag, the first for six hundred years. "Me, I had a lifetime's experience of going to the bad. And I'm gonna give you all the benefit of that."

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Gerald Skibbow shuffled into the warm, white-walled room, one arm holding on tightly to the male orderly. His loose powder-blue institute gown revealed several small medical nanonic packages as it shifted about. He moved as would a very old man in a high-gravity environment, with careful dignity. Needing help, needing guidance.

Unlike any normal person, he didn't even flick his eyes from side to side to take in his newest surroundings. The thickly cushioned bed in the centre of the room, with its surrounding formation of bulky, vaguely medical apparatus didn't seem to register on his consciousness.

"Okay, now then, Gerald," the orderly said cordially. "Let's get you comfortable on here, shall we?"

He gingerly positioned Gerald's buttocks on the side of the bed, then lifted his legs up and around until his charge was lying prone on the cushioning. Always cautious. He'd prepared a dozen candidates for personality debrief here in Guyana's grade-one restricted navy facility. None of them had exactly been volunteers. Skibbow might just realize what he was being prepped for. It could be the spark to bring him out of his trauma-trance.

But no. Gerald allowed the orderly to secure him with the webbing which moulded itself to his body contours. There was no sound from his throat, no blink as it tightened its grip.

The relieved orderly gave a thumbs-up to the two men sitting behind the long glass panel in the wall. Totally immobilized, Gerald stared beyond the outsized plastic helmet that

lowered itself over his head. The inside was fuzzy, a lining of silk fur which had been stiffened somehow. Then his face was covered completely, and the light vanished.

Chemical infusions insured there was no pain, no discomfort as the nanonic filaments wormed their way around his dermal cells and penetrated the bone of the skull. Positioning their tips into the requisite synapses took nearly two hours, a delicate operation similar to the implanting of neural nanonics. However these infiltrations went deeper than ordinary augmentation circuitry, seeking out the memory centres to mate with neurofibrillae inside their clustered cells. And the incursion was massive, millions of filaments burrowing along capillaries, active superstring molecules with preprogrammed functions, knowing where to go, what to do. In many respects they resembled the dendritic formation of living tissue in which they were building a parallel information network. The cells obeyed their DNA pattern, the filaments' structure was formatted by AIs. One process designed by studying the other, but never complementary.

Impulses began to flow back down the filaments as the hypersensitive tips registered synaptic discharges. A horribly jumbled montage of random thoughtsnaps, memories without order. The facility's AI came on-line, running comparisons, defining characteristics, recognizing themes, and weaving them into coherent sensorium environs.

Gerald Skibbow's thoughts were focused on his apartment in the Greater Brussels arcology: three respectably sized rooms on the sixty-fifth floor of the Delores pyramid. From the triple glazed windows you could see a landscape of austere geometries. Domes, pyramids, and towers, all squashed together and wrapped up within the intestinal tangle of the elevated bhan tubes. Every surface he could see was grey, even the dome glass, coated with decades of grime.

It was a couple of years after they had moved in. Paula was about three, totter-running everywhere, and always falling over. Marie was a tiny energetic bundle of smiles who could emit a vast range of incredulous sounds as the world produced its daily marvels for her.

He was cradling his infant daughter (already beautiful) in his lap that evening, while Loren was slumped in an armchair,

accessing the local news show. Paula was playing with the secondhand Disney mechanoid minder he'd bought her a fortnight ago, a fluffy anthropomorphized hedgehog that had an immensely irritating laugh.

It was a cosy family, in a lovely home. And they were together, and happy because of that. And the strong arcology walls protected them from the dangers of the outside world. He provided for them, and loved them, and protected them. They loved him back, too; he could see it in their smiles and adoring eyes. Daddy was king.

Daddy sang lullabies to his children. It was important to sing; if he stopped, then the hobgoblins and ghouls would come out from the darkness and snatch children away—

Two men walked into the room, and quietly sat down on the settee opposite Gerald. He frowned at them, unable to place their names, wondering what they were doing invading his home.

Invading . . .

The pyramid trembled as if caught by a minor earthquake, making the colours blur slightly. Then the room froze, his wife and children becoming motionless, their warmth draining away.

"It's okay, Gerald," one of the men said. "Nobody is invading. Nobody is going to hurt you."

Gerald clutched at baby Marie. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dr Riley Dobbs, a neural expert; and this is my colleague, Harry Earnshaw, who is a neural systems technician. We're here to help you."

"Let me sing," a frantic Gerald yelled. "Let me sing. They'll get us if I stop. They'll get us all. We'll be dragged down into the bowels of the earth. None of us will ever see daylight again."

"There's always going to be daylight, Gerald," Dobbs said. "I promise you that." He paused, datavisising an order into the AI.

Dawn rose outside the arcology. A clean dawn, the kind which Earth hadn't seen for centuries; the sun huge and red-gold, casting brilliant rays across the dingy landscape. It shone directly into the apartment, warm and vigorous.

Gerald sighed like a small child, and held his hands out to it. "It's so beautiful."

"You're relaxing. That's good, Gerald. We need you relaxed; and I'd prefer you to reach that state by yourself. Tranquillizers inhibit your responses, and we want you to be clearheaded."

"What do you mean?" Gerald asked suspiciously.

"Where are you, Gerald?"

"At home."

"No, Gerald, this is long ago. This is a refuge for you, a psychological retreat into the past. You're creating it because something rather nasty happened to you."

"No. Nothing! Nothing nasty. Go away."

"I can't go away, Gerald. It's important for a lot of people that I stay. You might be able to save a whole planet, Gerald."

Gerald shook his head. "Can't help. Go away."

"We're not going, Gerald. And you can't run from us. This isn't a place, Gerald, this is inside your mind."

"No no no!"

"I'm sorry, Gerald, truly, I am. But I cannot leave until you have shown me what I want to see."

"Go away. Sing!" Gerald started to hum his lullabies again. Then his throat turned to stone, blocking the music inside. Hot tears trickled down his cheeks.

"No more singing, Gerald," Harry Earnshaw said. "We're going to play a different game. Dr Dobbs and I are going to ask you some questions. We want to know what happened to you on Lalonde—"

The apartment exploded into a blinding iridescent swirl. Every sensory channel spliced into Gerald Skibbow's brain thrummed from overload.

Riley Dobbs shook himself as the processor array broke the direct linkage. In the seat next to him Harry Earnshaw was also stirring.

"Sod it," Dobbs grumbled. In the room through the glass, he could see Skibbow's body straining against the webbing. He hurriedly datavised an order into the physiological control processor for a tranquillizer.

Earnshaw studied the neural scan of Skibbow's brain, the huge electrical surge at the mention of Lalonde. "That is one

very deep-seated trauma. The associations are hotwired into almost every neural pathway.”

“Did the AI pull anything out of the cerebral convulsion?”

“No. It was pure randomization.”

Dobbs watched Skibbow’s physiological display creep down towards median. “Okay, let’s go in again. That trunk should take the edge off his neurosis.”

This time the three of them stood on a savanna of lush emerald-green knee-high grass. Tall snowcapped mountains guarded the horizon. A bright sun thickened the air, deadening sounds. Before them was a burning building; a sturdy log cabin with a lean-to barn and a stone chimney.

“Loren!” Gerald shouted hoarsely. “Paula! Frank!” He ran towards the building as the flames licked up the walls. The roof of solar cell panels began to curl up, blistering from the heat.

Gerald ran and ran, but never got any nearer. There were faces behind the windows: two women and a man. They did nothing as the flames closed around them, simply looked out with immense sadness.

Gerald sank to his knees, sobbing.

“Wife Loren, and daughter Paula with her husband Frank,” Dobbs said, receiving their identities direct from the AI. “No sign of Marie.”

“Small wonder the poor bastard’s in shock if he saw this happen to his family,” Earnshaw remarked.

“Yeah. And we’re too early. He hasn’t been taken over by the energy virus yet.” Dobbs datavised an order into the AI, activating a targeted suppression program, and the fire vanished along with the people. “It’s all right, Gerald. It’s over. All finished with. They’re at peace now.”

Gerald twisted around to glare at him, his face deformed by rage. “At peace? At peace! You stupid ignorant bastard. They’ll never be at peace. None of us ever will. Ask me! Ask me, you fucker. Go on. You want to know what happened? *This*, this happened.”

Daylight vanished from the sky, replaced by a meagre radiance from Rennison, Lalonde’s innermost moon. It illuminated another log cabin; this one belonged to the Nicholls family, Gerald’s neighbour. The mother, father, and son had

been tied up and put in the animal stockade along with Gerald.

A ring of dark figures encircled the lonely homestead, distorted human shapes, some atrociously bestial.

"My God," Dobbs murmured. Two of the figures were dragging a struggling, screaming girl into the cabin.

Gerald gave a giddy laugh. "God? There is no God."

• • •

After nearly five hours of unbroken and mercifully uneventful travel, Carmitha still hadn't convinced herself they were doing the right thing in going to Bytham. Every instinct yelled at her to get to Holbeach and surround herself with her own kind, use them like a fence to keep out the nemesis which prowled the land, to be safe. That same instinct made her queasy at Titreano's presence. Yet as the younger Kavanagh girl predicted, with him accompanying them nothing had happened to the caravan. Several times he had indicated a farmhouse or hamlet where he said his kind were skulking.

Indecision was a wretched curse.

But she now had few doubts that he was almost what he claimed to be: an old Earth nobleman possessing the body of a Norfolk farmhand.

There had been a lot of talk in the last five hours. The more she heard, the more convinced she became. He knew so many *details*. However, there was one small untruth remaining which bothered her.

After Titreano had spoken about his former life to the fascination of the sisters, he in turn became eager to hear of Norfolk. And that was when Carmitha finally began to lose patience with her companions. Genevieve she could tolerate; the world as seen through the eyes of a twelve-(Earth)-year-old was fairly bizarre anyway, all enthusiasms and misunderstandings. But Louise, now; that brat was a different matter. Louise explained about the planet's economy being built around the export of Norfolk Tears, about how the founders had wisely chosen a pastoral life for their descendants, about how pretty the cities and towns were, how clean the countryside and the air were compared to industrialized worlds, how

nice the people, how well organized the estates, how few criminals there were.

"It sounds as though you have achieved much that is worthy," Titreano said. "Norfolk is an enviable world in which to be born."

"There are some people who don't like it," Louise said. "But not very many." She looked down at Genevieve's head, cradled in her lap, and smiled gently. Her little sister had finally fallen asleep, rocked by the gentle rhythm of the caravan.

She smoothed locks of hair back from Genevieve's brow. It was dirty and unkempt, with strands shrivelled and singed from the fire in the stable. Mrs Charlsworth would have a fit of the vapours if she saw it thus. Landowner girls were supposed to be paragons of deportment at all times, Kavanagh girls especially.

Just thinking of the old woman, her sacrifice, threatened to bring the tears which had been so long delayed.

"Why don't you tell him the reason those dissidents don't like it here," Carmitha said.

"Who?" Louise asked.

"The Land Union people, the traders flung in jail for trying to sell medicine the rest of the Confederation takes for granted, the people who work the land, and all the other victims of the landowner class, me included."

Anger, tiredness, and despair spurted up together in Louise's skull, threatening to quench what was left of her fragile spirit. She was so very tired; but she had to keep going, had to look after Gen. Gen and the precious baby. Would she ever see Joshua again now? "Why are you saying this?" she asked jadedly.

"Because it's the truth. Not something a Kavanagh is used to, I'll warrant. Not from the likes of me."

"I know this world isn't perfect. I'm not blind, I'm not stupid."

"No, you know what to do to hang on to your privileges and your power. And look where it's got you. The whole planet being taken over, being taken away from you. Not so smart now, are you? Not so high and mighty."

"That's a wicked lie."

“Is it? A fortnight ago you rode your horse past me when I was working in one of your estate roseyards. Did you stop for a chat then? Did you even notice I existed?”

“Come now, ladies,” Titreano said, uneasily.

But Louise couldn’t ignore the challenge, the insult and the vile implication behind it. “Did you ask me to stop?” she demanded. “Did you want to hear me chat about the things I love and care about the most? Or were you too busy sneering at me? You with your righteous poverty. Because I’m rich I’m evil, that’s what you think, isn’t it?”

“Your family is, yes. Your ancestors made quite sure of that with their oppressive constitution. I was born on the road, and I’ll die on it. I have no quarrel with that. But you condemned us to a circular road. It leads us nowhere, in an era when there is a chance to travel right into the heart of the galaxy. You shackled us as surely as any house would. I’ll never see the wonder of sunrise and sunset on another planet.”

“Your ancestors knew the constitution when they came here, and they still came. They saw the freedom it would give you to roam like you always have done, like you cannot do on Earth anymore.”

“If that’s freedom, then tell me why can’t we leave?”

“You can. Anyone can. Just buy a ticket on a starship.”

“Fat bloody chance. My entire family working a summer cupping season couldn’t raise the price of one ticket. You control the economy, too. You designed it so we never earn more than a pittance.”

“It’s not my fault you can’t think of anything other than grove work to do. You have a caravan, why don’t you trade goods like a merchant? Or plant some rose groves of your own? There’s still unsettled land on hundreds of islands.”

“We’re not a landowning people, we don’t want to be tied down.”

“Exactly,” Louise shouted. “It’s only your own stupid prejudices which trap you here. Not us, not the landowners. Yet we’re the ones who you blame for your own inadequacies, just because you can’t face up to the real truth. And don’t think you’re so unique. I want to see the whole Confederation, too. I dream about it every night. But I’ll never be able to fly in a starship. I’ll never be allowed, which is much worse

than you. You made your own prison. I was born into mine. My obligations bind me to this world, I have to sacrifice my entire life for the good of this island.”

“Oh, yes. How you noble Kavanaghs suffer so. How grateful I am.” She glared at Louise, barely noticing Titreano, and not paying any attention to where the cob was trotting. “Tell me, little Miss Kavanagh, how many brothers and sisters do you think you have in your highborn family?”

“I have no brothers, there’s only Genevieve.”

“But what of the half-bloods?” Carmitha purred. “What of them?”

“Half-bloods? Don’t be foolish. I have none.”

She laughed bitterly. “So sure of yourself. Riding high above us all. Well I know of three, and those are just the ones born to my family. My cousin carried one to term after last midsummer. A bonny little boy, the spitting image of his father. Your father. You see, it isn’t *all* work for him. There’s pleasure, too. More than to be found in your mother’s bed.”

“Lies!” Louise cried. She felt faint, and sick.

“Really? He lay with me the day before the soldiers went to Boston. He got his money’s worth of me. I made sure of that; I don’t cheat people. So don’t you talk to me about nobility and sacrifice. Your family are nothing more than titled robber barons.”

Louise glanced down. Genevieve’s eyes were open, blinking against the red light. Please don’t let her have heard, Louise prayed. She turned to look at the Romany woman, no longer able to stop her jaw from quivering. There was no will to argue anymore. The day had won, beaten her, captured her parents, invaded her home, burned her county, terrorized her sister, and destroyed the only remaining fragment of happiness, that of the past with its golden memories. “If you wish to hurt a Kavanagh,” she said in a tiny voice. “If you wish to see me in tears for what you claim has happened, then you may have that wish. I don’t care about myself anymore. But spare my sister, she has been through so much today. No child should have to endure more. Let her go into the caravan where she can’t hear your accusations. Please?” There was more to say, so much more, but the heat in her throat wouldn’t let it come out. Louise started sobbing, hating herself for

letting Gen see her weakness. But allowing the tears to flow was such an easy act.

Genevieve put her arms around her sister and hugged her fiercely. "Don't cry, Louise. Please don't cry." Her face puckered up. "I hate you," she spat at Carmitha.

"I hope you are satisfied now, lady," Titreano said curtly.

Carmitha stared at the two distraught sisters, Titreano's hard, disgusted face, then dropped the reins and plunged her head into her hands. The shame was beyond belief.

Shit, taking out your own pathetic fear on a petrified sixteen-year-old girl who'd never hurt a living soul in her life. Who'd actually risked her own neck to warn me about the possessed in the farmhouse.

"Louise." She extended an arm towards the still sobbing girl. "Oh, Louise, I'm so sorry. I never meant to say what I did. I'm so stupid, I never think." At least she managed to stop herself from asking "forgive me." Carry your own guilt, you selfish bitch, she told herself.

Titreano had put his own arm around Louise. It didn't make any difference to the broken girl. "My baby," Louise moaned between sobs. "They'll kill my baby if they catch us."

Titreano gently caught her hands. "You are . . . with child?"

"Yes!" Her sobbing became louder.

Genevieve gaped at her. "You're pregnant?"

Louise nodded roughly, long hair flopping about.

"Oh." A small smile twitched across Genevieve's mouth. "I won't tell anyone, I promise, Louise," she said seriously.

Louise gulped loudly and looked at her sister. Then she was laughing through her tears, clutching Genevieve to her. Genevieve hugged her back.

Carmitha tried not to show her own surprise. A landowner girl like Louise, the highest of the high, pregnant and unmarried! I wonder who . . .

"Okay," she said with slow determination. "That's another reason to get you two girls off this island. The best yet." The sisters were regarding her with immense distrust. Can't blame them for that. She ploughed on: "I swear to you here and now, Titreano and I will make sure you get on the plane. Right, Titreano?"

"Indeed, yes," he said gravely.

“Good.” Carmitha picked up the cob’s reins again and gave them a brisk flip. The horse resumed its interminable plodding pace.

One good act, she thought, a single piece of decency amid the holocaust of the last six hours. That baby was going to survive. Grandma, if you’re watching me, and if you can help the living in any way possible, now would be a good time.

And—the thought wouldn’t leave her alone—a boy who wasn’t intimidated by Grant Kavanagh, who’d dared to touch his precious daughter. A lot more than just touch, in fact. Foolhardy romantic, or a real hero prince?

Carmitha risked a quick glance at Louise. Either way, lucky girl.

• • •

The longbase van which nosed down into the third sub-level car park below City Hall had the stylized palm tree and electron orbit logo of the Tarosa Metamech Corp emblazoned on its sides. It drew up in a bay next to a service elevator. Six men and two women climbed out, all wearing the company’s dull red overalls. Three flatbed trolleys, piled high with crates and maintenance equipment, trundled down obediently out of the rear of the van.

One of the men walked over to the elevator and pulled a processor block out of his pocket. He typed something on the block’s surface, paused, then typed again, casting a nervous glance at his impassive workmates as they watched him.

The building management processor array accepted the coded instruction which the block had datavised, and the elevator doors hissed open.

Emmet Mordden couldn’t help the way his shoulders sagged in sheer relief as soon as the doors started to move. In his past life he’d suffered from a weak bladder, and it seemed as though he’d brought the condition with him to the body he now possessed. Certainly his guts were dangerously wobbly. Being in on the hard edge of operations always did that to him. He was strictly a background tech; until, of course, the day in 2535 when his syndicate boss got greedy, and sloppy with it. The police claimed afterwards that they’d given the

gang an opportunity to surrender, but by then Emmet Morden was past caring.

He shoved the processor block back into his overalls pocket while he brought out his palm-sized tool-kit. Interesting to see how technology had advanced in the intervening seventy-five years; the principles were the same, but circuitry and programs were considerably more sophisticated.

A key from the tool-kit opened the cover over the elevator's small emergency manual control panel. He plugged an optical cable into the interface socket, and the processor block lit up with a simple display. The unit took eight seconds to decode the elevator monitor program commands and disable the alarm.

"We're in," he told the others, and unplugged the optical cable. The more basic the electronic equipment, the more chance it had of operating in proximity to possessed bodies. By reducing the processor block functions to an absolute minimum he'd found he could make it work, although he still fretted about the efficiency.

Al Capone slapped him on the shoulder as the rest of the work crew and the flatbeds squeezed into the elevator. "Good work there, Emmet. I'm proud of you, boy."

Emmet gave a fragile grin of gratitude, and pressed the DOOR CLOSE button. He respected the resolve which Al had bestowed on the group of possessed. There had been so much bickering before about how to go about turning more bodies over for possession. It was as though they'd spent ninety per cent of their time arguing among themselves and jockeying for position. The only agreements they ever came to were grudgingly achieved.

Then Al had come along and explained as coolly as you like that he was taking charge now thank you very much. Somehow it didn't surprise Emmet that a man who displayed such clarity of purpose and thought would have the greatest energetic strength. Two people had objected. And the little stick held so nonchalantly in Al Capone's hand had grown to a full-sized baseball bat.

Nobody else had voiced any dissension after that. And the beauty of it was, the dissenters could hardly go running to the cops.

Emmet wasn't sure which he feared the most, Al's strength or his temper. But he was just a soldier who obeyed orders, and happy with it. If only Al hadn't insisted he come with them this morning.

"Top floor," Al said.

Emmet pressed the appropriate button. The elevator rose smoothly.

"Okay, guys, now remember with our strength we can always blast our way out if anything goes wrong," Al said. "But this is our big chance to consolidate our hold over this town in one easy move. If we get rumbled, it's gonna be tough from here on. So let's try and stick to what we planned, right?"

"Absolutely, Al," Bernhard Allsop said eagerly. "I'm with you all the way."

Several of the others gave him barely disguised glances of contempt.

Al ignored them all, and smiled heartily. Je-zus, but this felt good; starting out with nothing again apart from his ambition. But this time he knew the moves to make in advance. The others in the group had filled him in on chunks of history from the last few centuries. The New California administration was a direct descendant of the old U.S. of A government. The feds. And Al had one or two old scores to settle with those bastards.

The elevator doors chimed gently as they opened on the one hundred and fiftieth floor. Dwight Salerno and Patricia Mangano were out first. They smiled at the three staff members who were in the corridor and killed them with a single coordinated blast of white fire. Smoking bodies hit the floor.

"We're okay, they didn't get out an alarm," Emmet said, consulting his processor block.

"Get to it, people," Al told his team proudly. This wasn't the same as the times with his soldiers like Anselmi and Scalise back on Cicero's streets. But these new guys had balls, and a cause. And it felt righteous to be a mover again.

The possessed spread out through the top floor. Tarosa Metamech uniforms gave way to clothes of their own periods. A startlingly unpleasant variety of weapons appeared in their hands. Doors were forced open with precisely applied bolts of white fire, rooms searched according to the list. Everyone following their assignment to the letter. Capone's letter.

It was six o'clock in the morning in San Angeles, and few of the mayor's staff were at work. Those that had turned up early found Retros bursting into their offices and hauling them out at gunpoint. Their neural nanonics failed, desktop blocks crashed, net processors wouldn't respond. There was no way to get a warning out, no way to cry for help. They found themselves corralled in the deputy health director's office, seventeen of them, clinging together in panic and mutual misery.

They thought that would surely be the worst of it, crammed into the one room for hours or maybe a couple of days while negotiations for their release were conducted with the terrorists. But then the Retros started taking them out one at a time, summoning the toughest first. The sound of screams cut back clean through the thick door.

Al Capone stood by the long window wall of the mayor's office, and looked out at the city. It was a magnificent view. He couldn't remember being so high off the ground in his life before. This skyscraper made the Empire State Building look puny for God's sake. And it wasn't even the tallest in the city.

The skyscrapers only occupied the central portion of San Angeles, fifty or sixty of them bunched together to form the business, finance, and administration district. Beyond that the vast urban sprawl clung to the shallow folds of the land, long grey lines of buildings and autoways, interspaced with the equally regular squares of green parks. And to the east was the brilliant glimmer of the ocean.

Al, who had always enjoyed Lake Michigan in the summer, was fascinated by the glistening turquoise expanse as it reflected the first light of a new day. And the city was so clean, vibrant. So different from Chicago. This was an empire which Stalin and Genghis Khan would both envy.

Emmet knocked on the door, and popped his head around when he didn't receive an answer. "Sorry to bother you, Al," he ventured cautiously.

"That's okay, boy," Al said. "What've you got for me?"

"We've rounded up everyone on this floor. The electronics are all fucked, so they can't get word out. Bernhard and Luigi have started to bring them to possession."

"Great, you've all done pretty goddamn good."

"Thanks, Al."

"What about the rest of the electrics, the telephones and math-machine things?"

"I'm getting my systems plugged into the building network now, Al. Give me half an hour and I should have it locked down safe."

"Good. Can we go to stage two?"

"Sure, Al."

"Okay, boy, you get back to your wiring."

Emmet backed out of the office. Al wished he knew more about electrics himself. This future world depended so much on their clever mini-machines. That had to be a flaw. And Al Capone knew all about exploiting such weaknesses.

He let his mind slip into that peculiar state of otherness, and felt around for the rest of the possessed under his command. They were positioned all around the base of City Hall, strolling casually down the sidewalk, in cars parked nearby, eating breakfast in arcade diners.

Come, he commanded.

And the big ground floor doors of City Hall opened wide.

• • •

It was quarter to nine when Mayor Avram Harwood III arrived in his office. He was in a good mood. Today was the first day in a week when he hadn't been bombarded with early morning datavises from his staff concerning the Retro crisis. In fact there hadn't been any communication from City Hall at all. Some kind of record.

He took the express elevator from his private car bay up to the top floor, and stepped out into a world which wasn't quite normal. Nothing he could clarify, but definitely wrong. People scurried past as usual, barely pausing to acknowledge him. The elevator doors remained open behind him, the lights inside dying. When he tried to datavise its control processor there was no response. Attempting to log a routine call to maintenance he found none of the net processors were working.

Damn it, that was all he needed, a total electronics failure. At least it explained why he hadn't received any messages.

He walked into his office to find a young, olive-skinned

man lounging in his chair, a fat soft stick in his mouth with one end on fire. And his clothes . . . Retro!

Mayor Harwood spun around, ready to make a dash for the door. It was no good. Three of them had moved in to block the opening. They were all dressed in the same kind of antique double-breasted suits, brown hats with broad rims, and carrying primitive automatic rifles with circular magazines.

He tried to datavise a citizen's distress call. But his neural nanonics crashed, neatly tabulated icons retreated from his mind's eye like cowardly ghosts.

"Sit down, Mr Mayor," Al Capone said munificently. "You and I have some business to discuss."

"I think not."

The Thompson's butt slammed into the small of Avram Harwood's back. He let out a cry at the pain, and the world went dizzily black for a second. One of his big armchairs hit the back of his legs, and he fell down into the cushions, clutching at his spine.

"You see?" Al asked. "You ain't calling the shots no more. Best you cooperate."

"The police will be here soon. And, mister, when they arrive they are going to fillet you and your gang. Don't think I'll help you negotiate, the commissioner knows my policy on hostage situations. No surrender."

Al winked broadly. "I like you, Avvy. I do. I admire a man who stands up for himself. I knew you wouldn't be no patsy. It takes smarts to get to the top in a city like this, and plenty of them. So why don't you have a word with that commissioner of yours. Clear the air some." He beckoned.

Avram Harwood twisted around as Police Commissioner Vosburgh walked into the office.

"Hi there, Mr Mayor," Vosburgh said blithely.

"Rod! Oh, Christ, they got you too . . ." The words shrank as Vosburgh's familiar face *twisted*. A feral-faced stranger sneered down at him; hair was visibly sprouting out of his cheeks. Not a beard, more like thick prickly fur.

"Yeah, they got me too." The voice was distorted by teeth which were too long for a human mouth. He burst into a wild laugh.

“Who the hell are you Retro people?” an aghast Avram Harwood asked.

“The dead,” Al said. “We’ve come back.”

“Bullshit.”

“I ain’t arguing with you. Like I told you, I’m here to make a proposition. One of my guys—comes from just after my time—he said people took to calling it an offer you can’t refuse. I like that, it’s great. And that’s what I’m making here to you, Avvy, my boy. An offer you can’t refuse.”

“What offer?”

“It’s like this: Souls ain’t the only thing I’m resurrecting today. I’m gonna build up an Organization. Like I had me before, only with a shitload more clout. I want you to join it, join me. Just as you are. No catch; you have my word. You, your family, maybe a few close friends, they don’t get possessed. I know how to reward loyalty.”

“You’re crazy. You’re absolutely berserkoid. Join you? I’m going to see you destroyed, all of you deviant bastards, and then I’m going to stamp on the pieces.”

Al leaned forwards and rested his elbows on the desk, staring earnestly at the mayor. “Sorry, Avvy. That’s one thing you ain’t gonna do. No fucking way. See, people hear my name, and they think I’m just a bigshot hoodlum, a racketeer who made good. Wrong. I used to be a fucking king. King Capone the first. I got the politics tied up. So I know which strings to pull in City Hall and the precinct houses. I know how a city works. That’s why I’m here. I’m launching the biggest heist there’s ever been in all of history.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna steal your world, Avvy. Take the whole caboodle from under your nose. These guys you see here, the ones you called Retros, they didn’t know what the Christ they were doing before. Because just between you and me shutting off the sky like it’s some kind of window with thick drapes is a bit of a wacko idea, you know? So I’ve straightened them out. No more of that bullshit. Now we’re playing straight hardball.”

Avram Harwood lowered his head. “Oh, Christ.” They were insane. Utterly demented. He began to wonder if he would see his family again.

“Let me lay it out for you here, Avvy. You don’t take over a society from the bottom like the Retros were trying to do. You know, little bit at a time until you’re in the majority. Know why that’s a crappy way to get on top? Because the goddamn self-righteous majority is gonna find out and fight like fuck to stop you. And they get led by people like you, Avvy. You’re the generals, the dangerous ones, you organize the lawyers and the cops and the special federal agents to stop it happening. To protect the majority that elects you from anything which threatens you or them. So instead of an assways first revolution, you do what I’m doing. You start at the top and work down.” Al got up and walked over to the window wall. He gestured at the street far below with his cigar. “People are coming into City Hall, Avvy. The workers, the police captains, the attorneys, your staff, tax clerks. All of them; the ones who’d lead the fight against me if they knew what I was. Yeah. They’re coming in, but they ain’t going out again. Not until we’ve made our pitch to each and every one of them.” Al turned to see Avram Harwood staring at him in horror. “That’s the way it is, Avvy,” he said softly. “My people, they’re working their way up from the ground floor. They’re coming all the way up here. And all the people sitting in their offices who would normally fight against me—why, they’re going to be the ones who lead our crusade out into the world. Ain’t that right, guys?”

“You got it, Al,” Emmet Mordden said. He was hunched over a couple of processor blocks at one end of the desk, monitoring the operation. “The first twelve floors are all ours now. And we’re busy converting everyone on thirteen to eighteen. I make that approximately six and a half thousand people possessed so far this morning.”

“See?” Al waved his cigar expansively. “It’s already begun, Avvy. Ain’t nothing you can do about it. By lunch I’m gonna own the entire city administration. Just like the old days when Big Bill Thompson was in my pocket. And I got even bigger plans for tomorrow.”

“It won’t work,” Avram Harwood whispered. “It can’t work.”

“Course it will, Avvy. The thing is . . . returned souls. They ain’t altogether marbles intacto. *Capisce?* It’s not just an Or-

ganization I'm building. Shit. We can be honest in here, you and me. It's a whole new government for New California. I need people who can help me run it. I need people who can run the factory machines. I need people who can keep the lights on and the water flowing, who're gonna take the garbage away. Fuck, if all that goes down the pan, my citizens, they're gonna come gunning for me, right? I mean, that's what the Retros didn't think about. What happens after? You still gotta keep things running smoothly." Al sat on the arm of Avram Harwood's comfy chair and put a friendly arm around his shoulder. "Which is where you come in, Mr Mayor. Plenty of people want to run it. Everyone in this room, they all want to be my lieutenants. But it's the old problem. Sure they're keen, but they ain't got the talent. But you, you my boy, you have got the talent. So how about it? Same job as before. Better salary. Perks. Fancy girl or two on the side if you like. So what do you say? Huh, Avvy? Say yeah. Make me happy."

"Never."

"What? What was that, Avvy? I didn't hear too good."

"I said NEVER, you psychopathic freak."

Very calmly, Al rose to his feet. "I ask. I go down on my fucking knees and ask you to help me. I ask you to be my friend. You, a wiseass I ain't never even seen before. I open my goddamn heart to you. I'm bleeding across the floor for you here. And you say no? No. To me!" Three scars burned hot and bright on his cheek. Everyone else in the office had retreated into a daunted silence.

"Is that what you're saying, Avvy? No?"

"You got it, shithead," Avram Harwood shouted recklessly. Something wild was running free in his brain, a mad glee at confounding his adversary. "The answer is never. Never. Never."

"Wrong." Al flicked his cigar onto the thick carpet. "You got it way wrong, buddy. The answer is yes. It is always yes when you talk to me. It is yes fucking please Mr Capone Sir. And I'm going to fucking well hear you say it." A fist thumped on his chest for emphasis. "Today is the day you say yes to me."

Mayor Avram Harwood took one look at the stained base-

ball bat which had materialized in Al Capone's hands, and knew it was going to be *bad*.

• • •

Duke-dawn failed. There was no sign of the primary sun's comforting white light brushing the short night before it as the bright disk rose above the wolds. Instead, a miscreant coral phosphorescence glided out over the horizon, staining the vegetation a lustreless claret.

For a harrowingly confused moment Louise thought that Duchess was returning, racing around the underside of the planet after it had set scant minutes ago to spring up ahead of the lumbering Romany caravan. But after a minute's scrutiny she realized the effect was due to a high haze of reddish mist. It really was Duke which had risen.

"What is it?" Genevieve inquired querulously. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure." Louise scanned the horizon, leaning around the corner of the caravan to check behind them. "It looks like a layer of fog really high up, but why is it that colour? I've never seen anything like it before."

"Well I don't like it," Genevieve announced, and folded her arms across her chest. She glared ahead.

"Do you know what's doing that?" Carmitha asked Titreano.

"Not entirely, my lady," he said, appearing troubled. "And yet, I sense there is a rightness to it. Do you not feel comforted by its presence?"

"No I bloody don't," Carmitha snapped. "It's not natural, and you know it."

"Yes, lady."

His subdued acknowledgement did nothing to alleviate her nerves. Terror, uncertainty, lack of sleep, not having eaten since yesterday, remorse, it was all starting to add up.

The caravan trundled on for another half a mile under the brightening red light. Carmitha steered them along a well-worn track below a forest. Here, the land's gentle undulations were gradually increasing to form deeper vales and rolling hills. Dried up streambeds crisscrossed the slopes, emptying

into the deeper gullies which ran along the floor of each valley. There was more woodland than out on the open wolds, more cover from, and for, prying eyes. All they had to go on was Titreano's strange sixth sense.

Nobody spoke, too tired or too fearful. Louise realized the birds were missing from the air. The characterless forest loomed up like a shaggy cliff face mere yards away, bleak and repellent.

"Here we are," Carmitha said as they rounded a curve in the track. It had taken longer than she thought. Eight hours at least. Not good for poor old Olivier.

Ahead of them the slope dipped down to expose a broad valley with heavily forested sides. The alluvial floor was a chessboard of neat fields, all marked out by long dry-stone walls and geneered hawthorn hedges. A dozen streams bubbling out from the head of the valley funnelled into a small river which meandered off into the distance. Red sunlight glinted off a narrow sliver of water running along the centre of its baked clay banks.

Bytham was situated about three miles down the valley; a cluster of stone cottages split in half by the river. Over the centuries the community had grown outwards from a single humpbacked stone bridge. At the far end, a narrow church spire rose above the thatched roofs.

"It looks all right," Louise said cautiously. "I can't see any fires."

"Quiet enough," Carmitha agreed. She hardly dared consult Titreano. "Are your kind out there?" she asked.

His eyes were closed, yet his head was thrust forwards, as though he were sniffing the air ahead. "Some of them," he said, regretfully. "But not all of the village has been turned. Not yet. People are waking to the fact that great evil stalks this land." He glanced at Louise. "Where is your aerial machine berthed?"

She blushed. "I don't know. I've never been here before." She didn't like to admit that apart from accompanying Mother on a twice-yearly train trip to Boston for a clothes-buying spree she'd hardly ever ventured outside Cricklade's sprawling boundaries.

Carmitha pointed to a circular meadow half a mile outside

the town, with two modest hangars on the perimeter. "That's the aerodrome. And thank God it's on this side of the village."

"I suggest we make haste, lady," Titreano said.

Still not quite trusting him, Carmitha nodded reluctantly. "One minute." She stood up and hurried back into the caravan. Inside, it was a complete mess. All her possessions had been slung about by her madcap dash from Colsterworth, clothes, pots and pans, food, books. She sighed at the shards of broken blue and white china lying underfoot. Her mother always claimed the crockery had come with the family from Earth.

The heavy chest under her bed was one article which hadn't moved. Carmitha knelt down and spun the combination lock.

Louise gave the Romany woman an alarmed look when she emerged from the caravan. She was carrying a single-barrelled shotgun and a belt of cartridges.

"Pump action," Carmitha said. "It holds ten rounds. I've already loaded it for you. Safety's on. You hold it, get used to the weight."

"Me?" Louise gulped in surprise.

"Yes, you. Who knows what's waiting for us down there. You must have used a shotgun before?"

"Well, yes. Of course. But only on birds, and tree rats, and things. I'm not a very good shot, I'm afraid."

"Don't worry. Just point it in the general direction of any trouble, and shoot." She gave Titreano a dry grin. "I'd give it to you, but it's rather advanced compared to the kind of guns you had in your day. Better Louise carries it."

"As you wish, my lady."

Now that Duke was higher in the sky it was doing its best to burn away the red mist which hung over the land. Occasionally a beam of pure white sunlight would wash over the caravan, making all four of them blink from its glare. But for the most part, the veil remained unbroken.

The caravan reached the valley floor, and Carmitha urged the cob into a faster trot. Olivier did his best to oblige, but his reserves of strength were clearly ebbing.

As they drew nearer to the village they heard the church

bell tolling. It was no glad peal calling the faithful to morning service, just a monotonous strike. A warning.

"The villagers know," Titreano announced. "My kind are grouping together. They are stronger that way."

"If you know what they're doing, do they know about you?" Carmitha asked.

"Yes, lady, I would fear so."

"Oh, just wonderful." The road ahead was now angling away from the direction in which the aerodrome lay. Carmitha stood on the seat, and tried to work out where to turn off. The hedges and walls of the fields were spread out before her like a maze. "Bugger," she muttered under her breath. Both of the aerodrome's hangars were clearly visible about half a mile away, but you'd have to be a local to know how to get to them.

"Do they know we're with you?" Carmitha asked.

"Probably not. Not over such a distance. But when we are closer to the village, they will know."

Genevieve tugged anxiously at Titreano's sleeve. "They won't find us, will they? You won't let them?"

"Of course not, little one. I gave my word I will not abandon you."

"I don't like this at all," Carmitha said. "We're too visible. And when they realize there's four of us riding on it, your side is going to know you're travelling with non-possessed," she said accusingly to Titreano.

"We can't turn around now," Louise insisted, her voice high and strained. "We're so close. We'll never have another chance."

Carmitha wanted to add that there might not even be a pilot at the aerodrome; come to that she hadn't actually seen the distinctive shape of the aeroambulance itself yet. Could be in a hangar. But with the way their luck was turning out right now . . .

Both the sisters were obviously near the end of their tether. They looked dreadful, filthy and tired, close to breaking down in tears—for all Louise's outward determination.

Carmitha was surprised to realize just how much she had begun to respect the elder girl.

"You can't go back, no," Carmitha said. "But I can. If I take

the caravan back to the woods the possessed will think we're all running away from Titreano here."

"No!" Louise said in shock. "We're together now. We've only got each other. There's only us left in the whole world."

"We are not all that's left. Don't ever think that. Outside Kesteven, people are going about their lives just like before. And once you get to Norwich, they'll be warned."

"No," Louise mumbled. But there was less conviction now.

"You know you have to go," Carmitha continued. "But me. Hell, I'll be a lot better off by myself. With my lore I can lose myself in the forests; the possessed will never find me. I can't do that with you three tagging along. You know us Romanies belong with the land, girl."

The corners of Louise's mouth turned down.

"Don't you?" Carmitha said sternly. She knew she was still being selfish; just plain didn't want to admit she couldn't stand seeing their delicate hopes burnt to cinders when they reached the aerodrome.

"Yes," Louise said docilely.

"Good girl. Okay, this section of road is wide enough to turn the caravan around. You three had better get down."

"Are you sure of this, lady?" Titreano asked.

"Absolutely. But I'm holding you to your promise of guarding these two."

He nodded sincerely and dropped down over the side.

"Genevieve?"

The little girl glanced up shyly, her lower lip pressed against her teeth.

"I know we didn't get on too well, and I'm sorry we didn't. But I want you to have this." Carmitha reached behind her neck and unfastened the pendant's chain. The silver bulb which glinted in the pink light was made from a fine mesh, much dented now; but through the grid a filigree of thin brown twigs was just visible. "It used to be my grandma's; she gave it to me when I was about your age. It's a charm to ward off evil spirits. That's lucky heather inside, see? Genuine heather; it grew on Earth in the time before the armada storms. There's real earth magic stored in there."

Genevieve held the bauble up in front of her face, studying it intently. A fast smile lit up her delicate features, and she

lunged forward to hug Carmitha. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for everything." She climbed down into Titreano's arms.

Carmitha gave an edgy smile to Louise. "Sorry it turned out the way it did, girl."

"That's all right."

"Hardly. Don't lose faith in your father because of what I said."

"I won't. I love Daddy."

"Yes, I expect you do. That's good, something to hold on to. You are going to be facing a few more dark days yet, you know."

Louise started tugging at a ring on her left hand. "Here. It's not much. Not lucky, or anything special. But it is gold, and that's a real diamond. If you need to buy anything, it'll help."

Carmitha eyed the ring in surprise. "Right. Next time I need a mansion I'll remember."

They both grinned sheepishly.

"Take care, Carmitha. I want to see you when I come back, when all this is over." Louise twisted around, preparing to climb down.

"Louise."

There was such disquiet in the voice that Louise froze.

"There's something wrong about Titreano," Carmitha said quietly. "I don't know if I'm just being paranoid, but you ought to know before you go any further with him."

A minute later Louise clambered gingerly down the side of the caravan, keeping hold of the pump-action shotgun, the cartridge belt an uncomfortable weight around her hips. When she was on the dirt track she waved up at Carmitha. The Romanay waved back and flicked the cob's reins.

Louise, Genevieve, and Titreano watched the caravan turn around and head back up the rucked road.

"Are you all right, Lady Louise?" Titreano asked courteously.

Her fingers tightened around the shotgun. Then she took a breath and smiled at him. "I think so."

They struck out for the aerodrome, scrambling through ditches and over hedges. The fields were mostly ploughed,

ready for the second cereal crop, difficult to walk on. Dust puffed up from each footfall.

Louise glanced over at Genevieve, who was wearing Carmitha's pendant outside her torn and dusty blouse, one hand grasping the silver bulb tightly. "Not long now," she said.

"I know," Genevieve replied pertly. "Louise, will they have something to eat on the aeroambulance?"

"I expect so."

"Good! I'm starving." She trudged on for another few paces, then cocked her head to one side. "Titreano, you're not dirty at all," she exclaimed in a vexed tone.

Louise looked over. It was true; not a scrap of dirt or dust had adhered to his blue jacket.

He glanced down at himself, rubbing his hands along the seams of his trousers in a nervous gesture. "I'm sorry, little one, it must be the fabric. Although I do confess, I don't remember being immune to such depredations before. Perhaps I should bow to the inevitable."

Louise watched in some consternation as mud stains crept up from his ankles, discolouring his trousers below the knee. "You mean you can change your appearance whenever you want?" she asked.

"It would seem so, Lady Louise."

"Oh."

Genevieve giggled. "You mean you want to look all silly like that?"

"I find it . . . comfortable, little one. Yes."

"If you can change that easily, I think you ought to adopt something which will blend in a bit better," Louise said. "I mean, Gen and I look like a pair of tramps. And then there's you in all your strange finery. What would you think of us if you were one of the aeroambulance crew?"

"Finely argued, lady."

For the next five minutes as they crossed the fields Titreano went through a series of alterations. Genevieve and Louise kept up a stream of suggestions, arguing hotly, and explaining textures and styles to their mildly befuddled companion. When they finished he was dressed in the fashion of a young

estate manager, with fawn cord trousers, calf-length boots, a tweed jacket, check shirt, and grey cap.

“Just right,” Louise declared.

“I thank you, lady.” He doffed his cap and bowed low.

Genevieve clapped delightedly.

Louise stopped at another of the interminable walls and found a gap in the stone to shove her boot toe in. Straddling the top of the wall she could see the aerodrome’s perimeter fence two hundred yards away. “Almost there,” she told the others cheerfully.

• • •

The Bytham aerodrome appeared to be deserted. Both hangars were closed up; nobody was in the control tower. Away on the other side of the mown field the row of seven cottages used by station personnel were silent and dark.

The only sound was the persistent clang of the church bell in the village. It hadn’t stopped ringing the whole time they had walked across the fields.

Louise peered around the side of the first hangar, clutching at the shotgun. Nothing moved. A couple of tractors and a farm ranger were parked outside a small access door. “Are there any possessed here?” she whispered to Titreano.

“No,” he whispered back.

“What about normal people?”

His brown face creased in concentration. “Several. I hear them over in yon houses. Five or six are malingering inside this second barn.”

“Hangar,” Louise corrected. “We call them hangars nowadays.”

“Yes, lady.”

“Sorry.”

They swapped a nervous grin.

“I suppose we’d better go and see them, then,” she said. “Come here, Gen.” She pointed the shotgun at the ground and took her sister’s hand as they walked towards the second hangar.

She really wished Carmitha hadn’t given her the weapon. Yet at the same time it imbued her with an uncommon sense of confidence. Even though she doubted she could ever actually fire it at anyone.

"They have seen us," Titreano said quietly.

Louise scanned the corrugated panel wall of the hangar. A narrow line of windows ran the entire length. She thought she saw a shiver of motion behind one. "Hello?" she called loudly.

There was no reply.

She walked right up to the door and knocked firmly. "Hello, can you hear me?" She tried the handle, only to discover it was locked.

"Now what?" she asked Titreano.

"Hey!" Genevieve shouted at the door. "I'm hungry."

The handle turned, and the door opened a crack. "Who the hell are you people?" a man asked.

Louise drew herself up as best she could manage, knowing full well what she must look like to anyone inside. "I am Louise Kavanagh, the heir of Cricklade, this is my sister Genevieve, and William Elphinstone, one of our estate managers."

Genevieve opened her mouth to protest, but Louise nudged her with a toe.

"Oh, really?" came the answer from behind the door.

"Yes!"

"It is her," said another, deeper voice. The door opened wide to show two men gazing out at them. "I recognize her. I used to work at Cricklade."

"Thank you," Louise said.

"Until your father fired me."

Louise didn't know whether to burst into tears or just shoot him on the spot.

"Let them in, Duggen," a woman called. "The little girl looks exhausted. And this is no day to settle old grudges."

Duggen shrugged and moved aside.

A line of dusty windows was the sole source of illumination inside. The aeroambulance was a hulking dark presence in the middle of the concrete floor. Three people were standing below the plane's narrow, pointed nose; the woman who had spoken, and a pair of five-year-old twin girls. She introduced herself as Felicia Cantrell, her daughters were Ellen and Tammy; her husband Ivan was an aeroambulance pilot,

the man who had opened the door. "And Duggen you already know, or at least he knows you."

Ivan Cantrell took a vigilant look out of the hangar door before closing it. "So would you like to tell us what you're doing here, Louise? And what happened to you?"

It took her over fifteen minutes to produce a patched-up explanation which satisfied them. All the time guarding her tongue from uttering the word possession, and mentioning who Titreano really was. As she realized, those two items would have got her ejected from the hangar in no time at all. Yet at the same time she was pleased with her white lies; the Louise who had woken to a normal world yesterday would have just blurted the truth and imperiously demanded they do something about it. This must be growing up, after a fashion.

"The Land Union with modern energy weapons?" Duggen mused sceptically when she was finished.

"I think so," Louise said. "That's what everyone said."

He looked as if he was about to object when Genevieve said: "Listen."

Louise couldn't hear a thing. "What?" she asked.

"The church bells, they've stopped."

Duggen and Ivan went over to the windows and looked out.

"Are they coming?" Louise mouthed to Titreano.

He nodded his head surreptitiously.

"Please," she appealed to Ivan. "You have to fly us out of here."

"I don't know about that, Miss Kavanagh. I don't have the authority. And we don't really know what's happening in the village. Perhaps I ought to check with the constable first."

"Please! If you're worried about your job, don't be. My family will protect you."

He sucked in his breath, blatantly unhappy.

"Ivan," Felicia said. She stared straight at him, pointing significantly to the twins. "Whatever is going on, this is no place for children to be. The capital will be safe if anywhere is."

"Oh, hell. All right, Miss Kavanagh. You win. Get in. We'll all go."

Duggen started to open the big sliding doors at the end of the hangar, allowing a thick beam of pink-tinted sunlight to

strike the aeroambulance. The plane was an imported Kulu Corporation SCV-659 civil utility, a ten-seater VTOL supersonic with a near global range.

"It has the essence of a bird," Titreano murmured, his face gently intoxicated. "But with the strength of a bull. What magic."

"Are you going to be all right inside?" Louise asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes, Lady Louise. This is a voyage to be prized beyond mountains of gold. To be granted this opportunity I shall give full praise to the Lord tonight."

She coughed uncomfortably. "Right. Okay, we'd better get in; up that stairs on the other side, see?"

They followed Felicia and the twins up the airstairs. The plane's narrow cabin had been customized for its ambulance role, with a pair of stretchers and several cabinets of medical equipment. There were only two seats, which the twins used. Genevieve, Titreano, and Louise wound up sitting together on one of the stretcher couches. Louise checked the safety on the shotgun once again and wedged it below her feet. Surprisingly, no one had objected to her carrying it on board.

"This is all we need," Ivan called back from the pilot's seat as he started to run through the preflight checklist. "I've got half a dozen systems failures showing."

"Any critical?" Duggen asked as he closed the hatch.

"We'll survive."

Felicia opened one of the cabinets and handed Genevieve a bar of chocolate. The girl tore the wrapper off and sat munching it with a huge contented smile.

If she craned forwards, Louise could just see the windscreen beyond Ivan. The plane was rolling forwards out of the hangar.

"There are some houses on fire in the village," the pilot exclaimed. "And some people running down the road towards us. Hang on."

There was a sudden surge in the bee-hum from the fans, and the cabin rocked. They were airborne within seconds, climbing at a shallow angle. The only thing visible through the windscreen were daubs of insubstantial pink cloud.

"I hope Carmitha is all right down there," Louise said guiltily.

"I feel certain she will remain free from harm, lady. And it gladdens me that you resolved your quarrel with her. I admire you for that, my lady Louise."

She knew her cheeks would be blushing, she could feel the heat. Hopefully the smears of mud and dust would be veiling the fact. "Carmitha said something to me before she left. Something about you. It was a question. A good one."

"Ah. I did wonder what passed between you. If you care to ask, I will answer with such honesty as I own."

"She wanted me to ask where you really came from."

"But, Lady Louise, I have spoken nothing but the truth to you in this matter."

"Not quite. Norfolk is an English-ethnic planet; so we do learn something of our heritage in school. I know that the England of what you say is your time was a pure Anglo-Saxon culture."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And Titreano is not an English name. Not at that time. After that possibly, when immigration began in later centuries. But if you had been born in Cumbria in 1764 as you claim, that could not be your name."

"Oh, lady, forgive me any mistrust I have inadvertently caused you. Titreano is not the name I was born with. However, it is the one I lived with in my latter years. It is the closest rendering the island people I adopted could come to my family name."

"And that is?"

The dignity vanished from his handsome features, leaving only sorrow. "Christian, my lady Louise. I was baptized Fletcher Christian, and was proud to be named so. In that I must now be alone, for I have brought naught but shame to my family ever since. I am a mutineer, you see."

4

Ralph Hiltch was gratified and relieved by the speed with which Ombey's senior administration reacted to what they'd taken to calling the Mortonridge crisis. The people at Hub One were joined by the full complement of the Privy Council security committee. This time Princess Kirsten herself was sitting at the head of the table in the white bubble room, relegating Admiral Farquar to a position adjacent to her. The tabletop mutated into a detailed map showing the top half of Mortonridge; the four towns which the rogue Longhound bus had visited—Marble Bar, Rainton, Gaslee, and Exnall—glinted a macabre blood-red above the rumpled foothills. Flurries of symbols flickered and winked around each of them, electronic armies harassing their foes.

Once the last of Moyce's delivery lorries had been tracked down and eliminated, Diana Tiernan switched the entire capacity of the AIs to analysing vehicles that had left the four towns, and stopping them. In one respect they were fortunate: it was midnight along Mortonridge, the volume of traffic was much reduced from its daytime peak. Identification was reasonably easy. Deciding what to do about both cars and towns was less so.

It took twenty minutes of debate, arbitrated by the Princess, before they thrashed out an agreed policy. In the end, the deciding factor was Gerald Skibbow's completed personality debrief which was datavised down from Guyana. Dr Riley Dobbs appeared before the committee to testify its provenance; an apprehensive man, telling the planetary rulers that they were being assaulted by the dead reborn. But it did provide the justification, or spur, necessary for the kind of action which Ralph was pressing for. And even he sat through

Dobbs's report in a state of cold incredulity. If I'd made a mistake, shown a single gram of weakness . . .

The expanded security committee decided that all ground vehicles which had left the Mortonridge towns were to be directed to three separate holding areas established along the M6 by the police AT Squads. Refusal to comply would result in instantaneous SD fire. Once at the holding area, they would be required to wait in their vehicles until the authorities were ready to test them for possession. Failure to remain in the vehicle would result in the police AT Squads opening fire.

For the towns, a complete martial law curfew was to be effected immediately, no vehicular traffic or pedestrians allowed. Low orbit SD sensor satellites would scan the streets constantly in conjunction with the local police patrols. Anyone found disobeying the prohibition would be given exactly one opportunity to surrender. Weapons engagement authorization was granted to all the police personnel responsible for enforcing the curfew order.

At first light tomorrow the operation to evacuate the four towns would begin. Now that Diana Tiernan and the AIs were reasonably satisfied that no possessed were left anywhere else on the continent, Princess Kirsten agreed to dispatch marine troops from Guyana to assist with the evacuation. All Xingu police reserves would be called in, and together with the marines they would encircle the towns. Squads would then move in to conduct a house-to-house examination. Non-possessed members of the population were to be escorted out and flown on military transports to a Royal Navy ground base north of Pasto where they would be housed for the immediate future.

As for the possessed, they would be given a stark choice: release the body or face imprisonment in zero-tau. No exceptions.

"I think that covers everything," Admiral Farquar said.

"You'd better make it clear to the marine commanders that they're not to use assault mechanoids under any circumstances," Ralph said. "In fact, the more primitive the systems they deploy, the better."

"I don't know if we've got enough chemical projectile

weapons in store for everyone," the admiral said. "But I'll see that all our current stock is issued."

"It wouldn't be too difficult for Ombey's engineering factories to start production of new projectile rifles and ammunition," Ralph said. "I'd like to see what can be done in that direction."

"It would take at least a couple of days to set up," Ryle Thorne said. "Our current situation should have been settled by then."

"Yes, sir," Ralph said. "If we truly have got all the possessed trapped on Mortonridge this time. And if no more sneak on to the planet."

"Starship interception has been one hundred per cent throughout the Ombey system for the last five hours," Deborah Unwin said. "And you were the first ship to arrive from Lalonde, Ralph. I guarantee no more possessed will escape from orbit down to the planet."

"Thank you, Deborah," Princess Kirsten said. "I'm not doubting the competence of your officers, nor the efficiency of the SD network, but I have to say I think Mr Hiltch is correct in requesting contingency arrangements. What we've seen so far is simply the very first encounter with the possessed; and combating them is absorbing nearly all of our resources. We have to assume that other planets will not be as successful as us in containing the outbreaks. No, this problem is not one which is going to go away in the near or even mid-future. And, as is likely, it is proved beyond reasonable doubt that there is both an afterlife and an afterworld, the philosophical implications are quite extraordinary, and profoundly disturbing."

"Which brings us to our second problem," Ryle Thorne said. "What are we going to tell people?"

"Same as always," Jannike Dermot said. "As little as possible, certainly to start with. We really can't risk the prospect of a general panic right now. I would suggest we use the energy virus as a cover story."

"Plausible," Ryle Thorne agreed.

The Home Secretary, the Princess, and her equerry put together a statement for general release the next morning. It was instructive for Ralph to see the Saldana body politic at work

in the flesh, as it were. There was no question of the Princess herself delivering the statement to the news companies. That was the job of the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. A Saldana simply could not announce such appalling news. It was the function of royalty to offer comments of support and sympathy to the victims at a later date, and people were going to need all the comfort they could get when that byte of official news hit the communications net.

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The town of Exnall sat two hundred and fifty kilometres below the neck of Mortonridge, where the peninsula joined the main body of the continent. It had been founded thirty years ago, and had grown with confidence ever since. The soil around it was rich, the haunt of any number of aboriginal plant species, many of which were edible. Farmers came in the hundreds to cultivate the new species alongside terrestrial crops which thrived in the moist tropical climate. Exnall was a town dominated by agriculture; even the light industries attracted by the council produced and serviced farm machinery.

But by no means a hick town, Chief Inspector Neville Latham thought as his car drove along Maingreen, which ran straight through the centre. Exnall had amalgamated with the local harandrid forest instead of chopping it down to make way for buildings as other Mortonridge towns had done. Even twenty minutes after midnight Maingreen looked superb, the mature trees importing an air of rustic antiquity for the buildings, as if the two had been coexisting for centuries. Streetlights hanging from overhead cables cast a glareless haze of orange-white light, turning the harandrids' dripping leaves a spooky grey. Only a couple of bars and the all-nighter coffee shop were open; their liquid glass windows swirling in abstract patterns, making it impossible to see exactly what was happening inside. Not that anything wild ever did take place; Neville Latham knew that from his days as a patrol officer twenty years ago. Terminal drunks and stim victims slumped the bars, while night shift workers took refuge in the coffee shop, along with the duty police officers.

The car's drive processor datavised an update request, and

Neville directed it off Maingreen and into the police station's car park. Almost all of Exnall's twenty-five-strong police complement were waiting for him in the station's situation management room. Sergeant Walsh stood up as he entered, and the rest stopped talking. Neville took his place at the head of the room.

"Thank you all for coming in," he said briskly. "As you know from the level two security datavise you've received, the Prime Minister has decreed a continent-wide curfew to come into effect from one o'clock this morning. Now, I'm sure we've all accessed the rumours streaming the net today, so I'd like to clarify the situation for you. First the good news: I've been in communication with Landon McCulloch who assures me that Ombey has not been contaminated by a xenoc biohazard as the media has been hinting. Nor are we under any sort of naval assault. However, it seems someone has released an extremely sophisticated sequestration technology down here on Xingu."

Neville watched the familiar faces in front of him register various levels of apprehension. The ever-dependable Sergeant Walsh remained virtually emotionless, the two detectives, Feroze and Manby, wary and working out angles, genuine disquiet among the junior patrol officers—who knew full well they'd have the dirty job of actually going out in their cars and enforcing the curfew order.

He waited a few moments for the grumbles to subside. "Unfortunately, the bad news is that the Privy Council security committee believes several examples of this technology may already be loose here in Exnall. Which means we are now under a full state of martial law. Our curfew has to be enforced one hundred per cent, no exceptions. I know this is going to be difficult for you, we've all got family and friends out there, but believe me the best way to help them now is to make sure the order holds. People must not come into contact with each other; which is how the experts think this technology spreads. Apparently it's very hard to spot anyone who has been sequestered until it's too late."

"So we just sit in our homes and wait?" Thorpe Hartshorn asked. "For how long? For what?"

Neville held up a placatory hand. "I'm coming to that, Of-

ficer Hartshorn. Our efforts will be supported by a combined team of police and marines who are going to seal off the entire area. They should be here in another ninety minutes. Once they arrive all the houses in the town will be searched for any victims of the sequestration, and everyone else is going to be evacuated.”

“The whole town?” Thorpe Hartshorn asked suspiciously.

“Everybody,” Neville confirmed. “They’re sending over a squadron of military transports to take us away. But it’s going to take a few hours to organize, so it falls upon us to ensure that the curfew is maintained until then.”

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DataAxis, Exnall’s sole news agency, was at the other end of Maingreen from the police station; a shabby, three-storey flat-roofed office module which made few creditworthy concessions to the sylvan character of the town. The agency itself was a typical small provincial outfit, employing five reporters and three communications technicians who between them combed the whole county for nuggets of information. Given the nature of the area their brief was wide-ranging, dealing in local human interest stories, official events, crime (such as it was), and the horrendously mundane crop price sheets which the office processors handled with little or no human supervision. Out of this fascinating assortment of articles they had managed to sell precisely four items to Ombey’s major media companies in the last six weeks.

But that had certainly changed today, Finnuala O’Meara thought jubilantly as the desktop processor finished decrypting the level two security datavise from Landon McCulloch to Neville Latham. She’d spent a solid ten hours fishing the net streams today, digesting every rumour since yesterday’s Guyana alert. Thanks to the trivia and paranoid nightmares which every bulletin site geek on the planet had contributed she’d felt completely stymied out and ready to pack it in. Then an hour ago things got interesting.

AT Squads had seen action in Pasto. Violent action by all accounts—and still no official media release on that from the police. The motorways were being shut down clean across the continent. Reports of SD fire on vehicles abounded, including

a clear account of a runaway bus being vaporized not a hundred and fifty kilometres south of Exnall. And now, Xingu's police commissioner, in person, informing Neville Latham that an unknown, but probably xenoc, sequestration virus was loose in Exnall.

Finnuala O'Meara datavised a shutdown order into the desktop processor block and opened her eyes. "Bloody hell," she grunted.

Finnuala was in her early twenties, eleven months out of university in Atherstone. Her initial delight at landing a job within two days of qualifying, had, during the first quarter of an hour at the agency, turned into dismay. The Exnall agency didn't deal in news, it churned out anti-insomnia treatments. Dismay had slumped to surly anger. Exnall was everything which was rotten with small towns. It was run by a clique, a small elite group of councillors and businessmen and the richer local farmers, who made the decisions which counted at their dinner parties and out on their golf course.

It was no different from her own hometown, the one over on the Esparta continent where her parents never quite made the leap to real money contracts because they lacked the connections. Excluded, by class, by money.

She did nothing for half a minute after the decrypted datavise slipped from her mind, sitting staring at the desktop processor. Accessing the net's police architecture was illegal enough, owning a level two decryption program was grounds for deportation. But she couldn't ignore this. *Couldn't*. It was everything she'd become a reporter for.

"Hugh?" she called.

The communications technician sharing the graveyard shift with her cancelled the Jezzibella album he was running and gave her a disapproving look. "What?"

"How would the authorities announce a curfew to the general public, one where everyone is confined to their house? Specifically, a curfew here in Exnall."

"Are you having me on?"

"No."

He blinked away the figments of the flek and accessed a civil procedures file in his neural nanonics. "Okay, I've found it; it's a pretty simple procedure. The chief inspector will use

his code rating to load a universal order into the town's net for every general household processor. The message will play as soon as the processor is accessed, no matter what function you asked for—you tell it to cook your breakfast or vacuum the floor, the first thing it will do is tell you about the curfew."

Finnuala patted her hands together, charting out options. "So people won't know about the curfew until tomorrow morning after they wake up."

"That's right."

"Unless we tell them first."

"Now you really are winding me up."

"No way." The smile on her face was carnivorous. "I know what that prat Latham is going to do next. He'll warn his friends before anyone else, he'll make sure they're ready to be evacuated first. It's his style, this whole bloody town's style."

"Don't be so paranoid," Hugh Rosler said edgily. "If the evacuation is under McCulloch's command, nobody will be able to pull a fast one from this end."

Finnuala smiled sweetly and datavised an order into the desktop processor block. It accessed the net's police architecture again, and the monitor programs she designated went into primary mode.

The results simmered into Hugh's mind as a cluster of grey, dimensionless icons. Someone at the police station was datavising a number of houses in the town and outlying areas. They were personal calls, and the households they were being directed at were all depressingly familiar.

"He already is," Finnuala said. "I know these people as well as you do, Hugh. Nothing changes, not even when our planet is under threat."

"So what do you want to do?"

"What this agency is supposed to do: inform people. I'll assemble a package warning everyone about the sequestration, but instead of just releasing it on the media circuit I want you to program the agency processor to datavise it to everyone in Exnall right away, coded as a personal priority message. That way we'll all have an equal chance to get clear when the military transports arrive."

"I don't know about this, Finnuala. Maybe we ought to check with the editor first . . ."

“Bugger the editor,” she snapped. “He already knows. Look who was seventh on Latham’s list. Do you think his priority is to call us? Do you? Right now he’s getting his fat wife and their backwards brat dressed ready to take off for the landing site. Are your wife and kids being told, Hugh? Are they being made safe?”

Hugh Rosler did what he always did and offered no resistance. “All right, Finnuala, I’ll modify the processor’s program. But by Christ, you’d better be right about this.”

“I am.” She stood up and pulled her jacket off the back of the chair. “I’m going down to the police station, see if I can get a personal comment from that good man Chief Inspector Latham on the crisis facing his little fiefdom.”

“You’re pushing it,” Hugh warned.

“I know.” She grinned sadistically. “Great, isn’t it.”

• • •

Ralph knew he didn’t have anything to prove anymore. The AT Squads were alert to the terrible danger, they’d been fully blooded. So there was no practical reason for him to take a police hypersonic out to Mortonridge. Yet here he was with Cathal, Will, and Dean heading south at Mach five. His justification . . . well, the marine brigade coming down from the orbital bases would need to be brought up to speed. And he might have some advice invaluable to those on the ground.

In reality, he needed to see those towns cordoned off for himself. The threat contained, pinned down ready for extermination.

“It looks like your idea about zero-tau was on the ball,” Roche Skark datavised. “All six prisoners we captured at Moyce’s have now been placed in the pods shipped down from Guyana. Four of them fought like lunatics before the AT Squads could force them in. The other two were apparently cured before they went in. In both cases the possessors just gave up and left the bodies rather than undergo exposure to temporal stasis.”

“That’s about the best news I’ve had for ten hours,” Ralph replied. “They can be beaten, squeezed out without killing the body they’re possessing. It means we’re not just fighting a holding action.”

“Yes. Well, full credit to you for that one, Ralph. We still don’t know why the possessed can’t tolerate zero-tau, but no doubt the reason will turn up in debrief at some time.”

“Are you shoving the cured prisoners into personality debrief?”

“We haven’t decided. Although I think it’s inevitable eventually. We must not get sidetracked from neutralizing the Mortonridge towns. Frankly, the science of it all can wait.”

“What sort of state are the prisoners in?”

“Generally similar to Gerald Skibbow, disorientated and withdrawn, but their symptoms are nothing like as severe as his. After all they were only possessed for a few hours. Skibbow had been under Kingston Garrigan’s control for several weeks. Certainly they’re not classed as dangerous. But we’re placing them in secure isolation wards for the moment, just in case. It’s the first time I’ve agreed with Leonard DeVille all day.”

Ralph snorted at the name. “I meant to ask you, sir. What is it with DeVille?”

“Ah, yes; sorry about him, Ralph. That’s pure politics between us and our dear sister agency. DeVille is one of Jannike’s puppets. The ISA keeps tabs on all major Kingdom politicians, and those who are squeaky clean are nudged forward. DeVille is obnoxiously pure in heart, if devious in mind. Jannike is grooming him as a possible replacement for Warren Aspinal as Xingu’s Prime Minister. Ideally, she’d like him in charge of the hunt operation.”

“Whereas you had the Princess appoint me as chief advisor . . .”

“Exactly. I’ll have a word with Jannike about him. It’s probably heretical of me, but I think the problem the possessed present us might be slightly more important than our little internal rivalries.”

“Thank you, sir. It’d be nice to have him off my back.”

“I doubt he’d be much more of a problem anyway. You’ve done some sterling work tonight, Ralph. Don’t think it’s gone unnoticed. You’ve condemned yourself to a divisional chief’s desk for the rest of eternity now. I can assure you the boredom is quite otherworldly.”

Ralph managed a contemplative smile in the half-light of the hypersonic's cabin. "Sounds attractive right now."

Roche Skark cancelled the channel.

With his mind free, Ralph datavised a situation update request to Hub One. The squadron of Royal Marine troop flyers were already halfway down from Guyana. Twenty-five police hypersonics carrying AT Squads were arrowing across the continent, converging on Mortonridge. All motorway traffic had now been shut down. An estimated eighty-five per cent of non-motorway vehicles had been located and halted. Curfew orders were going out to every general household processor in Xingu. Police in the four Mortonridge towns were preparing to enforce the martial law declaration.

It looked good. In the computer, it looked good. Secure. But there must be something we missed. Some rogue element. There always is. Someone like Mixi Penrice.

Someone . . . who abandoned the Confederation marines in Lalonde's jungle. Who left Kelven Solanki and his tiny, doomed command to struggle against the wave of possessed all alone.

All actions which were fully justifiable in the defence of the realm. Maybe I'm not so dissimilar to DeVille after all.

• • •

Twenty minutes after Neville Latham had issued his assignment orders, the station situation management room had settled down into a comfortable pattern. Sergeant Walsh and Detective Feroze were monitoring the movement of the patrol cars, while Manby was maintaining a direct link to the SD centre. Any sign of human movement along the streets should bring a patrol car response within ninety seconds.

Neville himself had taken part in issuing dispatch orders to the patrol officers. It felt good to be involved, to show his people the boss wasn't afraid of rolling up his sleeves and getting stuck in there. He'd quietly accepted the fact that for someone his age and rank Exnall was a dead end posting. Not that he was particularly bitter; he'd realized twenty-five years ago he wasn't cut out for higher office. And he fitted in well here with these people, the town was his kind of community. He understood it. When he retired he knew he would be staying on.

Or so he'd thought until today. Judging from some of the latest briefing updates he'd received from Pasto, after tomorrow there might not be much of Exnall left standing for him to retire to.

However, Neville was determined about one thing. Non-entity he might be, but Exnall was going to be protected to the best of his ability. The curfew would be carried out to the letter with a competence which any big city police commander would envy.

"Sir." Sergeant Walsh was looking up from the fence of stumpy AV pillars lining his console.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Sir, I've just had three people datavise the station, wanting to know what's going on, and is the curfew some kind of joke."

Feroze turned around, frowning. "I've had five asking me the same thing. They all said they'd received a personal datavise telling them a curfew was being effected. I told them they should check their household processor for information."

"Eight people?" Neville queried. "All receiving personal messages at this time of night?"

Feroze glanced back at one of his displays. "Make that fifteen, I've got another seven incoming datavises stacked up."

"This is absurd," Neville said. "The whole point of my universal order was to explain what's happening."

"They're not bothering to access it," Feroze said. "They're calling us direct instead."

"Eighteen new datavises coming in," Walsh said. "It's going to hit fifty any minute."

"They can't be datavising warnings to each other this fast," Neville murmured, half to himself.

"Chief," Manby was waving urgently. "SD control reports that house lights are coming on all over town."

"What?"

"Hundred and twelve datavises, sir," Walsh said.

"Did we mess up the universal order?" Neville asked. At the back of his mind was the awful notion that the electronic warfare capability Landon McCulloch warned him about had glitched the order.

"It was straight out of the file," Feroze protested.

“Sir, we’re going to run out of net access channels at this rate,” Walsh said. “Over three hundred datavises coming in now. Do you want to reprioritize the net management routines? You have the authority. We’d be able to re-establish our principle command channels if we shut down civilian data traffic.”

“I can’t—”

The door of the situation management room slid open.

Neville twisted around at the unexpected motion (the damn door was supposed to be codelocked!), only to gasp in surprise at the sight of a young woman pushing her way past a red-faced Thorpe Hartshorn. A characteristics recognition program in his neural nanonics supplied her name: Finnuala O’Meara, one of the news agency reporters.

Neville caught sight of a slender, suspicious-looking processor block which she was shoving back into her bag. A codebuster? he wondered. And if she has the nerve to use one inside a police station, what else has she got?

“Ms O’Meara, you are intruding on a very important official operation. If you leave now, I won’t file charges.”

“Recording and relaying, Chief,” Finnuala said with a hint of triumph. Her eyes with their retinal implants were unblinking as they tracked him. “And I don’t need to tell you this is a public building. Knowing what happens here is a public right under the fourth coronation proclamation.”

“Actually, Miss O’Meara, if you bothered to fully access your legal file, you’d know that under martial law all proclamations are suspended. Leave now, please, and stop relaying at once.”

“Does that same suspension give you the right to warn your friends about the danger of xenoc sequestration technology before the general public, Chief Inspector?”

Latham blushed. How the hell did the little bitch know that? Then he realized what someone with that kind of command access to the net could do. His finger lined up accusingly on her. “Have you datavised personal warnings to people in this town?”

“Are you denying you warned your friends first, Chief Inspector?”

“Shut up, you stupid cow, and answer me. Did you send out those personal alarm calls?”

Finnuala smirked indolently. "I might have done. Want to answer my question now?"

"God in Heaven! Sergeant Walsh, how many calls now?"

"One thousand recorded, sir, but that's all our channels blocked. It may be a lot more. I can't tell."

"How many did you send, O'Meara?" Neville demanded furiously.

She paled slightly, but stood her ground. "I'm just doing my job, Chief Inspector. What about you?"

"How many?"

She arched an eyebrow, aspiring to hauteur. "Everybody."

"You stupid—The curfew is supposed to be averting a panic; and it would have done just that if you hadn't interfered. The only way we're going to get out of this with our minds still our own is if people stay calm and follow orders."

"Which people?" she spat back. "Yours? The mayor's family?"

"Officer Hartshorn, get her out of here. Use whatever force is necessary, and some which isn't if you want. Then book her."

"Sir." A grinning Hartshorn caught Finnuala's arm. "Come along, miss." He held up a small nervejam stick in his free hand. "You wouldn't want me to use this."

Finnuala let Hartshorn tug her out of the situation management room. The door slid shut behind them.

"Walsh," Neville said. "Shut down the town's communications net. Do it now. Leave the police architecture functional, but all civil data traffic is to cease immediately. They mustn't be allowed to spread this damn panic any further."

"Yes, sir!"

• • •

The police hypersonic carrying Ralph had already started to descend over the town of Rainton when Landon McCulloch datavised him.

"Some bloody journalist woman started a panic in Exnall, Ralph. The chief inspector is doing his best to damp it down, but I'm not expecting miracles at this point."

Ralph abandoned the hypersonic's sensor suite. The image he'd received of Rainton was all in the infrared spectrum, rectangles of luminous pink glass laid out over the black land.

Glowing dots converged in the air above it, marine troop flyers and police hypersonics ready to implement the isolation. Given they were the forces of salvation, their approach formation looked strangely like the circling of giant carrion birds.

“I suggest you or the Prime Minister broadcasts to them directly, sir. Appeal to them to follow the curfew order. Your word should carry more weight than some local dignitary. Tell them about the marines arriving; that way they’ll also see that you’re acting positively to help them.”

“Good theory, Ralph. Unfortunately Exnall’s chief inspector has shut down the town’s net. Only the police architecture is functional right now. The only people we can broadcast to are the ones sitting in the patrol cars.”

“You have to get the net back on-line.”

“I know. But now it seems there’s a problem with some of the local management processors.”

Ralph squeezed his fists, not wanting to hear. “Glitches?”

“Looks like it. Diana is redirecting the AIs to interrogate Exnall’s electronics. But there aren’t nearly enough channels open for them to be as effective as they were in Pasto.”

“Hellfire! Okay, sir, we’re on our way.” He datavised a quick instruction to the pilot, and the hypersonic rose above its spiralling siblings before streaking away to the south.

• • •

Two hundred and fifty kilometres above Mortonridge, the SD sensor satellite made its fourth pass over Exnall since the network had been raised to a code three alert status. Deborah Unwin directed its high-resolution sensors to scan the town. Several specialist teams of security council analysts and tactical advisors were desperate for information about the town’s on-the-ground situation.

But they weren’t getting the full picture. In several places the satellite images were fuzzy, edges poorly defined. Switching to infrared didn’t help; red ripples swayed to and fro, never still.

“Just like the Quallheim Counties,” Ralph concluded morosely when he accessed the data. “They’re down there, all right. And in force.”

“It gets worse,” Deborah datavised. “Even in the areas rel-

actively unaffected we still can't get a clear picture of what's going on below those damn harandrid trees. Not at night. All I can tell you is that there are a lot of people out on the streets."

"On foot?" Ralph queried.

"Yes. The AIs loaded travel proscription orders into all the processor controlled vehicles in the town. Some people will be able to break the order's code, of course. But basically the only mechanical transport left in Exnall right now are the bicycles."

"So where are all the pedestrians going?"

"Some are taking the main link road to the M6, but it looks like the majority are heading for the town centre. I'd say they're probably converging on the police station."

"Damn it, that's all we need. If they congregate in a crowd there's no way we'll be able to stop the possession from spreading. It'll be like a plague."

• • •

Frank Kitson was angry in a way he hadn't been for years. Angry, and just a bit alarmed, too. First, woken up in the dead of night by a priority message from some O'Meara woman he'd never heard of. Which turned out to be a paranoid fantasy about xenoc takeovers and martial law. Then when he tried to datavise the police station about it he couldn't get through to the duty officer. So he'd seen the lights on next door, and datavised old man Yardly to see if he knew what was going on. Yardly had received the same priority datavise, as had some of his family, and he couldn't get through to the police either.

Frank didn't want to make a fool of himself by appearing panicky, but something odd was definitely going down. Then the communications net crashed. When he accessed the general household processor for an emergency channel to the police station there was an official message in the processor's memory from Chief Inspector Latham announcing the curfew, setting out its rules, and assuring all the citizens they would be evacuated in the morning. Genuinely worried now, Frank told his little family to get ready, they were leaving right away.

The car processor refused to acknowledge his datavise.

When he switched the car to manual override, it still wouldn't function. That was when he set off to find a police officer and demand to be told just what the hell was going on. It was a few minutes short of one o'clock when the curfew was officially due to start. And in any case, he was an upstanding subject of the King, he had every right to be on the street. The curfew couldn't possibly apply to him.

A lot of other people seemed to have the same idea. Quite a group of them marched down the wide road out of their tranquil residential suburb heading for the town centre, shoulders set squarely against the night air. Some people had brought their kids, the children sleepy, their voices piping and full of queries. Comments were shouted back and forth, but no one had any answers to what was actually going on.

Frank heard someone call his name, and saw Hanly Nowell making his way towards him.

"Hell of a thing," he told Hanly. They worked for the same agrichemical company; different divisions, but they drank together some nights, and their two families went on joint outings occasionally.

"Sure." Hanly looked distracted. "Did your car pack up?"

Frank nodded, puzzled by how low Hanly was keeping his voice, almost as if he didn't want to be overheard. "Yes, some kind of official traffic division override in the processor. I didn't even know they could do that."

"Me neither. But I've got my four-wheeler. I can bypass the processor in that, go straight to manual drive."

They both stopped walking. Frank threw cautious glances at the rest of the loose group as they passed by.

"Room in it for you and the family," Hanly said when the stragglers had moved away.

"You serious?" Maybe it was the thick grey tree shadows which flapped across the street creating confusing movements of half-light, but Frank was sure Hanly's face was different somehow. Hanly always smiled, or grinned, forever happy with life. Not tonight, though.

Guess it's getting to him, too.

"Wouldn't have offered otherwise," Hanly said generously.

"God, thanks, man. It's not for me. I'm scared for the wife and Tom, you know?"

"I know."

"I'll go back and get them. We'll come around to your place."

"No need." And now Hanly was smiling. He put an arm around Frank's shoulders. "I'm parked just around the corner. Come on, we'll drive back to your house. Much quicker."

Hanly's big offroad camper was sitting behind a thick clump of ancient harandruds in a small park. Invisible from the street.

"You thought about where we can go to get clear?" Frank asked. He was keeping his own voice low now. There were still little groups of people walking about through the suburb, all making their way to the town centre. Most of them would probably appreciate a ride out, and wouldn't be too fussy how they got it. He was bothered by how furtive and uncharitable he'd become. Focusing on survival must do that to a man.

"Not really." Hanly opened the rear door and gestured Frank forwards. "But I expect we'll get there anyway."

Frank gave him a slightly stiff smile and climbed in. Then the door banged shut behind him, making him jump. It was pitch black inside. "Hey, Hanly." No answer. He pushed at the door, pumping the handle, but it wouldn't open. "Hanly, what the hell you doing, man?"

Frank had the sudden, awful realization that he wasn't alone inside the camper. He froze, spread-eagle against the door. "Who's there?" he whispered.

"Just us chickens, boss."

Frank whirled around as a fearsome green-white light bloomed inside the camper. Its intensity made him squeeze his eyes tight shut, fearing for his retinas. But not before he'd seen the sleek wolverine creatures launching themselves at him, their huge fangs dripping blood.



From his seat in the situation management room, Neville Latham could hear the crowd outside the police station. They produced an unpleasant ebb and flow of sound which lapped at the building, its angry tone plain for all to hear.

The final impossibility: a mob in Exnall! And while he was supposed to be enforcing a curfew. Dear Lord.

"You must disperse them," Landon McCulloch datavised.

“They cannot be allowed to group together for any length of time, it would be a disaster.”

“Yes, sir.” How? he wanted to shout at his superior. I’ve only got five officers left in the station. “How long before the marines land?”

“Approximately four minutes. But, Neville, I’m not allowing them in to the town itself. Their priority is to establish a secure perimeter. I have to think of the whole continent. What’s loose in Exnall cannot be allowed out.”

“I understand.” He glanced at the desktop processor’s AV projector which was broadcasting Exnall’s status display. The SD sensor satellite wasn’t producing as many details as he would have liked, but the overall summary was accurate enough. Approximately six hundred people were milling along Maingreen outside the station, with dribs and drabs still arriving. Neville made his decision and datavised the communications block for a channel to each patrol car.

It was all over now, anyway: career, retirement prospects, probably his friends, too. Ordering the police to open fire with sonics on his own townsfolk wouldn’t make the recriminations appreciably worse. And it would be helping them, even though they’d never appreciate the fact.

• • •

Eben Pavitt had arrived at the police station ten minutes ago, and still hadn’t managed to get anywhere near the doors to make his complaint. Not that it would do him much good if he had got up there. He could see those at the front of the building hammering away at the thick glass doors to no avail. If that pompous dickbrain Latham was in there, he wasn’t doing his duty and talking to the crowd.

It was beginning to look like his walk (two bloody kilometres, dressed in a thin T-shirt and shorts) had all been for nothing. How utterly bloody typical that Latham should bungle tonight. Ineffective warnings. Sloppy organization. Cutting people off from the net. The chief inspector was supposed to be helping the town, for crying out loud.

By God, my MP is going to hear about this.

If I get out in one piece.

Eben Pavitt glanced uneasily at his fellow townsfolk. There

was a constant derisory shouting now. Several stones had been thrown at the police station. Eben disapproved of that, but he could certainly understand the underlying frustration.

Even Maingreen's overhead streetlights seemed to be sharing the town's malaise, they weren't as bright as usual. Away in the distance, above the fringes of the crowd, he could see several of them flickering.

He wasn't going to achieve anything here. Perhaps he should have hiked straight out of town? And it still wasn't too late, if he started now.

As he turned around and started to push his way through the press of aggrieved people, he thought he saw a large flyer curving through the sky above the western edge of town. Trees and the wayward streetlights swiftly cut it from his view, but there wasn't much else that gold-haze blob could be. And the size could only mean a military transport of some kind.

He grinned secretively. The government was doing something positive. Perhaps all was not lost after all.

Then he heard the sirens. Patrol cars were racing along Maingreen, approaching the crowd from both ends. Those people around him were straining to catch a glimpse of the latest distraction.

"LEAVE THE AREA," an amplified voice bellowed from the police station. "THE TOWN IS NOW UNDER MARTIAL LAW. RETURN HOME AND REMAIN THERE UNTIL YOU RECEIVE FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS."

Eben was sure the distorted voice belonged to Neville Latham.

The first patrol cars braked dangerously close to people on the edge of the main crowd, as if their safety systems had somehow become uncoupled. Several jumped clear hurriedly, two or three lost their footing and fell over. One man was struck by a patrol car, sending him cannoning into a woman. They both went sprawling.

A deluge of boos were directed at the patrol cars. Eben didn't like the mood which was emerging among his fellow citizens. These weren't the usual peaceable Exnall residents. And the police reaction was unbelievably provocative. A life-long law abider, Eben was shocked by their actions.

“LEAVE THE AREA NOW. THIS IS AN ILLEGAL ASSEMBLY.”

A single lump of stone tumbled through the air above the bobbing heads of the crowd. Eben never did see the arm which flung it. One thing remained certain, though, it was thrown with incredible force. When it hit the patrol car it actually managed to fracture the bonded silicon windscreen.

Several taunting cheers went up. Suddenly the air was thick with improvised missiles raining down on the patrol cars.

The response was predictable, and immediate. A couple of assault mechanoids emerged from the rear of each patrol car. Sense-overload ordnance shot out, red flares slicing brilliant ephemeral archways across the stars.

They should have been warning shots. The mechanoids had a direct-attack prohibition loaded into their processors which only Neville Latham could cancel.

The ordnance activated two metres above the compressed bustle of bodies at the heart of the crowd. The effect was almost as bad as if live ammunition had been fired straight at them.

Eben saw men and women keel over as though they'd been electrocuted. Then his eyes were streaming from intolerable light and wickedly acidic gas. Human screams vanished beneath a hyper-decibel whistle. His neural nanonics sensorium filter programs were unable to cope (as the ordnance designers intended), leaving him blind, deaf, and virtually insensate. Heavy bodies thudded into him, sending him spinning, stumbling for balance. Pinpricks of heat bloomed across his bare skin, turning to vicious stings. He felt his flesh ballooning, body swelling to twice, three times its normal size. Joints were seizing up.

Eben thought he was screaming. But there was no way to tell. The solid sensations, when they started to return, were crude ones. His bare legs scraping over damp grass. Limp arms banging against his side. He was being dragged along the ground by his collar.

When he'd regained enough rationality to look around, the scenes of suffering on Maingreen outside the police station made him want to weep with rage and helplessness. The crazed assault mechanoids were still pummeling people with

their ordnance from point-blank range. A direct hit brought instant death, for those nearby the activation it was outright torture.

“Bastards,” Eben rasped. “You bastards.”

“Pigs are always the same.”

He looked up at the man who was pulling him away from the melee. “Christ, thanks, Frank. I could have died if I’d stayed in there.”

“Yeah, I suppose you could have,” Frank Kitson said. “Lucky I came along, really.”

• • •

The police hypersonic landed next to the five big marine troop flyers. They were strung out along the link road which connected Exnall to the M6; a quintet of dark, menacingly obese arachnids whose landing struts had dented the carbon concrete. The start of the town’s harandrid forest was two hundred metres away, a meticulous border where the aboriginal trees finished and the cultivated citrus groves began.

As he came down the hypersonic’s airstairs, Ralph’s suit sensors showed him the marine squads fanning out along the edge of the trees. Some kind of barrier had already been thrown across the road itself. So far a perfect deployment.

The marine colonel, Janne Palmer, was waiting for Ralph in the command cabin of her flyer. It was a compartment just aft of the cockpit with ten communications operatives, and three tactical interpretation officers. Even though it was inside and well protected, the colonel was wearing a lightweight armour suit like the rest of her brigade. Her shell helmet was off, showing Ralph a surprisingly feminine face. The only concession to military life appeared to be her hair, which was shaved down to a two-millimetre stubble of indeterminable colour. She gave him a fast nod of acknowledgement as he was escorted in by a young marine.

“I accessed a recording of the operation at Moyce’s,” she said. “These are one tough set of people we’ve got here.”

“I’m afraid so. And it looks like Exnall is the worst infestation out of all the four Mortonridge towns.”

She glanced into an AV pillar’s projection. “Nice assignment. Let’s hope my brigade can handle it. At the moment I’m

trying to establish a circular perimeter roughly fifteen hundred metres outside the town. We should have it solid in another twenty minutes.”

“Excellent.”

“That forest’s going to be a bitch to patrol. The SD sensor sats can’t see shit below the trees, and you’re telling me I can’t rely on our usual observation systems.”

“’Fraid not.”

“Pity. Aerovettes would be exceptionally handy in this case.”

“I must advise against using them. The possessed can really screw our electronics. You’re far better off without them. At least that way you know the information you’re receiving is accurate, even though there isn’t much of it.”

“Interesting situation. Haven’t handled anything like this since tac school, if then.”

“Diana Tiernan told me the AIs have got very few datalinks left into Exnall. We’ve definitely lost most of the town’s communications net. Even the police architecture has failed now. So the exact situation inside is unknown.”

“There was some kind of fight outside the police station which finished a couple of minutes ago. But even if that crowd which gathered along Maingreen have all been possessed, that still leaves us with a lot of the population which have escaped so far. What do you want to do about them?”

“Same as we originally planned. Wait until dawn, and send in teams to evacuate everyone. But I wish to Christ that curfew had held. It did in all the other towns.”

“Wishes always wind up as regrets in this game, I find.”

Ralph gave her a speculative look, but she was concentrating on another AV projection. “I think our main concern right now is to contain the possessed in Exnall,” he said. “When it’s light we can start worrying about getting the rest out.”

“Absolutely.” Janne Palmer stared straight at the ESA operative, and gave him a regretful grin. “And come dawn I’m going to need the best information I can acquire. A lot of lives are going to depend on me getting it right. I don’t have any special forces types in my brigade. This was a rush operation. But what I do have now is you and your G66 troops. I’d like

you to go in and make that assessment for me. I believe you're the best qualified, in all respects."

"You don't happen to know Jannike Dermot, do you?"

"Not personally, no. Will you go in for me? I can't order you to; Admiral Farquar made it quite plain you're here to advise, and I have to take that advice."

"Considerate of him." Ralph didn't even need any time to decide. *I made that choice when I put the armour suit on again.* "Okay, I'll go and tell my people we're on line again. But I'd like to take a squad of your marines in with us. We might need some heavy-calibre firepower support."

"There's a platoon assembled and waiting for you in flyer four."

• • •

Finnuala O'Meara had passed simple frustration a long time ago. Over an hour, in fact. She had been sitting on a bunk in the police station's holding cell for an age. Nothing she did brought the slightest response from anyone, not datavisers into the station processor, nor shouting, or thumping on the door. Nobody came. It must have been that prick Latham's orders. *Let her cool off for a few hours.* Jumped-up cretin.

But she could nail him. Anytime she wanted, now. He must know that. Which was probably why he'd kept her in here while the rest of *her* story played out, denying her a complete victory. If only her coverage had been complete she would have been able to dictate her own terms to a major.

She'd heard the noises from outside, the sound of a crowd gathering and protesting. A large crowd if she was any judge. Then the sirens of the patrol cars rushing along Maingreen. Speakers blaring a warning, pleas, and threats. Strange monotonous thumps. Screams, glass smashing.

It was awful. She belonged outside, drinking down the sight.

After the riot, or whatever, it had become strangely quiet. Finnuala had almost drifted off to sleep when the cell door did finally open.

"About bloody time," she said. The rest of the invective died in her throat.

A huge mummy shuffled laboriously into the cell, its ban-

dages a dusty brown, with lime-green pustulant fluids weeping from its hands. It was wearing Neville Latham's immaculate peaked cap. "So sorry to keep you waiting," it apologized gruffly.

• • •

Colonel Palmer's field command officers informed Ralph's reconnaissance team about the woman as they were about to enter Exnall. Datavise bandwidth was being suppressed by the now-familiar electronic warfare field, preventing anything other than basic conversation. They certainly couldn't receive a full sensewise, or even a visual image, so they had to rely on a simple description instead.

As far as the SD sensor satellites could tell, the town's entire population had retreated back into the buildings. Earlier on there had been a considerable amount of movement under the umbrella of harandruds, blurred infrared smears skipping about erratically. Then as dawn rose even those beguiling traces vanished. The only things left moving in Exnall were the treetops swaying back and forth in the first morning zephyr. Roofs, and even entire streets, appeared blurred, as if a gentle rain was pattering on the satellite's lenses. Visually, the town was a complete hash, except for a solitary circle, fifteen metres across, in front of a diner which served the link road to the M6. And in the middle of that was the woman.

"She's just standing there," Janne Palmer datavised. "She'll be able to see anything approaching up the link road into town."

"Any weapons apparent?" Ralph asked. Along with the twelve-strong platoon the colonel had assigned him, he was crouched down at the side of the road, a hundred metres short of the first houses. They were using a small embankment for cover as they crept in towards the town.

His head was ringing with a mental version of tinnitus, which he suspected was due to the stimulants. After only two hours sleep in the last thirty-six he was having to use both chemical and software excitants to keep his edge. But he couldn't afford to relax his guard, not now.

"Definitely not," Janne Palmer told him. "At least not any

heavy-calibre hardware, anyway. She's wearing a jacket, so she could be concealing a small pistol inside it."

"Not that it makes any difference if she's possessed. We've not seen them use a weapon yet."

"Quite."

"Dumb question, but is she alive?"

"Yes. We can see her chest moving when she breathes, and her infrared signature is optimum."

"She's some kind of bait, do you think?"

"No, too obvious. I'd guess some kind of sentry, except they must know we're here. Several squads have skirmished while we were setting up the perimeter."

"Hell, you mean they're loose in the woods?"

"'Fraid so. Which means I can't confirm that all the possessed are inside the cordon. I've requested some more troops from Admiral Farquar to start searching the locality. The request is up before the security committee as we speak."

Ralph cursed silently. Possessed roaming around in this area would be nigh on impossible to track down. The Mortonridge countryside was a rugged nightmare. Pity we haven't got any affinity-bonded hounds, he thought. The ones he'd seen the settlement supervisors use back on Lalonde would have been perfect for the job. And I can just see Jannike Dermot's face if I make that suggestion to the security committee. But . . . hell, they're what we need.

"Ralph, one moment please," Colonel Palmer datavised. "We've run an ident check on our lady sentry. It's confirmed, she's Angeline Gallagher."

"Hell. That changes everything."

"Yes. Opinion here is that she's wanting to talk. She's not stupid. Allowing herself to be seen like this must be their equivalent of a white flag."

"I expect you're right." Ralph gave the platoon's lieutenant an order to halt their advance while the security committee came on line. The marines formed themselves into a defensive circle, scanning the trees and the nearby houses with their most basic sensors. Ralph let his automatic rifle hang at his side as he squatted in the middle of some thick marloop bushes. He had a terrible intimation that Gallagher (or rather her possessor) wasn't about to lay out some convenient terms

of surrender. There never can be surrender between us, he acknowledged gloomily.

So what could she want to say?

“Mr Hiltch, we concur with Colonel Palmer that the woman wants to negotiate,” Princess Kirsten datavised. “I know it’s a lot to ask after all you’ve been through, but I’d like you to go in there and talk to her.”

“We can set up SD ground-strike coverage to support you,” Deborah Unwin datavised. “Put you in the eye of a hurricane, so to speak. Any tricks or attempts to overwhelm you, and we’ll laser out a two-hundred-metre circle with you at the centre. We know they can’t withstand the SD platform’s power levels.”

“It’s all right,” Ralph told his invisible audience. “I’ll go in. After all, I was the one who brought her here.”

• • •

Strangely enough, Ralph didn’t think of very much at all when he was walking the last five hundred metres along the road. All he wanted to do now was get the job over. The road which had started at the mouth of a titanic river on a different, distant planet finished inside a pretty rural town on the rump of nowhere. If there was an irony to be had in those circumstances, Ralph couldn’t taste it.

Angeline Gallagher’s possessor waited calmly outside the cheap single-storey diner as he walked towards her. Dean, Will, and Cathal accompanied him for most of the way; then when they were still a hundred metres away from her he told them to wait and carried on alone. Nothing moved in any of the simple, elegant buildings which lined the link road. But he knew they were waiting behind the walls and blanked windows. The conviction grew inside him that they weren’t showing themselves because it wasn’t yet their time to do so. Their part in the drama would come later.

This was a surety he’d never known before, a kind of psychic upswelling. And with it his intimation of disaster grew ever stronger.

The closer he got to the woman, the less the electronic warfare field affected his implants and suit blocks. By the time he was five metres away, the security committee was receiving a full sensewise again.

He stopped. Squared his shoulders. Took off his shell helmet.

Her smile was almost pitying in its sparsity. "Looks like we've arrived at the crunch time," she said.

"Who are you?"

"Annette Ekelund. And you are Ralph Hiltch, the ESA's head of station on Lalonde. I might have known you would be the one they set on us. You've done quite a good job so far."

"Could we cut the bullshit? What do you want?"

"Philosophically, to live for ever. Practically, I want you to call off the police and marines you've got circling this town along with the other three we've managed to occupy. Right now."

"No."

"I see you've already learned not to make threats. *No or else. No if you don't you'll regret it.* That's good. After all, what can you threaten me with?"

"Zero-tau."

Annette Ekelund frowned as she considered the response. "Yes. Possibly. It is, I admit, certainly frightening enough for us. But there's no finality to that, not anymore. If we flee our possessed bodies to escape zero-tau, we can still return. There are already several million possessed walking upon the Confederation worlds. Within weeks, that number will be hundreds of millions, a few days later billions. I will always have a way back now. As long as a single human body is left alive my kind can resurrect me. Do you understand now?"

"I understand the zero-tau option works. We will put you in the pods; and we will keep putting you in the pods until there are no more of you left. Do you understand that?"

"I'm sorry, Ralph, but as I said, you simply cannot threaten me. Have you worked out why yet? Have you worked out the real reason I will win? It is because you will ultimately join me. You are going to die, Ralph. Today. Tomorrow. A year from now. If you're lucky, in fifty years time. It doesn't matter when. It is entropy, it is fate, it is the way the universe works. Death, not love, conquers all in the end. And when you die, you will find yourself in the beyond. That is when you and I will become brother and sister in the same fellowship. United against the living. Coveting the living."

“No.”

“Do not speak about something you know nothing about.”

“I still do not believe you. God is not that cruel. There will be more to death than this emptiness you found.”

She laughed bitterly. “Fool. Know-nothing fool.”

“But a living fool. A fool you have to contend with here and now.”

“There is no such thing as God, Ralph. Only humans are stupid enough to create religions. Have you noticed that? None of the xenocs we’ve encountered need to bandage their insecurities and fears with promises of incorporeal glory that are every soul’s due. Oh, no, Ralph; God is merely the term an ignorant primitive uses when he wants to say quantum cosmology. The universe is an entirely natural structure, one which is exceptionally vicious in its attitude to life. And now we have an opportunity to leave it for good, a chance of salvation. We’re not going to let you stop us, Ralph.”

“I can, and I will.”

“Sorry, Ralph, but your intransigent belief in humanity is your principal weakness, one which you share with the rest of this Kingdom’s devout population. We intend to exploit that to the full. What I’m about to say might seem inhuman, but then, that’s what you think I am anyway. As I told you, the dead cannot lose this fight, for you have no lever on us. We cannot be threatened, coerced, nor pleaded with. Like death itself, we are an absolute.”

“What is it you have to say?”

“Am I talking to this planet’s authorities, the Saldana Princess?”

“Yes. She’s on-line.”

“Good. Then I say this: You almost managed to exterminate us last night, and if our fight continues along those same lines today then a great many people will be killed, a situation neither of us would welcome. Therefore I propose a standoff solution. We will keep Mortonridge for ourselves, and I pledge none of us will leave it. If you do not believe me, and I expect trust to be lacking on your part, you have the physical power to set up a blockade across the neck of this land where it joins the continent.”

“No deal,” Princess Kirsten datavised.

"The Kingdom will not abandon its subjects," Ralph said out loud. "You ought to know that by now."

"We acknowledge the Kingdom's strength," Annette Ekelund said. "And that is why we propose this ceasefire. The outcome of the struggle between the living and our kind will not be decided by what transpires here. We are too evenly matched. However, not every Confederation planet is as advanced or as competent as Ombey." She raised her head, closing her eyes as she did so, looking blindly up at the sky. "Out there is where both our fates are being decided right now. You, like I, will have to wait for the outcome to be determined by others. We know that we will triumph. Just as your misplaced faith tells you that the living will be victorious."

"So you're saying we should just sit it out on the sidelines?"

"Yes."

"I don't even have to ask the security committee for their opinion on that one. We're not the sideline, we're the front line, we are a major part of the struggle against you. If we can show other planets that it is possible to stop you from spreading, banish you from the bodies you've captured, then they will have faith in their own ability."

Annette Ekelund nodded sadly. "I understand. Princess Saldana, I have tried reason; now I must use something stronger to convince you."

"Ralph, our satellite sensors just came back on-line," Deborah Unwin reported. "We can see a lot of movement down there. Oh, Christ, they're swarming out of the houses. Ralph, get out of there. Now. Do it now! Run."

But he stood his ground. He knew the Ekelund woman wasn't threatening him personally. This was to be a demonstration. The one he'd anticipated, and dreaded all along.

"Do you want ground-strike support?" Admiral Farquar datavised.

"Not yet, sir." His enhanced retinas showed him doors opening all the way along the street, people emerging onto the pavements.

At Ekelund's invisible signal, the possessed were bringing out their hostages. The illusory bodies on display were deliberately gaudy, ranging from historical warlords to fictitious

creatures, blighted monsters and necromantic demigods. Fantasies chosen to emphasise the impossible gulf between them and their frightened prisoners.

Each of the sorcerous apparitions was paired with one of Exnall's surviving non-possessed residents. Like their captors, they were a cross section of the community, young and old, male and female; dressed in nightgowns, pyjamas, hurriedly thrown on shirts, even naked. Some struggled, the diehards and the fatalists; but most had been tyrannized into obedience.

The possessed restrained them with the greatest of ease as they hustled them forwards, their energetic ability giving them a mechanoid's strength. Children wailed fearfully as they were gripped by hands and claws as hard as stone. Men grimaced in subdued fury.

A symphony of cries and hopeless shouts laid siege to Ralph's ears.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yelled at Ekelund. His arm swept around. "For Christ's sake, you're hurting them."

"This is not all," Annette Ekelund said impassively. "Tell your people to look four kilometres south-west of the town at a lake called Otsuo. There is an abandoned offroad camper there belonging to one of Exnall's residents."

"Hang on, Ralph," Deborah Unwin datavised. "We're scanning now. Yep, there's a vehicle parked there all right. Registered to a Hanly Nowell, he works at an agrichemical plant in the town's industrial precinct."

"Okay," Ralph said. "It's there. Now tell your people to ease off those hostages."

"No, Ralph," Annette Ekelund said. "They will not ease off. What I am trying to make clear to you is the fact that we have spread beyond this town. I could only know where the vehicle was if I ordered the driver to leave it there. And it is not the only one, not from this town nor the others. We have escaped the clutches of your marines, Ralph. I organized the four towns which the Longhound bus visited very carefully; we were busy last night while you were chasing after the possessed in Pasto. My followers spread out along the whole peninsula; on foot, on horseback, on bikes, in manual control vehicles. Even I don't know where they all are any more. The

marines barricading the towns are worthless. Now you will have to block off Mortonridge in its entirety to prevent us from contaminating the rest of the continent.”

“No problem.”

“I’m sure. But you’ll never retake this land from us, not now. You can’t even claim back this single town, not without committing genocide. You’ve already seen what a single one of us can achieve when we have to defend ourselves. Imagine that destructive power focused with evil intent. Suburban fusion plants ruptured, hospitals incinerated, day clubs crashing down on their young occupants. So far we have never killed anyone, but if we chose to do so, if you leave us with no alternative, this planet will suffer enormously.”

“Monster!”

“And I’ll do it, Ralph. I’ll give the order for my followers to start the campaign. It will come right after my order for every non-possessed in Exnall to be murdered. They’re going to be killed right here on the streets in front of you, Ralph. We will crush their skulls, snap their necks, strangle them, cut their bellies open and leave them to bleed to death.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No, you don’t want to believe me, Ralph. There is a difference.” Her voice became smooth, taunting him. “What have we got to lose? These people you see around you will join us one way or the other. That is what I’m trying to tell you. Either their bodies will be possessed, or they will die and possess in turn. Please, Ralph, don’t allow yourself and others to suffer because of your stupid beliefs. *We will win.*”

Ralph wanted to kill her, hating and fearing the serene way she talked about slaughter, knowing she wasn’t bluffing. The most basic human urge, to wipe out your enemy hard and fast, came firing up from his subconscious. His neural nanonics had to reduce his heart rate. One hand moved fractionally towards the pistol holster on his belt.

And I can’t do it. Can’t kill her. Can’t end it all with the one act of barbarism which we’ve always resorted to. Dear God, she’s already dead.

Annette Ekelund’s eyes followed the tiny motion of his hand. She smiled and turned to beckon one of the figures that had emerged from the diner.

Ralph watched numbly as a mummy wearing a peaked police cap shuffled forwards. The girl held in its solid embrace couldn't have been more than fifteen. All she wore was a long mauve T-shirt. Her bare legs were grazed and streaked with dirt. She'd been crying profusely. Now she could only whimper as she was dragged towards him.

"Nice-looking girl," Annette Ekelund said. "A fine body, if a little young. But I can alter that. You see, if you blow big chunks out of this body of Angeline Gallagher's, Ralph, the girl will become the one I possess next. My colleague here will break her bones, rape her, rip the skin from her face, hurt her so terribly she'll make a pact with Lucifer himself to make it stop. But it won't be Lucifer who answers her from the afterlife, only me. I shall come forth again; and you and I will be right back where we started, except that Gallagher's body will be dead. Will she thank you for that, do you think, Ralph?"

Nerve impulse overrides prevented Ralph's hands from tearing Ekelund's head from her shoulders. "What do you want me to say?" he datavised to the security committee.

"I don't think we have any choice," Princess Kirsten replied. "I cannot allow thousands of my people to be killed out of hand."

"If we leave, they'll be possessed," Ralph warned her. "Ekelund will do exactly what she described to this girl, and all the others. Not just here, but right along the whole length of Mortonridge."

"I know, but I have to consider the majority. If the possessed are outside the marine cordons, then we've already lost Mortonridge. I cannot lose Xingu, too."

"There are two million people living on Mortonridge!"

"I am aware of that. But at least if they're possessed they will still be alive. I think that Ekelund woman is right; the overall problem of possession isn't going to be solved here." There was a moment's pause. "We're cutting our losses, Ralph. Tell her she can have Mortonridge. For now."

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered.

Annette Ekelund smiled. "She agreed, didn't she?"

"You may have Mortonridge," Ralph relayed imper- turbably as the Princess started to outline the conditions. "We

will instigate an immediate evacuation procedure for people from areas you have not yet reached; any attempt to sabotage vehicles will result in SD strikes against areas where we know you are concentrated. If any of you try to pass the cordon we establish between Mortonridge and the main body of the continent you will be put into zero-tau. If any of you are found outside the cordon you will be put into zero-tau. If there is any terrorist assault against any Ombey citizen or building we will send in a punitive expedition and throw several hundred of you into zero-tau. If you attempt to communicate with other offplanet possessed forces, you will again be punished."

"Of course," Ekelund said mockingly. "I agree to your terms."

"And the girl comes with me," Ralph declared.

"Come come, Ralph, I don't believe the authorities actually said that."

"Try me," he challenged.

Ekelund glanced at the sobbing girl, then back to Ralph. "Would you have bothered if she was a wizened old grandmother?" she asked sarcastically.

"But you didn't choose a wizened old grandmother, did you? You chose her because you knew how protective we are towards the young. Your error."

Ekelund said nothing, but made a sharp irritated gesture to the mummy. It let the girl go. She floundered, trembling so badly she could hardly stand. Ralph caught her before she fell. He winced at the weight that put on his injured leg.

"I'll look forward to the day you join us, Ralph," Ekelund said. "However long it takes. You'll be quite an asset. Come and see me when your soul finally obtains a new body to live in."

"Fuck you." Ralph scooped the girl up and started to walk down the road. He ignored the hundreds of people standing in front of the prim buildings, the indifferent possessed and their wailing distraught victims, the ones he'd failed so completely. Staring resolutely ahead, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. He knew if he took it all in, ac-

knowledged the magnitude of the disaster he'd wrought, he'd never be able to carry on.

"Enjoy your magnificent victory with the girl," Annette Ekelund called after him.

"This one is only the beginning," he promised grimly.

5

At a point in space four light-years distant from the star around which Mirchusko orbited, the gravity density suddenly leapt upwards. The area affected was smaller than a quark, at first. But once established, the warp rapidly grew both in size and in strength. Faint strands of starlight curved around the fringes, only to be sucked in towards the centre as the gravity intensified further.

Ten picoseconds after its creation, the shape of the warp twisted from a spherical zone to a two-dimensional disk. By this time it was over a hundred metres in diameter. At the centre of one side, gravity fluctuated again, placing an enormous strain on local space. A perfectly circular rupture appeared, rapidly irising open.

A long grey-white fountain of gas spewed out from the epicentre of the wormhole terminus. The water vapour it contained immediately turned to minute ice crystals, spinning away from the central plume, twinkling weakly in the sparse starlight. Lumps of solid matter began to shoot out along the gas jet, tumbling off into the void. It was a curious collection of objects: sculpted clouds of sand, tufts of reed grass with their roots wriggling like spider legs, small fractured dendrites of white and blue coral, broken palm tree fronds, oscillating globules of saltwater, a shoal of frantic fish, their spectacularly coloured bodies bursting apart as they underwent explosive decompression, several seagulls squirting blood from beaks and rectums.

Then the crazy outpouring reduced drastically, blocked by a larger body which was surging along the wormhole. *Udat* slipped out into normal space, a flattened teardrop over a hundred and thirty metres long, its blue polyp hull enlivened with a tortuous purple web. Straightaway the blackhawk changed

the flow of energy through the vast honeycomb of patterning cells which made up the bulk of its body, modifying its gravitonic distortion field. The wormhole terminus began to close behind it.

Almost the last object to emerge from the transdimensional opening was a small human figure. A woman: difficult to see because of the black SII spacesuit she wore, her limbs scrabbling futilely, almost as though she were clawing at the structure of space-time in order to pursue the big blackhawk as it drew away from her. Her movements slowly calmed as the suit's sensor collar revealed stars and distant nebulas again, replacing the menacingly insubstantial pseudofabric of the wormhole.

Dr Alkad Mzu felt herself shudder uncontrollably, the relief was so intoxicating. Free from the grip of equations become energy.

I understand the configuration of reality too well to endure such direct exposure. The wormhole has too many flaws, too many hidden traps. A quasi-continuum where time's arrow has to be directed by an artificial energy flow; the possible fates lurking within such a non-place would make you welcome death as the most beautiful of consorts.

The collar sensors showed her she had picked up a considerable tumble since losing her grip on the rope ladder. Her neural nanonics had automatically blocked the impulses from her inner ears as a precaution against nausea. There were also a number of analgesic blocks erected across the nerve paths from her forearms. A physiological status display showed her the damage inflicted on tendons and muscles as she'd forced herself to hang on as the *Udat* dived for safety. Nothing drastic, thankfully. Medical packages would be able to cope once she got the suit off.

"Can you retrieve me?" she datavised to the *Udat's* flight computer. "I can't stop spinning." As if they couldn't see that. But the bitek starship was already seven hundred metres away, and still retreating from her. She wanted an answer, wanted someone to talk to her. Proof she wasn't alone. This predicament was triggering way too many thirty-year-old memories. Dear Mary, I'll be calling it déjà vu next. "Calling *Udat*, can you retrieve me?" Come on, answer.

On the *Udat's* bridge Haltam was busy programming the medical packages which were knitting to the base of Meyer's skull. Haltam was the *Udat's* fusion specialist, but doubled as ship's medical officer.

The captain was lying prone on his acceleration couch, unconscious. His fingers were still digging into the cushioning, frozen in a claw-like posture, nails broken by the strength he'd used to maul the fabric. Blood dribbling out of his nose made sticky blotches on his cheeks. Haltam didn't like to think of the whimpers coming from Meyer's mouth just before the blackhawk had swallowed out of Tranquillity, snatching Alkad Mzu away from the intelligence agents imprisoning her within the habitat. Nor did he like the physiological display he was accessing from Meyer's neural nanonics.

"How is he?" asked Aziz, the *Udat's* spaceplane pilot.

"None too good, I think. He's suffered a lot of cerebral stress, which pushed him into shock. If I'm interpreting this display right, his neural symbionts were subjected to a massive trauma. Some of the bitek synapses are dead, and there's minor hemorrhaging where they interface with his medulla oblongata."

"Christ."

"Yeah. And we don't have a medical package on board which can reach that deep. Not that it would do us a lot of good if we had. You need to be a specialist to operate one."

"I cannot feel his dreams," *Udat* datavised. "I always feel his dreams. Always."

Haltam and Aziz exchanged a heavy glance. The bitek starship rarely used its link with the flight computer to communicate with any of the crew.

"I don't believe the damage is permanent," Haltam told the blackhawk. "Any decent hospital can repair these injuries."

"He will waken?"

"Absolutely. His neural nanonics are keeping him under for the moment. I don't want him conscious again until the packages have knitted. They ought to be able to help stabilize him, and alleviate most of the shock."

"Thank you, Haltam."

"Least I can do. And what about you? Are you all right?"

“Tranquillity was very harsh. My mind hurts. I have never known that before.”

“What about your physical structure?”

“Intact. I remain functional.”

A whistle of breath emerged from Haltam’s mouth. Then the flight computer informed him that Alkad Mzu was datavising for help. “Oh, hell,” he muttered. The coverage provided by the electronic sensor suite mounted around the outside of the starship’s life support horseshoe was limited. Normally, *Udat*’s own sensor blisters provided Meyer with all the information he needed. But when Haltam accessed the suite, the infrared sweep found Mzu easily, spinning amid the thin cloud of dispersing debris which had been sucked into the wormhole with them.

“We’ve got you located,” he datavisied. “Stand by.”

“*Udat*?” Aziz asked. “Can you take us over to her, please?”

“I will do so.”

Haltam managed a nervous, relieved smile. At least the blackhawk was cooperating. The real big test would come when they wanted a swallow manoeuvre.

Udat manoeuvred itself to within fifty metres of Mzu, and matched her gentle trajectory. After that, Cherri Barnes strapped on a cold gas manoeuvring pack and hauled her in.

“We have to leave,” Alkad datavisied as soon as she was inside the airlock. “Immediately.”

“You didn’t warn us about your friends on the beach,” Cherri answered reproachfully.

“You were told about the observation agents. I apologize if you weren’t aware of how anxious they were to prevent me from escaping, but I thought that was implicit in my message. Now, please, we must perform a swallow manoeuvre away from here.”

The airlock chamber pressurized as soon as the outer hatch closed, filling with a slightly chilled air. Cherri watched Mzu touch the seal catches on her worn old backpack with awkward movements. The small incongruous pack fell to the floor. Mzu’s SII suit began flowing off her skin, its oil-like substance accumulating in the form of a globe hanging from the base of her collar. Cherri eyed their passenger curiously as her own suit reverted to neutral storage mode. The short black

woman was shivering slightly, sweat coating her skin. Both hands were bent inward as though crippled with arthritis; twisted, swollen fingers unmoving.

“Our captain is incapacitated,” Cherri said. “And I’m none too certain about *Udat* either.”

Alkad grimaced, shaking her head. Oh, what an irony. Depending on the *Udat*’s goodwill, it of all starships. “Ships will be sent after us,” she said. “If we remain in this location I will be captured, and you will probably be exterminated.”

“Look, just what the hell did you do to get the Kingdom so pissed at you?”

“Better you don’t know.”

“Better I do, then I’ll know what we’re likely to be facing.”

“Trouble enough.”

“Try to be a little more specific.”

“Very well: every ESA asset they can activate throughout the Confederation will be used to find me, if that makes you feel any happier. You really don’t want to be around me for any length of time. If you are, you will die. Clear enough?”

Cherri didn’t know how to answer. True, they’d known Mzu was some kind of dissident on the run, but not that she would attract this kind of attention. And why would Tranquillity, presumably in conjunction with the Lord of Ruin, help the Kulu Kingdom try to restrain her? Mzu was adding up to real bad news.

Alkad datavised the flight computer, requesting a direct link to the blackhawk itself. “*Udat*?”

“Yes, Dr Mzu.”

“You must leave here.”

“My captain is hurt. His mind has darkened and withered. I am in pain when I try to think.”

“I’m sorry about Meyer, but we cannot stay here. The blackhawks at Tranquillity know where you swallowed to. The Lord of Ruin will send them after me. They’ll take us all back.”

“I do not wish to return. Tranquillity frightens me. I thought it was my friend.”

“One swallow manoeuvre, that’s all. A small one. Just a light-year will suffice, the direction is not important. No

blackhawk will be able to follow us then. After that we can see what's to be done next."

"Very well. A light-year."

Cherri had already unfastened her spacesuit collar when she felt the familiar minute perturbation in apparent gravity which meant *Udat's* distortion field was altering to open a wormhole interstice. "Very clever," she said sardonically to Mzu. "I hope to hell you know what you're doing. Bitek starships don't usually make swallows without their captain providing some supervision."

"That's a conceit you really ought to abandon," Alkad said tiredly. "Voidhawks and blackhawks are considerably more intelligent than humans."

"But their personalities are completely different."

"It's done now. And it would appear we are still alive. Were there any more complaints?"

Cherri ignored her and started to pull on a one-piece ship-suit.

"Could you sling my backpack over my shoulder, please?" Alkad asked. "I don't have the use of my hands at this moment. Our exit from *Tranquillity* was more precipitous than I imagined. And I'll need some medical packages."

"Fine. Haltam can apply the packages for you; he'll be on the bridge tending to Meyer. I'll take the backpack for you."

"No. Put it over my shoulder. I will carry it."

Cherri sighed through clenched teeth. She urgently wanted to see for herself how bad Meyer was. She was worried about the way *Udat* would react if the captain was unconscious for too long. She was coming down off the adrenaline high of the escape, which was like a hit of pure depression. And this small woman was about as safe as her own weight in naked plutonium.

"What have you got in it?"

"Do not concern yourself about that."

Cherri grabbed the backpack by its straps and held it up in front of Mzu's impassive face. There couldn't have been much in it, judging by the weight. "Now look—!"

"A great deal of money. And an even larger amount of information; none of which you would have the faintest comprehension of. Now, you are already harbouring me on board

which in itself is enough to get you killed if I'm discovered. And if the agency knew you had physically held up the backpack containing the items it does, they would throw you straight into personality debrief just to find out how much those items weigh. Do you really want to compound matters by taking a look inside?"

What Cherri wanted to do was swing the backpack at Mzu's head. Meyer had made the worst error of judgement in his life agreeing to this absurd rescue mission. All she could do now was pray it turned out not to be a terminal mistake.

"As you wish," Cherri said with fragile calm.

• • •

San Angeles spaceport was situated on the southern rim of the metropolis. A square ten kilometres to a side, a miniature city chiselled from machinery. Vast barren swathes of carbon concrete had been poured over the levelled earth and then divided up into roads, taxi aprons, and landing pads. Hundreds of line company hangars and cargo terminals hosted a business which accounted for a fifth of the entire planet's ground-to-orbit traffic movements.

Among the numbingly constant lines of standardized composite-walled hangars and office block cubes, only the main passenger terminal had been permitted a flight of fancy architecture. It resembled the kind of starship which might have been built if the practicalities of the ZTT drive hadn't forced a uniform spherical hull on the astroengineering companies. A soft-contoured meld between an industrial microgee refinery station and a hypersonic biplane, it dominated the skyline with its imperious technogothic silhouette. On the long autoway ride out from the city it gave approaching drivers the impression it was ready to pounce jealously on the tiny delta-planform spaceplanes which scuttled underneath its sweeping wings to embark passengers.

Jezzibella didn't bother looking at it. She sat in the car with her eyes closed for the whole of the early morning journey, not asleep, but brain definitely in neutral. Those kids from the concert—whatever their names were—had proved worthless last night, their awe of her interfering with their emotions.

Now she just wanted out. Out of this world. Out of this galaxy. Out of this universe. Forever living on the hope that the waiting starship would take her to a place where something new was happening. That the next stop would be different.

Leroy and Libby shared the car with her, silent and motionless. They knew the mood. Always the same when she was leaving a planet, and a fraction more intense every time.

Leroy was pretty sure the unspoken yearning was one reason she appealed to the kids; they identified with that integral sense of bewildered desperation and loss. Of course, it would have to be watched. Right now it was just an artist's essential suffering, a perverted muse. But eventually it could develop into full depression if he wasn't careful.

Another item to take care of. More stress. Not that he'd have it any other way.

The eleven cars which made up the Jezzibella tour convoy slid into the VIP parking slots below one of the terminal's flamboyant wings. Leroy had chosen such an early hour for the flight because it was the terminal's slackest time. They ought to be able to clear the official procedures without any problems.

Maybe that was the reason why none of the bodyguards sensed anything wrong. Always scanning for trouble with augmented senses, the absence of people was a relief rather than a concern.

It wasn't until Jezzibella asked: "Where the fuck are the reporters?" that Leroy noticed anything amiss. The terminal wasn't merely quiet, it was dead. No passengers, no staff, not even a sub-manager to greet Jezzibella. And certainly no sign of any reporters. That wasn't odd, that was alarming. He'd leaked their departure schedule to three reliable sources last night.

"Just fucking great, Leroy," Jezzibella growled as the entourage went through the entrance. "This exit is really up there in fucking mythland, isn't it? Because I certainly don't fucking believe it. How the hell am I supposed to make a fucking impression when the only things watching me leave are the fucking valeting mechanoids?"

"I don't understand it," Leroy said. The cavernous VIP

vestibule carried on the never-was illusion of the terminal building: ancient Egypt discovers atomic power. A marble fantasyville of obelisks, fountains, and outsize gold ornaments, where ebony sphinxes prowled around the walls. When he datavised the local net processor all he got was the *capacity engaged* response.

“What’s to understand, dickbrain? You screwed up again.” Jezzibella stomped off towards the wide wave-effect escalator which curved up towards one of the terminal’s concourses. She could remember coming down it when she arrived, so it must be the way to the spaceplanes. The bastard local net processor wouldn’t even permit her to access a floor plan. Cock-up planet!

She was five metres from the top (her retinue scurrying to catch up) when she saw the man standing waiting for her beside the arched entrance of the concourse. Some oaf in a terminal staff suit uniform, officious smile in place.

“I’m sorry, lady,” he said, when she drew level with him. “You can’t go any further.”

Jezzibella said: “Oh, really?”

“Yes. We’ve got a priority flight operation in progress today, everything has been rescheduled.”

Jezzibella smiled, her skin softening: a delectably young wide-eyed ingenue looking for a *real man* to guide her. “That’s such a pity. I’m booked to leave this morning.”

“I’m afraid there will be a short delay.”

Still smiling, Jezzibella slammed her knee into his crotch.

Isaac Goddard had been pleased at his assignment. Putting the brakes on inconvenient civilians wandering through the terminal was an important task, Al Capone wouldn’t give it to just anyone. And now it meant he got to meet this century’s superstar, too. Lee Ruggiero, whose body he possessed, was full of admiration for Jezzibella. Looking at her up close, Isaac could see why. So sweet and vulnerable. Shame he had to use force to stop her. But the timing of the spaceplane flights was vital. Al had emphasised that often enough.

He was readying his energistic powers to deal with her bodyguards, who had now caught her up, when she did her level best to ram his testicles into his eye sockets via his intestinal tract.

The energistic power which was the inheritance of every possessed was capable of near-miraculous feats as it bent the fabric of reality to a mind's whim. As well as its destructive potential, items could be made solid at the flicker of a thought. It was also capable of reinforcing a body to resist almost any kind of assault as well as enhancing its physical strength. Wounds could be healed at almost the same rate they were inflicted.

But first the wish had to be formulated, the energistic flow regulated appropriately. Isaac Goddard never had a chance to wish for anything. A uniquely male agony blew apart every coherent thought current stealing through his captured brain. Pain was all that remained.

His face white, he slowly sank to the floor before Jezzibella. Tears trickled down his cheeks as his mouth laboured soundlessly.

"If it's all the same to you," Jezzibella said brightly, "I really would like to leave this shit tip of a planet right now." She strode away.

"Oh, hey, come on, Jez," Leroy called as he chased after her down the concourse, forcing himself into a fast waddle. "Give me a break. You can't go around doing things like that."

"Why not, for shit's sake? Worried this fucking great army of witnesses will all testify in court?"

"Look, you heard him. There's some kind of special flight schedule this morning. Why don't you wait here, and I'll find out what's going on. Huh? I won't be long."

"I'm the fucking special flight, shithead! *Me, me.*"

"Christ! Grow up, will you! I don't manage bloody teen-scream acts. I only do adults."

Jezzibella stopped in surprise. Leroy never shouted at her. She pouted prettily. "I've been bad."

"You got it."

"Forgive me. I was all worked up over Emerson."

"I can understand that. But he's not coming on the starship with us. Panic over."

The mock smile faltered. "Leroy . . . Please, I just want to leave. I hate this fucking place. I'll behave, really. But you have got to get me away from here."

He rubbed his fat fingers over his face; sweat was making hair stick to his brow. "Okay. One miracle evacuation flight coming up."

"Thanks, Leroy. I don't have your defences, you know? The world's different for you. Hard and easy altogether."

Leroy tried to datavise a net processor. But he couldn't get a single response, the units were all inert. "What the hell is going on here?" he asked in annoyance. "If these flights were that big a deal, why weren't we informed?"

"Guess that's my fault," Al Capone told him.

Jezzibella and Leroy turned to see a group of ten men walking down the concourse towards them. They all wore double-breasted suits and carried machine guns. Somehow the idea of running from them seemed ludicrous. More gangsters were emerging from side corridors.

"You see, I don't want people informed," Al explained. "At least not for a while. After that, I'm gonna speak to this whole goddamn planet. Loud and clear."

Two of Jezzibella's bodyguards caught sight of the approaching gangsters. They began to run forwards, drawing their thermal induction pistols.

Al clicked his fingers. The bodyguards let out simultaneous yelps of pain as their pistols turned red hot. They dropped them fast. That was when a ripple of onyx flooring rose up and tripped them.

Jezzibella watched in astonishment as both bulky men went skidding into the wall. She looked from them back to Al, and grinned. "*Magnifico.*"

She desperately wanted to record the scene, but her fucking neural nanonics were crashing. Fucking typical!

Al watched the beef boy back away fearfully. But the dame . . . she just stood there. This weird expression on her face, fascination and interest making her eyes narrow demurely. Interest in *him*, by damn! She wasn't afraid. She was pure class, this one. She was also one hell of a looker. Minx face, and a body the likes of which simply didn't exist in the twenties.

Lovegrove was itching for a peek at her, busy telling him who Jezzibella was. Some kind of hotshot nightclub singer. Except there was more to it than just singing and playing the ivories these days, a lot more.

“So what are you going to tell us?” Jezzibella asked, her voice husky.

“What?” Al asked.

“When you speak to the planet. What are you going to say?”

Al took his time lighting a cigar. Making her wait, showing exactly who was in control. “I’m gonna tell them that I’m in charge now. Number one guy on the planet. And you’ve all gotta do what I say. *Anything* I say.” He winked broadly.

Jezzibella put on a disappointed expression. “Waste of talent.”

“*What?*”

“You’re the guys the police are calling Retros, right?”

“Yeah,” Al said cautiously.

She flicked a casual finger towards her dazed bodyguards. “And you’ve got the balls and the power to take over a whole planet?”

“You catch on quick.”

“So why waste it on this dump?”

“This *dump* has eight hundred and ninety million people living on it, lady. And I’m gonna be the fucking emperor of them all before the evening.”

“My last album has sold over three billion so far, probably triple that number in bootlegs. Those people *want* me to be their empress. If you’re going for broke, why not choose a decent planet? Kulu, or Oshanko, or even Earth.”

Not taking his eyes off her, Al called over his shoulder: “Hey, savvy Avvy, get your crummy ass up here. Now!”

Avram Harwood scuttled forwards, his head bowed, shoulders drooping. Each step was obviously painful for him, he was favouring his right leg. “Yes, sir?”

“New California is the greatest goddamn planet in the Confederation, ain’t that right?” Al asked.

“Oh, yes, sir. It is.”

“Is your population bigger than Kulu?” Jezzibella asked in a bored tone.

Avram Harwood twitched miserably.

“Answer her,” Capone growled.

“No, ma’am,” Harwood said.

“Is your economy larger than Oshanko’s?”

“No.”

“Do you export as much as Earth?”

“No.”

Jezzibella inclined her head contemptuously on one side, pushing her lips out towards Al. “Anything else you want to know?”

Her voice had suddenly become the same as a school-teacher’s. Al started to laugh in sincere admiration. “God-damn! Modern women.”

“Can you all do that heat trick with the fingers?”

“Sure can, honey.”

“Interesting. So how is taking over this spaceport tied in with conquering the planet?”

Al’s first instinct was to brag. About the synchronized flights up to the orbiting asteroids. About taking out the SD personnel. About using the SD network firepower to open up the whole planet to his Organization. But they were short on time. And this was no backwoods girl, she’d understand if he explained it. “Sorry, babe, but we’re kinda in a hurry. It’s been a ball.”

“No it hasn’t. If you’d had a ball with me, you’d know about it.”

“Hot shit—”

“If it’s tied in with spaceplane flights, you’re either going up to starships or the orbiting asteroids. But if you’re taking over the planet, it can’t be the starships. So it has to be the asteroids. Let me guess, the Strategic Defence network.” She watched the alarmed expressions light up on the faces of the gangsters. All except Mayor Harwood, but then he was already hopelessly adrift in some deep private purgatory. “How did I do?”

Al could only gawp. He’d heard of lady spiders like this; they knitted fancy webs or did hypnosis, or something. It ended up that the males just couldn’t escape. Then they got screwed and eaten.

Now I know what they go through.

“You did pretty good.” He was envious of her cool. Envious of a lot of things, actually.

“Al?” Emmet Mordden urged. “Al, we have to get going.”

“Yeah, yeah. I ain’t forgotten.”

“We can send this group down to Luciano’s people for possessing.”

“Hey, who the fuck’s in charge here?”

Emmet took a frightened pace backwards.

“In charge, but not in control,” Jezzibella teased.

“Don’t push it, lady,” Al warned her sharply.

“True leaders simply tell people to do what they want to do anyway.” She licked her lips. “Guess what I want to do?”

“Fuck this. Modern women. You’re all like goddamn whores. I ain’t never heard anything like it.”

“The talk isn’t all you’ve never had before.”

“Holy Christ.”

“So what do you say, Al?” Jezzibella switched her voice back to a liquid rumble. She almost didn’t have to fake it. She was so turned on, excited, stimulated. You name it. Caught up in a terrorist hijack. And such strange terrorists, too. Wimps with a personal nuclear capability. Except the leader, he was massively focused. Not bad-looking, either. “Want me to tag along on your little coup d’état mission? Or are you going to spend the rest of every waking day wondering what it would have been like? And you will wonder. You know you will.”

“We got a spare seat on the rocketship,” Al said. “But you’ve got to do as you’re told.”

She batted her eyelashes. “That’ll be a first.”

Amazed at what he’d just said, Al tried to play back their conversation in his mind to see how he’d gotten to this point. No good, he couldn’t figure it. He was acting on pure impulse again. And that felt first-class. Like the good old days. People never did know what he was going to do next. It kept them on edge, and him on top.

Jezzibella walked over to him and tucked her arm in his. “Let’s go.”

Al grinned around wolfishly. “Okay, wiseasses, you heard the lady. Mickey, take the rest of this bunch down to Luciano. Emmet, Silvano, take your boys to their spaceplanes.”

“Leave me my manager, and the old woman, oh, and the band too,” Jezzibella said.

“What the hell is this?” Al demanded. “I ain’t got room in my Organization for freeloaders.”

“You want me to look good. I need them.”

“Je-zus, you’re pushy.”

“You want a girl who’s a pushover, find yourself a teenage bimbo. Me, it’s the whole package or nothing.”

“Okay, Mickey, lay off the cornholers. But the rest of them get the full treatment.” He shoved his hands out towards her, palms held up imploringly. “Good enough?” The sarcasm wasn’t entirely feigned.

“Good enough,” Jezzibella agreed.

They grinned knowingly at each other for a moment, then led the procession of gangsters down the concourse to the waiting spaceplanes.

• • •

The wormhole terminus opened smoothly six hundred and eighty thousand kilometres above Jupiter’s equator, the absolute minimum permitted distance from the prodigious band of orbiting habitats. *Oenone* flew out of the circular gap, and immediately identified itself to the Jovian Strategic Defence network. As soon as their approach authorization had been granted, the voidhawk accelerated in towards the Kristata habitat at an urgent five gees. It was already asking the habitat to assemble a medical team to meet it as soon as it docked.

Of what nature? Kristata asked.

At which point Cacus, their medical officer, took over, using the voidhawk’s affinity to relay a list of the grisly physical injuries inflicted on Syrix by the possessed occupying Pernik island. **But most importantly we’re going to need a psychological trauma team, he said. We put her in zero-tau for the flight, naturally. However, she did not respond to any level of mental communication after she was brought on board, other than a purely autonomic acknowledgement of *Oenone*’s contact. I’m afraid the intensity of the withdrawal is one which approaches catatonia.**

What happened to her? queried the habitat. It was unusual for a voidhawk to fly without its captain’s guidance.

She was tortured.

Ruben waited until the medical discussion was under way before asking *Oenone* for an affinity link with Eden itself. Arriving at Jupiter he could actually feel his body relaxing in the

bridge couch despite the acceleration pressure. The events which would play out over the next few hours were going to be strenuous, but nothing like as bad as Atlantis and the voyage to the Sol system.

Oenone's instinct had been to rush directly to Saturn and the Romulus habitat as soon as Oxley had brought Syrinx on board. The yearning to go *home* after such a tremendous shock was as much a voidhawk trait as a human one.

It had been down to Ruben to convince the frantic, frightened voidhawk that Jupiter would be preferable. Jovian habitats had more advanced medical facilities than those orbiting Saturn. And, of course, there was the Consensus to inform.

This was a threat which simply had to rank higher than individual concerns.

Then there was the flight itself. *Oenone* had never flown anywhere without Syrinx's subliminal supervision, much less performed a swallow manoeuvre. Voidhawks could fly without the slightest human input, of course. But as ever there was a big difference between theory and practice. They identified so much with the needs and wishes of their captains.

The crew's general affinity band had rung with a powerful cadence of relief when the first swallow manoeuvre passed off flawlessly.

Ruben knew he shouldn't have doubted *Oenone*, but his own mind was eddying with worry. The sight of Syrinx's injuries . . . And worse, her mind closed as if it were a flower at night. Any attempt to prise below her churning surface thoughts had resulted in a squirt of sickening images and sensations. Her sanity would surely suffer if she was left alone with such nightmares. Cacus had immediately placed her in zero-tau, temporarily circumventing the problem.

Hello, Ruben, Eden said. It is pleasant to receive you again. Though I am saddened by the condition of Syrinx, and I sense that *Oenone* is suffering considerable distress.

Ruben hadn't conversed directly with the original habitat for over forty years, not since his last visit. It was a trip which most Edenists made at some time in their life. Not a pilgrimage (they would hotly deny that) but paying their respects, ac-

knowledging the sentimental debt to the founding entity of their culture.

That's why I need to speak with you, Ruben said. Eden, we have a problem. Would you call a general Consensus, please?

There was no hierarchy in Edenism, it was a society proud of its egalitarianism; he could have made the same request of any habitat. If the personality considered the request valid, it would be forwarded to the habitat Consensus, then if it passed that vote, a general Consensus would be called, comprising every single Edenist, habitat, and voidhawk in the Sol system. But for this issue, Ruben felt obliged to make his appeal direct to Eden, the first habitat.

He gave an account of what had happened on Atlantis, followed by the précis which was Laton's legacy. When he finished, the affinity band was silent for several moments.

I will call for a general Consensus, Eden said. The habitat's mental voice was uncharacteristically studious.

Relief mingled with a curious frisson of worry among Ruben's thoughts. At least the burden which *Oenone's* crew had carried by themselves during the flight was to be shared and mitigated—the fundamental psychology of Edenism. But what amounted to the habitat's shock at the revelation of souls returning to possess the living was deeply unsettling. Eden had been germinated in 2075, making it the oldest living entity in the Confederation. If anything had the requisite endowment of wisdom to withstand such news then surely it must be the ancient habitat.

Disquieted by the habitat's response, and chiding himself for expecting miracles, Ruben settled back in the acceleration couch and used the voidhawk's sensor blisters to observe their approach flight. They were already twenty-five thousand kilometres from Europa, curving gently around its northern hemisphere. The moon's ice mantle glinted a grizzled oyster as distant sunlight skittered over its smooth surface, throwing off the occasional dazzling mirror-flash from an impact crater.

Behind the moon, Jupiter occluded half of the universe. They were close enough that the polar regions were invisible, distilling the planet to a simple flat barrier of enraged orange and white clouds. The gas giant was in one of its more active

phases. Vast hurricane storm-spots geysered through the upper cloud bands, swirling mushroom formations bringing with them a multitude of darker contaminates from the lower levels. Colours fought like armies along frenzied boundaries of intricate curlicues, never winning, never losing. There was too much chaos for any one pattern or shade to gain the ultimate triumph of stability. Even the great spots, of which there were now three, had lifetimes measurable in mere millennia. But for raw spectacle they were unmatched. After five centuries of interstellar exploration, Jupiter remained one of the largest gas giants ever catalogued, honouring its archaic title as the father of gods.

A hundred thousand kilometres in from Europa, the habitats formed their own unique constellation around their lord, drinking down its magnetosphere energy, bathing in the tempestuous particle winds, listening to the wild chants of its radio voice, and watching the ever-changing panorama of the clouds. They could never live anywhere else but above such worlds; only the magnetic flux spun out by gas giants could generate the power levels necessary to sustain life within their dusky-crimson polyp shells. There were four thousand two hundred and fifty mature habitats in Jupiter orbit, nurturing a total Edenist population of over nine billion individuals. The second largest civilization in the Confederation—in numerical terms. Only Earth with its guesstimated population of thirty-five billion was bigger. But the *standard* of civilization, in both economic and cultural terms, was peerless. Jupiter's citizens had no underclass, no ignorance, no poverty, and no misfits, barring the one-in-a-million Serpent who rejected Edenism in its entirety.

The reason for such enviable social fortune was Jupiter itself. To build such a society, even with affinity-enhancing psychological stability, and bitek alleviating a great many mundane physical problems, required vast wealth. It came from helium₃, the principal fusion fuel used throughout the Confederation.

In comparison with other fuels, a mix of He₃ and deuterium produced one of the cleanest fusion reactions possible, resulting mainly in charged helium with an almost zero neutron emission. Such an end product meant that the generator sys-

tems needed little shielding, making them cheaper to build. Superenergized helium was also an ideal space drive.

The Confederation societies were heavily dependent on this form of cheap, low-pollution fusion to maintain their socioeconomic index. Fortunately deuterium existed in massive quantities; a common isotope of hydrogen, it could be extracted from any sea or glacial asteroid. He₃, however, was extremely rare in nature. The operation to mine it from Jupiter began in 2062 when the then Jovian Sky Power Corporation dropped its first aerostat into the atmosphere to extract the elusive isotope in commercial quantities. There were only minute amounts present, but minute is a relative term in the context of a gas giant.

It was that one tentative high-risk operation which had transformed itself, via political revolution, religious intolerance, and bitek revelation into Edenism. And Edenists continued to mine He₃ in every colonized star system which had a gas giant (with the notable exception of Kulu and its Principalities), although cloudscoops had replaced aerostats long ago as the actual method of collection. It was the greatest industrial enterprise in existence, and also the largest monopoly. And with the format for developing stage one colony worlds now institutionalized, it looked set to remain so.

Yet as any student of ekistics could have predicted, it was Jupiter which remained the economic heart of Edenism. For it was Jupiter which supplied the single largest consumer of He₃: Earth and its O'Neill Halo. Such a market required a huge mining operation, as well as its associated support infrastructure; and on top of that came their own massive energy requirements.

Hundreds of industrial stations flocked around every habitat, varying in size from ten-kilometre-diameter asteroidal mineral refineries to tiny microgee research laboratories. Tens of thousands of spaceships congested local space, importing and exporting every commodity known to the human and xenoc races of the Confederation—their assigned flight vectors weaving a sluggish, ephemeral DNA coil around the five-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-kilometre orbital band.

By the time *Oenone* was two thousand kilometres away from Kristata, the habitat was becoming visible to its optical

sensors. It shone weakly of its own accord, a miniature galaxy with long, thin spiral arms. The habitat itself formed the glowing core of the nebula, a cylinder forty-five kilometres long, rotating gently inside a corona of Saint Elmo's fire sparked by the agitated particle winds splashing across its shell. Industrial stations glimmered around it, static flashing in crazed patterns over external girders and panels, their metallic structures more susceptible to the ionic squalls than bitek polyp. Fusion drives formed the spiral arms, Adamist starships and inter-orbit craft arriving and departing from the habitat's globe-shaped counter-rotating spaceport.

A priority flight path had been cleared through the other ships, allowing *Oenone* to race past them towards the docking ledges ringing Kristata's northern endcap, although the starship was actually decelerating now, pushing seven gees. Ruben observed the habitat expand rapidly, its central band of starscrapers coming into focus. It was virtually the only aspect of the external vista which had changed after travelling a hundred thousand kilometres from their swallow emergence point. Jupiter remained exactly the same. He couldn't even tell if they were closer to the gas giant or not, there were no valid reference points. It seemed as though *Oenone* were flying between two flat plains, one comprised of ginger and white clouds, the other a midnight sky.

They swept around the counter-rotating spaceport and headed in for the northern endcap. The violet haze of glowing particles was murkier here, disrupted by slithering waves of darkness as the energized wind broke and churned against the four concentric docking ledge rings. *Oenone* experienced a prickle of static across its blue polyp hull as it slipped over the innermost ledge at a shallow tangent; for a moment the tattered discharge mimicked the purple web pattern veining its hull surface. Then the bulky voidhawk was hovering directly above a docking pedestal, slowly twisting around until the feed tubes were aligned correctly. It settled on the pedestal with all the fuss of a falling autumn leaf.

A convoy of service vehicles rolled towards it. The ambulance was the first to reach the rim of the saucer-shaped hull, its long airlock tube snaking out to mate with the crew toroid. Cacus was still discussing Syrinx's status with the medical

team as the zero-tau pod containing her body was rolled into the ambulance.

Ruben realized *Oenone* was hungrily ingesting nutrient fluid from the pedestal tubes. **How are you?** he asked the voidhawk belatedly.

I am glad the flight is over. Syrinx can begin to heal now. Kristata says all the damage can be repaired. Many doctors are part of its multiplicity. I believe what it says.

Yes, she'll heal. And we can help. Knowing you are loved is a great part of any cure.

Thank you, Ruben. I am glad you are my friend, and hers.

Rising from his acceleration couch, Ruben felt a flush of sentiment and admiration at the voidhawk's guileless faith. Sometimes its simple directness was like a child's honesty.

Edwin and Serina were busying themselves powering down the crew toroid's flight systems, and supervising the service vehicles as umbilicals were plugged into the ledge's support machinery. Tula was already conversing with a local cargo depot about storing the few containers remaining in the lower hull cradles. Everyone seemed to have acknowledged that they would be here for some time, even *Oenone*.

Ruben thought of her injuries again and shivered in the bridge's warm air. **I'd like to talk to Athene, please,** he asked the voidhawk. The final duty. Which he'd put off as long as possible, terrified Athene would pick up his shame. He felt so responsible for Syrinx. If I hadn't let her rush down there. If I'd gone with her . . .

Individuality is to be cherished, the voidhawk told him stiffly. **She decides for herself.**

He barely had time to form a rueful grin when he was aware of the voidhawk's potent affinity reaching out across the solar system to Saturn and the Romulus habitat.

It's all right, my dear, Athene told him as soon as they swapped identity traits. **She's alive, and she has *Oenone*. That is enough no matter what the damage those fiends inflicted. She will come back to us.**

You know?

Of course. I always know when one of *lasius*'s children returns home, and *Oenone* informed me straightaway.

Since Eden called for a Consensus I've been listening to the details.

There will be a general Consensus?

Certainly.

Ruben felt the old voidhawk captain's lips assume an ironic smile.

You know, she said, we haven't called one since Laton destroyed Jantrit. And now he's back. I suppose there is a certain inevitability about it.

He was back, Ruben said. We really have seen the last of him now. It's funny, in a way I almost regret his suicide, however noble. I think we're going to need that kind of ruthlessness in the weeks ahead.

The general Consensus took several minutes to gather; people had to be woken, others had to stop work. All across the solar system Edenists merged their consciousness with that of their home habitats, which in turn linked together. It was the ultimate democratic government, in which everyone not only voted but also contributed to and influenced the formation of policy.

Oenone presented Laton's précis first, the message he had delivered to the Atlantean Consensus. He stood before them, a tall, handsome man with Asian-ethnic features and black hair tied back in a small ponytail; dressed in an unfussy green silk robe, belted at the waist, alone in a darkened universe. His studied attitude showed he knew they were his judges, and yet did not quite care.

"No doubt you have assimilated the account of events on Pernik island and what happened at Aberdale," he said. "As you can see this whole episode started with Quinn Dexter's sacrifice ritual. However, we can safely conclude that the breakthrough from beyond which occurred in the Lalonde jungle was unique. These idiot Satanists have been dancing through the woods at midnight for centuries, and they've never succeeded in summoning up the dead before. Had souls ever returned at any time in the past we would know about it; although I concede there have always been rumours of such incidents throughout human history.

"Unfortunately, I was never able to ascertain the exact cause of what I can only describe as a rupture between our di-

mension and this 'beyond' where souls linger after death. Something must have happened to make this ritual different from all the others. This is the area where you should concentrate your research effort. The spread of possession is not a threat which can be countered on an individual basis, though I'm sure Adamist populations will demand military action whenever it breaks out. Resist such futile actions. You must discover the root cause, close the dimensional rupture. Such a method is the only long-term chance for success you have. I believe that only Edenism has the potential to challenge this problem with the necessary commitment and resources. Your unity may be the only advantage which the living have. Use it.

"I assure you that though the possessed remain unorganized, they do have a common and overriding goal. They seek strength through numbers, and they will not rest until every living body is possessed. Now that you are warned you should be able to protect yourself from anything like Pernik happening again. Simple filtering sub-routines will safeguard the habitat multiplicities, and they in turn can detect possessed individuals claiming to be Edenists with a more detailed interrogation of personality traits.

"My last observation is more philosophical than practical, although equally important in the long run should you triumph. You are going to have to make considerable adjustments to your culture now you know humans have an immortal soul. In making this adaptation, I cannot over-emphasise how important corporeal existence is. Do not think death is an easy escape option from suffering, or life as simply a phase of being, for when you die it is truly the end of a part of yourself. Nor would I want you to worry about being trapped in beyond for all of time, I doubt one in a billion Edenists ever would be. Think of what the returning souls are, who they are, and you will see what I mean. Ultimately you will know for yourself, as we all do. What I discovered on confronting the final reality is the belief that our culture is supreme among corporeal societies. I only wish I could have returned to it for just a little while longer knowing what I now know. Not that you would have me back, I suspect."

A final knowing smile, and he was gone for the last time.

First, Consensus decided, we must safeguard our own culture. Although we are relatively immune from infiltration, we must consider the longer term prospect of physical assault should the possessed gain control of a planetary system with military starships. Our protection will be achieved most effectively by supporting the Confederation, and preventing the spread of possession. To this end, all voidhawks will be recalled from civil flight activities to form an expanded defence force, one-third of which will be assigned to the Confederation Navy. Our scientific resources must be targeted as Laton suggested to discover the origin of the initial breakthrough, and achieve understanding of the energistic nature of the possessing souls. We must discover a permanent solution.

We acknowledge the views of those among us who favour a policy of isolation, and will retain it as an option should it appear the possessed are gaining the upper hand. But to be left alone in the universe after the possessed remove the Adamist planets and asteroids they have conquered is not a future we consider to be optimum. This threat must be faced in conjunction with the entire human race. We are the problem, we must cure ourselves.

• • •

Louise Kavanagh woke to the blessed smell of fresh clean linen, the pleasing sensation of crisp sheets pressing against her. When she opened her eyes the room she found herself in was even larger than her bedroom back at Cricklade. On the opposite wall, thick curtains were drawn across the windows, permitting very little light to enter. The gloomy chinks didn't even tell her what colour the light outside was. And that was tremendously important.

Louise pushed back the sheets and padded over the pile carpet to draw one of the high curtains. Duke's golden haze surged in. She studied the sky anxiously, but it was a clear day outside. There weren't even any rain clouds, and certainly none of the spirals of gauzy red mist. She had seen her fill of that banshee's breath yesterday as the aeroambulance flew across Kesteven, broad translucent whorls of it swirling above

every town and village they passed. Streets, houses, and fields below the downy substance were all tarnished a lurid carmine.

They're not here yet, Louise thought in relief. But they'll come, sure as winter.

Norwich had been a city in panic when they arrived yesterday, though the authorities weren't entirely sure what they were panicking over. The only news which had reached the capital from islands afflicted by the relentless march of the possessed were muddled claims of uprisings and invasions by offworld forces carrying strange weapons. But the Confederation Navy squadron orbiting Norfolk assured the Prince and Prime Minister that no invasion had occurred.

Nonetheless a full mobilization of the Ramsey island militias had been ordered. Troops were digging in around the capital. Plans were being drawn up to free those islands like Kesteven which had been lost to the enemy.

Ivan Cantrell had been ordered to land his plane on a remote part of the city's aerodrome. Soldiers had surrounded the vehicle as they touched down, nervous men in ill-fitting khaki uniforms, squeezing the stocks of rifles which had been antique back in their grandfathers' time. But dotted among them were several Confederation Navy Marines, clad in sleek one-piece suits which seemed like an outgrowth of rubbery skin. And their dull black weapons were definitely not obsolete. Louise suspected a single shot from one of those blank muzzles would be quite capable of destroying the aeroambulance.

The soldiers had calmed considerably when the Kavanagh sisters had climbed down the plane's airstairs followed by Felicia Cantrell and her girls. Their commanding officer, a captain called Lester-Swindell, accepted that they were refugees, but it took another two hours of being questioned before they had been "cleared." At the end Louise had to call Aunt Celina to come and vouch for her and Genevieve. She really hadn't wanted to, but by that time there was little choice. Aunt Celina was Mother's elder sister, and Louise never could quite believe the two could be related: the woman was completely brainless, a simpering airhead concerned only with the season and shopping. But Aunt Celina was married to Jules Hewson, the Earl of Luffenham, and he was a senior advisor to the

Prince's court. If the Kavanagh name didn't carry quite the weight here on Ramsey which it did on Kesteven, his certainly did.

Two minutes after Aunt Celina had blustered and whined her way into the office, Louise and Genevieve were outside being bundled into her carriage. Fletcher Christian—a *Cricklade farmhand who helped us escape, Auntie*—was told to ride on the bench with the driver. Louise wanted to protest, but Fletcher gave her a wink and bowed deeply to Aunt Celina.

Louise dropped her gaze from the unblemished sky over Norwich. Balfern House was in the centre of Brompton, the most exclusive borough of the capital city, but even so it stood in its own extensive grounds. There had been two policemen on duty outside the iron gates as they drove in yesterday evening.

Safe for the moment, then, she told herself. Except she had brought one of the possessed right into the heart of the capital. Into the core of government, in fact.

But Fletcher Christian was her secret, hers and Genevieve's; and Gen wouldn't tell. It was funny, but she trusted Fletcher now, more so than the Earl and the Prime Minister. He had already proved he would and could protect her from the other possessed. And she in turn was charged with protecting Genevieve. Because Heaven knows the militia soldiers and Confederation marines couldn't, not against *them*.

She slumped her shoulders and walked the length of the room, pulling back the remaining curtains. What do I do next? Tell people the truth about what they're facing? I can just imagine Uncle Jules listening to that. He'll think I'm hysterical. Yet if they don't know, they'll never be able to protect themselves.

It was a horrible dilemma. And to think, she'd expected her problems to end once they reached the safety of the capital. That something would be done. That we could rescue Mummy and Daddy. A schoolgirl dream.

Carmitha's shotgun was resting against the side of the bed. Louise smiled fondly at the weapon. Aunt Celina had fussed so when she insisted on bringing it with them from the aero-

drome, bleating that Young Ladies simply did not know about such things, let alone carry them on their person.

It was going to go hard on Aunt Celina when the possessed caught up with her. Louise's smile faded. *Fletcher*, she decided. I must ask Fletcher what to do next.

• • •

Louise found Genevieve sitting in the middle of her bed in the next room, knees tucked up under her chin, sulking silently. They both took one look at each other and burst out laughing. The maids, on Aunt Celina's strict instruction, had provided them with the most fanciful dresses, brightly coloured silk and velvet fabrics with huge ruffed skirts and puffball sleeves.

"Come on." Louise took her little sister's hand. "Let's get out of this madhouse."

Aunt Celina was taking breakfast in the long glass-walled morning room which looked out over the garden's lily ponds. She sat at the head of the teak table, an old world empress marshalling her troops of liveried manservants and starch-uniformed maids. A gaggle of overweight corgies snuffled hopefully around her chair to be rewarded with the odd tidbit of toast or bacon.

"Oh, that's so much better," she declared when the sisters were ushered in. "You did look simply awful yesterday. Why I barely recognized you. Those dresses are so much prettier. And your hair is so shiny now, Louise. You look a picture."

"Thank you, Aunt Celina," Louise said.

"Sit down, my dear, and do tuck in. Why you must be famished after such a terrible ordeal. Such dreadful things you've seen and endured, more than any gal I know. I gave thanks to God last night that you both reached us in one piece."

One of the maids put a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Louise. She felt her stomach curdle alarmingly. Oh, please Jesus, don't let me throw up now. "Just some toast, please," she managed to say.

"You remember Roberto, don't you, Louise?" Aunt Celina said. Her voice became slippery with pride. "My dear son, and such a strapping lad, too."

Louise glanced at the boy sitting at the other end of the table, munching his way through a pile of bacon, eggs, and

kidneys. Roberto was a couple of years older than she was. They hadn't got on the last time he visited Cricklade. He never seemed to want to do anything. And now he'd put on at least another stone and a half, most of it around his middle.

Their eyes met. He was giving her what she now called the William Elphinstone look. And the dratted dress with its tight bodice flattered her figure.

She was rather surprised when her steely stare made him blush and shift his gaze hurriedly back to his plate. I've got to get out of here, she thought, out of this house, this city, away from these stupid bovine people, and most of all out of this bloody dress. I don't need Fletcher to tell me that.

"I never did know why your mother went to live on Kesteven," Aunt Celina said. "It's such a *wild* island. She should have stayed here in the city. Could have had her pick of the court, you know, your dear mother. Divine creature she was, simply divine when she was younger. Just like you two. And now who knows what dreadful things have happened to her in this horrid rebellion. I told her to stay, but she simply wouldn't listen. Wild, it is. Wild. I hope the navy squadron shoots every one of those savages. They should cleanse Kesteven, laser it clean right down to the bedrock. Then you two darlings can come and live here safely with me. Won't that be wonderful?"

"They'll come here, too," an indignant Genevieve said. "You can't stop them, you know. Nobody can."

Louise jabbed her with a toe and glared. Genevieve simply shrugged and tucked into her eggs.

Aunt Celina blanched theatrically, her handkerchief flapping in front of her face. "Why, my darling child, what a simply dreadful thing to say. Oh, your mother should never have left the capital. Gals are brought up properly here."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Celina," Louise said swiftly. "Neither of us is thinking straight right now. Not after . . . you know."

"Of course I understand. You must both visit a doctor. I should have summoned one last night. Goodness knows what you picked up tramping around the countryside for days on end."

"No!" A doctor would discover her pregnancy in minutes. And Heaven knows how Aunt Celina would react to that.

“Thank you, Aunt Celina. But really, it’s nothing a few days rest won’t cure. I was thinking, we could tour Norwich now we’re here. It would be a real treat for us.” She smiled winningly. “Please, Aunt Celina.”

“Yes. Please may we?” Genevieve chipped in.

“I don’t know,” Aunt Celina said. “This is hardly the time for sightseeing, what with the militias forming up. And I promised Hermione I would attend the Red Cross meeting today. One must do what one can to support our brave men-folk in such times. I really can’t spare the time to show you around.”

“I could,” Roberto said. “I’d enjoy it.” His eyes were lingering on Louise again.

“Don’t be silly, darling,” Aunt Celina said. “You have school today.”

“Fletcher Christian could chaperone us,” Louise said quickly. “He’s more than proved his worth. We’d be completely safe.” From the corner of her eye she could see Roberto frowning.

“Well—”

“Please!” Genevieve wheedled. “I want to buy you some flowers, you’ve been so kind.”

Aunt Celina clasped her hands together. “Oh, you are a little treasure, aren’t you. I always wanted a little gal of my own, you know. Of course you can go.”

Louise blew her cheeks out in thanks. She could just imagine what would have happened if they’d tried pulling that routine on Mother. Genevieve had gone back to her eggs, her face a perfect composure of purity.

At the other end of the table, Roberto was chewing thoughtfully on his third slice of toast.

• • •

The sisters found Fletcher Christian in the servants’ quarters. With so many of Balfern House’s staff called away to their militia regiments he had been put to work by the cook bringing sacks up from the storerooms.

He gave both girls a measured look as he lowered a big string bag of carrots onto the kitchen floor and bowed gracefully. “How splendid you look, my young ladies, so refined. I always imagined you more suited to finery such as this.”

Louise gave him a *very* sharp stare. And then they were grinning at each other.

“Aunt Celina has lent us the use of a carriage,” she said in her grandest tone. “And she’s also given you leave to accompany us, my man. Of course, should you prefer to remain here doing what you seem to do so well . . .”

“Ah, my lady Louise, I see you are a cruel one. But justly do I deserve such mockery. It would be my honour to accompany you.”

He picked up his jacket under the disapproving gaze of the cook, and followed Louise out of the kitchen. Genevieve picked up her skirt hems and ran on ahead of them through the house.

“The little one seems none the worse for all she has been through,” Fletcher observed.

“Yes, thank the Lord. Was it truly awful for you last night?” Louise asked once they were out of earshot of the other servants.

“The room was dry and warm. I’ve made my bunk in sorrier circumstances.”

“I apologize for bringing you here, I’d forgotten quite how bad Aunt Celina was. But I couldn’t think of anyone else who could extract us from the aerodrome as quickly.”

“Pay it no further heed, my lady. Your aunt is a model of enlightenment compared to some of the matrons I knew in my own youth.”

“Fletcher.” She put her hand on his arm and slowed their pace. “Are they here?”

His sturdy features turned melancholy. “Yes, my lady Louise. I can feel several dozen encamped throughout the city. And their numbers grow with every passing hour. It will take many days, perhaps a week. But Norwich will surely fall.”

“Oh, dear Jesus, when will this ever end?”

She was aware of his arm around her as she trembled. Hating herself for being weak. Oh, where are you, Joshua? I *need* you.

“Speak not of evil, and it will pay you no heed,” Fletcher said softly.

“Really?”

“So my mother assured me.”

“Was she right?”

His fingers touched her chin, tilting her face up. “That was a long time ago, and far away. But today I think if we avoid their attentions, then you will remain out of harm’s way for longer.”

“Very well. I’ve been giving this some serious thought, you know; how to keep Genevieve and the baby truly safe. And there’s only one way to do it.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“Leave Norfolk.”

“I see.”

“It’s not going to be easy. Will you help me?”

“You do not have to ask that of me, lady, you know I will offer you and the little one what aid I can.”

“Thank you, Fletcher. The other thing was: Do you want to come with us? I’m going to try and reach Tranquillity. I know someone there who can help us.” If anyone can, she added silently.

“Tranquillity?”

“Yes, it’s a sort of palace in space, orbiting a star a long way away from here.”

“Ah, lady, what a temptress you are. To sail the stars I once sailed by. How could I resist such a request?”

“Good,” she whispered.

“I imply no criticism, Lady Louise. But do you really know how to prepare for such an endeavour?”

“I think so. There was one thing I learned from both Daddy and Joshua, Carmitha, too, in a way; and that is: Money makes everything possible.”

Fletcher smiled respectfully. “A worthy saying. And do you have this money?”

“Not on me, no. But I’m a Kavanagh, I can get it.”

6

Ione Saldana's palatial cliff-base apartment was empty now, apart from herself; the guests from the Tranquillity Banking Regulatory Council had been ushered out politely but insistently. The convivial party most definitely over. And they had known better than to argue. Unfortunately, they were also astute enough to know they wouldn't be turned out unless it was a real crisis. Word would already be spreading down the length of the giant habitat.

She had reduced the output of the ceiling's electrophorescent cells to a sombre starlight glimmer. It allowed her to see out through the glass wall which held back the sea, revealing a silent world composed entirely from shades of aquamarine. And now even that was darkening as the habitat's light tube allowed night to claim the interior. Fish were reduced to stealthy shadows slithering among the prickly coral branches.

When Ione was younger she had spent hours staring out at the antics of the fish and sand-crawling creatures. Now she sat cross-legged on the apricot moss carpet before her private theatre of life, Augustine nesting contentedly in her lap. She stroked the little xenoc's velvety fur absently, eyes closed to the world.

We can still send a squadron of patrol blackhawks after Mzu, Tranquillity suggested. I am aware of the Udat's worm-hole terminus coordinate.

So are the other blackhawks, she replied. But it's their crews I worry about. Once they're away from our SD platforms, there really is nothing we can do to enforce their loyalty. Mzu would try to make a deal with them. She'd probably succeed, too. She's proved astonishingly resourceful so far. Fancy even lulling us into complacency.

I was not complacent, the habitat personality said irk-

somely. I was caught off guard by the method. Which in itself I find disturbing. It implies a great deal of thought went into her escape. One wonders what her next move will be.

I've got a pretty good idea, unfortunately. She'll go for the Alchemist. There's no other reason for her to behave like this. And after she's got it: Omuta.

Indeed.

So no, we don't send the blackhawks after her. She may lead them to the Alchemist. That would give us an even worse situation than the one we've got now.

In that case, what do you want to do about the intelligence agency teams?

I'm not sure. How are they reacting?

• • •

Lady Tessa, the head of the ESA's Tranquillity station, had been badly frightened by the news of Alkad Mzu's escape, a fact which she managed to conceal behind a show of pure fury. Monica Foulkes stood in front of her in the starscraper apartment which doubled as the ESA team's headquarters. She had reported to Lady Tessa in person rather than use the habitat's communications net. Not that Tranquillity was unaware (hardly!), but there were a great number of organizations and governments who knew nothing of Mzu's existence, nor the implications arising from it.

It was twenty-three minutes since the physicist's escape, and a form of delayed shock had begun to infiltrate Monica's body as her subconscious acknowledged just how lucky she'd been to avoid vanishing down the *Udat's* wormhole. Her neural nanonics were helpless to prevent the cold shivers which spiralled their way around her limbs and belly muscles.

"I won't even dignify your performance by calling it a disaster," Lady Tessa stormed. "Great God Almighty, the principal reason we're here is to make sure she remained confined to the habitat. Every agency endorses that policy, even the bloody Lord of Ruin supports it. And you let her stroll out right in front of you. I mean, Jesus Christ, what the hell were you all doing on that beach? She stops to put on a spacesuit, and you didn't even move in closer to investigate."

"It was not exactly a *stroll*, Chief. And I'd like to point out

for the record that we are just an observation team. Our operation in Tranquillity has always been too small to guarantee Mzu remains inside should she make a determined effort to leave, or if someone uses force to extract her. If the agency wanted to be certain, it should have allocated a bigger team to monitor her.”

“Don’t datavise the rule flek at me, Foulkes. You’re boosted, you’ve got weapons implants”—she flinched, and glanced up at the ceiling as though expecting divine censure—“and Mzu is in her sixties. There is no way she should have ever got near that bloody blackhawk, let alone have it snatch her away.”

“The blackhawk tipped the physical balance heavily in her favour. It simply wasn’t a contingency we allowed for. Tranquillity had two serjeants eliminated during our attempt to stop her boarding. Personally, I’m surprised the starship was allowed to swallow inside at all.” Now Monica glanced guiltily around the naked polyp walls.

Lady Tessa’s baleful expression didn’t alter, but she did pause. “I doubt there was much it could do. As you say, that swallow manoeuvre was completely unprecedented.”

“Samuel claimed that not many voidhawks could be that precise.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to include that most helpful unit of data in my report.” She got up out of the chair and walked over to the oval window. The apartment was two thirds of the way down the StEtalia starscraper, where gravity was approaching Earth standard. It was a location which gave her a unimpeded view across the bottom of the vast curving burnt-biscuit-coloured habitat shell, with just a crescent of the counter-rotating spaceport showing beyond the rim as if it were a metallic moon rising. Today, as for the last four days, there were few starships arriving or departing from its docking bays. Big SD platforms glinted reassuringly against the backdrop of Mirchusko’s darkside as they caught the last of the sunlight before Tranquillity sailed into the penumbra.

And what use would they be against the Alchemist? Lady Tessa wondered sagely. A doomsday device that’s supposed to be able to kill stars . . .

“What’s our next move?” Monica asked. She was rubbing

her arms for warmth in an attempt to stop the shaking. Grains of sand were still falling out of her sweater's sleeves.

"Informing the Kingdom is our primary responsibility now," Lady Tessa said in a challenging tone. There was no reaction from the AV pillar sticking up out of her desktop processor block. "But it's going to take time for them to respond and start searching. And Mzu will know that. Which means she's got two options, either she takes the *Udat* straight to the Alchemist, or she loses herself out there." She tapped a gold-chromed fingernail on the window as the myriad stars drifted past in slow arcs.

"If she was smart enough to get away from all the agency teams tagging her, she'll know that she'll never stay lost, not forever," Monica said. "Too many of us are going to be looking now."

"And yet the *Udat* doesn't have any special equipment rigged. I checked the CAB registry, it hasn't had any refitting for eight months. Sure, it has got standard interfaces for combat wasp cradles and heavy-duty close defence weapons. Almost every blackhawk has. But there was nothing unusual."

"So?"

"So if she does take *Udat* straight to the Alchemist, how will they fire it at Omuta's sun?"

"Do we know what equipment is necessary to fire it?"

"No," Lady Tessa admitted. "We don't even know if it does need anything special. But it was different, new, and unique; that means it's non-standard. Which may give us our one chance to neutralize this situation. If there is any hardware requirement involved, she's going to have to break cover and approach a defence contractor."

"She might not have to," Monica said. "She'll have friends, sympathisers; certainly in the Dorados. She can go to them."

"I hope she does. The agency has kept the Garissa survivors under surveillance for decades, just in case any of them try to pull any stupid revenge stunts." She turned from the window. "I'm sending you there to brief their head of station. It's a reasonable assumption she'll turn up there eventually,

and it may help having someone familiar with her on the ground.”

Monica nodded in defeat. “Yes, Chief.”

“Don’t look so tragic. I’m the one who’s going to have to report back to Kulu and tell the director we lost her. You’re getting off lightly.”

• • •

The meeting in the Confederation Navy Bureau on the forty-fifth floor of the StMichelle starscraper was synchronous with that of the ESA in both time and content. In the bureau it was an aghast Commander Olsen Neale who accessed the sensewise memory of Mzu’s abrupt exit from the habitat as recorded by a thoroughly despondent Pauline Webb.

When the file ended he asked a few supplemental questions and came to the same conclusions as Lady Tessa. “We can assume she has access to the kind of money necessary to buy whatever systems she needs to use the Alchemist, and install them in a combat-capable ship,” he said. “But I don’t think it’ll be the *Udat*; that’s too high profile now. Every navy ship and government is going to be hunting it inside a week.”

“Do you think the Alchemist really does exist then, sir?” Pauline asked.

“CNIS has always believed so, even though it could never track down any solid evidence. And after this, I don’t think there can be any doubt. Even if it wasn’t stored in zero-tau, don’t forget she knows how to build another one. Another hundred, come to that.”

Pauline hung her head. “Shit, but we screwed up big-time.”

“Yes. I always thought we were a little overdependent on the Lord of Ruin’s benevolence in keeping her here.” He made a finger-fluttering gesture with one hand and muttered: “No offence.”

The AV pillar on his desktop processor block sparkled momentarily. “None taken,” said Tranquillity.

“We also got complacent with how static the whole situation had become. You were quite right when you said she’d fooled us for a quarter of a century. Bloody hell, but that is an awful long time to keep a charade going. Anyone who can hate for that long isn’t going to be fooling around. She’s gone

because she thinks she has a good chance to use the Alchemist against Omuta.”

“Yes, sir.”

Olsen Neale made an effort to suppress his worry and formulate some kind of coherent response to the situation—one he didn’t have a single contingency plan for. No one at CNIS ever believed she could actually escape. “I’ll leave for Trafalgar right away. Our first priority is to inform Admiral Lalwani that Mzu’s gone, so she can start activating our assets to find her. Then the First Admiral will have to beef up Omuta’s defences. Damn, that’s another squadron which the navy can’t spare, not now.”

“The Laton scare will make it difficult for her to travel,” Pauline said.

“Let’s hope so. But just in case, I want you to go to the Dorados and alert our bureau that she may put in an appearance soon.”

• • •

Samuel, of course, didn’t have to physically meet with the other three Edenist intelligence operatives in the habitat. They simply conferred with each other via affinity, then Samuel and a colleague called Tringa headed for the spaceport. Samuel chartered a starship to take him to the Dorados, while Tringa found one which would convey him to Jupiter so he could warn the Consensus.

The same scenario was played out by the other eight national intelligence agency teams assigned to watch Mzu. In each case, it was decided that alerting their respective directors was the primary requirement; three of them also dispatched operatives to the Dorados to watch for Mzu.

The spaceport charter agents who had been suffering badly from the lack of flights brought on by the Laton scare suddenly found business picking up.

• • •

So now you have to decide if you’re going to allow them to inform their homeworlds, Tranquillity said. For once the word gets out, you will be unable to control further events.

I didn’t really control events before. I was like an umpire insuring fair play.

Well now is your chance to get down off your stool and take part in the game.

Don't tempt me. I have enough problems right now with the Laymil's reality dysfunction. If dear Grandfather Michael was right, that may yet turn out to be a lot more trouble than Mzu's Alchemist.

I concede the point. But I do need to know if I am to permit the agency operatives to depart.

Ione opened her eyes to look through the window, but the water outside was sable-black now, there was nothing to see apart from a weak reflection of herself in the glass. For the first time in her life she began to understand what loneliness was.

You have me, Tranquillity assured her gently.

I know. But in a way you are a part of me. It would be nice to have someone else's shoulder to lean on occasionally.

A someone such as Joshua?

Don't be so bitchy.

I'm sorry. Why don't you ask Clement to come to the apartment? He makes you happy.

He makes me orgasm, you mean.

Is there a difference?

Yes, but don't ask me to explain it. It's just that I'm looking for more than physical contentment right now. These are big decisions I'm making here. They could affect millions of people, hundreds of millions.

You have known this time would come ever since you were conceived. It is what your life is for.

Most of the Saldanas, yes. They make a dozen decisions like this before lunch every day. Not me. I think the family's arrogance gene might be inactive in my case.

It is more likely to be a hormonal imbalance due to your pregnancy which is making you procrastinate.

She laughed out loud, the sound echoing around the vast room. **You really don't understand the difference between your thought processes and mine, do you?**

I believe I do.

Ione had the silliest vision of a two-kilometre-long nose sniffing disdainfully. Her laugh turned to a giggle. **Okay, no**

more procrastination. Let's be logical. We blew it with safeguarding Mzu, and now she's presumably on her way to exterminate Omuta's star. And you and I certainly don't have the kind of resources available to the ESA and other agencies to track her down and stop her. Right?

An elegant summary.

Thank you. Therefore, the best chance to stop her will be to let the intelligence community off the leash.

Granted.

Then we let them out. At least that way Omuta stands a chance of survival. I don't think I really want a genocide on my conscience. Nor, I suspect, do you.

Very well. I will not restrict their starships from departing.

Which just leaves us with what's going to happen afterwards. If they do catch her, someone is going to wind up with the technology to build Alchemist devices. As Monica said on the beach, every government will want it to safeguard their own particular version of democracy.

Yes. The old term for a nation acquiring such an overwhelming military advantage is a "superpower." At the very least, the emergence of such a nation will result in an arms race as other governments try to acquire the Alchemist technology, which will not benefit the general Confederation economy. And if they succeed, the Confederation will be plunged into a deterrence cycle, a balance of terror.

And it was all my fault.

Not quite. Dr Alkad Mzu invented the Alchemist. From that moment on all subsequent events were inevitable. There is a saying that once you have released the genie from the bottle, he cannot be put back.

Maybe not. But it wouldn't hurt to have a go.

• • •

From the air Avon's capital, Regina, was almost indistinguishable from any big city on a fully developed and industrialized planet within the Confederation. A dark gritty stain of buildings which crept a little further outwards into the

green countryside with every passing year. Only the steeper hill slopes and crinkled watercourses inconvenienced the encroachment to any degree, although in the central districts even they had been tamed with metal and carbon concrete. Again, as normal, a clump of skyscrapers occupied the very heart of the city, forming the commercial, financial, and government administration district. A lavish display of crystal spires, thick composite cylinders, and gloss-metal neo-modern towers, reflecting the planet's economic strength.

The one exception to the standard urban layout was a second, smaller cluster of silver and white skyscrapers occupying the shore of a long lake on the city's easternmost district. Like the Forbidden City of ancient Chinese Emperors, it existed aloof from the rest of Regina, yet it held sway over billions of lives. Home to one and a half million people, it was sixteen square kilometres of foreign diplomatic compounds, embassies, legal firms, multistellar corporation offices, navy barracks, executive agencies, media studios, and a thousand catering and leisure company franchises. This overcrowded, overpriced, bureaucratic mother-hive formed a protective ring around the Assembly building which straddled the lakeshore, itself looking more like a domed sports stadium than the very seat of the Confederation.

The stadium analogy was continued inside the main chamber, with tiered ranks of seats circling the central polity council table. First Admiral Samual Aleksandrovich always likened it to a gladiatorial arena, where the current polity council members had to present and defend their resolutions. It was ninety per cent theatre; but politicians, even in this day and age, clung to the public stage.

As one of the four permanent members of the polity council, the First Admiral had the right and authority to summon a full session of the Assembly. It was a right which earlier First Admirals had exercised only three times in the Confederation's history; twice to request additional vessels from member states to prevent inter-system wars, and once to ask for the resources to track down Laton.

Samual Aleksandrovich hadn't envisaged himself being number four. But there really hadn't been time to consult with the President after the voidhawk from Atlantis arrived at

Trafalgar. And after reviewing the report it carried, Samual Aleksandrovich was convinced that time was a crucial issue. Mere hours could make a colossal difference if the possessed were to be prevented from infiltrating unsuspecting worlds.

So now here he was in his dress uniform walking towards the polity council table under the bright lights shining out of a black marble ceiling, Captain Khanna on one side, Admiral Lalwani on the other. The chamber's tiers were full of diplomats and aides shuffling to their designated seats, their combined grumbling sounding like a couple of bulldozers attacking the foundations. A glance upwards showed him the media gallery was packed. Everybody wanted in on the phenomenon.

You wouldn't if you knew, he thought emphatically.

The President, Olton Haaker, wearing his traditional Arab robe, took his seat at the oaken horseshoe table along with the other members of the polity council. Samual Aleksandrovich thought Haaker looked nervous. It was a telling sign; the old Breznikan was a superb, not to mention wily, diplomat. This was his second five-year term of office; and only four of the last fifteen Presidents had managed to gain renomination.

Rittagu-FHU, the Tyrathca ambassador, walked imperiously across the chamber floor, minute particles of bronze-coloured powder shaking out of her scales to dust the tiles below her. She reached one end of the table and eased her large body onto a broad cradle arrangement. Her mate hooted softly at her from a similar cradle in the front tier.

Samual Aleksandrovich wished it were the Kiint who held the xenoc polity council seat this term. The two xenoc member races alternated every three years, although there were those in the Assembly who said that the xenocs should join the rota for the polity council seats like every human government had to.

The Assembly speaker called for silence, and announced that the First Admiral had been granted the floor under article nine of the Confederation Charter. As he got to his feet, Samual Aleksandrovich studied the blocks in the tiers which he would have to carry. The Edenists, of course, he already had. Earth's Govcentral would probably follow the Edenists, given their strong alliance. Other key powers were Oshanko,

New Washington, Nanjing, Holstein, Petersburg, and, inevitably, the Kulu Kingdom, which probably had the most undue influence of all—and thank God the Saldanas were keen supporters of the Confederation.

In a way he was angry that an issue as vital as this (surely the most vital in human history?) would be dependent on who was speaking with whom, whose ideologies clashed, whose religions denounced the other. The whole point of ethnic streaming colonies, as Earth had painfully discovered centuries ago during the Great Dispersal, was that foreign cultures can live harmoniously with each other providing they didn't have to live jammed together on the same planet. And the Assembly allowed that wider spirit of cooperation to continue and flourish. In theory.

“I have asked for this session because I wish to call for a full state of emergency to be declared,” Samual Aleksandrovich said. “Unfortunately, what started off as the Laton situation has now become immeasurably graver. If you would care to access the sensewise account which has just arrived from Atlantis.” He datavised the main processor to play the recording.

Diplomats they might have been, but even their training couldn't help them maintain poker faces as the events of Pernik island unravelled inside their skulls. The First Admiral waited impassively as the gasps and grimaces appeared simultaneously throughout the chamber. It took a quarter of an hour to run, and many broke off during the playback to check the reactions of their colleagues, or perhaps even to make sure they were receiving the right recording, and not some elaborate horrorsense.

Olton Haaker got to his feet when it finished, and stared at Samual Aleksandrovich for a long time before speaking. The First Admiral wondered exactly how he was taking it, the President's Muslim faith was a strong one. Just what does he think about djinns coming forth?

“Are you certain this information is genuine?” the President asked.

Samual Aleksandrovich signalled Admiral Lalwani, the CNIS chief, who was sitting in one of the chairs behind him.

She got to her feet. "We vouch for its authenticity," she said, and sat down again.

A number of intense stares were directed at Cayeaux, the Edenist ambassador, who bore them stoically.

How typical to blame the messenger, the First Admiral thought.

"Very well, what exactly are you proposing we should do?" the President asked.

"Firstly, the vote for a state of emergency will provide a considerable reserve of national naval ships for the Confederation Navy," the First Admiral said. "We shall require all those national squadrons pledged to us to be transferred over to their respective Confederation fleets as soon as possible. Preferably within a week." That didn't go down well, but he was ready for it. "Combating the threat we now face cannot be achieved by confronting it in a piecemeal fashion. Our response has to be swift and overwhelming. That can only be achieved with the full strength of the navy."

"But to what end?" the Govcentral ambassador asked. "What possible solution can you provide for the dead coming back? You can't be considering killing those who are possessed."

"No, we cannot do that," the First Admiral acknowledged. "And unfortunately they know it, which will provide them with a huge advantage. We are faced with what is essentially the greatest hostage scenario ever. So I propose we do what we always do in such situations, and that is play for time while a genuine solution is found. While I have no idea what that will be, the overall policy we must adopt I consider to be very clear-cut. We must prevent the problem from spreading beyond those star systems in which it has already taken hold. To that end, I would ask for a further resolution requiring the cessation of all civil and commercial starflights, effective immediately. The number of flights has already been reduced sharply because of the Laton crisis; reducing it to zero should not prove difficult. Once a Confederation-wide quarantine is imposed, it will become easier to target our forces where they will be most effective."

"What do you mean, effective?" the President demanded. "You just said we cannot consider an armed response."

“No, sir, I said we cannot consider it as the ultimate solution. What it can, and must, be used for is to prevent the spread of possessed from star systems which they have infiltrated. If they ever manage to conquer an industrialized system, they will undoubtedly commit its full potential against us to further their aim; which, as Laton has told us, is total annexation. We have to be ready to match that, probably on several separate fronts. If we do not they will multiply at an exponential rate, and the entire Confederation will fall, every living human will become possessed.”

“Are you saying we just abandon star systems that have been taken over?”

“We must isolate them until we have a solution which works. I already have a science team examining the possessed woman we hold in Trafalgar. Hopefully their research may produce some answers.”

A loud murmur of consternation spiralled around the tiers at that disclosure.

“You have one captured?” the President inquired in surprise.

“Yes, sir. We didn’t know exactly what she was until the voidhawk from Atlantis came. But now we do, our investigation can proceed along more purposeful lines.”

“I see.” The President seemed at a loss. He glanced at the speaker, who inclined his head.

“I second the motion of the First Admiral for a state of emergency,” the President said formally.

“One vote down, eight hundred to go,” Admiral Lalwani whispered.

The speaker rang the silver bell on the table in front of him. “As, at this time, there would seem little to add to the information the First Admiral has presented to us, I will now call upon those here present to cast their votes on the resolution before you.”

Rittagu-FHU emitted a piping hoot and rose to her feet. Her thick head swung around to look at the First Admiral, a motion which sent the chemical program teats along her neck bobbling, delivering a leathery slapping sound. She worked her double lips elaborately, producing a prolonged gabble. “Speaker statement not true,” the translator block on the table said. “I have much to add. *Elemental* humans, dead humans;

these are not part of Tyrathca nature. We did not know such things were possible for you. We impugn these assaults upon what is real today. If you all have this ability to become *elemental*, then you all threaten the Tyrathca. This is frightening for us. We must withdraw from contact with humans.”

“I assure you, Ambassador, we did not know of this ourselves,” the President said. “It frightens us as much as it does you. I would ask you to retain at least some lines of communication until this situation can be resolved.”

Rittagu-FHU’s fluting reply was translated as: “Who says this?”

Olton Haaker’s weary face reflected his puzzlement. He flicked a glance at his equally uncertain aides. “I do.”

“But who speaks?”

“I’m sorry, Ambassador, I don’t understand.”

“You say you speak. Who are you? I see Olton Haaker standing here today, as he has stood many times. I do not know if it is Olton Haaker. I do not know if it is an *elemental* human.”

“I assure you I’m not!” the President spluttered.

“I do not know that. What is the difference?” She turned her gaze on the First Admiral, big glassy eyes displaying no emotions he could ever understand. “Is there a way of knowing?”

“There seems to be a localized disturbance of electronic systems in the presence of anyone possessed,” he said. “That’s the only method of detection we have now. But we’re working on other techniques.”

“You do not know.”

“The possessions started on Lalonde. The first starship to reach here from that planet was *Ilex*, and it came directly. We can be safe in assuming that no one in the Avon system has been possessed yet.”

“You do not know.”

Samual Aleksandrovich couldn’t answer. I’m sure, but the damn creature is right. Certainty is no longer possible. But then humans have never needed absolutes to convince themselves. The Tyrathca have, and it’s a difference which divides us far greater than our biology.

When he appealed silently to the President, he met a blank face. Very calmly, he said: “I do not know.”

There was a subliminal suggestion of a mass sigh from the tiers, maybe even resentment.

But I did what was right, I answered her on her own terms.

"I express gratitude that you speak the truth," Rittagu-FHU said. "Now I do what is my task in this place, and speak for my race. The Tyrathca this day end our contact with all humans. We will leave your worlds. Do not come to ours."

Rittagu-FHU stretched out a long arm, and a nine-fingered circular hand switched off her translator block. She hooted to her mate, and together they made their way to the exit.

The vast chamber was utterly silent as the door slid shut behind them.

Olton Haaker cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and faced the Kiint ambassador who was standing passively in the bottom tier. "If you wish to leave us, Ambassador Roulor, then of course we shall provide every assistance in returning you and the other Kiint ambassadors to your homeworld. This is a human problem after all, we do not wish to jeopardize our fruitful relationship by endangering you."

One of the snow-white Kiint's tractamorphic arms uncurled to hold up a small processor block, its AV projection pillar produced a moiré sparkle. "Being alive is a substantial risk, Mr President," Roulor said. "Danger always balances enjoyment. To find one, you must face and know the other. And you are wrong in saying that it is a human problem. All sentient races eventually discover the truth of death."

"You mean you knew?" Olton Haaker asked, his diplomatic demeanour badly broken.

"We are aware of our nature, yes. We confronted it once, a great time ago, and we survived. Now you must do the same. We cannot help you in this struggle which you are facing, but we do sympathise."

• • •

Starflight traffic to Valisk was dropping off; ten per cent in two days. Even though Rubra's subsidiary thought routines managed the habitat's traffic control, the statistic hadn't registered with his principal personality. It was the economics of the shortfall which finally alerted him. The flights were all

scheduled charters, bringing components to the industrial stations of his precious Magellanic Itg company. None of them were blackhawk flights from his own fleet, it was only Adamist ships.

Curious, he reviewed all the news fleks delivered by those starships which had arrived recently, searching for a reason, some crisis or emergency in another section of the Confederation. He drew a blank.

It was only when his principal personality routine made its weekly routine check on Fairuza that Rubra realized something was wrong inside the habitat as well. Fairuza was another of his protégés, a ninth-generation descendant who had showed promise from an early age.

Promise, as defined by Rubra, consisted principally of the urge to exert himself as leader of the other boys at the day club, snatching the biggest share, be it of sweets or game processor time, a certain cruel streak with regards to pets, contempt for his timid, loving parents. It marked him down as a greedy, short-tempered, bullying, disobedient, generally nasty little boy. Rubra was delighted.

When Fairuza reached ten years of age, the slow waves of encouragement began to twist their way into his psyche. Dark yearnings to go further, a feeling of righteousness, a sense of destiny, a quite insufferable ego. It was all due to Rubra's silent desires oozing continually into his skull.

The whole moulding process had gone wrong so often in the past. Valisk was littered with the neurotic detritus of Rubra's earlier attempts to create a dynamic ruthless personality in what he considered his own image. He wanted so much to forge such a creature, someone *worthy* to command Magellanic Itg. And for two hundred years he had endured the humiliation of his own flesh and blood failing him time and again.

But Fairuza had a resilient quality which was rare among his diverse family members. So far he had displayed few of the psychological weaknesses which ruined all the others. Rubra had hopes for him, almost as many hopes as he once had for Dariat.

However, when Rubra summoned the sub-routine which monitored the fourteen-year-old youth, nothing happened. A

giant ripple of surprise ran down the entire length of the habitat's neural strata. Servitor animals flinched and juddered as it passed below them. Thick muscle rings regulating the flow of fluids inside the huge network of nutrient capillaries and water channels buried deep in the polyp shell spasmed, creating surges and swirls which took the autonomic routines over half an hour to calm and return to normal. All eight thousand of Rubra's descendants shivered uncontrollably, and for no reason they could understand, even the children who had no knowledge of their true nature yet.

For a moment, Rubra didn't know what to do. His personality was distributed evenly through the habitat's neural strata, a condition the original designers of Eden had called a homogenized presence. Every routine and sub-routine and autonomic routine was at once whole and separate. All perceptual information received by any sensitive cell was immediately disseminated for storage uniformly along the strata. Failure, *any* failure, was inconceivable.

Failure meant his own thoughts were malfunctioning. His mind, the one true aspect of self left to him, was flawed.

After surprise, inevitably, came fear. There could be few reasons for such a disaster. He might finally be succumbing to high-level psychological disorders. It was a condition the Edenists always predicted he would develop after enduring centuries of loneliness coupled with frustration at his inability to find a worthy heir.

He began to design a series of entirely new routines which would analyse his own mental architecture. Like undercover wraiths, these visitants flashed silently through the neural strata on their missions to spy on the performance of each sub-routine without it being aware, reporting back on his own performance.

A list of flaws began to emerge. They made a strange compilation. Some sub-routines, like Fairuza's monitor, were missing completely, others were inactive, then there were instances of memory dissemination being blocked. The lack of any logical pattern bothered him. Rubra didn't doubt that he was under attack, but it was a most peculiar method of assault. However, one aspect of the attack was perfectly clear: whoever was behind the disruptions had a perfect understanding

of both affinity and a habitat's thought routines. He couldn't believe it was the Edenists, not them with their repugnant superiority. They considered time to be their premier weapon against him; the Kohistan Consensus was of the opinion that he could not sustain himself for more than a few centuries. And a covert undeclared war on someone who didn't threaten them was an inconceivable breach of their culture's ethics. No, it had to be someone else. Someone more intimate.

Rubra reviewed the monitor sub-routines which had been rendered inactive. There were seven; six of them were assigned to ordinary descendants, all of them under twenty; as they weren't yet involved with Magellanic Itg they didn't require anything more than basic observation to keep an eye on them. But the seventh . . . Rubra hadn't bothered to examine him at any time during the last fifteen years of their thirty-year estrangement, his greatest ever failure: Dariat.

The intimation was profoundly shocking: that somehow Dariat had achieved a degree of control over the habitat routines. But then Dariat had managed to block all Rubra's attempts to gain access to his mind through affinity ever since that fateful day thirty years ago. Dariat, for all his massive imperfections, was unique.

Rubra reacted to the revelation by erecting safeguards all around his primary personality pattern; input filters which would scrutinize all the information reaching him for trojan viruses. He wasn't certain exactly what Dariat was trying to achieve by interfering with the sub-routines, but he knew the man still blamed him for Anastasia Rigel's death. Ultimately Dariat would try to extract his vengeance.

What remarkable determination. It actually rivalled his own.

Rubra hadn't been so stimulated for decades. Maybe he could still negotiate with Dariat; after all, the man was not yet fifty, there was another half century of useful life left in him. And if they couldn't come to an agreement, well . . . he could always be cloned. All Rubra needed for that was a single living cell.

With his mentality as secure as he could make it, he formed a succession of new orders. Again, they were different from anything which existed in the neural strata before; fresh pat-

terns, a modified routing hierarchy, invisible to anyone accustomed to the standard thought routines. The clandestine command went out to every optically sensitive cell, every affinity-capable descendant, every servitor animal: find a match for Dariat's visual image.

It took seven minutes. And it wasn't quite what Rubra was expecting.

A number of the observation routines on the eighty-fifth floor of the Kandi starscraper had been tampered with. The Kandi was used mainly by the less wholesome of Valisk's residents, which given the overall content of the population meant that the starscraper was just about the last resort for the real lowlife. It was in the apartment of Anders Bospoort, vice lord and semi-professional rapist, where the greatest anomaly was centred. One of the observation sub-routines had been altered to include a memory segment. Instead of observing the apartment, and feeding the processed image directly into a general event analysis routine it was simply substituting an old visualization of the rooms for the real-time picture.

Rubra solved the problem by wiping the old routine entirely and replacing it with a viable one. The apartment he was now looking around was a shambles, furniture out of place and smothered by every kind of male and female clothing, plates of half-eaten food discarded at random, empty bottles lying about. High-capacity Kulu Corporation processor blocks and dozens of technical encyclopedia fleks were piled up on the tables—not exactly Bospoort's usual bedtime material.

With the restoration of true sight and sound came an olfactory sense; a stiff price to pay: the feculent stink in the apartment was dreadful. The reason for that was simple: Dariat's obese corpse was lying slumped at the foot of the bed in the master bedroom. There was no sign of foul play, no bruising, no stab wounds, no energy beam charring. Whatever the cause, it had left an appallingly twisted grin scrawled across his chubby face. Rubra couldn't help but think that Dariat had actually enjoyed dying.

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Dariat was inordinately happy with his new, captive body. He had quite forgotten what it was like to be skinny; to move

fast, to slither adroitly between the closing doors of a lift, to be able to wear proper clothes instead of a shabby toga. And youth, of course, that was another advantage. A more *vital* physique, lean and strong. That Horgan was only fifteen years old was of no consequence, the energetic power made up for everything. He chose the appearance of a twenty-one-year-old, a male in his physical prime, his dark skin smooth and glossy; hair worn thick, long, and jet-black. His clothes were white, simple cotton pantaloons and shirt, thin enough to show off the panther flex of muscles. Nothing as gross-out as Bospoort's ridiculous macho frame which Ross Nash wore, but he'd certainly drawn the eye of several girls.

In fact, possession with all its glories was almost enough to make him renege on his task. Almost, but not quite. His agenda remained separate from the others', for unlike them he wasn't scared of death, of returning to the beyond. He believed in the spirituality Anastasia had preached, now as never before. The beyond was only part of the mystery of dying; God's creativity was boundless, of course more continua existed, an after-afterlife.

He pondered this as he walked with his fellow possessors towards the Tacoul Tavern. The others were all desperately intent on their mission, and so humourless.

The Tacoul Tavern was a perfect microcosm of life in Valisk. Its once stylish black and silver crystalline interior was a form now abandoned even by designers of retro chic; its food came out of packages where once its cuisine was prepared by chefs in a five-star kitchen; its waitresses were really too old for the short skirts they wore; and its clientele neither questioned nor cared about its inexorable decline. Like most bars it tended to attract one type of customer; in this case it was the starship crews.

There were a couple dozen people seated at the various rock mushroom tables when Dariat followed Kiera Salter inside. She sauntered over to the bar and ordered a drink for herself. Two men offered to buy it for her. While the charade played out, Dariat chose a table by the door and studied the big room. They'd done well; five of the drinkers had the tell-tale indigo eyes of Rubra's descendants, and all of them wore shipsuits with a silver star on the epaulet: blackhawk captains.

Dariat concentrated on the observation routines operating in the neural strata behind the tavern's walls, floor, and ceiling. Abraham, Matkin, and Graci, who also possessed affinity-capable bodies, were doing the same thing; all four of them were sending out a multitude of subversive commands to isolate the room and everything which happened in it from Rubra's principal personality.

He had taught them well. It took the foursome barely a minute to corrupt the simple routines, turning the Tacoul Tavern into a perceptual null zone. To complete the act, the muscle membrane door contracted quietly, its grey pumicelike surface becoming an intractable barrier, sealing everyone inside.

Kiera Salter stood up, dismissing her would-be suitors with a contemptuous gesture. When one of them rose and started to say something, she struck him casually, an openhanded slap across his temple. The blow sent him flailing backwards. He struck the polyp floor hard, yelling with pain. She laughed and blew him a kiss as he dabbed at the blood seeping from his nose. "No chance, lover boy." The long leather purse in her hand morphed into a pump-action shotgun. She swung it around to point towards the startled patrons, and blew one of the ceiling's flickering light globes to pieces.

Everyone ducked as splinters of pearl-white composite rained down. Several people were attempting to datavise emergency calls into the room's net processor. Electronics were the first thing the possessed had disabled.

"Okay, people," Kiera announced, with a grossly stressed American twang. "This is a stickup. Don't nobody move, and shove your valuables in this here sack."

Dariat sighed in contempt. It seemed altogether inappropriate that a complete bitch like Kiera should possess the body of such a physically sublime girl as Marie Skibbow. "There's no need for all this," he said. "We only came for the blackhawk captains. Let's just keep focused on that, shall we?"

"Maybe there's no need," she said, "but there's certainly plenty of want."

"You know what, Kiera, you really are a complete asshole."

"That so?" She flung a bolt of white fire at him.

Waitresses and customers alike shouted in alarm and dived for cover. Dariat just managed to deflect the bolt, thumping it aside with a fist he imagined as a fat table tennis bat. The white fire bounced about enthusiastically, careering off tables and chairs. But not before the strike gave him a vicious electric shock, jangling all the nerves in his arm.

"Give the lectures a rest, Dariat," Kiera said. "We do what we're driven to do."

"Nobody drove you to do that. It hurt."

"Oh, get real, you warped slob. You'd enjoy yourself a lot more if you didn't have that morals bug stuffed so far up your arse."

Klaus Schiller and Matkin sniggered at his discomfort.

"You're screwing up everything with this childishness," Dariat said. "If we are to acquire the blackhawks we cannot afford your indiscipline. The Lord Tarrug is making you dance to his tune. Contain yourself, listen to your inner music."

She shouldered the shotgun and levelled an annoyed finger at him. "One more word of that New Age bullshit, and I swear I'll take your head clean off. We brought you along so that you could deal with the habitat personality, that's all. I'm the one who lays down our goals. I have concrete bloody policies; policies which are going to help us come up trumps. Policies with attitude. What the fuck have you got to offer us, slob? Chop away at the habitat's floor for a century until we find this Rubra's brain, then stamp on it. Is that it? Is that your big, useful plan?"

"No," he said with wooden calm. "I keep telling you, Rubra cannot be defeated by physical means. This policy you have for taking over the habitat population isn't going to work until we've dealt with him. I think we're making a mistake with the blackhawks; not even their physical power can help us beat him. And if we start taking them over, we risk drawing attention to ourselves."

"As Allah wills," Matkin muttered.

"But don't you see?" Dariat appealed to him. "If we concentrate on annihilating Rubra and possessing the neural strata, then we can achieve anything. We'll be like gods."

"That is close to blasphemy, son," Abraham Canaan said. "You should have a little more care in what you say."

“Shit. Look, godlike, okay? The point is—”

“The *point*, Dariat,” Kiera said, aligning the shotgun on him for emphasis, “is that you are steaming for vengeance. Don’t try and plead otherwise, because you are even insane enough to kill yourself in order to achieve it. *We* know what we are doing, we are multiplying our numbers to protect ourselves. If you don’t wish to do that, then perhaps you need a little more time in the beyond to set your mind straight.”

Even as he gathered himself to argue, he realized he’d lost. He could see the blank expressions hardening around the other possessed, while his mind simultaneously perceived their emotions chilling. Weak fools. They really didn’t care about anything other than the now. They were animals. But animals whose help he would ultimately need.

Kiera had won again, just as she had when she insisted on him proving his loyalty through self-sacrifice. The possessed looked to her for leadership, not him.

“All right,” Dariat said. “Have it your way.” For now.

“Thank you,” Kiera said with heavy irony. She grinned, and sauntered over to the first blackhawk captain.

During the altercation, the patrons of the Tacoul Tavern had been as quiet as people invariably become when total strangers are discussing your fate two metres in front of you. Now the discussion was over. Fate decided.

The waitresses squealed, huddling together at the bar. Seven of the starship personnel made a break for the closed muscle-membrane door. Five actually launched themselves at the possessed, wielding whatever came to hand: fission blades (which malfunctioned), broken bottles, nervejam sticks (also useless), and bare fists.

White fire flared in retaliation: globes aimed at knees and ankles, disabling and maiming; whip tendrils which coiled around legs like scalding manacles.

With their victims thrashing about on the floor, and the stink of burnt flesh in the air, the possessed closed in.

Rocio Condra had been trapped in the beyond for five centuries when the time of miracles came. An existence of madness, which he could only liken to the last moment of smothering being drawn out and out and out . . . And always in

total darkness, silence, numbness. His life had replayed itself a million times, but that wasn't nearly enough.

Then came the miracles, sensations leaking in from the universe outside. Cracks in the nothingness of the beyond which would open and shut in fractions of a second, akin to storm clouds of soot parting to let through the delicious golden sunlight of dawn. And every time, a single lost soul would fly into the blinding, deafening deluge of reality, out into freedom and beauty. Along with all the others left behind, Rocio would howl his frustration into the void. Then they would redouble their pleas and prayers and pledges to the obdurate, indifferent living, offering them salvation and ennoblement if they would just help.

Perhaps such promises actually worked. More and more of the cracks were appearing, so many that they had become a torment in their own right. To know there was a route out, and yet always denied.

Except now. *This time . . .* This time the glory arose all around Rocio Condra so loud and bright it nearly overwhelmed him. Furled with the torrent was someone crying for help, for the agony to stop.

"I'll help," Rocio lied perilously. "I'll stop it happening."

Pain flooded into him as the frantic thoughts clung to his false words. It was far, far more than the usual meshing of souls in search of bitter sustenance. He could feel himself gaining weight and strength as their thoughts entwined. And the pain surged towards ecstasy. Rocio could actually feel legs and arms jerking as agonizing heat played over skin, a throat which had been stung raw from screaming. It was all quite delicious, the kind of high a masochist would relish.

The man's thoughts were becoming weaker, smaller, as Rocio pushed and wriggled himself deeper into the brain's neural pathways. As he did so, more of the old human experiences made their eminently welcome return, the air rushing into his lungs, thud of a heart. And all the while his new host was diminishing. The way Rocio pushed him down, confining his soul, was almost instinctive, and becoming easier by the second.

He could hear the other lost souls of the beyond shrieking

their outrage that he was the one to gain salvation. The bitter threats, the accusations of unworthiness.

Then there was just his host's feeble protests, and a second oddly distant voice begging to know what was happening to its beloved. He squeezed the host's soul away, expanding his own mind to fill the entire brain.

"That's enough," a woman's voice said. "We need you for something more important."

"Leave me!" he coughed. "I'm almost in, almost—" His strength was growing, the captive body starting to respond. Tear-drowned eyes revealed the wavery outline of three figures bending over him. Figures which must surely be angels. A gloriously pretty girl clad only in a resplendent white corona.

"No," she said. "Get into the blackhawk. Now."

There must have been some terrible mistake. Didn't they understand? This was the miracle. The redemption. "I'm in," Rocio told them. "Look, see? I'm in now. I've done it." He made one of his new hands rise, seeing blisters like big translucent fungi hanging from every finger.

"Then get out."

The hand disintegrated. Blood splattered across his face, obliterating his sight. He wanted to scream, but his vocal cords were too coarsened to obey.

"Get into the blackhawk, you little pillock, or we'll send you right back into the beyond again. And this time we'll never let you return."

Another burst of quite astonishing pain, followed by equally frightening numbness, told him his right foot had been destroyed. They were gnawing away at his beautiful new flesh, leaving him nothing. He raged barrenly at the unfairness of it all. Then strange echoey sensations blossomed into his mind.

See? Dariat asked. It's simple, apply your thoughts like this.

He did, and affinity opened, joining him with the *Mindor*.

What is happening? the frantic blackhawk asked.

Rocio's entire left leg was obliterated. White fire engulfed his groin and the stumpy remnant of his right leg.

Peran! the blackhawk called.

Rocio superimposed the captain's mind tone over his own thoughts. **Help me, *Mindor*.**

How? What is happening? I could not feel you. You closed yourself to me. Why? You have never done that before.

I'm sorry. It's the pain, a heart attack. I think I'm dying. Let me be with you, my friend.

Come. Hurry!

He felt the affinity link broaden, and the blackhawk was there waiting for its captain, its mind full of love and sympathy; a gentle and trusting creature for all its size and indomitable power. Kiera Salter exerted still more of her own particular brand of pressure.

With a last curse at the devils who left him no choice, Rocio abandoned that cherished human body, sliding himself along the affinity link. This transfer was different from the one which had brought him back from beyond. That had been a forced entry, this was a welcome embrace from an unsophisticated lover, drawing him in to secure him from harm.

The energetic nexus which his soul engendered established itself within the waiting neural cells at the core of the blackhawk, and the linkage which connected him to the captain's body snapped as the skull was smashed apart by Kiera's triumphant fist.

The *Mindor* sat on its pedestal on the second of Valisk's three docking ledges, patiently sucking nutrient fluid into its storage bladders. Beyond the eclipse of the habitat's non-rotating spaceport, the gas giant *Opuntia* was a pale cross-hatching of lime-green storm bands. The sight was a comforting one to the blackhawk. It had been birthed in *Opuntia*'s rings, taking eighteen years to grow into the lengthy hundred-and-twenty-five-metre cone of its mature form. Even among blackhawks, whose profiles varied considerably from the standard voidhawk disk shape, it was an oddity. Its polyp hull was a dusky green speckled with purple rings; three fat finlike protuberances angled up out of its rear quarter. Given its squashed-missile appearance, the only option for the life support module was a swept-back teardrop, which sat like a metallic saddle over the midsection of its upper hull.

Like all blackhawks and voidhawks its distortion field was folded around the hull, barely operative while it was docked. A condition which ended as soon as Rocio Condra's soul invaded

its neural cells. The number of neurones he now possessed was considerably larger than a human brain, increasing the amount of energetic power produced by the transdimensional twist. He extended himself out from the storage cluster *Mindor* had designated, breaking straight through the sub-routines designed to support him.

The startled blackhawk managed to ask: **Who are you?** before he vanquished its mind. But he couldn't assume control of a blackhawk's enormously complex functions as easily as he could a human body. There was no instinct to guide him, no old familiar nerve impulse sequences to follow. This was an alien territory, there hadn't been any starships at all during his life, let alone living ones.

The autonomic routines, those regulating the *Mindor's* organs, were fine, he just left them operating. However, the distortion field was controlled by direct conscious thought.

A couple of seconds after he gained possession it was billowing outwards uncontrollably. The blackhawk tipped back, pulling the pedestal feed tubes from their orifices. Nutrient fluid fountained out, flooding across the ledge until the habitat hurriedly closed the muscle valves.

Mindor rocked forwards, then rose three metres above the mushroom-shaped pedestal as Rocio frantically tried to contain the oscillating fluxes running wild through his patterning cells. Unfortunately he couldn't quite coordinate the process. Mass detection, the blackhawk's primary sense, came from a sophisticated secondary manipulation of the distortion field. Rocio couldn't work out where he was, let alone how to return to where he'd been.

What the hell are you doing? an irate Rubra asked.

Mindor's stern swept around in a fast arc, lower fins almost scraping the ledge surface. The driver of a service vehicle slammed on the brakes, and reversed fast as the huge bitek starship swished past less than five metres in front of her cabin's bubble windscreen.

Sorry, Rocio said, frenziedly searching through the blackhawk's confined memories for some kind of command routine. **It's a power flux. I'll have it choked back in a second.**

Two more blackhawks had started similar gyrations as re-

turned souls invaded their neurones. Rubra shot them vexed questions as well.

Rocio managed to regulate the field somewhat more effectively, and tie in the mass forms he was sensing to the images from the sensor blisters. His hull was slithering dangerously close to the rim of the docking ledge.

He reconfigured the distortion field to impel him in the other direction. Which was fine, until he realized exactly how fast he was heading for the shell wall. And another (non-possessed) blackhawk was sitting in the way.

Can't stop, he blurted at it.

It rose smooth and fast, shooting sixty metres straight up, protesting most indignantly. The *Mindor* skidded underneath, and just managed to halt before its rear fins struck Valisk's shell.

The remaining two blackhawk captains in the Tacoul Tavern were finally sacrificed to Kiera's strategy; and their ships shot off their respective pedestals like overpowered fireworks. Rubra and the other blackhawks fired alarmed queries after them. Three of the unpossessed blackhawks, thoroughly unnerved by their cousins' behaviour, also launched themselves from the ledge. A collision appeared imminent as the giant ships cavorted in the kilometre gap between the two ledges. Rubra began broadcasting flight vectors at them to try to steer them apart, demanding instant obedience.

By now, Rocio had mastered the basics of distortion field dynamics. He manoeuvred his prodigious bulk back towards the original pedestal. After five attempts, edging around in jerky spirals, he managed to settle.

If you've all quite finished, Rubra said as the agitated flock of blackhawks settled nervously.

Rocio sheepishly acquiesced to the admonishment. He and the other four possessed blackhawks exchanged private acknowledgements, swapping snippets of information on how to control their new bodies.

After experimenting for half an hour Rocio was pleasantly surprised with what he could see and feel. The gas giant environ was bloated with energy of many types, and a great deal of loose mass. There were overlapping tides of magnetic, electromagnetic, and particle energy. Twenty moons, hundreds of

small asteroids. They all traced delicate lines across his consciousness, registering in a multitude of fashions: harmonics, colours, scents. He had far more sensations available than those produced by a human sensorium. And any sense at all was better than the beyond.

The affinity band fell into a subdued silence as they waited to see what would happen next.

7

The overloaded spaceplane ascended cleanly enough through Lalonde's stratosphere, racing away from Amarisk's mountainous eastern coastline. It wasn't until the craft reached an altitude of a hundred kilometres, where the ions had thinned out to little more than a static-congested vacuum, that Ashly Hanson had to switch from the induction rams to the reaction drive. That was when their problems began. He had to redline the twin rocket engines in the tail, shunting up the voltage from the power cells, boosting the plasma temperature to dangerous heights. Coolant shunts emitted caution warnings, which he balanced against the craft's performance, heeding some, ignoring others. The job was his personal milieu: true piloting, knowing just how far he could push the systems, when to take calculated risks.

Power reserves, fuel levels, and safety margins formed fabulously elaborate interacting multitextural graphics inside Ashly's mind as he continued the magic juggling act. The factors were slowly coming together, enabling him to decide on his best case option: escape velocity at a hundred and twenty kilometres altitude. In theory that would leave seven kilos of reaction mass in the tanks. "But not a nice height," he muttered to himself. Never mind, it gave them the ability to rendezvous with *Lady Mac*.

The reasons for the spaceplane's overstressed loading parameters, all twenty-nine of them, were chattering and whooping happily behind him, impervious to the efforts of Father Elwes and Kelly Tirrel to shush them. It wouldn't last, Ashly thought with an air of inevitable gloom, kids always threw up in zero-gee, especially the ones as young as these.

He datavised the flight computer for a channel to *Lady Mac*. It took a while for the communications processor to lock

on to Lalonde's satellite, and even then the bandwidth was reduced. Sore evidence of the malicious forces swirling invisibly around the doomed planet.

"Joshua?"

"Tracking you, Ashly."

"You're going to have to manoeuvre to make rendezvous. I'm even having to expend my RC thruster reaction mass to achieve orbit. This is the vector." Ashly datavisaged over the file from the spaceplane's flight computer.

"Jesus, that's cutting it fine."

"I know. Sorry, but the kids weigh too much. And you're going to have to replace the reaction engines altogether when we reach port. I had to pump them over the safeties. A full structural stress test probably wouldn't hurt, either."

"Ah well, our no claims bonus got blown to shit in the battle anyway. Stand by for rendezvous in twelve minutes."

"Thank you, Joshua."

The contented babble coming from the spaceplane's cabin was quieting considerably. Acceleration had now declined to a twentieth of a gee as the orbital injection burn was finalized. Both rocket engines cut out. The flight computer reported four kilos of reaction mass were left in the tanks.

Then the first damp groan could be heard from the rear of the cabin. Ashly braced himself.

• • •

Acceleration warnings sounded in the *Lady Macbeth's* cabins. The Edenists working under the direction of Sarha Mitcham and Dahybi Yadev to prepare for the influx of some thirty children hurried to the couches and temporary mattresses. They all wore variants of the same grey, haunted expression on their faces. Given what they'd been through in the last thirty hours, such consternation was understandable. The high-pitched hooting conjured up all the wrong associations.

"Don't worry," Joshua announced. "No killer gees this time, we're just manoeuvring."

He was alone on the bridge, lights reduced to a pink glimmer, sharpening the resolution of the console hologram displays and AV projections. Strangely enough, the solitude felt good. He was now what he had always wanted to be—or thought he did—a starship captain, devoid of any other re-

sponsibility. Overseeing the flight computer and simultaneously piloting the big vessel along their new course vector towards the inert spaceplane didn't leave him with much time to brood on the consequences of their recent actions: Warlow dead, the mercenary team lost, the planet conquered, the rescue fleet broken. The whole shabby disaster really wasn't one he wanted to reflect on, nor the wider implications of having the possessed loose in the universe. Better to function usefully, to lose oneself in the mechanics of the problem at hand.

In a way his emotional climb-down was akin to a sense of release. The battles which they'd personally fought in, they'd won. Then they'd rescued the Edenists, the children, and now Kelly. And in a little while they were going home.

At the end, what more could you ask?

The unsuppressible guilt was his silent answer.

Joshua stabilized *Lady Mac* a kilometre above the spaceplane, allowing orbital mechanics to bring the two together. Both craft had fallen into the penumbra, reducing the planet below to a featureless black smear. They were visually dead, only radar and infrared could distinguish between oceans and continents.

He ordered the flight computer to establish communications circuits with the small number of low-orbit observation satellites remaining. The image they provided built up quickly.

Amarisk had emerged completely into the daylight hemisphere now. He could see the continent was completely dominated by the huge red cloud. The vast patch must already cover nearly a quarter of the land; and it was expanding rapidly out from the Juliffe basin, its leading edges moving at hurricane velocities. Yet it still retained its silky consistency, a uniform sheet through which no glimpse of the ground below was possible. The grey blemish which had hung above the Quallheim Counties during the mercenaries' brief campaign had also vanished. Even the mountains where the Tyrathca lived proved no barrier; the cloud was bubbling around them, sealing over valleys. Only the very tallest peaks were left unclaimed, their jagged snow caps sticking up from the red veil, icebergs bobbing through a sea of blood.

The sight had repelled Joshua before. Now it frightened him. The sheer potency it intimated was appalling.

Joshua flicked back to the images coming in from the *Lady Mac*'s extended sensor clusters. The spaceplane was five hundred metres away, its wings already folded back. He played the starship's equatorial ion thrusters, and moved in, bringing the docking cradle around to engage the latches in the spaceplane's nose cone.

Sitting in his pilot's seat, watching the performance through the narrow windscreen, Ashly was, as ever, amazed by Joshua's ability to control the huge spherical starship's motions. The docking cradle which had telescoped out of the hangar bay swung around gracefully until it was head-on, then slid over the squashed-bullet nose. Naturally the alignment matched first time.

Various clunking sounds were transmitted through the stress structure, and the spaceplane was slowly drawn inside the *Lady Mac*'s narrow cylindrical hangar. Ashly shuddered as another warm, sticky, smelly globe of fluid landed on his ship-suit. He didn't make the mistake of trying to swat it, that just broke the larger portions into smaller ones. And you could inhale those.

"Eight of you are going to have to stay inside the spaceplane cabin," Sarha datavisd as the hangar's airlock tube mated to the spaceplane.

"You're kidding me," a dismayed Ashly replied.

"Bad luck, Ashly. But we're maxing out our life support with so many people on board. I really need the spaceplane's carbon dioxide filters."

"Oh, God," he said miserably. "Okay. But send in some handheld sanitizer units, and quickly."

"They're already in the airlock waiting for you."

"Thanks."

"Send out the smallest children first, please. I'm going to cram them into the zero-tau pods."

"Will do." He datavisd the flight computer to open the airlock hatch, then left his seat to talk with Father Elwes about which children should go where.

Lady Macbeth's two undamaged fusion drive tubes ignited as soon as the spaceplane was stowed inside the hull. She rose

away from the planet at a steady one gee, heading up towards a jump coordinate which would align her on Tranquillity's star.

Far behind her, the middle section of the red cloud rippled and swirled in agitation. A tornado column swelled up from the centre, extending a good twenty kilometres above the twisting currents of cumulus. It flexed blindly for several minutes, like a beckoning—or clawing—finger. Then the *Lady Macbeth's* sensor clusters and thermal dump panels began to retract into their jump positions below the hull. Her brilliant blue-white fusion exhaust shrank away, and she coasted onwards and upwards for a brief minute until an event horizon claimed her.

The questing finger of cloud lost its vigour, and slowly bowed over in defeat, its glowing vapour reabsorbed into the now quiescent centre of the shroud. The leading edges continued their advance.

• • •

The view from Monterey's Hilton was as spectacular as only a three-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar building could provide. Al Capone loved it. The Nixon suite was on the bottom floor of the tower, giving it a standard gravity. New California glided slowly past the curving, radiation-shielded window which made up an entire wall of the master bedroom. The planet gleamed enticingly against the jet-black starfield. His one disappointment was that from here the stars didn't twinkle like they used to when he watched them at night above his summer retreat cottage at Round Lake. That aside, he felt like a king again.

The Hilton was a sixty-storey tower sticking out of the Monterey asteroid, orbiting a hundred and ten thousand kilometres above New California. Apart from Edenist habitat starscrapers (which it was modelled on), there were few structures like it in the Confederation. Tourists could rarely look down on terracompatible planets in such a fashion.

Which was stupid, Al thought, big business could make a packet out of hotels like the Hilton. But he couldn't spend all day looking at New California. He could sense his Organiza-

tion's top lieutenants waiting patiently outside the suite. They'd learned quickly enough not to interrupt when he wanted his privacy. But they did need orders, to be kept on their toes. Al knew just how fast things would fall apart if he didn't ride them hard. The world might be different, but the nature of people didn't change.

As if on cue, Jezzibella purred, "Come back here, lover."

Well maybe some people did, women never acted like her back in the 1920s and thirties. Then, they were either whores or wives. But Al was beginning to suspect there weren't many girls quite like Jezzibella in this century, either.

One minute all cute and kittenish, the next an animal as strong and demanding as himself. Al had his energetic strength now, which meant he could do some pretty incredible things with his wang. Things which even Jezzibella hadn't known about. Performances which made him proud, for a while anyway, because they were the only times he could make her beg him for more, to keep going, tell him how stupendous he was. Most of the time it was the other way around. Shit, she even kissed like a boy. Trouble was, after he'd done all those fantastic things to her hot-rod body, she wanted them done again, and again, and again . . .

"Please, baby. I really liked the Egyptian position. Only you are big enough to make that work."

With a halfhearted sigh Al left the window and walked back to the sunken bed she was lying on. The oomph girl had no shame, she was absolutely naked.

He grinned and let the front of his white robe fall open. Jezzibella hooted and applauded as his erection rose. Then she flopped back, character shifting in an instant. Al looked down on a scared-for-her-cherry schoolgirl.

His entry was fierce, without any attempt at finesse. It made her cry out in disbelief, pleading for him to stop, to be kind. But she couldn't resist, no girl could, not a lover like him. In minutes his vigorous pumping had turned her cries to rolling moans of delight, her snarl to a smile. Her body was responding, the two of them moving in a slick acrobatic rhythm. He made no attempt to control himself, to wait for her, he climaxed when *he* was ready, oblivious to anything else.

When his drowsy eyes opened, he saw her staring drunkenly up at the ceiling, the tip of her tongue licking her lips. "That was a good fantasy fuck," she drawled. "We'll have to do that one again."

Al gave up. "I gotta get going. I gotta sort the boys out, you know how it is."

"Sure, baby. What are you going to get them to do?"

"Christ, you dumb broad. I'm running the whole fucking planet now. You think that just falls into place? I gotta million problems need looking at. Soldiers, they need orders or they go sour."

Jezzibella pouted, then rolled over to grab the processor block which lay on the side of the bed. She typed on it, and frowned. "Al, honey, you must pull in that field of yours."

"Sorry," he muttered, and made an effort to calm his thoughts. It was the best way to make the electric gadgets work.

Jezzibella whistled in appreciation as she read the data running down the block's screen (she'd long since given up trying to datavise when she was in Al's presence). According to the information assembled by Harwood's office, there were nearly forty million possessed on New California now. Hooking up with Al, that wild impulse back at the San Angeles spaceport, looked like being the smartest move she'd ever made. *This* was the anarchy ride she'd been hunting for most of her life. The buzz of power she got from being with Al—very literally one of life and death—stimmed her higher than any adulation the fans gave during a concert.

How could anyone know that a gangster from the past would have such a genius for assembling a power structure which could hold an entire planet in bondage? But that was what he'd done. "You just gotta know what strings to jerk," he'd told her on the flight up to the orbiting asteroids.

Of course all forty million possessed weren't perfectly loyal to him, they weren't even recruited into the Organization. But then neither had the vast majority of Chicago's citizens sworn fealty to him. Nonetheless, willing or not, they had been his vassals. "All we gotta do is have an Organization in place and ready when the possessed start to emerge," he explained. "Back in Chicago, they called me a mobster because

there was another administration trying to run things parallel to mine: the government. I lost out because the fuckers were bigger and stronger. This time, I ain't making that mistake. This time there's only gonna be me from the word go."

And he'd been true to his word. She'd watched him at work that first day, just after they'd captured the orbiting asteroids and the SD network, sitting quietly in the background of the Monterey naval tactical operations room which the Organization soldiers had taken over as their headquarters. Watching and learning just what she'd gone and gotten herself involved in. And what she saw was the building of a pyramid, one constructed entirely from people. Without once losing his temper, Al issued orders to his lieutenants, who issued them to their seconds, and so on down the line. A pyramid which was constantly growing, absorbing new recruits at the bottom, adding to the height, to the power of the pinnacle. A pyramid whose hierarchy was established and maintained with the coldly ruthless application of force.

The first targets to be blasted into lava by the SD platforms had been government centres, everything from the Senate palace and the military bases right down to county police stations. (Al really hated the police. "Those cocksuckers murdered my brother," he'd growl darkly when she questioned him on it.) Even little town halls in country smallvilles were reduced to cinders after they opened for business in the morning. For eight hours, the platforms had fired energy pulses down on the hapless, helpless planet they had been constructed to defend. Any group who could organize resistance was systematically wiped out. After that, the possessed were free to sweep across the land.

But Al's Organization people were among them, directing the onwards march, finding out exactly who had returned from the beyond, when they came from, what they did in their first life. Their details would be sent up to the office which Avram Harwood had set up in Monterey, where they would be studied to gauge their potential usefulness. A select few would then be made an offer which—"They just can't refuse," Al chortled jubilantly.

They were a tiny minority, but that was all it ever took to govern. No rival could ever develop. Al had seen to that; he

had the firepower to support his Organization if anyone stepped out of line. And when he captured the SD network, he acquired the ultra-hardened military communications net which went with it, the only one which had a chance of remaining functional in the territories of the possessed. So even if there were objectors among the newly emerged possessed (and there certainly were), they couldn't get in contact with others who thought along the same lines to create any decent kind of opposition.

In the end Jezzibella had felt privileged. It was a pivotal moment of history, like watching Eisenhower dispatching his D-day forces, or being with Richard Saldana as he organized the exodus from the New Kong asteroid to Kulu. Privileged and ecstatic.

More statistics ran down the processor block's screen. There were over sixteen million non-possessed left in the areas where the Organization ruled supreme. Harwood's office had declared they should be left alone to keep the utilities and services going, and by and large the Organization ensured they were left alone—for now. How long that would last, though, Jezzibella had her doubts.

Transport was also being orchestrated to invade the cities and counties which remained uncontaminated. According to the tactical estimates there would be a hundred million possessed living on New California by this time tomorrow. The Organization would achieve absolute control of the entire planet within a further three days.

And yesterday all she'd had to entertain her were a couple of fresh, gawky kids and the tiresome antics of the entourage.

"It's looking pretty fucking fantastic, Al," she said. "Guess you've got what it takes."

He slapped her buns playfully. "I always have. Things here ain't so different from Chicago. It's just a question of size; this is one fuck of a lot bigger, but I got savvy Avvy's boys to help sort out that side of things, keeping track and all. Avvy didn't get to be mayor of San Angeles the way Big Jim Thompson made it into city hall back in Chicago. No, sir, he's got a flair for paperwork."

"And Leroy Octavius, too."

“Yep. I see why you wanted to keep him now. I could do with a load more like him.”

“To do what?”

“To keep going, of course. At least for a few days more.” He slumped his shoulders and rubbed his face in his hands. “Then it’s really gonna hit the fan. Most of the dumb asses down there want to do this magic disappearing act. Je-zus, Jez, I ain’t so sure I can stop them.” Eight times in the last day he’d ordered Emmet Mordden to use the SD platforms to sharpshoot buildings and city blocks over which the wisps of red cloud were forming. Each time the culprits had taken the hint, and the luminous swirl had vanished.

For the moment he was on top of things. But what was gonna happen after he’d won the planet was giving his brain a real hard time. It was going to be difficult stopping the possessed from vanishing inside the red cloud, because he was the only one among them who didn’t want that to happen. Once he’d delivered the whole planet to them, they’d start looking around at what was stopping them from achieving their true goal. And some wiseass with an eye on the main chance would make his bid. Wouldn’t be the first time.

“So give them something more to do,” Jezzibella said.

“Sure, right, doll. Like after the entire fucking world, what else am I gonna give them, for Christ’s sake?”

“Listen, you keep telling me this whole setup is going to end once the possessed pull New California out of the universe, right? Everyone’s going to be equal and immortal.”

“Yeah, that’s about it.”

“That means you’ll be nothing, least nothing special.”

“That’s what I’m fucking telling *you*.”

Jezzibella shifted again. This time she was like nothing he’d seen before: a librarian or schoolmarm. Not the remotest bit sexy. Al sucked some breath through his teeth, the way she did that was just plain unnerving—her not having the energetic power, and all.

She leaned over and put a hand on each of his shoulders, stern eyes inches from his. “When you’re nothing, all your lieutenants and soldiers become nothing, too. Deep down they’re not going to want that. You’ve got to find a reason—a fucking good reason—to keep the Organization intact. Once

they grab that angle you can keep things humming along sweetly for quite a while yet.”

“But we’ve won here. There isn’t a single excuse to keep going the way we have.”

“There are plenty,” she said. “You simply don’t know enough about the way the modern galaxy works to make any long-range plans, that’s all. But I’m going to cure that, starting right here. Now listen closely.”

• • •

New California’s planetary government had always taken a progressive view on flinging tax dollars at the local defence establishment. Firstly, it provided a healthy primer for industry to pursue an aggressive export policy, boosting foreign earnings. Secondly, their navy’s above-average size gave them an excellent heavyweight political stature within the Confederation.

Such enthusiasm for defence hardware had resulted in a superb C3 (command, control, and communication) setup, the core of which was Monterey’s naval tactical operations centre. It was a large chamber drilled deep into the asteroid’s rock, below the first biosphere cavern, and equipped with state-of-the-art AIs and communications systems, linked in to equally impressive squadrons of sensor satellites and weapons platforms. It was capable of coordinating the defence of the entire star system against anything from a full-scale invasion to a sneak attack by a rogue antimatter-powered starship. Unfortunately, no one had ever considered the consequences should it be captured and its firepower turned inwards on the planet and orbiting asteroids.

The Organization lieutenants had split into two fractions to run their operations centre. There was Avram Harwood’s staff who dealt purely with the administration and management details of the Organization, essentially the new civil service. Then there were those, a smaller number, working under the auspices of Silvano Richmann and Emmet Mordden, who were operating the military hardware they’d captured. The law enforcers. Al’s laws. He’d given that task to the possessed alone, just in case any non-possessed tried to be a hero.

When Al and Jezzibella walked into the centre the huge wall-mounted hologram screens were showing satellite views of Santa Volta. Grizzled spires of smoke were rising from sev-

eral of the city's blocks. Graphic symbols were superimposed over the real-time layout as the organization advanced its troops. Silvano Richmann and Leroy Octavius stood in front of the colourful screens, heads together as they discussed the best strategy to crack open the population. Filling the eight rows of consoles behind them, the communications team was waiting patiently.

Everyone turned as Al strode forward. There were grins, smiles, whoops, sharp whistles. He did the rounds, pressing the flesh, joking, laughing, thanking, offering encouragement.

Jezzibella followed a pace behind him. She and Leroy quirked an eyebrow at each other.

"So how's it going?" Al asked a scrum of his senior lieutenants when he'd finished his procession.

"We're more or less sticking to the timetable," Mickey Pileggi said. "Some places put up a fight. Others just roll onto their backs and stick their legs in the air for us. We got no way of knowing in advance. Word's getting out that we aren't possessing everyone. It helps. Causes a shitload of confusion."

"Fine from my angle, too, Al," Emmet Mordden said. "Our sensor satellites have been monitoring some of the deep space message traffic. It's not easy, because most of it is directional tight beam. But it looks like the rest of the system knows we're here, and what we're doing."

"Is that going to be a problem?" Al asked.

"No, sir. We caught nearly forty per cent of New California's navy ships in dock when we took over the orbiting asteroids. They're still there, and another twenty per cent is on permanent assignment to the Confederation Navy fleets. That just leaves a maximum of about fifty ships left in the system who could cause us any grief. But I've got every SD platform on situation-A readiness. Even if the admirals out there get their act together, they know it would be suicide to attack us."

Al lit a cigar, and blew a stream of smoke towards the screen. The near-orbit tactical display, Emmet had called it yesterday. It looked pretty calm at the moment. "Sounds like you're handling your slice of the action, Emmet. I'm impressed."

"Thanks, Al." The nervous man bobbed in appreciation. "As you can see, there's no spacecraft activity within a mil-

lion kilometres of the planetary surface, except for five voidhawks. They're holding themselves stable over the poles, seven hundred thousand kilometres out. My guess is they're just watching us to see what's happening."

"Spies?" Al inquired.

"Yes."

"We should blow them all to shit," Bernhard Allsop said loudly. "Ain't that right, Al? That'll give the rest of those frigging Commie Edenists the message: Don't spy on us, don't fuck with us or it's your ass."

"Shut up," Al said mildly.

Bernhard twitched apprehensively. "Sure, Al. I didn't mean nothing by it."

"Can you hit the voidhawks?" Jezzibella asked.

Emmet glanced from her to Al, and licked his suddenly sweaty lips. "It's difficult, you know? They chose those polar positions carefully. I mean, they're out of range of our energy weapons. And if we launch a combat wasp salvo at them, they'll just dive down a wormhole. But, hey . . . they can't hurt us, either."

"Not this time," Al said. He chewed his cigar from the left side of his mouth to the right. "But they can see what we're about, and it'll frighten them. Pretty soon the whole goddamn Confederation is going to know what's happened here."

"I told you they'd be trouble, Al baby," Jezzibella said, on cue. Her voice had shunted down to a tart's whinny.

"Sure you did, doll," he said, not taking his eyes off the tactical display. "We're gonna have to do something about them," Al announced to the room at large.

"Well, hell, Al," Emmet said. "I'll give it a go, but I don't think . . ."

"No, Emmet," Al said generously. "I ain't talking about five crappy little ships. I'm talking about what's lining up behind them."

"The Edenists?" Bernhard asked, hopefully.

"Partly, yeah. But they ain't the whole picture, are they, boy? You gotta think *big*, here. You're in a big universe now." He had their complete attention. Damn, but Jez had been right. Typical.

"The Edenists are gonna broadcast what we've done here

to the whole Confederation. Then what do you think is gonna happen, huh?" He turned a full circle, arms held out theatrically. "Any takers? No? Seems pretty goddamn obvious to me, guys. They're gonna come here with every fucking battleship they got, and grab the planet back off us."

"We can fight," Bernhard said.

"We'll lose," Al purred. "But that don't matter. Does it? Because I know what you're thinking. Every goddamned dumb-ass one of you. You're thinking: We won't be here. We're gonna be out of this stinking joint any day now, safe on the other side of the red cloud where there ain't no sky and there ain't no space, and nobody dies anymore. Ain't that right? Ain't that what's brewing inside those thick skulls of yours?"

Shuffled feet and downcast eyes was the only response he was offered. "Mickey, ain't that right?"

Mickey Pileggi developed an urgent wish to be somewhere else. He couldn't meet his boss's interrogatory stare. "Well, you know how it is, Al. That's a last resort, sure. But shit, we can do like Bernhard says and fight some first. I ain't afraid of fighting."

"Sure you ain't afraid. I didn't say you were afraid. I didn't insult you, Mickey, you rube goof. I'm saying you ain't thinking level. The Confederation Navy, they're gonna turn up here with a thousand, ten thousand starships, and you're gonna do the smartest thing you can do, and hide. Right? I would if they came at me with all pieces shooting."

The left side of Mickey's face began to tic alarmingly. "Sure, boss," he said numbly.

"So you think that's gonna make them give up?" Al asked. "Come on, all of you. I want to know. Who in this room believes the big government boys are just gonna give up if you make New California disappear? Huh? Tell me. They lose a planet with eight hundred million people on it, and the admiral in charge, he's just gonna shrug and say: Well fuck it, you can't win them all. And go home." Al stabbed a finger at the little purple stars of light representing the voidhawks on the tactical display screen. A slim bolt of white fire lashed out, striking the glass. Glowing droplets sprinkled out. A crater bowed inwards, distorting and magnifying the graphics

below. "Is he FUCK," Al bellowed. "Open your goddamn eyes, shitheads! These people can fly among the stars for Christ's sake. They know everything there is to know about how energy works, they know all about quantum dimensions, hell they can even switch off time if they feel like it. And what they don't know, they can find out pretty fucking quick. They'll see what you've done, they'll follow where you take the planet. And they'll bring it back. Those cruddy longhairs will look at what happened, and they'll work on it, and they'll work on it. And they ain't never going to stop until they've solved the problem. I know the feds, the governments. Believe me, of all people, I fucking know. You ain't never safe from them. They don't ever fucking stop. Never! And it won't matter diddly how much you scream, and how much you cuss and rage. They'll bring you back. Oh, yeah, right back here under the stars and emptiness where you started from. Staring death and beyond in the face." He had them now, he could see the doubt blossoming, the concern. And the fear. Always the fear. The way right into a man's heart. The way a general jerked his soldiers' strings.

Al Capone grinned like the devil himself into the daunted silence. "There's only one fucking way to stop that from ever happening. Any of you cretins figured that out yet? No? Big surprise. Well, it's simple, assholes. You stop running scared like you have been all your life. You stop, you turn around to face what's scaring you, and you bite its fucking dick off."

• • •

For five centuries after the first successful ZTT jump, governments, universities, companies, and military laboratories throughout the Confederation had been researching methods of direct supralight communication. And for all the billions of fuseodollars poured into the various projects, no one had ever produced a valid theory let alone a practical system to surmount the problem. Starships remained the only method of carrying data between star systems.

Because of this, waves of information would spread out like ripples through the inhabited star systems within the Confederation. And as the stars were not arranged in a tidy geometrical lattice, such wavefronts became more and more

distorted as time went on. News companies had long since refined a set of equations defining the most effective distribution procedure between their offices. On receiving a hot item (such as the appearance of Ione Saldana), an office would typically charter eight to twelve starships to relay the flek depending on when and where the story originated. Towards the end of the distribution coverage, the information could well arrive in one system from several directions over the course of a fortnight. The nature of the starships employed also had a strong influence on the timing, depending on the marque of ship used, how good the captain was, component malfunctions, a hundred diverse circumstances all contributing to the uncertainty.

Laton's appearance had naturally received an overriding precedence from all the Time Universe offices receiving Graeme Nicholson's flek. But Srinagar was over four hundred light-years away from Tranquillity. News of the *Yaku's* existence, and who it was carrying, arrived several days after the *Yaku* itself had departed from Valisk.

Laton!

Rubra was astonished. They might have been fellow Serpents, but that hardly made them allies. So for the first time in a hundred and thirty years he expanded his affinity and grudgingly contacted the Edenist habitats orbiting Kohistan to tell them the starship had docked briefly.

But Laton did not come inside, he assured them. **Only three crew came through immigration: Marie Skibbow, Alicia Cochrane, and Manza Balyuzi.**

Skibbow was definitely sequestered, and the other two are likely recipients, the Kohistan Consensus replied. **Where are they?**

I don't know. It was a humiliating, dismaying admission, especially to make to his former peers. But Rubra had immediately made the connection between Marie Skibbow and Anders Bospoort, in whose apartment Dariat's corpse had been found. Such a chain of events worried him enormously. But his supposedly infallible memory storage facility had failed him utterly. After Marie and Anders had gone down the starscraper that first time they had simply vanished from his perception; and the sub-routine in the starscraper hadn't no-

ticed their absence. Nor could he locate them now, not even with his perception sub-routines expanded and upgraded with a new batch of safeguards.

Do you require our assistance? the Kohistan Consensus asked. **Our neuropathologists may be able to analyse the nature of the distortion in your sub-routines.**

No! You'd love that, wouldn't you? Getting into my mind again. Poking around to see what makes me pulse.

Rubra—

You shits don't ever give up, don't ever stop.

Given the circumstances, do you not think it would be sensible to put old antagonisms behind us?

I'll deal with it. By myself. They can only fuck with my peripheral routines. They can't touch me.

As far as you know.

I know! Believe me, I know. I'm me; same as I ever was.

Rubra, this is only the beginning. They will try to infiltrate your higher-order thought routines.

They won't succeed, not now I know what to watch for.

Very well. But we must recommend to the Srinagar system assembly that starships are prohibited from docking with you. We cannot risk the prospect of any contamination spreading.

Suits me fine.

Will you at least cooperate with us on that?

Yes, yes. But only until I've tracked down the three *Yaku* crew and exterminated them.

Please be careful, Rubra. Laton's proteanic virus is extremely dangerous.

So that's what you think I've got, why my routines are failing. Bastards!

It took several minutes for his anger to sink back into more rational, passive thought currents. By the time he was thinking logically again, Valisk's SD sensor network alerted him to five voidhawks emerging from their wormhole termini to take up station half a million kilometres away. Spies! They didn't trust him.

He had to find the three people from the *Yaku*, and those members of his family whose monitor routines had been tampered with.

While the rest of the Srinagar system went to an agitated stage one military alert status, he tried again and again to scan his own interior for the renegades. Standard visual pattern recognition routines were useless. He upgraded and changed the perception interpretation routines several times. To no avail. He tried loading similar search orders into the servitors, hoping that they might succeed where the sensitive cells woven into every polyp surface had failed. He swept through entire starscrapers with his principal consciousness, certain that they still hadn't managed to infiltrate and corrupt his identity core. He found nothing.

After ten hours, the watching voidhawks were joined by three Srinagar navy frigates.

Inside the habitat, Time Universe played Graeme Nicholson's recording continuously, agitating the population badly. Opinions were divided. Some said Laton and Rubra were obviously colleagues, comrades in antagonism. Laton wouldn't hurt Valisk. Others pointed out that the two had never met, and had chosen very different paths through life.

There was unease, but no actual problems. Not for the first few hours. Then some idiot from the spaceport's civil traffic control centre leaked the news (actually he was paid two hundred thousand fuseodollars by Collins for the data) that the *Yaku* had docked at Valisk. Twenty starships immediately filed for departure flights, which Rubra refused.

Unease began to slip into resentment, anger, and alarm. Given the nature of the residents, they had no trouble asserting their feelings in a manner which the rentcops employed by Magellanic Itg had a hard time damping down. Riots broke out in several starscrapers. Localized 'councils' were formed, demanding the right to petition Rubra—who simply ignored them (after memorizing the ringleaders). More thoughtful and prudent members of the population started to hike out into the remoter sections of parkland, taking camping gear with them.

Such strife was almost designed to make Rubra's frantic search for the three *Yaku* crew members difficult verging on impossible.

Thirty-eight hours after Graeme Nicholson's flek arrived in the Srinagar system, a voidhawk came from Avon, exposing the true nature of the threat the Confederation was facing.

Such was the priority, it even beat the First Admiral's earlier communiqué warning of a possible energy virus.

In its wake all incoming starships were isolated and told to prepare for boarding and inspection by fully armed military teams. Civil starflight effectively shut down overnight. Proclamations were issued, requiring all newly arrived travellers to report to the police. Failure to comply was roughly equivalent to thumbprinting your own death warrant. Navy reserves were called in. Industrial astroengineering stations began producing combat wasps at full capacity.

In one respect, news of the possessed assisted Rubra. It seemed to shock Valisk's population out of their confrontational attitude. Rubra judged it an appropriate time to appeal to them for help. Every communications net processor, holoscreen, and AV pillar in the habitat relayed the same image of him: a man in his prime, handsome and capable, speaking calmly and authoritatively. Given that he'd had nothing to do with the general population for a century, it was an event unusual enough to draw everyone's attention.

"There are only three possessed at large in the habitat at this moment," he told his audience. "While they are certainly a cause for concern, they do not as yet present a threat to us. I have issued the police with the kind of heavy-calibre weapons necessary to surmount their energistic ability. And if circumstances warrant, several citizens have the kind of experience which might prove useful in a confrontation." An ironic, knowing curl of his lip brought an appreciative smile from many watchers. "However, their ability to alter their appearance means they are proving hard for me to track down. I'm therefore asking all of you to look out for them and inform me immediately. Don't trust people just because they look the same as they've always been; these bastards are probably masquerading as friends of yours. Another effect to watch for is the way they interfere with electronic equipment; if any of your processors start glitching, inform me immediately. There's a half-million-fuseodollar reward for the information which results in their elimination. Good hunting."

• • •

"Thank you, Big Brother." Ross Nash tipped his beer glass at the holoscreen over the Tacoul Tavern's bar. He looked away

from the drastically wobbly picture of Rubra, and grinned at Kiera. She was sitting in one of the wall booths, talking in low intense tones with the small cadre she'd been building up; her staff officers, people joked. Ross was mildly bugged that she hadn't been including him in the consultation process recently. Okay, so he didn't have much in the way of technical knowledge, and this habitat was a far gone trip into future-world for a guy who was born in 1940 (and died in '89—bowel cancer); he kept expecting Yul Brynner to turn up in his black gunslinger outfit. But damn it, his opinion counted for something. She hadn't screwed with him for days either.

He glanced around the black and silver tavern, resisting the impulse to laugh. It was busier than it had been for years. Unfortunately for the owner, nobody was paying for their drinks and meals anymore. Not this particular clientele. Tatars and cyberpunks mixed happily with Roman legionaries and heavy-leather bikers, along with several rejects from the good Dr Frankenstein's assembly lab. Music was blasting out of a magnificent 1950s Wurlitzer, allowing a flock of seraphim to strut their stuff across the neon underlit floor. It was pure sensory overload after the deprivation of the beyond, nourishment for the mind. Ross grinned engagingly at his new buddies propping up the bar. There was poor old Dariat, also cut out of Kiera's elite command group and really pissed by that. Abraham Canaan, too, in full preacher's ensemble, scowling at the debauchery being practised all around. One thing about the possessed, Ross thought cheerfully, they knew how to party. And they could do it in perfect safety in the Tacoul Tavern; those who were affinity-capable had turned the joint into a safe enclave, completely reformatting the sub-routines which operated in the neural strata behind the walls.

He gulped down the rest of his glass, then held it up in front of his nose and wished it full once again. The liquid which appeared in it really did look like gnat's piss. He frowned at it; a complicated process, coordinating that many facial muscles. For the last five hours he'd been delighted that possessing a body didn't prevent you from getting utterly smashed, now it seemed there were disadvantages. He chucked the glass over his shoulder. He was sure he'd seen shops out in the vestibule, some of them would stock a bottle or two of decent booze.



Rubra knew his thought processing efficiency was lower than optimum. The malaise was his own fault. He should be reviewing the search, reformatting sub-routines yet again. Now more than ever the effort should be made, now the true nature of his predicament was known. And it was a predicament. The possessed had conquered Pernik. Bitek was not invincible. He ought to divert every mental resource towards breaking the problem; after all, the possessed were physically present, there had to be some way of detecting them. Instead he brooded—something an Edenist habitat personality couldn't, or wouldn't, do.

Dariat. Rubra simply couldn't forget the insignificant little shit. Dariat was dead. But now death wasn't the end. And he died happy. That passive half smile seemed to flutter through the cells of the neural strata like a menacing ghost. Not such a stretched metaphor, now.

But to kill yourself just to return . . . No. He wouldn't.

But someone had taught the possessed how to glitch his thought routines. Someone very competent indeed.

That smile, though. Suppose, just suppose, he was *so* desperate for vengeance . . .

Rubra became aware of a disturbance in the Diocca starscraper, the seventeenth floor, a delicatessen. Some kind of attempted holdup. A sub-routine was attempting to call for the rentcops, but it kept misdirecting the information. The new safeguard protocols he'd installed were trying to compensate, and failing. They fell back on their third-level instructions, and alerted the principal personality pattern. And barely succeeded in that. Dozens of extremely potent subversive orders were operating within the Diocca starscraper's neural strata, virtually isolating it from Rubra's consciousness.

Elated and perturbed, he focused his full attention on it . . .

Ross Nash was leaning on the delicatessen's counter, pressing a very large pump-action shotgun into the face of the petrified manager. He clicked the fingers of his free hand, and a thousand-dollar bill flipped out of his cuff, just like the way he'd seen a magician do it in Vegas one time. The crisp note floated down to join the small pile on the counter.

“We got enough here yet, buddy?” Ross asked.

“Sure,” the manager whispered. “That’s fine.”

“Goddamn bet your ass it is. Yankee dollar, best goddamn currency in the whole fucking world. Everybody knows that.” He snatched up a bottle of Norfolk Tears from beside the bills.

Rubra focused on the shotgun, not entirely sure the seventeenth floor’s perception interpretation routine was fully functional after all. The weapon seemed to be made of wood.

Ross grinned at the trembling manager. “I’ll be back,” he said, in a very heavy accent. He did an about-face and started to march away. The shotgun flickered erratically, competing with a broken chair leg to occupy the same space.

The manager snatched his shockrod from its clips under the counter and took a wild swing. It connected with the back of Ross’s head.

Along with the manager, Rubra was amazed at the result of the simple blow.

As soon as the shockrod sparked across Ross’s skin, his possessed body ignited with the pristine glory of a small solar flare. All colours in the shop vanished beneath the incandescent blaze, leaving only white and silver to designate rough shapes.

Nearby processors and sensors came back on-line. Thermal alerts flashed into Valisk’s net, along with a security call. Ceiling-mounted fire suppression nozzles swivelled around, and squirted retardant foam at the blaze.

The thick streams made little difference. Ross’s stolen body was dimming now, sinking to its charred knees, flakes of carbonated flesh crumbling away.

Rubra activated the audio circuit on in the shop’s net processor. “Out!” he commanded.

The manager cringed at the shout.

“Move,” Rubra said. “It’s the possessed. Get out.” He instructed all the net processors on the seventeenth floor to repeat the order. Analysis routines began correlating all the information from the starscraper’s sensitive cells. Even with his principal personality pattern directing the procedure, he couldn’t see what was happening inside the Tacoul Tavern. Then bizarre figures started to emerge from the tavern’s doorway into the vestibule.

He'd found them, the whole damnable nest.

White fireballs shot through the air, pursuing the terrorized delicatessen manager as he ran for the lifts. One of them caught him, clinging to his shoulder. He screamed as black, rancid smoke churned out of the wound.

Rubra immediately cancelled the floor's autonomic routines and shunted himself into the operating hierarchy. The vestibule's electrophorescent cells went dead, dropping the whole area into darkness, except for the confusing strobe of white fire. A muscle membrane door leading onto the stairwell snapped open, sending out a single fan of light. The manager altered course, put his head down, and charged straight at it.

Chips of polyp rained down on the vestibule floor. All across the ceiling the atmosphere duct tubules were splitting open as Rubra contracted and flexed the flow regulator muscles in directions they were never designed for. Thick white vapour poured out of the jagged holes. Warm, dank, and oily, it was the concentrated water vapour breathed out of a thousand lungs, which the tubules were supposed to extract from the air and pump into specialist refining organs.

The possessed wished it gone. And the muggy fog obeyed, rushing aside to let them pass. But not before it reduced their fireballs to impotent wispy swirls of fluorescing mist.

The manager reached the stairwell. Rubra closed the muscle-membrane door behind him, clenching it tight as several balls of white fire slammed into the surface, burrowing in like lava worms.

Kiera Salter ran out into the vestibule just as the last of the stinking mist vanished. Red emergency lights had come on, bringing an antagonistic moonlight glow to the broad chamber. She saw the stairwell's muscle-membrane door slap shut ahead of the vengeful mob.

"Stop!" she yelled.

Some did. Several threw white fire at the muscle membrane.

"Stop this right now," she said, this time there was an edge in her voice.

"Fuck you, Kiera."

"He zapped Ross, goddamnit."

“I’m gonna make him suffer.”

“Maybe.” Kiera strode into the centre of the vestibule and stood there, hands on her hips, staring around at her precariously allied colleagues. “But not like this.” She gestured at the smoking muscle membrane door, which was still shut. The grey surface was visibly quivering. “He knows now.” She tipped her head back, calling out at the ceiling. “Don’t you, Rubra?”

The ceiling’s electrophorescent cells slowly came back on, illuminating her upturned face. Lines of darkness flowed across them, taking shape. YES.

“Yes. See?” She dared any of the possessed to challenge her; a couple of her more powerful new lieutenants, Bonney Lewin and Stanyon, came forward to stand beside her for emphasis. “We’re playing a different game now, no more skulking about. Now we take over the entire habitat.”

NO, printed the ceiling.

“That wasn’t a deal, Rubra,” she shouted up at him. “I’m not offering to make you a partner. Got that? If you’re real, *real* lucky, then you get to live on. That’s all. If you don’t piss me off. If you don’t get in my way. Then maybe we’ll have a use for your precious Valisk afterwards. But only if you behave. Because once I’ve taken over your population it’s going to be easy to fly away. Only before we go, I’ll use the starships to cut you into little pieces; I’ll split your shell open, I’ll bleed your atmosphere out, I’ll freeze your rivers solid, I’ll blast your digestive organs out of the endcap. It’ll take a long time hurting for you to die completely. Decades, maybe. Who knows. You want to find out?”

YOU ARE COMPLETELY ALONE. POLICE AND COMBAT-BOOSTED MERCENARIES ON THEIR WAY. SURRENDER NOW.

Kiera laughed brutally. “No, we’re not alone, Rubra. There are billions of us.” She looked around at the possessed in the vestibule, not seeing any dissenters (except ones like Dariat and Canaan, who really didn’t count). “Okay, people, as from now we’re going overt. I want procedure five enacted this minute.” A casual click of her fingers, designating tasks. “You three, override the lift supervisor processors, have them ready to take us up into the parkland. Bonney, track down that little

shit who wiped Ross, I want him creatively hurt. We'll set up our command centre in Magellanic Itg's boardroom."

The first lift arrived at the seventeenth floor. Five of the possessed hurried in, anxious to show Kiera their eagerness to obey, anxious to reap the rewards. The doors slid shut. Rubra overrode the starscraper's power circuit safeguards, and routed eighty thousand volts through the metal tracks which lined the lift shaft.

Kiera could hear the screams from inside the lift, feel the agony of forced banishment. The silicon rubber seal between the doors melted and burned, allowing the fearsome light of the bodies' internecine flame to spew out of the crack.

NOT SO EASY, IS IT?

For about twenty seconds she stood absolutely still, face a perfect cage around any emotion. Then her finger lined up on a spindly youth in a baggy white suit. "You, open the muscle membrane; we'll use the stairs."

"Told you so," the youth said. "We should have gone for him first."

"Do it," Kiera snapped. "And the rest of you, Rubra's demonstrated what he can do. It's not much compared to our ability, but it's an irritant. We'll cut through the neural strata's connections with the starscrapers eventually, but until then, proceed with caution."

The muscle-membrane door parted smoothly, allowing the now slightly subdued possessed to troop up the seventeen flights of stairs to the parkland above.

It wasn't a pure affinity command, Rubra told the Kohistan Consensus. I felt what was almost like a power surge through the neural cells around the muscle membrane. It came in with the affinity command, just wiped all my routines completely. But it's localized, an area roughly five metres in diameter; it can't reach into the main neural strata.

Laton claimed that Lewis Sinclair had that same kind of supercharged affinity when he took over Pernik island, the Consensus replied. It works through brute strength, and as such can be subverted. But should one of them succeed in transferring his personality into you, the energistic abil-

ity increases in proportion to the number of cells subsumed. You must not allow that to happen.

Fat chance. You know Valisk's neural cells were sequenced from my DNA, they will only process my thought routines. I guess that's similar to what Laton did to Pernik when he altered the island's neural strata with his proteanic virus. The affinity-capable possessed might be able to knock out some functions like the muscle membranes, but their personalities wouldn't function as independent entities in the neural strata, not unless they operate as a subsection of my pattern. I'd have to let them in.

Excellent news. But can you protect your general population from possession?

It's going to be tricky, Rubra admitted reluctantly. And I'll never save all of them, not even a majority. I'm going to have to take a whole load of internal damage, too.

We sympathise. We will help you rebuild afterwards.

If there is an afterwards.

8

Culey asteroid was an almost instinctive choice for André Duchamp. Located in the Dzamin Ude star system, a healthy sixty light-years from Lalonde, it acted as a ready haven for certain types of ships in certain circumstances. As if in reaction to its Chinese-ethnic ancestry, and all the clutter of authoritarian tradition which came with that, the asteroid was notoriously lax when it came to enforcing CAB regulations and scrutinizing the legitimacy of cargo manifests. Such an attitude hadn't done its economy any harm. Starships came for the ease of trading, and the astroengineering conglomerates came to maintain and support the ships, and where the majors went there followed a plethora of smaller service and finance companies. The Confederation Assembly subcommittee on smuggling and piracy might routinely condemn Culey's government and its policies, but nothing ever altered. Certainly in the fifteen years he'd been using it, André never had any trouble selling cargo or picking up dubious charters. The asteroid was virtually a second home.

This time, though, when the *Villeneuve's Revenge* performed its ZTT jump into the designated emergence zone, Culey spaceport was unusually reticent in granting docking permission. During the last three days the system had received first the reports of Laton's re-emergence, and secondly the warning from Trafalgar about possible energy virus contamination. Both designated Lalonde as the focus of the trouble.

"But I have a severely injured man on board," André protested as his third request to be allocated a docking bay was refused.

"Sorry, Duchamp," the port control officer replied. "We have no bays available."

“There’s very little traffic movement around the port,” Madeleine Collum observed; she’d accessed the starship’s sensor suite, and was viewing the asteroid. “And most of that is personnel commuters and MSVs, no starships.”

“I am declaring a first-degree emergency,” André datavised to the port officer. “They have to take us now,” he muttered to Madeleine. She simply grunted.

“Emergency declaration acknowledged, *Villeneuve’s Revenge*,” the port control officer datavised back. “We would advise you set a vector for the Yaxi asteroid. Their facilities are more appropriate to your status.”

André glared at the almost featureless communications console. “Very well. Please open a channel to Commissioner Ri Drak for me.”

Ri Drak was André’s last card, the one he hadn’t quite envisioned playing in a situation such as this, not over the fate of a crew member; the likes of Ri Drak were to be held in reserve until André’s own neck was well and truly on the line.

“Hello, Captain,” Ri Drak datavised. “We would seem to have a problem evolving here.”

“Not for me,” André answered. “No problems. Not like in the past, eh?”

The two of them switched to a high-order encryption program. Much to Madeleine’s annoyance, she couldn’t access the rest of the conversation. Whatever was said took nearly fifteen minutes to discuss. The only giveaway was André’s clumsy face, registering a sneaky grin, intermingled with the sporadic indignant frown.

“Very well, Captain,” Ri Drak said at last. “The *Villeneuve’s Revenge* is cleared to dock, but at your own risk should you prove to be contaminated. I will alert the security forces to your arrival.”

“Monsieur,” André acknowledged gracelessly.

Madeleine didn’t press. Instead she began datavising the flight computer for systems schematics, assisting the captain with the fusion drive’s ignition sequence.

Culey’s counter-rotating spaceport was a seven-pointed star, its unfortunate condition mirroring the asteroid’s general attitude to spaceworthiness statutes. Several areas were in darkness: silver-white insulation blankets were missing from

the surface, creating strange mosaic patterns, and at least three pipes were leaking, throwing up weak grey gas jets.

The *Villeneuve's Revenge* was assigned an isolated bay near one of the tips. That at least was fully illuminated, internal spotlights turning the steep-walled metal crater into a shadowless receptacle. Red strobes around the rim flashed in unison as the starship descended onto the extended cradle.

An armed port police squad were first through the airlock tube when it sealed. They rounded up André and the crew, detaining them on the bridge while a customs team examined the ship's life-support capsules from top to bottom. The search took two hours before clearance was granted.

"You put up a hell of a fight in here," the port police captain said as he slid through the open ceiling hatch into the lower deck lounge where the possessed had stormed aboard. The compartment was a shambles, fittings broken and twisted, blackened sections of composite melted into queer shapes, dark bloodstains on various surfaces starting to flake. Despite the best efforts of the straining environmental circuit there was a nasty smell of burnt meat in the air which refused to go away. Nine black body bags were secured to the hatch ladder by short lengths of silicon fibre. Stirred by the weak columns of air which was all the broken, vibrating conditioning duct could muster, they drifted a few centimetres above the scorched decking, bumping into each other and recoiling in slow motion.

"Erick and I saw them off," André said gruffly. It earned him a filthy glance from Desmond Lafoe, who was helping the spaceport coroner classify the bodies.

"You did pretty well, then," the captain said. "Lalonde sounds as if Hell has materialized inside the Confederation."

"It has," André said. "Pure hell. We were lucky to escape. I've never seen a space battle more ferocious than that."

The police captain nodded thoughtfully.

"Captain?" Madeleine datavised. "We're ready to take Erick's zero-tau pod down to the hospital now."

"Of course, proceed."

"We'll need you there to clear the treatment payment orders, Captain."

André's cheerfully chubby face showed a certain tautness.

"I will be along, we're almost through with the port clearance procedures."

"You know, I have several friends in the media who would be interested in recordings of your mission," the police captain said. "Perhaps you would care for me to put you in touch with them? There may even be circumstances where you wouldn't have to pay import duty; these matters are within my discretion."

André's malaised spirit lifted. "Perhaps we could come to some arrangement."

Madeleine and Desmond accompanied Erick's zero-tau pod to the asteroid's hospital in the main habitation cavern. Before the field was switched off, the doctors went through the flek Madeleine had recorded as she stabilized Erick.

"Your friend is a lucky man," the principal surgeon told them after the initial review.

"We know," Madeleine said. "We were there."

"Fortunately his Kulu Corporation neural nanonics are top of the range, very high capacity. The emergency suspension program he ran during the decompression event was correspondingly comprehensive; it has prevented major internal organ tissue death, and there's very little neural damage, the blood supply to his cranium was sustained almost satisfactorily. We can certainly clone and replace the cells he has lost. Lungs will have to be completely replaced, of course, they always suffer the most from such decompression. And quite a few blood vessels will need extensive repair. The forearm and hand are naturally the simplest operation, a straightforward graft replacement."

Madeleine grinned over at Desmond. The flight had been a terrific strain on everyone, not knowing if they'd used the correct procedures, or whether the blank pod simply contained a vegetable.

André Duchamp appeared in the private waiting room they were using, his smile so bright that Madeleine gave him a suspicious frown.

"Erick's going to be all right," she told him.

"*Très bon*. He is a beautiful *enfant*. I always said so."

"He can certainly be restored," the surgeon said. "There is the question of what kind of procedure you would like me to

perform. We can use artificial tissue implants to return him to full viability within a few days, these we have in store. Following that we can begin the cloning operation and start to replace the AT units as his organs mature. Or alternatively we can simply take the appropriate genetic samples, and keep him in zero-tau until the new organs are ready to be implanted.”

“Of course.” André cleared his throat, not quite looking at his other two crew. “Exactly how much would these different procedures cost?”

The surgeon gave a modest shrug. “The cheapest option would just be to give him the artificial tissue and not bother with cloned replacements. AT is the technology which people use in order to boost themselves; the individual units will live longer than him, and they are highly resistant to disease.”

“*Magnifique.*” André gave a wide, contented smile.

“But we’re not going to use that option, are we, Captain?” Madeleine said forcibly. “Because, as you said when Erick saved both your ship and your arse, you would buy him an entire new clone body if that’s what it took. Didn’t you? So how fortunate that you don’t have to clone a new body, and all the expense that entails. Now all you are going to have to pay for is some artificial tissue and a few clones. Because you certainly don’t want Erick walking around in anything less than a perfectly restored and natural condition. Do you, Captain?”

André’s answering grin was a simple facial ritual. “*Non,*” he said. “How right you are, my dear Madeleine. As ever.” He gave the surgeon a nod. “Very well, a full clone repair, if you please.”

“Certainly, sir.” The surgeon produced a Jovian Bank credit disk. “I must ask for a deposit of two hundred thousand fuseodollars.”

“Two hundred thousand! I thought you were going to rebuild him, not rejuvenate him.”

“Sadly, there is a lot of work to be done. Surely your insurance premium will cover it?”

“I’ll have to check,” André said heavily.

Madeleine laughed.

“Will Erick be able to fly after the artificial tissue has been implanted?” André asked.

“Oh, yes,” the surgeon said. “I won’t need him back here for the clone implants for several months.”

“Good.”

“Why? Where are we going?” Madeleine asked suspiciously.

André produced his own Jovian Bank disk, and proffered it towards the surgeon. “Anywhere we can get a charter for. Who knows, we might even avoid bankruptcy until we return. I’m sure that will make Erick very happy knowing what his recklessness has reduced me to.”

• • •

Idria asteroid was on full Strategic Defence alert, and had been for three days. For the first forty-eight hours all the asteroid council knew was that *something* had taken over the New California SD network, and coincidentally knocked out (or captured) half of the planetary navy at the same time. Details were hazy. It was almost too much to believe that some kind of coup could be successful on a modern planet, but the few garbled reports which did get beamed out before the transmitters fell ominously silent confirmed that the SD platforms were firing at groundside targets.

Then a day ago the voidhawk messenger from the Confederation Assembly arrived in the system, and people understood what had happened. With understanding came terror.

Every settled asteroid in the Lyll belt was on the same maximum alert status. The Edenist habitats orbiting Yosemite had announced a two-million-kilometre emergence exclusion zone around the gas giant, enforced by armed voidhawks. Such New California navy ships as had escaped the planetary catastrophe were dispersed across several settled asteroids, while the surviving admirals gathered at the Trojan asteroid cluster trailing Yosemite to debate what to do. So far all they’d done was fall back on the oldest military maxim and send out scouts to fill in the yawning information gap.

Commander Nicolai Penovich was duty officer in Idria’s SD command centre when the Adamist starships emerged three thousand kilometres away—five medium-sized craft, nowhere near the designated emergence zone. Sensors showed their infrared signature leap upwards within seconds

of their appearance. Tactical programs confirmed a massive combat wasp launch. Targets verified as the asteroid's SD platforms, and supplementary sensor satellites.

Nicolai datavisaged the fire command computer to retaliate. Electron and laser beams stabbed out. The hastily assembled home defence force fleet—basically every ship capable of launching a combat wasp—was vectored onto the intruders. By the time most of them had got under way the attackers had jumped away.

Another four starships jumped in, released their combat wasps, and jumped out.

The assault was right out of the tactics flek, and there was nothing Nicolai could do about it. His sensor coverage had already degraded by forty per cent, and still more was dropping out as combat wasp submunitions stormed local space with electronic warfare pulses. Nuclear explosions were surrounding the asteroid with a scintillating veil of irradiated particles, almost completely wiping out the satellites' long-range scanner returns.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to direct the platforms' fire on incoming drones. He didn't even know how many surviving salvos there were anymore.

Two of the defending ships were struck by kinetic missiles, disintegrating into spectacular, short-lived streaks of stellar flame.

Nicolai and his small staff recalled the remainder of the fleet, trying to form them into an inner defensive globe. But his communications were as bad as the sensor coverage. At least three didn't respond. Two SD platforms dropped out of his command network. Victims of combat wasps, or electronic warfare? He didn't know, and the tactics program couldn't offer a prediction.

The platforms were never really intended to ward off a full-scale assault like this, he thought despairingly. Idria's real protection came from the system's naval alliance.

A couple of close-orbit detector satellites warned him of four starships emerging barely fifty kilometres from the asteroid. Frigates popped out, spraying combat wasps in all directions. Eight were aimed at Idria's spaceport, scattering shoals of submunitions as they closed at thirty-five gees.

Nicolai didn't have anything left to stop them. Small explosions erupted right across the two-kilometre grid of metal and composite. Precisely targeted, they struck communications relays and sensor clusters.

Every input into the SD command centre went dead.

"Oh, shit almighty," Lieutenant Fleur Mironov yelled. "We're gonna die."

"No," Nicolai said. "They're softening us up for an assault." He called up internal structural blueprints, studying the horribly few options remaining. "I want whatever combat personnel we have positioned in the axial spindle tubes, they're to enforce a total blockade. And close down the transit tubes linking the caverns with the spaceport. Now. Whoever's left out there will just have to take their chances."

"Against the possessed?" Fleur exclaimed. "Why not just fling them out of an airlock?"

"Enough, Lieutenant! Now find me some kind of external sensor that's still functioning. I must know what's happening outside."

"Sir."

"We have to protect the majority of the population. Yreka and Orland will respond as soon as they see what's happened. And Orland had two navy frigates assigned to it. We only have to hold out for a couple of hours. The troops can manage that, surely. The possessed aren't that good."

"If Yreka and Orland haven't been attacked as well," Fleur said dubiously. "We only saw about a dozen ships. There were hundreds in the asteroids and low-orbit station docks when the possessed took over New California."

"Jesus, will you stop with the pessimism, already? Now where's my external sensor?"

"Coming up, sir. I got us a couple of thermo dump panel inspection mechanoids on microwave circuits. Guess the possessed didn't bother targeting those relays."

"Okay, let's have it."

The quality of the image which came foaming into his brain was dreadful: silver-grey smears drifting entirely at random against an intense black background, crinkled blue-brown rock across the bottom quarter of the picture. Fleur manipulated the mechanoids so that their sensors swung

around to focus on the battered spaceport disk at the end of its spindle. The spaceport was venting heavily in a dozen places, girders had been mashed, trailing banners of tattered debris. Eight lifeboats were flying clear of the damaged sections. Nicolai Penovich didn't like to imagine how many people were crammed inside, nor how they could be rescued. Vivid white explosions shimmered into existence against the bent constellation of Pisces. Someone was still fighting out there.

A large starship slid smoothly into view, riding a lance of violet fusion fire. Definitely a navy craft of some kind, it was still in its combat configuration; short-range sensor clusters extended, thermo dump panels retracted. Steamy puffs of coolant gas squirted from small nozzles ringing its midsection. Hexagonal ports were open all around its front hull, too big for combat wasp launch tubes.

Scale was hard to judge, but Nicolai estimated it at a good ninety metres in diameter. "I think that's a marine assault ship," he said.

The main drive shut off, and blue ion thrusters fired, locking it in to position five hundred metres away from the spindle which connected the non-rotating spaceport with the asteroid.

"I've placed a couple of squads in the spindle," Fleur said. "They're not much, some port police and a dozen boosted mercenaries who volunteered."

"Horatio had it easy compared to them," Nicolai murmured. "But they should be able to hold. The possessed can't possibly mount a standard beachhead operation. Their bodies screw up electronics, they'd never be able to wear an SII suit, let alone combat armour. They're going to have to dock and try and fight their way along the transit tubes, that's going to cost them." He checked the external situation again, seeking confirmation of his assessment. The big ship was holding steady, with just intermittent orange fireballs spluttering out of the equatorial vernier thruster nozzles to maintain attitude.

"Get me access to sensor coverage of the spaceport, and check on our internal communications," Nicolai ordered. "We may be able to coordinate a running battle from here."

"Aye, sir." Fleur started to datavise instructions into the command centre's computer, interfacing their communica-

tions circuits with the civil data channels which wove through the spaceport.

Shadows began to flicker inside the ship's open hatches. "What the hell have they got in there?" Nicolai asked.

The inspection mechanoids turned up their camera resolution. He saw figures emerging from the ship, hornets darting out of their nest. Dark outlines, hard to see with the mushy interference and low light level. But they were definitely humanoid in shape, riding manoeuvring packs that had enlarged nozzles for higher thrust. "Who are they?" he whispered.

"Traitors," Fleur hissed. "Those NC navy bastards must have switched sides. They never did support independent asteroid settlements. Now they're helping the possessed!"

"They wouldn't. Nobody would do that."

"Then how do you explain it?"

He shook his head helplessly. Outside the spindle, the fast, black hornets were burning their way in through the carbottanium structure. One by one, they flew into the ragged holes.

• • •

Louise was actually glad to return to the quiet luxury of Balfern House. It had been an extraordinary day, and a wearily long one, too.

In the morning she'd visited Mr Litchfield, the family's lawyer in the capital, to arrange for money from the Cricklade account to be made available to her. The transfer had taken hours; neither the lawyer nor the bank was accustomed to young girls insisting on being issued with Jovian Bank credit disks. She stuck to her guns despite all the obstacles; Joshua had told her they were acceptable everywhere in the Confederation. She doubted Norfolk's pounds were.

That part of the day had proved to be simplicity itself compared to finding a way off Norfolk. There were only three civil-registered starships left in orbit, and they were all chartered by the Confederation Navy to act as support ships for the squadron.

Louise, Fletcher, and Genevieve had taken their coach out to Bennett Field, Norwich's main aerodrome, to talk to a spaceplane pilot from the *Far Realm*, who was currently groundside. His name was Furay, and through him she had

gradually persuaded the captain to sell them a berth. She suspected it was her money rather than her silver tongue which had eventually won them a cabin. Their fee was forty thousand fuseodollars apiece.

Her original hope of buying passage directly to Tranquillity had gone straight out of the window barely a minute after starting to talk to Furay. The *Far Realm* was contracted to stay with the squadron during its Norfolk assignment; when the ship did leave, it would accompany the navy frigates. No one knew when that would be anymore, the captain explained. Louise didn't care, she just wanted to get off the planet. Even floating around in low orbit would be safer than staying in Norwich. She would worry about reaching Tranquillity when the *Far Realm* arrived at its next port.

So the captain appeared to give in gracefully and negotiate terms. They were due to fly up tomorrow, where they would wait in the ship until the squadron's business was complete.

More delay. More uncertainty. But she'd actually started to accomplish her goal. Fancy, arranging to fly on a starship, all by herself. Fly away to meet Joshua.

And leave everyone else in the stew.

I can't take them all with me, though. I want to, dear Jesus, but I really can't. Please understand.

She tried not to let the guilt show as she led the maids through the house back to her room. They were carrying the parcels and cases Louise had bought after they'd left Bennett Field. Clothes more suitable to travelling on a starship (Gen had a ball choosing them), and other items she thought they might need. She remembered Joshua explaining how difficult and dangerous star travel could be. Not that it bothered him, he was so brave.

Thankfully Aunt Celina hadn't returned yet, even though it was now late afternoon. Explaining the baggage away would have been impossible.

After shooing the maids out of her room Louise kicked her shoes off. She wasn't used to high heels, the snazzy black leather was beginning to feel like some kind of torture implement. Her new jacket followed them onto the floor, and she pushed the balcony doors open.

Duke was low in the sky, emitting a lovely golden tint,

which in turn made the gardens seem rich with colour. A cooling breeze was just strong enough to sway the branches on the trees. Out on the largest pond, black and white swans performed a detailed waltz around clumps of fluffy tangerine water lilies, while long fountains foamed quietly behind them. It was all so deceitfully tranquil; with the wall shielding the sound of the busy road outside she would never know she was in the heart of the largest city on the planet. Even Cricklade was noisier at times.

Thinking about her home made her skin cold. It was something she'd managed to avoid all day. I wonder what Mummy and Daddy are being made to do by their possessors? Evil, vile acts if that awful Quinn Dexter has any say in the matter.

Louise shivered, and retreated back into the room. Time for a long soak in the bath, then change for dinner. By the time Aunt Celina rose tomorrow morning, she and Gen would be gone.

She took off her new blouse and skirt. When she removed her bra she felt her breasts carefully. Were they more sensitive? Or was she just imagining it? Were they supposed to be sensitive this early in a pregnancy? She wished she'd paid more attention to the family planning lessons at school, rather than giggling with her friends at the pictures of men's privates.

"Looks like you're getting lonely, Louise; having to do that for yourself."

Louise yelped, grabbing up the blouse and holding it in front of her like a shield.

Roberto pushed aside the curtain at the far end of the room where he'd concealed himself and sauntered forward. His grin was arctic.

"Get out!" Louise screamed at him. The terrible first heat of embarrassment was turning to cold anger. "*Out*, you filthy fat oaf!"

"What you need is a close friend," Roberto gloated. "Someone who can do it for you. It's a lot better that way."

Louise took a step back, her body shaking with revulsion. "Get out, now," she growled at him.

"Or what?" His hand swept wide, the gesture taking in the pile of cases which the maids had left. "Going somewhere? What exactly have you been up to today?"

“How I spend my time is none of your business. Now go, before I ring for a maid.”

Roberto took another step towards her. “Don’t worry, Louise, I won’t say anything to my mother. I don’t rat on my friends. And we are going to be friends, aren’t we? Real good friends.”

She took a pace back, glancing around. The bell cord to summon a maid was on the other side of the bed, near him. She’d never make it. “Get away from me.”

“I don’t think so.” He started to undo the buttons on his shirt. “See, if I have to leave now I might just tell the police about that so-called farmhand friend of yours.”

“What?” she barked in shock.

“Yeah. Thought that might adjust your attitude. They make me do history at school, see. I don’t like it, but I do know who Fletcher Christian was. Your friend is using a false name. Now why would he do that, Louise? In a bit of trouble back on Kesteven, was he? Bit of a rebel is he?”

“Fletcher is not in any trouble.”

“Really? Then why don’t I just go make that call?”

“No.”

Roberto licked his lips. “Now that’s a whole lot nicer, Louise. We’re cooperating with each other. Aren’t we?”

She just clutched the blouse closer to her, mind feverish.

“Aren’t we?” he demanded.

Louise nodded jerkily.

“Okay, that’s better.” He peeled off his shirt.

Louise couldn’t help the tears stinging her eyes. No matter what, she told herself, I won’t let him. I’d sooner die; it would be cleaner.

Roberto unbuckled his belt, and started to take down his trousers. Louise waited until they were around his knees, then bolted for the bed.

“Shit!” Roberto yelled. He made a grab for her. Missed. Nearly toppled over as the trouser fabric tangled around his shins.

Louise flung herself on top of the bed and started to scurry over the blankets. She’d left it on the other side. Roberto was cursing behind her, grappling with his trousers. She reached

the end of the bed and flopped down, hands reaching underneath.

“No you don’t.” Roberto grasped an ankle and started dragging her back.

Louise squealed, kicking backwards with her free foot.

“Bitch.”

He landed on top of her, making her cry out at the pain of such a weight. She clawed desperately at the mattress, pulling both of them to the edge of the bed. Her hands could just reach the carpet. Roberto laughed victoriously at her ineffectual struggling, and shifted around until he was straddling her buttocks. “Going somewhere?” he taunted. Her head and shoulders hung over the edge of the bed, vast waves of hair flooding the sheets. He sat up, panting slightly, and brushed the hair off her back, enjoying the flawless skin which was exposed. Louise strained below him, as if she was still trying to wriggle free. “Stop fighting it,” he told her. His cock was hugely erect. “It’s going to happen, Louise. Come on, you’ll love it when we get started. I’m going to last all night long with you.” His hands pushed below her, reaching for her breasts.

Louise’s desperate fingers finally found the cool, smooth shape of carved wood she was searching for under the bed. She grabbed at it, groaning in revulsion as Roberto’s hands squeezed. But the feel of Carmitha’s shotgun sent resolution surging through her veins, inflaming and chilling at the same time.

“Let me up,” she begged. “Please, Roberto.”

The obscene prowling hands were stilled. “Why?”

“I don’t want it like this. Turn me over. Please, it’ll make it easier for you. This hurts.”

There was a moment’s silence. “You won’t struggle?” He sounded uncertain.

“I won’t. I promise. Just not like this.”

“I do like you, Louise. Really.”

“I know.”

The weight against the small of her back lifted. Louise tensed, gathering every ounce of strength. She pulled the shotgun clear from under the bed and twisted around, swinging it in a wide arc, trying to predict where his head would be.

Roberto saw it coming. He managed to bring his arms up in an attempt to ward off the blow, ducking to one side—

The shotgun barrel caught him a glancing blow above his left ear, the end of the pump mechanism thumping his guarding hand. Nothing like as devastating as Louise wanted it. But he cried out in pain and shock, clamping his hands over the side of his head. He started to keel over.

Louise tugged her legs out from under him and tumbled off the bed, almost losing hold of the shotgun. She could hear Roberto sob behind her. It was a sound which sent a frightening burst of glee into her head. It freed her from all that genteel refinement which Norfolk had instilled, put civilization aside.

She climbed to her feet, got a better grip on the shotgun, and brought it crashing down on the top of Roberto's skull.

• • •

The anxious knocking on the door was the next thing Louise was conscious of. For some inexplicable reason she'd sunk down onto the floor and started to weep. Her whole body was cold and trembling, yet her skin was prickled with perspiration.

The knock came again, more urgent this time. "Lady Louise?"

"Fletcher?" she gasped. Her voice was so weak.

"Yes, my lady. Are you all right?"

"I . . ." A giggle became choked in her throat. "One minute, Fletcher." She looked around, and gagged. Roberto was sprawled over the bed. Blood from his head wound had produced a huge stain over the sheet.

Dear Jesus, I've killed him. They'll hang me.

She stared at the body for a long, quiet moment, then got up and wrapped a towel around her nakedness.

"Is anyone with you?" she asked Fletcher.

"No, my lady. I am alone."

Louise opened the door, and he slipped inside. For some reason the sight of the corpse didn't seem to shake him.

"My lady." The voice was so soft with sympathy and concern. He opened his arms, and she pressed against him, trying not to cry again.

"I had to," she blurted. "He was going to . . ."

Fletcher's hand stroked her wild hair, smoothing and combing it with every stroke. Within a minute it was a dry, shiny cloak again. And somehow the pain inside was lessened.

"How did you know?" she murmured.

"I could sense your anguish. A mighty silent shout, it was."

"Oh." Now there was a strange notion, that the possessed could listen to your thoughts. There's so much badness inside my head.

Fletcher met her troubled gaze. "Did that animal violate you, my lady?"

She shook her head. "No."

"He is lucky. Had he done so, I would have dispatched him to the beyond myself. Nor would such a passage be pleasant for him."

"But, Fletcher, he is dead. I did it."

"No, lady, he lives."

"The blood . . ."

"A cut to the head always looks far worse than it is. Come now, I will have you shed no more tears for this beast."

"Oh, Lord, what a dreadful mess we're in. Fletcher, he suspects something about you. I can't just go to the police and file a rape charge. He'd tell them about you. Besides"—she drew an annoyed breath—"I'm not quite sure which of us Aunt Celina would believe."

"Very well. We shall have to leave now."

"But—"

"Can you think of another course to follow?"

"No," she said sadly.

"Then you must prepare; pack what you need. I shall go and tell the little one, also."

"What about him?" She indicated Roberto's unconscious form.

"Dress yourself, my lady. I will deal with him."

Louise picked through the boxes and went into the en suite bathroom. Fletcher was already leaning over Roberto.

She put on a pair of long dark blue trousers and a white T-shirt. Black sneakers completed the outfit: a combination unlike anything she'd ever worn before—unlike anything Mother had ever *allowed* her to wear. But practical, she de-

cided. Just wearing such garments made her feel different. The rest of the things she needed went into one of the suitcases she'd bought. She was halfway through packing when she heard Roberto's frightened shout from the bedroom. It trailed off into a whimper. Her initial impulse was to rush in and find out what was happening. Instead, she took a deep breath, then looked in the mirror and finished tying back her hair.

When she did finally emerge back into the bedroom, Roberto had been trussed up with strips of blanket. He stared at her with wide, terrified eyes. The gag in his mouth muffled his desperate shouts.

She walked over to the bed and looked down at him. Roberto stopped trying to speak.

"I'm going to return to this house one day," she said. "When I do, I'll have my father and my husband with me. If you're smart, you won't be here when we arrive."

• • •

Duchess was already rising by the time they arrived at Bennett Field. Every aircraft on Norfolk had been pressed into military service (including the aeroambulance from Bytham), ready to fly the newly formed army out to the rebel-held islands. Over a third of them were parked in long ranks over the aerodrome's close-mown grass. There were a lot of khaki-uniformed troops milling around outside the hangars.

Three guards stood beside the entrance to the administration block, a sergeant and two privates. There hadn't been any at lunchtime when Louise had met Furay.

Genevieve climbed down out of the cab and gave them a sullen look. The young girl was becoming very short-tempered.

"Sorry, miss," the sergeant said. "No civilians permitted in here. The aerodrome is under army control now."

"We're not civilians, we're passengers," Genevieve said indignantly. She glared up at the big man, who couldn't help a grin.

"Sorry, love, but you still can't come in."

"She's telling the truth," Louise said. She fished a copy of

their transport contract with the *Far Realm* out of her bag and proffered it to the sergeant.

He shrugged and flicked through the pages, not really reading it.

“The *Far Realm* is a military ship,” Louise said hopefully.

“I’m not sure . . .”

“These two young ladies are the nieces of the Earl of Luffenham,” Fletcher said. “Now surely your superior officer should be made aware of their travel documentation? I’m sure nobody would want the Earl to have to call the general commanding this base.”

The sergeant nodded gruffly. “Of course. If you’d like to wait inside while I get this sorted out. My lieutenant is in the mess at the moment. It might take a while.”

“You’re very kind,” Louise said.

The sergeant managed a flustered smile.

They were shown into a small ground-floor office overlooking the field. The privates brought their bags in for them, both smiling generously at Louise.

“Have they gone?” she asked after the door was closed.

“No, my lady. The sergeant is most discomforted by our presence. One of the privates has been left a few yards down the corridor.”

“Damnation!” She went over to the single window. From her position she could see nearly a third of the field. If anything the planes seemed to be packed even tighter than this morning; there were hundreds of them. Squads of militia were marching along the grass roadways, shouted at by sergeant majors. A great many people were involved with loading big cargo planes. Flat-topped trucks trundled past the squads, delivering more matériel.

“I think the campaign must be starting,” Louise said. Dear Jesus, they look so young. Just boys, my age. “They’re going to lose, aren’t they? They’re all going to be possessed.”

“I expect so, my lady, yes.”

“I should have done something.” She wasn’t sure if she was speaking out loud or not. “Should have left Uncle Jules a letter. Warned them. I could have given them that much of my time, enough to write a few simple lines.”

“There is no defence, dear lady.”

“Joshua will protect us. He’ll believe me.”

“I liked Joshua,” Genevieve said.

Louise smiled, and ruffed her sister’s hair.

“If you had warned your family and the Prince’s court, and they believed you, I fear you would not have been able to buy your passage on the *Far Realm*, lady.”

“Not that it’s done us much good, so far,” she said in exasperation. “We should have gone up to the *Far Realm* as soon as Furay finalized the contract.”

Genevieve gave her an anxious look. “We’ll get up there, Louise. You’ll see.”

“Not very easily. I can’t see the lieutenant allowing us on to the field on the strength of that contract, not when all the troops are taking off. At the very least he’ll call Uncle Jules first. Then we’ll really be in trouble.”

“Why?” Genevieve asked.

Louise squeezed her sister’s hand. “I had a bit of a quarrel with Roberto.”

“Yuck! Mr Fatso. I didn’t like him.”

“Me neither.” She glanced out of the window again. “Fletcher, can you tell if Furay is out there?”

“I will try, Lady Louise.” He came over to stand beside her, putting both hands flat on the windowsill and bowing his head. He shut his eyes.

Louise and Genevieve swapped a glance. “If we can’t get away into orbit, we’ll have to go out onto the moors and camp there,” Louise said. “Find somewhere isolated, like Carmitha did.”

Genevieve put her arms around her big sister’s waist and hugged. “You’ll get us away, Louise. I know you will. You’re so clever.”

“Not really.” She hugged the girl back. “But at least I got us into some decent clothes.”

“Yes!” Genevieve smiled down approvingly at her jeans and sweatshirt, even though there was a horrid cartoon rabbit printed on the chest.

Fletcher’s eyes flicked open. “He’s here, Lady Louise. Over yonder.” He pointed out of the window in the direction of the central control tower.

Louise was fascinated by the wet palmprints he’d left on

the sill. "Excellent. That's a start. Now all we have to do is work out how to get to the spaceplane." Her hand tightened on the new Jovian Bank credit disk in her trouser pocket. "I'm sure Mr Furay can be persuaded to take us up straightaway."

"There are also several possessed within the aerodrome perimeter." Fletcher gave a confused frown. "One of them is wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Odd."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not quite sure, only that he is odd."

Louise glanced down at Genevieve, whose face had paled at the mention of the possessed. "They won't catch us, Gen. Promise."

"As do I, little one."

Genevieve nodded uncertainly, wanting to believe.

Louise looked from the girl to the soldiers marching about outside, and came to a decision. "Fletcher, can you fake one of the army uniforms?" she asked. "An officer, not too high-ranking. A lieutenant or captain, perhaps?"

He smiled. "A prudent notion, my lady." His grey suit shimmered, darkening to khaki, its surface roughening.

"The buttons are wrong," Genevieve declared. "They should be bigger."

"If you say so, little one."

"That'll do," Louise said after a minute, anxious that the sergeant would return before they were done. "Half of these boys have never seen uniforms before. They don't know if it's right or not. We're wasting time."

Genevieve and Fletcher pulled a face together at the reprimand. The girl giggled.

Louise opened the window and peered out. There was no one in the immediate vicinity. "Push the cases through first," she said.

They walked over to the nearest hangar as quickly as they could; Louise immediately regretted bringing their bags and cases. She and Fletcher were carrying two apiece, and they were heavy; even Genevieve had a big shoulder bag which she was wilting under. Any attempt to be inconspicuous was doomed from the start.

It was about two hundred yards to the hangar. When they got there, the central control tower didn't look any nearer. And Fletcher just said that Furay was "near there." The pilot could be well on the other side for all she knew.

The hangar was being used as a store depot by the army; long rows of wooden crates were lined up along the sides, arranged so that narrow alleyways branched off at right angles leading right back to the walls. Five forklift trucks were parked at the far end. There were no soldiers in sight. The doors at both ends were wide open, creating a gentle breeze along the main aisle.

"See if there's a farm ranger or something like it parked here," Louise said. "If not, we're going to have to dump the cases."

"Why?" Genevieve asked.

"They're too heavy, Gen, and we're in a hurry. I'll buy you some more, don't worry."

"Can you use such a contraption, my lady?" Fletcher asked.

"I've driven one before." Up and down Cricklade's drive. Once. With Daddy shouting instructions in my ear.

Louise let the bags fall to the floor and told Genevieve to wait by them.

"I will search around outside," Fletcher said. "My appearance will cause little concern. May I suggest you stay in here."

"Right. I'll check down there." She started walking towards the other end of the hangar. The ancient corrugated iron roof panels were creaking softly as they shed the heat of Duke-day.

She was about thirty yards from the open sliding doors when she heard Fletcher calling out behind her. He was running down the wide aisle formed by the crates, waving his arms urgently. Genevieve was chasing after him.

A jeep drove into the hangar. Two people were sitting in it. The one driving wore a soldier's uniform. The second, sitting in the back, was dressed all in black.

Louise turned to face them. I'll brazen it out; after all, that's what I've been doing all day.

Then she realized the man in black was a priest, she could

see the dog collar. She breathed out a sigh of relief. He must be an army padre.

The jeep braked to a halt beside her.

Louise smiled winningly, the smile which always made Daddy say yes. "I wonder if you could help us, I'm a little bit lost."

"I doubt that, Louise," Quinn Dexter said. "Not someone as resourceful as you."

Louise started to run, but something cold and oily snaked around her ankles. She crashed down onto the timeworn concrete floor, grazing her hands and wrists.

Quinn stepped down out of the jeep. The mockery of a cassock swirled around his feet. "Going somewhere?"

She ignored her stinging hands and numbed knee, lifting her head to see him standing above her. "Devil! What have you done to Mummy?"

His dog collar turned a shiny scarlet, as though it were made from blood. "Such a fucking great hurry for knowledge. Well don't you worry, Louise, we're going to show you exactly what happened to *Mummy*. I'm going to give you a personal demonstration."

"Do not touch her, sir," Fletcher called as he came to a halt by the front of the jeep. "The lady Louise is my ward, under my protection."

"Traitor," Lawrence Dillon yelled. "You are one of the blessed ones. God's Brother allowed you back into this world to fight the legions of the false Lord. Now you defy the messiah chosen to lead the returned."

Quinn clicked his fingers, and Lawrence fell silent. "I don't know who you are, friend. But don't fuck with me or you'll die to regret it."

"I do not wish to draw swords with any man. So stand aside and we will go our separate ways."

"Arsehole. I'm stronger than you by myself; and there's two of us."

Fletcher smiled thinly. "Then why do you not take what you desire by your might? Could it be I would struggle? And that would draw the attention of the soldiers. Are you stronger than an entire army?"

"Don't push it," Quinn warned. "I'm off this shit tip planet

today, and nobody's gonna stop that. Now I know this bitch from before, she's smart. She'll have a starship lined up to take her away, right?"

Louise glared up at him.

"Thought so," Quinn sneered. "Well, lover, you're gonna hand your tickets over to me. My need is one fuck of a lot greater than yours."

"Never!" She groaned as Lawrence Dillon grabbed her by the back of her neck and hauled her upright.

Fletcher made a start forwards, but stopped as Quinn pointed at Genevieve, who was cowering behind him.

"Dumb move," Quinn said. "I'll blow you back to the beyond if I have to. And then it'll go real bad for your little pal. You know I mean it. I won't possess her. I'll keep her for myself. Some nights I'll hand her over to Lawrence; he knows some real kinks now. I taught him myself."

"Sure did." Lawrence grinned wildly at Genevieve.

"You are inhuman." Fletcher put an arm instinctively around Genevieve.

"*Wrong!*" Quinn barked. His sudden fury made Fletcher take a half pace backwards.

"Banneth. Now she's inhuman. She did things to me . . ." Spittle appeared on Quinn's chin. He giggled, and wiped it away on the back of a trembling hand. "She did things, okay. And now. Now, I'm the one who's gonna do things right back to her. Things so sick she's never thought of them. God's Brother understands that, understands the need in me. I'm gonna let my serpent beast devour her and then spew out the bits. I'll turn my whole crusade on her if I have to. I'll use biowar bugs, I'll use nukes, I'll use antimatter. I don't fucking care. I'm gonna crack Earth wide open. And I'm gonna go down there, and I'm gonna take her. And nobody is going to stand in my way."

"Right on!" Lawrence shouted.

Quinn was breathing heavily, as if there were insufficient oxygen in the hangar. The cassock had returned to his original priest robe, tiny crackles of energy rippling along the voluminous fabric. Louise quailed before the expression on his face. There wasn't even any point in struggling.

Quinn smiled at her, enraptured; two drops of blood dripped off his vampire fangs, running down his chin.

“Sweet Jesus,” Louise made the shape of the cross with her free hand.

“But,” Quinn said, calm again, “right now, I’m only interested in you.”

“Fletcher!” she wailed.

“I warn you, sir, do not touch her.”

Quinn waved a dismissive hand. Fletcher doubled up as if a giant had slammed a fist into his stomach. Breath *oofed* out of his parted lips. With a look of horrified surprise, he was flung backwards, thin slivers of white fire crawling over him, slowly constricting. His uniform began to smoulder. Blood burst out of his mouth and nose, more began to stain his crotch. He screamed, bucking about helplessly, wrestling with the air.

“Nooo!” Louise implored. “Please stop. Stop!”

Genevieve had stumbled to her knees, white face staring brokenly.

Lawrence began to fumble at the collar of Louise’s T-shirt, snickering eagerly. Then his hand froze, and he drew a breath in surprise.

Quinn was frowning, squinting along the length of the hangar.

Louise gulped, not understanding anything. But Fletcher had stopped his agonized contortions. A liquid dust, sparkling with rainbow colours, was slithering over him, and his clothes were slowly mending. He rolled around groggily and swayed up on his knees.

“What the fuck you doing here, man?” Quinn Dexter shouted.

Louise scanned the far end of the hangar. Duchess was shining directly through the wide-open doors, producing a brilliant scarlet rectangle set amid the funereal metal cavern. A blank, black human figure was silhouetted in the exact centre. It raised its arm, pointing.

A bullet bolt of white fire streaked down the hangar, almost too fast for the eye to follow. Louise saw huge shadows careering around at dizzying speeds. The bolt hit the iron roofing girder directly above Quinn Dexter. He flinched, ducking

blindly as flakes of hot, tortured metal rained down. The whole roof creaked as the loading was redistributed.

“God’s Brother, what the shit are you playing at?” Quinn raged.

A bass laugh rumbled down the hangar, distorted by the peculiar acoustics of the stacked crates.

Louise had time to flash one imploring look at Fletcher, who could only shrug in confusion before the strange figure spread both arms wide.

“Quinn?” Lawrence appealed. “Quinn, what the hell is happening?”

His answer was a rosette corona of white fire which burst out of the silhouette. The crates around the figure ignited in the eerily powerful topaz flame which the energistic ability always fanned. A dry wind rose from nowhere, sending Quinn’s robe thrashing.

“Shit,” Quinn gasped.

The flames were racing towards them, gorging on the crates, swirling around and around the aisle, faster and faster, the eye of a cyclonic inferno. Wood screeched and snapped as it was cremated, spilling the contents of the crates for the flames to consume, intensifying their strength.

Louise squealed as the awesome heat pummelled against her. Lawrence had let go of her, his arms waving frantically. In front of him the air was visibly flexing like a warped lens, a shield against the baneful radiance.

Fletcher scooped up Genevieve. Bending low, he scuttled towards the open door beyond the jeep. “Move, lady,” he shouted.

Louise barely heard him above the roaring. Dull explosions sounded somewhere behind the leading edge of flame. Corrugated iron panels were taking flight, busting their rusty rivets to shoot off the roof, soaring high into the two-tone sky.

She staggered after Fletcher. Only when she was actually outside did she look around, just for a second.

The flames formed a furious rippling tunnel the entire length of the hangar. Dense black smoke churned out of the end. But the centre was perfectly clear.

Quinn stood before the conflagration, facing it down, arms raised to discharge his power, deflecting the devastating bar-

rage of heat. Far ahead of him, the blank figure had adopted a similar pose.

“Who are you?” Quinn screamed into the holocaust. “Tell me!” A large wall of crates burst apart, sending a storm of sparks charging into the fray. Several roof girders buckled, sagging down, corrugated panels scythed into the flames. The tunnel began to twist, losing its stability. “Tell me. Show your face.” Sirens were sounding, the shouts of men. And more of the ruined hangar collapsed. “*Tell me!*”

The rampaging flames obscured the impudent figure. Quinn let out a wordless howl of outrage. And then even he had to retreat as metal melted and concrete turned to sluggish lava. He and Lawrence together lurched out onto the withered grass. Men and fire engines swarmed around in chaos. It was easy to blend in and slink away. Lawrence said nothing as they made their way along a lane of parked aircraft, the darkness of Quinn’s mind humbling him into silence.

Louise and Fletcher saw the first vehicles bumping over the grass, farm rangers painted military green and a couple of jeeps. A squad of militia were running around the rank of planes, urged on by their officer. Sirens were starting up in the distance. Behind her, the flames were crawling ever higher into the sky.

“Fletcher, your uniform,” she hissed.

He glanced down. His trousers had become purple. A blink, and they were khaki again; his jacket lost its rumpled appearance. His bearing was impressively imperious.

Genevieve moaned in his arms, as if she were fighting a nightmare.

“Is she all right?” Louise asked.

“Yes, my lady. Simply a faint.”

“And you?”

He nodded gingerly. “I survive.”

“I thought . . . It was awful. That devil brute, Quinn.”

“Never worry for me, lady. Our Lord has decreed some purpose for me, it will be revealed in time. I would not be here otherwise.”

The first vehicles were nearly upon them. Louise could see more soldiers on their way. It was going to be a complete

madhouse; nobody would know what was going on, what was to be done.

"This could be our chance," she said. "We must be bold." She started waving at one of the farm rangers. "That's only a corporal driving. You outrank him."

"As always, lady, your ingenuity is matched only by your strength of spirit. What cruel fate that our true lives are separated by such a gulf of time."

She gave him a half-embarrassed, half-delighted smile. Then the farm ranger was pulling to a halt in front of them.

"You there," Fletcher snapped at the startled man. "Help me get this child away. She has been overcome by the fire."

"Yes, sir." The corporal rushed out of the driving seat to help Fletcher ease Genevieve onto the backseat.

"Our spaceplane is over by the tower," Louise said, fixing Fletcher with an emphatic stare. "It will have the medicine my sister requires. Our pilot is skilled in such matters."

"Yes, madame," Fletcher said. "The tower," he instructed the corporal.

The bewildered man looked from Louise to Fletcher, and decided not to question orders from an officer, no matter how bizarre the circumstances. Louise hopped in the back and cradled Genevieve's head as they drove away from the disintegrating hangar.

The corporal took ten minutes to find the *Far Realm's* spaceplane, guided by Fletcher. Although she'd never seen one before, Louise could see how different it was from the aircraft it was parked among. A needle fuselage with sleek wings that didn't quite match, as if they'd come off another, larger craft.

Genevieve had recovered by the time they arrived, though she was very subdued, pressing into Louise's side the whole time. Fletcher helped her down out of the farm ranger, and she glanced mournfully over to where the stain of black smoke was spreading over the crimson horizon. One hand gripped the pendant which Carmitha had given her, knuckles white.

"It's over, now, all over," Louise said. "I promise, Gen." She ran her thumb over the Jovian Bank credit disk in her pocket as if it were a talisman as potent as Carmitha's charm. Thank heavens she'd kept hold of that.

Genevieve nodded silently.

“Thank you for your assistance, Corporal,” Fletcher said. “Now I think you had better return to your commanding officer and see if you can help with the fire.”

“Sir.” He was dying to ask what was going on. Discipline defeated curiosity, and he flicked the throttle, driving off down the broad strip of grass.

Louise blew out a huge sigh of relief.

Furay waited for them at the bottom of the airstairs. A half-knowing smile in place; interested rather than apprehensive.

Louise looked straight at him, grinning in return—at their arrival, the state they were in. It was a relief that for once she didn’t have to concoct some ludicrous story on the spot. Furay was too smart for that. Bluntness and a degree of honesty was all she needed here.

She held up her Jovian Bank disk. “My boarding pass.”

The pilot cocked an eyebrow towards the smoke. “Anyone you know?”

“Yes. Just pray you never get to know them, too.”

“I see.” He took in Fletcher’s uniform. When they’d met at lunchtime Fletcher had been in a simple suit. “I see you’ve made lieutenant in under five hours.”

“I was once more than this, sir.”

“Right.” It wasn’t quite the response Furay expected.

“Please,” Louise said. “My sister needs to sit down. She’s been through a lot.”

Furay thought the little girl looked about dead on her feet. “Of course,” he said sympathetically. “Come on. We’ve got some medical nanonics inside.”

Louise followed him up the airstairs. “Do you think you could possibly lift off now?”

He eyed the ferocious blaze again. “Somehow, I just knew you were going to ask that.”

• • •

Marine Private Shaukat Daha had been standing guard outside the navy spaceplane for six hours when the hangar caught fire on the other side of Bennett Field. The major in charge of his squad had dispatched half a dozen marines to assist, but the rest were told to stand firm. “It may just be a diversion,” the major datavised.

So Shaukat could only watch the extraordinarily vigorous flames through enhanced retinas on full resolution. The fire engines which raced across the aerodrome were quite something, though, huge red vehicles with crews in silvery suits. Naturally this crazy planet didn't have extinguisher mechanoids. Actual people had to deploy the hoses. It was fascinating.

His peripheral senses monitor program alerted him to the two men approaching the spaceplane. Shaukat shifted his retinal focus. It was a couple of the locals, a Christian padre and an army lieutenant. Shaukat knew that technically he was supposed to take orders from Norfolk officers, but this lieutenant was ridiculously young, still a teenager. There were limits.

Shaukat datavised his armour suit communications block to activate the external speaker. "Gentlemen," he said courteously as they came up to him. "I'm afraid the spaceplane is a restricted zone. I'll have to see some identification and authorization before you come any closer."

"Of course," Quinn Dexter said. "But tell me, is this the frigate *Tantu's* spaceplane?"

"It is, yes, sir."

"Bless you, my son."

Annoyed at the honorific, he tried to datavise a moderately sarcastic response into the communications block. His neural nanonics had shut down completely. The armour suit suddenly became oppressively constrictive, as if the integral valency generators had activated, stiffening the fabric. He reached up to tear the shell helmet off, but his arms wouldn't respond. A tremendous pain detonated inside his chest. Heart attack! he thought in astonishment. Allah be merciful, this cannot be, I'm only twenty-five.

Despite his disbelief the convulsion strengthened, jamming every muscle rock solid. He could neither move nor breathe. The padre was looking at him with a vaguely interested expression. Coldness bit into his flesh, fangs of ice piercing every pore. His guttural cry of anguish was stifled by the armour suit tightening like a noose around his throat.

Quinn watched the marine tremble slightly as he earthed the man's body energy, snuffing out the chemical engines of life from every cell. After a minute he walked up to the dead

statue and flicked it casually with a finger. There was a faint crystalline *ting* which faded quickly.

"Neat," Lawrence said in admiration.

"It was quiet," Quinn said with modest pride. He started up the spaceplane's airstairs.

Lawrence examined the armour suit closely. Tiny beads of pale hoarfrost were already forming over the dark leathery fabric. He whistled appreciatively and bounded up the airstairs after Quinn.

. . .

William Elphinstone rose up out of the diabolical cage of darkness at the center of his own brain into a riot of heat, light, sound, and almost intolerable sensation. His gasp of anguish at the traumatic rebirth was deafening to his sensitive ears. Air seemed to rasp over his skin, every molecule a saw tooth.

So long! So long without a single sense. Held captive inside himself.

His possessor had gone now. A departure which had freed his body. William whimpered in relief and fear.

There were fragments of memory left behind from the time he'd been reduced to a puppet. Of a seething hatred. Of a demonic fire let loose. Of satisfaction at confounding the enemy. Of Louise Kavanagh.

Louise?

William understood so very little. He was propped up against a chain-link fence, his legs folded awkwardly below him. In front of him were hundreds of planes lined up across a broad aerodrome. It wasn't a place he'd ever seen before.

The sound of sirens rose and fell noisily. When he looked around he saw a hangar which had been gutted by fire. Flames and smoke were still rising out of the blackened ruins. Silver-suited firemen were surrounding the building, spraying it with foam from their hoses. An awful lot of militia troops were milling around the area.

"Here," William cried to his comrades. "I'm over here." But his voice was a feeble croak.

A Confederation Navy spaceplane flew low over the field, wobbling slightly as if it wasn't completely under control. He blinked at it in confusion. There was another memory associ-

ated with the craft. Strong yet elusive: a dead boy hanging upside down from a tree.

“And what do you think you’re doing here?” The voice came from one of the two patrolling soldiers who were standing three yards away. One of them was pointing his rifle at William. The second was holding back a pair of growling Alsatians.

“I . . . I was captured,” William Elphinstone said. “Captured by the rebels. But they’re not rebels. Please, you must listen. They’re devils.”

Both soldiers exchanged a glance. The one with the rifle slung it over his shoulder and raised a compact communications block.

“You must listen,” William said desperately. “I was taken over. Possessed. I’m a serving officer from the Stoke County militia. I order you to listen.”

“Really, sir? Lost your uniform, did you?”

William looked at what he was wearing. It *was* his old uniform, but you had to look close to know. The shirt’s original khaki colour had been superseded by a blue and red check pattern. From the thighs down his regulation trousers were now tough blue denim jeans. Then he caught sight of his hands. The backs of both were covered in black hair—and everyone always teased him about having delicate woman’s hands.

He let out a little moan of dismay. “I’m telling you the truth. As God is my witness.” Their blank, impersonal faces told him how useless it all was.

William Elphinstone remained slumped against the fence until the MPs came and took him off to Bennett Field’s tiny police station. The detectives who arrived from Norwich’s Special Branch division to interrogate him didn’t believe his story either. Not until it was far too late.

• • •

The Nyiru asteroid orbited ninety thousand kilometres above Narok, one of the earliest Kenya-ethnic colony worlds. After it was knocked into position two centuries ago the construction company had sliced out a five-hundred-metre-diameter ledge for visiting bitek starships. Eager for

the commerce they would bring, the asteroid council equipped the ledge with a comprehensive infrastructure; even a small chemical plant to provide the nutrient fluid the starships digested.

Udat complained it didn't taste right. Meyer wasn't up to arguing. With Haltam's best ministrations, it had taken him seven hours to recover consciousness after their escape from Tranquillity. Waking to find himself in interstellar space, with a worried, hurting blackhawk and an equally unsettled crew to placate did not help his frail mental state. They had flown directly to Narok, needing eleven swallows to cover the eighty light-years, where normally they would only use five.

In all that time he had seen Dr Alkad Mzu precisely twice. She kept to herself in her cabin for most of the trip. Despite analgesic blocks and the medical nanonic packages wrapped around her legs and arms, her injuries were causing some discomfort. Most curious of all she refused to let Haltam program the leg packages to repair an old knee injury. Neither of them had been in the mood to give ground. A few tersely formal words were exchanged; she apologised for his injuries and the vigour of the opposition, he filled her in on the flight parameters. And that was all.

After they arrived at Nyiru she paid the agreed sum without any quibble, added a five per cent bonus, and departed. Cherri Barnes did ask where she was headed, but the slight woman replied with one of her dead-eye smiles and said it was best nobody knew.

She vanished from their lives as much a mystery as when she entered it so dramatically.

Meyer spent thirty-six hours in the asteroid's hospital undergoing cranial deep-invasion procedures to repair the damage around his neurone symbionts. Another two days of recuperation and extensive checks saw him cleared to leave.

Cherri Barnes kissed him when he walked back onto the *Udat's* bridge. "Nice to see you."

He winked. "Thanks. I was worried there for a while."

"You were worried?"

I was frightened, *Udat* said.

I know. But it's all over now. And by the way, I think you behaved commendably while I was out of it. I'm proud of you.

Thank you. I do not want to have to do that again, though.

You won't have to. I think we're finally through with trying to prove ourselves.

Yes!

He glanced inquiringly around at his three crew. "Anybody got any idea what happened to our weirdo passenger?"

"'Fraid not," Aziz said. "I asked around the port, and all I could find out was that she's hired herself a charter agent. After that—not a byte."

Meyer eased himself down into his command couch. A small headache was still pulsing away behind his eyes. He was beginning to wonder if it was going to be permanent. The doctor had said most probably not. "No bad thing. I think Mzu was right when she said we'd be better off not knowing about her."

"Fine in theory," Cherri said irritably. "Unfortunately all those agency people saw it was us who lifted her from Tranquillity. If she's right about how dangerous she is, then we're in some sticky shit right now. They're going to want to ask us questions."

"I know," Meyer said. "God, targeted by the ESA at my age."

"We could just go straight to them," Haltam said. "Because, let's be real here, they're going to catch us if they want to. If we go to them, it ought to show we aren't at the heart of whatever it is she's involved in."

Cherri snorted in disgust. "Yeah, but running to the King's secret police . . . It ain't right. I've heard the stories, we all have."

"Too right," Haltam said. "They make bad enemies."

"What do you think, Meyer?" Aziz asked.

It wasn't something he wanted to think about. His nutrient levels had been balanced perfectly by the hospital while he was in recuperation therapy, but he still felt shockingly tired. Oh, for someone else to lift the burden from him,

which of course was the answer, or at least a passable fudge.

Good idea, Udat commented. She was nice.

“There is somebody who might be able to help us,” Meyer told them. “If she’s still alive. I haven’t seen her for nearly twenty years, and she was quite old then.”

Cherri gave him a suspicious look. “Her?”

Meyer grinned. “Yeah. Her. A lady called Athene, she’s an Edenist.”

“They’re worse than the bloody ESA,” Haltam protested.

“Stop being so prejudiced. They have one quality above all else, they’re honest. Which is a damn sight more than you can say for the ESA. Besides, Edenism is one culture the ESA can never subvert.”

“Are you sure she’ll help?” Cherri asked.

“No promises. All I can tell you is if she can, she will.” He looked at each of them in turn. “Does anyone have an alternative?”

They didn’t.

“Okay, Cherri, file a departure notice with the port, please. We’ve been here quite long enough.”

“Aye, sir.

And, you, let’s have a swallow sequence for the Sol system.

Of course, Udat said, then added rather wistfully: I wonder if the Oenone will be at Saturn when we arrive?

Who knows? But it would be nice to see how it developed.

Yes. As you say, it has been a long time.

The first swallow manoeuvre took them twelve light-years from Narok’s star. The second added another fifteen light-years. Confident the blackhawk had recovered from its ordeal, Meyer told it to go ahead with the third swallow.

Empty space twisted apart under the immense distortion which the patterning cells exerted. *Udat* moved cleanly into the interstice it had opened, shifting the energy which chased through its cells in smaller, more subtle patterns to sustain the continuity of the pseudofabric that closed around

the hull. Distance without physical length flowed past the polyp.

Meyer! Something is wrong!

The alarmed mental shout struck like a physical blow.

What do you mean?

The terminus is retreating, I cannot match the distortion pattern to its coordinate.

Linked with the blackhawk's mentality he could actually feel the pseudofabric changing, twisting and flexing around the hull as if it were a tunnel of agitated smoke. *Udat* was unable to impose the stability necessary to maintain the wormhole's uniformity.

What's happening? he asked, equally panicked.

I don't understand. There is another force acting on the wormhole. It is interfering with my own distortion field.

Override it. Come on, get us out of here. He felt a burst of power surge through the blackhawk's cells, amplifying the distortion field. It simply made the interference worse. *Udat* could actually sense waves forming in the wormhole's pseudofabric. The blackhawk juddered as two of them rolled against its hull.

It doesn't work. I cannot support this energy output.

Keep calm, Meyer implored. It might just be a temporary episode. In his own mind he could feel the energy drain reach exorbitant levels. There was barely ninety seconds reserve left at this expenditure rate.

Udat reduced the strength of the distortion field, desperate to conserve its energy. A huge ripple ran down the wormhole, slapping across the hull. Loose items jumped and spun over the bridge. Meyer instinctively grabbed the couch arms even as the restraint webbing folded over him.

The flight computer datavisaged that a recorded message was coming on line. Meyer and the crew could only stare at the offending console in amazement as Dr Mzu's image invaded their neural nanonics. There was no background, she simply stood in the middle of a grey universe.

"Hello, Captain Meyer," she said. "If everything has gone according to plan you should be accessing this recording a few seconds before you die. This is just a slightly melodramatic gesture on my part to explain the how and why of your

situation. The how is simple enough, you are now experiencing distortion feedback resonance. It's a spin-off discovery from my work thirty years ago. I left a little gadget in the life-support section which has set up an oscillation within the *Udat's* distortion field. Once established, it is quite impossible to damp down; the wormhole itself acts as an amplifier. The resonance will not end while the distortion field exists, and without the field the wormhole will collapse back into its quantum state. A neat logic box you cannot escape from. You can now only survive as long as *Udat's* patterning cells have energy, and that is depleting at quite a rate, I imagine.

"As to the why; I specifically chose you to extract me from Tranquillity because I always knew *Udat* was capable of pulling off such a difficult feat. I know because I've witnessed this blackhawk in action once before. Thirty years ago, to be precise. Do you remember, Captain Meyer? Thirty years ago, almost to the month, you were part of an Omuta mercenary squadron assigned to intercept three Garissan navy ships, the *Chengho*, the *Gombari*, and the *Beezling*. I was on the *Beezling*, Captain, and I know it was you in the Omuta squadron because after it was over I accessed the sensor recordings we made of the attack. The *Udat* is a most distinctive ship, both in shape, colouring, and agility. You are good, and because of that you won the battle. And don't we all know exactly what happened to my home planet after that."

The datavise ended.

Cherri Barnes looked over to Meyer, strangely placid. "Is she right? Was it you?"

All he could do was give her a broken smile. "Yes." **I'm sorry, my friend.**

I love you.

Three seconds later, the energy stored in the *Udat's* patterning cells was exhausted. The wormhole, which was held open purely by the artificial input of the distortion field, closed up. A straight two-dimensional fissure, fifteen light-years in length, appeared in interstellar space. For an instant it spat out a quantity of hard radiation equal to the mass of the blackhawk. Then, with the universe returned to equilibrium, it vanished.

9

Nicolai Penovich tried not to show how outright shit-scared he was when the stern-faced gangsters ushered him into the Nixon suite. Not that the macho-routine facade would do a hell of a lot of good, they'd already let slip that the possessed could pretty much tell what was going on in your mind. But not read it direct, not pull out exact memories. And that was his ace. One memory, and a prayer.

As prayers went it was a goddamn feeble one to be gambling not just his life but also his life after death.

He was shown into a giant living room with a fluffy white shag carpet and pale pink furniture which resembled fragile glass balloons. There were several doors leading off to the rest of the suite, plain gold slabs three metres high. The far wall was a window looking down on New California. The view as the terracompatible planet slowly drifted past was magnificent.

One of the gangsters used his Thompson machine gun to prod Nicolai into the middle of the room. "Stand there. Wait," he grunted.

About a minute later one of the tall doors opened silently. A young girl walked out. Despite his predicament, Nicolai couldn't help staring. She was ravishing, a mid-teens face with every feature highlighted by the purest avian bones. All she wore was a long gossamer robe revealing an equally sublime physique.

When he thought about it, she was obscurely familiar. He couldn't imagine meeting her and not remembering, though.

She walked straight past him to a pile of travelling cases on the other side of the living room. "Libby, where's my red leather playsuit? The one with the silver chain collar. Libby!" Her foot stomped on the carpet.

“Coming, poppet.” A harried woman shuffled into the lounge. “It’s in the brown case, the one with your after-party informal collection.”

“Which one’s that?” the girl complained.

“This one, poppet. Honestly, you’re worse now than when we were touring.” She bent over to open the case.

Nicolai gave the nymphet a more intense scrutiny. It couldn’t be . . .

Al Capone hurried in, followed by a number of cronies. And there was no doubt at all of his identity. A handsome man in his early twenties, with jet-black hair, slightly chubby cheeks which emphasised his near-permanent soft smile. His clothes were as antique (and as ridiculous to Nicolai’s eyes) as the other gangsters’, but he wore them with such panache it really didn’t matter.

He took one glance at Jezzibella and grimaced. “Jez, I told you before, will you stop goddamn prancing around in front of the guys like this. You ain’t wearing diddly.”

She looked back over her shoulder, pouted, and twirled a lock of hair around one finger. “Oh, come on, Al baby, it gives you a kick. The boys can all see what it is you’ve got, and they can never have. Living proof you’re top doggy.”

“Jez-us.” He raised his eyes heavenwards.

Jezzibella sauntered over to him and pecked him lightly on the cheek. “Don’t be long, precious. I’ve got parts of me that need a serious seeing to.” She beckoned Libby to follow, and made for the door. The woman walked after her, a garment made up from about five slender red leather straps draped over her arm.

Jezzibella treated Nicolai to a cutely bashful smile from the middle of a cloud of gold-blond curls. Then she was gone.

Al Capone was staring at him. “You got something on your mind, fella?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what’s that?”

“I’ve got some information for you, Mr Capone. Something that could be very useful to your Organization.”

Al nodded curtly. “Okay, you got through the door, that proves you got balls enough. Believe me not many get this far. So now you’re here, make your pitch.”

"I want to join your Organization. I hear you make room for non-possessed people with special talents."

Al pointed a thumb at Avram Harwood III who was standing among the little cluster of lieutenants. "Sure do. If savvy Avvy here says what you got is good news, then you're in."

"Is antimatter good news?" Nicolai asked. He caught the shudder of horror on the broken mayor's face.

Al rubbed a finger thoughtfully over his chin. "Could be. You got some?"

"I know where you can get it. And I can assist your starship fleet when it comes to handling the stuff. It's a tricky substance, but I've had the training."

"How come? You're a fed, or close to it; a G-man for sure. I thought it was illegal."

"It is. But Idria is a small asteroid sharing a star system with some powerful institutions. A lot of groundside politicians talk about strengthening our general assembly into a system-wide administration or union. Some of Idria's council and SD officers don't appreciate that kind of talk. It took us a long time to gain our independence from the founding company, and it wasn't easy. So we made preparations. Just in case. Several of our companies make components that can be used to build antimatter confinement systems and drives. Strategic Defence Command also established a link with a production station."

"So you can get it anytime you want?" Al asked.

"Yes, sir. I have the coordinate of the star which the station is orbiting. I can take you there."

"What makes you think I want this stuff?"

"Because you're in the same position Idria was. New California is big, but the Confederation is a lot bigger."

"You telling me I'm penny-ante?"

"You might wind up that way if the First Admiral comes knocking."

Al grinned broadly, he put his arm around Nicolai and patted his shoulders. "I like you, boy, you got what it takes. So here's the deal. You go sit in a corner with my friend Emmet Mordden, here, who is a real wiz with electric machines and stuff. And you tell him what you know, and if he says it checks out, you're in."

• • •

Al shut the door behind him and leaned against it, taking a moment out of life, that essential chunk of time alone in his head which allowed his worn-down resolution to build itself up again. I never realized being me was so goddamn *difficult*.

Jezzibella had shifted to the trim athlete persona again, strong and haughty. She lay on the bed, arms stretched above her head, one knee bent. The playsuit had gripped her breasts with tight silver chains, forcing hard dark nipples to point at the ceiling. Every time she breathed her whole body flexed with feline allure.

“Okay,” Al said. “So tell me what the fuck is antimatter?”

She arched her back, glaring defiantly at him. “Never.”

“Jez! Just tell me. I don’t have time for this crap.”

Her head was tossed from side to side.

“Goddamnit!” He strode over to the bed, grabbed her jaw, and forced her to face him. “I want to know. I gotta make decisions.”

A hand came arching through the air to strike him. He managed to catch it just before it reached his face, but his pale grey fedora was knocked off. She started to struggle, pushing him aside.

“Games huh?” he shouted angrily. “You wanna play fucking games, bitch?” He grabbed both her arms, pinning them against the pillows. And the sight of her chest heaving below the playsuit’s revealing confinement ignited the dragon’s fire in his heart. He forced her further down into the mattress, gloating at the sight of her superb muscles straining helplessly. “Who’s in charge now? Who fucking owns you?” He ripped the leather off her crotch and prised her legs apart. Then he was kneeling between her thighs, his clothes evaporating. She groaned, making one last desperate attempt to break free. Against him, she never stood a chance.

Somewhen later, his own fulfillment made him cry out in wonder. The orgasmic discharge from his body was primitive savagery, enrapturing every cell. He held himself rigid, prolonging the flow as long as he could bear before collapsing onto the rumpled silk sheets.

"That's better, baby," Jezzibella said as she stroked his shoulders. "I hate it when you're all uptight."

Al grinned languidly at her. She'd changed back into the teen-kitten again, all worshipful concern crowned by a frizz of golden curls. "No way, lady. No way are you human."

She kissed his nose. "About the antimatter," she said. "You need it, Al. If there's any chance at all, then grab it."

"I don't follow," he mumbled. "Lovegrove says it's just a different kind of bomb. And we got ourselves plenty of the atom explosives already."

"It's not just a better kind of bomb, Al; you can use it to power combat wasps and starships, too, bump up their performance by an order of magnitude. If you like, it's the difference between a rifle and a machine gun. They both fire bullets, but which would you prefer in a rumble?"

"Good point."

"Thanks. Now even with the asteroid campaign going well, we haven't got anything like numerical parity with the Confederation's conventional forces. However, antimatter is a superb force multiplier. If you've got some, they're going to think twice before launching any sort of offensive."

"Jeeze, you are a fucking marvel. I gotta get this organized with the boys." He swung his legs over the side of the bed, and started to reconstitute his clothes out of the magic realm where they'd been banished.

"Wait." She pressed up against his back, arms sliding around to hug. "Don't go rushing into this half-cocked, Al. We've got to think this through. You're going to have problems with antimatter, it's vicious stuff. And you don't help."

"What do you mean?" he bridled.

"The way your energistic ability gronks out electronics and power circuits, you just can't afford that with antimatter. Put a possessed anywhere near a confinement system and we're all going to be watching the last half of the explosion from the beyond. So . . . it will have to be the non-possessed who work with the stuff."

"Sheesh." Al scratched his mussed hair, desperately uncertain. His Organization was built along the principle of keeping the non-possessed in line, under his thumb. You had to have some group at the bottom who needed to be watched on

a permanent basis, it kept the Organization soldiers busy, gave them a purpose. Made them take orders. But give the non-possessed antimatter . . . that would screw up the balance something chronic. "I ain't so sure, Jez."

"It's not that big a problem. You just have to make sure you've got a secure hold over anyone you assign to handle the stuff. Harwood and Leroy can fix that; they can arrange for you to hold their families hostage."

Al considered it. Hostages might just work. It would take a lot of effort to arrange, and the Organization soldiers would really have to be on the ball. Risky.

"Okay, we'll give it a shot."

"Al!" Jezzibella squealed girlishly and started kissing his throat exuberantly.

Al's half-materialized clothes vanished again.

• • •

The chiefs of staff's office was as extravagant as only senior government figures could get away with; its expensive, handcrafted furniture arranged around a long hardwood table running down the centre. One wall could be made transparent, giving the occupants a view out over the SD tactical operations centre.

Al sat himself down at the head of the table and acknowledged his senior lieutenants with a wave of his hand. There was no smile on his face, a warning that this was strictly business.

"Okay," he said. "So what's been happening? Leroy?"

The corpulent manager glanced along the table, a confident expression in place. "I've more or less kept to the original pacification schedule we drew up. Eighty-five per cent of the planet is now under our control. There are no industrial or military centres left outside our influence. The administrative structure Harwood has been building up seems to be effective. Nearly twenty per cent of the population is non-possessed, and they're doing what they're told."

"Do we need them?" Silvano Richmann asked Al, not even looking at Leroy.

"Leroy?" Al asked.

"For large urban areas, almost certainly," Leroy said. "The smaller towns and villages can be kept going with their pos-

essed inhabitants providing a combined energistic operation. But cities still require their utilities to function, you just can't wish that much shit and general rubbish away. Apparently the possessed cannot create viable food out of inorganic compounds, so the transport network has to be maintained to keep edible supplies flowing in. At the moment that's just stock from the warehouses. Which means we'll have to come up with a basic economy of some sort to persuade the farms to keep supplying the cities. The problem with that is, the possessed who are living out in the rural areas aren't inclined to do too much work, and in any case I haven't got a clue what we could use for money—counterfeiting is too damn easy for you. We may just have to resort to barter. Another problem is that the possessed cannot manufacture items which have any permanence; once outside the energistic influence they simply revert to their component architecture. So a lot of factories are going to have to be restarted. As for the military arena, non-possessed are unquestionably necessary, but that's Mickey's field."

"Okay, you done good, Leroy," Al said. "How long before I'm in charge of everything down there?"

"You're in charge of everything that counts right now. But that last fifteen per cent is going to be a hard slog. A lot of the resistance is coming from the hinterland areas, farm country where they're pretty individual characters. Tough, too. A lot of them are holed up in the landscape with their hunting weapons. Silvano and I have been putting together hunter teams, but from what we've experienced so far it's going to be a long dirty campaign, on both sides. They know the terrain, our teams don't; it's an advantage which almost cancels out the energistic ability."

Al grunted sardonically. "You mean we gotta fight fair?"

"It's a level playing field," Leroy acknowledged. "But we'll win in the end, that's inevitable. Just don't ask me for a timetable."

"Fine. I want you to keep plugging away at that economy idea. We gotta maintain some kind of functioning society down there."

"Will do, Al."

"So, Mickey, how are you holding out?"

Mickey Pileggi scrambled to his feet, sweat glinting on his forehead. "Pretty good, Al. We broke forty-five asteroids with that first action. They're the big ones, with the most important industrial stations. So now we've got three times as many warships as when we started. The rest of the settlements are just going to be a mopping-up operation. There's nothing out there which can threaten us anymore."

"You got crews for all these new ships?"

"We're working on it, Al. It isn't as easy as the planet. There's a lot of distance involved here, our communications lines aren't so hot."

"Any reaction from the Edenists?"

"Not really. There were some skirmishes with armed void-hawks at three asteroids, we took losses. But no big retaliation attacks."

"Probably conserving their strength," Silvano Richmann said. "It's what I would do."

Al fixed Mickey with *the look* (God, the hours he'd spent practising that back in Brooklyn). And he hadn't lost it, poor old Mickey's tic started up like he'd thrown a switch. "When we've taken over all the ships docked at the asteroids, are we gonna be strong enough to bust the Edenists?"

Mickey's eyes performed a desperate search for allies. "Maybe."

"It's a question of how you want them, Al," Emmet Morden said. "I doubt we could ever subdue them, not make them submit to possession, or hand the habitats over to the Organization's control. You'll just have to trust me on this, they're completely different from any kind of people you have ever met before. All of them, even the kids. You might be able to kill them, destroy their habitats. But conquest? I don't think so."

Al squeezed his lips together and studied Emmet closely. Emmet was nothing like Mickey; timid, yeah, but he knew his stuff. "So what are you saying?"

"That you've got to make a choice."

"What choice?"

"Whether to go for the antimatter. You see, Edenism has a monopoly on supplying He₃, and that's the fuel which all the starships and industrial stations run on, as well as the SD plat-

forms, and we all know they have to be kept powered up. Now there's an awful lot of He₃ stored around the New California system, but ultimately it's going to run out. That means we must go to the source if we want to keep our starships going, and maintain our hold over the planet. Either that or use the alternative."

"Right," Al said reasonably. "You've been talking to this Nicolai Penovich character, Emmet, is he on the level?"

"As far as I can make out, yeah. He certainly knows a lot about antimatter. I'd say he can take us to this production station of his."

"We got ships which can handle that?"

Emmet gave an unhappy scowl. "Ships, yeah, no problem now. But, Al, starships and antimatter, it means using a lot of non-possessed to run them. Our energistic power, it's not good for space warfare, if anything it puts our ships at a disadvantage."

"I know," Al said smoothly. "But, shit, we can turn this in our favour if we handle it right. It'll prove that the non-possessed have got a part in the Organization just as much as anyone. Good publicity. Besides, those boosted guys, they helped out in the asteroids, right?"

"Yes," Silvano admitted reluctantly. "They're good."

"That's it then," Al said. "We'll give our ships a crack at the Edenists, for sure. See if we can snatch the helium mines they got. But in the meantime we take out a sweet little insurance policy. Emmet, start putting together the ships you'll need. Silvano, I want you and Avvy to work on who's gonna crew them. I only want you to use non-possessed who are family guys, catch? And before they leave for the station, I want those families up here in Monterey being given the holiday of a lifetime. Shift everyone out of the resort complex, and house them there."

Silvano produced a greedy smile. "Sure thing, Al, I'm on it."

Al sat back and watched as they started to implement his instructions. It was all going real smooth, which threw up its own brand of trouble. One which even Jez had overlooked—but then this was one field where he had a shitload more experience than she had. The lieutenants were getting used to

wielding power, they were learning how to pull levers. They all had their own territories right now, but pretty soon they'd start to think. And sure as chickens shat eggs, one of them would try for it. He looked around the table and wondered which it would be.

• • •

Kiera Salter sat down on the president's chair in Magellanic Itg's boardroom and surveyed her new domain. The office was one of the few buildings inside the habitat; a circular, fifteen-storey tower situated at the foot of the northern end-cap. Its windows gave her a daunting view down the interior. The shaded browns of the semi-arid desert were directly outside, slowly giving way to the tranquil greens of grassland and forest around the midsection, before finally merging into the rolling grass plains, currently dominated by some vivid pink xenoc plant. Moating that, and forming an acute contrast, was the circumfluous sea; a broad band of near-luminous turquoise shot through with wriggling scintillations. High and serene above it all, the axial light tube poured out a glaring noon-sun radiance. The only incongruity amid the peaceful scene was the dozen or so clouds which glowed a faint red as they drifted through the air.

There was little other evidence of the coup which she had led, one or two small smudges of black smoke, a crashed rent-cop plane in the parkland surrounding a starscraper lobby. Most of the real damage had occurred inside the starscrapers; but the important sections, the industrial stations and spaceport, had sustained only a modest amount of battering.

Her plan had been a good one. Anyone who came into contact with a possessed was immediately taken over, regardless of status. A ripple effect spread out from the seventeenth floor of the Diocca starscraper, slow at first, but gradually gaining strength as the numbers grew. The possessed moved onto the next starscraper.

Rubra warned people of course, told them what to look out for, told them where the possessed were. He directed the rent-cops and the boosted mercenary troops, ambushing the possessed. But good as they were, the troops he had at his disposal were heavily dependent on their hardware. That gave

the possessed a lethal advantage. Unless it was as basic as a chemical projectile weapon, technology betrayed them, failing at critical moments, producing false data. He didn't even attempt to take Valisk's small squad of assault mechanoids out of storage.

Out on the docking ridges, the polyp hulls of possessed starships began to swell below a shimmer of exotic light patterns, emerging from their convulsions as full-grown hell-hawks. Fantastically shaped starships and huge harpies zoomed away from the habitat to challenge the voidhawks and Srinagar frigates that were edging in cautiously. The military ships had pulled back, abandoning their effort to assist the beleaguered population.

Kiera's authority now extended the length of the habitat, and encompassed a zone a hundred thousand kilometres in diameter outside the shell. All in all, not a bad little fiefdom for an ex-society wife from New Munich. She'd glimpsed it briefly once before, this position, the influence, importance, and respect which authority endowed. It could have been hers for the taking back then; she had the breeding and family money, her husband had the ambition and skill. By rights a cabinet seat awaited, and maybe even the chancellorship (so she dreamed and schemed). But he'd faltered, betrayed by his ambition and lack of patience, making the wrong deals in search of the fast track. A weak failure condemning her to sitting out her empty life in the grand old country house, working studiously for the right charities, pitied and avoided by the social vixens she'd once counted as her closest friends. Dying bitter and resentful.

Well, now Kiera Salter was back, younger and prettier than ever before. And the mistakes and weaknesses of yesteryear were not going to be repeated again. Not ever.

"We finished going through the last starscraper three hours ago," she told the council she'd assembled (oh-so-carefully selecting most of the members). "Valisk now effectively belongs to us."

That brought applause and some whistles.

She waited for it to die down. "Bonney, how many non-possessed are left?"

"I'd say a couple of hundred," the hunter woman said.

“They’re hiding out, with Rubra’s help, of course. Tracking them down is going to take a while. But there’s no way for them to get out; I’ll find them eventually.”

“Do they pose any danger?”

“The worst case scenario would be a few acts of sabotage; but considering we can all sense them if they get close enough to us, it would be very short-lived. No, I think the only one who could hurt us now would be Rubra. But I don’t know enough about him and what his capabilities are.”

Everyone turned to look at Dariat. Kiera hadn’t wanted him on the council, but his understanding of affinity and the habitat routines was peerless. They needed his expertise to deal with Rubra. Despite that, she still didn’t consider him a proper possessed; he was crazy, a very ruthless kind of crazy. His agenda was too different from theirs. A fact which to her mind made him a liability, a dangerous one.

“Ultimately, Rubra could annihilate the entire ecosystem,” Dariat said calmly. “He has control over the environmental maintenance and digestive organs; that gives him a great deal of power. Conceivably he could release toxins into the water and food, replace the present atmosphere with pure nitrogen and suffocate us, even vent it out into space. He can turn off the axial light tube and freeze us, or leave it on and cook us. None of that would damage him in the long term; the biosphere can be replanted, and the human population replaced. He cares less for the lives of humans than we do, his only priority is himself. As I told you right at the start, everything else we achieve is completely pointless until he is eliminated. But you didn’t listen.”

“So, shitbrain, why hasn’t he done any of that already?” Stanyon asked contemptuously.

Kiera put a restraining hand on his leg under the table. He was a good deputy for her, his intimidating strength accounting for a great deal of the obedience she was shown; he also made an excellent replacement for Ross Nash in her bed. However, vast intelligence was not one of his qualities.

“Yes,” she said levelly to Dariat. “Why not?”

“Because we have one key element left to restrain him,” Dariat said. “We can kill him. The hellhawks are armed with enough combat wasps to destroy a hundred habitats. We’re in

a deterrence situation. If we fight each other openly, we both die.”

“Openly?” Bonney challenged.

“Yes. Right now, he will be conferring with the Edenist Consensus about methods of reversing possession. And as you know, I’m investigating methods of transferring my personality into the neural strata without him blocking it. That way I could assume control of the habitat and eliminate him at the same time.”

Which isn’t exactly the solution I want, Kiera thought.

“So why don’t you just do it?” Stanyon asked. “Shove yourself in there and fight the bastard on his own ground. Don’t you have the balls for it?”

“The neural strata cells will only accept Rubra’s thought routines. If a thought routine is not derived from his own personality pattern it will not function in the neural strata.”

“But you fucked with the routines before.”

“Precisely. I made changes to what was there, I did not replace anything.” Dariat sighed elaborately, resting his head in his hands. “Look, I’ve been working on this problem for nearly thirty years now. Conventional means were utterly useless against him. Then I thought I’d found the answer with affinity enhanced by this energistic ability. I could have used it to modify sections of the neural strata, force the cells to accept my personality routines. I was exploring that angle when that drunk cretin Ross Nash blew our cover. So we went overt and showed Rubra what we can do; fine, but by doing that we threw away our stealth advantage. He is on his guard like never before. I’ve had enough evidence of that over the last ten hours. If I try to convert a chunk of the neural strata ready to accept me, it drops out of the homogeneity architecture, and he does something to the cells’ bioelectric component, too, which kills them instantly. Don’t ask me what—breaks down the natural chemical regulators, or simply electrocutes them with nerve impulse surges. I don’t know! But he’s blocking me every step of the way.”

“All very interesting,” Kiera said coldly. “What we need to know, however, is can you beat him?”

Dariat smiled, his gaze unfocused. “Yes. I’ll beat him, I feel

the lady Chi-ri touching me. There will be a way, and I'll find it eventually."

The rest of the council exchanged irritated or worried glances; except for Stanyon who merely gave a disgusted groan.

"Can we take it then, that Rubra does not pose any immediate threat?" Kiera asked. She found Dariat's devotion to the Starbridge religion with its Lords and Ladies of the realms another indication of just how unstable he was.

"Yes," Dariat said. "He'll keep up the attrition, of course. Electrocutation, servitor housechimps cracking rocks over your skull; and we'll have to abandon the tubes and starscraper lifts. It's an annoyance, but we can live through it."

"Until when?" Hudson Proctor asked. He was an ex-general Kiera had drafted in to her initial coterie to help plan their takeover strategy. "Rubra is in here with us, and the Edenists are outside. Both of them are doing their damndest to push us back into the beyond. We have to stop that, we must fight back. I'm damned if I'm prepared to sit here and let them win." He glanced around the table, buoyed by the level of silent support shown by the council.

"Our hellhawks are easily a match for any voidhawk," Kiera said. "The Edenists cannot get inside Valisk, all they can do is sit at a safe distance and watch. I don't consider them a problem at all, let alone a threat."

"The hellhawks might be as good as a voidhawk in a fight, but what's to make them stay and guard us?"

"Dariat," Kiera said, irked at having to defer to him again. But he was the one who'd worked out how to keep the hellhawks loyal to Valisk.

"The souls possessing the hellhawks will help us for as long as we want," Dariat said. "We have something they ultimately want: human bodies. Rubra's descendants can all use their affinity to converse with Magellanic Itg's blackhawks. That means the souls can get out of the hellhawks and into those bodies the same way as they got in. During our takeover we captured enough of Rubra's descendants to provide each hellhawk possessor with a human body. They're all stored in zero-tau, waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Hudson Proctor asked. "This is what

gets me. I don't even know why we're bothering with this discussion in the first place."

"What do you suggest we should be doing, then?" Kiera asked.

"The blindingly obvious. Let's just go. Now! We know we can do it; together we have the power to lift Valisk clean out of this universe. We can create our own universe around us; one with new laws, a place where there's no empty eternity around us, and where we're safely sealed off from the beyond. We'll be safe there, from Rubra, from the Edenists, from everybody. Safe and immortal."

"Quite right," Kiera said. Most possessed had only been back for a few hours, but already the urge was growing. To run, to hide from the dreadful empty sky. Enclosed Valisk was better than a planet; but Kiera had hated the starscrapers with their windows showing the naked stars, always reminding her of the beyond. Yes, she thought, we will have to leave that sight eventually. But not yet. There were other, older instincts prising at her thoughts. For when Valisk departed to a universe where anything became possible to every individual, the need for leadership would fade away, lost among the dream of eternal sybaritic life into which they would all fall. Kiera Salter would cease to be anything special. Maybe it was inevitable, but there was no need to rush into it. "What about the threat from ourselves?" she asked them, a high note of curiosity in her voice. As if they'd already solved the obvious problem.

"What threat?" Stanyon asked.

"Think about it. How long are we intending to leave this universe for?"

"I wasn't planning on coming back," Hudson Proctor said caustically.

"Me neither. But eternity is rather a long time, isn't it? And those are the terms we're going to have to start thinking in nowadays."

"So?" he demanded.

"So how many people are there in Valisk right now? Stanyon?"

"Close to nine hundred thousand."

"Not quite nine hundred thousand people. And the purpose

of life, or the nearest definition I'll ever make, is to experience. Experience whatever you can for as long as you can." She gave the councillors a morbid smile. "That isn't going to change whatever universe we occupy. As it stands, there aren't enough of us; not if we want to keep providing ourselves with new and different experiences for all of eternity. We have to have variety to keep on generating freshness, otherwise we'll just be playing variants on a theme for ever. Fifty thousand years of that, and we'll be so desperate for a change that we'll even come back here just for the novelty." She'd won them; she could see and sense the doubt and insecurity fission in their minds.

Hudson Proctor sat back in his chair and favoured her with a languid smile. "Go on, Kiera, you've obviously thought this through. What's the solution?"

"There are two possibilities. First, we use the hellhawks to evacuate ourselves to a terracompatible world and begin the possession campaign all over again. Personally I'd hate to risk that. Srinagar's warships might not be able to break into Valisk, but if we tried to land on the planet it would be a shooting gallery. Alternatively, we can play it smart and gather people in to us. Valisk can support at least six or seven million, and that's without our energistic ability enhancing it. Six million should be enough to keep our society alive and fresh."

"You're joking. Bring in over five million people?"

"Yes. It'll take time, but it can be done."

"Bringing some people in, yes, but so many . . . Surely our population is going to grow anyway?"

"Not by five million it isn't. We'd have to make permanent pregnancy compulsory for every female for the next ten years. This council might be in command now, but try implementing that and see how long we last."

"I'm not talking about right now, I'm talking about after. We'll have children after we leave."

"Will we? These aren't our actual bodies, they'd never be *our* children. The biological imperative isn't driving us anymore; these bodies are sensory receptors for our consciousness, nothing else. I certainly don't intend to have any children."

“All right, even assuming you’re right, and I’m not saying you are, how are you going to get that kind of influx, launch the hellhawks on pirate flights to capture people?”

“No,” she said confidently. “Invite them. You’ve seen the Starbridge tribes. There are the disaffected just like them in every society throughout the Confederation. I know, one of the charities I used to work for helped rehabilitate youngsters who couldn’t cope with modern life. Gather them all together, and you could fill twenty habitats this size.”

“But how? What’s going to make them want to come here, to Valisk?”

“We just have to find the right message, that’s all.”

• • •

Even by day, Burley Palace stood aloof from the city of Atherstone; surrounded by extensive parkland at the top of a small rise, it surveyed the sprawling lower districts with a suitably regal detachment. At night the isolation made it positively imperious. Atherstone’s lights turned the motorways, boulevards, and grand squares into a gaudy mother-of-pearl blaze which shimmered as though it were alive. Right in the centre, however, the palace grounds were a lake of midnight darkness. And in the centre of that, Burley Palace shone brighter than it ever did under the noon sun, illuminated by a bracelet of five hundred spotlights. It was visible from almost anywhere in the city.

Ralph Hiltch observed it through the Royal Navy Marine flyer’s sensor suite as they approached. It was a neoclassic building with innumerable wings slotting together at not quite geometrical angles, and five quadrangles enclosing verdant gardens. Even though it was nearly one o’clock in the morning, there were a lot of cars using the long drive which cut through the parkland, headlights creating a near-constant stream of white light. Although highly ornamental, the palace was the genuine centre of government; so given the planet’s current state of alert, the activity was only to be expected.

The pilot brought the flyer down on one of the discreetly positioned rooftop pads. Roche Skark was waiting for Ralph as he came down the airstairs, two bodyguards standing unobtrusively a few metres behind.

"How are you?" the ESA director asked.

Ralph shook his hand. "Still in one piece, sir. Unlike Mortonridge."

"That's a nasty case of guilt you've got there, Ralph. I hope it's not clouding your judgement."

"No, sir. In any case, it isn't guilt. Just resentment. We nearly had them, we were so close."

Roche gave the younger operative a sympathetic look. "I know, Ralph. But you drove them out of Pasto, and that's got to be a colossal achievement. Just think what would have happened if it had fallen to the likes of Annette Ekelund. Mortonridge multiplied by a hundred. And if they'd possessed that many people they wouldn't have been content to stay put like they are on the peninsula."

"Yes, sir."

They walked into the palace.

"This idea the pair of you came up with. Is it workable?" Roche asked.

"I believe so, sir," Ralph said. "And I appreciate you allowing me to outline it to the Princess myself." The notion had evolved from several strategy reviews he and Colonel Palmer had held during the occasional lull in the frantic two days of the Mortonridge evacuation. Ralph knew that it contained suggestions which had to be made to the Princess personally. He feared it being diluted by navy staff analysts and tacticians if he routed it through the correct procedural channels. Smooth minds polishing away the raw substance to present a sleek concept, one that was politically acceptable. And that wouldn't work, nothing short of hundred per cent adherence to the proposal would produce success.

Sometimes when he stood back and observed this obsessional character he'd become he wondered if he wasn't simply overdosing on arrogance.

"Given the circumstances, it was the least we could do," Roche Skark said. "As I told you, your efforts have not gone unnoticed."

Sylvester Geray was waiting for them in the decagonal reception room with its gleaming gold and platinum pillars. The equerry in his perfect uniform gave Ralph's borrowed marine fatigues a reluctant appraisal, then opened a set of doors.

After the opulence of the state rooms outside, Princess Kirsten's private office was almost subdued, the kind of quietly refined study a noble landowner would run an estate from. He couldn't quite make the leap to accepting that the entire Ombey star system was ruled from this room.

He stepped up to the desk, feeling he ought to salute, but knowing it would appear ridiculous; he wasn't military. The Princess didn't look much different from her images on the news, a dignified lady who seemed to be locked in perpetual middle age. No amount of discipline was able to stop him checking her face. Sure enough, there was the classic Saldana nose, slender with a downturned end; which was almost her only delicate feature, she had an all-over robustness of a kind which made it impossible ever to imagine her growing into a frail old grandmother.

Princess Kirsten acknowledged him with a generous nod. "Mr Hiltch. In the flesh at last."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you so much for coming. If you'd like to sit down, we can start."

Ralph took the chair next to Roche Skark, grateful for the illusion of protection his boss gave him. Jannike Dermot was eyeing him with what was almost a sense of amusement. The only other person in the room, apart from the equerry, was Ryle Thorne, who didn't appear to care about Ralph's presence one way or the other.

"We'll bring in Admiral Farquar now," Kirsten said. She datavised the desk's processor for a security level one sensor-conference. The white bubble room emerged to claim them.

Ralph found he was sitting to the right of the admiral, down at the end of the table away from the Princess.

"If you'd like to summarize the current Mortonridge situation for us, Mr Hiltch," Kirsten said.

"Ma'am. Our principal evacuation operation is now finished. Thanks to the warnings we broadcast, we managed to lift out over eighteen thousand people with the planes and Royal Navy transport flyers. Another sixty thousand drove up the M6 and got out that way before the motorway failed. The sensor satellites show us that there are about eight hundred

boats carrying refugees which are heading up to the main continent. Our priority at the moment is to try and take people off the smaller ones, which are desperately overcrowded.”

“Which leaves us with close to two million people stranded in Mortonridge,” Admiral Farquar said. “And not a damn thing we can do about it.”

“We believe most of them are now possessed,” Ralph said. “After all, Ekelund’s people have had two days. And those that aren’t possessed will be by tomorrow. We keep running into this exponential curve. It’s a frightening equation when it’s translated into real life.”

“You’re absolutely sure they are being possessed?” Princess Kirsten asked.

“I’m afraid so, ma’am. Our satellite images are being fudged, of course, right across the peninsula. But we can still use sections of the communications net. The possessed seem to have forgotten or ignored that. The AIs have been pulling what images they can from sensors and cameras. The overall pattern is constant. Non-possessed are tracked down, then systematically hurt until they submit to possession. They’re fairly ruthless about it, though they do seem to be reticent with children. Most of those reaching the evacuation points now are under sixteen.”

“Dear Heaven,” the Princess muttered.

“Any of the possessed trying to get out?” Ryle Thorne asked.

“No, sir,” Ralph said. “They seem to be sticking to the agreement as far as we can tell. The only anomaly at the moment is the weather. There’s a considerable amount of unnatural cloud building up over Mortonridge, it started this morning.”

“Unnatural cloud?” Ryle Thorne inquired.

“Yes, sir. It’s an almost uniform blanket spreading up from the south, which doesn’t appear to be affected by the wind. Oh, and it’s starting to glow red. We believe it could be an additional form of protection from the sensor satellites. If it continues to expand at its current rate, Mortonridge will be completely veiled in another thirty-six hours. After that we’ll only have the sensors hooked into the net, and I don’t believe they’ll overlook them for much longer.”

“A red cloud? Is it poisonous?” Princess Kirsten asked.

“No, ma’am. We flew some drones through it, taking samples. It’s just water vapour. But they’re controlling it somehow.”

“What about its potential as a weapon?”

“I don’t see how it could be used aggressively. The amount of power necessary to generate it is quite impressive, but that’s all. In any case, the border we’ve established at the top of Mortonridge is an effective block. The troops are calling it a firebreak. The SD lasers have cleared a two-kilometre-wide line of scorched earth straight across the neck. We’re combining satellite observation with ground patrols to monitor it. If anything moves out there it’ll be targeted immediately.”

“What happens if the cloud tries to move over?”

“Then we’ll attempt to burn it back with the SD lasers. If that doesn’t work, then we’ll need your authority to launch punitive strikes, ma’am.”

“I see. How will you know how to target these punitive strikes if the red cloud covers all of Mortonridge?”

“Scout teams will have to go in, ma’am.”

“Let us pray the cloud can be halted by the lasers, then.”

“I can see you’re geared up to prevent any attempt at a mass breakout,” Ryle Thorne said. “What have you done to prevent individual possessed sneaking out among the refugees? We all know it only takes one to restart the whole nightmare. And I monitored aspects of the evacuation, it was rather chaotic at times.”

“It was chaotic getting the refugees out, sir,” Ralph said. “But the other end was more straightforward. Everyone was tested to see if they had this energistic effect. We didn’t find anybody. Even if they did manage to get through, the refugees are all being held in isolation. We think the only possessed on Ombey are on Mortonridge.”

“Good,” Princess Kirsten said. “I know Roche Skark has already congratulated you, Mr Hiltch, but I’d like to express my own gratitude for the way you’ve handled this crisis. Your conduct has been exemplary.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“It galls me to say it, but I think that Ekelund woman was right. The final outcome isn’t going to be decided here.”

“Excuse me, ma’am, but I told Ekelund I thought that was incorrect, and I still believe that.”

“Go on, Mr Hiltch,” Kirsten told him cordially. “I don’t bite, and I’d dearly love to be proved wrong in this instance. You have an idea?”

“Yes, ma’am. I think just waiting passively for this problem to be resolved somewhere else would be a vast mistake. For our own peace of mind, if nothing else, we have to know that the possessed can be beaten, can be made to give up what they’ve taken. We know zero-tau can force them to abandon the bodies they’ve stolen; and it may be that Kulu or Earth, or somewhere with real top-grade scientific resources, can find a quicker more effective method. But the point is, whatever solution we eventually come up with we still have to get out there on the ground and implement it.”

“So you want to start now?” Admiral Farquar asked.

“The preparation stage, yes, sir. There is a lot of groundwork to be laid first. Colonel Palmer and myself believe the possessed have already made one critical mistake. By possessing everyone left in Mortonridge they have given up their blackmail weapon. They cannot threaten us with a massacre as they did in Exnall, not anymore, because they have no hostages left. There is only us and them now.”

“Ralph, you’ve had firsthand experience of how hard they fight. It would cost us a couple of marines for every four or five possessed we captured. That’s a bad ratio.”

Ralph switched his attention to the Princess, wishing they were out of the sensenviron. He wanted physical eye contact, delivering her the truth of what he believed. “I don’t believe we should use our own marines, sir. Not in the front line. As you say, they would be wiped out. We know the possessed have to be completely overwhelmed before they can be subdued, and those kinds of battles would demoralize the troops long before we made any real inroads.”

“So what do you want to use?” Kirsten asked curiously.

“There is, ma’am, one technology which can function effectively around a possessed, and is also available in the kind of quantities necessary to liberate Mortonridge.”

“Bitek,” Kirsten said quickly, vaguely pleased at making the connection.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ralph made an effort to rein in his surprise. “The Edenists could probably produce some kind of warrior construct which could do the job.”

“There’s even an appropriate DNA sequence which they could employ,” she said, enjoying the game, her thoughts racing ahead, mapping our possibilities. “A Tranquillity serjeant. I’ve accessed sensevises of them. Nasty-looking brutes. And Ione is a cousin of ours, I’m sure acquisition wouldn’t be a problem.”

The rest of the security committee remained silent, startled by her apparent eagerness to discard taboos.

“We would still need a massive conventional army to occupy and hold the land we regained, and support the bitek constructs,” Ralph said cautiously.

“Yes.” The Princess was lost in thought. “You’ve certainly offered a valid proposal, Mr Hiltch. Unfortunately, as I’m sure you are aware, I could not conceivably approach the Edenists with such a request. The political implications of such an alliance would undermine some of the Kingdom’s basic tenets of foreign policy, a policy which has been maintained for centuries.”

“I see, ma’am,” Ralph said stiffly.

“I can’t petition them,” Kirsten said, enjoying herself. “Only King Alastair can do that. So you’d better go and ask my big brother for me, hadn’t you, Mr Hiltch?”

• • •

As soon as New California fell to the Capone Organization the Consensus of the thirty habitats orbiting Yosemite started preparing for war. It was a situation which had never before occurred in the five centuries since Edenism was founded. Only Laton had ever threatened them in the past, but he was one man; the staggering pan-Confederation resources they had were adequate to deal with him (so they considered at the time). This was different.

Adamists throughout the Confederation nearly always allowed prejudice to contaminate their thinking towards the Edenist culture. They assumed that as it was both wealthy and cloistered it would be if not decadent, then at least timorous. They were wrong. Edenists prided themselves in their ratio-

nal approach to all facets of life. They might deplore violence, favouring endless diplomatic negotiations and economic sanctions to any form of conflict, but if there was no alternative, they would fight. And fight with a coldly logical precision which was frightening.

Once the decision was taken, Consensus began the job of coordinating the gas giant's resources and priorities. The extensive clusters of industrial stations which surrounded each habitat were immediately turned over in their entirety to armaments manufacture. Component production was integrated by Consensus, matching demand to capability within hours, then going on to harmonize final fabrication procedures. Barely four hours after the operation started, the first new combat wasps were emerging from their freshly allocated assembly bays.

After conquering New California itself, Capone began his campaign against the system's asteroid settlements. Consensus knew then it would only be a matter of time. Yosemite was the source of He₃ for the entire system, the strategic high ground.

Perhaps if Capone had ordered an all-out assault on Yosemite as his first action he might have been successful. Instead, taking over the asteroid settlements was a tactical error. It allowed the Consensus precious days to consolidate the gas giant's defences. Not even Emmet Mordden really grasped the awesome potential of an entire civilization converted to a war footing, especially one with Edenism's technological resources. How could he? It had never happened before.

Voidhawks hovering seven hundred thousand kilometres above New California's poles observed the three new squadrons being assembled among the fifty-three asteroids orbiting the planet. Their composition, numbers, and in some cases even the armament specifications were duly noted and relayed to Yosemite. Unknown to the Organization, the voidhawks were not the summation of the Edenist intelligence gathering operation, they simply coordinated the observation. Thousands of stealthed spy sensor globes the size of tomatoes were falling past the asteroids like a constant black snow. All the information they gathered was passed back to the voidhawks through affinity links with their bitek processors. The

possessed couldn't detect affinity, nor was it susceptible to either conventional electronic warfare or the interference by the energetic ability, all of which allowed the spy globes to reveal a minute by minute account of the buildup.

Had anyone in the Organization realized just how detailed the Edenist knowledge was, they would never have dispatched the starships.

Thirty-nine hours after Capone had given the go-ahead to try to capture the Yosemite cloudscoops, two of the three squadrons of ships docked in the asteroids departed. Consensus knew both the vectors of the ships and their arrival time.

Yosemite orbited seven hundred and eighty-one million kilometres from the G5-type star of the New California system. At a hundred and twenty-seven thousand kilometres in diameter it was slightly smaller than Jupiter, although its storm bands lacked the vigour normally associated with such mass; even their coloration was uninspiring, streamers of sienna and caramel meandering among the pristine white upbursts of ammonia crystals.

The thirty Edenist habitats orbited sedately three-quarters of a million kilometres above the equator, their tracks perturbed only by gentle resonances with the eight large innermost moons. It was that radial band where the Consensus had concentrated its new defensive structure. Each of the habitats was englobed by beefed-up Strategic Defence platforms; but given the demonstrated ruthlessness of the attackers, Consensus was attempting to prevent any Organization ships getting near enough to launch a combat wasp salvo.

With the vectors identified and timed, Consensus redeployed twelve thousand of the combat wasps out of the total of three hundred and seventy thousand it had already seeded across the gas giant's equatorial zone. Their fusion drives ignited for a few minutes, putting them on a loose interception trajectory with the area of space the attackers were likely to emerge in. A hundred of the patrolling voidhawks were moved closer.

The first seven attackers to emerge, as per standard tactics programs, were all front-line navy rapid-response frigates. Their mission was to assess the level of opposition, and if necessary clear the incoming squadron's designated emer-

gence zone of any hostile hardware. Even as their event horizons vanished, leaving them falling free, twenty-five voidhawks were accelerating towards them at ten gees. Distortion fields locked on, ruining the equilibrium of space around their hulls, preventing any of them from jumping clear. Combat wasps were already shooting over the intervening distance at twenty-five gees. The frigates immediately launched defensive salvos, but with their sensors hampered by the energistic flux of their own crews, the response was too slow in coming, and even when it did they were hopelessly outnumbered. Each of the frigates was the target of at least a hundred and fifty combat wasps, streaking in at them from every direction. At most, they could fire forty defenders. To have stood a good chance they would have needed close to five hundred apiece.

Within a hundred seconds all seven frigates were destroyed.

Ten minutes later, the rest of the Organization's starships started to emerge from their ZTT jumps. Their predicament was even worse. They were expecting the specialist frigates to have established a defensive perimeter. It took time for an ordinary Adamist starship to deploy its sensor clusters and scan local space for possible danger; time which in this case was lengthened by malfunctioning equipment. When the sensors finally did relay an image of the external arena, it seemed as though a small galaxy was on the move. Yosemite was almost invisible behind a sparkling nebula of fusion drives; thousands of combat wasps and tens of thousands of submunitions were generating a fraudulent dawn across half of the colossal planet's night side. And the nebula was contracting, twin central whorls twisting lazily into two dense spires which were rising inexorably towards the emergence zones.

One by one, the Organization starships crashed against the terrible, moon-sized mountains of light, detonating into photonic avalanches which tumbled away into the yawning darkness.

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Two hours later, the voidhawks on observation duty above New California reported that Capone's third squadron was leaving the orbital asteroids. When they were a quarter of a million kilometres above the planet, the starships activated

their energy patterning nodes and vanished. Consensus was puzzled by the vector; they weren't aligned on any known inhabited world.

• • •

Not even the ending of the physical threat had brought any relief to the turmoil in Louise's head. They had flown all the way into orbit to dock with the *Far Realm* without any problem, although Furay had grumbled constantly about bits of machinery going wrong on the ascent.

The starship itself wasn't quite as impressive as she'd been expecting. The interior was like servants' quarters, except made out of metal and plastic. There were four spheres grouped together in a pyramid shape, which the crew called life-support capsules, and that was the total available living space; apparently the rest of the ship inside the hull was solid machinery. Everything was so dreadfully small—tables, chairs, bunks; and what wasn't being used had to be folded away. And to complete her misery, free fall was an utter nightmare.

It was ironic. As Genevieve had perked up during the spaceplane flight, so Louise had felt gradually worse. As soon as the rocket engines finally cut out, leaving them floating free, Genevieve had yelled delightedly, releasing her webbing and hurtling around the cabin, giggling as she bounced and somersaulted. Even Fletcher, after his initial alarm at the sensation, had relaxed, smiling cautiously as he attempted a few simple gymnast manoeuvres with Genevieve cheering him on.

But not her. Oh, no. She'd been wretchedly sick three times during the rendezvous, what with the spaceplane juddering around the whole time. It had taken her several tries to learn how to use the sanitation tube provided for such instances, much to the disgusted dismay of the others in the cabin.

She had then continued to be sick, or at least have the stomach spasms, after they floated through the airlock tube into the starship's tiny lounge. Endron, the ship's systems specialist who doubled as medical officer, had towed her into the sick bay cubicle. Twenty minutes later when the horrid warm itch inside her stomach faded, and some kind of cool fluid was

sprayed into her mouth to rinse away the taste of vomit, she began to take stock for the first time. Her ears felt funny, and when she touched one she could feel something hard cupped around the back of it.

“That’s a medical nanonic,” Endron told her. “I’ve put one package behind each ear. Don’t try and take them off, they’ve knitted with your inner ears. It ought to solve your balance problem.”

“Thank you,” she said meekly. “I’m sorry to be so much trouble.”

“You’re not. If only your sister was as quiet as you.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Is she being a nuisance?”

He laughed. “Not really. We’re just not used to girls her age on board, that’s all.”

Louise stopped fingering the medical package. When she brought her hand away she saw a strange green bracelet on her wrist; it was made from a substance like lustreless polythene, an inch wide and about half an inch thick. There was no join, it was solid. On closer inspection she saw it had fused to her skin, yet it wasn’t painful.

“Another package,” Endron said dryly. “Again, don’t touch it, please.”

“Is it for my balance as well?”

“No. That one is for your other condition. It will keep your blood chemistry stable, and if it detects any metabolic problem starting from free-fall exposure it’ll datavise a warning to me.”

“Other condition?” she asked timidly.

“You did know you were pregnant, didn’t you?”

She closed her eyes and nodded, too ashamed to look at him. A complete stranger knowing. How awful.

“You should have told Furay,” he remonstrated gently. “Free fall exerts some strong physiological changes on a body, especially if you’re unaccustomed to it. And in your state, you really should have been prepared properly before the spaceplane took off.”

A warm tear squeezed out from under her eyelids. “It’s all right, isn’t it? The baby. Oh, please, I didn’t know.”

“Shush.” Endron’s hand stroked her forehead soothingly. “The baby is just fine. You’re a very healthy young girl. I’m

sorry if I frightened you; like I said, we're not used to passengers. I suppose it must be equally strange for you, too."

"It's all right, really?"

"Yes. And the nanonic will keep it that way."

"Thank you. You've been very kind."

"Just doing my job. I'll have to consult some files about your diet, though, and check what food stocks we've got on board. I'll get back to you on that one."

Louise opened her eyes, only to find the cabin blurred by liquid stretching across her irises. A lot of blinking cleared it.

"Let's get you mobile again," Endron said, and released the seal on the straps holding her down on the couch. "Though you're not to whizz about like your sister, mind."

His tone was identical to Mrs Charlsworth's. "I won't." The rest of the sentence died on her lips as she caught sight of him. Her first thought was that he was suffering some kind of terrible affliction.

Endron's head was ordinary enough. He was a man in his late fifties, she guessed, with a short crop of fading black, curly hair and cheeks which appeared almost bloated, eradicating wrinkles. However, his body . . . He had very broad shoulders atop an inflated rib cage, she could actually see the lines of individual ribs under his glossy green ship-suit. She'd seen holograms of terrestrial sparrows at school, and the anatomical arrangement put her in mind of that puffed-out bird. His chest was huge, and very frail-looking.

"Not seen a Martian before, huh?" he asked kindly.

Furious with herself for staring, Louise turned her head away. "I'm not sure. Do all Martians look like you?"

"Yep. So you'd better get used to it. This is an SII line ship after all, the rest of the crew are the same as me. Except Furay of course; that's why he's on board. We couldn't fly the spaceplane down to terracompatible planets. Can't take the gravity."

"How . . ." She wasn't sure if this was really a fit subject to discuss so casually. It was almost as though they were talking about a terminal illness. "Why are you like that?"

"Geneering. It's very deliberate, dates back a while. Even with terraforming we don't have a standard atmosphere on Mars. Our ancestors decided to meet the problem halfway. As

we're a Communist society, naturally everyone got the modification to expand our lung capacity; and that was on top of the earlier adaptations we made to ourselves to survive in the Moon's gravity field."

"The Moon?" Louise asked, trying to sort things out in her mind. "You lived on the Moon first?"

"It was the Lunar nation which terraformed Mars. Didn't they teach you that at school?"

"Uh, no. At least, we haven't got to it yet." She decided not to question him on the communism bit. Given Daddy's opinion on that topic, it would make life a little too complicated right now.

He was smiling gently at her. "I think that's enough history. It's nearing midnight, Norwich time. Perhaps you'd better get some sleep, yes?"

She gave him an eager nod.

Endron coached her in the elementary movements necessary to get about in free fall. Speed was not a requirement, he insisted, arriving safely and accurately at your destination was. And you must be careful of inertia, it creates huge bruises.

With his encouragement she made her way into the life support capsule they'd been allocated: a lounge five yards to a side, made from grubby pearl-grey composite walls which were inlaid with several instrument panels with tiny orange and green lights winking below their dark glass surfaces. Plastic doors which were like a kind of solidified liquid flowed apart to reveal three "cabins" for them to sleep in (the wardrobes she had in her Cricklade bedroom were larger). There was a bathroom in the upper deck at which Louise took one look and promptly recoiled, vowing not to go to the toilet again until they were safely back on a planet.

Genevieve shot up to embrace her as soon as she glided through the ceiling hatch. Fletcher smiled a welcome.

"Isn't this truly wondrous!" the little girl proclaimed. She was floating with her toes six inches off the decking, spinning like a ballerina. Two ponytails stood out at right angles from her head. When she spread her arms wide her speed slowed. A neat toe kick, too quick to follow, and she soared up to the ceiling, clasping a grab hoop to kill her movement. Enchanted

eyes smiled at Louise. "Bet you I can do seven somersaults before I reach the floor."

"You probably can," Louise said wearily.

"Oh." Genevieve's face was instantly contrite. She levitated back to the decking until she was level with Louise. "I'm sorry. How are you feeling?"

"Fine now. And it's time for bed."

"Oww, Louise!"

"Now."

"All right."

Endron proffered the girl a squeeze bulb. "Here, it's a chocolate drink. Try it, I'm sure you'll like it."

Genevieve started sucking eagerly on the nozzle.

"You are recovered, lady?" Fletcher asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Fletcher."

They looked at each other for a long moment, unaware of Endron watching them.

One of the instrument panels let out a quiet bleep.

Endron scowled and drifted over to it, anchoring himself on a stikpad. "Shoddy components," he muttered.

Fletcher gave Louise an apologetic grimace, mildly embarrassed. "I can't stop it," he said in a whisper.

"Not your fault," she whispered back. "Don't worry. The ship still works."

"Yes, lady."

"That was nice," Genevieve announced. She held out the empty squeeze bulb and promptly burped.

"Gen!"

"Sorry."

With Endron showing her how the cabin fittings worked, Louise finally got Genevieve into bed; a heavily padded sleeping bag stuck to the decking. Louise tucked her sister's hair into the hood and kissed her gently. Genevieve gave her a drowsy smile and immediately closed her eyes.

"She'll sleep for a good eight hours now she's got that sedative in her," Endron said, holding up the empty squeeze bulb. "And when she wakes up she won't be anything like as hyper. Furay told me what she was like when you boarded the spaceplane. She was having a bounceback response to the

hangar fire. In a way that kind of overreaction is as bad as depressive withdrawal.”

“I see.” There didn’t seem anything to add. She glanced back at Genevieve before the funny door contracted. For one whole night there would be no possessed, no Roberto, and no Quinn Dexter.

I’ve done what I promised, Louise thought. Thank you, Jesus.

Despite how tired she was feeling, she managed a prideful smile. No longer the worthless, pampered landowner daughter Carmitha had such contempt for just scant days ago. I suppose I’ve grown up a bit.

“You should rest now, lady,” Fletcher said.

She yawned. “I think you’re right. Are you going to bed?”

For once Fletcher’s sedate features showed a certain lightness. “I believe I will linger awhile longer.” He indicated a holoscreen which was displaying the image from an external camera. Cloud-splattered landscape was rolling past, pastel greens, browns, and blues illuminated by Duke’s radiance. “It is not often a mortal man is permitted to view a world over the shoulder of angels.”

“Good night, Fletcher.”

“Good night, lady. May the Lord guard your dreams from the darkness.”

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Louise didn’t have time to dream. A hand pressing her shoulder woke her soon enough.

She winced at the light coming through the open door. When she tried to move, she couldn’t, the sleeping bag held her too tight.

“What?” she groaned.

Fletcher’s face was a few inches from hers, a gloomy frown spoiling his brow. “I apologise, lady, but the crew is in some confusion. I thought you should know.”

“Are they on board?” she cried in dismay.

“Who?”

“The possessed.”

“No, Lady Louise. Be assured, we are perfectly safe.”

“What then?”

“I think they are in another ship.”

“All right, I’m coming.” Her hand fumbled around until she found the seal catch inside the bag; she twisted it ninety degrees and the spongy fabric split open along its length. After she dressed she wrapped her hair into a single artless ponytail, and swam out into the tiny lounge.

Fletcher showed her the way to the bridge, wriggling along the tubular companionways which connected the life-support capsules, and through dimly lit decks which appeared even more cramped than their lounge. Louise’s first sight of the bridge reminded her of the Kavanagh family crypt beneath the manor’s chapel: a gloomy room with candlelike crystals sitting on top of instrument consoles, spilling out waves of blue and green light which crawled across the walls. Machinery, ribbed tubes, and plastic cables formed an untidy glyptic over most bulkheads. But most of all it came from the four crew members lying prone on their bulky acceleration couches; eyes closed, limbs immobile. A thin hexagonal web was stretched over them, holding them down on the cushioning.

Furay and Endron she recognised, but this was the first time she’d seen Captain Layia and Tilia, the *Far Realm’s* node specialist. Endron had been right, the other Martians had exactly the same anatomical features as himself. In fact there was very little difference between genders; Louise wasn’t entirely sure the two women even had breasts. On top of that rib cage they would have been absurd.

“Now what?” she asked Fletcher.

“I am not sure, their repose refutes any disturbance.”

“It’s not sleep, they’re datavising with the flight computer. Joshua told me that’s what happens on a starship bridge. Um, I’ll explain later.” Louise blushed faintly; Joshua had become such a fixture in her life it was hard to remember who he actually was. She used some grab hoops to move herself over to Furay’s couch, and tapped him experimentally on the shoulder. Somehow the thought of disturbing the others didn’t arise, a child-fear of how those strange figures would respond.

Furay opened his eyes in annoyance. “Oh, it’s you.”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to know what was happening.”

“Yeah, right. Hang on.” The webbing peeled back and

curled up, vanishing into the edge of the couch's cushioning. Furay pushed off, and slowly twisted his body around to the vertical, using a stikpad to anchor himself in front of Louise. "Nothing too good, I'm afraid. The navy squadron's commanding admiral has put every ship on condition amber, which is one stage short of an actual combat alert."

"Why?"

"The *Tantu* has dropped out of our communications net. They won't respond to any signals. She's worried that they might have been hijacked. Apparently there was some kind of garbled message a few minutes after the frigate's spaceplane docked, then nothing."

Louise flashed a guilty glance at Fletcher, who remained unperturbed. The action did not go unnoticed by Furay. "The *Tantu's* spaceplane left Bennett Field about ten minutes after us. Care to comment?"

"The rebels were close behind us," Louise said quickly. "Perhaps they stowed away on the other spaceplane."

"And took over an entire frigate?" Furay said sceptically.

"They have energy weapons," Louise said. "I've seen them."

"Try waving a laser rifle around on the bridge of a Confederation Navy starship and the marines would cut you into barbecue ribs."

"I have no other explanation," she said earnestly.

"Hummm." His stare informed her he was having big second thoughts about bringing her on board.

"What remedial action does the admiral propose?" Fletcher asked.

"She hasn't decided yet. The *Serir* has been sent to rendezvous. The situation will be reviewed when they report."

"She?" Fletcher asked in surprise. "Your admiral is a lady?"

Furay pulled at his chin, trying to work out just what the hell he was dealing with.

"Yes, Fletcher," Louise hissed. "We don't have many female estate managers on Norfolk," she explained brightly to Furay. "We're not used to ladies holding important positions. Do excuse our ignorance."

"You don't strike me as unimportant, Louise," Furay said.

His tone was so muddled, silky, and scathing at the same time, she couldn't decide if he was making what Mrs Charlsworth called an overture, or just being plain sarcastic.

Furay suddenly stiffened. "It's moving."

"What is?"

"The *Tantu*. It's under way, heading up out of orbit. Your rebels must have hijacked it, there's no other reason."

"The ship is flying away?" Fletcher asked.

"That's what I just said!" Furay told him in irritation.

"They must be heading up for a jump coordinate."

"What's the admiral doing about it?" Louise asked.

"I'm not sure. The *Far Realm* isn't a combat craft, we don't have access to the squadron's strategic communications."

"We must follow it," Fletcher announced.

"Pardon me?"

Louise glared at him with silent urgency.

"This ship must follow the frigate. People must be warned of what it carries."

"And just what does it carry?" Furay asked mildly.

"Rebels," Louise said hurriedly. "People who've looted and murdered, and will do so again if they aren't arrested. But I'm sure we can leave the administering of justice to the Confederation Navy, can't we, Fletcher?"

"Lady—"

"Exactly what has got you so all-fired het up?" Captain Layia asked. Her couch webbing peeled back allowing her to glide over towards the three of them.

Her face did have a few feminine qualities, Louise admitted, but not many; the shaven scalp was too unsettling—all ladies had long hair. The judgemental way Layia took in the scene betrayed her authority; that she was in command had never been in doubt from the moment she spoke, it had nothing to do with the silver star on her epaulette.

"I am concerned that we should follow the frigate, ma'am," Fletcher said. "The rebels on board cannot be allowed to spread their sedition any further."

"Nor will they be allowed to," Layia said patiently. "I can assure you the admiral does not regard the hijacking of a navy frigate lightly. However, it is a navy matter, and we are just a supply ship. It is not our problem."

“But they must be stopped.”

“How? If you use combat wasps you’ll kill everyone on board.”

Fletcher appealed to Louise, who could only shrug, though the motion didn’t quite come off in free fall.

“The admiral will send a ship to pursue them,” Captain Layia said. “When it arrives in a star system it will simply broadcast the situation to the authorities. The *Tantu* will be unable to dock at any port, and eventually their consumables will run out, forcing them to negotiate.”

“Those on board will not be allowed to disembark?” Fletcher asked apprehensively.

“Absolutely not,” the captain assured him.

“Providing the pursuit ship manages to keep up with them through their ZTT jumps,” Furay said pessimistically. “If *Tantu* programs for a sequential jump sequence, then anyone following will be in trouble, unless it’s a voidhawk. Which it won’t be, because the squadron doesn’t have one.” He trailed off under the captain’s stare. “Sorry, but that’s the normal method to avoid tracking, and every navy ship can perform sequential jumps. You know that.”

“Ma’am, please,” Fletcher entreated, “if there is any chance the rebels can escape, we have to fly after them.”

“One, you’re a passenger. I believe Mr Furay explained how we are obliged to stay in Norfolk orbit as long as the navy requires, and no amount of money can alter that. Two, if I broke orbit to chase the *Tantu*, then the admiral would have me brought back and relieved of my duty. Three, as you’ve been so helpfully informed, the *Tantu* can perform sequential jumps; if a top-line frigate can’t follow them through those manoeuvres, then we certainly can’t. And four, mister, if you don’t get off my bridge *right now*, I’ll sling you into a lifeboat and give you a one-way trip back down to the land you love so dearly. Have you got all that?”

“Yes, Captain,” Louise said, feeling an inch small. “Sorry to bother you. We won’t do it again.”

“Aw shit,” Endron called from his acceleration couch. “I’m getting multiple processor dropouts. Whatever this glitch is, it’s multiplying.”

Layia looked at Louise, and jabbed a finger at the hatch.

Louise grabbed Fletcher's arm and pushed off with her feet, trying to propel them towards the hatchway. She didn't like the expression of anguish on his face one bit. Her trajectory wasn't terribly accurate, and Fletcher had to flip them aside from one of the consoles.

"What are you trying to do?" Louise wailed when they were back in the lounge they'd been allocated. "Don't you understand how dangerous it is to antagonize the captain?" She caught herself and clamped a hand over her mouth, distraught at the gaffe. "Oh, Fletcher, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yet you spoke the truth, lady. As always. It was foolish of me, I admit, aye, and reckless too. For you and the little one must remain safe up here." He turned and looked at the holoscreen. They were over the side of Norfolk which was turned to face Duchess, a harsh vista of reds and black.

"Why, Fletcher? What was so important about following Quinn Dexter? The navy can take care of him. Are you worried what'll happen if he gets loose on another planet?"

"Not exactly, lady. Alas, there are many possessed abroad in your fine Confederation now. No, I have seen into that man's heart, and he frightens me sorely, Lady Louise, a fright more profound than the hell of beyond. He is the strange one I felt earlier. He is not as other possessed. He is a monster, a bringer of evil. I have resolved this matter in my own mind, though it has taken many hours of struggle. I must become his nemesis."

"Dexter's?" she said weakly.

"Yes, my lady. I think he may be the reason Our Lord blessed me to return. I am vouchsafed a clarity in this regard I cannot in conscience ignore. I must raise the alarm before he can advance his schemes further to the misery of other worlds."

"But it's not possible for us to go after him."

"Aye, lady, such a conundrum has a fierce grip upon my heart, borrowed though it be. It squeezes like a fire. To have been so close, and to lose the scent."

"We might not have lost him," Louise said, her thoughts aching they were spinning so fast.

"How so, lady?"

“He said he was going to Earth. To Earth so he could hurt someone . . . Banneth. He was going to hurt Banneth.”

“Then Banneth must be warned. He will commit such terrible atrocities in pursuit of his devilsome aims. I can never purge what he said of the little one from my mind. To even think such filth. Only in his head do such ideas dwell.”

“Well, we are going to Mars anyway. I expect there will be more ships flying to Earth than to Tranquillity. But I don’t have a clue how you could find Banneth once you get there.”

“Every voyage is divided into stages, lady. It is best to sail them one at a time.”

She watched him for some while as the holoscreen’s pallid light washed across his rapt face. “Why did you mutiny, Fletcher? Was it truly terrible on the *Bounty*?”

He gazed at her in surprise, then slowly smiled. “Not the conditions, lady, though I doubt you would much care for them. It was one man, my captain. He it was, the force moving my life towards the shore of destiny. William Bligh was my friend when the voyage started, strange though it is to recount such a fact now. But oh, how the sea changed him. He was embittered by his lack of promotion, fired by his notions of how a ship should be run. Never have I witnessed such barbarism from a man who claimed to be civilized, nor endured such treatment at his hands. I will spare you the anguish of detail, my fair lady Louise, but suffice it to say that all men have a breaking point. And mine was found during that long, dreadful voyage. However, I endure no shame over my actions. Many good and honest men were freed from his tyranny.”

“Then you were in the right?”

“I believe so. If this day I were called before the captains in a court-martial, I could give a just account of my actions.”

“Now you want to do something similar again. Freeing people, I mean.”

“Yes, lady. Though I would endure a thousand voyages with Bligh as my master in preference to one with Quinn Dexter. I had thought William Bligh versed in the ways of cruelty. I see now how mistaken I was. Now, to my horror, I have looked upon true evil. I will not forget the form it takes.”

10

The reporters had spent several days in prison, a phrase which their Organization captors studiously avoided; the preferred designation was house arrest, or protective confinement. They'd been singled out and spared when the possessed spread through San Angeles, then corralled with their families in the Uorestone Tower. Patricia Mangano who was in charge of the guard detail allowed the children to play in the opulent lounges while parents mixed freely, speculating on their circumstances and rehashing old gossip as only their profession knew how.

Five times in the last couple of days small groups had been taken out to tour the city, observing the steady falsification of buildings which was the hallmark of a land under possession. Once-familiar suburban streets had undergone timewarps overnight. It was as though some kind of dark architectural ivy were slowly creeping its way upwards, turning chrome-glass to stone, crinkling flat surfaces into arches, pillars, and statues. A plethora of era enclaves had emerged, ranging from 1950s New York avenues to timeless whitewashed Mediterranean villas, Russian dachas to traditional Japanese houses. All of them were ameliorated, more wistful renderings of real life.

The reporters recorded it all as faithfully as they could with their glitch-prone neural nanonic memory cells. This morning, though, was different. All of them had been summoned from their rooms, herded onto buses, and driven the five kilometres to City Hall. They were escorted from the buses by Organization gangsters and assembled on the sidewalk, forming a line between the autoway and the skyscraper's elaborate arched entrance. On Patricia's order the gangsters took several paces back, leaving the reporters to themselves.

Gus Remar found his neural nanonics coming back on-line, and immediately started to record his full sensorium, datavis-ing his flek recorder block to make a backup copy. It had been a long time since he'd covered a story in the field. These days he was a senior studio editor at the city's Time Universe bureau, but the old skill was still there. He started to scan around.

There were no vehicles using the autoway, but crowds were lining the sidewalk, five or six deep at the barrier. When he switched to long-range focus he could see they stretched back for about three blocks. The possessed were a majority, easy to spot in their epoch garments: the outlandish and the tediously uninspired. They seemed to be mingling easily enough with the non-possessed.

A slight fracas two hundred metres away at the back of the crowd caught Gus's attention. His enhanced retinas zoomed in.

Two men were pushing at each other, faces red with anger. One was a dark, handsome youth, barely twenty with perfectly trimmed black hair; dressed in leather jacket and trousers. An acoustic guitar was slung over his back. The second was older, in his forties, and considerably fatter. His attire was the most bizarre Gus had yet seen on display; some kind of white suit, smothered in rhinestones, with trousers flaring over thirty centimetres around his ankles, and collars which looked like small aircraft wings. Large amber-tinted sunglasses covered a third of his puffed-out face. If it hadn't been for the circumstances, Gus would have said it was a father quarrelling with his son. He shunted his audio discrimination program into primary mode.

"Goddamn fake," the younger man shouted with a rich Southern drawl. "I was never *this*." Hands flicked insultingly over the front of the white costume, ruffling the fit. "You're what they squeezed me into. You ain't nothing but a sick disease the record companies cooked up to make money. I would never come back as you."

The larger man pushed him away. "Who are you calling a fake, son? I am the King, the one and only."

The shoving began in earnest; both of them trying to floor the other. Amber sunglasses went spinning. Organization

gangsters moved in quickly to separate them, but not before the younger Elvis had unslung his guitar ready to brain the Vegas version.

Gus never saw the outcome. The crowd started cheering. A cavalcade had turned onto the autoway. Police motorcycles (Harley-Davidsons, according to Gus's encyclopedia memory file) appeared first, ten of them with blue and red lights flashing. They were followed by a huge limousine which crawled along at little more than walking pace: a 1920s Cadillac sedan which looked absurdly massive, fat tyres bulging from the weight of its armour plated bodywork. Glass that was at least five centimetres thick shaded the interior aquarium-green. There was one man sitting in the back, waving happily at the crowd.

The city was going wild for him. Al grinned around his cigar and gave them a thumbs-up. Je-zus, but it was like the good old days, riding around in this very same bulletproof Cadillac with the pedestrians staring openmouthed as he went past. In Chicago they'd known it contained a prince of the city. And now in San Angeles they goddamn well knew it again.

The Cadillac drew to a halt outside City Hall. A smiling Dwight Salerno came down the steps to open the door.

"Good to see you back, Al. We missed you."

Al kissed him on both cheeks, then turned to face the ecstatic crowd, clapping his hands together above his head like he was a prizefighter posing over a whipped opponent. They roared their approval. White fire cascaded and fizzed over the autoway as if Zeus were putting on a Fourth of July display.

"I love you guys!" Al bellowed at the faceless mass of chuckleheads. "Together ain't no miserable Confederation fucker gonna stop us doing what we wanna do."

They couldn't hear the words, not even those in the front rank. But the content was clear enough. The laudation increased.

With one hand still waving frantically, Al turned around and bounded up the stairs into City Hall. Always leave them wanting more, Jez said.

The conference was held in the lobby, a vaulting four-storey cavern that took up over half of the ground floor. An

avenue of huge palm trees, cloned from California originals, stretched from the doors to the vast reception desk. Today their solartubes were diminished to an off-white fluorescence, their bowls of loam drying out. Other signs of neglect and hurried tidying were in evidence: defunct valet mechanoids lined up along one wall, emergency exit doors missing, scraps of rubbish swept into piles behind stilled escalators.

The reception desk had been completely cleared, and a row of chairs placed behind it. Al sat in the centre, with two lieutenants on either side. His chair had been raised slightly. He watched the nervous reporters being brought in and marshalled on the floor in front of him. When they'd shushed down he rose to his feet.

"My name is Al Capone, and I suppose you're all wondering why I asked you here," he said, and chuckled. Their answering grins were few and far between. Tight asses. "Okay, I'll lay it on the line for you; you're here because I want the whole Confederation to know what's been going down in these parts. Once they know and understand then that's gonna save everyone a shitload of grief." He took off his grey fedora and put it down carefully on the polished desk. "It's an easy situation. My Organization is now in charge of the whole New California system. We're keeping the planet and the asteroid settlements in order, no exceptions. Now we ain't out to harm anyone, we just use our clout to keep things flowing along as best they'll go, same as any other government."

"Are you running the Edenist habitats, too?" a reporter asked. The rest flinched, waiting for Patricia Mangano's retribution. It never came, though she looked far from happy.

"Smart of you, buddy," Al acknowledged with a grudging smile. "No, I ain't running the Edenist habitats. I could. But I ain't. Know why? Because we're about evenly matched, that's why. We could do a lot of damage to each other if we ever came to fighting. Too much. I don't want that. I don't want people sent into the beyond on account of some penny-ante dispute over territory. I've been there myself, it's worse than any fucking nightmare you can imagine; it shouldn't happen to anyone."

"Why do you think you've been returned from the beyond, Al? Has God passed judgement on you?"

“You got me there, lady. I don’t know why any of this started. But I’ll tell you guys this much: I never saw no angels or no demons while I was stuck in the beyond, none of us did. All I know is we’re back. It ain’t no one’s fault, it just happened. And now we gotta make the best of what’s a pretty shitty deal, that’s what the Organization is for.”

“Excuse me, Mr Capone,” Gus said, encouraged by the response to earlier questions. “What’s the point of your Organization? You don’t need it. The possessed can do whatever they want.”

“Sorry, buddy, you’re way wrong there. Maybe we don’t need quite the same government as we had before, not all that tax, and regulations, and ideology, and shit. But you’ve got to have order, and that’s what I provide. I’m doing everyone a favour by taking charge like this. I’m protecting the possessed from attack by the Confederation Navy. I’m looking out for a whole load of non-possessed; because I’m telling you, without me you certainly wouldn’t be standing here in charge of your own body. See, I’m providing for all kinds of people, even though half of them don’t appreciate it right now. The possessed didn’t have jack shit worked out about where they were going until I came along. Now we’re all working together, making it happen. All because of me and the Organization. If I hadn’t stepped in and kept things going the cities would have busted down, we would have had a whole flood of lost boys heading for the countryside. Listen, I’ve seen the Depression firsthand, I know what it’s like for people who don’t have a job or something to do. And that’s what we were heading for here.”

“So what are your long-range goals, Al? What’s your Organization going to do next?”

“Smooth things out. No one is trying to deny things are still a little rough around the edges down here. We need to work on what kind of society we can build.”

“Is it true you’re planning to attack the Confederation?”

“That’s pure bullshit, buddy. Je-zus, I don’t know where you got that rumour from. No of course we’re not going to attack anyone. But we can defend ourselves pretty good if the Confederation Navy tries any funny stuff, we sure got the ships for that. Hell, I don’t want that to happen. We just want

to be peaceable neighbours with everyone. I might even ask if we can join the Confederation.” At the murmur of surprise echoing through the lobby he grinned around happily. “Yeah. Why the hell not? Sure we can ask to join. Maybe some good will come out of it, some kind of compromise that’ll make everyone happy; a solution to all the souls that wanna come back. The Organization can pay Confederation longhairs to grow us all new bodies from scratch, something like that.”

“You mean you’d give up your body if a clone was available?”

Al frowned as Emmet leaned over to murmur in his ear, explaining what a clone was. “Sure,” he said. “Like I told you, we’re all the victims of circumstance.”

“You believe peaceful coexistence is possible?”

Al’s jocularly darkened. “You’d better fucking believe it, buddy. We’re back, and we’re here to stay. Grab that? What I’m trying to convince you guys is that we ain’t no end of the world threat, it’s not us who’s the riders of the Apocalypse. We’ve proved possessed and non-possessed can live together on this planet. Okay, so people out there are alarmed right now, that’s only natural. But we’re frightened too, you can’t expect us to go back to the beyond. We’ve got to work together on this. I’m personally offering the Assembly President my hand in friendship. Now that’s an offer he can’t refuse.”

• • •

The glowing red clouds had begun to grow, small ruby speckles blossoming right across Norfolk. Louise, Fletcher, and Genevieve spent their first day in orbit watching the images received by the *Far Realm*’s external cameras. Kesteven island was by far the worst. A solid crimson aureole had gathered to mask the land, its shape a distended mockery of the coastline it was obscuring. Strands of ordinary white cloud malingered around its disciplined edges, only to be rebuffed by invisible winds if they drifted too close.

Fletcher assured the girls that in itself the red cloud was harmless. “A simple manifestation of will,” he proclaimed. “Nothing more.”

“You mean it’s just a wish?” Genevieve asked, intrigued.

She had woken almost purged of her emotional turmoil; there were none of yesterday's periods of manic exuberance or haunted silences. Although she was quieter than usual; which Louise thought was about right. She didn't feel like talking much, either. Neither she nor Fletcher had mentioned the *Tantu*.

"Quite so, little one."

"But why are they wishing it?"

"So that they can seek refuge below it from the emptiness of the universe. Even this planet's sky, which has little night, is not a sight to cherish."

Over thirty islands now had traces of redness in the air. Louise likened it to watching the outbreak of some terrible disease, a swelling cancer gnawing away at the flesh of her world.

Furay and Endron had come down into the lounge a few times, keeping them informed of the navy squadron's actions, and the army's progress. Neither of which amounted to much. The army had landed on two islands, Shropshire and Lindsey, hoping to retake their capitals. But reports from the forwards units were confused.

"Same problem as we had with Kesteven," Furay confided when he brought them lunch. "We can't support the lads on the ground because we don't have any reliable targeting information. And that red cloud has got the admiral badly worried. None of the technical staff can explain it."

By midafternoon, ship's time, the army commanders had lost contact with half of their troops. The red cloud was visible over forty-eight islands, nine of which it covered completely. As Duke-day ended for Ramsey island slender wisps were located over a couple of villages. Teams of reserve soldiers were hurriedly flown in from Norwich. In both cases contact was lost within fifteen minutes of them entering the area.

Louise watched grimly as the coiling cloud thickened over each village. "I was right," she said miserably. "There's nothing anybody here can do. It's only a matter of time now."

• • •

Tolton made his way up the narrow creek, water from the

narrow stream slopping over his glittery purple shoes. The top of the steep bank, a fringe of sandy grass, was several centimetres above his head. He couldn't see out onto the parkland, and nobody could see him—thankfully. Far overhead, Valisk's light tube gleamed. The intensity hurt Tolton's eyes. He was a night person, used to the clubs, bars, and vestibules of the starscrapers, delivering his poet sermons to the ship crew burnouts, bluesensers, stimed-out wasters, and mercenaries who sprawled throughout the lower floors of the starscrapers. They tolerated him, those lost entities, listening to (or laughing at) his carefully crafted words, donating their own stories to his wealth of experiences. He moved among the descriptions of shattered lives as vagrants moved through the filthy refuse of a darkened cul-de-sac, forever picking, trying to understand what they said, to bestow some grace to their wizened dreams with his prose, to explain them to themselves.

One day, he told them, I will incorporate it all into an MF album. The galaxy will know of your plight, and liberate you.

They didn't believe him, but they accepted him as one of their own. It was a status which had saved him from many a bar fight. But now, in his hour of desperate need, they had failed him. However difficult it was to acknowledge, they had lost; the toughest bunch of bastards in the Confederation had been wiped out in less than thirty-six hours.

"Take the left hand channel at the next fork," the processor block clipped to his belt told him.

"Yes," he mumbled obediently.

And this was the greatest, most hurtful joke of all: him, the aspirant anarchist poet, pathetically grateful to Rubra, the super-capitalist dictator, for helping him.

Ten metres on two gurgling streams merged together. He turned left without hesitation, the foaming water splashing his knees. Fleeing from the starscraper, it was as though an insane montage of all the combat stories he'd ever been told had come scampering up out of his subconscious to torment him. Horror and laughter pursued him down every corridor, even the disused ones he thought only he walked. Only Rubra, a calm voice reeling off directions, had offered any hope.

Water made his black trousers heavy. He was cold, partly from the fright, partly cold turkey.

There had been no sign of pursuit for three hours now, though Rubra said they were still tracking him.

The narrow creek began to widen, its banks lowering. Tolton walked out into a tarn fifteen metres across with a crescent cliff cupping the rear half. Fat xenoc fish lumbered out of his way, apparently rolling along the bottom. There was no other exit, no feed stream.

“Now what?” he asked plaintively.

“There’s an inlet at the far end,” Rubra told him. “I’ve shut down the flow so you’ll be able to swim through. It’s only about five metres long, it bends, and there’s no light; but it leads to a cave where you’ll be safe.”

“A cave? I thought caves were worn into natural rock over centuries.”

“Actually, it’s a surge chamber. I just didn’t want to get technical on you, not with your artistic background.”

Tolton thought the voice sounded tetchy. “Thank you,” he said, and started to wade forwards towards the cliff. A couple more directions, and he dived under the surface. The inlet was easy to find, a nightmare-black hole barely a metre and a half wide. Knowing he would never be able to turn around or even back out, he forced himself to glide into the entrance, bubbles streaming behind him.

It couldn’t have been five metres long, more like twenty or thirty. The curves were sharp, one taking him down, the other up. He broke surface with a frantic gasping cry. The cave was a dome shape, twenty metres across, every surface was coated in a film of water, thin ripples were still running down the walls. He had emerged in the pool at the centre. When he looked up there was a large hole at the apex, droplets splattered on his upturned face. A high ring of electrophorescent cells cast a weak pink-white glow into every cranny.

He paddled over to the side of the pool and pushed himself out onto the slippery floor. A bout of shivering claimed his limbs; he wasn’t sure if it was from the cold water or the nagging feeling of claustrophobia. The surge chamber was horribly confined, and the fact that it was usually full of water didn’t help.

"I'll have one of the housechimps bring you some dry clothes and food," Rubra said.

"Thank you."

"You should be safe here for a while."

"I . . ." He looked around apprehensively. Everyone always said Rubra could see everything. "I don't think I can stay very long. It's a bit . . . closed in."

"I know. Don't worry, I'll keep you moving, keep you ahead of them."

"Can I join up with anyone else? I need to be around people."

"There aren't that many of you left free, I'm afraid. And meeting up with them isn't a good idea, that would just make you easier to locate. I haven't quite worked out how they track the non-possessed yet; I suspect they've got some kind of ESP ability. Hell, why not? They've got every other kind of magic."

"How many of us are there?" he asked, suddenly panicky.

Rubra considered giving him the truth, but Tolton wasn't the strongest of characters. "A couple of thousand," he lied. There were three hundred and seventy-one people left free within the habitat, and assisting all of them simultaneously was pure hell.

Even as he was reassuring Tolton he perceived Bonney Lewin stalking Gilbert Van-Riytell. The tough little woman had taken to dressing in nineteenth-century African safari gear, a khaki uniform with two crossed bandoleer straps holding polished brass cartridges in black leather hoops. A shiny Enfield .303 rifle was slung over her shoulder.

Gilbert was Magellanic Itg's old comptroller, and had never really stood a chance. Rubra had been trying to steer him along some service tunnels below a tube station, but Bonney and her co-hunters were boxing him in.

"There's an inspection hatch three metres ahead," Rubra datavisaged to Van-Riytell. "I want you to—"

Shadows lifted themselves off the service tunnel wall and grabbed the old man. Rubra hadn't even noticed them. His perception routines had been expertly circumvented.

Once again, he purged and reformatted local sub-routines. By the time he regained some observation ability Van-

Riytell's legs and arms were being tied around a long pole, ready to be carried away like a prize trophy. He wasn't even struggling anymore. Bonney was supervising the procedure happily.

One of her hunting team was standing back, watching aloofly; a tall young man in a simple white suit.

Rubra knew then. It had to be him.

Dariat!

The young man's head jerked up. For an instant the illusion flickered. Long enough for Rubra. Under the outline of the handsome youth lurked Horgan. Horgan with a shocked expression wrenching his thin face. Incontrovertible proof.

I knew it would be you, Rubra said. In a way the knowledge came almost as a relief.

Much good it will do you, Dariat answered. **Your awareness of anything is going to come to an end real soon now. And you won't even make it to the freedom of the beyond, I won't allow you that escape.**

You're amazing, Dariat. I mean that as a compliment. You still want me, don't you? You want revenge. It's all you've ever wanted, all that kept you alive these last thirty years. You still blame me for poor old Anastasia Rigel, even after all this time.

You got another suspect? If you hadn't driven me away, she and I would still be alive.

The pair of you would be dodging good old Bonney here, you mean.

Maybe so. But then maybe if I'd been happy I might have made something of my life. Ever think of that? I might have risen through the company hierarchy just like you always wanted. I could have made Magellanic Itg supreme; I could have turned Valisk into the kind of nation that would have had Tranquillity's plutocrats flocking to us in droves. There wouldn't be any of these misfits and losers who rally around your banner. King Alastair would have come here asking me for tips on how to run his Kingdom. Do you really think a shipload of fucking zombies could have walked in here past passport, customs, and immigration without anyone even noticing if that kind

of regime had been in place? Don't you dare try and avoid facing up to what you've done.

Oh, really? Tell me: by misfits, and all the other trash you'd fling out of the airlocks, do you include the kind of girl you fell in love with?

"Bastard!" Dariat screamed. Everyone in the hunting party stared at him, even Van-Riytell. "I'll find you. I'll get you. I'll crush your soul to death." Rage distended his face. He flung both arms out horizontally from his body, a magus Samson thrusting against the temple pillars. White fire exploded from his hands to chew into the tunnel walls. Polyp flaked and cracked, black chips spinning away through the air.

Temper temper, Rubra mocked. I see that hasn't improved much over the years.

"Pack it in, you maniac!" Bonney yelled at him.

"Help me!" Dariat shouted back. The energistic hurricane roaring through his body was turning his brain to white-hot magma, wanting to burst clean out of his skull. "I'm going to kill him. Help me, for Chi-ri's sake." White fire hammered at the crumbling tunnel, desperate to reach the neural strata, to reach the very substance of the mind, and burn and burn and burn . . .

"Stop it, right now." Bonney aimed her Enfield at him, one eyebrow cocked.

Dariat slowly allowed the white fire to sink back into the passive energistic currents stirring the cells of his possessed body. His shoulders hunched in as smoke from the scorched polyp spun around him. He reverted to Horgan, even down to the unwashed shirt and creased trousers. Hands were pressed to his face as he resisted the onrush of tears. "I'll get him," Horgan's quavering, high-pitched voice proclaimed. "I'll fucking have him. I'll roast him inside his shell like he was some kind of lobster. You'll see. Thirty years I've waited. Thirty! Thole owes me my justice. He *owes* me."

"Sure he does," Bonney said. "But just so you and I are clear on this: pull another stunt like that, and you'll need a new body to work out of." She jerked her head to the team trussing up Van-Riytell. They lifted the old comptroller off the ground and started off down the tunnel.

The hunter woman glanced back at Dariat's hunched fig-

ure, opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it. She followed the rest of the hunters along the tunnel.

You frightened me so bad I'm trembling, Rubra sneered. Can you feel the quakes? I expect the sea is about to flood the parkland. How's about that for wetting yourself?

Laugh away, Dariat said shakily. Go right ahead. But I'm going to come for you one day. I'll crack your safeguards. They won't last forever, you know that. And forever is what I've got on my side now. Then when I've busted you, I'm going to come into that neural strata with you, I'm going to crawl into your mind like a maggot, Rubra. And like a maggot I'm going to gnaw away at you.

I always was right about you. You were the best. Who else could still burn so hot after thirty years? Damn, why did you ever have to meet her? Together we could have rebuilt the company into a galaxy challenger.

Such flattery. I'm honoured.

Don't be. Help me.

What? You have got to be fucking joking.

No. Together we could beat Kiera, purge the habitat of her cronies. You can rule Valisk yet.

The Edenists were right, you are insane.

The Edenists are frightened by my determination. You should know, you inherited that gene, it seems.

Yeah. So you know you can't deflect me. Don't even try.

Dariat, you're not one of them, boy, not one of the possessed. Not really. What can they possibly give you afterwards, huh? Ever thought of that? What sort of culture are they going to build? This is just an aberration of nature, a nonsense, and a transient one at that. Life has to have a purpose, and they're not alive. This energistic ability, the way you can create out of nothing, how can you square that with human behaviour? It's not possible, the two are not compatible, never will be. Look at yourself. If you want Anastasia back, bring her back. Find her in the beyond, get her back here. You can have everything now, remember? Kiera said so, did she not? Are you a part of that, Dariat? You have to decide, boy. Someday. If you don't, they'll do it for you.

"I can't bring her back," he whispered.

What's that?

I can't. You understand nothing.

Try me.

You, a confessor father? Never.

I always have been. I am the confessor for everyone inside me, you know that. I am the repository of everyone's secrets. Including those of Anastasia Rigel.

I know everything about Anastasia. We had no secrets. We were in love.

Really? She had a life before you met her, you know. Seventeen long years. And afterwards, too.

Dariat glanced around with cold anger, his appearance sliding back to the white-suited ascetic. There was no afterwards. She died! Because of you.

If you knew of her past, you would understand what I meant.

What secrets? he demanded.

Help me, and I'll show you.

You shit! I'm going to cremate you, I'll dance on your fragments—

Rubra's principal routine watched Dariat's rage run its course. He thought at one point that the man would revert to flailing at the tunnel walls with white fire again. But Dariat managed to hang on to that last shred of control—barely.

Rubra stayed silent. He knew it was too early to play his ace, the one final secret he had kept safe for the last thirty years. The doubt he had planted deep in Dariat's mind would have to be teased further, tormented into full-blown paranoia before the revelation was exposed.

• • •

Lady Macbeth's event horizon vanished, allowing her mushroom-shaped star trackers to rise out of their jump recesses and scan around. Fifteen seconds later the flight computer confirmed the starship had emerged fifty thousand kilometres above Tranquillity's non-rotational spaceport. By the time her electronic warfare sensors registered, eight of the habitat's Strategic Defence platforms had locked on to the hull, despite the fact their coordinate was smack in the centre of a designated emergence zone.

“Jesus,” Joshua muttered sourly. “Welcome home, people, nice to see you again.” He looked over to Gaura, who was lying on Warlow’s acceleration couch. “Update Tranquillity on our situation, fast, please. It seems a little trigger-happy today.” Combat sensors had located four blackhawks on interception trajectories, accelerating towards them at six gees.

Gaura acknowledged him with an indolent wrist flick. The Edenist’s eyes were closed; he’d been communicating with the habitat personality more or less from the moment the starship had completed the ZTT jump. Even with affinity it was difficult to convey their situation in a single quick summary; explanations, backed up with full memory exposure, took several minutes. He detected more than one ripple of surprise within the personality’s serene thoughts as the story of Lalonde unfolded in its mentality.

When he’d finished, Ione directed her identity trait at him in the Edenist custom. **That’s some yarn you’ve got there, she said. Two days ago I wouldn’t have believed a word of it, but as we’ve had warning fleks arriving from Avon on an almost hourly basis for the last day and a half all I can say is I’ll grant you docking permission.**

Thank you, Ione.

However, you will all have to be checked for possession before I’ll admit you into the habitat. I can hardly expose the entire population to the risk of contamination on the word of one man, even though you seem genuine.

Of course.

How’s Joshua?

He is well. A remarkable young man.

Yes.

The flight computer’s display showed the Strategic Defence platforms disengaging their weapons lock. Joshua received a standard acknowledgement from the spaceport’s traffic control centre followed by a datavised approach vector.

“I need a docking bay which can handle casualties,” he datavised back. “And put a pediatric team on alert status, as well as some biophysics specialists. These kids have had a real hard time on Lalonde, and that only finished when they got nuked.”

“I am assembling the requisite medical teams now,” Tran-

quillity replied. "They will be ready by the time you dock. I am also alerting a spaceport maintenance crew. Judging by the state of your hull, and the vapour leakages I can observe, I believe it would be appropriate."

"Thank you, Tranquillity. Considerate as ever." He waited for Ione to come on-line and say something, but the channel switched back to traffic control's guidance updates.

If that's the way she wants it . . . Fine by me. His features slumped into a frown.

He ignited the *Lady Mac's* two functional fusion tubes, aligning the ship on their approach vector. They headed in for Tranquillity at one and a half gees.

"They believe all that spiel about possession?" Sarha asked Gaura, a note of worried scepticism in her voice.

"Yes." He queried the habitat about the fleks from Avon. "The First Admiral's precautions have been endorsed by the Assembly. By now ninety per cent of the Confederation should be aware of the situation."

"Wait a minute," Dahybi said. "We only just got back here from Lalonde, and we didn't exactly hang around. How the hell could that navy squadron alert Avon two or three days ago?"

"They didn't," Gaura said. "The possessed must have got off Lalonde some time ago. Apparently Laton had to destroy an entire Atlantean island to prevent them from spreading."

"Shit," Dahybi grunted. "You mean they're loose in the Confederation already?"

"I'm afraid so. It looks like Shaun Wallace was telling Kelly the truth after all. I had hoped it was all some subtle propaganda on his part," the Edenist added sadly.

The news acted as a mood damper right through the starship. Their expected sanctuary wasn't so secure after all; they'd escaped a battle to find a war brewing. Not even an Edenist psyche could suppress that much gloom. The children from Lalonde (those not squeezed into the zero-tau pods) picked up on it, another emotional ricochet, though admittedly not as large as all the others they'd been through. The happiness Father Horst had promised them waited at the end of their journey was proving elusive. Even the fact the voyage was ending didn't help much.

The damage *Lady Macbeth* had suffered in the fight above Lalonde didn't affect her manoeuvrability, not with Joshua piloting. She closed in on her designated docking bay, CA 5-099, at the very centre of the spaceport disk, precisely aligned along the vector assigned by traffic control. There was no hint that fifteen attitude control thrusters had been disabled, and she was venting steadily from emergency dump valves as well as a couple of fractured cryogenic feed pipes.

By that time almost a quarter of the habitat population was accessing the spaceport's sensors, watching her dock. The news companies had broken into their schedules to announce that a single ship had made it back from Lalonde. Reporters had been very quick off the mark in discovering the pediatric teams were assembling in the bay. (Kelly's boss was making frantic datavises to the incoming starship, to no avail.)

The space industry people, industrial station workers, and ships' crews kicking their heels in the bars because of the quarantine observed the approach with a sense of troubled awe. Yes, Joshua had come through again, but the state of old *Lady Mac* . . . Charred, flaking nultherm foam exposed sections of her hull which showed innumerable heat-stress ripples (a sure sign of energy beam strikes), melted sensor clusters, only two fusion tubes functional. It must have been one hell of a scrap. They all knew no one else would be returning. Knowledge that every friend, colleague, or vague acquaintance who had accompanied Terrance Smith was either radioactive dust or lost to possession was hard to accept. Those starships were powerful, fast, and well armed.

The disembarkment process was, as expected, a shambles. People kept emerging from the airlock tube as if *Lady Mac* were the focus of some dimensional twist, her internal space far larger than that which the hull enclosed. Edenists formed a good percentage of the exiles, much to the surprise of the rover reporters. They helped a horde of wondrously senseogenic, scared-looking refugee kids in ragged clothes. Pediatric nurses floated after them in the reception compartment, while reporters dived like airborne sharks to ask the children how they felt/what they'd seen. Tears started to flow.

How the hell did they get in there? Ione asked the habitat. Serjeants launched themselves to intercept the reporters.

Jay Hilton hugged her legs to her chest as she drifted across the compartment, shivering unhappily. None of this was what she'd been expecting, not the starship voyage nor their arrival. She tried to catch sight of Father Horst amid the noisy swirl of bodies bouncing around the compartment, knowing that he had others to look out for and probably couldn't spare much time for her. In fact, she wouldn't be needed for anything much now there were plentiful adults around to take care of things again. Perhaps if she hunched up really small everyone would ignore her, and she'd be able to have a look at the habitat's park. Jay had heard stories of Edenist habitats and how beautiful they were; back in the arcology she'd often day-dreamed that one day she'd visit Jupiter, despite everything Father Varhoos preached about the evils of bitek.

The opportunity to escape the melee never quite presented itself. A reporter soared past her, noticed she was the oldest kid in the compartment, and used a grab hoop to brake himself abruptly. His mouth split into a super-friendly smile, the kind his neural nanonics program advised was best to interface trustfully with Young Children. "Hi there. Isn't this atrocious? They should have organized things better."

"Yes," Jay said doubtfully.

"My name is Matthias Rems." The smile broadened further.

"Jay Hilton."

"Well, hi there, Jay. I'm glad you've reached Tranquillity, you're quite safe here. From what we've heard it was nasty for all of you on Lalonde."

"Yes!"

"Really? What happened?"

"Well, Mummy got possessed the first night. And then—" A hand closed on her shoulder. She glanced around to see Kelly Tirrel giving Matthias Rems an aggressive stare.

"He wants to know what happened," Jay said brightly. She liked Kelly, admiring her right from the moment she arrived at the savanna homestead to rescue them. On the voyage to Tranquillity she'd secretly decided that she was going to be a tough, Confederation-roaming reporter like Kelly when she grew up.

"What happened is your story, Jay," Kelly said slowly. "It

belongs to you; it's all you've got left. And if he wants to hear it he has to offer you a great deal of money for it."

"Kelly!" Matthias flashed her a slightly exasperated you-know-the-score grin.

It made no discernible impression on Kelly. "Pick on someone your own size, Matthias. Ripping off traumatized children is low even for you. I'm covering for Jay."

"Is that right, Jay?" he asked. "Did you thumbprint a contract with Collins?"

"What?" Jay glanced from one to the other, puzzled.

"Serjeant!" Kelly shouted.

Jay squeaked in alarm as a glitter-black hand closed around Matthias Rems's upper arm. The owner of the hand was a hard-skinned monster worse than any shape a possessed had ever worn.

"It's all right, Jay." Kelly grinned for the first time in days. "It's on our side. This is what Tranquillity uses for its police force."

"Oh." Jay swallowed loudly.

"I'd like to complain about an attempted violation of confidentiality copyright," Kelly told the serjeant. "Also, Matthias is breaking the sense-media ethics charter concerning the approach and enticement of minors in the absence of their parents or guardians."

"Thank you, Kelly," the serjeant said. "And welcome home, I offer my congratulations on your endurance through difficult times."

She grimaced numbly at the bitek servitor.

"Come along now, sir," the serjeant said to Matthias Rems. It pushed away from the compartment bulkhead with its stocky legs, the pair of them heading for one of the hatchways.

"Don't ever trust reporters, Jay," Kelly said. "We're not nice people. Worse than the possessed really; they only steal bodies, we steal your whole life and make a profit out of it."

"You don't," Jay said, shoving the full child-force of trusting worship behind the words. A belief which was a sheer impossibility for any adult to live up to.

Kelly kissed her forehead, emotions in a muddle. Kids today, so knowing, which only makes them even more vul-

nerable. She gently pushed Jay towards one of the pediatric nurses, and left them discussing what the little girl had eaten last, and when.

“Kelly, thank Christ!”

The familiar voice made her twitch, a movement which in free fall was like a ripple running from toe to crown. She held on to a grab hoop to steady herself.

Feetfirst, Garfield Lunde slid down into her vision field. Her direct boss, and the man who had authorized her assignment. A big gamble, as he told her at the time, this kind of fieldwork is hardly your forte. Putting her deeper in his debt; everything he did for his workforce was a favour, an against-the-rules kindness. He owed his position entirely to his mastery of office politics; sensewise talent and investigative ability never entered into it.

“Hello, Garfield,” she said in a dull tone.

“You made it back. Great hairstyle, too.”

Kelly had almost forgotten her hair, cut to a fine fuzz to fit her armour suit’s skull helmet. Style, dress sense, cosmetic membranes: concepts which seemed to have dissolved clean out of her universe. “Well done, Garfield; I can see why your observational ability pushed you right the way up the seniority league.”

He wagged a finger, almost catching his ponytail which was snaking around his neck. “Tough lady, at last. Looks like you lost your cherry on this assignment; touched a few corpses, wondered if you should have helped instead of recorded. Don’t feel bad, it happens to us all.”

“Sure.”

“Is anyone else coming back, any other starships?”

“If they’re not here by now, they won’t be coming.”

“Christ, this is getting better by the second. We’ve got us a total exclusive. Did you get down to the planet?”

“Yes.”

“And is it possessed?”

“Yes.”

“Magnificent!” He glanced contentedly around the reception chamber, watching children and Edenists in free-fall flight, their movements reminiscent of geriatric ballerinas. “Hey, where are the mercs you went with?”

“They didn’t make it, Garfield. They sacrificed themselves so the *Lady Mac*’s spaceplane could lift the children off.”

“Oh, my God. Wow! Sacrificed themselves for kids?”

“Yes. We were outgunned, but they stood their ground. All of them. I never expected . . .”

“Stunning. You got it, didn’t you? For Christ’s sake, Kelly, tell me you recorded it. The big fight, the last noble stand.”

“I recorded it. What I could. When I wasn’t so scared I couldn’t think straight.”

“Yes! I knew I made the right decision sending you. This is it, babe. Just watch our audience points go galactic. We’re going to put Time Universe and the others out of business. Do you realize what you’ve done here? Shit, Kelly, you’ll probably wind up as my boss, after this. Wonderful!”

Very calmly, Kelly let Ariadne’s free-fall unarmed combat program shift into primary mode. Her sense of balance was immediately magnified, making her aware of every slight movement her body made in the minute air currents churning through the chamber. Her spacial orientation underwent a similar augmentation; distances and relative positions were *obvious*.

“Wonderful?” she hissed.

Garfield grinned proudly. “You bet.”

Kelly launched herself at him, rotating around her centre of gravity as she did so. Her feet came around, seeking out his head, legs kicking straight.

Two of the serjeants had to pull her off. Luckily the pediatric team had some medical nanonic packages with them; they were able to save Garfield’s eye; it would take a week before his broken nose knitted back into its proper shape, though.

• • •

All the passenger refugees had left *Lady Mac*. Overstressed environmental systems were calming. The docking bay’s umbilicals sent a cool wind washing through the bridge, taking with it the air of the voyage; ugly air with its smell of human bodies, humidity, and heavy carbon dioxide. To Joshua’s mind even the fans behind the grilles weren’t whining so much. Perhaps it was his imagination.

Now there was only the crew left to soak up the luxuriously

plentiful oxygen. The crew minus one. There hadn't been much time for Joshua to dwell on Warlow during the flight. Racing between jump coordinates, worrying about the energy patterning nodes holding out, the leakages, the damaged systems, children he had suddenly become responsible for, the desperate need to succeed.

Well, now he'd won, beaten the odds the universe had thrown at him. And it made him feel good, even though there was no happiness to accompany it. Self-satisfaction was a curious state, in this case roughly equivalent to fatigue-induced nirvana, he thought.

Ashly Hanson came up through the decking hatch and took a swift glance around the lethargic forms still encased by their acceleration couch webbing. "Flight's over, you know," he said.

"Yeah." Joshua datavisited an instruction into the flight computer. Harlequin schematics of the starship's principal systems vanished from his mind, and the webbing peeled back.

"I think the cleaning up can wait until tomorrow," Dahybi said.

"Message received," Joshua said. "Shore leave is now granted, and compulsory."

Sarha glided over from her couch and gave Joshua a tiny kiss. "You were magnificent. After all this is over, we're going back to Aethra so we can tell him we escaped and got the children off."

"If he's there."

"He's there. You know he is."

"She's right, Joshua," Melvyn Ducharme said as he cancelled the neurographic visualization of *Lady Mac's* power circuits. "He's there. And even if the transfer didn't work, his soul is going to be watching us right now."

"Jesus." Joshua shivered. "I don't even want to think about that."

"We don't have a lot of choice in the subject anymore."

"But not today," Ashly put in heavily. He held out an arm to Sarha. "Come along, we'll leave these morbids to moan among themselves. I don't know about you, but I'm having one very stiff drink in Harkey's first, then it's bed for a week."

"Sounds good." She twisted her feet off the stikpad by

Joshua's couch and followed the old time-hopper pilot through the hatch.

A vaguely nonplussed expression appeared on Joshua's face as they left together. None of your business, he told himself. Besides, there was Kelly to consider, though she'd been almost unrecognizable since returning from Lalonde. And then there was Louise. Ione, too.

"I think I'll skip the drink and go straight to bed," he announced to the other two.

They went out of the bridge hatch one at a time. It was only when they got to the airlock that they encountered the service company's systems specialist coming the other way. She wanted the captain's authority to begin assessing the ship so she could assemble a maintenance schedule. Joshua stayed behind to discuss priorities, datavising over the files on systems which had taken punishment above Lalonde.

There was nobody about when he finally left the starship. The circus in the reception chamber had ended. The reporters had packed up. There wasn't even a serjeant left to check him over for possession. Sloppy, he thought, not like Tranquillity at all.

A commuter lift took him along the spindle which connected the spaceport disk to the centre of the habitat's northern endcap. It deposited him in one of the ten tube stations which served the hub; deserted but for a single occupant.

Ione stood outside the waiting tube carriage, dressed in a sea-blue sarong and matching blouse. He smiled ruefully at the memory that evoked.

"I remember you," she said.

"Funny, I thought you'd forgotten."

"No. Not you, no matter what."

He stood in front of her, looking down at a face which owned far too much wisdom for such delicate features. "I was stupid," he confessed.

"I think you and I can withstand one argument, don't you?"

"I was stupid more than once."

"Tranquillity's been reviewing the memories of the Edenists you saved. I'm very proud of what you achieved on that flight, Joshua, and I don't just mean all that fancy flying. Very proud indeed."

All he could do was nod ineffectually. For a long time he'd dreamed about a reunion like this; going off after they'd had a fight had left too many things open-ended, too much unsaid. Now it was actually happening, his mind was slipping to Louise, who had also been left behind. It was all Warlow's fault, him and that damn promise to be a little less selfish with his girls.

"You look tired," Ione said, and held out her hand. "Let's go home."

Joshua looked down at her open hand, small and perfect. He twined his fingers through hers, rediscovering how warm her skin was.

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Parker Higgens thought it must have been about twenty years since he last left Tranquillity, a short trip on an Adamist starship to a university on Nanjing so he could deliver a paper and assess some candidates for the Laymil project. He hadn't enjoyed the experience; free-fall nausea seemed capable of penetrating whatever defences his neural nanonics erected across his nerve pathways.

This time it was pleasantly different. The gravity in the blackhawk's life-support capsule never fluctuated, he had a comfortable cabin to himself, the crew were friendly, and his navy escort officer was a cultured lady who made an excellent travelling companion.

At the end of the flight he even accessed the blackhawk's electronic sensors to watch their approach to Trafalgar. Dozens of navy starships swarmed around its two large spaceport globes. Avon provided a sumptuous backdrop; the warm blues, whites, greens, and browns of a terracompatible planet were so much kinder than the abrasive storm bands of Mirchusko, he realized. Parker Higgens almost laughed at the stereotype image he presented as he gawped like some stupefied tourist: the dusty old professor finally discovers there is life outside the research centre.

Pity he didn't have time to enjoy it. The navy officer had been datavisaging Trafalgar constantly since their wormhole terminus closed behind them, outlining their brief and authenticating it with a series of codes. They'd been given a priority

approach vector, allowing them to curve around one of the spaceports at an exhilarating speed before sliding into the huge crater which served as a docking ledge for bitek starships (they were the only blackhawk using it).

After that he'd had a couple of meetings with the First Admiral's staff officers, an exchange of information which chilled both sides. Parker found out about possession, they were given the data on the Laymil home planet, Unimeron. They decided there wasn't any room for doubt.

When he was shown into Samuel Aleksandrovich's big circular office the first thing Parker Higgens felt was an obscure burst of jealousy. The First Admiral had a view out over Trafalgar's biosphere which was more impressive than the one in his own office back on the Laymil project campus. A true dedicated bureaucrat's reaction, he chided himself; prestige is everything.

The First Admiral came around from behind his big teak desk to greet Parker with a firm handshake. "Thank you for coming, Mr Director; and I'd also like to convey my gratitude to the Lord of Ruin as well for acting so promptly in this matter. It would appear she is a strong supporter of the Confederation; I just wish other heads of state followed her example."

"I'll be sure to tell her," Parker said.

The First Admiral introduced the others sitting around his desk: Admiral Lalwani, Captain Maynard Khanna, Dr Gilmore, and Mae Ortlieb, the President's science office liaison aide.

"Well the Kiint did warn us, I suppose," Admiral Lalwani said. "All races eventually face the truth about death. It would appear the Laymil lost their confrontation."

"They never said anything before," Parker said bitterly. "We have six Kiint assisting the project back at Tranquillity; I've worked with them for decades; they're helpful, cooperative, I even considered them as friends . . . And never once did they drop the slightest hint. Damn them! They knew all along why the Laymil killed themselves and their habitats."

"Ambassador Roulor did say it was something which we must come to terms with on our own."

"Very helpful," Dr Gilmore grunted. "I have to say it's a

typical attitude to take given their psychology inclines towards the mystic.”

“I think any race which has uncovered the secret of death and survived the impact is inevitably going to take a highly spiritual approach to life,” the First Admiral said. “Don’t begrudge them that, Doctor. Now then, Mr Director, it would appear that our possession and the Laymil reality dysfunction are one and the same thing, correct?”

“Yes, Admiral. In fact, in the light of what we know now, the Laymil shipmaster’s reference to the Galheith clan’s death essence makes perfect sense. Possession was spreading across Unimeron as he left orbit.”

“I think I can confirm that,” Admiral Lalwani said. She glanced at the First Admiral for permission. He inclined his head. “A voidhawk messenger has just returned from Ombey. Several possessed got loose there; fortunately the authorities were remarkably successful in hunting them down. However, despite that success, they’ve had to cede some ground to them. We have a recording of the phenomena.”

Parker accessed the flek of images compiled by Ombey’s Strategic Defence sensor satellites, seeing the remarkably smooth red cloud slowly sheathing Mortonridge. Time-lapse coverage showed the planet’s terminator cruise in across the ocean. At night the peninsula’s covering glowed a hostile cerise, its edges flexing in agitation over the crinkled coastline.

“Oh, dear,” he said after he cancelled the visualization.

“They match,” Dr Gilmore said. “Absolutely, the same event.”

“Admittedly Laton was in a hurry and under a great deal of stress,” Lalwani said. “But if we understand him correctly, once that red cloud envelops a world completely, the possessed can take it right out of the universe.”

“Not outside, exactly,” Dr Gilmore said. “If you can manipulate space-time to the extent they apparently can, then you should be able to format a favourable micro-continuum around a world. The surface simply won’t be accessible through ordinary space-time. A wormhole might reach them, if we knew the correct quantum signature for its terminus.”

“The Laymil homeworld wasn’t destroyed,” Parker said

slowly. "Of that we are sure. We speculated that it could have been moved, but naturally we considered only physical movement through this universe."

"Then the possessed Laymil must have worked this vanishing trick," Lalwani said. "It really is possible."

"Dear God," the First Admiral murmured. "As if it wasn't enough trying to find a method of reversing possession, we now have to consider how to bring back entire planets from some demented version of Heaven."

"And the Laymil in the spaceholms committed suicide rather than submit," Lalwani said bleakly. "The parallel between the Ruin Ring and Pernik island is one I find most disturbing. The possessed confront us with a single choice; surrender or die. And if we do die, we enhance their own numbers. Yet Laton chose death; indeed he seemed almost happy at the prospect. Right at the end he told Oxley he would begin what he named the great journey, though he never elaborated. But the intimation that he would not suffer in the beyond was a strong one."

"Unfortunately it's hardly something you can turn into a firm policy," Mae Ortlieb observed. "Nor one to reassure people with even if you did."

"I am aware of that," Lalwani told the woman coolly. "What this information can do is point us towards areas which should be investigated. From the result of those investigations, policies can then be formulated."

"Enough," the First Admiral said. "We are here to try and decide which is the most fruitful line of scientific inquiry. Given we now have a basic understanding of the problem confronting us I'd like some suggestions. Dr Gilmore?"

"We're continuing to examine Jacqueline Couteur to try and determine the nature of the energy which the possessing soul utilizes. So far we've had very little success. Our instruments either cannot read it, or suffer glitches produced by it. Either way, we cannot define its nature." He gave the First Admiral a timorous glance. "I'd like your permission to move on to reactive tests."

Parker couldn't help the disapproving snort which escaped from his lips. Again reinforcing the persona of crusty old aca-

demic; but he deplored Gilmore's wholehearted right-wing militarism.

No one would think of it to look at him now, but Parker Higgins had done his stint for radicalism and its various causes during his student days. He wondered if that was on the file Lalwani must invariably keep on him, aging bytes in an obsolete program language detailing his protests over military development work carried out on the university campus. Had she accessed that before he'd been allowed in here, the heart of the greatest military force the human race had ever assembled? Perhaps she judged him safe these days. Perhaps she was even right in doing so. But people like Gilmore reopened all the old contemptuous thoughts. Reactive tests, indeed.

"You have a problem with that, Mr Director?" Dr Gilmore asked with formal neutrality.

Parker let his gaze wander around the office's big holo-screens, watching the starships shoaling over Avon. Readying themselves for combat. For conflict. "I agree with the First Admiral," he said sorrowfully. "We must attempt to locate a scientific solution."

"Which is only going to happen if my research can proceed unhindered. I know what you're thinking, Mr Director, and I regret the fact that we're dealing with a live human here. But unless you can offer me a valid alternative we must use her to add to our knowledge base."

"I am aware of the argument about relative levels of suffering, Doctor. I just find it depressing that after seven centuries of adhering to the scientific method we haven't come up with a more humane principle. I find the prospect of experimenting on people to be abhorrent."

"You should review the file Lieutenant Hewlett made when his marine squad were sent on their capture mission to obtain Jacqueline Couteur. You'd see exactly who really practises abhorrent behaviour."

"Excellent argument. They do it to us, so we're fully justified doing it to them. We are all people."

"I'm sorry," the First Admiral interjected. "But we really don't have time for the pair of you to discuss ethics and morality. The Confederation is now officially in a state of

emergency, Mr Director. If that turns us into what you regard as savages in order to defend ourselves, then so be it. We did not initiate this crisis, we are simply reacting to it the only way I know how. And I am going to use you as much as Dr Gilmore will use the Couteur woman.”

Parker straightened his spine, sitting up to stare at the First Admiral. Somehow arguing with him as he had with the navy scientist wasn't even an option. Lalwani was right, he acknowledged sorely. Student politics didn't stand much chance against his adult survival instinct. We are what our genes made us. “I don't think I would be much use to your endeavour, Admiral. I've made my contribution.”

“Not so.” He gestured to Mae Ortlieb.

“The Laymil must have tried to prevent possession from engulfing their spaceholms before they committed suicide,” she said. “I believe that is what the essencemasters were on board the ship for.”

“Yes, but it couldn't have worked.”

“No.” She gave him a heavily ironic smile. “So I'd like to use the scientific method, Mr Director: eliminate the impossible and all you're left with is the possible. It would be a lot of help to us if we knew what won't work against the possessed. A great deal of time would be saved. And lives, too, I expect.”

“Well yes, but our knowledge is extremely limited.”

“I believe there are still many files in the Laymil electronics stack which have not been reformatted to human sense compatibility?”

“Yes.”

“Then that would be a good start. If you could return to Tranquillity and ask Ione Saldana to initiate a priority search for us, please.”

“That was in hand when I left.”

“Excellent. My office and the navy science bureau here in Trafalgar can provide fresh teams of specialists to assist in the analysis process. They'd probably be better qualified in helping to recognize any weapons.”

Parker gave her an exasperated look. “The Laymil didn't work like that; weapons are not part of their culture. Their countermeasures would consist principally of psychological

inhibitors distributed through the spaceholms' life-harmony gestalt. They would attempt to reason with their opponents."

"And when that failed, they might just have been desperate enough to try something else. The Laymil possessed weren't above using violence, we saw that in the recording. Their reality dysfunction was incinerating large portions of land."

Parker surrendered, even though he knew it was all wrong. These people could so easily believe in the concept of super-weapons hidden amid the fractured debris of the Ruin Ring, a deus ex machina waiting to liberate the human race. The military mind! "Anything is possible," he said. "But I'd like to go on record as saying that in this case I strongly doubt it."

"Of course," the First Admiral said. "However, we do need to look, I'm sure you can appreciate that. May we send our specialists back with you?"

"Certainly." Parker didn't like to think what Ione Saldana would say about that. Her one principal limitation on the project was the right to embargo weapons technology. But these people had outmanoeuvred him with astonishing ease. An acute lesson in the difference between political manoeuvring practised on the Confederation capital and one of its most harmless outpost worldlets.

Samual Aleksandrovich watched the old director knuckle under, even feeling a slight sympathy. He really didn't like to invade the world of such a blatantly decent man of peace. The Parker Higgenses of this universe were what the Confederation existed to defend. "Thank you, Mr Director. I don't want to appear an ungracious host, but if you could be ready to leave within a couple of hours, please. Our people are already being assembled." He carefully avoided Higgens's sharp glance at that comment. "They can travel on navy voidhawks, which should provide you a suitable escort back to Tranquility. I really can't run the risk of your mission being intercepted. You're too valuable to us."

"Is that likely?" Parker asked in concern. "An interception, I mean?"

"I would certainly hope not," the First Admiral said. "But the overall situation is certainly less favourable than I'd hoped. We didn't get our warnings out quite fast enough. Several returning voidhawks have reported that the possessed

have gained an enclave on various worlds, and there are seven asteroid settlements we know of that have been taken over completely. Most worrying is a report from the Srinagar system that they have taken over the Valisk habitat, which means they have a fleet of blackhawks at their disposal. That gives them the potential to mount a substantial military operation to assist others of their kind.”

“I see. I didn’t realize the possessed had advanced so far. The Mortonridge recording is a distressing one.”

“Precisely. So you can appreciate our hurry in acquiring what information we can from the Laymil recordings.”

“I . . . I do, yes.”

“Don’t worry, Mr Director,” Lalwani said. “Our advantage at the moment is that the possessed are all small individual groups, they lack coordination. It is only if they become organized on a multistellar level that we will be in real trouble. The Assembly’s prohibition on commercial starflight should give us a few weeks grace. It will be difficult for them to spread themselves by stealth. Any interstellar movements they make from now on will have to be large scale, which gives us the ability to track them.”

“That is where the navy will face its greatest challenge,” the First Admiral said. “Also our greatest defeat. In space warfare there is no such thing as a draw, you either win or you die. We will be shooting at complete innocents.”

“I doubt it will come to that,” Mae Ortlieb said. “As you said, they are a disorganized rabble. We control interstellar communications, it should be enough to prevent them merging to form a genuine threat.”

“Except . . .” Parker said, he caught himself, then gave a penitent sigh. “Some of our greatest generals and military leaders must be waiting in the beyond. They will understand just as much about tactics as we do. They’ll know what they have to do in order to succeed.”

“We’ll be ready for them,” the First Admiral said. He tried not to show any disquiet at Parker’s suggestion. Would I really be able to compete against an alliance between Napoleon and Richard Saldana?

Dariat walked up the last flight of stairs into the foyer of the Sushe starscraper. None of the possessed used the lifts anymore—too dangerous, with Rubra still controlling the power circuits (and as for taking a tube carriage . . . forget it). The once-stylish circular foyer echoed a war zone, its glass walls cracked and tarnished with soot, furniture mashed and flung about, dripping with water and grubby grey foam from the ceiling fire sprinklers. Black soil from broken pot plants squelched messily underfoot.

He refused to say it to the others picking their way through the wreckage: *If you'd just listened to me.* They'd heard it from him so many times they didn't listen; besides, they followed Kiera slavishly now. He had to admit the council she'd put together was effective at maintaining control within the habitat. And precious little else. He found it a telling point that the possessed hadn't bothered using their energistic power to return the lobby to its original state; it wasn't as if they had to go around with a brush and sponge. Rubra's continuing presence and war-of-nerves campaign was taking its toll on morale.

He stepped through the twisted doors out onto the flagstones ringing the lobby building. The surrounding parkland had, at least, retained its bucolic appearance. Emerald grass, unblemished by a single weed, extended out to the rank of sagging ancient trees two hundred metres away, crisscrossed by hard-packed gravel paths leading off deeper into the habitat interior. Dense hemispherical bushes with dark violet leaves and tiny silver flowers were scattered about. Small reptilian birds that were little more than triangular wings of muscle, with scales coloured turquoise and amber, swooped playfully through the air overhead.

The corpse spoils the idyll; lying with its legs across one of the gravel paths, one ankle twisted at an awkward angle. There was no way of telling if it was male or female. Its head looked as if it had been shoved into a starship's fusion exhaust jet.

The remains of the perpetrators, a pair of servitor housechimps, were smouldering on the grass twenty metres away. One of them held a melted wand which Dariat recognized as a shockrod. A lot of the possessed had been caught unawares

by the harmless-looking servitors. After a couple of days of unexpected, and unpredictable, attacks, most people simply exterminated them on sight now.

He walked past, wrinkling his nose at the smell. When he reached the trees he saw one of the triangular birds had alighted on the topmost branch. They eyed each other warily. It was a xenoc, so he was reasonably sure it wasn't affinity-bonded. But with Rubra, you could never be certain. Now Dariat thought about it, the servitors would be an excellent way of keeping everyone under observation, circumventing the disruption he'd been inflicting on the neural strata's sub-routines. He scowled up at the bird, which rippled its wings but didn't take off.

Dariat moved swiftly through the woods to a large glade which Kiera was using. Impressively tall trees with grey-green leaves formed a valley on either side of a wide stream, their black trunks host to a furry moss-analogue. Long grass fringed the water, littered with wild poppies.

Two groups of people were occupying the glade. One was comprised entirely of youngsters, couples in their late teens and early twenties; boys all with bare chests, wearing shorts or swimming trunks; girls in light summer dresses or bikinis, emphasising their femininity. Both genders had been chosen for their beauty. Four or five children milled about looking completely bored; girls in party frocks and ribbons in their hair, boys in shorts and smart shirts. Two of the under sevens were smoking.

At the other end of the glade four people in ordinary clothes stood in a group, talking in loud strained voices. Arms waved around as fingers jabbed for emphasis. Various electronic modules were scattered on the grass around their feet, the paraphernalia of a professional MF recording operation.

Dariat saw Kiera Salter was standing among the recording team, and went over. She was wearing a white cotton camisole with tiny pearl buttons down the front, the top half undone to display her cleavage; and a thin white skirt showing tanned legs and bare feet. With her hair unbound over her shoulders the effect was awesomely sexy. It lasted right up until she turned her gaze on him. Marie Skibbow's body

might be a male fantasy made flesh, but the maleficent intelligence now residing in her skull was instantly chilling.

"I hear you're losing it, Dariat," she said curtly. "I've been patient with you so far, because you've been very useful to us. But if there's another incident like the one in the service tunnel, then I shall consider that usefulness at an end."

"If you don't have me here to counter Rubra, then it's going to be you who'll wind up losing your temper. He'll blast every possessed back into the beyond if you let your guard down for a second. He doesn't care about the people whose bodies we've stolen."

"You are becoming a bore, Dariat. And from what I hear that wasn't a temper loss, more like a psychotic episode. You're a paranoid schizophrenic, and people find that unsettling. Now concentrate on how to flush Rubra out of the neural strata by all means, but stop trying to spread dissension or it's going to go hard on you. Clear?"

"As crystal."

"Good. I do appreciate what you're trying to do, Dariat. You're just going to have to learn a softer approach, that's all." She gave him a factory-issue sympathetic smile.

Dariat saw one of the xenoc triangle birds perched on a tree behind her, watching the scene in the glade. The smirk which rose on his real lips was hidden by the energistic mirage-form he cloaked himself with. "I expect you're right. I'll try."

"Good man. Look, I don't want to be forced out of Valisk by him any more than you do. We're both onto a good thing here, and we can both maintain our status providing we just keep calm. If this recording works we should have recruits flocking to join us. That way we can shift Valisk to a place where Rubra's neutered. Permanently. Just keep him from causing too much trouble before then, and leave the rest to me, okay?"

"Yeah, all right. I understand."

She nodded dismissal, then took a steadying breath and turned back to the recording team. "Are you ready yet?"

Khaled Jaros glared at the recalcitrant sensor block in his hand. "I think so, yes. I'm sure it will work this time. Ramon has reprogrammed it so that only the primary functions are left; we won't be able to get olfactory or thermal inputs, but

the AV reception appears to be holding stable. With a bit of luck we can add some emotional activant patterns later.”

“All right, we’ll try again,” she said loudly.

Under Khaled’s directions the group of sybarite youths took up their positions once more. One couple started necking on the grass, another pair sported in the water. The little children stubbed their cigarettes out, then ran around in dizzy circles, giggling and shrieking. “Not so loud!” Khaled bellowed at them.

Kiera took up her own position leaning against the boulder at the side of the sparkling water. She cleared her throat, and forked her hair back with her left hand.

“Undo another couple more buttons, dear, please,” Khaled instructed. “And bend your knees further.” He was staring straight into an AV pillar on one of the blocks.

She paused irately, and thought about it. The solidity of the camisole buttons wavered, and the hoops fell off allowing the flimsy fabric to shift still further apart. “Is this quite necessary?” she asked.

“Trust me, darling. I’ve directed enough commercials in my time. Sex always sells: primary rule of advertising. And that’s what this is, no matter what you want to call it. So I want legs and cleavage for the boys to drool over, and confidence to inspire the girls. That way we get them both feeding from our palm.”

“Okay,” she grumbled.

“Wait.”

“Now what?”

He looked up from the AV pillar. “You’re not distinctive enough.”

Kiera glanced down at the slope of her breasts on show. “You are making a very bad joke.”

“No no, not your tits, darling; they’re just fine. No, it’s the overall image, it’s so passé.” Fingers plucked at his lower lip. “I know, let’s be astonishingly bold. I want you lounging there, just as you are, but have a red scarf wrapped around your ankle.”

Kiera stared at him.

“Please, love? Trust, remember?”

She concentrated again. The appropriate fabric material-

ized around her ankle, a silk handkerchief tied in a single knot. Blood red, and see if he caught the hint.

“That’s wonderful. You look wild, gypsy exotic. I’m in love with you already.”

“Can I start now?”

“Ready when you are.”

Kiera took a moment to compose herself again, aiming for an expression which was the epitome of adolescent coyness. The water tinkled melodically beside her, other youths smiled and held each other close, children raced past her boulder. She grinned indulgently at them, and waved as they played their merry game. Then her head came around slowly to look straight at the sensor block.

“You know, they’re going to tell you that you shouldn’t be accessing this recording,” she said. “In fact, they’re going to get quite serious about that; your mum and dad, your big brother, the authorities in charge of wherever you live. Can’t think why. Except, of course, I’m one of the possessed, one of the demons threatening ‘the fabric of the universe,’ your universe. I’m your enemy, apparently. I’m pretty sure I am, anyway; the Confederation Assembly says so. So . . . that must be right. Yes? I mean, President Haaker came here and looked me over, and talked to me, and found out all about me, what I want, what I hate, which is my favourite MF artist, what frightens me. I don’t remember that time when I spoke to him. But it must have happened, because the ambassadors of every government in the Assembly voted that I’m officially to be denounced as a monster. They wouldn’t do that, not all those bright, serious, wise people, unless they had all the facts at their disposal, now would they?”

“Actually, the one lonely fact they had, and voted on, was that Laton killed ten thousand Edenists because they were possessed. You remember Laton. Some sort of hero a while back, I’ve been told, something about a habitat called Jantrit. I wonder if he asked the individuals on Pernik island if they wanted to be exterminated. I wonder if they all said yes.

“They’ve done to us what they do to kids the universe over, lumped us together and said we’re bad. One thug hits somebody, and every kid is a violent hooligan. You know that’s truth, it happens all the time in your neighbourhood. You’re

never an individual, not to them. One wrong, all wrong. That's the way we're treated.

"Well, not here, not in Valisk. Maybe some possessed want to conquer the universe. If they do, then I hope the Confederation Navy fights them. I hope the navy wins. Those sort of possessed frighten me as much as they frighten you. That's not what we're about, it's so stupid, it's so obsolete. There's no need for that kind of behaviour, that kind of thinking, not anymore. Not now.

"Those of us here on Valisk have seen what the power which comes of possession can really do when it's applied properly. Not when it's turned to destruction, but when it's used to help people. That's what frightens President Haaker, because it threatens the whole order of his precious world. And if that goes, he goes, along with all his power and his wealth. Because that's what this is really all about: money. Money buys people, money lets companies invest and consolidate their markets, money pays for weapons, tax money pays for bureaucracy, money buys political power. Money is a way of rationing what the universe has to offer us. But the universe is infinite, it doesn't need to be rationed.

"Those of us who have emerged from the dead of night can break the restrictions of this corrupt society. We can live outside it, and flourish. We can burn your Jovian Bank ration cards and liberate you from the restrictions others impose on you." Her smile tilted towards shy impishness. She held a hand out towards the sensor block, palm open. Her fingers closed into a fist, then parted again. A pile of ice-blue diamonds glittered in her palm, laced with slim platinum chains.

She grinned back at the sensor block, then tipped them carelessly onto the grass. "You see, it's so simple. Items, objects, goods, the capitalist stockpile, exist only to give joy; for us living in Valisk they are an expression of emotion. Economics is dead, and true equality will rise out of the ashes. We've turned our back on materialism, rejected it completely. It has no purpose anymore. Now we can live as we please, develop our minds not our finances. We can love one another without the barrier of fear now that honesty has replaced greed, for greed has died along with all the other vices of old. Valisk has become a place where every wish is granted, how-

ever small, however grand. And not just for those of us who have returned. To keep it to ourselves would be a cardinal act of greed. It is for everyone. For this aspect of our existence is the part which your society will despise the most, will curse us for. We are taking Valisk out of this physical dimension of the universe, launching it to a continuum where everyone will have our energistic power. It's a place where I can take on form, and return the body I have borrowed. All of us lost souls will be real people again, without conflict, and without the pain it takes for us to manifest ourselves here.

"And now I'll make our offer. We open Valisk to all people of goodwill, to those of a gentle disposition, to everyone sick of having to struggle to survive, and sick also of the petty limits governments and cultures place on the human heart. You are welcome to join us on our voyage. We shall be leaving soon, before the navy warships come and their bombs burn us for the crime of being what we are: people who embrace peace.

"I promise you that anyone who reaches Valisk will be granted a place among us. It will not be an easy journey for you, but I urge you to try. Good luck, I'll be waiting."

The white cotton changed, darkening into a swirling riot of colour, as if skirt and camisole were made from a thousand butterfly wings. Marie Skibbow's smile shone through, bringing a natural warmth all of its own to the watchers. Children flocked around her, giggling merrily, hurling poppy petals into the air so that when they fell they became a glorious scarlet snowstorm. She let them take her hands and hurry her forwards, eager to join their game.

The recording ended.

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Despite being nearly fifty years old, the implant surgery care ward boasted an impressive array of contemporary equipment. Medicine, along with its various modern sidelines, was a profitable business in Culey asteroid.

The annex to which Erick Thakrar had been assigned (Duchamp hadn't paid for a private room) was halfway along the ward's main hall, a standardized room of pearl-white composite walls and glare-free lighting panels, the template followed by hospitals right across the Confederation. Patients

were monitored by a pair of nurses at a central console just inside the door. They weren't strictly necessary, the hospital's sub-sentient processor array was a lot faster at spotting metabolic anomalies developing. But hospitals always adopted the person-in-the-loop philosophy; invalids wanted the human touch, it was reassuring. As well as being profitable, medicine was one of the last remaining labour-intensive industries, resisting automation with an almost Luddite zeal.

The operation to implant Erick's artificial tissue units had begun fifteen minutes after his removal from zero-tau. He'd been in surgery for sixteen hours; at one point he had four different surgical teams working on various parts of him. When he came out of theatre, thirty per cent of his body weight was accounted for by artificial tissue.

On the second day after his operation he had a visitor: a woman in her mid-thirties with unobtrusive Oriental features. She smiled at the ward's duty nurse, claiming she was Erick's second cousin, and could even have proved it with an ID card if she'd been pressed. The nurse simply waved her down the ward.

When she entered the annex two of the six beds were unoccupied. One had the privacy screen down to reveal an elderly man who gave her a hopeful talk-to-me-please look, the remaining three were fully screened. She smiled blandly at the lonely man, and turned to Erick's bed, datavising a code at the screen control processor. The screen split at the foot of the bed, shrinking back towards the walls. The visitor stepped inside, and promptly datavisied a closure code at it.

She tried not to flinch when she saw the figure lying on the active shapeform mattress. Erick was completely coated in a medical package, as if the translucent green substance had been tailored into a skintight leotard. Tubes emerged from his neck and along the side of his ribs, linking him with a tall stack of medical equipment at the head of the bed, supplying the nanonics with specialist chemicals needed to bolster the traumatized flesh, and syphoning out toxins and dead blood cells.

Two bloodshot, docile eyes looked out at her from holes in the package smothering his face. "Who are you?" he

datavised. There was no opening in the package for his mouth, only a ventlike aperture over his nose.

She datavised her identification code, then added: "Lieutenant Li Chang, CNIS. Hello, Captain, we received your notification code at the Navy Bureau."

"Where the hell have you people been? I sent that code yesterday."

"Sorry, sir, there's been a system-wide security flap for the last two days. It's kept us occupied. And your shipmates have been hanging around the ward. I judged it best that they didn't encounter me."

"Very smart. You know which ship I came in on?"

"Yes, sir, the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. You made it back from Lalonde."

"Just barely. I've compiled a report of our mission and what happened. It is vital you get this datapackage to Trafalgar. We're not dealing with Laton, this is something else, something terrible."

Li Chang had to order a neural nanonics nerve override to retain her impassive composure. After everything he'd been through to obtain this data . . . "Yes, sir; it's possession. We received a warning flek from the Confederation Assembly three days ago."

"You know?"

"Yes, sir, it appears the possessed left Lalonde before you got there, presumably on the *Yaku*. They're starting to infiltrate other planets. It was Laton who alerted us to the danger."

"Laton?"

"Yes, sir. He managed to block them on Atlantis, he warned the Edenists there before he kamikazed. The news companies are broadcasting the full story if you want to access it."

"Oh, shit." A muffled whimper was just audible from behind the package over his face. "Shit, shit, shit. This was all for nothing? I went through this for a story the news companies are shoving out? This?" An arm was raised a few centimetres from the mattress, shaking heavily as though the package coating were too burdensome to lift.

"I'm sorry, sir," she whispered.

His eyes were watering. The facial package sucked the salty liquid away with quiet efficiency. "There's some infor-

mation left in the report. Important information. Vacuum can defeat them. God, can it defeat them. The navy will need to know that.”

“Yes, sir, I’m sure they will.” Li Chang hated how shallow that sounded, but what else was there to say? “If you’d like to datavise the report to me I’ll include it on our next communiqué to Trafalgar.” She assigned the burst of encrypted data to a fresh memory cell.

“You’d better check my medical record,” Erick said. “And run a review on the team who operated on me. The surgeons are bound to realize I was hardwired for weapons implants.”

“I’ll get on to it. We have some assets in the hospital staff.”

“Good. Now for Heaven’s sake, tell the head of station I want taking off this bloody assignment. The next time I see André Duchamp’s face I’m going to smack his teeth so far down his throat he’ll be using them to eat through his arse. I want the asteroid’s prosecution office to formally charge the captain and crew of the *Villeneuve’s Revenge* with piracy and murder. I have the appropriate files, it’s all there, our attack on the *Krystal Moon*.”

“Sir, Captain Duchamp has some contacts of his own here, political ones. That’s how he circumvented the civil starflight quarantine to dock here. We could probably have him arrested, but whoever that contact is, they aren’t going to want the embarrassment of a trial. He’d probably be allowed to post bail, that’s if he doesn’t simply disappear quietly. Culey asteroid is really not the kind of place to bring that kind of charge against an independent trader. It’s one of the reasons so many of them use it, which is why CNIS has such a large station here.”

“You won’t arrest him? You won’t stop this madness? A fifteen-year-old girl was killed when we attacked that cargo ship. Fifteen!”

“I don’t recommend we arrest him here, sir, because he wouldn’t stay under arrest. If the service is to have any chance of nailing him, it ought to be done somewhere else.” There was no answer, no response. The only clue she had that Erick was still alive came from the slow-blinking coloured LEDs on the medical equipment. “Sir?”

“Yes. Okay, I want him so bad I can even wait to be sure.

You don't understand that people like him, ships like his, they've got to be stopped, and stopped utterly. We should fling every crew member from every independent trader down onto a penal planet, break the ships down for scrap and spare parts."

"Yes, sir."

"Go away, Lieutenant. Make arrangements to have me shipped back to Trafalgar. I'll do my convalescing there, thank you."

"Sir . . . Yes, sir. I'll relay the request. It might be some time before you can actually be transferred. As I said, there is a Confederation-wide quarantine order in effect. We could have you taken to a more private area and guarded."

Again there was a long interval. Li Chang bore it stoically.

"No," Erick datavised. "I will remain here. Duchamp is paying, perhaps my injuries along with the repairs his ship needs will be enough to bankrupt the bastard. I expect Culey's authorities regard bad debts as a serious crime, after all that's money which is at stake, not morality."

"Yes, sir."

"The first ship out of here, Lieutenant, I want to be on it."

"I'll set it up, sir. You can count on me."

"Good. Go now."

Feeling as guilty as she'd ever done in her life, she turned quickly and datavised the screen to open. One quick glance over her shoulder as she left—hoping to ease her conscience, hoping to see him relaxing into a peaceful sleep—showed his eyes were still open at the bottom of their green pits; a numbed angry stare, focused on nothing. Then the screen flowed shut.

• • •

Alkad Mzu exited the Nyiru traffic control sensor display as soon as the wormhole interstice closed. At fifty thousand kilometres there hadn't been much of an optical-band return, the visualization was mostly graphics superimposed over enhanced pixel representations. But for all the lack of true visibility, there was no fooling them. *Udat* had departed.

She looked out through the observation lounge's giant win-

dow which was set in the rock wall just above the asteroid's docking ledge. A slender slice of stars were visible below the edge of the bulky non-rotational spaceport a kilometre and a half away. Narok itself drifted into view; seemingly smothered in white cloud, its albedo was sufficient to cast a frail radiance. Faint elongated shadows sprang up across the ledge, streaming away from the blackhawks and voidhawks perched on their docking pedestals. They tracked around over the smooth rock like a clock's second hand. Alkad waited until Narok vanished below the sharp synthetic horizon. The swallow manoeuvre would be complete now. One more, and the resonance device she had secreted on board would be activated.

There wasn't really any feeling of success, let alone happiness. A lone blackhawk and its greedy captain were hardly compensation for Garissa's suffering, the genocide of an entire people. It was a start, though. If nothing else, internal proof that she still retained the ardent determination of thirty years ago when she had kissed Peter goodbye. "*Au revoir*, only," he'd insisted. An insistence she'd willed herself to believe in.

Maybe the easy, simple heat of hatred had cooled over the decades. But the act remained, ninety-five million dead people dependent on her for some degree of justice. It wasn't rational, she knew, this dreadful desire for revenge. But it was so sadly human. Sometimes she thought it was all she had left to prove her humanity with, a single monstrously flawed compulsion. Every other genuine emotion seemed to have disappeared while she was in Tranquillity, suppressed behind the need to behave normally. As normal as anyone whose home planet has been destroyed.

The dusky shadows appeared again, odd outlines stroking across the rock ledge, matching the asteroid's rotation. *Udat* would have performed its third swallow by now.

Alkad crossed herself quickly. "Dear Mother Mary, please welcome their souls to Heaven. Grant them deliverance from the crimes they committed, for we are all children who know not what we do."

What lies! But the Maria Legio Church was an ingrained and essential part of Garissan culture. She could never discard

it. She didn't want to discard it, stupid as that paradox was for an unbeliever. There was so little of their identity left that any remnant should be preserved and cherished. Perhaps future generations could find comfort among its teachings.

Narok fell from sight again. Alkad turned her back on the starfield and walked towards the door at the back of the observation lounge; in the low gravity field her feet took twenty seconds to touch the ground between each step. The medical nanonic packages she wore around her ankles and forearms had almost finished their repair work now, making her lazy movements a lot easier.

Two of the *Samaku's* crew were waiting patiently for her just inside the door, one of them an imposing-looking cosmonik. They fell in step on either side of her. Not that she thought she really needed bodyguards, not yet, but she wasn't willing to take the chance. She was hauling around too much responsibility to risk jeopardizing the mission over a simple accident, or even someone recognizing her (this was a Kenyan-ethnic star system, after all).

The three of them took a commuter lift along the spindle to the spaceport where the *Samaku* was docked. Chartering the Adamist starship had cost her a quarter of a million fuseodollars, a reckless sum of money, but necessary. She needed to get to the Dorados as quickly as possible. The intelligence agencies would be searching for her with a terrifying urgency now she'd evaded them on *Tranquillity*, and coincidentally proved they were right to fear her all along. *Samaku* was an independent trader; its military-grade navigational systems, and the bonuses she promised, would ensure a short voyage time.

Actually transferring over the cash to the captain had been the single most decisive moment for her; since escaping *Tranquillity* every other action had been unavoidable. Now, though, she was fully committed. The people she was scheduled to join in the Dorados had spent thirty years preparing for her arrival. She was the final component. The flight to destroy Omuta's star, which had started in the *Beezling* three decades ago, was about to enter its terminal phase.

The *Intari* started to examine the local space environment as soon as it slipped out of its wormhole terminus. Satisfied there was no immediate hazard from asteroidal rubble or high-density dust clouds it accelerated in towards Norfolk at three gees.

Norfolk was the third star system it had visited since leaving Trafalgar five days earlier, and the second to last on its itinerary. Captain Nagar had ambiguous feelings about carrying the First Admiral's warning of possession; in time-honoured fashion Adamists did tend to lay a lot of the blame on the messenger. Typical of their muddled thinking and badly integrated personalities. Nonetheless he was satisfied with the time *Intari* had made, few voidhawks could do better.

We may have a problem, *Intari* told its crew. The navy squadron is still in orbit, they have taken up a ground fire support formation.

Nagar used the voidhawk's senses to see for himself, his mind accepting the starship's unique perception. The planet registered as a steeply warped flaw in the smooth structure of space-time, its gravity field drawing in a steady sleet of the minute particles which flowed through the interplanetary medium. A clutter of small mass points were in orbit around the flaw, shining brightly in both the magnetic and electromagnetic spectrum.

They should have departed last week, he said rhetorically. At his silent wish *Intari* obligingly focused its sensor blisters on the planet itself, shifting its perceptive emphasis to the optical spectrum. Norfolk's bulk filled his mind, the twin sources of illumination turning the surface into two distinctly coloured hemispheres, divided by a small wedge of genuine night. The land which shone a twilight vermilion below Duchess's radiance appeared perfectly normal, complying with *Intari*'s memory of their last visit, fifteen years ago. Duke's province, however, was dappled by circles of polluted red cloud.

They glow, *Intari* said, concentrating on the lone slice of night.

Before Nagar could comment on the unsettling spectacle, the communications console reported a signal from the squadron's commanding admiral, querying their arrival.

When Nagar had confirmed their identity the admiral gave him a situation update on the hapless agrarian planet. Eighty percent of the inhabited islands were now covered by the red cloud, which seemed to block all attempts at communication. The planetary authorities were totally incapable of maintaining order in the affected zones; police and army alike had mutinied and joined the rebels. Even the navy marine squads sent in to assist the army had dropped out of contact. Norwich itself had fallen to the rebel forces yesterday, and now the streamers of red cloud were consolidating above the city. That substance more than anything had prevented the admiral from attempting any kind of retaliation using the starships' ground bombardment weapons. How, she asked, could the rebels produce such an effect?

"They can't," Nagar told her. "Because they're not rebels." He began datavisaging the First Admiral's warning over the squadron's secure communications channels.

Captain Layia remained utterly silent as the datavise came through. Once it was finished she looked round at her equally subdued crew.

"So now we know what happened to the *Tantu*," Furay said. "Hellfire, I hope the chase ship the admiral dispatched kept up with it."

Layia gave him an agitated glance, uncomfortable notions stirring in her brain. "You brought our three passengers up from the same aerodrome as the *Tantu*'s spaceplane, and at more or less the same time. The little girl was caught up in some sort of ruckus: a weird fire. You said so yourself. And they originally came from Kesteven island, where it all started."

"Oh, come on!" Furay protested. The others were all staring at him, undecided but definitely suspicious. "They fled from Kesteven. They bought passage on the *Far Realm* hours before the hangar fire."

"We're suffering from glitches," Tilia said.

"Really?" Furay asked scathingly. "You mean more than usual?"

Tilia glared at the pilot.

"Slightly more," Layia murmured seriously. "But nothing exceptional, I admit." The *Far Realm* might have been an SII

ship, but that didn't mean the company necessarily operated an exemplary maintenance procedure. Cost cutting was a major company priority these days, not like when she started flying.

"They're not possessed," Endron said.

Layia was surprised by the soft authority in his voice, he sounded so certain. "Oh?"

"I examined Louise as soon as she came on board. The body sensors worked perfectly. As did the medical nanonics I used on her. If she was possessed the energistic effect the First Admiral spoke of would have glitched them."

Layia considered what he said, and gave her grudging agreement. "You're probably right. And they haven't tried to hijack us."

"They were concerned about the *Tantu*, as well. Fletcher hated those rebels."

"Yes. All right, point made. That just leaves us with the question of who's going to break the news to them, tell them exactly what's happened to their homeworld."

Furay found himself the centre of attention again. "Oh, great, thanks a lot."

By the time he'd drifted through the various decks to the lounge the passengers were using, the squadron admiral had begun to issue orders to the ships under her command. Two frigates, the *Ldora* and the *Levêque*, were to remain in Norfolk orbit where they could enforce the quarantine; any attempt to leave the planet, even in a spaceplane, was to be met with an instant armed response. Any commercial starship that arrived was to be sent on its way, again failure to comply was to be met with force. The *Intari* was to continue on its warning mission. The rest of the squadron was to return to 6th Fleet headquarters at Tropea in anticipation of reassignment. *Far Realm* was released from its support duties and contract.

After a brief follow-on discussion with the admiral, Layia announced: "She's given permission for us to fly directly back to Mars. Who knows how long this emergency is going to last, and I don't want to be stranded in the Tropea system indefinitely. Technically, we're on military service, so the civil starflight proscription doesn't apply. At the worst case

it'll be something for the lawyers to argue about when we get back."

With his mood mildly improved at the news they were going home, Furay slid into the lounge. He came through the ceiling hatch, head first, which inverted his visual orientation. The three passengers watched him flip around and touch his feet to a stikpad. He gave them an awkward grin. Louise and Genevieve were looking at him so intently, knowing something was wrong, yet still trusting. It wasn't a burden he was used to.

"First the good news," he said. "We're leaving for Mars within the hour."

"Fine," Louise said. "What's the bad news?"

He couldn't meet her questing gaze, nor that of Genevieve. "The reason we're leaving. A voidhawk has just arrived with an official warning from the First Admiral and the Confederation Assembly. They think . . . there's the possibility that people are being . . . possessed. There was a battle on Atlantis; someone called Laton warned us about it. Look, something strange is happening to people, and that's what they're calling it. I'm sorry. The admiral thinks that's what has been happening on Norfolk, too."

"You mean it's happening on other planets as well?" Genevieve asked in alarm.

"Yes." Furay frowned at her, goose bumps rising along his arms. There hadn't been the slightest scepticism in her voice. Children were always curious. He looked at Fletcher, then Louise. Both of them were concerned, yes, but not doubting. "You knew. Didn't you? You knew."

"Of course." Louise gave him a bashful smile.

"You knew all along. Holy Christ, why didn't you say something? If we'd known, if the admiral . . ." He broke off, troubled.

"Quite," Louise said.

He was surprised by just how composed she was. "But—"

"You find it hard enough to accept an official warning from the Confederation Assembly. You would never have believed us, two girls and an estate worker. Now would you?"

Even though there was no gravity, Furay hung his head. "No," he confessed.

11

The heavily wooded valley was as wild and as beautiful as only an old habitat could be. Syrinx wandered off into the forest which came right up to the edge of Eden's single strip of town. She was heartened by just how many trees had survived from the habitat's early days. Their trunks might have swollen, and tilted over, but they were still alive. Wise ancient trees who several centuries ago had discarded the usual parkland concept of discreet order, becoming completely unmanageable, so the habitat didn't even try anymore.

She couldn't remember being happier; though the verdant surroundings were only one contributing factor.

"Separation generates anticipation," Aulie had told her with a mischievous smile as he kissed her goodbye just after lunch. He was probably right, his understanding of emotions was as extensive as his sexual knowledge. That was what made him such a *fabulous* lover, giving him complete control over her responses.

In fact, he was right, Syrinx admitted wistfully. They had only been parted for ninety minutes, and already her body missed him dreadfully. The very notion of what they'd do that night when she had him alone to herself again was glorious.

Their holiday visit to Eden was the talk of all her friends, and her family. She relished that aspect of their affair almost as much as the physical side. Aulie was forty-four, twenty-seven years older than she. In a culture which was too egalitarian and liberal to be shocked, she'd delighted in making a pretty good job of it so far.

There was the odd time when she was aware of the age gulf, this afternoon being one of them. Aulie had wanted to visit one of the caverns in the habitat's endcap which was full of late twenty-first century cybernetic machinery, kept work-

ing as a functional museum. Syrinx was hard put to think of anything more boring. Here they were in the first habitat ever grown, five hundred years old, the seat of their culture; and he wanted to take a look at antique robots?

So they'd parted company. Him to his steam engines, leaving her to explore the interior. Eden was much smaller than the other habitats, a cylinder eleven kilometres long, three in diameter; a prototype really. It didn't have starscrapers, the inhabitants lived in a small town ringing the northern endcap. Again, leftovers from a bygone age; simple, quick-to-assemble bungalows of metal and composite, laboriously preserved by their present occupants. Each of them had spruce handkerchief-sized gardens boasting ancient pure genotype plant varieties. The vegetation might not have the size or sharpness of colour owned by their modern descendants, but their context made them a visual treat. Living history.

She picked her way along what she thought were paths, dodging gnarled roots which knitted together at ankle height, ducking under loops of sticky vine. Moss and fungi had colonized every square centimetre of bark, giving each tree its own micro-ecology. It was hot among the trunks, the motionless air cloyingly humid. Her dress with its short skirt and tight top was intended purely to emphasise her adolescent figure for Aulie's benefit. In here it was totally impractical, damp fabric fighting every movement of her limbs. Her hair died within minutes, sodden strands flopping down to grease her shoulders. Green and brown smears multiplied over her arms and legs, nature's tribal war paint.

Despite the inconveniences she kept going forwards. The sensation of expectancy growing all the while, and nothing to do with Aulie anymore. This was something more ambivalent, a notion of approaching divinity.

She emerged from the jumbled trees into a glade which accommodated a calm lake that was almost sealed over with pink and white water lilies. Black swans drifted slowly along the few remaining tracts of open water. A bungalow sat on the marshy shore, very different from those in the town; it was built from stone and wood, standing on stilts above the reeds. A high, steeply curved blue slate roof overhung the walls, pro-

viding an all-round veranda, and giving the building an acutely Eastern aspect.

Syrinx walked towards it, more curious than apprehensive. The building was completely incongruous, yet apposite at the same time. Copper wind chimes, completely blue from age and exposure to the elements, tinkled softly as she climbed the rickety steps to the veranda which faced out over the lake.

Someone was waiting for her there, an old Oriental man sitting in a wheelchair, dressed in a navy-blue silk jacket, with a tartan rug wrapped around his legs. His face had the porcelain delicacy of the very old. Almost all of his hair had gone, leaving a fringe of silver strands at the back of his head, long enough to come down over his collar. Even the wheelchair was antique, carved from wood, with big thin wheels that had chrome spokes; there was no motor. It looked as though the man hadn't moved out of it for years; he blended into its contours perfectly.

An owl was perched on the veranda balcony, big eyes fixed on Syrinx.

The old man raised a hand with a thousand liver spots on its crinkled yellowing skin. He beckoned. **Come closer.**

Horribly aware of what a mess she looked, Syrinx took a hesitant couple of steps forwards. She glanced sideways, trying to see into the bungalow through its open windows. Empty blackness prowled behind the rectangles. Blackness which hid—

What is my name? the old man asked sharply.

Syrinx swallowed nervously. **You are Wing-Tsit Chong, sir. You invented affinity, and Edenism.**

Sloppy thinking, my dear girl. One does not invent a culture, one nurtures it.

I'm sorry. I can't . . . It's difficult to think. There were shapes flickering in the darkness, consolidating into outlines which she thought she recognized. The owl hooted softly. Guilty, Syrinx jerked her gaze back to Wing-Tsit Chong.

Why is it difficult for you to think?

She gestured to the window. **In there. People. I remember them. I'm sure I do. What am I doing here? I don't remember.**

There is no one inside. Do not allow your imagination

to fill the darkness, Syrinx. You are here for one reason only: to see me.

Why?

Because I have some very important questions to ask you.

Me?

Yes. What is the past, Syrinx?

The past is a summation of events which contribute to making the present everything which it is—

Stop. What is the past?

She shrugged her shoulders, mortified that here she was in front of the founder of Edenism, and couldn't answer a simple question for him. **The past is a measure of entropic decay—**

Stop. When did I die, what year?

Oh. Two thousand and ninety. She twitched a smile of relief.

And what year were you born?

Two thousand five hundred and eighty.

How old are you now?

Seventeen.

What am I when you are seventeen?

Part of Eden's multiplicity.

What components make up a multiplicity?

People.

No. Not physically, they don't. What are the actual components, name the process involved at death.

Transfer. Oh, memories!

So what is the past?

Memories. She grinned broadly, straightening her shoulders to say formally: **The past is a memory.**

At last, we achieve progress. Where is the only place your personal past can take form?

In my mind?

Good. And what is the purpose of life?

To experience.

This is so, though from a personal view I would add that life should also be a progression towards truth and purity. But then I remain an intransigent old Buddhist at heart, even after so long. This is why I could not refuse the re-

quest from your therapists to talk to you. Apparently I am an icon you respect. Humour quirked his lips for a moment. In such circumstances, for me to assist in your deliverance is an act of *dana* I could not possibly refuse.

Dana?

The Buddhist act of giving, a sacrifice which will allow the *dayaka*, the giver, a glimpse of a higher state, helping in transforming one's own mind.

I see.

I would be surprised if you did, at least fully. Edenism seems to have shied away from religion, which I admit I did not anticipate. However, our current problem is more immediate. We have established that you live to experience, and that your past is only a memory.

Yes.

Can it harm you?

No, she said proudly, the logical answer.

You are incorrect. If that were so you would never learn from mistakes.

I learn from it, yes. But I can't be hurt by it.

You can, however, be influenced by it. Very strongly. I believe we are debating how many angels dance on a pin-head, but influence can be harmful.

I suppose so.

Let me put it another way. You can be troubled by memories.

Yes.

Good. What effect does that have on your life?

If you are wise, it stops you from repeating mistakes, especially if they are painful ones.

This is so. We have established, then, that the past can control you, and you cannot control the past, yes?

Yes.

What about the future?

Sir?

Can the past control the future?

It can influence it, she said cautiously.

Through what medium?

People?

Good. This is karma. Or what Western civilization re-

ferred to as reaping the seeds you have sown. In simpler terms it is fate. Your actions in the present decide your future, and your actions are based on the interpretation of past experiences.

I see.

In that respect, what we have in your case is an unfortunate problem.

We do?

Yes. However, before we go any further, I would like you to answer a personal question for me. You are seventeen years old; do you now believe in God? Not some primitive concept as a Creator trumpeted by Adamist religions, but perhaps a higher force responsible for ordering the universe? Be honest with me, Syrinx. I will not be angry whatever the answer. Remember, I am probably the most spiritually inclined of all Edenists.

I believe . . . I think . . . No, I'm afraid that there might not be.

I will accept that for now. It is a common enough doubt among our kind.

It is?

Indeed. Now, I am going to tell you something about yourself in small stages, and I would like you to apply the most rigorous rational analysis to each statement.

I understand.

This is a perceptual reality, you have been brought here to help you overcome a problem. He smiled kindly, a gesture of his hand inviting her to continue.

If I am undergoing some form of treatment it can't be for physical injuries, I wouldn't need a perceptual reality for that. I must have had some kind of mental breakdown, and this is my therapy session. Even as she said it she could feel her heart rate increase, but the blood quickening in her veins only seemed to make her skin colder.

Very good. But, Syrinx, you did not have a breakdown, your own thought routines are quite exemplary.

Then why am I here?

Why indeed?

Oh, an outside influence?

Yes. A most unpleasant experience.

I've been traumatized.

As I said, your thought routines are impressive. Those of us running your therapy have temporarily blocked your access to your adult memories, thus avoiding contamination of those routines by the trauma. You can, for the moment, think without interference, even though this state does not permit your intellect to function at full capacity.

Syrinx grinned. I'm actually smarter than this?

I prefer the term swifter, myself. But what we have is adequate for our purpose.

The purpose being my therapy. With my adult mind traumatized I wouldn't listen. I was catatonic?

Partly; your withdrawal was within what the psychologist called a psychotic loop. Those responsible for hurting you were trying to force you to do something quite abhorrent. You refused, for love's sake. Edenists everywhere are proud of you for your resistance, yet that obstinacy has led to your current state.

Syrinx gave a downcast smile, not entirely perturbed. Mother always said I had a stubborn streak.

She was entirely correct.

So what must I do now?

You must face the root of what was done to you. The trauma can be overcome; not instantly, but once you allow yourself to remember what happened without it overwhelming you as it has done until now, then the auxiliary memories and emotions can be dealt with one at a time.

That's why you talked about the past, so I can learn to face my memories without the fear, because that's all they are, memories. Harmless in themselves.

Excellent. I will now make them available to you.

She steeled herself, foolish that it was, clenching her stomach muscles and fisting her hands.

Look at the owl, Wing-Tsit Chong instructed. Tell me its name.

The owl blinked at her, and half extended its wings. She stared at the flecked pattern of ochre and hazel feathers. They were running like liquid, becoming midnight-blue and purple. "Oenone!" she shouted. Pernik island rushed towards her at a speed which made her grasp the balcony rail in fright.

Please don't, Syrinx, *Oenone* asked. The deluge of misery and longing entwined with that simple request made her eyes brim with tears. **Don't leave me again.**

Never. Never ever ever ever, beloved. Her whole body was trembling in reaction to the years of memory yawning open in her mind. And right at the end, the last before stinking darkness had grasped at her, most vivid of all, the dungeon and its torturers.

Syrinx?

I'm here, she reassured the voidhawk unsteadily. **It's okay, I'm fine.**

You saved me from them.

How could I not?

I love you.

And I you.

I was right, Wing-Tsit Chong said.

When Syrinx raised her head she saw the old man's face smiling softly, the multiplying wrinkles aging him another decade. **Sir?**

To do what I did all those centuries ago. To allow people to see the love and the sourness which lives in all of us. Only then can we come to terms with what we are. You are living proof of that, young Syrinx. I thank you for that. Now open your eyes.

They are open.

He sighed theatrically. **So pedantic. Then close them.**

Syrinx opened her eyes to look up at a sky-blue ceiling. The dark blobs around the edges of her vision field resolved into three terribly anxious faces bending over her.

"Hello, Mother," she said. It was very difficult to talk, and her body felt as though it were wrapped in a shrunken ship-tunic.

Athene started crying.

• • •

There were fifteen holoscreens in the editing suite, arranged in a long line along one wall. All of them were switched on, and the variety of images they displayed was enormous, ranging from a thousand-kilometre altitude view of Amarisk with the red cloud bands mirroring the Juliffe tributary net-

work, to the terrifyingly violent starship battle in orbit above Lalonde; and from Reza Malin's mercenaries flattening the village of Pamiers, to a flock of overexcited young children charging out of a homestead cabin to greet the arrival of the hovercraft.

Out of the five people sitting at the editing suite's table, four of them stared at the screens with the kind of nervous enthusiasm invariably suffered by voyeurs of suffering on a grand scale, where the sheer spectacle of events overcame the agony of any individual casualty. In the middle of her colleagues, Kelly regarded her work with a detachment which was mainly derived from a suppressor program her neural nanonics were running.

"We can't cut anything else," Kate Elvin, the senior news editor, protested.

"I don't like it," said Antonio Whitelocke. He was the head of Collins's Tranquillity office, a sixty-year career staffer who had plodded his way to the top from the Politics and Economics division. An excellent choice for Tranquillity, but hardly empathic with young rover reporters like Kelly Tirrel. Her Lalonde report scared him shitless. "You just can't have a three hour news item."

"Grow some bollocks," Kelly snapped. "Three hours is just dip-in highlights."

"Lowlights," Antonio muttered, glaring at his turbulent new megastar. Her skinhead hairstyle was devastatingly intimidating, and he'd heard all about poor Garfield Lunde. Marketing always complained about the use of non-mainstream image anchors. When he thought of that pretty, feminine young woman who used to present the breakfast round-up just last month he could only worry that one of the possessed had sneaked back from Lalonde after all.

"The balance is perfect," Kate said. "We've incorporated the fundamentals of the doomed mission, and even managed to end on an upbeat note with the rescue. That was a stroke of sheer brilliance, Kelly."

"Well, gee, thanks. I would never have gone with Horst and the mercs back to the homestead unless it made a better report."

Kate sailed on serenely through the sarcasm; unlike Anto-

nio she'd been a rover once, which had included a fair share of combat assignments. "This edit will satisfy both our corporate objectives, Antonio. First off, the rumour circuit has been overheating ever since *Lady Macbeth* came back; Marketing hasn't even needed to advertise our evening news slot. Everybody in Tranquillity is going to access us tonight—I've heard the opposition are just going to run soap repeats while Kelly's on. And once our audience access they aren't going to stop. We're not just giving them sensenviron impressions of a war, we've got a whole story to tell them here. That always hooks them. Our advertising premium for this is going to be half a million fuseodollars for a thirty-second slot."

"For one show," Antonio grumbled.

"More than one, that's the beauty. Sure, everyone is going to make a flek of tonight. But Kelly brought back over thirty-six hours of her own fleks, and *then* we've got the recordings taken from *Lady Macbeth's* sensors from the moment they emerged in the Lalonde system. We can milk this for a month with specialist angle interviews, documentaries, and current affairs analysis panels. We've won the ratings war for the whole goddamn year, and we did it on the cheap."

"Cheap! Do you know what we paid that bloody Lagrange Calvert for those sensor recordings?"

"Cheap," Kate insisted. "Tonight alone is going to pay for those. And with universal distribution rights we'll quadruple Collins group profits."

"If we can ever get it distributed," Antonio said.

"Sure we can. Have you accessed the civil starflight prohibition order? It just prevents docking, not departure. Blackhawks can simply stay inside a planet's emergence zone and datavise a copy to our local office. We'll have to pay the captains a little more, but not much, because they're losing revenue sitting on the endcap ledges. This can work. It'll be head office seats for us after this."

"What, after this?" Kelly said.

"Come on, Kelly." Kate squeezed her shoulder. "We know it was rough, we felt it for ourselves. But the quarantine is going to stop the possessed from spreading, and now we're alert to the problem the security forces can contain them if

there is an outbreak. They won on Lalonde because it's so damn backwards."

"Oh, sure." Kelly was operating on stimulant programs alone now, fatigue toxin antidote humming melodically in her head. "Saving the galaxy is a breeze now we know. Hell, it's only the dead we're up against after all."

"If you're not up to this, Kelly, then say so," Antonio said, then played his mastercard. "We can use another anchor. Kirstie McShane?"

"That bitch!"

"So we can go ahead as scheduled, can we?"

"I want to put in more of Pamiers, and Shaun Wallace. Those are the kind of events which will make people more aware of the situation."

"Wallace is depressing, he spent that entire interview telling you that the possessed couldn't be beaten."

"Damn right. Shaun's vital, he tells us what we really need to know, to face up to the real problem."

"Which is?"

"Death. Everyone's going to die, Antonio, even you."

"No, Kelly, I can't sanction this sort of slant. It's as bad as that Tyrathca Sleeping God ceremony you recorded."

"I shouldn't have let you cut that out. Nobody even knew the Tyrathca had a religion before."

"Xenoc customs are hardly relevant at a time like this," he said.

"Kelly, we can use that Tyrathca segment in a documentary at a later date," Kate said. "Right now we need to finalize the edit. Christ, you're on-line in another forty minutes."

"You want to keep me sweet, then put in all of Shaun's interview."

"We've got half of it," Antonio said. "All the salient points are covered."

"Hardly. Look, we have got to bring home to people what possession is really all about, the meaning behind the act," Kelly said. "So far all the majority of Confederation citizens have had is this poxy official warning from the Assembly. It's an abstract, a problem on another planet. People have to learn it's not that simple, that there's more to this disaster than sim-

ple physical security. We have to deal with the philosophical issues as well.”

Antonio pressed the palm of his hand onto his brow, wincing.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Kelly asked hotly. Her arm waved at the holoscreens with their damning images. “Didn’t you access *any* of this? Don’t you understand? We have to get this across to people. I can do that for you. Not Kirstie blow-brain McShane. I was there, I can make it more real for anyone who accesses the report.”

Antonio looked at the holoscreen which showed Pat Hala-han running through the smoky ruins of Pamiers, blasting his bizarre attackers to shreds of gore. “Great. Just what we need.”

• • •

This just wasn’t the way Ione had expected it to go. Joshua hadn’t even looked at her bedroom door when they arrived back at the apartment, let alone show any eagerness. There had been times with him when she hadn’t made it to the bed before her skirt was up around her waist.

Yet somehow she knew this wasn’t entirely due to the traumas of the mission. He was intent and troubled, not frightened. Very unfamiliar territory as far as Joshua was concerned.

He’d simply had a shower and a light supper, then settled down in her big settee. When she sat beside him she was too uncertain about the reaction to even rest her hand on his arm.

I wonder if it’s that girl on Norfolk? she asked dubiously.

He has endured some difficult times, Tranquillity answered. **You must expect his usual behaviour to be toned down.**

Not like this. I can see he’s been shaken up, but this is more.

The human mind is constantly maturing. External events dictate the speed of the maturation. If he has begun to think harder for himself because of Lalonde, surely this is no bad thing?

Depends what you want from him. He was so perfect for

me before. So very uncomplicated, the roguish charmer who would never try to claim me.

I believe you also mentioned something about sex on occasion.

Yeah, all right, that too. It was great, and completely guilt free. I picked him up, remember? What more could a girl with my kind of responsibilities want? He was someone who was never going to try and interfere with my duties as the Lord of Ruin. Politics simply didn't interest him.

A husband would be preferable to a casual lover. Someone who is always there for you.

You're my husband.

You love me, and I love you; it could never be anything else since I gave birth to you. But you are still human, you need a human companion. Look at voidhawk captains, the perfect example of mental symbiosis.

I know. Maybe I'm just feeling jealous.

Of the Norfolk girl? Why? You know how many lovers Joshua has had.

Not of her. Ione looked at Joshua's profile as he stared out of the living room's big window. Of me. Me a year ago. The old story, you never know what you have until it's gone.

He is right next to you. Reach out. I am sure he needs comfort as much as you.

He's not there, not anymore. Not my original Joshua. Did you see that flying he did? Gaura's memory of the Lagrange stunt nearly gave me a heart attack. I never realized just how good a captain he is. How could I ever take that away from him? He lives for space, for flying *Lady Mac* and what that can give him. Remember that last argument we had before he left for Lalonde? I think he was right. He's achieved his *métier*. Flying is sequenced into his genes the way dictatorship is in mine. I can't take that away from him any more than he could take you away from me.

I think you may be stretching the metaphor slightly.

Maybe. We were young, and we had fun, and it was lovely. I've got the memories.

He had fun. You are pregnant. He has responsibilities to the child.

Does he? I don't think mothers require a big tough hunter gatherer to support them nowadays. And monogamy becomes progressively more difficult the longer we live. Geneering has done more to change the old till death do us part concept than any social radicalism.

Doesn't your child deserve a loving environment?

My baby will have a loving environment. How can you even question that?

I do not question your intentions. I am simply pointing out the practicalities of the situation. At the moment you are unable to provide the child with a complete family.

That's very reactionary.

I admit I am arguing on the extreme. I am not a fundamentalist, I simply wish to concentrate your thoughts. Everything else in your life has been planned and accounted for, the child has not. Conception is something you have done all for yourself. I do not wish it to become a mistake. I love you too much for that.

Father had other children.

Who were given to the Edenists so that they would be brought up in the greatest possible family environment. A whole world of family.

She almost laughed out loud. Imagine that, Saldanas became Edenists. We made the transition in the end. Does King Alastair know about that?

You are ducking the issue, lone. One child of the Lord of Ruin is brought up with me as a parental, the heir. The others are not. As a parent you have a responsibility to their future.

Are you saying I've been irresponsible conceiving this child?

Only you can answer that. Were you depending on Joshua to be a stay-at-home father? Even then you must have known how unlikely that was.

God, all this argument just because Joshua looks moody.

I am sorry. I have upset you.

No. You've done what you wanted to do, made me think. For some of us it's painful, especially if you're like me and hadn't really considered the consequences of your actions. It gets me all resentful and defensive. But I'll do the best for my child.

I know you will, Ione.

She blushed at the tenderness of the mental tone. Then she leaned against Joshua. "I was worried while you were gone," she said.

He took a sip of his Norfolk Tears. "You were lucky. I was scared shitless most of the time."

"Yes. Lagrange Calvert."

"Jesus, don't you start."

"If you didn't want the publicity, you shouldn't have sold *Lady Mac's* sensor recordings to Collins."

"It's hard to say no to Kelly."

Ione squinted at him. "So I gather."

"I meant: it's hard to refuse that kind of money. Especially given my situation. The fee I got from Terrance Smith isn't going to cover *Lady Mac's* repairs. And I can't see the Lalonde Development Company ever handing over the balance on our contract, given there isn't a Lalonde left to develop anymore. But the money I got from Collins will cover everything, and leave me happily in the black."

"Not forgetting the money you made on the Norfolk run."

"Yeah, that too. But I didn't want to break into that, it's kind of like a reserve I'm holding back for when everything settles down again."

"My hero optimist. Do you think the universe is going to settle down?"

Joshua didn't like the way the conversation was progressing. He knew her well enough now; she was steering, hoping to angle obliquely into the subject she wanted to discuss. "Who knows? Are we going to finish up talking about Dominique?"

Ione raised her head from his shoulder to give him a puzzled glance. "No. What made you ask that?"

"Not sure. I thought you wanted to talk about us, and what happens after. Dominique and the Vasilkovsky line played a heavy part in my original plans from here on in."

“There isn’t going to be an after, Joshua, not in the sense of returning to the kind of existence we had before. Knowing there’s an afterlife is going to tilt people’s perception on life for ever.”

“Yeah. It is pretty deep when you think about it.”

“That’s your considered in-depth analysis of the situation is it?” For a moment she thought she’d gone and wounded him. But he just gave a gaunt smile. Not angry.

“Yeah,” he said, quiet and serious. “It’s deep. I had three bloody narrow escapes inside two days on that Lalonde mission. If I’d made one mistake, Ione, just one, I’d be dead now. Only I wouldn’t, as we now know, I’d be trapped in the beyond. And if Shaun Wallace was telling the truth—and I suspect he was—then I’d be screaming silently to be let back in no matter what the cost or who had to pay it.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yes. I sent Warlow to his death. I think I knew that even before he went out of the airlock. And now he’s out there, or in there—somewhere, with all the other souls. He might even be watching us now, begging to be given sensation. The trouble with that is, I do owe him.” Joshua put his head back on the silk cushions, staring up at the ceiling. “Do I owe him big enough for that, though? Jesus.”

“If he was your friend, he wouldn’t ask.”

“Maybe.”

Ione sat up and reached for the bottle to pour herself another measure of Norfolk Tears.

I’m going to ask him, she told Tranquillity.

Surely you are not about to ask for my blessing?

No. But I’d welcome your opinion.

Very well. I believe he has the necessary resources to complete the task; but then he always has. Whether he is the most desirable candidate still presents me with something of a dilemma. I acknowledge he is maturing; and he would not knowingly betray you. Impetuosity does weigh against him, however.

Yes. Yet I value that trait above all.

I am aware of this. I even accept it, when it applies to your first child and my future. But do you have the right to make that gamble when it concerns the Alchemist?

Maybe not. Although there might be a way around it. And I have simply got to do something. “Joshua?”

“Yeah. Sorry, didn’t mean to go all moody on you.”

“That’s all right. I have a little problem of my own right now.”

“You know I’ll help if I can.”

“That’s the first part, I was going to ask you anyway. I’m not sure I can trust anyone else with this. I’m not even sure I can trust you.”

“This sounds interesting.”

She took a breath, committed now, and began: “Do you remember, about a year ago, a woman called Dr Alkad Mzu contacted you about a possible charter?”

He ran a quick check through his neural nanonics memory cells. “I got her. She said she was interested in going to the Garissa system. Some kind of memorial flight. It was pretty weird, and she never followed it up.”

“No, thank God. She asked over sixty captains about a similar charter.”

“Sixty?”

“Yes, Tranquillity and I believe it was an attempt to confuse the intelligence agency teams who keep her under observation.”

“Ah.” Instinct kicked in almost immediately, riding a wave of regret. This was big-time, and major trouble. It almost made him happy they hadn’t leapt straight into bed, unlike the old days (a year ago, ha!). For him it was odd, but he was simply too ambivalent about his own feelings. And he could see how she’d been thrown by his just-old-friends approach, too.

Sex would have been so easy; he just couldn’t bring himself to do it with someone he genuinely liked when it didn’t mean what it used to. That would have been too much like betrayal. I can’t do that to her. Which was a first.

Ione was giving him a cautious, inquiring look. In itself an offer.

I can stop it now if I want.

It was sometimes easy for him to forget that this blond twenty-year-old was technically an entire government, the repository of state, and interstellar, secrets. Secrets it didn’t always pay to know about; invariably the most fascinating kind.

“Go on,” Joshua said.

She smiled faintly in acknowledgement. “There are eight separate agencies with stations here; they have been watching Dr Mzu for nearly twenty-five years now.”

“Why?”

“They believe that just before Garissa was destroyed she designed some kind of doomsday device called the Alchemist. Nobody knows what it is, or what it does, only that the Garissan Department of Defence was pouring billions into a crash-development project to get it built. The CNIS have been investigating the case for over thirty years now, ever since they first heard rumours that it was being built.”

“I saw three men following her when she left Harkey’s Bar that night,” Joshua said, running a search and retrieval program through his neural nanonics. “Oh, hell, of course. The Omuta sanctions have been lifted; they were the ones who committed the Garissa genocide. You don’t think she’d . . . ?”

“She already has. This is not for general release, but last week Alkad Mzu escaped from Tranquillity.”

“Escaped?”

“Yes. She turned up here twenty-six years ago and took a job at the Laymil project. My father promised the Confederation Navy she would neither be allowed to leave nor pass on any technical information relating to the Alchemist to other governments or astroengineering conglomerates. It was an almost ideal solution; everyone knows Tranquillity has no expansionist ambitions, and at the same time she could be observed continually by the habitat personality. The only other alternative was to execute her immediately. My father and the then First Admiral both agreed the Confederation should not have access to a new kind of doomsday device; antimatter is quite bad enough. I continued that policy.”

“Until last week.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, she made total fools out of all of us.”

“I thought Tranquillity’s observation of the interior was perfect. How could she possibly get out without you knowing?”

“Your friend Meyer lifted her away clean. The *Udat* actu-

ally swallowed inside the habitat and took her on board. There was nothing we could do to stop him.”

“Jesus! I thought my Lagrange point stunt was risky.”

“Quite. Like I said, her escape leaves me with one hell of a problem.”

“She’s gone to fetch the Alchemist?”

“Hard to think of any other reason, especially given the timing. The only real puzzle about this is, if it exists, why hasn’t it been used already?”

“The sanctions. No . . .” He started to concentrate on the problem. “There was only ever one navy squadron on blockade duties. A sneak raid would have a good chance of getting through. That’s if one ship was all it took to fire it at the planet.”

“Yes. The more we know about Dr Mzu, the less we understand the whole Alchemist situation. But I really don’t think her ultimate goal can be in any doubt.”

“Right. So she’s probably gone to collect it, and use it. The *Udat* has a fair payload capacity; and Meyer’s seen combat duty in his time, he can take a bit of heat.” Except . . . Joshua knew Meyer, a wily old sod, for sure, but there was one hell of a difference between the occasional mercenary contract, and annihilating an entire planet of unsuspecting innocents. Meyer wouldn’t do that, no matter how much money was offered. Offhand, Joshua couldn’t think of many (or even any) independent trader captains who would. That kind of atrocity was purely the province of governments and lunatic fanatics.

“The use of it is what concerns me the most,” Ione said. “Once it’s been activated, governments will finally be able to see what it can actually do. From that, they’ll deduce the principles. It’ll be mass-produced, Joshua. We have to try and stop that. The Confederation has enough problems with antimatter, and now possession. We cannot allow another terror factor to be introduced.”

“We? Oh, Jesus.” He let his head flop back onto the cushions—if only there was a stone wall to thump his temple against instead. “Let me guess. You want me to chase after her. Right? Go up against every intelligence agency in the Confederation, not to mention the navy. Find her, tap her on

the shoulder, and say nicely: All is forgiven, and the Lord of Ruin would really like you to come home, oh, and by the way, whatever your thirty-year plan—your *obsession*—was to screw up Omuta we'd like you to forget it as well. Jesus fuck-ing Christ, Ione!”

She gave him an unflustered sideways glance. “Do you want to live in a universe where a super-doomsday weapon is available to every nutcase with a grudge?”

“Try not to weight your questions so much, you might drown.”

“The only chance we have, Joshua, is to bring her back here. That or kill her. Now who are you going to trust to do that? More to the point, who can *I* trust? There's nobody, Joshua. Except you.”

“Walk into Harkey's Bar any night of the week, there's a hundred veterans of covert operations who'll take your money and do exactly what you ask without a single question.”

“No, it has to be you. One, because I trust you, and I mean really *trust* you. Especially after what you did back at Lalonde. Two, you've got what it takes to do the job, the ship and the contacts in the industry necessary to trace her. Three, you've got the motivation.”

“Oh, yeah? You haven't said how much you'll pay me yet.”

“As much as you want, I am the national treasurer after all. That is, until young Marcus takes over from me. Did you want to bequeath our son this problem, Joshua?”

“Shit, Ione, that's really—”

“Below the belt even for me? Sorry, Joshua, but it isn't. We all have responsibilities. You've managed to duck out of yours for quite a while now. All I'm doing is reminding you of that.”

“Oh, great, now this is all my problem.”

“No one else in the galaxy can make it your problem, Joshua, only you. Like I said, all I'm doing is making the data available to you.”

“Nice cop-out. It's me that's going to be in at the shit end, not you.” When Joshua looked over at her he expected to see her usual defiant expression, the one she used when she was powering up to out-stubborn him. Instead all he saw was

worry and a tinge of sorrow. On a face that beautiful it was heartbreaking. "Look, anyway, there's a Confederation-wide quarantine in effect, I can't take *Lady Mac* off in pursuit even if I wanted to."

"It only applies to civil starflight. *Lady Macbeth* would be re-registered as an official Tranquillity government starship."

"Shit." He smiled up at the ceiling, a very dry reflex. "Ah well, worth a try."

"You'll do it?"

"I'll ask questions in the appropriate places, that's all, Ione. I'm not into heroics."

"You don't need to be, I can help."

"Sure."

"I can," she insisted, piqued. "For a start, I can issue you with some decent combat wasps."

"Great, no heroics please, but take a thousand megatonnes' worth of nukes with you just in case."

"Joshua . . . I don't want you to be vulnerable, that's all. There will be a lot of people looking for Mzu, and none of them are the type to ask questions first."

"Wonderful."

"I can send some serjeants with you as well. They'll be useful as bodyguards when you're docked."

He tried to think up an argument against that, but couldn't. "Fine. Unsubtle, but fine."

Ione grinned. She knew that tone.

"Everyone will just think they're cosmoniks," she said.

"Okay, that just leaves us with one minor concern."

"Which is?"

"Where the hell do I start looking? I mean, Jesus; Mzu's smart, she's not going to fly straight to the Garissa system to pick up the Alchemist. She could be *anywhere*, Ione; there are over eight hundred and sixty inhabited star systems out there."

"She went to the Narok system, I think. That's where the *Udat's* wormhole was aligned, anyway. It makes sense, Narok is Kenyan-ethnic; she may be contacting sympathisers."

"How the hell do you know that? I thought only black-hawks and voidhawks could sense each other's wormholes."

"Our SD satellites have some pretty good sensors."

She was lying; he knew it right away. What was worse than the lie, he thought, was the reason behind it. Because he couldn't think of one, certainly not one that had to be kept from him, the only person she trusted to send on this job. She must be protecting something, a something more important than the Alchemist. Jesus. "You were right, you know that? The night we met at Dominique's party, you said something to me. And you were right."

"What was it?"

"I can't say no to you."

• • •

Joshua left an hour later to supervise the *Lady Mac*'s refit, and round up his crew. It meant he missed Kelly's report, which put him in a very small minority. Kate Elvin's earlier optimism had been well founded; the other news companies didn't even try to compete. Ninety per cent of Tranquillity's population accessed the sensevises Kelly had recorded on Lalonde. The impact was as devastating as predicted—though not at once. The editing was too good for that, binding segments together in a fast-paced assault on the sensorium. Only afterwards, when they could duck the all-out assault on their immediate attention, did the implications of possession begin to sink in.

The effect acted like a mild depressant program or a communal virus. Yes, there truly was life after corporeal death. But it seemed to be perpetual misery. Nor was there any sighting of God, any God, even the Creator's numerous prophets went curiously unseen; no pearly gates, no brimstone lakes, no judgement, no Jahannam, no salvation. There was apparently no reward for having lived a virtuous life. The best anybody now had to hope for after death was to come back and possess the living.

Having to come to terms with the concept of a universe besieged by lost souls was a wounding process. People reacted in different ways. Getting smashed, or stoned, or stimed out was popular. Some found religion in a big way. Some became fervently agnostic. Some turned to their shrinks for reassurance. Some (the richer and smarter) quietly focused their attention (and funding) to zero-tau mausoleums.

One thing the psychiatrists did notice, this was a depression

which drove nobody to suicide. The other constants were the slow decline in efficiency at work, increased lethargy, a rise in use of tranquilizer and stimulant programs. Pop psychology commentators took to calling it the rise of the why-bother psychosis.

The rest of the Confederation was swift to follow, and almost identical in its response no matter what ethnic culture base was exposed to the news. No ideology or religion offered much in the way of resistance. Only Edenism proved resilient, though even that culture was far from immune.

Antonio Whitelocke chartered twenty-five blackhawks and Adamist independent trader starships to distribute Kelly's fleks to Collins offices across the Confederation. Saturation took three weeks, longer than optimum, but the quarantine alert made national navies highly nervous. Some of the more authoritarian governments, fearful of the effect Kelly's recording would have on public confidence, tried to ban Collins from releasing it; an action which simply pushed the fleks underground whilst simultaneously boosting their credibility. It was an unfortunate outcome, because in many cases it clashed and interacted with two other information ripples expanding across the Confederation. Firstly there was the rapidly spreading bad news about Al Capone's takeover of New California, and secondly the more clandestine distribution of Kiera Salter's seductive recording.

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The *Mindor* hit eight gees as soon as it cleared the wormhole terminus. Various masses immediately impinged on Rocio Condra's perception. The core of the Trojan point was twenty million kilometres in diameter, and cluttered with hundreds of medium-sized asteroids, tens of thousands of boulders, dust shoals, and swirls of ice pebbles, all of them gently resonating to the pull of distant gravity fields. *Mindor* opened its wings wide, and began beating them in vast sweeps.

Rocio Condra had chosen an avian form as the hellhawk's image. The three stumpy rear fins had broadened out, becoming thinner to angle back. Its nose had lengthened, creases and folds multiplying across the polyp, deepening, accentuating

the creature's streamlining. Meandering green and purple patterns had vanished, washed away beneath a bloom of midnight-black. The texture was crinkly, delineating tight-packed leather feathers. He had become a steed worthy of a dark angel.

Loose streamers of inter-planetary dust were churned into erratic storms as he powered forwards in hungry surges. Radar and laser sensors began to pulse against his hull. It had taken Rocio Condra a long time experimenting with the energetic power pumping through his neural cells to maintain a viable operational level within the hellhawk's electronic systems, although efficiency was still well down on design specs. So long as he remained calm, and focused the power sparingly and precisely, the processors remained on-line. It helped that the majority of them were bitek, and military grade at that. Even so, combat wasps had to be launched with backup solid rockets, but once they were clear they swiftly recovered; leaving only a small window of vulnerability. Thankfully, his mass perception, a secondary effect of the distortion field, was unaffected. Providing he wasn't outnumbered by hostile voidhawks, he could give a good account of himself.

The beams of electromagnetic radiation directed at him were coming from a point ten thousand kilometres ahead: Koblat asteroid, a new and wholly unimportant provincial settlement in a Trojan cluster which after a hundred and fifteen years of development and investment had yet to prove its economic worth. There were thousands just like it scattered across the Confederation.

Koblat didn't even rate a navy ship from the Toowoomba star system's defence alliance. Its funding company certainly didn't provide it with SD platforms. The sole concession which the asteroid's governing council had made to "the emergency" was to upgrade their civil spaceflight sensors, and equip two inter-planetary cargo ships with a dozen combat wasps apiece, grudgingly donated by Toowoomba. It was, like every response to the affairs of the outside universe, a rather pathetic token.

And now a token which had just been exposed for what it was. The hellhawk's emergence, location, velocity, flight vector, and refusal to identify itself could only mean one thing: It

was hostile. Both of the armed inter-planetary craft were dispatched on an interception vector, lumbering outwards at one and a half gees, hopelessly outclassed even before their fusion drives ignited.

Koblat beamed a desperate request for help to Pinjarra, the cluster's capital four million kilometres away, where three armed starships were stationed. The asteroid's inadequate internal emergency procedures were activated, sealing and isolating independent sections. Its terrified citizens rushed to designated secure chambers deep in the interior and waited for the attack to begin, dreading the follow on, the infiltration by possessed.

It never happened. All the incoming hellhawk did was open a standard channel and datavise a sensorium recording into the asteroid's net. Then it vanished, expanding a wormhole interstice and diving inside. Only a couple of optical sensors caught a glimpse of it, producing a smudgy image which nobody believed in.

When Jed Hinton finally got back from his designated safe shelter chamber, he almost wished the alert had kept going a few more hours. It was change, something new, different. A rare event in all of Jed's seventeen years of life.

When he returned to the family apartment, four rooms chewed out of the rock at level three (a two-thirds gravity field), his mum and Digger were shouting about something or other. The rows had grown almost continual since the warning from the Confederation Assembly had reached Koblat. Work shifts were being reduced as the company hedged its bets, waiting to see what would happen after the crisis was over. Shorter shifts meant Digger spending a lot more time at home, or up at the Blue Fountain bar on level five when he could afford it.

"I wish they'd stop," Gari said as more shouting sounded through the bedroom door. "I can't think right with so much noise." She was sitting at a table in the living room, trying to concentrate on a processor block. Its screen was full of text with several flashing diagrams, part of a software architecture course. The level was one his didactic imprints had covered five years ago; Gari was only three years younger, she should have assimilated it long ago. But then his sister had something

in her genes which made it difficult for laser imprinters to work on her brain. She had to work hard at revising everything to make it stick.

“Girl’s just plain arse backwards,” Digger shouted some nights when he stumbled home drunk.

Jed hated Digger, hated the way he shouted at Mum, and hated the way he picked on Gari. Gari tried hard to keep up with her year, she needed encouraging. Not that there was anything to achieve in Koblat, he thought miserably.

Miri and Navar came in, and promptly loaded a games flek into the AV block. The living room immediately filled up with an iridescent laserlight sparkle. A flock of spherical, coloured-chrome chessboards swooped around Jed’s head every time his eyes strayed towards the tall AV pillar. Both girls started yelling instructions at the block, and small figures jumped between the various spheres in strategic migrations, accompanied by a thumping music track. The projector was too damn large for a room this size.

“Come on, guys,” Gari wailed. “I’ve got to get this stuff locked down ready for my assessment.”

“So do it,” Navar grunted back.

“Cow!”

“Dumb bitch!”

“Stop it! You played this all yesterday.”

“And we haven’t finished yet. If you weren’t so *thick* you’d know that.”

Gari appealed to Jed, chubby face quivering on the threshold of tears.

Miri and Navar were Digger’s daughters (by different mothers), so if Jed lifted a finger to them Digger would hit him. He’d found that out months ago. They knew it too, and used the knowledge with tactical skill.

“Come on,” he told Gari, “we’ll go down to the day club.”

Miri and Navar laughed jeeringly as Gari shut down her processor block and glared at them. Jed shoved the door open and faced his tiny worldlet.

“It’s not any quieter at the club,” Gari said as the door shut behind them.

Jed nodded dispiritedly. “I know. But you can ask Mrs Yandell if you can use her office. She’ll understand.”

“Suppose,” Gari acknowledged brokenly. Not long ago her brother had been capable of putting the whole universe to rights. A time before Digger.

Jed set off down the tunnel. Only the floor had been covered in composite tiling, the walls and ceiling were naked rock lined with power cables, data ducts, and fat environmental tubes. He took the left turning at the first junction, not even thinking. His life consisted of walking the hexagonal weave of tunnels which circled the asteroid’s interior; that entire topographic web existed only to connect two places: the apartment and the day club. There was nowhere else.

Tunnels with gloomy lighting, hidden machines that made every wall in Koblat thrum quietly; that was his environment now, a worldlet without a single horizon. Never fresh air and open spaces and plants, never *room*, not for his body or his mind. The first biosphere cavern was still being bored out (that was where Digger worked), but it was years behind schedule and ruinously over budget. At one time Jed had lived with the faith that it would provide him an outlet for all his crushed-up feelings of confinement and anger, allowing him to run wild over fresh-planted grass meadows. Not now. His mum and Digger along with all the rest of the adults were too stupid to appreciate what possession really meant. But he knew. Nothing mattered now, nothing you did, nothing you said, nothing you thought, nothing you wished for. Die now or die in a hundred years time, you still spent eternity with a sprained mind which was unable to extinguish itself. The final, absolute horror.

No, they didn’t think about that. They were as trapped in this existence as the souls were in the beyond. Both of them trekking after the low income jobs, going where the companies assigned them. No choice, and no escape, not even for their children. Building a better future wasn’t a concept which could run in their thought routines, they were frozen in the present.

For once the dreary tunnel outside the day club centre was enlivened with bustle. Kids hurried up and down, others clumped together to talk in bursts of high-velocity chatter. Jed frowned: this was wrong. Koblat’s kids never had so much energy or enthusiasm. They came here to hang out, or access

the AV projections which the company provided to absorb and negate unfocused teenage aggression. Travelling the same loop of hopelessness as their parents.

Jed and Gari gave each other a puzzled look, both of them sensitive to the abnormal atmosphere. Then Jed saw Beth winding through the press towards them, a huge smile on her narrow face. Beth was his maybe-girlfriend; the same age, and always trading raucous insults. He couldn't quite work out if that was affection or not. It did seem a solid enough friendship of some kind, though.

"Have you accessed it yet?" Beth demanded.

"What?"

"The senseise from the hellhawk, cretin." She grinned and pointed to her foot. A red handkerchief was tied above her ankle.

"No."

"Come on then, mate, you're in for a swish-ride treat." She grabbed his hand and tugged him through the kids milling around the door. "The council tried to erase it, of course, but it was coded for open access. It got into every memory core in the asteroid. Nothing they could do about it."

There were three AV players in the day club centre, the ones Jed always used to access vistas of wild landscapes, his one taste of freedom. Even so he could only see and hear the wonderful xenoc planets; the AV projectors weren't sophisticated (i.e. expensive) enough to transmit activent patterns which stimulated corresponding tactile and olfactory sensations.

A dense sparkle-mist filled most of the room. Twenty people were standing inside it, their arms hanging limply by their sides, faces entranced as they were interacted with the recording. Curious now, Jed turned to face one of the pillars square on.

Marie Skibbow's tanned, vibrant body lounged back over a boulder five metres in front of him, all flimsy clothes and pronounced curves. It was a perfectly natural pose; such a Venus could only possibly belong in this paradisiacal setting with its warmth and light and rich vegetation. Jed fell in love, forgetting all about skinny, angular Beth with her hard-edge attitude. Until now girls such as Marie had existed only in

advertises or AV dramas; they weren't real, *natural*, not like this. The fact that such a person actually lived and breathed somewhere in the Confederation gave him a kick higher than any of the floaters he scored.

Kiera Salter smiled at him, and him alone. "You know, they're going to tell you that you shouldn't be accessing this recording," she told him.

...

When it ended Jed stood perfectly still, feeling as though a piece of his own body had been stolen from him; certainly something was missing, and he was the poorer for it. Gari was at his side, her face forlorn.

"We have to go there," Jed said. "We have to get to Valisk and join them."

12

The hotel sat on its own plateau halfway up the mountainside, looking out across the deep bay. The only buildings to share the rocky amphitheatre with it were half a dozen weekend retreat villas belonging to old-money families.

Al could appreciate why the owners had made strenuous efforts to keep the developers out. It was a hell of a sight, an unspoilt beach which went on for miles, tiny fang rocks at the front of the headlands stirring up founts of spray, long lazy breakers rolling onto the sands. The only thing wrong about it was that he couldn't get down there to enjoy it. There was a lot of time pressure building up at the top of the Organization, dangerous amounts of work and too-tight schedules. Back in Brooklyn when he was a kid he'd sit on the docks and watch gulls pecking at dead things in the muddy shallows. One thing about those gulls, their necks never stayed still, peck peck peck all day long. Now he'd surrounded himself with people that took after them. Never ever did his senior lieutenants give him a break. Peck peck peck. "Al, we need you to settle a beef." Peck peck. "Al, what do we do with the navy rebels?" Peck peck. "Al, Arcata is pulling in the red cloud again, you want we should zap the bastards?" Peck peck.

Je-zus. In Chicago he had days off, months on holiday. Everyone knew what to do, things ran smoothly—well, kind of. Not here. Here, he didn't have a fucking minute to himself. His head was buzzing like a fucking hornets' nest he had to think so hard on the hoof.

"But you're loving it," Jezzibella said.

"Huh?" Al turned back from the window. She was lying across the bed, wrapped in a huge fluffy white robe, her hair lost beneath a towel turban. One hand held a slim book, the other was plucking Turkish delights out of a box.

“You’re Alexander the Great and Jimi Hendrix all in one, you’re having a ball.”

“Dozy dame, who the hell is Jimi Hendrix?”

Jezzibella pouted crossly at the book. “Oh, he was the sixties, sorry. A real wildcat musician, everybody loved him. The thing I’m trying to say here is, don’t knock what you’ve got, especially when you’ve got so much. Sure, things are a little rough at the start, they’re bound to be. It just makes winning all the sweeter. Besides, what else have you got to do? If you don’t give orders, you take orders. You told me that.”

He grinned down at her. “Yeah. You’re right.” But how come she’d known what he was thinking? “You wanna come with me this time?”

“It’s your shout, Al. I’ll maybe go down to the beach later.”

“Sure.” He was beginning to resent these goddamn tours. San Angeles had been a beaut, but then everyone else wanted in on the act. This afternoon it was Ukiah, tomorrow morning it was Merced. Who gave a shit? Al wanted to get back up to Monterey where the action was at.

The silver and ivory telephone at the side of the bed rang. Jezzibella picked up the handset and listened for a moment. “That’s good to hear, Leroy. Come on in; Al can give you ten minutes for news like that.”

“What?” Al mouthed.

“He thinks he’s cracked our money problem,” she said as she replaced the handset.

Leroy Octavius and Silvano Richmann walked in, Leroy smiling effusively, Silvano managing a glimmer of enthusiasm as he greeted Al and ignored Jezzibella entirely. Al let the faint insult pass. Silvano was always on the level about how he hated the non-possessed, and there was no hint in Jez’s mind that she’d taken offence.

“So what have you come up with?” Al asked as they sat in the chairs which gave them a splendid view out across the bay.

Leroy put a slim black case down on the coffee table in front of him, resting a proud hand on it. “I took a look at the basics of what money is all about, Al, and tried to see how it could apply to our situation.”

“Money is just something you screw out of other people, right, Silvano?” Al laughed.

Leroy gave an indulgent smile. “That’s about it, Al. Money is principally a fancy method of accounting, it shows you how much other people owe you. The beauty of it is you can use it to collect that debt in a thousand different ways, that’s how come money always grows out of a barter economy. Individual currencies are just a measure of the most universal commodity. It use to be gold, or land, something which never changed. The Confederation uses energy, which is why the fuseodollar is the base currency, because it’s linked to He₃ production, and those costs are fixed and universal.”

Al sat back, materialized a Havana, and took a deep drag. “Thanks for the history lesson, Leroy. Get to the point.”

“The method of accounting isn’t so important, whether you use old-fashioned notes and coins or a Jovian Bank disk, it doesn’t matter. What you must establish is the nature of the debt itself, the measure of what you owe. In this case it’s so simple I could kick myself for not thinking of it straight off.”

“Someone’s gonna kick you, Leroy, for sure. And pretty quick. *What* debt?”

“An energistic one. An act of magic, you promise to pay someone whatever they want.”

“For Christ’s sake, that’s crazy,” Al said. “What’s the sense in someone owing me a chunk of magic when I can work my own? The original New California economy went ass backwards in the first place because we got this ability.”

Leroy’s grin became annoyingly wide. Al let him get away with it because he could see how tight and excited the fat manager’s thoughts were. He’d certainly convinced himself he was right.

“You can, Al,” Leroy said. “But I can’t. This is a not-so-rhetorical question, but how are you going to pay me for all this work I’ve been doing for you? Sure you’ve got the threat of possession to hold me with, but you need my talent, have me possessed and you don’t get that. But put me on a salary and I’m yours for life. For a day’s work you promise to do five minutes of magic for me; manifest a good suit or a copy of the Mona Lisa, whatever I ask for. But it doesn’t have to be you who owes me for the day; I can take the token, or

promise, or whatever, and go to any possessed for my magic to be performed.”

Al chewed around his cigar. “Let me get this straight, here, Leroy. Any schmuck with one of your chocolate dime tokens can come along and ask me to make them a set of gold-plated cutlery anytime they want?”

“Not anytime, no, Al. But it’s the simplest principle of all: you do something for me, I do something for you. Like I said, it’s exchanging and redeeming debt. Don’t think of it on such a personal level. We’ve been wondering how to keep the non-possessed working for the possessed, this is the answer: You’ll pay them, but you pay them in whatever they want.”

Al glanced over at Jezzibella, who shrugged. “I can’t see a flaw in the idea,” she said. “How are you going to measure it, Leroy? Surely the possessed will be able to counterfeit any currency?”

“Yes. So we don’t use one.” He opened his bag and took out a small processor block, matt-black with a gold Thompson sub-machine gun embossed on one side. “Like I said, money is all accounting. We use a computer memory to keep track of what’s owed to whom. You want your magic doing for you, then the computer shows how much you’re entitled to. Same for the reverse; if you’re a possessed it shows how much work the non-possessed have been doing for you. We just set up a planetary bank, Al, keep a ledger on everyone.”

“I must be crazy even listening to this. Me? You want me to run a bank? The First National Al Capone Bank? Jesus H Christ, Leroy!”

Leroy held up the black processor block to stress the argument. “That’s the real beauty of it, Al. It makes the Organization utterly indispensable. The soldiers are the ones who are going to enforce and regulate payment on the ground. They make it fair, they make the whole economy slide along smoothly. We don’t have to force or threaten anyone anymore, at least not on the scale we have been doing with the SD network. We don’t put taxes on the economy, like other governments; we become the economy. And there’s nothing to stop the possessed using the system themselves. There are a lot of jobs too big for one individual. It can work, Al. Really it can.”

"I scratch your back, you scratch mine," Al said. He eyed the black processor block suspiciously. Leroy handed it over. "Did Emmet help with this accounting machine?" Al asked curiously. Apart from the gold emblem it could have been carved from a lump of coal for all he knew.

"Yes, Al, he designed it, and the ledger program. He says that the only way a possessed guy can tamper with it is if he gets into the computer chamber, which is why he wants to base it on Monterey. We're already making it the Organization headquarters; this will cement the deal."

Al scaled the electric gadget back on the table. "Okay, Leroy. I see you've busted your balls to do good work for me here. So I'll tell you what we'll do; I'll grab all my senior lieutenants for a meeting in Monterey in two days time, see what they make of it. If they buy it, I'm behind you all the way. How does that sound?"

"Achievable."

"I like you, Leroy. You setting up any more tours for me?"

Leroy flicked a fleeting glance at Jezzibella, who gave him a tiny shake of her head. "No, Al; Merced is the last for a while. It's more important you're up at Monterey for a while now, what with the next stage just about ready."

"Goddamn, am I glad to hear that."

Leroy smiled contentedly, and put the accountancy block back in his slim case. "Thanks for listening, Al." He stood.

"No problem. I'll just have a word with Silvano, here, then the pair of you can get back into space."

"Sure, Al."

"So?" Al asked when Leroy had left.

"It ain't my concern, Al," Silvano said. "If that's the way you wanna do it, then fine by me. I admit, we gotta have some kinda dough around here, else things are gonna start falling apart pretty damn fast. We can only keep people in line with the SD platforms for so long."

"Yeah, yeah." Al waved a discontented hand. Money for magic, Je-zus, even the numbers racket was more honest than that. He stared at his lieutenant; if it hadn't been for the ability to sense emotions there would have been no way for him to work out what was going on behind that Latino poker face.

But Silvano was eager about something. “So what do you want? And it better be good fucking news.”

“I think it may be. Somebody came back from beyond who had some interesting information for us. He’s an African type, name of Ambar.” Silvan smiled at the memory. “He wound up in a blond Ivy League body, man was he pissed about that; it’s taking up a lot of effort to turn himself into a true brother again.”

“Now *there’s* someone who could cash in a potload of Leroy’s tokens,” Jezzibella said innocently. She popped another Turkish delight in her mouth, and winked at Al as Silvano scowled.

“Right,” Al chuckled. “What did he want to trade?”

“He’s only been dead thirty years,” Silvano said. “Came from a planet called Garissa, said it got blown away, the whole damn world. Some kind of starship attack that used antimatter. Don’t know whether to believe him or not.”

“You know anything about that?” Al asked Jezzibella.

“Sure, baby, I nearly did a concept album on the Garissa Genocide once. Too depressing, though. It happened all right.”

“Sweet shit, a whole planet. And this Ambar guy was there?”

“So he says.”

“Antimatter can really do that? Waste out an entire planet?”

“Yeah. But the thing is, Al, he says the Garissa government was working on their own weapon when they got wasted, something to fire at Omuta. The biggest weapon ever built, he swears. And he oughta know, he was some hotshot rocket scientist for their navy.”

“Another weapon?”

“Yeah. They called it the Alchemist. Ambar said it got built, but never got used. Said the whole fucking Confederation would know if it had been, that mother’s got some punch.”

“So it’s still around,” Al said. “Let me guess: he’ll lead us right to it.”

“No. But he says he knows someone who can. His old college lecturer, a broad called Alkad Mzu.”

Lady Macbeth was scheduled to depart in another eight hours, though no one would ever guess by looking at her. Twenty per cent of her hull was still open to space, exposing the hexagonal stress structure; engineers on waldo platforms had the gaps completely surrounded, working with methodical haste to integrate the new systems they had installed to replace battle-damaged units.

There was an equal amount of well-ordered effort going on inside the life-support capsules, as crews from five service and astroengineering companies laboured to bring the starship up to its full combat capable status. A status whose performance figures would surprise a lot of conventional warship captains. A status she hadn't truly enjoyed for decades. Her standard internal fittings were being stripped out, replaced by their military-grade equivalents.

Joshua wanted the old girl readied at peak performance, and as Ione was paying . . . The more he thought about what he'd agreed to do for her, the more he worried about it. Immersing himself in the details of the refit was an easy escape, almost as good as flying.

He had spent most of yesterday holding conferences with astroengineering company managers discussing how to compress a fortnight's work into forty-eight hours. Now he watched attentively as their technicians clustered around the consoles manipulating the cyberdrones and waldo arms enclosing *Lady Mac*.

A pair of legs slid through the control centre's hatch, wobbling about as though the owner wasn't quite accustomed to free-fall manoeuvring. Joshua hurriedly grabbed at the offending trousers, pulling the man to one side before his shoes caught one of the console operators behind her ear.

"Thank you, Joshua," a red-faced Horst Elwes said as Joshua guided him down onto a stikpad. He gave a watery blink, and peered out into the bay. "I was told I would find you here. I heard that you had found yourself a charter flight."

There was no detectable irony in the priest's tone, so Joshua said: "Yes, the Lord of Ruin contracted me to pick up some essential specialist components to enhance Tranquillity's defences. The industrial stations outside don't manufacture every component which goes into the SD platforms."

Joshua didn't actually hear anyone snigger, but there were definitely some sly grins flashing around the consoles. Nobody knew for sure what the flight was for, but they all had a good idea what it didn't entail. As an excuse the components charter was pretty feeble. Ione had reported that every intelligence agency in the habitat had taken a sudden interest in his impending departure.

"But they can manage to build combat wasps, apparently," Horst said with gentle amusement. Brackets on the bay walls held sixty-five combat wasps ready for loading into *Lady Macbeth's* launch tubes.

"One of the reasons we won the contract, Father. *Lady Mac* can carry cargo and fight her way out of trouble."

"If you say so, young Joshua. But please, don't try that one on St Peter if you ever make it to those big white gates."

"I'll bear it in mind. Was there something you wanted?"

"Nothing important. I was gladdened to hear your starship was being repaired for you. *Lady Macbeth* sustained a lot of damage rescuing us. I understand how expensive such machinery is. I wouldn't want you to suffer a financial penalty for such a selfless act."

"Thank you, Father."

"The children would like to see you before you leave."

"Er . . . Why?"

"I believe they want to say thank you."

"Oh, yes." He glanced at Melvyn, who appeared equally discomfited. "I'll try, Father."

"I thought you could combine it with the memorial service. They will all be there for that."

"What memorial service?"

"Oh, dear, didn't Sarha tell you? The bishop has agreed that I can hold a service of commemoration to those who sacrificed themselves for the children. I think Mr Malin's team and Warlow deserve our prayers. It starts in three hours time."

Joshua's good humour drained away. I do not want to think about death and after, not right now.

Horst studied the young man's face, seeing both anxiety and guilt expressed in the carefully composed features. "Joshua," he said quietly. "There is more to death than the beyond. Believe me, I have seen how much more with my own

two eyes. The recordings your friend Kelly made, while truthful, do not contain anything like the whole story. Do you think I could retain my faith in Our Lord if Shaun Wallace had been right?"

"What did you see?"

"The one thing which could convince me. For you, I expect it would be different."

"I see. We have to come to faith in our own way?"

"As always, yes."

• • •

Tranquillity's cathedral was modelled on the old European archetype. One of the few buildings inside the habitat, it grew up out of the parkland several kilometres away from the circle of starscraper lobbies halfway along the cylinder. The polyp walls were lily-white, with an arching ceiling ribbed by smooth polygonal ridges to give the appearance of a long-abandoned hive nest. Tall gashes in the wall had been sealed by traditional stained glass, with a huge circular rosette at the end of the nave overlooking the stone altar. The Virgin Mary, baby Jesus in arm, gazed down on the slab of granite which Michael Saldana had brought from Earth.

Joshua had been given a place in the front pew, sitting next to Ione. He hadn't had time to change out of his ship-suit, while she was dressed in some exquisitely elegant black dress complete with elaborate hat. At least the rest of the *Lady Mac*'s crew shared his sartorial manner.

The service was short, perhaps because of the children who fidgeted and whispered. Joshua didn't mind. He sang the hymns and listened to Horst's sermon, and joined in with the prayers of thanks.

It wasn't quite as cathartic as he wanted it to be, but there was some sense of relief. People congregating together to tell the dead of their gratitude. And just how did that ritual start, he wondered—have we always known they'd be watching?

Ione propelled him over to the knot of children after it was over. Father Horst and several pediatric nurses were trying to keep them in order. They looked different, Joshua decided. The gaggle which closed around him could have been any junior day club on an outing. Certainly none of them resembled

that subdued, frightened group who had flooded on board *Lady Mac* barely a week ago.

As they giggled and recited their rehearsed thank yous he realized he was grinning back. Some good came out of the mission after all. In the background Father Horst was nodding approvingly. Wily old sod, Joshua thought, he set me up for this.

There were others filing out of the cathedral, the usual clutter of rover reporters, (surprisingly) the Edenists from Aethra, a large number of the clientele from Harkey's Bar and other space industry haunts, a few combat-boosted, Kelly Tirrel. Joshua excused himself from the children and caught up with her in the narthex.

"*Lady Mac* is departing this evening," he said lamely.

"I know."

"I caught some of the Collins news shows; you've done all right for yourself."

"Yes. Finally, I'm officially more popular than Matthias Rems." There was humour in her voice, but not her expression.

"There's a berth if you want it."

"No thanks, Joshua." She glanced over at Ione who was chatting to Horst Elwes. "I don't know what she's conned you into doing for her, but I don't want any part of it."

"It's only a charter to pick up components which—"

"Fuck off, Joshua. If that's all there is to it, why offer me a place? And why load *Lady Mac* full of top-grade combat wasps? You're heading straight back into trouble, aren't you?"

"I sincerely hope not."

"I don't need it, Joshua. I don't need the fame, I don't need the risk. For fuck's sake, do you know what's going to happen to you if you die? Didn't you access any of my recordings?" She almost seemed to be pleading with him.

"Yes, Kelly, I accessed some of them. I know what happens when you die. But you can't give up hope for something better. You can't stop living just because you're frightened. You kept going on Lalonde, despite everything the dead threw at you. And you triumphed."

"Ha!" She let out a bitter, agonized laugh. "I wouldn't call

that triumph if I were you: thirty kids saved. That's the most pathetic defeat in history. Even Custer did better than that."

Joshua gazed at her, trying to understand where his Kelly had vanished. "I'm sorry you feel that way, really I am. I think we did okay at Lalonde, and a lot of other people share that opinion."

"Then they're stupid, and they'll grow out of it. Because everything now is temporary. Everything. When you're damned to exist for eternity, nothing you experience lasts for long."

"Quite. That's what makes living worthwhile."

"No." She gave him a fragile smile. "Know what I'm going to do now?"

"What?"

"Join Ashly, he's got the right idea about how to spend his time. I'm going to take million-year sojourns in zero-tau. I'm going to sleep away the rest of the universe's existence, Joshua."

"Jesus, that's dumb. What's the point?"

"The point is, you don't suffer the beyond."

Joshua grinned the infamous Calvert grin, then ducked forwards to give her a quick kiss. "Thanks, Kelly."

"What the hell for, bollockbrain?"

"It's a faith thing. You have to come to it by yourself . . . apparently."

"If you go on like this, Joshua, you're going to die young."

"And leave a beautiful corpse. Yeah, I know. But I'm still flying Ione's charter."

Her mournful eyes regarded him with hurt and the old pain of longing. But she knew the gulf was too wide now. They both did.

"I never doubted it." She kissed him back, so platonic it was almost formal. "Take care."

"It was fun while it lasted, though, wasn't it?" he inquired to her retreating back.

Her hand fluttered casually, a dismissive backwards wave.

"Sod it," he grunted.

"Ah, Joshua, good, I wanted to catch you."

He turned to face Horst. "Nice service, Father."

“Why, thank you. I got rather out of practice on Lalonde, nice to see the old art hasn’t deserted me entirely.”

“The children look well.”

“I should hope so, the attention they’re getting. Tranquillity is an extraordinary place for an old arcology dweller like me. You know, the Church really did get it wrong about bitek. It’s a wonderful technology.”

“Another cause, Father?”

Horst chuckled. “I have my hands full, thank you. Speaking of which—” He pulled a small wooden crucifix from his cassock pocket. “I’d like you to take this with you on your voyage. I had it with me the whole time on Lalonde. I’m not sure if it’ll bring you good luck, but I suspect your need is greater than mine.”

Joshua accepted the gift awkwardly, not quite sure whether to put it around his neck or stuff it in a pocket. “Thank you, Father. It’ll come with me.”

“Bon voyage, Joshua. May the Lord look after you. And do try and be good, this time.”

Joshua grinned. “Do my best.”

Horst hurried back to the children.

“Captain Calvert?”

Joshua sucked in a breath. Now what? “You got me.” He was telling it to a gleaming brass breastplate, one with distinctly feminine contours. It belonged to a cosmonik that resembled some steam-age concept of a robot: solid metal bodywork and rubbery flexible joints. Definitely a cosmonik, Joshua determined after a quick survey, not combat boosted, there was too much finesse in the ancillary systems braceletting each of the forearms. This was a worker, not a warrior.

“My name is Beaulieu,” she said. “I was a friend of Warlow’s. If you are looking for a replacement for his post, I would like to be considered.”

“Jesus, you’re as blunt as he was, I’ll give you that. But I don’t think he ever mentioned you.”

“How much of his past did he mention?”

“Yeah, not much.”

“So?”

“I’m sorry?”

“So, do I have the post?” She datavised over her CV file.

The information matrix rotated slowly inside the confines of Joshua's skull. It competed for space with a sense of indignation that she should do this at Warlow's own memorial, coupled with a grudging acknowledgement that anyone this forthright probably had what it took, she wouldn't last long with an attitude that wasn't solidly backed up with competence.

Running a quick overview check on the file he saw she was seventy-seven years old. "You served with the Confederation Navy?"

"Yes, Captain. Thirty-two years ago; it qualifies me to maintain combat wasps."

"So I see. The navy issued an arrest warrant for me and *Lady Mac* at Lalonde."

"I'm sure they had their reasons. I only serve one captain at a time."

"Er, right. That's good." Joshua could see another three cosmoniks standing in the last pew, waiting to see what the outcome would be. He datavised the cathedral's net processor block. "Tranquillity?"

"Yes, Joshua."

"I've got three hours before we leave, and I don't have time for games. Is this Beaulieu on the level?"

"As far as I can ascertain, yes. She has been working in my spaceport for fifteen months, and has had no contact with any foreign agency operatives. Nor does she fraternize with the combat-boosted or the less savoury traders. She stays with her own kind; cosmoniks do tend to stick together. Warlow's outgoing nature was an exception rather than the rule."

"Outgoing?" Joshua's eyebrows shot up.

"Yes. Did you not find him so?"

"Thank you, Tranquillity."

"My pleasure to assist."

Joshua cancelled the datavise. "We're having to fly with one patterning node out until I can find a replacement, and there may be some trouble later on in the charter," he told Beaulieu. "I can't give you specifics."

"That does not concern me. I believe your ability will minimize any threat, Lagrange Calvert."

“Oh, Jesus. Okay, welcome aboard. You’ve got two hours to collect your gear and get it stowed.”

• • •

The docking cradle gently elevated *Lady Macbeth* upwards out of bay CA 5-099. Several hundred people had accessed the spaceport’s sensors to watch her departure; intelligence agency operatives, curious rumour-gorged space industry crews, news offices recording files for their library in case anything eventful did happen.

Ione saw the *Lady Macbeth*’s thermo dump panels slide out of their recesses, a parody of a bird’s wings extending ready for flight. Tiny chemical verniers ignited around the starship’s equator, lifting her smoothly from the cradle.

She used her affinity to receive a montage summary of the tired company engineering teams congratulating each other, traffic control officers coordinating the starship’s vector, Kelly Tirrel alone in her room accessing the spaceport sensor image.

It is fortunate that Kelly Tirrel did not wish to go with him, Tranquillity said. You would have had to stop her, which would have raised the flight’s profile.

Sure.

He will remain safe, Ione. We are there with him to provide assistance, and even in part to die to protect him.

Right.

The *Lady Macbeth*’s bright blue ion thrusters fired, washing out the bay’s floodlights. Ione used the Strategic Defence platforms to track the starship as it flew in towards Mirchusko. Joshua piloted her into a perfectly circular one-hundred-and-eighty-five-thousand-kilometre orbit, cutting off the triple fusion drives at the precise moment of injection. The ion thrusters only fired twice more to fine-tune the trajectory before the thermo dump panels started to fold up.

Tranquillity sensed the gravitonic pulse as the starship’s patterning nodes discharged. Then the tiny mote of mass was gone.

Ione turned back to her other problems.

• • •

Demaris Coligan thought he’d done okay with his suit,

dreaming up a fawn-brown fabric with silvery pinstripes, and a neat cut that wasn't half as garish as some of the Organization lieutenants wore.

At the last minute he added a small scarlet buttonhole rose to his lapel, then nodded to the oily Bernhard Allsop who led him into the Nixon suite.

Al Capone was waiting for him in the vast lounge; his suit wasn't that different from Demaris's, it was just that Al wore it with such verve. Not even the equally snappy senior lieutenants flanking him could produce the same style.

The sight of so many heavyweights didn't do much to increase Demaris's level of confidence. But there was nothing he'd done wrong, he was sure of that.

Al gave him a broad welcoming smile, and clasped his hand in a warm grip. "Good to see you, Demaris. The boys here tell me you've been doing some good work for me."

"Do whatever I can, Al. And that's a fact. You and the Organization's been good to me."

"Mighty glad to hear that, Demaris. Come over here, got something to show you." Al draped his arm around Demaris's shoulder in a companionable fashion, guiding him over to the transparent wall. "Now ain't that a sight?"

Demaris looked out. New California itself was hidden behind the bulk of the asteroid, so he looked up. Crinkled sepia-coloured rock curved away to a blunt conical peak. Three kilometres away, hundreds of thermo dump panels the size of football fields hung down from the rock, forming a ruff collar right around the asteroid's neck. Beyond that was the non-rotating spaceport disk, which, like the stars, seemed to be revolving. An unnervingly large constellation of Adamist starships floated in a rigorously maintained lattice formation just past the edge of the disk. Demaris had spent the entire previous week helping to prep them for flight; and the constellation only represented thirty percent of the Organization's total warship fleet.

"It's, er . . . pretty fine, Al," Demaris said. He couldn't make out Al's thoughts too clearly, so he didn't know whether he was in the shit or not. But the boss seemed pleased enough.

"Pretty fine!" Al appeared to find this hilarious, roaring

with laughter. He slapped Demaris's back enthusiastically. The other lieutenants smiled politely.

"It's a fucking great ritzy miracle, Demaris. One hundred per cent proof. You know just one of those ships is packing enough firepower to blow the entire old U.S. Navy out of the water? Now that's the kinda thought makes you shit bricks, huh?"

"Right, Al."

"What you're seeing out there is something no one else has ever tried before. It's a fucking crusade, Demaris. We're gonna save the universe for people like us, put it to rights again. And you helped make it happen. I'm mighty grateful to you for that, yes, sir. Mighty grateful."

"Did what I could, Al. We all do."

"Yeah, but you helped with getting those star-rockets ready. That takes talent."

Demaris tapped the side of his head. "I possessed someone who knows; he don't hold nothing back." With great daring he gave a gentle punch to Al's upper arm. "Least, not if he knows what's good for him."

A split-second pause, then Al was laughing again. "God-damn right. Gotta let em know who's calling the shots." A finger was raised in caution. "But, I gotta admit; I got one hell of a problem brewing here, Demaris."

"Well, Christ, Al, anything I can do to help, you know that."

"Sure, Demaris, I know that. The thing is, once we start the crusade they're gonna fight back, the Confederation guys. And they're bigger than we are."

Demaris dropped his voice an octave, glancing from side to side. "Well sure they are, Al; but we got the antimatter now."

"Yeah, that's right, we got that. But that don't make them any smaller, not numbers wise."

Demaris's smile was a little harder to maintain. "I don't see . . . What is it you want, Al?"

"This guy you're possessing—what's his name?"

"The goof calls himself Kingsley Pryor, he was a real hot-shot engineer for the Confederation Navy, a lieutenant commander."

“That’s right, Kingsley Pryor.” Al pointed a finger at Leroy Octavius.

“Lieutenant Commander Kingsley Pryor,” Leroy recited, glancing at the screen on his processor block. “Attended University of Columbus, and graduated 2590 with a degree in magnetic confinement physics. Joined Confederation Navy the same year, graduated from Trafalgar’s officer cadet campus with a first. Took a doctorate in fusion engineering at Montgomery Tech in 2598. Assigned to 2nd Fleet headquarters engineering division. Rapid promotion. Currently working on the navy’s project to reduce fusion rocket size. Married, with one son.”

“Yeah,” Demaris said cagily. “That’s him. So?”

“So I got a job for him, Demaris,” Al said. “A special job, see? I’m real sorry about that, but I can’t see no way out of it.”

“No need to be sorry, Al. Like I said, anything I can do.”

Al scratched the side of his cheek, just above three thin white scars. “No, Demaris, you ain’t listening. I fucking hate it when people do that. I got a job for *him* to do. Not you.”

“Him? You mean Pryor?”

Al gave the ever-impassive Mickey a helpless grimace. “Je-zus, I’m dealing with fucking Einstein here. YES, shit-for-brains. Kingsley Pryor, I want him back. Now.”

“But, but, Al, I can’t give you him. I *am* him.” Demaris thumped his chest frantically with both hands. “I ain’t got anybody else to ride around in. You can’t ask me to do that.”

Al frowned. “Are you loyal to me, Demaris, are you loyal to the Organization?”

“What kind of a fucking question is that? Course I’m fucking loyal, Al. But it still don’t mean you can ask that. You can’t!” He whirled around as he heard the smooth *snik* of a Thompson being cocked. Luigi Balsmao was cradling one of the machine guns lightly, an affable smile on his thickset face.

“I am asking you, as a loyal member of my Organization, to give me back Kingsley Pryor. I’m asking you *nicely*.”

“No. No fucking way, man!”

The scars on Al’s reddening face were frost-white. “Because you acted loyal to me I give you the choice. Because we’re gonna liberate every one of those ass-backwards plan-

ets out there, you're gonna have a zillion decent bodies to choose from. Because of this, I give you the opportunity to avoid zero-tau and prove your honour like a man. Now for the last goddamn time, read my lips: I want Pryor."

• • •

Kingsley Pryor didn't even know why he was crying like a baby. Because he was free? Because he'd been possessed? Because death wasn't final?

Whatever the reason, the emotional fallout was running through him like an electrical discharge. Control was impossible. However, he was fairly sure he was crying. Lying on cool silk sheets, a billowingly soft mattress below his spine. Knees hooked up under his chin with arms wrapped around his shins. And in darkness. Not the sensory deprivation of the mental imprisonment, but a wonderful genuine dusk, where a mosaic of grey on grey shadows delineated shapes. It was enough for a start. Had he been plunged directly into countryside on a sunny day he would probably have fried from sensory overload.

A swishing sound made him tighten his grip on himself. Currents of air stirred across his face as someone sat on the bed beside him.

"It's all right," a girl's melodic voice whispered. "The worst part's over now."

Fingers stroked the nape of his neck. "You're back. You're alive again."

"Did . . . Did we win?" he croaked.

"No. I'm afraid not, Kingsley. In fact, the real battle hasn't even begun yet."

He shivered uncontrollably. Too much. Everything was too much for him right now. He wanted, not to die (Gods no!) but just to be away. Alone.

"That's why Al let you out again. You have a part to play in the battle, you see. A very important part."

How could a voice so mellifluous carry such an intimation of catastrophe? He used his neural nanonics to retrieve a strong tranquillizer program and shunt it into primary mode. Sensations and palpitating emotions damped down. Something was not quite right about the

neural nanonics function, but he couldn't be bothered to run a diagnostic.

"Who are you?" he asked.

A head was laid down on his shoulder, arms embracing him. For a moment he was reminded of Clarissa, the softness, the warmth, the female scent.

"A friend. I didn't want you to wake up with them taunting you. That would have been too horrible. You need my touch, my sympathy. I understand people like no other. I can prepare you for what is to come: the offer you can't refuse."

He slowly straightened himself and turned to look at her. The sweetest girl he'd ever seen, her age lost between fifteen and twenty-five, fair hair curling buoyantly around her face as she looked down at him in concern.

"You're beautiful," he told her.

"They've captured Clarissa," she said. "And dear little Webster, too. I'm sorry. We know how much you love them. Demaris Coligan told us."

"Captured?"

"But safe. Secure. Non-possessed. A child and a woman, they could not be hurt, not here. Al welcomes the non-possessed to his Organization. They'll have an honoured place, Kingsley. You can earn that for them."

He struggled to resolve the image which the name Al stirred in his mind. The fleshy-faced young man in a strange grey hat. "Earn it?"

"Yes. They can be safe forever, they need never die, never age, never endure pain. You can bring them that gift."

"I want to see them."

"You could." She kissed his brow, a tiny dry lick with her lips. "One day. If you do what we ask, you will be able to return to them. I promise that. Not as your friend. Not as your enemy. Just one human to another."

"When? When can I see them?"

"Hush, Kingsley. You're too tired now. Sleep. Sleep away all your anguish. And when you wake, you will learn of the fabulous destiny which is yours to fulfill."

Moyo watched Ralph Hiltch walk down the road out of Ex-nall, the girl lying in his arms. Together they made a classical image, the hero rescuing his damsel.

The other armour-suited troops closed around their leader, and together they slipped off the road, back into the cover of the trees. Not that the snarled-up trunks of the old forest could hide them; Ralph's fury acted like a magnesium flare to the strange senses which Moyo was only just accustoming himself to.

The ESA agent's anger was of a genus which perturbed Moyo deeply. The resolution behind it was awesome. After two centuries incarcerated in the beyond, Moyo had assumed he would be immune to any kind of threat ever again. That was why he had cooperated with Annette Ekelund's scheme, no matter how callous it was by the standards of the living. Possession, a return to the universe he had thought himself banished from, brought a different, darker slant on those things he had cherished and respected before—morality, honour, integrity. With such an outlook contaminating his thinking, he had considered himself invulnerable to fear, even aloof from it. Hiltch made him doubt the arrogance of his newfound convictions. He might have been granted an escape from the beyond, but remaining free was by no means guaranteed.

The boy whom Moyo held in front of him began to squirm again, crying out in anguish as Ralph Hiltch vanished from sight. His last hope dashed. He was about ten or eleven. The misery and terror whirling inside his head was so strong it was almost contagious.

His resolution fractured by Hiltch, Moyo began to feel shame at what he was doing. The craving which the lost souls in the beyond set up at the back of his mind was worse than any cold turkey, and it was relentless. They wanted what he had, the light and sound and sensation which dwelt so richly in the universe. They promised him fealty forever if he granted it to them. They cajoled. They insisted. They threatened. It would never end. A hundred billion imps of obligation and conscience whispering together were a voice more powerful than his.

He had no choice. While the living remained unpossessed,

they would fight to fling him back into the beyond. While souls dwelt in the beyond they would plague him to be given bodies. The equation was so horrifically simple, the two forces cancelling each other out. Providing he obeyed.

His rebirth was only a few hours old, and already independent destiny was denied him.

“Do you see what we can do?” Annette Ekelund shouted at the ranks of her followers. “The *Saldanas* reduced to bargaining with us, accepting our terms. That’s the power we have now. And the first thing we must do is consolidate it. Everyone who was assigned to a vehicle, I want you ready to leave as soon as the marines withdraw; that should be in a quarter of an hour at the most, so be ready. If we even appear to lack the courage to go through with this, they’ll unleash the SD platforms on us. You felt Hiltch’s thoughts, you know it’s true. Those of you holding a hostage, get them possessed right now. We need all the numbers we can muster. This isn’t going to be easy, but we can capture this whole peninsula within a couple of days. After that we’ll have the power to close the sky for good.”

Moyo couldn’t help but glance up. Dawn was strengthening above the barbed tree line, thankfully eradicating the stars and their hideous reminder of infinity. But even with daylight colours fermenting across the blackness the vista remained so empty, a void every bit as barren as the beyond. Moyo wanted nothing more than to seal it shut, to prevent the emptiness from draining his spirit once again.

Every mind around him had the same yearning.

Moans and shouting broke his introspection. The hostages were being dragged back inside the buildings. Nothing had been said about that, there was no prior arrangement. It was as though the possessed shared a communal unease at inflicting the necessary suffering in full view of each other and the low-orbit sensor satellites. Breaking a person’s spirit was as private as sex.

“Come on,” Moyo said. He picked the boy up effortlessly and went back into the wooden frame bungalow.

“Mummy!” the boy yelled. “Mummy help.” He started weeping.

“Hey now, don’t panic,” Moyo said. “I’m not going to hurt

you.” It didn’t make any difference. Moyo went straight through into the living room, and opened the big patio doors. There was a lawn at the rear, extending back almost to the handrid trees which encircled the town. Two horticultural mechanoids roamed anarchically over the trim grass, their mowing blades digging into the loamy soil as if they’d been programmed to plough deep furrows.

Moyo let go of the boy. “Go on,” he said. “Run. Scoot.”

Limpid eyes stared up at him, not understanding at all. “But my mummy . . .”

“She’s not here anymore. She’s not even her anymore. Now go on. The Royal Marines are out there in the forest. If you’re quick, you’ll find them before they leave. They’ll look after you. Now *run*.” He made it fiercer than he had to. The boy snatched a quick glance into the living room, then turned and shot off over the lawn.

Moyo waited to make sure he got through the hedge without any trouble, then went back inside. If it had been an adult he held hostage, there would have been no compunction, but a child . . . He hadn’t abandoned all of his humanity.

Through the living-room window he could see vehicles rumbling down the road. It was a strange convoy which Annette Ekelund had mustered; there were modern cars, old models ranging across planets and centuries, mobile museums of military vehicles. Someone had even dreamed up a steam-powered traction engine which slowly clanked and snorted its way along, dripping water from leaky couplings. If he focused his thoughts, he could make out the profile of the actual cars and farm vehicles underneath the fanciful solid mirages.

There had been a coupe Moyo had always wanted back on Kochi, a combat wasp on wheels, its top speed three times the legal limit; but he never could quite manage to save enough for a deposit. Now though, it could be his for the price of a single thought. The concept depressed him, half of the coupe’s attraction had been rooted in how unobtainable it was.

He spent a long time behind the window, wishing the procession of would-be conquerors well. He’d promised Annette Ekelund he would help, indeed he’d opened five of Exnall’s

residents for possession during the night. But now, contemplating the days which lay ahead, repeating that barbarity ten times an hour, he knew he wouldn't be able to do it. The boy had proved that to him. He would be a liability to Ekelund and her blitzkrieg coup. Best to stay here and keep the home fires burning. After the campaign, they would need a place to rest.

Breakfast was . . . interesting. The thermal induction panel in the kitchen went crazy as soon as he switched it on. So he stared at it, remembering the old range cooker his grandmother had in her house, all brushed black steel and glowing burner grille. When he was young she had produced the most magnificent meals on it, food with a tang and texture he'd never tasted since. The induction panel darkened, its outline expanding; the yellow composite cupboard unit it sat on merged into it—and the stove was there, radiant heat shining out of its grille as the charcoal blocks hissed unobtrusively. Moyo grinned at his achievement, and put the copper kettle on the hot plate. While it started to boil he searched around the remaining cupboards for some food. There were dozens of sachets, modern chemically nutritious food without any hint of originality. He tossed a couple into the iron frying pan, compelling the foil to dissolve, revealing raw eggs and several slices of streaky bacon (with the rind left on as he preferred). It began to sizzle beautifully just as the kettle started to whistle.

Chilled orange juice, light muesli flakes, bacon, eggs, sausages, kidneys, buttered wholemeal toast with thickly cut marmalade, washed down with cups of English tea—it was almost worth waiting two centuries for.

After he was finished eating, he tailored Eben Pavitt's sad casual clothes into the kind of expensive bright blue suit which the richer final year students had worn when he was a university freshman. Satisfied, he opened the bungalow's front door and stepped out into the street.

There had never been a town like Exnall on Kochi. Moyo found it pleasantly surprising. From the media company shows he had always imagined the Kulu Kingdom planets to have a society even more formal than his own Japanese-ethnic culture. Yet Exnall lacked any sort of disciplined layout. He wandered along its broad streets, sheltered by the lofty ha-

randrids, enjoying what he found, the small shops, gleaming clean cafés, patisseries, and bars, the little parks, attractive houses, the snow-white wooden church with its bright scarlet tile roof.

Moyo wasn't alone exploring his new environment. Several hundred people had stayed behind after Annette Ekelund had left. Most of them, like himself, were ambling around, not quite meeting the eye of their fellow citizens. Everyone was party to the same guilty secret: what we did, what was done for us to return our souls into these bodies. The atmosphere was almost one of mourning.

The strollers were dressed in the clothes of their era and culture, solid citizens all. Those who favoured grotesquerie and mytho-beast appearances had departed with Ekelund.

He was delighted that several of the cafés were actually open, taken over by possessed proprietors who were industriously imagineering away the modern interiors, replacing them with older, more traditional decors (or in two cases retro-futuristic). Espresso machines gurgled and slurped enthusiastically, the smell of freshly baked bread wafted about. And then there was the doughnut machine. Set up in the window of one café, a beautiful antique contraption of dull polished metal with an enamel manufacturer's badge on the front, it was a couple of metres long, with a huge funnel at one end, filled with white dough. Raw doughnuts dropped out of a nozzle onto a metal grid conveyer belt which dunked them into a long vat of hot cooking oil where they fizzled away, effervescing golden bubbles until they rose out of the other side a rich brown in colour. After that they dropped off the end onto a tray of sugar. The smell they released into the crisp morning air was delectable. Moyo stood with his nose to the glass for a full minute, entranced by the parade of doughnuts trundling past while electric motors hummed and clicked, and the turquoise gas flames played underneath the oil. He had never guessed that anything so wondrously archaic could be found within the Confederation, so simple and so elaborate. He pushed the door open and went in.

The new proprietor was behind the counter, a balding man with a handkerchief knotted around his neck and wearing a blue and white striped apron. He was wiping the counter's

shiny wooden top with a dishcloth. "Good morning, sir," he said. "And what can I get you?"

This is ridiculous, Moyo thought, we're both dead, we've been rescued by some weird miracle, and all he's interested in is what I want to eat. We should be getting to know each other, trying to understand what's happened, what this means to the universe. Then he sensed the alarm burbling up in the proprietor's thoughts, the man's terribly brittle nature.

"I'll have one of the doughnuts, of course, they look delicious. And have you got any hot chocolate?"

The proprietor gave a big smile of relief, sweat was prickling his forehead. "Yes, sir." He busied himself with the jugs and cups behind the counter.

"Do you think Ekelund will succeed?"

"I expect so, sir. She seems to know what she's doing. I did hear she came from another star. That's one resourceful lady."

"Yes. Where do you come from?"

"Brugge, sir. Back in the twenty-first century. A fine city it was in those days."

"I'm sure."

The proprietor put a mug of steaming hot chocolate on the counter along with a doughnut. Now what? Moyo wondered. I haven't got a clue what kind of coin to conjure up.

The whole situation was becoming more surreal by the second.

"I'll put it on your bill, sir," the proprietor said.

"Thank you." He picked up the mug and plate, glancing around. There were only three other people in the café. A young couple were oblivious to anything but each other. "Mind if I sit here?" he asked the third, a woman in her late twenties, making no attempt to cloak herself in any kind of image. Her head came up to show tear trails smearing chubby pale cheeks.

"I was just going," she muttered.

"Don't, please." He sat opposite her. "We ought to talk. I haven't talked to anyone for centuries."

Her eyes looked down at her coffee cup. "I know."

"My name's Moyo."

"Stephanie Ash."

"Pleased to meet you, Stephanie. I don't know what I

should be saying, half of me is terrified by what's happened, the other half is elated."

"I was murdered," she whispered. "He . . . he. He laughed when he did it, every time I screamed it just made him laugh louder. He enjoyed it." The tears were flowing openly again.

"I'm sorry."

"My children. I had three children, they were only little, the eldest was six. What kind of life would they have knowing what happened to me? And Mark, my husband, I thought I saw him once, later, much later. He was all broken down and old."

"Hey there, it's over now, finished," he said softly. "Me, I got hit by a bus. Which is a tricky thing to do in Kochi's capital city; there are barriers along the roads, and safety systems, all kinds of protective junk. But if you're real stupid, and loaded, and part of a group that's daring you to run the road, then you can jump in front of one before its brakes engage. Yeah, real tricky, but I managed it. So what use was my life? No girl, no kids; just Mum and Dad who would have been heartbroken. You had something, a family that loved you, kids you can be proud of. You were taken away from them, and that's a real evil, I'm not saying it isn't. But look at you now, you still love them after all this time. And I'll bet wherever they are, they love you. Compared to me, Stephanie, you're rich. You had it all, the whole life trip."

"Not anymore."

"No. But then this is a fresh start for all of us, isn't it? You can't allow yourself to grieve over the past. There's too much of it now. If you do that, then you'll never do anything else."

"I know. But it's going to take time, Moyo. Thank you, anyway. What were you, some kind of social worker?"

"No. I was at university studying law."

"You were young, then?"

"Twenty-two."

"I was thirty-two when it happened."

Moyo bit into his doughnut, which tasted as good as it looked. He grinned and gave the proprietor an appreciative thumbs up. "I can see I'll be coming back here."

"It seems silly to me," she confided.

"Me too. But it's the way he's chosen to anchor himself."

“Are you sure it was law, and not philosophy?”

He smiled around the doughnut. “That’s better. Don’t go for the big issues right away, you’ll only get depressed, start small and work along to quantum metaphysics.”

“You’ve lost me already, when I did work I was just a councillor at the local junior day club. I adored children.”

“I don’t think you were *just* anything, Stephanie.”

She sat back in the chair, toying with the tiny coffee cup. “So what do we do now?”

“Generally speaking?”

“We have only just met.”

“Okay, generally speaking, try and live the life we always wanted to. From now on, every day is going to be a summer’s day you’ve taken off work so that you can go out and do the one thing you’ve always wanted to.”

“Dance in the Rubix Hotel,” she said quickly. “It had the most beautiful ballroom, the podium was big enough for a whole orchestra, and it looked out over the grounds to a lake. We never went to a function there; Mike always promised he’d take me. I wanted to wear a scarlet gown, with him in a dinner jacket.”

“Not bad. You’re a romantic, Stephanie.”

She blushed. “What about you?”

“Oh, no. Mine are all pretty basic male daydreams. Tropical beaches and girls with perfect figures; that kind of thing.”

“No, I don’t believe that. There’s more to you than simplistic clichés. And besides, I told you mine.”

“Well . . . I suppose there is mountain gliding. It was a rich-kid sport on Kochi. The gliders were made out of linked molecule films, only weighed about five kilos, but they had a wingspan of about twenty-five metres. Then before you could even get in to one you had to have your retinas and cortical processor implants upgraded so that you could actually see air currents, determine their flow speed; the whole X-ray vision trip. That way you’d be able to pick out the wind stream which could carry you to the top.

“The clubs would set out courses over half a mountain range. I watched a race once. The pilots looked like they were lying in a torpedo-shaped bubble; the linked molecule film is so thin you can’t even see it unless the sun catches it just right.

They were skiing on air, Stephanie, and they made it seem like the easiest thing in the world.”

“I don’t think either of us is going to be living our fantasies for a while.”

“No. But we will, eventually, when Ekelund takes over Mortonridge. Then we’ll have the power to indulge ourselves.”

“That woman. God, she frightened me. I had to hold a man hostage while she spoke to the soldier. He was pleading and crying. I had to give him to someone else afterwards. I couldn’t hurt him.”

“I let mine go altogether.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It was a boy. I think he got to the marines in time to be evacuated. Hope so, anyway.”

“That was good of you.”

“Yeah. I had the luxury this time. But if the Saldana Princess sends her troops in here to find us and claw us back, I’ll fight. I’ll do everything I can to stop them from evicting me from this body.”

“I hear mine,” Stephanie said. “She’s inside me, lonely and afraid. She cries a lot.”

“My host’s called Eben Pavitt, he rages the whole time. But underneath he’s scared.”

“They’re as bad as the souls in the beyond. Everyone is making demands on us.”

“Ignore them. You can do it. Compared to the beyond, this is paradise.”

“Not really. But it’s a good first step.”

He finished his chocolate, and smiled. “Do you want to come for a walk, see what our new town is like?”

“Yes. Thank you, Moyo, I think I would.”

13

The Confederation Navy Intelligence Service had originally been formed with the intent of infiltrating the black syndicates that produced antimatter, and hunting down their production stations. Since those early days its activities had expanded along with those of the Confederation Navy as a whole. By the time Admiral Lalwani assumed command, one of its principal functions was to monitor, analyse, and assess the deplorable amount of new and ingenious weapons systems manufactured by governments and astroengineering companies across the Confederation, with emphasis on the more clandestine marques. To that end, the designers of the service's secure weapons technology laboratory complex were given a brief to contain just about any conceivable emergency, from biohazards to outbreaks of nanonic viruses, to small nuclear explosions.

There was only one entrance: a long corridor cut through the rock with two right-angle turns; it was wide and high enough to accommodate an outsize service truck or even a small flyer. Three separate doors were spaced along it, each built from a two-metre-thickness of carbotanium composite strengthened by molecular binding force generators. The first two slabs could only be opened by the security staff outside, while the third was operated from inside the facility.

Since the arrival of Jacqueline Couteur, Trafalgar's population had started calling it the demon trap.

Appropriate enough, Samual Aleksandrovich conceded as the final door swung upwards amid a hiss of pressure and loud mechanical whinings. Dr Gilmore was waiting on the other side to greet him and his entourage.

"I'm delighted I can actually offer you some good news for a change," Dr Gilmore said as he led the First Admiral up to

the biological division's isolation facility. "We've all heard about New California. Is it really Al Capone leading them?"

"We don't have any evidence to the contrary," Lalwani said. "The Edenists in the system are monitoring news broadcasts. Capone appears very fond of publicity, he's been touring cities like some kind of medieval monarch. Pressing the flesh, he calls it. A number of reporters were left unpossessed purely so they could record the event."

"And this pre-starflight primitive had the ability to take over one of our most developed worlds?" Dr Gilmore inquired. "I find that hard to credit."

"Don't," Lalwani said. "We've been researching him. He's a genuine emperor genotype. People like him have an intuitive ability to format social structures which support their premiership, whatever their local environment, from street gangs to entire nations. Thankfully they don't occur very often, nor at such a high level; but when they do the rest of us need to watch out."

"Even so—"

"Obviously, he's getting advice on modern life. There will be an inner cabinet to help him, but he won't share the ultimate power. We don't believe he's psychologically capable of it. That could be a significant weakness given the sheer quantity of problems he must be facing in enforcing his rule."

"So far New California is the only planetary system we know of which has succumbed completely," the First Admiral said. "Seventeen more planets are suffering from large-scale incursions, and are doing their best to isolate the affected areas. Fortunately the legitimate authorities retained control of their SD networks. The worst casualties have been among the asteroid settlements; our last estimation was that we'd lost over a hundred and twenty Confederation-wide. If a possessed gets inside one, their success rate in taking it over is close to a hundred percent. It's proving difficult to fight them in such closed environments. Other planets have had trouble, but on a much smaller scale. Our warning seems to have had the required effect. It could have been a lot worse."

"Our main concern is that nobody attempts any foolhardy liberation missions," Lalwani said. "There would be few national navies capable of mounting a successful operation

along those lines. At the moment any troops entering such an environment are liable to be possessed themselves.”

“There will be political pressure on the military to act, though,” the First Admiral said dourly. “So far our only notable public success has been the destruction of the *Yaku* in the Khabrat system. Trivial. What we need above all is some kind of weapon which is able to incapacitate the possessed. That or an effective method of exorcism. Preferably both.” He gave Dr Gilmore a questing gaze.

“I believe we can now help you on the first count,” the implant specialist said confidently. They stopped before the biological isolation facility, and he datavised his code at the door.

Euru’s researchers had acted swiftly as soon as they’d obtained permission to advance their studies. The First Admiral flinched at the sight which greeted him within the examination room. On his side, the monitoring consoles were fully staffed; remorselessly obsessive scientists and technicians absorbed in the displays projected by AV pillars. A scene of brisk competence and scientific endeavour, as always reinforcing the concept of impersonal efficiency.

Samual Aleksandrovich doubted there was any other way the team could cope with their objective; it must act as a psychological buffer between them and the subject. *Subject*—he chided himself silently. Although he’d witnessed inhumanity on a far more brutal scale than this during his active service days.

With Captain Khanna at his side he walked hesitantly up to the transparent wall which cut the rock chamber in two, wondering if he should show signs of dismay or approval. In the end he settled for the same bleak acceptance which everyone else in the room had put on along with their baggy white lab overalls.

A naked and shaven Jacqueline Couteur had been immobilized on a surgical bed. Although wired into it would be a more honest evaluation, the First Admiral thought. Grey composite ribs formed a cage over the length of her body, supporting clamps which pressed pairs of large circular electrodes against her forearms, abdomen, and upper legs; clear jell was leaking out from beneath the silvery metal, ensuring better contact and conductivity. Two ceiling-mounted

waldo arms had been equipped with sensor arrays, like bundles of fat white gun muzzles, which they were sweeping slowly and silently up and down the prone body. The thick circular brace which held her head fast looked as if it had melded with her skin. A plastic defecation tube had been inserted in her anus, while a free-fall toilet suction catheter adhered to her vagina. He couldn't decide if that was a civilized courtesy or the final humiliation.

Not that Couteur would care, not in her present condition.

Her entire musculature twitched and rippled in random spasms. The flesh quivering on her face made it seem as though she were enduring a ten-gee acceleration.

"What the hell are you doing to her?" Maynard Khanna asked in a guttural whisper.

It was the first time the First Admiral could ever remember the staff captain speaking before his superiors.

"Neutralizing her offensive potential," Dr Gilmore said with a tone of high satisfaction. "The report we received from Lalonde contained a reference from Darcy and Lori that electricity affects the possessed in an adverse fashion. We checked and discovered it's true. So we're running a current through her."

"Dear God, that's . . ." His face crunched up in a disgusted grimace.

Dr Gilmore ignored him, addressing himself solely to the First Admiral. "She is having to use her entire energetic ability to ward off the current. We experimented with the voltage level until we achieved this balance. Her physiological functions continue to operate normally, but she is completely incapable of manifesting any reality dysfunction effect. She can no longer distort matter, create illusions, or conjure up white fireballs. It means we are free to study her without any interference; even our electronic systems have recovered eighty-five per cent of their efficiency in her presence."

"So what have you learned?" the First Admiral asked.

"Please bear in mind we are on the threshold of a completely new field here."

"Doctor," the First Admiral cautioned.

"Of course. Firstly, we have developed a screening method which can pick out any possessed. There is a tiny but constant

discharge of static electricity right across their bodies. We think it must be a by-product of their beyond continuum spilling into ours. Such an influx surge would also account for the energy they constantly have at their disposal.”

“Static electricity?” a bemused Lalwani said.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s beautiful: the sensors that will pick it up are cheap, easy to mass-produce, simple to use; and if they malfunction it’s a certainty that a possessed is nearby anyway. Now we know what to look for they will find it impossible to hide in a crowd or infiltrate new areas.”

“Excellent,” the First Admiral said. “We’ll have to see that this information is distributed as fast as our original warning.” He moved right up to the transparent wall, seeing his breath mist the surface, and activated the intercom. “Do you remember me?” he asked.

Jacqueline Couteur took a long time to answer, her syllables maimed by the laboured gurgling of vocal cords not fully under control. “We know you, Admiral.”

“Is she in communication with those in the beyond?” he asked Dr Gilmore quickly.

“I cannot give you an absolute, Admiral. However, I suspect not; at least nothing more than leaking a rudimentary form of contact back into her own continuum. Our Jacqueline is very fond of dominance games, and ‘we’ tends to sound impressive.”

“If you are in pain,” the First Admiral told her, “I apologize.”

“Not as sorry as that shit’s going to be when I catch up with him.” Bloodshot eyes juddered around to focus on Dr Gilmore.

He responded with a thin superior smile.

“Exactly how much pain do you inflict on the mind of the body you have stolen?” Samuel Aleksandrovich asked mildly.

“Touché.”

“As you see, we are learning from you as I said we would.” He gestured at the sensors which the waldo arms were sliding over her head and torso. “We know what you are, we know something of the suffering which awaits you back in the beyond, we understand why you are driven to do what you do. I would ask you to work with me in helping to solve this prob-

lem. I do not wish there to be conflict between us. We are one people, after all, albeit at different stages of existence.”

“You will give us bodies? How generous.” Somehow she managed to grin, lips wriggling apart to dribble saliva down her cheeks.

“We could grow bitek neural networks which you could inhabit. You would be able to receive the full range of human senses. After that they could be placed in artificial bodies, rather like a cosmonik.”

“How very reasonable. But you forget that we are human, too; we want to live full human lives. For ever. Possession is only the beginning of our return.”

“I am aware of your goals.”

“Do you wish to help us?”

“Yes.”

“Then terminate your life. Join us. Be on the winning side, Admiral.”

Samual Aleksandrovich gave the vibrating, abused body a final, almost disgusted glance, and turned his back to the transparent wall.

“She says the same thing to us,” Dr Gilmore said as if in apology. “Repeatedly.”

“How much of what she says is the truth? For instance, do they really need human bodies? If not, we might just be able to force them into a compromise.”

“Verification may be difficult,” Euru said. “The electricity has contained the worst excesses of Couteur’s reality dysfunction, but a personality debrief in these circumstances may prove beyond us. If the nanonics were to malfunction during axon interface they could cause a lot of damage to her brain.”

“The possessed are certainly capable of operating within bitek neurone structures,” Lalwani said. “Lewis Sinclair captured Pernik’s neural strata; and we have confirmed that Valisk’s blackhawks have also been captured.”

“Physically they’re capable of it, yes,” Euru said. “But the problem is more likely to be psychological. As ex-humans, they want human bodies, they want the familiar.”

“Acquire what information you can without risking the actual body itself,” the First Admiral instructed. “In the meantime have you developed any method of subduing them?”

Dr Gilmore indicated the surgical table with a muddled gesture. "Electricity, Admiral. Equip our marines with guns that fire a dart that contains a small electron matrix cell and simply push a current into them. Such weapons were in widespread use from the mid-twentieth century right up until the twenty-third. We've already produced a modern chemical-powered design with a range over five hundred metres."

Samual Aleksandrovich didn't know whether to berate the implant specialist or commiserate with him. That was the trouble with laboratory types, all theory, no thought about how their gadgets would perform in the field. It was probably just the same in Couteur's time, he reflected. "And how far can they project their white fire?"

"It varies depending on the individual."

"And how will you determine what voltage to discharge from the electron matrix cell? Some will be stronger than Couteur, while others will be weaker."

Dr Gilmore glanced to Euru for support.

"Voltage regulation is a problem area," the suave, black-skinned Edenist said. "We are considering if a static scanner can determine the level in advance. It may be that the quantity of static exuded might indicate the individual's energistic strength."

"In here, possibly," the First Admiral said. "In combat conditions I very much doubt it. And even if it did work, what do you propose we should do with the captive?"

"Put them in zero-tau," Dr Gilmore said. "We know that method has enjoyed a hundred per cent success rate. They employed it on Ombey."

"Yes," the First Admiral acknowledged, recalling the file he'd accessed, the battle to capture the possessed inside the big department store. "And at what cost? I don't intend to be cavilling about your endeavours, Doctor, but you really need to bring some experienced combat personnel into your consultation process. Even conceding your stun gun could work, it would take two or three marines to subdue a possessed and place them in zero-tau. During which time those possessed remaining at liberty would have converted another five people. With that ratio we could never win. We must have a single weapon, a one-shot device which can rid a body of the pos-

sessing soul without harming it. Will electricity do that? Can you increase the voltage until the incursive soul is forced out?"

"No, Admiral," Euru said. "We have already tried with Couteur. The voltages necessary will kill the body. In fact we had to abandon the procedure for several hours to allow her to heal herself."

"What about other methods?"

"There will be some we can try, Admiral," Dr Gilmore insisted. "But we'll need to research her further. We have so little data at the moment. The ultimate solution will of course be to seal the junction between this universe and the beyond continuum. Unfortunately we still cannot locate the interface point. Those scanners we are operating in there are some of the most sensitive gravitonic distortion detectors ever built, yet there is no sign of any space-time density fluctuation in or around her. Which means the souls are not returning through a wormhole."

"Not wormholes as we understand them, anyway," Euru finished. "But then, given Couteur's existence, our whole conception of quantum cosmology is obviously seriously incomplete. Having the ability to travel faster than light isn't nearly as smart as we once thought it was."

• • •

It had taken Quinn some time to modify the *Tantu's* bridge. It wasn't the look of the compartment which bothered him so much; the frigate was configured for high gee acceleration, its fittings and structure were correspondingly functional. He liked that inherent strength, and emphasised it by sculpting the surfaces with an angular matte-black bas-relief of the kind he imagined would adorn the walls of the Light Brother's supreme temple. Lighting panels were dimmed to a carmine spark, flickering behind rusty iron grilles.

It was the information he was presented with, or rather the lack of it, which displeased him, and consequently required the longest time to rectify. He had no neural nanonics, not that they would have worked even if he did have a set. Which meant he didn't know what was happening outside the ship. For all of *Tantu's* fabulous high-resolution sensor array, he was blind, unable to react, to make decisions. To have the external universe visible was his first priority.

Possessing the frigate's nineteen-strong crew had taken barely twenty minutes after he and Lawrence had docked. Initiating the returned souls into the sect, having them accept his leadership, had required another hour. Three times he had to discipline the faithless. He regretted the waste.

Those remaining had worked hard to build the displays he wanted; fitting holoscreens to the consoles, adapting the flight computer programs to portray the external environment in the simplest possible terms. Only then, with his confidence restored, had he ordered their departure from Norfolk orbit.

Quinn settled back in his regal, velvet-padded acceleration couch and gave the order to jump away. Twenty seconds after they completed the operation, the holoscreens showed him the little purple pyramid which represented the squadron's lone pursuit ship lit up at the centre of the empty cube. According to the scale, it was three thousand kilometres away.

"How do we elude them?" he asked Bajan.

Bajan was possessing the body of the *Tantu's* erstwhile captain, the third soul to do so since the hijacking began. Quinn had been dissatisfied with the first two; they had both lived in pre-industrial times. He needed someone with a technological background, someone who could interpret the wealth of data in the captain's captive mind. A civil fusion engineer, Bajan had died only two centuries ago; starflight was a concept he understood. He also had a sleazy, furtive mind which promised instant obedience to both Quinn and the sect's doctrines. But Quinn didn't mind that, such weaknesses simply made him easier to control.

Bajan's fists squeezed, mimicking the pressure he was placing on the mind held within. "Sequential jumps. The ship can do it. That can throw off any pursuer."

"Do it," Quinn ordered simply.

Three jumps later, spanning seven light-years, they were alone in interstellar space. Four days after that, they jumped into a designated emergence zone two hundred thousand kilometres above Earth.

"Home," Quinn said, and smiled. The frigate's visible-spectrum sensors showed him the planet's nightside, a leaden blue-grey crescent which was widening slowly as the *Tantu's* orbit inched them towards the edge of the penumbra. First

magnitude stars blazed on the continents: the arcologies, silently boasting their vast energy consumption as the light from the streets, skyscrapers, stadiums, vehicles, parks, plazas, and industrial precincts merged into a monochrome blast of photons. Far above the equator, a sparkling haze band looped around the entire world, casting the gentlest reflection off the black-glitter oceans below.

"God's Brother, but it's magnificent," Quinn said. They hadn't shown him this view when he'd been brought up the Brazilian orbital tower on his way to exile. There were no ports in his deck of the lift capsule, nor on the sections of the mammoth docking station through which the Ivets had passed. He'd lived on Earth all his life, and never seen it, not as it should be seen. Exquisite, and tragically fragile.

In his mind he could see the dazzling lights slowly, torturously, snuffed out as thick oily shadows slid across the land, a tide which brought with it despair and fear. Then reaching out into space, crushing the O'Neill Halo, its vitality and power. No light would be left, no hope. Only the screams, and the Night. And Him.

Tears of joy formed fat distorting lenses across Quinn's eyeballs. The image, the conviction, was so strong. Total blackness, with Earth at its centre; raped, dead, frozen, entombed. "Is this my task, Lord? Is it?" The thought of such a privilege humbled him.

The flight computer let out an alarmed whistle.

Furious that his dreams should be interrupted, Quinn demanded: "What is it?" He had to squint and blink to clear his vision. The holoscreens were filling with tumbling red spiderwebs, graphic symbols flashed for attention. Five orange vector lines were oozing inwards from the edge of the display to intersect at the *Tantu's* location. "What is happening?"

"It's some kind of interception manoeuvre," Bajan shouted. "Those are navy ships. And the Halo's SD platforms are locking on."

"I thought we were in a legitimate emergence zone."

"We are."

"Then what—"

"Priority signal for the *Tantu's* captain from Govcentral

Strategic Defence Command,” the flight computer announced.

Quinn glowered at the AV projection pillar which had relayed the message. He snapped his fingers at Bajan.

“This is Captain Mauer, commander of the CN ship *Tantu*,” Bajan said. “Can somebody tell me what the problem is?”

“This is SD Command, Captain. Datavise your ship’s ASA code, please.”

“What code?” Bajan mouthed, completely flummoxed.

“Does anybody know what it is?” Quinn growled. *Tantu* had already datavised its identification code as soon as the jump was completed, as per standard procedure.

“The code, Captain,” SD Command asked again.

Quinn watched the fluorescent orange vectors of another two ships slide into the holoscreen display. Their weapons sensors focused on the *Tantu*’s hull.

“Computer, jump one light-year. Now,” he ordered.

“No, the sensors . . .” Bajan exclaimed frantically.

His objection didn’t matter. The flight computer was programmed to respond to Quinn’s voice commands alone.

The *Tantu* jumped, its event horizon slicing clean through the carbon-composite stalks which elevated the various sensor clusters out of their recesses. Ten of them had deployed as soon as the starship emerged above Earth: star trackers, mid-range optical sensors, radar, communications antennae.

All seven warships racing towards the *Tantu* saw it disappear behind ten dazzling white plasma spumes as its event horizon crushed the carbon molecules of the stalks to fusion density and beyond. Ruined sensor clusters spun out of the radioactive mist.

The SD Command centre duty officer ordered two of the destroyers to follow the *Tantu*, cursing his luck that the interception squadron hadn’t been assigned any voidhawks. It took the two starships eleven minutes to match trajectories with the *Tantu*’s jump coordinate. Everybody knew that was too long.

Soprano alarms shrilled at painful volume, drowning out all other sounds on the *Tantu*’s bridge. The holoscreens which had been carrying the sensor images turned black as soon as the patterning nodes discharged, then flicked to ship

schematic diagrams. Disturbing quantities of red symbols flashed for attention.

“Kill that noise,” Quinn bellowed.

Bajan hurried to obey, typing rapidly on the keyboard rigged up next to his acceleration couch.

“We took four hull breaches,” Dwyer reported as soon as the alarm cut off. He was the most ardent of Quinn’s new apostles, a former black stimulant program pusher who was murdered at the age of twenty-three by a faster, more ambitious rival. His anger and callousness made him ideal for the cause. He’d even heard of the sects, dealing with them on occasion. “Six more areas have been weakened.”

“What the fuck was that? Did they shoot at us?” Quinn asked.

“No,” Bajan said. “You can’t jump with sensors extended, the distortion effect collapses any mass caught in the field. Fortunately it’s only a very narrow shell which covers the hull, just a few micrometers thick. But the atoms inside it get converted directly into energy. Most of it shoots outwards, but there’s also some which is deflected right back against the hull. That’s what hit us.”

“How much damage did we pick up?”

“Secondary systems only,” Dwyer said. “And we’re venting something, too; nitrogen I think.”

“Shit. What about the nodes? Can we jump again?”

“Two inoperative, another three damaged. But they’re fail-soft. I think we can jump.”

“Good. Computer, jump three light-years.”

Bajan clamped down on his automatic protest. Nothing he could do about the spike of anger and exasperation in his mind though, Quinn could perceive that all right.

“Computer, jump half a light-year.”

This time the bridge lights sputtered almost to the point of extinction.

“All right,” Quinn said as the gloomy red illumination grew bold again. “I want some fucking sensor visuals on these screens now. I want to know where we are, and if anyone followed us. Dwyer, start working around those damaged systems.”

“Are we going to be okay, Quinn?” Lawrence asked. His

energistic ability couldn't hide the sweat pricking his sallow face.

"Sure. Now shut the fuck up, let me think." He slowly unbuckled the straps holding him into his acceleration couch. Using the stikpads he shuffled on tiptoe over to Bajan's couch. His black robe swirled like bedevilled smoke around him, the hood deepening until his face was almost completely hidden. "What," he asked in a tight whisper, "is an ASA code?"

"I dunno, Quinn, honest," the agitated man protested.

"I know *you* don't know, dickhead. But the captain does. Find out!"

"Sure, Quinn, sure." He closed his eyes, concentrating on the captain's mind, inflicting as much anguish as he could dream of to wrest free the information. "It's an Armed Ship Authorization designation," he grunted eventually.

"Go on," Quinn's voice emerged from the shadows of his hood.

"Any military starship which jumps to Earth has to have one. There's so much industry in orbit, so many settled asteroids, they're terrified of the damage just one rogue ship could cause. So the captain of every Confederation government navy ship is given an ASA code to confirm they're legally entitled to be armed and that they're under official control. It acts as a fail-safe against any hijacking."

"It certainly does," Quinn said. "But it shouldn't have done. Not with us. You should have known."

Nobody else on the bridge was looking anywhere near Bajan, all of them hugely absorbed with their own tasks of stabilizing the damage. And Quinn, looming over him like some giant carrion creature.

"This Mauer is a tough mother, Quinn. He tricked me, that's all. I'll make him suffer for it, I swear. The Light Bringer will be proud of the way I let my serpent beast loose on him."

"There's no need," Quinn said genially.

Bajan let out a faltering whimper of relief.

"I shall supervise his suffering myself."

"But . . . how?"

In the absolute silence of the bridge, Lawrence Dillon sniggered.

“Leave us, Bajan, you little prick,” Quinn ordered. “You have failed me.”

“Leave? Leave what?”

“The body I provided for you. You don’t deserve it.”

“No!” Bajan howled.

“Go. Or I’ll shove you into zero-tau.”

With a last sob, Bajan let himself fall back into the beyond, the glories of sensation ripping out of his mind. His soul wept its torment as the crowded emptiness closed around him once again.

Gurtan Mauer coughed weakly, his body trembling. He had lurched from one nightmare to another. The *Tantu’s* bridge had become an archaic crypt where technological artifacts protruded from whittled ebony, as if they were the foreign elements. A monk in midnight-black robes stood at the side of his couch, the hint of a face inside the voluminous hood indicated by the occasional carmine flicker striking alabaster skin. An inverted crucifix hung on a long silver chain around his neck; for some reason it wasn’t drifting around as it ought in free fall.

“You didn’t just defy me alone,” Quinn said. “That I could almost accept. But when you held back that fucking ASA code you defied the will of God’s Brother. Right now I should have been in the docking station, by morning I would have kissed the ground at the foot of the orbital tower. I was destined to carry the gospel of the Night to the whole mother-fucking world! And you *fucked with me*, shithead. You!”

Mauer’s ship-suit caught light. In free fall the flame was a bright indigo fluid, slithering smoothly across his torso and along his limbs. Scraps of charred fabric peeled off, exposing the charcoaled skin below. Fans whirred loudly behind the bridge’s duct grilles as they attempted to suck the awful stench from the compartment’s air.

Quinn ignored the agonized wailing muted by the captain’s clamped mouth. He let his mind lovingly undress Lawrence.

The slight lad drifted idly in the centre of the bridge, smiling dreamily down at his naked body. He allowed Quinn to shape him, the young stable boy’s skinny figure developing

thick sinuous muscles, the width of his shoulders increasing. Clad only in a barbarian warrior garb of shiny leather strips, he began to resemble a dwarf addicted to bodybuilding.

The blue flame cloaking Mauer dribbled away as the last of the ship-suit was consumed. With a simple wave of his hand, Quinn healed the captain's burns, restoring skin, nails, hair to their former state. Mauer became a picture of vitality.

"Your turn," Quinn told Lawrence with a deviant laugh.

The pain-shocked, imprisoned captain could only stare upwards in terror as the freakishly hulking boy grinned broadly and glided in towards him.

• • •

Alkad Mzu accessed the *Samaku's* sensor suite via the flight computer, allowing the picture to share her mind with a sense of benevolent dismay. This is what we fought over? This was what a planet died for? This? Dear Mary!

Like all starships jumping insystem, the *Samaku* had emerged a safe half-million kilometres above the plane of the elliptic. The star known as Tunja was an M4-type, a red dwarf. Bright enough from the starship's forty million kilometres distance, but hardly dazzling like a G-type, the primary of most terracompatible planets. From Alkad's excellent vantage point it hung at the centre of a vast disk of grizzled particles, extending over two hundred million kilometres in diameter.

The inner (annulet), surrounding Tunja out to about three million kilometres, was a sparsely populated region where the constant gale of solar wind had stripped away the smaller particles, leaving only tide-locked boulders and asteroid fragments. With their surfaces smoothed to a crystalline gloss by the incessant red heat, they twinkled scarlet and crimson as if they were a swarm of embers flung off by the dwarf's arching typhonic prominences. Further out, the disk's opacity began to build, graduating into a sheet of what looked like dense grainy fog; bright carmine at the inner fringe, shading away to a deep cardinal-red ninety million kilometres later. A trillion spiky shadows speckled the uniformity, cast by the larger chunks of rock and metal bobbing among the dust and slushy gravel.

No terracompatible planet was conceivable in such an environment. The star was barren except for a single gas giant, Duida, orbiting a hundred and twenty-eight million kilometres out. A couple of young Edenist habitats circled above it, but the main focus of human life was scattered across the disk.

A disk of such density was usually the companion of a newborn star, but Tunja was estimated to be over three billion years old. Confederation planetologists suspected the red dwarf's disk had its genesis in a spectacularly violent collision between a planet and a very large interstellar meteor. It was a theory which could certainly explain the existence of the Dorados themselves: three hundred and eighty-seven large asteroids with a near-pure metal content. Two-thirds of them were roughly spherical, permitting the strong conclusion that they were molten core magma material when the hypothetical collision took place. Whatever their origin, such abundant ore was an immensely valuable economic resource for the controlling government. Valuable enough to go to war over.

"Ayacucho's civil traffic control is refusing us docking permission," Captain Randol said. "They say all the Dorados are closed to civil starflight and we have to return to our port of origin."

Alkad exited the sensor visualization and stared across the *Samaku's* bridge. Randol was wearing a diplomatically apologetic expression.

"Has this ever happened before?" she asked.

"No. Not that we've been to the Dorados before, but I've never heard of anything like it."

I have not waited this long, nor come so far, to be turned away by some bloody bureaucrat, Alkad thought. "Let me talk to them," she said.

Randol waved a hand, signalling permission. The *Samaku's* flight computer opened a channel to Ayacucho asteroid's traffic control office.

"This is Immigration Service Officer Mabaki, how can I help you?"

"My name is Daphne Kigano," Alkad datavised back—she ignored the speculative gaze from Randol at the name on

one of her passports. "I'm a Dorado resident, and I wish to dock. I don't see why that should be a problem."

"It isn't a problem, not under normal circumstances. I take it you haven't heard of the warning from the Confederation Assembly?"

"No."

"I see. One moment, I'll datavise the file over."

Alkad and the rest of the crew fell silent as they accessed the report. More than surprise, more than disbelief, she felt anger. Anger that this should happen *now*. Anger at the threat it posed to her mission, her life's duty. Mother Mary must have deserted the Garissan people long ago, leaving the universe to place so much heartbreak and malicious catastrophe in their path.

"I would still like to come home," she datavised when it was over.

"Impossible," Mabaki replied. "I'm sorry."

"I'm the only one who will enter the asteroid. Even if I were possessed I would present no threat. And I'm quite willing to be tested for possession, the Assembly warning says electronics malfunction in their presence. It should be simple enough."

"I'm sorry, we simply can't take the risk."

"How old are you, Officer Mabaki?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your age?"

"Is there some relevance to this?"

"Indeed there is."

"I'm twenty-six."

"Indeed? Well, Officer Mabaki, I am sixty-three."

"Yes?"

Alkad sighed quietly. Exactly what was included in the Dorados' basic history didactic courses? Did today's youth know nothing of their tragic past? "That means I was evacuated from Garissa. I survived the genocide, Officer Mabaki. If our Mother Mary had wanted me harmed, she would have done it then. Now, I am just an old woman who wishes to come home. Is that really so hard?"

"I'm sorry, really. But no civil starships can dock."

Suppose I really can't get in? The intelligence services will

be waiting back at Narok, I can't return there. Maybe the Lord of Ruin would take me back. That would circumvent any personal disaster, not to mention personality debrief, but it would all be over then: the Alchemist, our justice.

She could see Peter's face that last time, still covered in a medical nanonic, but with his eyes full of trust. And that was the crux; too many people were relying on her; those treasured few who knew, and the blissfully ignorant masses who didn't.

"Officer Mabaki."

"Yes?"

"When this crisis is over, I will return home, will I not?"

"I shall look forward to issuing your ship docking permission personally."

"Good, because it will be the last docking authorization you ever do issue. The first thing I intend to do on my return will be to visit my close personal friend Ikela and tell him about this ordeal you have put me through." She held her breath, seemingly immersed in zero-tau. It was one lone name from the past flung desperately into the unknown. Mother Mary please let it strike its target.

Captain Randol gave a bass chuckle. "I don't know what you did, Alkad," he said loudly. "But they just datavised our docking authority and an approach vector."

• • •

André Duchamp had long since come to the bitter realization that the lounge compartment would never be the same again. Between them, Erick and the possessed had wrought an appalling amount of damage, not just to the fittings, but the cabin systems as well.

The small utility deck beneath the lounge was in a similar deplorable state. And the spaceplane was damaged beyond repair. The loading clamps hadn't engaged, allowing it to twist about while the *Villeneuve's Revenge* was under acceleration. Structural spars had snapped and bent all along its sleek fuselage.

He couldn't afford to rectify half of the damage, let alone replace the spaceplane. Not unless he took on another mercenary contract. That prospect did not appeal, not after Lalonde.

I am too old for such antics, he thought, by rights I should have made a fortune to retire on by now. If it wasn't for those bastard *anglo* shipping cartels I would have the money.

Anger gave him the strength to snap the last clip off the circulation fan unit he was working on; the little plastic star shattered from the pressure, chips spinning off in all directions. Bombarded by heat from a possessed's fireball, then subjected to hard vacuum for a week, the plastic had turned dismayingly brittle.

"Give me a hand, Desmond," he datavised. They had turned off the lounge's environmental circuit in order to dismantle it, which meant wearing his SII suit for the task. Without air circulating at a decent rate the smell in the compartment was unbearable. The bodies had been removed, but a certain amount of grisly diffusion had occurred during their flight from Lalonde.

Desmond left the thermal regulator power circuit he was testing and drifted over. They hauled the cylindrical fan unit out of the duct. It was clogged solid with scraps of cloth and spiral shavings of nultherm foam. André prodded at the grille with an anti-torque keydriver, loosening some of the mangled cloth. Tiny flakes of dried blood swirled out like listless moths.

"*Merde*. It'll have to be broken down and purged."

"Oh, come on, André, you can't use this again. The motor overloaded when Erick dumped the atmosphere. There's no telling what internal damage the voltage spike caused."

"Ship systems all have absurdly high performance margins. The motor can withstand a hundred spikes."

"Yeah, but the CAB . . ."

"To hell with them, data-constipated bureaucrats. They know nothing of operational flying."

"Some systems you don't take chances with."

"You forget, Desmond, this is my ship, my livelihood. Do you think I would risk that?"

"You mean, what's left of your ship, don't you?"

"What are you implying, that I am responsible for the souls of humanity returning to invade us? Perhaps also it is my fault that the Earth is ruined, and the Meridian fleet never returned."

"You're the captain, you took us to Lalonde."

"On a legitimate government contract. It was honest money."

"Have you never heard of fool's gold?"

André's answer was lost as Madeleine opened the ceiling hatch and used the crumbling composite ladder to pull herself down into the lounge. "Listen, you two, I've seen . . . Yek!" She slapped a hand over her mouth and nose, eyes smarting from the unwholesome scents layering the atmosphere. In the deck above, an air contamination warning sounded. The ceiling hatch started to hinge down. "Christ, haven't the pair of you got this cycled yet?"

"*Non*," André datavised.

"It doesn't matter. Listen, I've just seen Harry Levine. He was in a bar on the second residence level. I got out fast, I'm pretty sure he didn't see me."

"*Merde!*" André datavised the flight computer for a link into the spaceport's civil register, loading a search order. Two seconds later it confirmed the *Dechal* was docked, and had been for ten days. His SII suit's permeability expanded, allowing a sudden outbreak of sweat to expire. "We must leave. Immediately."

"No chance," Madeleine said. "The port office wouldn't even let us disengage the umbilicals, let alone launch, not with that civil starflight proscription order still in force."

"The captain's right, Madeleine," Desmond datavised. "There are only three of us left. We can't go up against Rawand's crew like this. We have to fly outsystem."

"Four!" she said through clenched teeth. "There are four of us left . . . Oh, mother of God, they'll go for Erick."

• • •

The fluid in Erick's inner ears began to stir, sending a volley of mild nerve impulses into his sleeping brain. The movement was so slight and smooth it made no impression on his quiescent mind. It did, however, register within his neural nanonics; the ever-vigilant basic monitor program noted the movement was consistent with a constant acceleration. Erick's body was being moved. The monitor program triggered a stimulant program.

Erick's hazy dream snuffed out, replaced by the hard-edged

schematics of a personal situation display. Second-level constraint blocks were erected across his nerves, preventing any give-away twitches. His eyes stayed closed as he assessed what the hell was happening.

Quiet, easy hum of a motor. *Tap tap tap* of feet on a hard floor—an audio discrimination program went primary—two sets of feet, plus the level breathing of two people. Constant pulse of light pressure on the enhanced retinas below closed eyelids indicated linear movement, backed up by inner ear fluid motion; estimated at a fast walking pace. Posture was level: he was still lying on his bed.

He datavised a general query/response code, and received an immediate reply from a communications net processor. Its location was a corridor on the third storey of the hospital, already fifteen metres from the implant surgery care ward. Erick requested a file of the local net architecture, and found a security observation camera in the corridor. He accessed it to find himself with a fish-eye vantage point along a corridor where his own bed was sliding underneath the lens. Madeleine and Desmond were at either end of the bed, straining to supplement the motor as they hauled it along. A lift door was sliding open ahead of them.

Erick cancelled the constraint blocks and opened his eyes. “What the fuck’s going on?” he datavised to Desmond.

Desmond glanced around to see a pair of furious eyes staring at him out of the green medical nanonic mask covering Erick’s face. He managed a snatched, semi-embarrassed grin. “Sorry, Erick, we didn’t dare wake you up in case someone heard the commotion. We had to get you out of there.”

“Why?”

“The *Dechal* is docked here. But don’t worry, we don’t think Hasan Rawand knows about us. And we intend to keep it that way. André is working on his political contact to get us a departure authorization.”

“For once he might make a decent job of it,” Madeleine muttered as they steered Erick’s bulky bed into the lift. “After all, it’s his own neck on the block this time, not just ours.”

Erick tried to rise, but the medical packages were too restrictive, he could only just get his head off the pillows, and

that simple motion was tiring beyond endurance. "No. Leave me. You go."

Madeleine pushed him down gently as the lift started upwards. "Don't be silly. They'll kill you if they catch up with you."

"We'll see this through together," Desmond said, his voice full of sympathy and reassurance. "We won't desert you, Erick."

Encased in the protective, nurturing packages, Erick couldn't even groan in frustration. He opened a secure encrypted channel to the Confederation Navy Bureau. Lieutenant Li Chang responded immediately.

"You have to intercept us," Erick datavised. "These imbeciles are going to take me off Culey if no one stops them."

"Okay, don't panic, I'm calling in the covert duty squad. We can reach the spaceport in time."

"Do we have any assets in the flight control centre?"

"Yes, sir."

"Activate one; make sure whatever departure authorization Duchamp gets is invalidated. I want the *Villeneuve's Revenge* to stay locked tight in that bloody docking bay."

"I'm on it. And don't worry."

Desmond and Madeleine had obviously devoted considerable attention to planning their route in order to avoid casual observation. They took Erick straight up through the rock honeycomb which was Culey's habitation section, switching between a series of public utility lifts. When they were in the upper levels, where gravity had dropped to less than ten per cent standard, they left the bed behind and tugged him along a maze of simple passages bored straight through the rock. It was some kind of ancient maintenance or inspection grid, with few functional net processors. Lieutenant Li Chang had trouble tracking their progress.

Eighteen minutes after leaving the hospital they arrived at the base of the spaceport's spindle. Several intrigued sets of eyes followed their course as they floated across the big axial chamber to a vacant transit capsule.

"We're two minutes behind you," Li Chang datavised. "Thank heavens they chose a devious route, it slowed you up."

“What about the departure authorization?”

“God knows how Duchamp did it, but Commissioner Ri Drak has cleared the *Villeneuve's Revenge* for departure. The Navy Bureau has lodged a formal protest with Culey's governing council. It should earn us a delay if not outright cancellation; Ri Drak's political opponents will use the complaint to make as much capital as they can.”

The transit capsule took them to the bay containing the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. It was a tedious journey; like the rest of the structure the transit tubes were in need of refurbishment, if not outright replacement. The capsule juddered frequently as it ran through lengths of rail with no power, the light panels dimming, then brightening in sympathy. It paused at several junctions, as if the spaceport route management computer was unsure of the direction.

“Can you manoeuvre a bit now?” Madeleine asked Erick, hopeful that free fall would grant them some relief from straining at his mass. She was carrying two of the ancillary medical modules which were hooked up to his dermal armour of packages, feeding in a whole pharmacopoeia of nutrients to the new implants. The tubes were forever tangling around her limbs or snagging on awkward fixtures.

“Sorry. Tricky,” he datavised back. It might earn them thirty seconds.

Madeleine and Desmond swapped a martyred glance, and bundled Erick out of the transit capsule. The hexagonal cross-section corridors that encircled the docking bay were white-walled composite, scuffed to a rusty grey by the boots of countless generations of crews and maintenance staff. The neat rows of grab hoops running along the walls had snapped off long ago, leaving only stumps. It didn't matter, the kind of people frequenting Culey spaceport were hardly novices. Madeleine and Desmond simply kept Erick in the middle of the corridor, imparting the odd gentle nudge to prevent him touching the walls as inertia slid him along.

Once the transit capsule door closed behind him, Erick lost his communications channel to Lieutenant Li Chang. He wished the packages didn't prevent him from sighing. Did nothing in this rat's arsehole of a settlement ever work? One of his medical support units emitted a cautionary bleep.

“Soon be over,” Madeleine soothed, misinterpreting the electronic tone.

Erick blinked rapidly, the sole method of expression left to him. They were risking themselves to save him, while he would be turning them over to the authorities as soon as they docked at a civilized port. Yet he’d killed to protect them, leaving them free to commit murder and piracy in turn. Applying for a CNIS post had seemed such a prestigious step forwards at the time. How stupid his vanity appeared with hindsight.

His eye focused on a two-centimetre burn mark scoring the composite wall. Instinct or a well-written extended sensory analysis program, it was the result which mattered. That burn mark was on the cover of a net conduit inspection panel, and it was fresh. When he switched to infrared it still glowed a faint pink. With the spectrum active, other burns became apparent, a small ruddy constellation sprayed around the corridor walls, every glimmer corresponding to an inspection panel.

“Madeleine, Desmond, stop,” he datavised. “Someone’s deliberately screwed the net here.”

Desmond halted his ponderous glide with a semi-automatic slap at the stump of a grab hoop. He reached out to brake Erick. “I can’t even establish a channel to the ship,” he complained.

“Do you think they got into the life-support capsules?” Madeleine asked. Her own enhanced retinas were scanning around the fateful inspection panels.

“They wouldn’t get past Duchamp, not while his paranoia’s roused. We’ll be lucky if he even opens the airlock for us.”

“They’re armed, though; they could have cut their way in. And they’re in front of us.”

Desmond peered down the slightly curving corridor, alarmed and uncertain. There was a four-way junction ten metres in front of him, one of its branches leading directly to the docking bay’s airlock. The only sounds he could hear were the rattly fans of the environmental maintenance system.

“Go back to the transit capsule,” Erick datavised. “That has a working net processor, we can open a channel to the ship

from there, even if we have to route it through the external antenna.”

“Good idea.” Madeleine braced her feet on a grab hoop stump, and gave Erick’s shoulders a steady push, starting him off back down the corridor. Desmond was already slithering around them, lithe as a fish. When she looked back she could see shadows fluctuating within the junction. “Desmond!” She scrambled inside her jacket for the TIP pistol she was carrying. An elbow hit the corridor wall, setting her tumbling. She tried to damp her momentum with one hand clawing at the coarse composite, while still fumbling at the obstinate holster. Her feet caught Erick, sending him thudding against the wall. He bounced, trailing long confused spirals of tubing, ancillary modules flying free.

Shane Brandes, the *Dechal*’s fusion engineer, slid out of the corridor which led to the airlock; he was wearing the copper one-piece overall of the local spaceport services company. It took him a couple of seconds to recognize the frenetic woman four metres in front of him who was grappling with a gun caught up in her jacket. He gagged in astonishment.

“Don’t move, ballhead!” Madeleine screeched, half in panic, half in exhilaration. She brought the TIP pistol around to point at the terrified man. Her body was still rebounding, which meant she had to keep tracking. Five separate combat programs went into primary mode; her thoughts were so churned up she’d simply designated the classification rather than individual files. Various options for combat wasp salvo attack formations skipped through her mind. She focused through the sleet of data and looping problematical high-gee vector lines to keep the nozzle trained on Brandes, who was doing a credible imitation of raising his hands in the air even though they were visually inverted.

“What do I do?” Madeleine yelled to Desmond. He was wrestling with Erick, trying to halt the injured man’s cumbersome oscillations.

“Just keep him covered,” Desmond shouted back.

“Okay.” She squeezed the pistol grip in an effort to stop it shaking so much; her legs forked wide, stabilizing her against the corridor. “How many with you?” she asked Brandes.

“None.”

Madeleine finally tamed her wayward programs. A blue neon targeting grid slid into place over her vision and locked. She aimed at a point ten centimetres to the side of Brandes's head and fired. Composite snapped and boiled, sending out a puff of unhealthy black smoke.

"Jesus. Nobody, I swear! I'm supposed to disable the starship's umbilical feeds, and smash this bay's net before . . ."

"Before what?"

Everybody had shunted an audio discrimination program into primary mode, so everybody heard the transit capsule door opening.

Desmond immediately activated a tactics program, and opened an encrypted channel to Madeleine. Their respective programs interfaced, coordinating their threat response. He turned to face the bright fan of light emerging from the door, his TIP pistol sliding around in a smooth program-controlled motion.

When Hasan Rawand came out of the commuter lift the exhilaration he was burning was hotter than any black-market stimulant program. He fancied himself as a hunting bird, power-diving on its unsuspecting prey.

The sharp reality of the corridor *hurt*. It was a situation so abrupt he was still smiling confidently as Desmond's TIP pistol nozzle was locked directly on his head. Stafford Charlton and Harry Levine almost cannoned into his back as they left the commuter lift; the four mercenaries hired to provide overwhelming firepower were considerably more controlled, reaching for their own weapons.

"Rawand, I've programmed in a dead man's trigger," Desmond said loudly. "If you shoot me, you still die."

The *Dechal's* captain swore murderously. Behind him the mercenaries were having a lot of trouble deploying in the cramped corridor. Fast encrypted datavises assured him three of them were targeting the crewman from the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. Give the word, we can vaporize his pistol first. We're sure.

They weren't exactly the kind of odds Hasan Rawand was keen on. His eyes swept over the figure encased in medical nanonic packages. "Is that who I think it is?" he inquired.

"Not relevant," Desmond replied. "Now listen, nobody

makes any sudden movements at all. Clear? That way no real untimely tragic accidents occur. This is what we have here: a standoff. With me so far? Nobody's going to win today, especially not if anyone starts shooting in here. So I'm calling time out, and we can both regroup and conspire to stab each other in the back some other happy time."

"I don't think so," Hasan said. "I don't have a quarrel with you, Lafoe, nor you, Madeleine. It's your captain I want, and that murdering bastard Thakrar. You two can leave anytime. Nobody's going to shoot you."

"You don't know shit about what we've been through," Desmond said, an anger which surprised him powering his voice. "I don't know about your ship, Rawand, but this isn't a crew which deserts each other the first second it hits the fan."

"Very noble," Hasan sneered.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen next. The three of us are going to back up into the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, and we'll take Brandes with us for insurance. One mistake on your part, and Madeleine fries him."

Hasan grinned rakishly. "So? He never was much use as a fusion engineer anyway."

"Rawand!" Shane screamed.

"Don't fuck with me!" Desmond shouted.

"Stafford, burn one of those medical modules our dear Erick is so attached to," Hasan ordered.

Stafford Charlton laughed, and shifted his maser pistol slightly. The module he chose let out a vicious crack as the lance of radiation pierced its casing. Boiling fluid shot out of blackened fissures as the internal reserve bladders were irradiated. Tubes broke free, chemicals spraying out of their melted ends, causing them to whip about with a serpent's ferocity.

Desmond didn't even have to datavise an order; acting on the evaluation of their combined programs, Madeleine fired her TIP pistol immediately. The pulse burned away half of the flesh covering Shane Brandes's left shin. He howled in agony, clutching at the mutilated limb. His voice subsided to a sob as his neural nanonics erected axon blocks against the pain.

Hasan Rawand narrowed his eyes, enhanced retinas absorbing the entire scene. He put a tactical analysis program

into primary mode, which offered him two blunt options: retreat, or open fire. Estimated casualties on his side were fifty per cent, including Shane. When he added the secondary goal of successfully entering the *Villeneuve's Revenge* the only option was retreat and reorganize.

"Want to play double or quits?" Desmond asked calmly.

Hasan glared at him; being thwarted was bad enough, but being mocked was almost intolerable.

The transit capsule doors opened again. A fist-sized sphere emitting intolerable white light soared into the corridor. Hasan Rawand and his accomplices were closest to it, receiving the full impact of the photonic blitz. Two of the mercenaries who had their retinal sensitivity cranked up wide were instantly blinded as the implants burnt out. For the others it was as though the terrible light were boring right through their eye sockets and into the soft tissue of the brain. Instinct and situation analysis response programs fused into a simple protective act: eyelids slammed shut and hands jammed over eyes.

Unseen in the glare, the three members of the CNIS covert duty squad dived out into the corridor, following Lieutenant Li Chang. Dressed in smooth neutral-grey armour suits, their active optical sensors were filtered for the intensity of the quasar grenade.

"Break through Rawand's people, snatch Erick," Li Chang ordered. She fired another quasar grenade from her forearm magazine, aiming along the corridor at Desmond. It never reached its intended goal, one of the blinded mercenaries struck it as he thrashed about.

The mercenaries had linked combat programs, coordinating their response. Guidance and orientation programs allowed them to fix an accurate line on the transit capsule door and bring their weapons to bear. Thermal induction pulses discharged, maser beams slashed about.

The dissipation layers on the suits which Li Chang's squad wore deflected or absorbed most direct hits. The composite walls of the tunnel had no such protection. Flames squirted out amid fountains of smoking composite. Fire alarms screeched in warning. Turbulent jets of thick grey extinguisher gas roared into the air, turning to blobs of oily

turquoise liquid as soon as the substance came into contact with any flame, smearing the combustible surface. Huge bubbling clumps congealed around the quasar grenades, smothering them.

Answering shots from Li Chang's squad eliminated three mercenaries straightaway. But their bodies formed a formidable tangled obstacle blocking off the corridor, as well as contriving a shield against further energy weapon fire. Behind it, Hasan and his remaining active cohorts rallied hurriedly.

Li Chang fought her way through the swirling extinguisher gas to grapple with one of the corpses. Her armour suit gauntlets couldn't get a decent grip on anything. The gas had slicked every damn surface. Two maser beams struck her chest and shoulder as she attempted to force her way forwards. She could actually see the gas crystallizing in long straight lines marking out the beams. One of the covert squad members was beside her, clawing at the dead man's neck. The body was bucking fitfully between them, its mass impeding every move.

Another TIP shot struck her armour, diffracting. A wide splash of skin on the dead man veered to a rancid bruise-brown as the energy punched it. His clothes were smouldering, drawing the extinguisher gas like a condensing dew.

Her neural nanonics had to activate a nausea suppressor program. "Use the smarts," she said, formulating search hunt parameter patterns. A volley of centimetre-long darts slid out of the cartridges on her belt. Miniature programmable missiles with a tiny ionic exhaust. They curved and rolled through the seething air, sliding around the awkward contours of the lifeless mercenaries, and accelerated down the corridor.

Li Chang heard a savage firecracker barrage as over two hundred diminutive EE warheads detonated in the space of three seconds. Sharp flickering fingers of blue-white light stabbed back past the floating bodies. Ripples of purple static surfed along the composite walls towards her. There was a sudden surge of air, sucking her towards the source of the light and sound. The three battered corpses began to move. A pressure drop warning sounded, its metallic whistle doppler-ing as the pressure thinned out fast. Emergency hatches were

sliding out of the corridor walls, sealing off the damaged section.

“Captain Thakrar?” she datavised. “Sir, are you there?”

Scrambling after the corpses she could see the butchery which the smart darts had inflicted. A galaxy of blood globules spun around the ripped torsos of Hasan Rawand and the others. She assumed there were four in total. It was hard to tell.

Chunks of gore were splatting against the cracks in the wall, producing temporary seals which would shake and wobble under pressure, before being sucked through. Holding her breath—which was ridiculous as the suit provided her with a full oxygen supply—Li Chang flung herself through the centre of the bloody pulp, flinching every time the suit’s tactile sensors faithfully reported an *object* slithering down her side.

The corridor beyond was empty. An emergency hatch had cut off the junction. Li Chang hauled her way along to it. The wind was abating now, almost all of the air had gone.

A small transparent port was set in the centre of the hatch. When Li Chang pressed her shell helmet sensors against it, all she could see was more hatches closed across the other corridors. Captain Thakrar and the crew members from the *Villeneuve’s Revenge* were nowhere to be seen.

That was when a new sound was added to the fading clamour of the various alarms: a deep bass rumble which she could feel through the structure as much as hear. The light panels flickered, then went out. Small blue-white backup globes came on.

“Oh, God, no,” she whispered to herself inside the helmet. “I promised him, I said he’d be safe now.”

The *Villeneuve’s Revenge* was launching from inside its docking bay. André had released the cradle hold-down latches, but without the bay manager to assist there was nothing he could do about the umbilical couplings and airlock tube. Secondary drive tubes ignited, power from the main generators vaporising hydrogen at barely sub-fusion temperatures. Clouds of searing blue ions billowed out around the spherical starship as it rose laboriously. Hoses and cables jacked into their sockets on the lower hull tore and snapped; streams of coolant fluid, water, and cryogenic fuel sluiced

around the cylindrical bay. Once the starship was above the cradle the drive exhaust played directly over the girders, reducing them to garish slag in seconds. The airlock tube stretched and flexed to its limit, then ripped free of the docking ring, pulling spars, data cables, and locking pins with it.

“What the fuck are you doing, Duchamp?” an enraged traffic control broadcast at the rogue starship. “Turn your drive off now.”

The *Villeneuve's Revenge* was rising out of the bay on a pillow of radiant ions. Walls and support girders marked its progress by melting and sagging.

André was only dimly aware of the massive damage his departure was causing. Flying the starship alone required his full concentration. Culey's SD platforms had lock-on, but he knew they would never fire, not while he was still so close. Frantically, he ordered all the open access hatches to close.

A ring of cryogenic storage tanks around the rim of the bay finally detonated under the unceasing blast of the starship's exhausts. It was a chain reaction, sending out vast plumes of white vapour and spinning chunks of debris. The entire docking bay structure began to crumple under the force of the multiple explosions. Momentum damping mechanisms in the spaceport spindle bearings veered towards overload as the impulse juddered its way through the framework.

The wave front from the tank explosions struck the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, fragments of wreckage puncturing the dark silicon hull in a dozen places. The starship was buffeted violently. An event horizon sealed over the hull, then shrank to nothing.

• • •

It was Gerald Skibbow's third trip to the lounge: a spacious semicircular room cut into Guyana's rock, with wide sliding-glass doors leading out onto a veranda that gave an excellent view down the interior of the asteroid's second habitation cavern. Despite the apparent easygoing nature, the lounge was at the centre of the navy's secure medical sanatorium, although the security measures were deliberately unobtrusive. Staff and patient-inmates mingled openly, producing what the doctors hoped was a casual atmosphere. It was in-

tended to redevelop the social interactivity skills of the inmates who had been bruised by traumas, stress, and, in several cases, stringent interrogation. Anyone was free to come and go as they pleased; sit in the big spongy chairs and contemplate the view, have a drink and a snack, or play the simple games provided.

Gerald Skibbow didn't like the lounge at all. The artificial asteroid cavern was too removed from his experience. Its cyclorama landscape unsettled him, and the lounge's expensive modern setting reminded him of the arcology he'd yearned to escape from. He didn't want memories. His family dwelt in memories, the only place they did live now.

For the first few days after his personality debrief he had begged and pleaded with his captors to end those memories with their clever devices (that or death). The nanonics were still entombed within his skull, it would take so little effort on their part to cleanse him, a purge of fiery impulses and his past would be gone. But Dr Dobbs had smiled kindly and shaken his head, saying they wanted to cure him, not persecute him further.

Gerald had come to despise that mild smile, the utter intransigence it fronted. It condemned him to live amid a swirl of wondrously awful images: those of the savannah, the shared laughter, the tired happiness which had come at the end of each day, the days themselves, filled with simple achievement. In short, happiness. And in knowing it, he knew all he had lost, and was never to regain. He convinced himself the Kulu military people were deliberately submerging him in his own recollections as a punishment for his involvement in Lalonde and the outbreak of possession. There was no other reason for them to refuse him help. They blamed him, and wanted him to remember that. Memories emphasised that he had nothing, that he was worth nothing, that he had failed the only people he'd ever loved. Memories which kept him permanently looped in his failure.

His other wounds, physical ones from the encounter with Jenny Harris's team, had been treated efficiently and effectively by medical packages. His face and head sported fresh scars from the time a few days ago when he'd tried to claw the lovely smiling faces from within his brain; fingernails

tearing at the skin to let him get at the bone of the skull and prise it open so that his darling family could escape and unfetter him. But the strong medical orderlies had jumped on him, and Dr Dobbs's smile had become sad. There had been fresh batches of chemicals to make him drowsy, and extra sessions when he had to lie on the psychiatrist's comfy couch and tell everyone how he felt. It hadn't done any good. How could it?

Gerald sat on one of the tall stools at the lounge's bar and asked for a cup of tea. The steward smiled and said: "Yessir. I'll get you some biscuits, too."

His tea and biscuits arrived on a tray. He poured, concentrating hard. These days his reactions weren't too sharp and his vision seemed to lack any real depth perception. Flat and unresponsive; so perhaps it was the world at fault, not him.

He rested his elbows on the polished wood of the bar, and cradled the cup in his hands, sipping slowly. His eyes scanned the ornamental plates and cups and vases in the showcase behind the bar. Not interested, but at least it kept him from looking out of the veranda windows and receiving the wickedly vertiginous view of the cavern. The first time they'd brought him into the lounge he'd tried to jump over the veranda. It was a hundred and fifty metres above the ground, after all. Two of the other inmates had actually cheered and laughed as he hurdled over the metal railing. But there was a net to snag him. Dr Dobbs had smiled tolerantly after it had stopped bouncing and winched him in.

At the far end of the bar, a holoscreen was switched to a news show (presumably censored—they wouldn't give inmates anything too contentious). Gerald shifted along a couple of stools so he could hear the commentary. The presenter was a handsome, silver-haired man speaking in level, measured tones. And smiling—naturally. The image changed to a low-orbit shot of Ombey, focusing on the Xingu continent. A curious appendicular finger glowed crimson amid the dour browns and greens of the earth, prodding out from the bottom of the main land mass. It was, Gerald heard, the latest anomaly to engulf Mortonridge. Unfortunately it meant that no one was able to see what was happening beneath. Royal Kulu Navy sources confirmed it matched the reality dysfunction ef-

fect observed on the Laymil homeworld; but emphasised that whatever mischief the possessed were cooking up below it there was no possibility of them removing Ombey from the universe. There simply weren't enough of them; they didn't have the strength. And the red cloud had been halted at the firebreak. After two laser shots from a low-orbit SD platform the cloud's leading edge had recoiled, yielding to the negotiated boundary.

The disconcerting image of cloud was replaced by a sequence of fast pictures of big government buildings and uniformed officials with grim faces bustling through their doors and ignoring shouted questions. Gerald found the report hard to follow, although it seemed to be hinting that the Mortonridge situation was going to be "resolved," that "certain" plans were being "initiated."

Fools. They didn't realize. Not even sucking out every piece of knowledge in his brain had brought them understanding.

He sipped some more of his tea, thoughts calming to a more contemplative mood. Perhaps if he was lucky the possessed would begin another offensive; that way his misery would be extinguished for good as he was crushed back into the numbing darkness.

Then came the report about yesterday's hellhawk incursion. Five of them had emerged into the Ombey system; two of their number skipping high above the planet, three jumping about between the system's handful of settled asteroids. Always maintaining their distance, keeping well outside the range of SD platforms, and sliding back into wormholes as soon as Royal Navy ships were dispatched to interdict. Apparently their missions were to datavise a sensorium recording coded for open access into every communications net they could establish a channel with.

Leonard DeVille appeared to say how unfortunate the recording was, and that he hoped people would be sensible enough to see it for the crude propaganda it represented. In any case, he added contemptuously, with the civil starflight proscription in force, anyone sad enough to succumb would be safe from Kiera Salter's clutches. They would simply be unable to reach Valisk.

“There now follows,” said the handsome anchorman, “a brief extract of the recording; though we are voluntarily complying with government wishes and not playing it in full.”

The holoscreen showed a beautiful teenage girl whose flimsy clothes were virtually falling off her.

Gerald blinked. His vision was deluged by a dizzy rush of memories, the pictures more vivid than anything his eyes provided. Past and present wrestled for dominance.

“You know, they’re going to tell you that you shouldn’t be accessing this recording,” the girl said. “In fact, they’re going to get quite serious about that—”

Her voice: a harmony which threaded through every memory. Gerald’s teacup hit the top of the bar and spun away, flinging the hot liquid over his shirt and trousers.

“—your mum and dad, your big brother, the authorities in charge of wherever you live. Can’t think why. Except, of course, I’m one of the possessed—”

“Marie?” His throat was so clogged he could barely whisper. Two of the inmate supervision staff sitting at a table behind him exchanged a troubled look.

“—one of the demons—”

“Marie.” Tears brimmed up in Gerald’s eyes. “Oh, my God. Darling!”

The two supervision staff rose to their feet, one of them datavising an alert code into the sanatorium’s net. Other inmates in the lounge had begun to notice Gerald’s behaviour. Grins zipped around: the loony’s at it again.

“You’re alive!” He shoved both hands palm-down on the top of the bar and tried to vault over. “*Marie!*” The steward ran towards him, an arm outstretched. “Marie! Darling, baby.” With his wobbly senses, Gerald completely misjudged his leap and went crashing onto the floor behind the bar. The steward had time for a fast yelp of shock as his flying feet tangled with Gerald’s sprawled body and sent him tumbling to smack painfully into the base of the bar. A flailing arm sent a cascade of glasses smashing down on the hard tiles.

Gerald shook the glass splinters from his hair and jerked his head back. Marie was still there above him, still smiling coyly and invitingly. At him. She wanted Daddy back.

“MARIE.” He surged up at the same time the two supervi-

sors arrived at the bar. The first snatched hold of Gerald's shirt, tugging him away from the holoscreen. Gerald spun around to face this new impediment, roared in rage, and swung a violent punch. The supervisor's unarmed combat program could barely cope with the suddenness of the attack. Muscles bunched under the orders of abrupt override impulses, twisting him away from the fist. The response wasn't quite good enough. Gerald caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head. Behind that strike was the force of a body hardened by months of tough physical labour. The supervisor stumbled back into his partner, the two of them swaying desperately for balance.

Cheers and raucous whoops of encouragement were hurled from all across the lounge. Someone picked up one of the big potted plants and threw it at a distracted nurse. An alarm shrilled. The staff began to draw their nervejam sticks.

"Marie! Baby, I'm here." Gerald had finally reached the holoscreen, thrusting his face against the cool plastic. His nose was squashed almost flat. She grinned and flirted mere centimetres away, her figure composed from a compact cellular array of small glowing spheres. "Marie! Let me in, Marie." He started to thump on the screen. "Marie!"

She vanished. The handsome anchorman smiled out. Gerald shrieked in anguish, and started pummelling the holoscreen with all his strength. "Marie. Come back. Come back to me." Smears of blood from torn knuckles dribbled down the anchorman's tanned features.

"Oh, Christ," the first supervisor grunted. He aimed a nervejam stick at Gerald's back and fired. Gerald froze, then his limbs started to quake fiercely. A long wretched wail fluted out of his lips as he crumpled onto the floor. He managed to gasp one last piteous "Marie" before unconsciousness claimed him.

14

Given the propensity for mild paranoia among Tranquillity's plutocrats, medical facilities were always one aspect of the habitat never short of investment and generous charitable donations. Consequentially, and in this case fortuitously, there was always a degree of overcapacity. After twenty years of what amounted to chronic underuse, the Prince Michael Memorial Hospital's pediatric ward was now chock full. A situation which produced a permanent riot along its broad central aisle during the day.

When Ione called in, half of the kids from Lalonde were chasing each other over beds and around tables, yelling ferociously. The game was possessed and mercenaries, and mercenaries always won. The two rampaging teams charged past Ione, neither knowing nor caring who she was (her usual escort of serjeants had been left outside). A harassed Dr Giddings, the head of the pediatric department, caught sight of his prestigious visitor and hurried over. He was in his late twenties, effusiveness and a lanky frame marrying to produce a set of hectic, rushed mannerisms whenever he spoke. His face inclined towards chubby, which gave him an engagingly boyish appearance. Ione wondered if he'd undergone cosmetic tailoring; that face would be so instantly trustworthy to children, a big brother you could always confide in.

"Ma'am, I'm so sorry," he blurted. "We had no idea you were coming." He tried to reseal the front of his white house tunic, glancing around fretfully at the ward. Cushions and bedclothes were scattered everywhere, colourful animatic dolls waddled around, either laughing or repeating their catch phrases. (Probably wasted, Ione thought, none of these children would recognize the idols from this season's AV shows.)

"I don't think I'd be very popular if you made them clean

up just for me,” Ione said with a smile. “Besides, I’ve been watching them for the last few days. I’m really only here to confirm they’re adapting properly.”

Dr Giddings gave her a careful glance, using his fingers to comb back some of his floppy ginger hair. “Oh, yes, they’re adapting all right. But then children are always easy to bribe. Food, toys, clothes, trips into the parkland, every kind of outdoor game they can play. Never fails. This is Heaven’s holiday camp as far as they’re concerned.”

“Aren’t they homesick?”

“Not really. I’d describe them as parent-sick more than anything. Separation causes some psychological problems, naturally.” He gestured around. “But as you can see, we’re doing our best to keep them busy, that way they don’t have time to think about Lalonde. It’s easier with the younger ones. Some of the older ones are proving recalcitrant; they can be prone to moodiness. But again, I don’t think it’s anything serious. Not in the short term.”

“And in the long term?”

“Long term, the only real cure is to get them back to Lalonde and their parents.”

“That’s going to have to wait, I’m afraid. But you’ve certainly done a wonderful job with them.”

“Thank you,” Dr Giddings murmured.

“Is there anything else you need?” Ione asked.

Dr Giddings pulled a face. “Well, medically they’re all fine now apart from Freya and Shona; and the nanonic packages are taking good care of those two. They should be healed within a week. So, as I said, what the rest could really do with right now is a strong, supportive family environment. If you were to appeal for foster families, I’m sure we’d have enough volunteers.”

“I’ll have Tranquillity put out an announcement, and make sure the news studios mention it.”

Dr Giddings grinned in relief. “That’s very kind, thank you. We were worried people might not come forwards, but I’m sure that if you back the appeal personally . . .”

“Do my best,” she said lightly. “Do you mind if I wander around?”

“Please.” He half bowed, half stumbled.

Ione walked on down the aisle, stepping around a thrilled three-year-old girl who was dancing with, and cuddling, a fat animatic frog in a bright yellow waistcoat.

The twin rows of beds had channelled an avalanche of toys along the main aisle. Holomorph stickers were colonizing the walls and even some of the furniture, their cartoon images swelling up from the surface to run through their cycle, making it appear as if the polyp were flexing with rainbow diffraction patterns. A blue-skinned imp appeared to be the favourite; picking its nose, then flicking disgusting tacky yellow bogies at anyone passing by. No medical equipment was actually visible, it was all built unobtrusively into the walls and bedside cabinets.

The far end opened up into a lounge section, with a big table where they all sat around for meals. Its curving wall had two large oval windows which provided a panoramic view out past the curving habitat shell. Right now Tranquillity was above Mirchusko's nightside, but the rings glistened as if they were arches of frosted glass, and the smooth beryl orb of Falsia shone with a steady aquamarine hue. The stars continued their eternal orbit around the habitat.

A girl had made a broad nest of cushions in front of a window, snuggling down in them to watch the astronomical marvels roll past her. According to the neural strata's local memory, she'd been there for a couple of hours—a ritual practised every day since *Lady Mac* had arrived.

Ione hunched down beside her. She looked about twelve, with short-cropped hair so blond it was almost silver.

What's her name? Ione asked.

Jay Hilton. She's the oldest of the group, and their leader. She is one of the moody ones Dr Giddings mentioned.

"Hello, Jay."

"I know you." Jay managed an aslant frown. "You're the Lord of Ruin."

"Oh, dear, you've found me out."

"Thought so. Everyone said my hair is the same as yours."

"Hum, they're almost right; I'm growing mine a bit longer these days."

"Father Horst cut mine."

"He did a good job."

"Of course he did."

"Cutting hair isn't the only thing he did right by all accounts."

"Yes."

"You're not joining in with the games much, are you?"

Jay wrinkled her nose up contemptuously. "They're just kids' games."

"Ah. You prefer the view then?"

"Sort of. I've never seen space before. Not real space, like this. I thought it was just empty, but this is always different. It's so pretty with the rings and everything. So's the parkland, too. Tranquillity's nice all over."

"Thank you. But wouldn't you be better off in the parkland? It's healthier than sitting here all day long."

"Suppose so."

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No. It's just . . . I think it's safer here, that's all."

"Safer?"

"Yes. I talked to Kelly on the flight here, we were in the spaceplane together. She showed me all the recordings she'd made. Did you know the possessed were frightened of space? That's why they make the red cloud cover the sky, so they don't have to see it."

"I remember that part, yes."

"It's sort of funny if you think about it, the dead scared of the dark."

"Thank heavens they're scared of something, I say. Is that why you like sitting here?"

"Yes. This is like the night; so I'll be safe from them here."

"Jay, there are no possessed in Tranquillity, I promise."

"You can't promise that. Nobody can."

"Okay. Ninety-nine per cent, then. How's that sound?"

"I believe that." Jay smiled sheepishly.

"Good. You must be missing your family?"

"I miss Mummy. We went to Lalonde so we could get away from the rest of our family."

"Oh."

"I miss Drusilla, too. She's my rabbit. And Sango; he was Mr Manani's horse. But he's dead anyway. Quinn Dexter shot

him.” The tenuous smile faded, and she glanced back at the stars in a hunt for reassurance.

Ione studied the young girl for a moment. She didn’t think a foster family would be much use in this case, Jay was too clued up to accept a substitute for anything. However, Dr Giddings had mentioned bribes . . . “There’s someone I’d like you to meet, I think you’ll get on very well with her.”

“Who?” Jay asked.

“She’s a friend of mine, a very special friend. But she doesn’t come down into the starscrapers; it’s tricky for her. You’ll have to come up and visit her in the park.”

“I ought to wait for Father Horst. We normally have lunch together.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind just this once. We can leave a message.”

Jay was obviously torn. “I suppose so. I don’t know where he’s gone.”

To see Tranquillity’s bishop, but Ione didn’t say it.

• • •

“I wonder why you saw the demon as red?” the bishop was asking as the two of them walked the old-fashioned grounds of the cathedral with its century-old yew hedges, rose beds, and stone-lined ponds. “It does seem somewhat classical. One can hardly credit that Dante did actually get shown around Hell.”

“I think demon might be a simplistic term in this instance,” Horst replied. “I’ve no doubt that it was some kind of spiritual entity; but given the clarity of hindsight, it seemed to be more curious than malevolent.”

“Remarkable. To come face-to-face with a creature not of this realm. And you say it first appeared before the Ivets performed their dark mass?”

“Yes. Hours before. Though it was definitely present at the mass; right there when possession started.”

“It was the instigator, then?”

“I don’t know. But I hardly think its presence can be a coincidence. It was certainly involved.”

“How strange.”

Horst was disturbed by how melancholic the old man

sounded. Joseph Saro was far removed from the tough realist of a bishop Horst had served with back at the arcology; this was a genteel jolly man, whose subtlety was perfectly suited to an undemanding diocese like Tranquillity. With his almost-white beard and crinkled ebony skin, he had evolved a cosy dignity. More of a social figure than religious leader.

“Your grace?” Horst prompted.

“Strange to think that it is two thousand six hundred years since Our Lord walked the earth, the last time of miracles. We are, as you said earlier, so used to dealing in the concept of faith rather than fact. And now here we are again, surrounded by miracles, although of a singularly dark countenance. The Church no longer has to teach people and then pray that they come to believe in their own way; all we have to do today is point. Who can refute what the eye beholds, even though it doth offend.” He finished with a lame smile.

“Our teachings still have purpose,” Horst said. “More so than ever now. Believe me, your grace, the Church has endured for millennia so that people alive today can know Christ’s message. That is a tremendous achievement, one we can all draw comfort from. So much has been endured, schism from within, conflict and assaults from outside. All so His word can be heard in the darkest hour.”

“Which word?” Joseph Saro asked quietly. “We have so many true histories now; old orthodoxies, revelationist scrolls, revisionist teachings; Christ the pacifist, Christ the warrior. Who knows what was really said, what was altered to appease Rome? It was so long ago.”

“You’re wrong, your grace. I’m sorry, but the details of that time are irrelevant. That He existed is all we need to know. We carried the essence of Our Lord across the centuries, it is that which we’ve kept alive for so long, ready for this day. Christ showed us the human heart has dignity, that everyone can be redeemed. If we have faith in ourselves, we cannot fail. And that is the strength we must gather if we are to confront the possessed.”

“I’m sure you’re right; it’s just that such a message seems, well . . .”

“Simplistic? Fundamentals are always simple. That is why they endure for so long.”

Joseph Saro patted Horst's shoulder. "Ah, my boy, I envy your faith, I really do. My task would be so much easier if I believed with your fervour. That we have souls is of no doubt to me; though we can be assured our scientist brethren will seek a solid rationale among the grubby shadows of quantum cosmology. Who knows, perhaps they will even find it. Then what? If our very souls are given a scientific basis, what use will people have for the Church?"

"I don't believe the Church's ethos can change simply because we have learned more of ourselves. The love of Christ will be no less valid for us now than it has been for the billions of past believers who lived in ignorance. His message uplifts the spirit, no matter what the substance of that spirit is revealed to be. If anything, the message becomes more important. We must have some hope as we face the beyond."

"Ah yes, the beyond. Purgatory indeed. It frightens people, Horst. It certainly frightens me."

"It shouldn't, your grace. There is more than purgatory awaiting us. Much more."

"Goodness me, you believe that as well?"

"Yes." Horst half smiled, as though he had only just realized it himself. "We can't pick and choose what parts of Christ's teachings to believe in; those sections which are convenient, or comforting, and disregard the rest. Above everything, he gave us the hope of redemption. I believe in that. Completely."

"Then the heavenly city awaits?"

"Some version of it, some sheltered haven for our souls where we can be at peace with our new existence."

"Did any of the lost souls you talked to happen to mention seeing such a place?"

"No." Horst smiled. "To demand proof is to lack faith."

The bishop laughed heartily. "Oh, well done, my boy. Teach the master what he once taught. Very good." He sobered. "So how do you explain the different faiths? Their myriad versions of the afterlife, and reincarnation, and spiritual development. You are going to have to think of that now. God knows, others will. Now spirituality is real, religion—all religion—will come in for scrutiny as never before. What of the others who claim theirs is the true path to God in his

Heaven? What of the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Sikhs, the Confucians, the Shintoists, even the Starbridge tribes, not to mention all those troublesome cultists?"

"The origin of each is identical, that's what's important. The notion that we are something more than flesh and mind alone. People must have faith. If you believe in your God, you believe in yourself. There is no greater gift than that."

"Such murky waters we are adrift in," Joseph Saro murmured. "And you, Horst, you have grown into a man with the clearest of visions. I'm humbled, and even a little frightened by you. I must have you deliver the sermon next Sunday; you'll bring them flocking in. You may very well be the first of the Church's new evangelists."

"I don't think so, your grace. I've simply passed through the eye of the needle. The Lord has tested me, as He will test all of us in the months ahead. I regained my faith. For that I have the possessed to thank." Unconsciously, his hand went to his throat, sensitive fingertips feeling the tiny scars left over from when invisible fingers had clawed at him.

"I do hope Our Lord doesn't set me too hard a test," Joseph Saro said in a forlorn tone. "I'm far too old and comfortable in my ways to do what you did on Lalonde. That's not to say I'm not proud of you, for I certainly am. You and I are strictly New Testament priests, yet you were set a decidedly Old Testament task. Did you really perform an exorcism, my boy?"

Horst grinned. "Yes, I really did."

• • •

Captain Gurtan Mauer was still dry retching as the lid of the zero-tau pod closed over him, blackness suspending him from time. The tortures and obscenities might have wrecked his dignity, the pitiful pleas and promises were proof of that, but he was still cold sober sane. Quinn was quite determined in that respect. Only sane, rational people were able to appreciate the nuances of their own suffering. So the pain and barbarism was always pitched a degree below the level which would tip the *Tantu's* ex-captain into the refuge of insanity. This way he could hold out for days, or even weeks. And zero-tau would hold him ready for when Quinn's wrath

rose again; for him there would be no periods of relief, just one long torment.

Quinn smiled at the prospect. His robe and hood shrank to more manageable proportions, and he pushed off from the decking. He'd needed the interlude to regain his own equilibrium after the disaster in Earth orbit, the humiliation of retreat. Gurtan Mauer provided him with a valid focus for his anger. He could hardly use the starship's crew; there were only fifteen of them left now, and few were inessential.

"Where are we going, Quinn?" Lawrence asked as the two of them drifted through the companionway to the bridge.

"I'm not sure. I'll bet most of the Confederation knows about possession now, it'll make life fucking difficult." He wriggled through the hatch to the bridge, and checked around to see what was being done.

"We're almost finished, Quinn," Dwyer said. "There wasn't too much damage, and this is a warship, so most critical systems have backups. We're flight-ready again. But people are going to know we've been in some sort of scrap. No way could we go outside to repair the hull. Spacesuits won't work on us."

"Sure, Dwyer. You've done good."

Dwyer's grin was avaricious.

They were all waiting for Quinn to tell them where he wanted to go next. And the truth was, he wasn't entirely sure he knew. Earth was his goal, but perhaps he'd been too ambitious trying for it first. It was the old problem: to charge in with an army of disciples, or to stealthily rot the structure from within. After the dreariness of Norfolk, the prospect of action had excited him. It still did, but he obviously didn't have enough forces to break through Earth's defences. Not even the Royal Kulu Navy could do that.

He needed to get there on a different ship, one which wouldn't cause such a heated response. After he'd docked at the orbital tower station he could get down to the planet. He knew that.

But where to get another ship from? He knew so little about the Confederation worlds. Only once during his twenty years on Earth had he met anyone from offworld.

“Ah.” He grinned at Lawrence. “Of course, Banneth’s colleague.”

“What?”

“I’ve decided where we’re going.” He checked the bridge displays; their cryogenic fuel reserves could fly them another four hundred light years. More than enough. “Nyvan,” he announced. “We’re going to Nyvan. Dwyer, start working out a vector.”

“What’s Nyvan?” Lawrence asked.

“The second planet anyone ever found which was good enough to live on. Everyone used to flock there from the arcologies. They don’t now.”

• • •

Nova Kong has always boasted that it is the most beautiful city to be found within the Confederation. Wisely, few challenged the claim.

No other Adamist society had the kind of money which had been lavished on the city ever since the day Richard Saldana first stepped down out of his spaceplane and (according to legend) said: “This footprint will not depart in the sands of time.”

If he did say it, he was certainly right. The capital city of the Kulu Kingdom was a memorial which no one who saw it would ever be likely to forget. Right from the start, aesthetics was a paramount factor in planning, and pretty grandiose aesthetics at that. It had no streets, only flamboyant boulevards, greenway avenues, and rivers (half of them artificial); all powered ground traffic used the labyrinth of underground motorways. Commemorative monuments and statues dominated the junctions; the Kingdom’s heroic history was celebrated in hundreds of artistic styles from megalithic to contemporary.

Although it had a population of nineteen million, the building density regulations meant it was spread out over five hundred square kilometres, with Touchdown plaza at its centre. Every conceivable architectural era was to be found among the public, private, and commercial buildings so carefully sprinkled across the ground, with the exception of prefab concrete, programmable silicon, and composite ezytak panels

(anything built in Nova Kong was built to last). Seventeen cathedrals strove for attention against neo-Roman government offices. Gloss-black pyramid condominiums were as popular as Napoleonic apartment blocks with conservatory roofs arching over their central wells. Sir Christopher Wren proved a heavy influence on the long curving terraces of snow-white stone town houses, while Oriental and Eastern designs appeared to be favoured among the smaller individual residences.

Chilly autumn air was gusting along the boulevards when Ralph Hiltch flew in over the clean spires and ornate belfries. His vantage point was a privilege not awarded to many people. Commercial overflights were strictly forbidden; only emergency craft, police, senior government officials, and the Saldanas were ever permitted this view.

He couldn't have timed his arrival better, he thought. The trees which filled the parks, squares, and ornamental waterways below were starting to turn in the morning frosts. Green leaves were fading to an infinite variety of yellows, golds, bronzes, and reds, a trillion flecks of rusty colour glinting in the strong sunlight. Soggy auburn mantles were already expanding across the damp grass, while thick dunes snuggled up in the sheltered lees of buildings. Nova Kong's million strong army of utility mechanoids were programmed to go easy on the invasive downfall, allowing the rustic image to prevail.

Today though, the refined perfection of the city was marred by twisters of smoke rising from several districts. As they passed close to one, Ralph accessed the flyer's sensor suite to obtain a better view of a Gothic castle made from blocks of amber and magenta glass which seemed to be the source. The smoke was a dense billow pouring out from the stubby remains of a smashed turret. Fires were still flickering inside the main hall. Over twenty police and Royal Marine flyers had landed on the parkland outside; figures in active armour suits walked through the castle's courtyards.

Ralph knew that depressing scene well enough. Although in his heart he'd never expected to see it here, not Nova Kong, the very nucleus of the Kingdom. He'd been born on the Principality of Jerez, and this was his first visit to Kulu. One part of his mind wryly acknowledged he would always retain a

hint of the provincial attitude. Nova Kong was the capital, it ought to remain impervious to anything, any form of attack, physical or subversive. That was the reason his job, his agency, existed: the first line of defence.

“How many of these incursions have there been?” he asked the Royal Navy pilot.

“A couple of dozen in the last three days. Tough bastards to beat, I can tell you. The marines had to call down SD fire support a couple of times. We haven’t seen any new ones for eleven hours now, thank Christ. That means we’ve probably got them all. City’s under martial law, every transport route on the planet has shut down, and the AIs are sweeping the net for any sign of activity. Nowhere the possessed can hide anymore, and they certainly can’t run.”

“Sounds like you people were on the ball. We did much the same thing on Ombey.”

“Yeah? You beat them there?”

“Almost.”

The ion field flyer lined up on Apollo Palace. Awe and nerves squeezed Ralph’s heart, quickening its pulse. Physically this was the middle of the city, politically the hub of an interstellar empire, and home to the most notorious family in the Confederation.

Apollo Palace was a small town in its own right, albeit contained under a single roof. Every wing and hall interlocked, their unions marked by rotundas and pagodas. Sumptuous stately homes, which in centuries past must have been independent houses for senior courtiers, had been now incorporated in the overall structure, ensnared by the flourishing webbing of stone cloisters which had gradually crept out from the centre. The family chapel was larger than most of the city’s cathedrals, and more graceful than all.

A hundred quadrangles containing immaculate gardens flashed past underneath the flyer’s fuselage as it descended. Ralph shunted a mild tranquillizer program into primary mode. Turning up electronically stoned before your sovereign probably went against every written and unwritten court protocol in existence. But, damn it, he couldn’t afford a slip due to nerves now—the Kingdom couldn’t afford it.

Eight armed Royal Marines were waiting at the foot of the

airstairs when they landed in an outer quadrangle. Their captain clicked his heels together and saluted Ralph.

“Sorry, sir, but I must ask you to stand still.”

Ralph eyed the chemical projectile guns trained on him. “Of course.” Cold air turned his breath to grey vapour.

The captain signalled one of the marines who came forward holding a small sensor pad. She touched it to Ralph’s forehead, then went on to his hands.

“Clear, sir,” she barked.

“Very good. Mr Hiltch, would you please datavise your ESA identification code, and your martial law transport authority number.” The captain held up a processor block.

Ralph obliged the request.

“Thank you, sir.”

The marines shouldered their weapons. Ralph whistled silent relief, happy at how seriously they were taking the threat of possession, but at the same time wishing he wasn’t on the receiving end.

A tall, middle-aged man stepped out of a nearby doorway and walked over. “Mr Hiltch, welcome to Kulu.” He put his hand out.

That he was a Saldana was not in doubt; his size, poise, and that distinct nose made it obvious for anyone to see. Trouble was, there were so many of them. Ralph ran an identity check through his neural nanonics, the file was in his classified section: the Duke of Salion, chairman of the Privy Council’s security commission, and Alastair II’s first cousin. One of the most unobtrusive and powerful men in the Kingdom.

“Sir. Thank you for meeting me.”

“Not at all.” He guided Ralph back through the door. “Princess Kirsten’s message made it clear she considers you important. I have to say we’re all extremely relieved to hear Ombey has survived a not inconsiderable assault by the possessed. The Principality does lack the resources available to the more developed worlds of the Kingdom.”

“I saw the smoke as I flew down. It seems nowhere is immune.”

A lift was waiting for them just inside the building. The Duke datavised an order into its processor. Ralph felt it start off, moving downwards, then horizontally.

“Regrettably so,” the Duke admitted. “However, we believe we have them contained here. And preliminary indications from the other Principalities are that they’ve also been halted. Thankfully, it looks like we’re over the worst.”

“If I might ask, what was the sensor that marine used on me?”

“You were being tested for static electricity. The Confederation Navy researchers have found the possessed carry a small but permanent static charge. It’s very simple, but so far it’s proved infallible.”

“Some good news, that makes a change.”

“Quite.” The Duke gave him a sardonic smile.

The lift opened out into a long anteroom. Ralph found it hard not to gape; he’d thought Burley Palace was opulent. Here the concept of ornamentation and embellishment had been taken to outrageous heights. Marble was drowning under arabesque patterns of platinum leaf; the church-high ceiling was adorned with frescoes of unusual xenocs which were hard to see behind the glare of galactic chandeliers. Arched alcoves were inset with circular windows of graduated glass, each fashioned after a different flower. Trophy heads were mounted on the wall, jewelled armour helmet effigies of fantasy creatures; dragons wrought in curving jade panes inlaid with rubies, unicorns in alabaster and emeralds, hobgoblins in onyx and diamonds, mermaids in aquamarine and sapphires.

Courtiers and civil servants were walking about briskly, their footfalls completely silent on the Chinese carpet. The Duke strode diagonally across the room, with everyone melting out of his way. Ralph hurried to keep up.

Double doors opened into a library of more manageable proportions. Then Ralph was through into a snug oak-panelled study with a log fire burning eagerly in the grate and frost-rimed French windows presenting a view out into a quadrangle planted with ancient chestnuts. Five young children were scampering about on the lawn, dressed against the cold in colourful coats, woollen bobble hats, and leather gloves. They were flinging sticks and stones into the big old trees, trying to bring down the prickly burrs.

King Alastair II stood before the fire, rubbing his hands to-

gether in front of the flames. A bulky camel's hair coat was slung over a high-backed leather chair. Damp footprints on the carpet indicated he'd just come in from the quadrangle.

"Good afternoon, Mr Hiltch."

Ralph stood to attention. "Your Majesty." Despite the fact he was in the presence of his King, Ralph could only stare at the oil painting on the wall. It was the Mona Lisa. Which was impossible. The French state of Govcentral would never let *that* out of the Paris arcology. Yet would the King of Kulu really have a copy on his wall?

"I reviewed the report which came with you, Mr Hiltch," the King said. "You've had a busy few weeks. I can see why my sister valued your counsel so highly. One can only hope all my ESA officers are so efficient and resourceful. You are a credit to your agency."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The Duke shut the study door as the King used an iron poker to stir the fire.

"Do stand easy, Mr Hiltch," Alastair said. He put the poker back in the rack and eased himself down in one of the leather chairs which ringed the hearth rug. "Those are my grandchildren out there." A finger flicked towards the quadrangle. "Got them here at the palace while their father's off with the Royal Navy. Safest place for them. Nice to have them, too. That lad in the blue coat, being pushed around by his sister, that's Edward; your future king, in fact. Although I doubt you'll be around when he ascends the throne. God willing, it won't be for another century at least."

"I hope so, Your Majesty."

"Course you do. Sit down, Mr Hiltch. Thought we'd have an informal session to start with. Gather you've something controversial to propose. This way if it is too controversial, well . . . it'll simply never have happened. Can't have the monarch exposed to controversy, now can we?"

"Certainly not," the Duke said with a modest smile as he sat between the two of them.

An arbitrator, or a buffer? Ralph mused. He sat in the remaining leather chair, mildly relieved that he wasn't having to look up at the two men anymore. Both of them were half a

head taller than he (another Saldana trait). "I understand, Your Majesty."

"Good man. So what hot little mess is dear Kirsten dropping in my lap this time?"

Ralph upped the strength of his tranquillizer program and started to explain.

When he finished, the King rose silently and dropped a couple of logs on the fire. Flames cast a shivering amber light across his face. At seventy-two he had acquired a dignity that went far beyond the superficial physical countenance provided by his genes; experience had visibly enriched his personality. The King, Ralph decided, had become what kings were supposed to be, someone you could trust. All of which made his troubled expression more worrying than it would be on any normal politician.

"Opinion?" Alastair asked the Duke, still gazing at the fire.

"It would appear to be an evenhanded dilemma, sir. Mr Hiltch's proposal is tenable, certainly. Reports we have received show the Edenists are more than holding their own against the possessed; only a handful of habitats have been penetrated, and I believe all the insurgents were rounded up effectively. And using bitek constructs as front line troops would reduce our losses to a minimum if you commit an army to liberating Mortonridge. Politically, though, Princess Kirsten is quite right; such a course of action will mean a complete reversal of a foreign policy which has stood for over four hundred years, and was actually instigated by Richard Saldana himself."

"For good reasons at the time," the King ruminated. "Those damn atheists with their Helium₃ monopoly have so much power over us Adamists. Richard knew being free of their helping hand was the only road to true independence. It might have been ruinously expensive to build our own cloud-scoops in those days, but by God look at what we've achieved with that freedom. And now Mr Hiltch here is asking me to become dependent on those same Edenists."

"I'm suggesting an alliance, Your Majesty," Ralph said. "Nothing more. A mutually advantageous military alliance in time of war. And they will benefit from the liberation of Mortonridge just as much as we will."

“Really?” the King asked; he sounded sceptical.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It has to be done. We have to prove to ourselves, and every other planet in the Confederation, that the possessed can be driven back into the beyond. I expect such a war might well take decades; and who would ever agree to start it if they didn’t know victory was possible? Whatever the outcome, we have to try.”

“There has to be another solution,” said the King, almost inaudibly. “Something easier, a more final way of ridding ourselves of this threat. Our navy scientists are working on it, of course. One can only pray for progress, though so far it has been depressingly elusive.” He sighed loudly. “But one cannot act on wishes. At least not in my position. I have to respond to facts. And the fact is that two million of my subjects have been possessed. Subjects I am sworn before God to defend. So something must be done, and you, Mr Hiltch, have offered me the only valid proposal to date. Even if it is only related to the physical.”

“Your Majesty?”

“One isn’t criticising. But I have to consider what the Ekelund woman said to you. Even if we win and banish them all from living bodies, we are still going to wind up joining them eventually. Any thoughts on how to solve that little conundrum, Mr Hiltch?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“No. Of course not. Forgive me, I’m being dreadfully unfair. But never fear; you’re not alone on that one, I’m sure. We can dump it off on the bishop for the moment, though ultimately it will have to be addressed. And addressed thoroughly. The prospect of spending eternity in purgatory is not one I naturally welcome. Yet at the moment it seems one to which we are all destined.” The King smiled wanly, glancing out of the French windows at his grandchildren. “I can only hope Our Lord will eventually show us some of His mercy. But for now, the problem at hand: liberating Mortonridge, and the political fallout from asking the Edenists to help. Simon?”

The Duke deliberated on his answer. “As you say, sir, the situation today is hardly the same as when Richard Saldana founded Kulu. However, four centuries of discord has entrenched attitudes, particularly that of the average middle-

Kulu citizen. The Edenists aren't seen as demons, but neither are they regarded with any geniality. Of course, as Mr Hiltch has said, in times of war allies are to be found in the most unusual places. I don't believe an alliance in these circumstances would damage the monarchy. Certainly a successful conclusion to a liberation campaign would prove your decision to be justified. That is assuming the Edenists will agree to come to our aid."

"They'll help, Simon. We might snub them for the benefit of the public, but they are not stupid. Nor are they dishonourable. Once they see I am making a genuine appeal they will respond."

"The Edenists, yes. But the Lord of Ruin? I find it hard to believe the Princess suggested we ask her for the DNA sequence of Tranquillity's serjeants, no matter how good they would be as soldiers."

The King gave a dry laugh. "Oh, come now, Simon, where's your sense of charity? You of all people should know how accommodating Ione is when it comes to the really important problems faced by the Confederation. She's proved her worth in the political arena with the Mzu woman; and she is family, after all. I'd say it was far less galling for me to request her help than it is making any approach to the Edenists."

"Yes, sir," the Duke said heavily.

Alastair tutted in bogus dismay. "Never mind, Simon, it's your job to be paranoid on my behalf." He turned his gaze back to Ralph Hiltch. "My decision, though. As always."

Ralph tried to appear resolute. It was quite extraordinary to witness the use of power at such a level. The thoughts and words formulated in this room would affect literally hundreds of worlds, maybe even a fate greater than that. He wanted to scream at the King to say yes, that it was bloody obvious what he should decide. Yes. Yes. YES. Say it, damn you.

"I'll give my authority to initiate the project," Alastair said. "That's all for now. We will ask the Edenists if they can assist us. Lord Mountjoy can sound out their ambassador to the court, that's what he's good at. While you, Mr Hiltch, will go directly to the Admiralty and begin a detailed tactical analysis of the Mortonridge Liberation. Find out if it really is possible. Once I've seen how these two principal factors mature, the

proposal will be brought before the Privy Council for consideration.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“It’s what I’m here for, Ralph.” His stately smile became artful. “I think you can cancel your tranquillizer program now.”

• • •

“Oh, Lord, now what’s he up to?” Staff Nurse Jansen Kovak asked as soon as he accessed the ceiling sensors in Gerald Skibbow’s room. All the medical facility’s inmates were reviewed on a regular basis; with troublesome ones like Skibbow a check was scheduled every twenty minutes.

The room had modest furnishings. A single bed and a deep settee had puffed themselves up out of the floor, ready to retract if an inmate tried to injure himself against them. All the services were voice-activated. There was nothing to grab hold of, no loose items lying around which could weight a fist.

Gerald was kneeling beside the bed as if in prayer, his hands hidden from the ceiling sensors. Jansen Kovak switched cameras, using one incorporated in the floor, giving him a mouse-eye view.

The image showed Gerald was holding a spoon with both hands. Slowly and relentlessly he was flexing it, bending the stem just below the scoop. It was made of a strong composite, but Jansen Kovak could see the tiny white stress fractures crinkling the surface. Another minute and the spoon would break, leaving Gerald with a long spike which although not exactly sharp could certainly harm anyone caught on the end of a lunge.

“Dr Dobbs,” Jansen datavised. “I think we have a problem with Skibbow.”

“What now?” Dobbs asked. He had only just caught up on his appointments; yesterday’s episode with Skibbow in the lounge had wrecked his schedule. Skibbow had been recovering well up until that point. Bad luck his daughter had turned up again—certainly the timing, anyway. Although the fact she was still alive could eventually be worked into his therapy, give him a long-term achievement goal.

“He’s smuggled a spoon out of the lounge. I think he’s going to use it as a weapon.”

“Oh, great, just what I need.” Riley Dobbs hurriedly finished with the patient he was counselling, and accessed the facility’s AI. He retrieved the interpretation routine which could make sense of Skibbow’s unique thought patterns and opened a channel to the debrief nanonics. This kind of grubby mental spying was totally unethical; but then he had discarded the constraints of the General Medical Council all those years ago when he came to work for the Royal Navy. Besides, if he was to effect any kind of cure on Skibbow, he needed to know exactly what kind of demons were driving the man. Resorting to a weapon, however feeble, seemed extreme for Skibbow.

The images were slow to form in Dobbs’s mind. Gerald’s thoughts were in turmoil, fast-paced, flicking between present reality and extrapolated fantasies.

Dobbs saw the pale blue wall of the bedroom, fringed with the redness which came from squinted eyes. Feeling the spoon in his hands, the friction heat building up in its stem. Tired arm muscles as they pushed and pulled at the stubborn composite. “And they’ll regret getting in my way. God will they ever.”

Image shift to—a corridor. Kovak screaming in pain as he sinks to his knees, the spoon handle jutting out of his white tunic. Blood spreading over his chest, drops splattering on the floor. Dr Dobbs was already sprawled facedown on the corridor floor, his whole body soaked in glistening blood. “Which is less than he deserves.” Kovak emitted a last gurgle and died. Gerald pulled the Weapon of Vengeance from his chest and carried on down the corridor. Sanatorium staff peered fearfully out of doors, only to shrink back when they saw who was coming. As well they might; they knew who had Right and Justice on his side.

Shifting back—to the bedroom, where the damn spoon still hadn’t snapped. His breath was becoming ragged now. But still he persevered. A soundless mutter of: “Come on. Please!”

Shifting—to the journey through Guyana, a confused blur of rock walls. Not actually knowing the geometry of the asteroid; but he’d find a way. Asteroid spaceports were always attached up at the axis. There would be trains, lifts . . .

Back—when the spoon finally snaps, making his taut arms judder. “Now I can begin. I’m coming for you, darling. Daddy’s coming.”

To—fly through space. Stars streaking into blue-white lightning outside the ship’s hull as he rushes to the strange distant habitat. And there’s Marie waiting for him at the end of the voyage, adrift in space, clad in those fragile white swirls of gauze, luscious hair blown back by the breeze. Where she says to him: “They’ll tell you that you shouldn’t have come, Daddy.”

“Oh, but I should,” he replies. “You need me, darling. I know what you’re going through. I can drive the demon out. You’ll feel nothing as I push you into zero-tau.” And so he lays her gently down into the plastic coffin and closes the lid. Blackness eclipses her, then ends to show her face smiling up at him, twinkling tears of gratitude slipping from her eyes.

Which is why he’s standing up now, slipping the jagged spoon handle into his sleeve. Calm. Take deep calming breaths now. There’s the door. Daddy’s coming to rescue you, baby. He is.

Riley Dobbs cancelled the interpretation routine. “Oh, bugger.” He ordered Gerald’s debrief nanonics to induce somnolence within the fevered brain.

Nerves and courage fired up, Gerald was reaching for the bedroom door when a wave of tiredness slapped into him with an almost physical force. He sagged, swaying on his feet as muscles became too exhausted to carry him. The bed loomed before him, and he was toppling towards it as darkness and silence poured into the room.

“Jansen,” Riley Dobbs datavised. “Get in there and take the spoon away, and any other implements you can find. Then I want him transferred to a condition three regime; twenty-four-hour observation, and a softcare environment. He’s going to be a dangerous pain until we can wean him off this new obsession.”

• • •

Kiera Salter had dispatched fifteen hellhawks to the Oshanko sector of the Confederation to seed dissent into the

communications nets of the Imperium's worlds and asteroid settlements. That was three days ago.

Now, Rubra observed eleven wormhole termini blink open to disgorge the survivors. Two bloated warplanes, and a sinister featureless black aeromissile-shape kept a loose formation with eight Olympian-sized harpies who flapped their way back towards Valisk's docking ledges with lethargic, defeated wing strokes.

I see the Emperor's navy has lived up to its top gun reputation, Rubra remarked in a tone of high spirits. Just how is troop morale coming along these days? That's the eighth of Kiera's little jaunts in which your hellhawks have taken a beating from unfriendly natives. Any grumbings of rebellion at the new regime yet? A few discreet suggestions that priorities ought to be altered?

Screw you, Dariat retorted. He was sitting on a small river-bank of crumbling earth, dark water flowing swiftly below his dangling feet. Occasionally he caught sight of a big garpike slithering past on the way to its spawning ground upriver. Five hundred metres away in the other direction the water tipped over a shallow cliff to splatter down into the circumfluous saltwater reservoir ringing the endcap. Out here among the habitat's low rolling hills the eight separate xenoc grasses waged a continual war for primacy. As they all came to seed at different times of the year none ever won an outright victory. Right now it was a salmon-pink Tallok-aboriginal variety which was flourishing, its slender corkscrew blades tangling in a dense blanket of dry candyfloss which matted the ground. Back along the cylindrical habitat, Dariat could see the broad rosy bracelet fading to emerald around the mid-section where the starscraper lobbies were; and in turn that rich terrestrial vegetation eventually petered away into the ochre scrub desert which occupied the far end. The bands of colour were as striking as they were regular; it was as if someone had sprayed them on while Valisk turned on a lathe.

Of course, you wouldn't actually know much about what's happening to the subjects of Kiera's politburo dictatorship these days, Rubra continued pleasantly. **You being a loner now. Did you know dear old Bonney was shouting for you yesterday? I whisked one of the non-**

possessed away from her clutches, put him on a tube carriage, and shot him off to one of my safe areas. I don't think she was very happy about it. Your name came up several times.

Sarcasm is a pitiful form of wit.

Absolutely, my boy. So you won't be letting it get to you, will you?

No.

Mind you, Kiera is having some success. The second hellhawk full of kids arrived this morning, looking for that bright new world she promised in her recording. Two dozen of them; the youngest was only nine. Would you like to see what was done to them so they could be possessed? I have all the memories, nobody tried to block my perception from that ceremony.

Shut up.

Oh, dear, is that a twang of conscience I detect?

As you well know, I don't care what happens to the morons who get suckered here. All I'm interested in is how badly I'm going to fuck you up.

I understand. But then I know you better than Kiera does. It's a pity you don't understand me.

Wrong. I know you completely.

You don't, my boy. You don't know what I'm holding secret. Anastasia would thank me for what I'm doing, the protection I'm extending you.

Dariat growled, sinking his head into his hands. He had chosen this spot for the seclusion it offered from Kiera's merry band of maniacs. He wanted somewhere quiet to meditate. Free from distractions he could try to formulate a mental pattern which had the ability to penetrate the neural strata. But he wasn't free of distractions, he never could be. For Rubra would never tire of playing his game; the insinuations, the doubts, the dark hints.

During the last thirty years, Dariat thought he'd perfected patience to an inhuman degree. But now he was finding that a different kind of patience was required. Despite a herculean resolution he was beginning to question if Rubra really did have any secrets. It was stupid, of course, because Rubra was bluffing, running an elaborate disinformation campaign.

However, if Anastasia did have some secret, some legacy, the only entity who would know was Rubra.

Yet if it did exist, why hadn't Rubra used it already? Both of them knew this was a struggle to the bitterest of ends.

Anastasia could never have done anything which would make him betray himself. Not sweet Anastasia, who had always warned him about Anstid. Her Lord Thoale made sure she knew the consequences of every action. Anastasia understood destiny. Why did I never listen to her?

Anastasia left nothing for me, he said.

Oh, yeah? In that case, I'll do a deal with you, Dariat.

Not interested.

You should be. I'm asking you to join me.

What?

Join me, here in the neural strata. Transfer yourself over like a dying Edenist. We can become a duality.

You have got to be fucking joking.

No. I have been considering this for some time. Our current situation is not going to end well, not for either of us. Both of us are at odds with Kiera; that will never change. But together we could beat her easily, purge the habitat of her cronies. You can rule Valisk yet.

You used to control a multistellar industrial empire, Rubra. Now look what you're reduced to. You're pathetic, Rubra. Contemptible. And the best thing is, you know it.

Rubra shifted his principal focus from the linen-suited young man, withdrawing to contemplate a general perception of the habitat. Bonney Lewin was missing again. That damn woman was getting too good at foxing his observation routines. He automatically expanded the secondary routines surrounding and protecting the remaining non-possessed. She'd show up near one of them soon enough.

He didn't agree, Rubra said to the Kohistan Consensus.

That is unfortunate. Salter is expending a great deal of effort to collect her Deadnight followers.

Her what?

Deadnight is the name which her subversive recording has acquired. Unfortunately a great many young Adamists are finding it seductive.

Don't I know it. You should see what she does to them

when they get here. Those hellhawks should never have been allowed to collect them.

There is little we can do. We do not have the capability to shadow every hellhawk flight.

Pity.

Yes. The hellhawks are causing us some concern. So far they have not been used in an aggressor role. If they were deployed in combat with Valisk's armament resources behind them, they would pose a formidable problem.

So you keep telling me. Don't say you've finally come to a decision?

We have. With your permission we would like to remove their threat potential.

Do as you would be done by, and do it first. Well, well, you've finally started thinking like me. There's hope for all of you yet. Okay, go ahead.

Thank you, Rubra. We know this must be difficult for you.

Just make damn sure you don't miss. Some of my industrial stations are very close to my shell.

Rubra had always maintained an above-average number of Strategic Defence platforms around Valisk. Given his semi-paranoid nature it was inevitable he should want to make local space as secure as possible. Forty-five weapons platforms covered a bubble of space fifty thousand kilometres in diameter with the habitat and its comprehensive parade of industrial stations at the centre. They were complemented by two hundred sensor satellites, sweeping both inwards and outwards. No one had ever attempted an act of aggression within Valisk's sphere of interest—a remarkable achievement considering the kind of ships which frequented the spaceport.

Magellanic Itg had manufactured the network, developing indigenous designs and fabricating all the components itself. A policy which had earned the company a healthy quantity of export orders. It also enabled Rubra to install his personality as the network's executive. He certainly wasn't about to trust any of his woefully ineffectual descendants with his own defence.

That arrangement had come to an abrupt end with the

emergence of the possessed. His control over the network was via affinity with bitek management processors that were integrated into every platform's command circuitry. He hadn't even realized he'd lost control of the platforms until he'd attempted to interdict the hellhawks when they first revealed themselves. Afterwards, he'd worked out that somebody—that little shit Dariat, no doubt—had subverted his SD governor thought routines long enough to load powerdown orders into every platform.

With the power off, there was no way of regaining control through the bitek processors. Every platform would have to be reactivated manually. Which was exactly what Kiera had done. Spacecraft had rendezvoused with the platforms and taken out Rubra's bitek management processors, replacing them with electronic processors and new fire authority codes.

A new SD Command centre was established in the counter-rotating spaceport, outside Rubra's influence. He couldn't strike at that like he could the starscrapers. The possessed technicians who reactivated the network were convinced they had made it independent, a system which only Kiera and her newly installed codes could control.

What neither they nor Dariat quite appreciated were the myriad number of physical interfaces between the neural strata and Valisk's communications net. The tube trains and the starscraper lifts were the most obvious examples, but every mechanical and electronic utility system had a similar junction, a small processor nodule which converted fibre optic pulses to nerve impulses and vice versa. And Magellanic Itg not only built Valisk's communications net, it also supplied ninety per cent of the counter-rotating spaceport's electronics. A fact which even fewer people were aware of was that every company processor had a back-door access function hardwired in, to which Rubra alone had the key.

Within seconds of the possessed establishing their new SD command channels he was in the system. A delicious irony, he felt, a ghost in the ghosts' machinery. The devious interface circuits he'd established to gain entry couldn't support anything like the data traffic necessary to give him full control of the platforms once more, but he could certainly do unto others what they'd done to him.

On the ready signal from the Kohistan Consensus, Rubra immediately sent a squall of orders out to the SD platforms. Command codes were wiped and replaced, safety limiters were taken off line, fusion generator management programs were reformatted.

In the commandeered spaceport management office used to run the habitat's SD network, every single alarm tripped at once. The whole room was flooded with red light from AV projectors and holoscreens. Then the power went off, plunging the crew into darkness.

"What the holy fuck is happening?" the recently appointed network captain shouted. A bright candle flame ignited at the tip of his index finger, revealing equally confounded faces all around him. He reached for his communications block to call Kiera Salter, dreading what she would say. But his hand never made it.

"Oh, shit, *look*," someone cried.

Severe white light began to flood in through the office's single port.

In forty-five fusion generators the plasma jet had become unstable, perturbed by rogue manipulations in the magnetic confinement field. Burnthrough occurred, plasma striking the confinement chamber walls, vaporizing the material, which increased the pressure a thousandfold. Forty-five fusion generators ruptured almost simultaneously, tearing apart the SD platforms in a burst of five million degree shrapnel and irradiated gas.

You're clear, Rubra told the waiting fleet.

Three hundred wormhole termini opened, englobing the habitat. Voidhawks shot out. Two hundred were designated to eradicate the industrial stations, depriving Kiera of their enormous armament manufacturing base. The bitek starships immediately swooped around onto their assault vectors. Kinetic missiles flashed out of their launch cradles, closing on the stations at sixteen gees. Each salvo was aimed so that the impact blast would kick the debris shower away from the habitat, minimizing the possibility of collision damage to the polyp shell.

The remaining hundred voidhawks were given suppression duties. Flying in ten-strong formations they broadcast affinity warnings to the thoroughly disconcerted hellhawks sitting on

the docking ledges, ordering them to remain where they were. Sharp ribbons of ruby-red light from targeting lasers made the ledge polyp shimmer like black ice speared by an early morning sun. Refracted beams twisted around the alien shapes perched on the pedestals as the voidhawks strove to match their discordant vectors with the habitat's rotation.

Closer to the habitat, cyclones of shiny debris were churning out from the ruined industrial stations. Victorious voidhawks dived and spun above the metallic constellations, racing away ahead of the perilous wavefront of sharp high-velocity slivers. The hellhawks sat on their pedestals, observing the carnage with mute impotence.

Exemplary shooting, Rubra told the Kohistan Consensus. **Just remember when this is all over, you're paying Magellanic Itg's compensation claim.**

Three hundred wormhole interstices opened. The voidhawks vanished in an extraordinary display of synchronization. Elapsed time of the attack was ninety-three seconds.

Even in the heat of passion Kiera Salter could sense nearby minds starting to flare in alarm. She tried to dislodge Stanyon from her back and rise to her feet. When he resisted, tightening his grip, she simply smacked an energistic bolt into his chest. He grunted, the impact shoving him backwards.

"What the fuck are you playing at, bitch?" he growled.

"Be silent." She stood up, her wishes banishing the soreness and rising bruises. Sweat vanished, her hair returned to a neatly brushed mane. A simple, scarlet summer dress materialized over her skin.

On the other side of the endcap, the hellhawks were seething with resentment and anger. Beyond them was a haze of life which gave off a scent of icy determination. And Rubra, the ever-present mental background whisper, was radiating satisfaction. "Damn it!"

Her desktop processor block started shrilling. Data scrawled over its screen. A Strategic Defence alert, and red systems failure symbols were flashing all over the network schematic.

The high-pitched sound started to cut off intermittently, and the screen blanked out. The more she glared at the block, the worse the glitches became.

"What's happening?" Erdal Kilcady asked. Her other bed-

room fancy—a gormless twenty-year-old who as far as she could determine had only one use.

“We’re being attacked, you fool,” she snapped. “It’s those fucking Edenists.” Shit, and her schemes had been progressing beautifully up until now. The idiot kids believed her recording; they were starting to arrive. Another couple of months would have seen the habitat population rise to a decent level.

Now this. The constant hellhawk flights must have frightened the Edenists into taking action.

The burn mark on Stanyon’s chest healed over. Clothes sprang up to conceal his body. “We’d better get along to the SD control centre and kick some butt,” he said.

Kiera hesitated. The SD centre was in the counter-rotating spaceport. She was certain the habitat itself would be safe from attack. Rubra would never allow that, but the spaceport might be a legitimate target.

Just as she took a reluctant first step towards the door the black bakelite telephone on her bedside table started to ring. The primitive communications instrument was one which worked almost infallibly in the energetic environment exuded by the possessed. She picked it up and pressed the handset to her ear. “Yes?”

“This is Rubra.”

Kiera stiffened. She’d thought this room was outside of his surveillance. Exactly how many of their systems were exposed to him? “What do you want?”

“I want nothing. I’m simply delivering a warning. The voidhawks from Kohistan are currently eliminating the habitat’s industrial production capability. There will be no more combat wasps to arm the hellhawks. We don’t like the threat they present. Do not attempt to resupply from other sources or it will go hard on you.”

“You can do nothing to us,” she said, squeezing some swagger into her voice.

“Wrong. The Edenists respect life, which is why no hellhawks were destroyed this time. However, I can guarantee you the next voidhawk strike will not be so generous. I have eliminated the habitat’s SD platforms so that in future it won’t even be as difficult for them as today’s strike. You and the

hellhawks will sit out the rest of the conflict here. Is that understood?" The phone went dead.

Kiera stood still, her whitened fingers tightening around the handset. Little chips of bakelite sprinkled down onto the carpet. "Find Dariat," she told Stanyon. "I don't care where he is, find him and bring him to me. Now!"

• • •

Chaumort asteroid in the Châlons star system. Not a settlement which attracted many starships; it had little foreign exchange to purchase their cargoes of exotica, and few opportunities for export charters. Attendant industrial stations were old, lacking investment, their products a generation out-of-date; their poor sales added to the downwards cycle of the asteroid's economy. Ten per cent of the adult population was unemployed, making qualified workers Chaumort's largest (and irreplaceable) export. The fault lay in its leadership of fifteen years ago, who had been far too quick to claim independence from the founding company. Decline had been a steady constant from that carnival day onwards. Even as a refuge for undesirables, it was close to the bottom of the list.

But it was French-ethnic, and it allowed certain starships to dock despite the Confederation's quarantine edict. Life could have been worse, André Duchamp told himself, though admittedly not by much. He sat out at a table in what qualified as a pavement café, watching what there was of the worldlet passing by. The sheer rock cliff of the biosphere cavern wall rose vertically behind him, riddled with windows and balconies for its first hundred metres. Out in the cavern the usual yellow-green fields and orchards of spindly trees glimmered under the motley light of the solartubes which studded the axis gantry.

The view was acceptable, the wine passable, his situation if not tolerable then stable—for a couple of days. André took another sip and tried to relax. It was a pity his initial thought of selling combat wasps (post-Lalonde, fifteen were still languishing in the starship's launch tubes) to Chaumort's government had come to nothing. The asteroid's treasury didn't have the funds, and three inter-planetary ships had already

been placed on defence contract retainers. Not that the money would have been much use here; the two local service companies which operated the spaceport had a very limited stock of spare parts. Of course, it would have come in useful to pay his crew. Madeleine and Desmond hadn't actually said anything, but André knew the mood well enough. And that bloody *anglo* Erick—as soon as they'd docked Madeleine had hauled him off to the local hospital. Well, those thieving doctors would have to wait.

He couldn't actually remember a time when there had been so few options available. In fact, he was down to one slender possibility now. He'd found that out as soon as he'd arrived (*this time* checking the spaceport's register for ships he knew). An unusually large number of starships were docked, all of them arriving recently. In other words, after the quarantine had been ratified and instituted by the Châlons system congress.

The Confederation Assembly had demonstrated a laudable goal in trying to stop the spread of the possessed, no one disputed that. However, the new colony planets and smaller asteroids suffered disproportionately from the lack of scheduled flights; they needed imported high-technology products to maintain their economies. Asteroid settlements like Chaumort, whose financial situation was none too strong to start with, were going to shoulder a heavy cost for the crisis not of their making. What most of these backwater communities shared was their remoteness; so if say an *essential* cargo were to arrive on a starship, then it was not inconceivable that said starship would be given docking permission. The local system congress wouldn't know, and therefore wouldn't be able to prevent it. That cargo could then (for a modest charter fee) be distributed to help other small disadvantaged communities by inter-planetary ships, whose movements were not subject to any Confederation proscription.

Chaumort was quietly establishing itself as an important node in a whole new market. The kind of market starships such as the *Villeneuve's Revenge* were uniquely qualified to exploit.

André had spoken to several people in the bars frequented by space industry crews and local merchants, voicing his ap-

proval for this turn of events, expressing an interest in being able to help Chaumort and its people in these difficult times. In short, becoming known. It was a game of contacts, and André had been playing it for decades.

Which was why he was currently sitting at a table waiting for a man he'd never seen before to show up. A bunch of teenagers hurried past, one of the lads snatching a basket of bread rolls from the café's table. His comrades laughed and cheered his bravado, and then ran off before the patron discovered the theft. André no longer smiled at the reckless antics of youth. Adolescents were a carefree breed; a state to which he had long aspired, and which his chosen profession had singularly failed to deliver. It seemed altogether unfair that happiness should exist only at one end of life, and the wrong end at that. It should be something you came in to, not left further and further behind.

A flash of colour caught his eye. All the delinquents had tied red handkerchiefs around their ankles. What a stupid fashion.

"Captain Duchamp?"

André looked up to see a middle-aged Asian-ethnic man dressed in a smart black silk suit with flapping sleeves. The tone and the easy body posture indicated an experienced negotiator; too smooth for a lawyer, lacking the confidence of the truly wealthy. A middleman.

André tried not to smile too broadly. The bait had been swallowed. Now for the price.

• • •

The medical nanonic around Erick's left leg split open from crotch to ankle, sounding as though someone were ripping strong fabric. Dr Steibel and the young female nurse slowly teased the package free.

"Looks fine," Dr Steibel decided.

Madeleine grinned at Erick and pulled a disgusted face. The leg was coated in a thin layer of sticky fluid, residue of the package unknitting from his flesh. Below the goo, his skin was swan-white, threaded with a complicated lacework of blue veins. Scars from the burns and vacuum ruptures were patches of thicker translucent skin.

Now the package covering his face and neck had been re-

moved, Erick sucked in a startled breath as cool air gusted over the raw skin. His cheeks and forehead were still tingling from the same effect, and they'd been uncovered two hours ago.

He didn't bother looking at the exposed limb. Why bother? All it contained was memories.

"Give me nerve channel access, please," Dr Steibel asked. He was looking into an AV pillar, disregarding Erick completely.

Erick complied, his neural nanonics opening a channel directly into his spinal cord. A series of instructions were datavised over, and his leg rose to the horizontal before flexing his foot about.

"Okay." The doctor nodded happily, still lost in the information the pillar was directing at him. "Nerve junctions are fine, and the new tissue is thick enough. I'm not going to put the package back on, but I do want you to apply the moisturizing cream I'll prescribe. It's important the new skin doesn't dry out."

"Yes, Doc," Erick said meekly. "What about . . . ?" He gestured at the packages enveloping his upper torso and right arm.

Dr Steibel flashed a quick smile, slightly concerned at his patient's listless nature. "'Fraid not. Your AT implants are integrating nicely, but the process isn't anywhere near complete yet."

"I see."

"I'll give you some refills for those support modules you're dragging around with you. These deep invasion packages you're using consume a lot of nutrients. Make sure the reserves don't get depleted."

He picked up the support module which Madeleine had repaired and glanced at the pair of them. "I'd strongly advise no further exposure to antagonistic environments for a while, as well. You can function at a reasonably normal level now, Erick, but only if you don't stress your metabolism. Do not ignore warnings from your metabolic monitor program. Nanonic packages are not to be regarded as some kind of infallible safety net."

"Understood."

"I take it you're not flying away for a while."

"No. All starship flights are cancelled."

"Good. I want you to keep out of free fall as much as possible, it's a dreadful medium for a body to heal in. Check in to a hotel in the high gravity section while you're here." He datavised a file over. "That's the exercise regime for your legs. Stick to it, and I'll see you again in a week."

"Thanks."

Dr Steibel nodded benevolently at Madeleine as he left the treatment room. "You can pay the receptionist on your way out."

The nurse began to spray a soapy solution over Erick's legs, flushing away the mucus. He used a neural nanonic override to stop a flinch when she reached his genitals. Thank God they hadn't been badly injured, just superficial skin damage from the vacuum.

Madeleine gave him an anxious glance over the nurse's back. "Have you got much cash in your card?" she datavised.

"About a hundred and fifty fuseodollars, that's all," he datavised back. "André hasn't transferred this month's salary over yet."

"I've got a couple of hundred, and Desmond should have some left. I think we can pay."

"Why should we? Where the hell is Duchamp? He should be paying for this. And my AT implants were only the first phase."

"Busy with some cargo agent, so he claimed. Leave it with me, I'll find out how much we owe the hospital."

Erick waited until she'd left, then datavised the hospital's net processor for the Confederation Navy Bureau. The net management computer informed him there was no such address. He swore silently, and accessed the computer's directory, loading a search order for any resident Confederation official. There wasn't one, not even a CAB inspector, too few ships used the spaceport to warrant the expense.

The net processor opened a channel to his neural nanonics. "Report back to the ship, please, *mon enfant* Erick," André datavised. "I have won us a charter."

If his neck hadn't been so stiff, Erick would have shaken his head in wonder. A charter! In the middle of a Confedera-

tion quarantine. Duchamp was utterly unbelievable. His trial would be the shortest formality on record.

Erick swung his legs off the examination table, ignoring the nurse's martyrdom as her spray hoses were dislodged. "Sorry, duty calls," he said. "Now go and find me some trousers, I haven't got all day."

• • •

The middleman's name was Iain Girardi. André envied him his temperament; nothing could throw him, no insult, no threat. His cool remained in place throughout the most heated of exchanges. It was just as well; André's patience had long since been exhausted by his ungrateful crew.

They were assembled in the day lounge of the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, the only place André considered secure enough to discuss Girardi's proposition. Madeleine and Desmond had their feet snagged by a stikpad on the decking, while Erick was hanging on to the central ladder, his medical support modules clipped on to the composite rungs. André floated at Iain Girardi's side, glowering at the three of them.

"You've got to be fucking joking!" Madeleine shouted. "You've gone too far this time, Captain. Too bloody far. How can you even listen to this bastard's offer? God in Heaven, after all we went through at Lalonde. After all Erick did. Look at this ship! They did that to it, to you."

"That's not strictly accurate," Iain Girardi said, his voice tactfully smooth and apologetic.

"Shut the fuck up!" she bawled. "I don't need you to tell me what's been happening to us."

"Madeleine, please," André said. "You are hysterical. No one is forcing you to take part. I will not hold you to your contract if that is your wish."

"Damn right it's my wish. And nowhere does it say in my crew contract that I fly for the possessed. You pay me my last two months in full, plus the Lalonde combat bonus you owe me, and I'm out of here."

"If that is what you want."

"You've got the money?"

"*Oui*. But of course. Not that it is any of your business."

"Bastard. Why did you leave us to pay for Erick's treatment, then?"

"I am only a captain, I do not claim to perform miracles. My account has only just been credited. Naturally it is my pleasure to pay for dear Erick's treatment. It is a matter of honour for me."

"Just been . . ." Madeleine glanced from André to Iain Girardi, then back again. Understanding brought outraged astonishment. "You accepted a retainer from him?"

"*Oui*," André snapped.

"Oh, Jesus." The shock of his admission silenced her.

"You spoke about Lalonde," Iain Girardi said. "Did the Confederation Navy rush to your aid while you were there?"

"Do not speak about an event of which you know nothing," Desmond growled.

"I know something about it. I've accessed Kelly Tirrel's report. Everybody has."

"And we have all accessed Gus Remar's report from New California. The possessed have conquered that world. By rights we ought to sign on with the Confederation Navy and help eradicate every one of them from this universe."

"Eradicate them how? This is a dreadful calamity which has befallen the human race, both halves of it. Dropping nukes on millions of innocent people is not going to bring about a resolution. Sure it was chaos at Lalonde, and I'm sorry you were hit with the worst of it. Those possessed were a disorganized terrified rabble, lashing out blindly to protect themselves from the mercenary army you carried. But the Organization is different. For a start we're proving that possessed and non-possessed can live together."

"Yeah, while we're convenient," Madeleine said. "While you need us to run the technology and fly starships. After that it's going to be a different bloody story."

"I can appreciate your bitterness, but you are wrong. Al Capone has taken the first steps to solving this terrible dilemma; he's proposing a joint research project to find a solution. All the Confederation Navy is doing is working on methods of blowing the possessed back into the beyond. I don't know about you, but I certainly don't want them to triumph."

Desmond bunched his fist, one toe coming off the stikpad, ready to launch himself at the man. "You traitorous little shit."

"You're going to die," Iain Girardi said remorselessly. "You, me, everyone on board this ship, everyone in Chaumort. All of us die. It can't be helped, you can't reverse entropy. And when you die, you're going to spend eternity in the beyond. Unless something is done about it, unless you can find a living neurone structure which will host you. Now I ask again, do you want Al Capone's project to fail?"

"If all Capone is interested in is spreading happiness across the galaxy, why does he want to hire a combat-capable starship?" Madeleine asked.

"Protection in the form of deterrence. There are Organization representatives like me in dozens of asteroids looking to sign up combat-capable starships. The more we have in orbit above New California, the more difficult it will be for anyone to launch a strike force against it. The Confederation Navy is going to attack New California's Strategic Defence network. Everyone knows that. The First Admiral has got the Assembly screaming at him for some kind of positive action. If he can crack the SD network open, he's cleared the way for an invasion; have the marines round up all the bad guys and shove them into zero-tau." Iain Girardi let out a heartfelt pained breath. "Can you imagine the bloodshed that'll cause? You have seen firsthand how hard the possessed can fight when they're cornered. Imagine the conflict in your lower lounge multiplied by a billion. That's what it will be like." He gave Erick a sympathetic glance. "Is that what you want?"

"I'm not fighting for the possessed," Madeleine muttered sullenly. She hated the way Iain Girardi could turn her words, make her doubt her convictions.

"Nobody is asking the *Villeneuve's Revenge* to fight," Iain Girardi said earnestly. "You are there for show, that's all. Perimeter defence patrol, where you're visible, a demonstration of numerical strength. Hardly an onerous duty. And you get paid full combat rates, with a guaranteed six-month contract; in addition to which I have a discretionary retainer fee to offer. Obviously for a prime ship like the *Villeneuve's Revenge* it will be a substantial one. You will be able to afford to have the worst of the damage repaired here at Chaumort, plus Erick can receive the best medical treatment available. I can even arrange for a brandnew spaceplane on very favourable

terms; New California astroengineering companies make the best models.”

“You see?” André said. “This is the kind of charter to be proud of. If the Organization is right we will have helped to secure the future of the entire human race. How can you object?”

“No, Captain,” Madeleine said. “I’m not sharing the life-support capsules with the possessed. Not ever. Period.”

“Nobody is suggesting you do.” Girardi sounded shocked. “Obviously we understand there is a lot of suspicion at the moment. The Organization is working hard at breaking down those old prejudicial barriers. But until more trust is built up, then obviously you will have your own crew and no one else. In a way, that’s part of establishing trust. The Organization is prepared to accept an armed ship crewed by non-possessed orbiting the planet providing you are integrated into its SD command network.”

“Shit,” Madeleine hissed. “Erick?”

He knew it was some kind of trap. And yet . . . it was hard to see how the possessed proposed to hijack the ship. This was one crew totally aware of the danger in letting even one of the bastards on board. Iain Girardi might have made a major mistake in approaching André.

The CNIS could undoubtedly use firsthand intelligence data on the disposition of ships around New California, which the *Villeneuve’s Revenge* would be ideally placed to gather. And he could always jump the ship away when the data was collected, no matter what objections Duchamp raised. There were items stowed in his cabin which could overcome the rest of the crew.

Which just left personal factors. I don’t want to go into the front line again.

“It’s an important decision,” he muttered.

André gave him a puzzled look. Naturally he was pleased some of the (diabolically expensive) medical nanonic packages were off, but obviously the poor boy’s brain still hadn’t completely recovered from decompression. And Madeleine was asking him to decide. *Merde*. “We know that, Erick. But I don’t want you to worry. All I need to know is which of my

crew is loyal enough to come with me. I have already decided to take my ship to New California.”

“What do you mean, loyal enough?” Madeleine asked hotly.

André held his hand up in a pleading gesture. “What does Erick have to say, eh?”

“Will we be docking with anything in the New California system? Do you expect us to take on any extra crew, for example?”

“Of course not,” Girardi said. “Fuel loading doesn’t require anyone coming into the life-support capsules. And if the unlikely event does arise, then obviously you’ll have a full veto authority over anyone in the airlock tube. Whatever precautions you want, you can have.”

“Okay,” Erick said. “I’ll come with you, Captain.”

• • •

“Yeah?”

...

“Fuck, I might have guessed, who else is going to call this time of night. Don’t you people ever sleep?”

...

“Everybody wants favours. I don’t do them anymore. I’m not so cheap these days.”

...

“Yeah? So you go run and tell my comrades; what use will I be to you then?”

...

“Mother Mary! You’ve got to be . . . Alkad Mzu? Shit, that’s a name I didn’t expect to hear ever again.”

...

“Here? In the Dorados? She wouldn’t dare.”

...

“You’re sure?”

...

“No, of course nobody’s said anything. It’s been months since the partizans even bothered having a meeting. We’re all too busy doing charity work these days.”

...

“Mother Mary. You believe it, don’t you? Ha! I bet you lot

are all pissing yourselves. How do you like it for a change, asshole? After all these years waiting, us poor old wanderers have gone and got us some real sharp teeth at last.”

...

“You think so? Maybe I just resigned from your agency. Don’t forget what the issue is here. I was born on Garissa.”

...

“Fuck you, don’t you fucking dare say that to me, you bastard. You even so much as look at my family, you little shit, and I’ll fire that fucking Alchemist at your home planet myself.”

...

“Yeah, yeah. Right, it’s a sorry universe.”

...

“I’ll think about it. I’m not promising you anything. Like I said, there are issues here. I have to talk to some people.”

• • •

The party was being thrown on the eve of the fleet’s departure. It had taken over the entire ballroom of the Monterey Hilton, and then spread out to occupy a few suites on the level below. The food was real food; Al had been insistent about that, drunk possessed could never keep the illusion of delicacies going. So the Organization had run search programs through their memory cores and hauled in anyone who listed their occupation as chef, possessed or non-possessed. Skill was all that counted, not its century of origin. The effort was rewarded in a formal eight-course banquet, whose raw materials had been ferried up to the asteroid in seven spaceplane flights, and resulted in Leroy Octavius handing out eleven hundred hours worth of energistic credits to farmers and wholesalers.

After the meal Al stood on the top table and said: “We’re gonna have a bigger and better ball when you guys come back safe, and you got Al Capone’s word on that.”

There was a burst of tumultuous applause, which only ended when the band struck up. Leroy and Busch had auditioned over a hundred musicians, whittling the numbers down to an eight-strong jazz band. Some of them were even genuine twenties musicians, or so they claimed. They certainly

sounded and looked the part when they got up onstage to play. Nearly three hundred people were out on the dance floor jiving away to the old honky-tonk tunes which Al loved best.

Al himself led the way, hurling a laughing Jezzibella about with all the energy and panache he'd picked up at the Broadway Casino back in the old days. The rest of the guests soon picked up the rhythm and the moves. Men, Al insisted, wore their tuxes or, if they were serving in the fleet, a military uniform; while the women were free to wear their own choice of ball gowns, providing the styles and fabrics weren't anything too modern. With the decorations of gossamer drapes and giant swans created out of fresh-cut flowers the overall effect was of a grand Viennese ball, but a damn sight more fun.

Possessed and non-possessed rubbed shoulders harmoniously. Wine flowed, laughter shook the windows, some couples snuck off to be by themselves, a few fights broke out. By any standard it was a roaring success.

Which was why at half past two in the morning Jezzibella was puzzled to find Al all by himself in one of the lower level suites, leaning against its huge window, tie undone, brandy glass in one hand. Outside, star-points of light moved busily through space as the last elements of the fleet manoeuvred into their jump formation.

"What's the matter, baby?" Jezzibella asked quietly. Soft arms circled around him. Her head came to rest on his shoulder.

"We'll lose the ships."

"Bound to lose some, Al honey. Can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"No, I mean, they're gonna be in action light-years away. What's to make them do as I say?"

"Command structure, Al. The fleet is a mini-version of the Organization. The soldiers at the bottom do what the lieutenants at the top tell them. It's worked in warships for centuries. When you're in battle you automatically follow orders."

"So what if that piece of shit Luigi takes it into his head to dump me and set up all on his own in Arnstadt?"

"He won't. Luigi is loyal."

“Right.” He chewed at a knuckle, thankful he was facing away from her.

“This bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. It’s a goddamn problem, okay? That fleet is one fuck of a lot of power to hand over to one guy.”

“Send two others.”

“What?”

“Put a triumvirate in charge.”

“What?”

“Easy, lover; if there’s three of them in charge of the fleet, then each of them is going to be busting his balls to prove how loyal he is in front of the others. And let’s face it, the fleet’s only going to be away for a week at the most. It takes a hell of a lot longer than that to get a conspiracy up and running successfully. Besides, ninety per cent of those soldiers are loyal to you. You’ve given them everything, Al; a life, a purpose. Don’t sell yourself short, what you’ve done with these people is a miracle, and they know it. They cheer your name. Not Luigi’s, not Mickey, not Emmet. You, Al.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, drawing his confidence back together. What she said made a lot of sense. It always did.

Al looked at her in the drizzle of starlight. The personas were combined tonight: a feminine athlete. Her dress of sparkling pearl-coloured silk hinted at rather than revealed her figure. The allure she exerted was terrifying. Al had been hard put to control his temper that evening as he picked up the swell of hunger and lust from the other men on the dance floor every time she glided past.

“Goddamn,” he whispered. “I ain’t never done anything to deserve a reward as big as you.”

“I think you have,” she murmured back. Their noses touched again, arms moving gently into an embrace. “I’ve got a present for you, Al. We’ve been saving it up as a treat, and I think the time’s right.”

His hold around her tightened. “I got the only treat I need.”

“Flatterer.”

They kissed.

“It can wait till the morning,” Jezzibella decided.

• • •

The lift opened onto a section of Monterey Al didn’t recog-

nize. An unembellished rock corridor with an air duct and power cables clinging to the ceiling. The gravity was about half-strength. He pulled a face at that, free fall was the one thing about this century he really hated. Jez kept trying to get him to make out with her in one of the axis hotel cubicles, but he wouldn't. Just thinking about it made his stomach churn.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Jezzibella grinned. She was the knowing and carefree girl-about-town persona this morning, wearing a snow-white ship-suit which stretched around her like rubber. "The docking ledges. They've not been used much since you took over. Not until now."

Al let her lead him along the corridor and into an observation lounge. Emmet Mordden, Patricia Mangano, and Mickey Pileggi were waiting in front of the window wall. All of them smiled proudly, an emotion reflected in their thought currents. Al played along with the game as Jez tugged him over to the window.

"We captured this mother on one of the asteroids a couple of weeks back," Mickey said. "Well, its captain was possessed, actually. Then we had to persuade the soul to transfer down the affinity link. Jezzibella said you'd like it."

"What is this shit, Mickey?"

"It's our present to you, Al baby," Jezzibella said. "Your flagship." She smiled eagerly, and gestured at the window.

Al walked over and looked out. Buck Rogers's very own rocketship was sitting on the rock shelf below him. It was a beautiful scarlet torpedo with yellow fins sprouting from the sides, and a cluster of copper rocket engine tubes at the rear.

"That's for me?" he asked in wonder.

• • •

The rocketship's interior was fully in keeping with its external appearance, the pinnacle of 1930s engineering and decor. Al felt more at home than any time since he had emerged from the beyond. This was his furniture, his styling. A little chunk of his home era.

"Thank you," he said to Jezzibella.

She kissed him on the tip of his nose, and they linked arms.

"It's a blackhawk," she explained. "The possessing soul is

called Cameron Leung; so you be nice to him, Al. I said you'd find him a human body when the universe calms down a little."

"Sure."

An iron spiral stair led up to the promenade deck. Al and Jezzibella settled back on a plump couch of green leather where they could see out of the long curving windows and along the rocket's nose cone. He put his fedora down on a cane table at the side of the couch and draped an arm around her shoulders. Prince of the city again, full-time.

"Can you hear me, Cameron?" Jezzibella inquired.

"Yes," came the reply from a silver tannoy grille set in the wall.

"We'd like to see the fleet before it leaves. Take us over please."

Al winced, grabbing hold of the couch's flared arms. More fucking spaceflight! But there was none of the rush of acceleration he'd braced himself for. All that happened was the view changed. One minute the spherical silver-white grid of Monterey's spaceport was rotating slowly in front of them, the next it was sliding to one side and racing past overhead.

"Hey, I can't feel nothing," Al whooped. "No acceleration, none of that free-fall crap. Hot damn, now this is the way to travel."

"Yes." Jezzibella clicked her fingers smartly, and a small boy hurried forwards. He was dressed in a white high-collar steward's uniform, and his hair had been parted in the centre and slicked back with cream. "A bottle of Norfolk Tears, I think," she told him. "This is definitely celebration time. I think we might make a toast, too. Make sure you chill the glasses."

"Yes, miss," he piped.

Al frowned after him. "Kinda young to be doing that, ain't he?"

"It's Webster Pryor," she said sotto voce. "Sweet boy."

"Kingsley's son?"

"Yes. Thought it best we keep him close to hand the whole time. Just in case."

"I see. Sure."

"You're right about the ship, Al. Bitek is the only way to

travel. My media company was always too miserly to let me have one for touring. Blackhawks make the best warships, too.”

“Yeah? So how many have we got?”

“Three, counting this one. And we only got those because their captains were coldfooted when we snatched the asteroids.”

“Pity.”

“Yes. But we’re hoping to get luckier this time.”

Al grinned out of the window as the luscious crescent of New California swung into view, and settled back to enjoy the ride.

• • •

Cameron Leung accelerated away from Monterey at two gees, curving down towards the planet a hundred and ten thousand kilometres below. Far ahead of the blackhawk’s sharp emerald aerospike, the Organization’s fleet was sliding along its five-thousand-kilometre orbit, a chain of starships spaced a precise two kilometres apart. Sunlight bounced and sparkled off foil-coated machinery as they emerged from the penumbra; a silver necklace slowly threading itself around the entire planet.

It had taken two days for all of them to fly down from their assembly points at the orbiting asteroids, jockeying into their jump formation under the direction of Emmet Mordden and Luigi Balsmao. The *Salvatore* was the lead vessel, an ex-New California navy battle cruiser, and now Luigi Balsmao’s command ship.

Two million kilometres away, hanging over New California’s south pole, the voidhawk *Galega* had observed the fleet gathering. The swarm of stealthed spy globes it showered around the planet had monitored the starships manoeuvring into their designated slot in the chain, intercepting their command communications. Given the two-degree inclination of the fleet’s orbital track, *Galega* and its captain, Aralia, had calculated the theoretical number of jump coordinates. Fifty-two stars were possible targets.

The Yosemite Consensus had dispatched voidhawks to warn the relevant governments, all of whom had been extremely alarmed by the scale of the potential threat. Other

than that there was little the Edenists could do. Attack was not a viable option. The Organization fleet was under the shield of New California's SD network, and its own offensive potential was equally formidable. If it was to be broken up, then it would have to be intercepted by a fleet of at least equal size. But even if the Confederation Navy did assemble a task force large enough, the admirals were then faced with the problem of where to deploy it: a fifty-two to one chance of getting the right system.

Galega watched Capone's scarlet and lemon blackhawk race down from Monterey to hold station fifty kilometres away from the *Salvatore*. A spy globe fell between the two. The intelligence-gathering staff in the voidhawk's crew toroid heard Capone say: "How's it going, Luigi?"

"Okay, boss. The formation's holding true. They'll all hit the jump coordinate."

"Goddamn, Luigi, you should see what you guys look like from here. It's a powerhouse of a sight. I tell you, I wouldn't want to wake up in the morning and find you in my sky. Those jerkhead krauts are gonna crap themselves."

"Count on it, Al."

"Okay, Luigi, take it away, it's all yours. You and Patricia and Dwight take care now, you hear? And Jez says good luck. Go get 'em."

"Thank the little lady for us, boss. And don't worry none, we'll deliver for you. Expect some real good news a week from now."

The *Salvatore*'s heat dump panels and sensor clusters began to retract down into their jump recesses, taking a long while to do so. Several times they seemed to stick or judder. The second ship in the formation began to configure itself for a jump, then the third.

For another minute nothing happened, then the *Salvatore* vanished inside its event horizon.

Aralia and *Galega* were instinctively aware of its spatial location, and with that the jump coordinate alignment could have only one solution. **It's Arnstadt**, Aralia told the Yosemite Consensus. **They're heading for Arnstadt.**

Thank you, Aralia, Consensus replied. **We will dispatch a voidhawk to alert the Arnstadt government. It will take the**

Organization fleet at least two days to reach the system. The local navy forces will have some time to prepare.

Enough?

Possibly. It depends on the Organization's actual goal.

When Aralia reviewed the images from the spy globes, another twelve ships had already followed the *Salvatore*. A further seven hundred and forty were gliding inexorably toward the Arnstadt jump coordinate.

• • •

"No, Gerald," Jansen Kovak said. The tone was one which parents reserved for particularly troublesome children. His hand tightened around Gerald's upper arm.

He and another supervisory nurse had walked Gerald to the sanatorium's lounge where he was supposed to eat his lunch. Once they reached the door, Gerald had glanced furtively down the corridor, muscles tensing beneath his baggy sweat-shirt.

Kovak was familiar with the signs. Gerald could drop into a frenzy at the slightest provocation these days; anything from an innocuous phrase to the sight of a long corridor which he assumed led directly to the outside world. When it happened, he'd lash out at his supervisors and anyone else who happened to be in the way, before making yet another run for it. The concept of codelocked doors seemed utterly beyond him.

The corner of Gerald's lip spasmed at the stern warning, and he allowed himself to be led into the lounge. The first thing he did was glance at the bar to see if the holoscreen was on. It had been removed altogether (much to the annoyance of other inmates). Dr Dobbs wasn't going to risk triggering another incident of that magnitude.

Privately, Jansen Kovak considered that they were wasting their time in trying to rehabilitate Skibbow. The man had obviously tipped right over the edge and was now free-falling into his own personal inferno. He should be shipped off to a long-term care institution for treatment and maybe some selective memory erasure. But Dr Dobbs insisted the psychosis could be treated here; and Gerald was technically an ESA internee, which brought its own complications. It was a bad duty.

The lounge fell silent when the three of them came in. Not that there were many people using it; four or five inmates and a dozen staff. Gerald responded to the attention with a frightened stare, checking faces. He frowned in puzzlement as one woman with Oriental features and vivid copper hair gave him a sympathetic half smile.

Jansen quickly steered him over to a settee halfway between the window and the bar and sat him down. "What would you like to eat, Gerald?"

"Um . . . I'll have the same as you."

"I'll get you a salad," Kovak said, and turned to go over to the bar. Which was his first mistake.

Something smashed into the middle of his back, knocking him forwards completely off balance. He went crashing painfully onto the ground. Auto-balance and unarmed combat programs went primary, interfacing to roll him smoothly to one side. He regained his feet in a fluid motion.

Gerald and the other nurse were locked together, each trying to throw the other to the ground. Jansen selected an option from the neural nanonics menu. His feet took a pace and a half forwards, and his weight shifted. One arm came around in a fast arc. The blow caught Gerald on his shoulder, which toppled him sideways. Before he could compensate, the back of his legs came into contact with Jansen's outstretched leg. He tripped, the weight of the other supervisory nurse quickening his fall.

Gerald yelled in pain as he landed on his elbow, only to be smothered below the bulk of the other nurse. When he raised his head the lounge door was five metres away. So close!

"Let me go," he begged. "She's my daughter. I have to save her."

"Shut up you prize pillock," Jansen grunted.

"Now that's not nice."

Jansen spun around to see the redheaded woman standing behind him. "Er . . . I. Yes." Shame was making his face become uncomfortably warm. It also seemed to be enervating his neural nanonics display. "I'm sorry, it was unprofessional. He's just so annoying."

"You should try being married to him for twenty years."

Jansen's face registered polite incomprehension. The

woman wasn't an inmate. She was wearing a smart blue dress, civilian clothing. But he didn't remember her on the staff.

She smiled briskly, grabbed hold of the front of his tunic, and threw him six metres clean through the air. Jansen's scream was more of shock than of pain. Until he hit the ground. That impact was pure agony, and his neural nanonics had shut down, allowing every volt of pain to flow cleanly through his nerves.

The other nurse who was still wrapped around Gerald managed to get out one dull grunt of surprise before the woman hit him. Her fist shattered his jaw, sending a spurt of blood splashing across Gerald's hair.

By that time one of the other sanatorium staff in the lounge had enough presence of mind to datavise an alarm code at the room's net processor. Sirens started wailing. A grid of metal bars started to slide up out of the floor, sealing off the open balcony doors.

Three burly nurses were closing on the red-haired woman as Gerald blinked up at her in amazement. She winked at him and raised an arm high, finger pointing to the ceiling. A bracelet of white fire ignited around her wrist.

"*Shit*," the leader of the three nurses yelled. He nearly pitched over as he tried desperately to reverse his headlong rush.

"It's a fucking possessed."

"Back! Get back!"

"Where the hell did she come from?"

"Go for it, babe," one of the inmates roared jubilantly.

A rosette of white fire exploded from her hand, dissolving into a hundred tiny spheres almost as soon as it appeared. They smashed into the ceiling and walls and furniture. Sparks cascaded down as small plumes of black smoke squirted out. Flames began to take hold. Fire alarms added their clamour to the initial alert. Then the lights went out and the alarms were silenced.

"Come on, Gerald," the woman said. She pulled him to his feet.

"No," he squeaked in terror. "You're one of them. Let me

go, please. I can't be one of you again. I can't take that again. Please, my daughter."

"Shut up, and get a move on. We're going to find Marie."

Gerald gaped at her. "What do you know of her?"

"That she needs you, very badly. Now come on!"

"You know?" he snivelled. "How can you know?"

"Come on." She tugged at him as she started towards the lounge door. It was as if the grapple arm of a heavy-load cargo mechanoid had attached itself to him.

The steward raised his head above the bar to see what was happening. Various inmates and staff had dived for cover behind the furniture. The terrifying possessed woman was striding purposefully for the door, hauling a cowering Skibbow along. He datavised a codelock order at the door, then opened an emergency channel to the net processor. It didn't respond. His hand curled around the nervejam stick, ready to—

"Hey you!" called the woman.

A streamer of white fire smacked straight into his forehead.

"Naughty," she said grimly.

Gerald gibbered quietly as the steward slumped forwards, smoke rising from the shallow crater in his temple. "Oh, dear God, what are you?"

"Don't blow it for me now, Gerald." She stood in front of the door. The room's air rushed past her, ruffling her long copper tresses. Then the air flow reversed, turning to a howling hurricane with a solid core. It smashed into the door, buckling the reinforced composite.

She stepped through the gap, pulling Gerald after her. "Now we run," she told him happily.

As the sanatorium was operated by the Royal Navy the guards were armed. It didn't make any difference, they weren't front-line combat troops. Whenever one of them got near to Gerald and the woman she would use her white fire to devastating effect. The asteroid's internal security centre could trace her position purely because of the wave of destruction she generated around herself. All electronics and power circuits were ruptured by flares of white fire, doors were simply ripped apart, environmental ducts were battered and split, mechanoids reduced to slag. She did it automati-

cally, a defensive manoeuvre burning clean any conceivable threat in front of her. Crude but effective.

The asteroid went to an immediate status two defence alert. Royal Marines were rushed from their barracks to the sanatorium.

But as with all asteroid settlements, everything was packed close together, and made as compact as possible. It took the woman and Gerald ninety seconds to get from the lounge to the sanatorium's nearest entrance. Sensors and cameras in the public hall caught her emerging from the splintered door. Terrified pedestrians sprinted from the vicious tendrils of white fire she unleashed; it was almost as though she were using them as whips to drive people away from her. Then the images vanished as she hammered at the net processors and sensors.

The Royal Marine commander coordinating the emergency at least had the presence of mind to shut down the lifts around the hall. If she wanted out, she'd have to walk. And when she did, she'd run smack into the marines now deploying in a pincer movement around her.

Both squads were edging cautiously down the public hall, hurrying civilians out of the way. They approached the sanatorium's wrecked entrance from opposite directions, chemical projectile rifles held ready, electronic warfare blocks alert for any sign of the distortion pattern given off by a possessed. When they came into view of each other they froze, covering the length of the hall with their rifles. No one was left between them.

The squad captain of one side shouldered his weapon. "Where the fuck did she go?"

• • •

"I knew they'd stop the lifts," the redhead said in satisfaction. "Standard tactics for dealing with the possessed is to block all nearby transport systems to prevent us from spreading. Bloody good job they were on the ball today."

Gerald agreed, but didn't say anything. He was concentrating on the rungs in front of his face, not daring to look down.

The possessed woman might have smashed open all the doors in the medical facility, but once they were out in the hall she had stood in front of the lift doors and made a parting mo-

tion with her hands. The lift doors had obeyed, sliding open silently. After that they had started to climb down the ladder set in the wall of the shaft. There wasn't much light to see where he was putting his hands and feet, just some sort of bluish radiance coming from the woman above him. Gerald didn't want to see how she was making it.

It was cold in the shaft, the air tasting both wet and metallic. And silent, too, the darkness above and below swallowing all sounds. Every minute or so he could just make out another door in the shaft wall; the buzz of conversation and tiny slivers of light oozing around the seals.

"Careful," she said. "You're near the bottom now. Ten more rungs."

The light increased, and he risked a glance down. A metal grid slicked with condensation glinted dully at the foot of the ladder. Gerald stood on it, shivering slightly and rubbing his arms. Mechanical clunks started to rumble down from above.

The possessed woman jumped nimbly past the last two rungs and gave him an enthusiastic smile. "Stand still," she said, and put her hands on either side of his head, spreading her fingers over his ears.

Gerald quivered at her touch. Her hands were starting to glow. This was it. The start of the pain. Soon he would hear the demented whispers emerging from the beyond, and one of *them* would pour into his body again. All hope would die then. I might as well refuse, and let her torture kill me. Better that than . . .

She took her hands away, their internal glimmer fading away. "I think that should do it. I've broken down the debrief nanonics. The doctors and police would only use you to see where we were and what we were doing, then they'd send you to sleep."

"What?" He started to probe his skull with cautious fingers. It seemed intact. "Is that all you did?"

"Yes. Not so bad was it?" She beckoned. "There's a hatch here which leads to the maintenance tunnels. It's only got a mechanical lock, so we won't trigger any processors."

"Then what?" he asked bleakly.

"Why, we get you off Guyana and on your way to Valisk to find Marie, of course. What did you think, Gerald?" She

grasped the handle on the metre-high hatch and shoved it upwards. The hatch swung open, revealing only more darkness behind.

Gerald felt like crying. His head was all funny, hot and light, which made it very hard for him to think. "Why? Why are you doing this? Are you just playing with me?"

"Of course I'm not playing, Gerald. I want Marie back to normal more than anything. She's all we have left now. You know that. You saw the homestead."

He sank to his knees, looking up at her flat-featured face and immaculate hair, trying desperately to understand. "But why? Who are you to want this?"

"Oh, dearest Gerald, I'm sorry. This is Pou Mok's body. It takes up far too much concentration to maintain my own appearance, especially with what I was doing up there."

Gerald watched numbly as the copper hair darkened and the skin of her face began to flow into new features. No, not new. Old. So very very old. "Loren," he gasped.

15

After five centuries of astounding technological endeavour and determined economic sacrifice by the Lunar nation, the God of War, Mars, had finally been pacified. The hostile red gleam which had so dominated Earth's night skies for millennia was extinguished. Now the planet had an atmosphere, complete with vast swirls of white and grey clouds; blooms of vegetation were expanding across the deserts, patches of sepia and dark green vegetation staining the tracts of rust-red soil. To an approaching starship it seemed, at first, almost identical to any other terracompatible planet to be found within the Confederation's boundaries. Disparities became apparent only when the extent of the remaining deserts was revealed, accounting for three-fifths of the surface; and there was a definite sparsity of free water. Although there were thousands of individual crater lakes, Mars had only one major body of water, the Lowell Sea, a gently meandering ribbon which wrapped itself around the equator. Given the scale involved it appeared as though a wide river were flowing constantly around the planet. Closer inspection showed that circumnavigation would be impossible. The Lowell Sea had formed as water collected in the hundreds of large asteroid-impact craters which pocked the planet's equator in an almost straight line.

Population, too, was one of the planet's quirks: a phenomenon which was also visible from orbit, provided you knew what to look for. Anyone searching the nightside for the usual sprawling iridescent patches of light which marked the kind of vigorous human cities normally present after five centuries of colonization would be disappointed; only six major urban areas had sprung up so far. Towns and villages were also present amid the rolling steppes, but in total the number of peo-

ple living on the surface didn't exceed three million. Phobos and Deimos were heavily industrialized, providing homes for a further half-million workers and their families. They at least followed a standard development pattern.

Apart from stage one colony planets in their formative years, Mars had the smallest human population of any world in the Confederation. However, that was where comparisons ended. The Martian technoeconomy was highly developed, providing its citizens with a reasonable standard of living, though nothing like the socioeconomic index enjoyed by Edenists or the Kulu Kingdom.

One other aspect of mature Confederation societies missing from Mars was a Strategic Defence network. The two asteroid moons were defended, of course; both of them were important SII centres with spaceports boasting a high level of starship traffic. But the planet was left open; there was nothing of any value on its surface to threaten or hold hostage or steal. The trillions of fuseodollars poured into the terraforming project were dispersed evenly throughout the new biosphere. Oxygen and geneered plants were not the kinds of targets favoured by pirates. Mars was the most expensive single project ever undertaken by the human race, yet its intrinsic value was effectively zero. Its real value was as the focus of aspirations for a whole nation of exiles, to whom it had become the modern promised land.

None of this was readily apparent to Louise, Genevieve, and Fletcher as they observed the planet growing in the lounge's holoscreen. The difference from Norfolk was apparent (Genevieve said Mars looked worn-out rather than brand-new) but none of them knew how to interpret what they were seeing in geotechnical terms. All they cared about was the lack of glowing red cloud.

"Can you tell if there are any possessed down there?" Louise asked.

"Alas no, Lady Louise. The planet lies far outside my second sight. All I can feel is the shape of this doughty ship. We could be alone in the universe for all the perception I have."

"Don't say that," Genevieve said. "We've come here to get away from horrible things."

"And away from them we certainly are, little one."

Genevieve spared a moment from watching the holoscreen to grin at him. The voyage had calmed her considerably. With very little to do for any of the passengers during the flight, the novelty of bouncing around in free fall had soon worn off, and she had swiftly learned how to access the flight computer. Furay had brought some old voice-interactive tutorial programs on-line for her, and she had been engrossed ever since with AV recordings of children's stories, educational files, and games. Genevieve adored the games, spending hours in her cabin, surrounded by a holographic haze, fighting off fantasy creatures, or exploring mythological landscapes, even piloting ships to the galactic core.

Louise and Fletcher had used the same programs to devour history encyclopedia files, reviewing the major events which had shaped human history since the mid 1800s. Thanks to Norfolk's restrictive information policies, most of it was as new to her as it was to him. The more she reviewed, the more ignorant she felt. Several times she had been obliged to ask Furay if a particular incident was genuinely true; the information in the *Far Realm's* memory was so different from that which she'd been taught. Invariably, the answer was yes; though he always tempered it by saying that no one viewed anything in the same context. "Interpretation through the filters of ideology has always been one of our race's curses."

Even that cushion didn't make her any happier. The teachers at school hadn't exactly been lying to her, censorship was hardly practical given the number of starship crews who visited at midsummer; but they'd certainly sheltered her from an awful lot of unsavoury truths.

Louise ordered the flight computer to show a display of their approach vector. The holoscreen image shifted, showing them the view from the forward sensor clusters overlaid with orange and green graphics. Phobos was falling towards the horizon, a darkened star embedded at the heart of a large scintillating wreath of industrial stations. They watched it expand as the *Far Realm* matched orbits at a tenth of a gee. Inhabited for over five centuries, it had a weighty history. No other settled asteroid/moon of such a size orbited so close to an inhabited planet. But its proximity made it ideal to provide raw material for the early stages of the terraforming project. Since

those days it had reverted primarily to being an SII manufacturing centre and fleet port. The spin imparted to provide gravity within its two biosphere caverns had flung off the last of the surface dust centuries ago. Naked grey-brown rock was all that faced the stars now; large areas had a marbled finish where mining teams had removed protrusions to enhance the symmetry, and both ends had been sheared flat. With its cylindrical shape and vast encrustations of machinery capping each end its genealogy appeared to be midway between ordinary asteroid settlements and an Edenist habitat.

Captain Layia slotted the starship into the spaceport approach vector which traffic control assigned her, then spent a further twenty minutes datavising the SII fleet operations office, explaining why their scheduled return flight from Norfolk had been delayed.

"You didn't mention our passengers then?" Tilia said when the exchange was over.

"Life is complicated enough right now," Layia retorted. "Explaining to the operations office why they're on board, and the financial circumstances, isn't going to make a good entry on anyone's record. Agreed?"

She received a round of apathetic acknowledgements from the other crew members.

"None of them have passports," Furay commented. "That might be a problem when we dock."

"We could get them to register as refugees," Endron said. "Under Confederation law the government is obliged to accept them."

"The first thing they would have to do is explain how they got here," Layia said. "Come on, think. We've got to off load them somehow, and without any comebacks."

"They're not listed on our manifest," Tilia said. "So no one's going to be looking for them. And if the port Inspectorate does decide to give us a customs check we can just move them around the life-support capsules to keep them out of sight of their team. Once our port clearance comes through we can sneak them into the asteroid without any difficulty."

"Then what?"

"They don't want to stay here," Furay said. "They just want to find a ship which will take them to Tranquillity."

"You heard traffic control," Layia said. "All civil flights have ended. The only reason our Defence Command didn't swarm all over us is because we still have a Confederation Navy flight authorization."

"There might not be any flights to Tranquillity from Mars, but if anyone in this system is going there, it'll be from Earth. Getting them to the O'Neill Halo shouldn't be too difficult, there are still plenty of inter-orbit flights, and Louise has enough money. She was talking about chartering the entire ship, remember?"

"That could work," Layia said. "And if we can acquire some passports for them first, then nobody in the Halo will ask how they got to Mars. From that distance, everything at this end will appear perfectly legitimate."

"I might know someone who can fix passports for them," Tilia volunteered.

Layia snorted. "Who doesn't?"

"He's not cheap."

"Not our problem. All right, we'll try it. Endron, tell them the way it is. And make certain they cooperate."

• • •

The *Far Realm* settled lightly on a docking cradle. Umbilical hoses snaked up to jack into the lower hull. Genevieve watched the operation on the lounge's holoscreen, fascinated by all the automated machinery.

"We'd best not tell Daddy we came here, had we?" she said without looking up.

"Why not?" Louise asked. She was surprised; it was the first time Gen had mentioned either of their parents since they'd left Cricklade. But then, neither have I.

"Mars has a Communist government. The computer said so. Daddy hates them."

"I think you'll find the Martians are a bit different from the people Daddy's always moaning about. In any case, he'll be glad we came here."

"Why?"

"Because he'll be glad we got away. The route we travel isn't really important, just that we get safely to our destination."

"Oh. I suppose you're right." Her face became solemn for

a moment. "What do you think he's doing right now? Will that nasty knight man be making him do things he doesn't want to?"

"Daddy isn't doing anything for anyone. He's just stuck inside his own head, that's all. It's the same as being in prison. He'll be thinking a lot, he's perfectly free to do that."

"Really?" Genevieve looked at Fletcher for confirmation.

"Indeed, little one."

"I suppose that's not so bad then."

"I know Daddy," Louise said. "He'll be spending the whole time worrying about us. I wish there were some way we could tell him we're all right."

"We can when it's all over. And Mummy, too. It is going to be all over, isn't it, Louise?"

"Yes. It's going to end; someday, somehow. And when we get to Tranquillity, we can stop running and do whatever we can to help."

"Good." She smiled primly at Fletcher. "I don't want you to go, though."

"Thank you, little one." He sounded ill at ease.

Endron came gliding through the ceiling hatch, head first. He twisted neatly around the ladder and touched his feet to a stikpad beside the holoscreen.

Fletcher kept very still. Now that she knew what to look for, Louise could see how hard he was concentrating. It had taken several days of intense practice for him to learn how to minimise the disruption his energistic effect exerted on nearby electronics. In the end it had paid off; it had been fifty hours since the last time any of the *Far Realm's* crew had come flashing through the life-support capsule searching for an elusive glitch in the starship's systems.

"We made it home," Endron started off blithely. "But there is a small problem with your legal status. Mainly the fact you don't have a passport between you."

Louise deliberately avoided glancing at Fletcher. "Is there a Norfolk Embassy here? They may be able to issue us with some documentation."

"There will be a legal office to handle Norfolk's diplomatic affairs, but no actual embassy."

"I see."

“But you have a solution,” Fletcher said. “That is why you are here, is it not?”

“We have a proposal,” Endron said edgily. “There is an unorthodox method of acquiring a passport for the three of you; it’s expensive but has the advantage of not involving the authorities.”

“Is it illegal?” Louise asked.

“What we have here is this: Myself and the rest of the crew have rather a lot of Norfolk Tears on board which we can sell to our friends, so we really don’t want to draw too much official attention to ourselves right now.”

“Your government wouldn’t send us back, would they?” Genevieve asked in alarm.

“No. Nothing like that. It’s just that this way would be easier all around.”

“We’ll get our passports the way you suggested,” Louise said hurriedly. She felt like hugging the genial payload officer; it was exactly what she had been nerving herself up to ask him.

• • •

Moyo didn’t exactly sleep, there were too many pressures being applied against his mind for that, but he did rest for several hours each night. Eben Pavitt’s body wasn’t in the best condition, nor was he in the first flush of youth. Of course, Moyo could use his energetic power to enhance any physical attribute such as strength or agility, but as he stopped concentrating he could feel the enervation biting into his stolen organs. Tiredness became an all-over ache.

After a couple of days he had learned the limits pretty well, and took care to respect them. He was lucky to have obtained this body; it would be the direst of follies to lose it by negligence. Another might not be so easy to come by. The Confederation was larger now than when he had been alive, but the number of souls back in the beyond was also prodigious. There would never be enough bodies to go around.

The slim blades of light which dawn drove through the loose bamboo blind were an unusually intense crimson. They shifted the bedroom from a familiar collection of grisaille outlines to a strong two-tone portrait of red and impenetrable

black. Despite the macabre perspective, Moyo was imbued by a feeling of simple contentment.

Stephanie stirred on the mattress next to him, then sat up frowning. "Your thoughts look indecently happy to me all of a sudden. What is it?"

"I'm not sure." He got up and padded over to the window. His fingers pressed the slim tubes of bamboo down. "Ah. Come and look."

The sky above Exnall was clotting with wisps of cloud, slowly condensing into a broad disk. And they glowed a muted red. Dawn's corona was rising up to blend with them. Only in the west was there a dark crescent of night, and that was slowly being squeezed to extinction.

"The stars will never rise here again," Moyo said happily.

There was a power thrumming through the land now, one which he could feel himself responding to, contributing a little of himself towards maintaining the whole. A vast conjunction of will, something he suspected was akin to an Edenist Consensus. Annette Ekelund had won, converting the peninsula to a land where the dead walked free once more. Now two million of them were marrying their energistic power at a subconscious level, bringing about the overriding desire which also dwelt within the latent mind.

Several shadows flittered across the bottom of the garden where the overhanging boughs granted immunity against the spreading red light. The horticultural mechanoids had long since cranked to a halt, though not before wrecking most of the flower beds and small shrubs. When he opened his mind to the dark area he found several nervous bundles of thought. It was the kids left over from the possession again. He hadn't been alone in letting one go. Unfortunately the Royal Marines had executed a fast, efficient retreat.

"Damn. They're back for the food again."

Stephanie sighed. "They've had all of the sachets in the kitchen. What else can we give them?"

"There are some chickens in one of the houses opposite; we could always cook them and leave the meat out."

"Poor little mites. They must be frozen sleeping out there. Could you go and fetch some chickens, please? I'll get the range cooker hot, we'll cook them in the oven."

"Why bother? We can just turn them straight into roasts."

"I'm not convinced about that; and I don't want them to catch anything from food that hasn't been cooked properly."

"If you just zap the chickens they'll be cooked properly."

"Don't argue. Just go and get them." She turned him around and gave him a push. "They'll need plucking, as well."

"All right, I'm going." He laughed as his clothes formed around him. Argument would be pointless. It was one of the things he enjoyed about her. She didn't have many opinions, but those she did have . . . "By the way, what are *we* going to do for food? There's none left in the bungalow, and people have been helping themselves to the stocks in the stores on Maingreen." After some experimenting he'd found his energetic power wasn't quite as omnipotent as he'd first thought. He could cloak anything in an illusion, and if the wish was maintained for long enough the matter underneath would eventually flow into the shape and texture which he was visualizing. But the human body needed to ingest specific proteins and vitamins. A lump of wood that looked, tasted, and smelt like salmon was still just a lump of wood when it was in his stomach. Even with real food he had to be sensible. Once he'd actually thrown up after transforming sachets of bread into chocolate gateau—he hadn't removed the foil wrapping first.

"That's something we can start thinking about later," she said. "If necessary we can move out of the town and set ourselves up in one of the farms."

He didn't like the idea—he'd lived all his life in cities—but didn't say anything out loud.

Someone knocked on the front door before he got to it. Pat Staite, their neighbour, was standing outside dressed in elaborate blue and grey striped baseball gear.

"We're looking for people to help make up the teams," he said hopefully.

"It's a little early in the day for me."

"Absolutely. Terribly sorry. If you're free this afternoon . . . ?"

"Then I'll come along, certainly."

Pat was one of Exnall's growing band of sports enthusiasts

who seemed intent on playing every ball game ever devised by the human race. They had already taken over two of the town's parks.

"Thanks," Staite said, not registering the irony in Moyo's voice or thoughts. "There's an ex-Brit living in the street now. He said he'd teach us how to play cricket."

"Fabulous."

"Is there anything you used to play?"

"Strip poker. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go and catch some chickens for my breakfast."

The chickens had broken out of their coop, but they were still pecking and scratching around the garden. They were a geneered variety, plump, with rusty yellow feathers. They were also remarkably quick.

Moyo's first couple of attempts at catching one ended with him falling flat on his stomach. When he climbed to his feet the second time, the whole flock was squawking in alarm and vanishing fast into the shrubbery. He glared at them, banishing the mud caking his trousers and shirt, and pointed a finger. The tiny bolt of white fire caught the chicken at the base of its neck, sending out a cloud of singed feathers and quite a lot of blood. It must have looked ludicrous, he knew, using his power for this. But, if it got the job done . . .

When he'd finished blasting every chicken he could see, he walked over to the nearest corpse. And it started running away from him, head flopping down its chest on the end of a flaccid strip of skin. He stared at it disbelievingly; he'd always thought that was an urban myth. Then another of the corpses sprinted for freedom. Moyo pushed his sleeves up and summoned a larger bolt of white fire.

There were voices drifting through the open kitchen door when he returned to the bungalow. He didn't even have to use his perception to know who was in there with her.

Under Stephanie's control the range cooker was radiating waves of heat. Several children were warming themselves around it, holding big mugs of tea. They all stopped talking as he walked in.

Stephanie's bashful welcoming smile was transformed to an astonished blink as she saw the smoking remnants of

chicken he was carrying. A couple of the children started giggling.

"Into the lounge everyone," Stephanie ordered the kids. "Go on, I'll see what I can salvage."

Once they had left he asked: "What the hell are you doing?"

"Looking after them, of course. Shannon says she hasn't had a meal ever since the possessed arrived."

"But you can't. Suppose—"

"Suppose what? The *police* come?"

He dropped the burnt carcasses onto the tile worktop next to the range cooker. "Sorry."

"We're responsible only to ourselves now. There are no laws, no courts, no rights and wrongs. Only what feels good. That's what this new life is for, isn't it? Indulgence."

"I don't know. It might be."

She leaned against him, arms encircling his waist. "Look at it selfishly. What else have you got to do today?"

"And there I was thinking I was the one who'd adjusted best to this."

"You did, at first. I just needed time to catch up."

He peered through the door at the children. There were eight of them bouncing around on the lounge furniture, none over twelve or thirteen. "I'm not used to children."

"Nor chickens by the look of things. But you managed to bring them back in the end, didn't you?"

"Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, how long do you want to look after them for? What's going to happen when they grow up? Do they hit sixteen and get possessed? That's an awful prospect."

"That won't happen. We'll take this world out of the reach of the beyond. We're the first and the last possessed. This kind of situation won't arise again. And in any case, I wasn't proposing to bring them up in Exnall."

"Where then?"

"We'll take them up to the end of Mortonridge and turn them over to their own kind."

"You're kidding me." A pointless statement; he could sense the determination in her thoughts.

“Don’t tell me you want to stay in Exnall for all of eternity?”

“No. But the first few weeks would be fine.”

“To travel is to experience. I won’t force you, Moyo, if you want to stay here and learn how to play cricket, that’s okay by me.”

“I surrender.” He laughed, and kissed her firmly. “They won’t be able to walk, not all that way. We’ll need some sort of bus or truck. I’d better scout around and see what Ekelund left us.”

• • •

It was the eighth time Syrinx had walked to Wing-Tsit Chong’s odd house on the side of the lake. For some of these meetings it would be just the two of them sitting and talking, on other occasions they would be joined by therapists and Athene and Sinon and Ruben for what amounted to a joint session. But today it was only the pair of them.

As ever, Wing-Tsit Chong was waiting in his wheelchair on the veranda, a tartan rug tucked around his legs. **Greetings, my dear Syrinx. How are you today?**

She bowed slightly in the Oriental tradition, a mannerism she had taken up after the second session. **They took the nanonic packages off my feet this morning. I could barely walk, the skin was so tender.**

I hope you did not chastise the medical team for this minor discomfort.

No. She sighed. **They have done wonders with me. I’m grateful. And the pain will soon be gone.**

Wing-Tsit Chong smiled thinly. **Exactly the answer you should give. If I were a suspicious old man . . .**

Sorry. But I really have accepted the physical discomfort as transitory.

How fortunate, the last chain unshackled.

Yes.

You will be free to roam the stars again. And if you were to fall into their clutches once more?

She shivered, giving him a censorious glance as she leaned on the veranda rail. **I don’t think I’m cured enough to want to think about that.**

Of course.

All right, if you really want to know. I doubt I'll venture out of *Oenone's* crew toroid quite so readily now. Certainly not while the possessed are still loose in the universe. Is that wrong for someone of my situation? Have I failed?

Answer yourself.

I still have some nightmares.

I know. Though not as many; which we all know is a good sign of progress. What other symptoms persist?

I want to fly again. But . . . it's difficult to convince myself to do it. I suppose the uncertainty frightens me. I could meet them again.

The uncertainty or the unknown?

You're so fond of splitting hairs.

Indulge an old man.

Definitely the uncertainty. The unknown used to fascinate me. I loved exploring new planets, seeing wonders.

Your pardon, *Syrinx*, but you have never done these things.

What? She turned from the railing to stare at him, finding only that annoying, passive expression. *Oenone* and I spent years doing exactly that.

You spent years playing tourist. You admired what others had discovered, what they had built, the way they lived. The actions of a tourist, *Syrinx*, not an explorer. *Oenone* has never flown to a star which has not been catalogued; your footprint has never been the first upon a planet. You have always played safe, *Syrinx*. And even that did not protect you.

Protect me from what?

Your fear of the unknown.

She sat on the wickerwork chair opposite him, deeply troubled. You believe that of me?

I do. I want you to feel no shame, *Syrinx*, all of us have weaknesses. Mine, I know, are more terrible than you would ever believe me capable of.

If you say so.

As always, you remain stubborn to the last. I have not yet decided if this is a weakness or a strength.

Depends on the circumstances, I guess. She flashed a mischievous smile.

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. **As you say. In these two circumstances, it must therefore count as a weakness.**

You would rather I had surrendered myself and *Oenone*?

Of course not. And we are here to deal with the present, not dwell on what was.

So you see this alleged fear of mine to be a continuing problem?

It inhibits you, and this should not be. Your mind should not be caged, by your own bars or anyone else's. I would like you and *Oenone* to face the universe with determination.

How? I mean, I thought I was just about cured. I've been through all my memories of the torture and the circumstances around it with the therapists; we broke up each and every black spectre with rigorous logic. Now you tell me I have this deep-seated flaw. If I'm not ready now, I doubt I ever will be.

Ready for what?

I don't know exactly. Do my bit, I suppose. Help protect Edenism from the possessed, that's what all the other voidhawks are doing right now. I know *Oenone* wants to be a part of that.

You would not make a good captain at this point, not if you were to take an active part in the conflict. The unknown would always cast its shadow of doubt over your actions.

I know all about the possessed, believe me.

Do you? Then what will you do when you join them?

Join them? Never!

You propose to avoid dying? I will be interested to hear the method you plan for this endeavour.

Oh. Her cheeks reddened.

Death is always the great unknown. And now we know more of it the mystery only deepens.

How? How can it deepen when we know more?

Laton called it the great journey. What did he mean? The

Kiint said they have confronted the knowledge and come to terms with it. How? Their understanding of reality cannot be so much greater than ours. Edenists transfer their memories into the neural strata when their bodies die. Does their soul also transfer? Do these questions not bother you? That such philosophical abstracts should attain a supreme relevance to our existence is most disturbing to me.

Well, yes, they are disturbing if you lay them out in clinical detail like that.

And you have never considered them?

I have considered them, certainly. I just don't obsess on them.

Syrinx, you are the one Edenist still with us who has come closest to knowing the truth of any of these. If it affects any of us, it affects you.

Affect, or hinder?

Answer yourself.

I wish you'd stop saying that to me.

You know I never will.

Yes. Very well, I've thought about the questions; as to the answers, I don't have a clue. Which makes the questions irrelevant.

Very good, I would agree with that statement.

You would?

With one exception. They are irrelevant only for the moment. Right now, our society is doing what it always does in times of crisis, and resorting to physical force to defend itself. Again I have no quarrel with this. But if we are to make any real progress in this arena these questions must be examined with a degree of urgency so far lacking. For answer them we must. This is not a gulf of knowledge the human race can survive. We must deliver—dare I call it—divine truth.

You expect that out of a *therapy* session?

My dear Syrinx, of course not. What sloppy thinking. But I am disappointed the solution to our more immediate problem has eluded you.

Which problem? she asked in exasperation.

Your problem. He snapped his fingers at her with some

vexation, as if she were a miscreant child. **Now concentrate please. You wish to fly, but you retain a perfectly understandable reticence.**

Yes.

Everyone wishes to know the answer to those questions I asked, yet they do not know where to look.

Yes.

One race has those answers.

The Kiint? I know, but they said they wouldn't help.

Incorrect. I have accessed the sensewise recording of the Assembly's emergency session. Ambassador Roulor said the Kiint would not help us in the struggle we faced. The context of the statement was somewhat ambiguous. Did the ambassador mean the physical struggle, or the quest for knowledge?

We all know that the Kiint would not help us to fight. QED the ambassador was referring to the afterlife.

A reasonable assumption. One hopes the future of the human race does not rest on a single misinterpreted sentence.

So why haven't you asked the Kiint ambassador to Jupiter to clarify it?

I doubt that even a Kiint ambassador has the authority to disclose the kind of information we now search for, no matter what the circumstances.

Syrinx groaned in understanding. You want me to go to the Kiint homeworld and ask.

How kind of you to offer. You will embark on a flight with few risks involved, and you will also be confronting the unknown. Sadly your latter task will be conducted on a purely intellectual level, but it is an honourable start.

And good therapy.

A most fortuitous combination, is it not? If I were not a Buddhist I would be talking about the killing of two birds.

Assuming the Jovian Consensus approves of the flight.

An amused light twinkled in the deeply recessed eyes. Being the founder of Edenism has its privileges. Not even the Consensus would refuse one of my humble requests.

Syrinx closed her eyes, then looked up at the vaguely puz-

zled face of the chief therapist. She realized her lips were parted in a wide smile.

Is everything all right? he asked politely.

Absolutely. Taking a cautious breath, she eased her legs off the side of the bed. The hospital room was as comfortable and pleasant as only their culture could make it. But it would be nice to have a complete change.

Oenone.

Yes?

I hope you've enjoyed your rest, my love. We have a long flight ahead of us.

At last!

• • •

It had not been an easy week for Ikela. The Dorados were starting to suffer from the civil and commercial starflight quarantine. All exports had halted, and the asteroids had only a minuscule internal economy, which could hardly support the hundreds of industrial stations that refined the plentiful ore. Pretty soon he was going to have to start laying off staff in all seventeen of the T'Opingtu company's foundry stations.

It was the first setback the Dorados had ever suffered in all of their thirty-year history. They had been tough years, but rewarding for those who had believed in their own future and worked hard to attain it. People like Ikela. He had come here after the death of Garissa, like so many others tragically disinherited from that world. There had been more than enough money to start his business in those days, and it had grown in tandem with the system's flourishing economy. In three decades he had changed from bitter refugee to a leading industrialist, with a position of responsibility in the Dorados' governing council.

Now this. It wasn't financial ruin, not by any means, but the social cost was starting to mount up at an alarming rate. The Dorados were used only to expansion and growth. Unemployment was not an issue in any of the seven settled asteroids. People who found themselves suddenly without a job and regular earnings were unlikely to react favourably to the council washing their hands of the problem.

Yesterday, Ikela had sat in on a session to discuss the idea of making companies pay non-salaried employees a retainer fee to tide them through the troubles; which had seemed the easy solution until the chief magistrate started explaining how difficult that would be to implement legally. As always the council had dithered. Nothing had been decided.

Today Ikela had to start making his own decisions along those same lines. He knew he ought to set an example and pay some kind of reduced wage to his workforce. It wasn't the kind of decision he was used to making.

He strode into the executive floor's anteroom with little enthusiasm for the coming day. His personal secretary, Lomie, was standing up behind her desk, a harassed expression on her face. Ikela was mildly surprised to see a small red handkerchief tied around her ankle. He would never have thought a levelheaded girl like Lomie would pay any attention to that Deadnight nonsense which seemed to be sweeping through the Dorados' younger generation.

"I couldn't stonewall her," Lomie datavised. "I'm sorry, sir, she was so forceful, and she did say she was an old friend."

Ikela followed her gaze across the room. A smallish woman was rising from one of the settees, putting her cup of coffee down on the side table. She clung to a small backpack which was hanging at her side from a shoulder strap. Few Dorados residents had skin as dark as hers, though it was extensively wrinkled now. Ikela guessed she was in her sixties. Her features were almost familiar, something about them agitating his subconscious. He ran a visual comparison program through his neural nanonics personnel record files.

"Hello, Captain," she said. "It's been a while."

Whether the program placed her first, or the use of his old title triggered the memory, he never knew. "Mzu," he choked. "Dr Mzu. Oh, Mother Mary, what are you doing here?"

"You know exactly what I'm doing here, Captain."

"Captain?" Lomie inquired. She looked from one to the other. "I never knew . . ."

Keeping his eyes fixed on Mzu as if he expected her to leap for his throat, Ikela waved Lomie to be silent. "I'm taking no appointments, no files, no calls, nothing. We're not to be in-

errupted.” He datavised a code at his office door. “Come through, Doctor, please.”

The office had a single window, a long band of glass which looked down on Ayacucho’s biosphere cavern. Alkad gave the farms and parks an appreciative glance. “Not a bad view, considering you’ve only had thirty years to build it. The Garisans seem to have done well for themselves here. I’m glad to see it.”

“This cavern’s only fifteen years old, actually. Ayacucho was the second Dorado to be settled after Mapire. But you’re right, I enjoy the view.”

Alkad nodded, taking in the large office; its size, furnishings, and artwork chosen to emphasise the occupant’s status rather than conforming to any notion of aesthetics. “And you have prospered, too, Captain. But then, that was part of your mission, wasn’t it?”

She watched him slump down into a chair behind the big terrestrial-oak desk. Hardly the kind of dynamic magnate who could build his T’Opingtu company into a multistellar market leader in the fabrication of exotic alloy components. More like a fraud whose bluff had just been called.

“I have some of the resources we originally discussed,” he said. “Of course, they are completely at your disposal.”

She sat on a chair in front of the desk, staring him down. “You’re straying from the script, Captain. I don’t want resources, I want the combat-capable starship we agreed on. The starship you were supposed to have ready for me the day the Omuta sanctions ended. Remember?”

“Look, bloody hell it’s been decades, Mzu. Decades! I didn’t know where the hell you were, even if you were still alive. Mother Mary, things change. Life is different now. Forgive me, I know you are supposed to be here at this time, I just never expected to see you. I didn’t think . . .”

A chilling anger gained control of Alkad’s thoughts, unlocked from that secret centre of motivation at the core of her brain. “Have you got a starship which can deploy the Alchemist?”

He shook his head before burying it in his hands. “No.”

“They slaughtered ninety-five million of us, Ikela, they wrecked our planet, they made us breathe radioactive soot

until our lungs bled. Genocide doesn't even begin to describe what was done to us. You and I and the other survivors were a mistake, an oversight. There's no life left for us in this universe. We have only one purpose, one duty. Revenge, vengeance, and justice, our three guiding stars. Mother Mary has given us this one blessing, providing us with a second chance. We're not even attempting to kill the Omutans. I would never use the Alchemist to do that; I'm not going to become as they are, that would be their ultimate victory. All we're going to do is make them suffer, to give them a glimpse, a pitiful glimmer of the agony they've forced us to endure every waking day for thirty years."

"Stop it," he shouted. "I've made a life for myself here, we all have. This mission, this vendetta, what would it achieve after so much time? Nothing! We would be the tainted ones then. Let the Omutans carry the guilt they deserve. Every person they talk to, every planet they visit, they'll be cursed to carry the weight of their name with them."

"As we suffer pity wherever we go."

"Oh, Mother Mary! Don't do this."

"You will help me, Ikela. I am not giving you a choice in this. Right now you've allowed yourself to forget. That will end. I will make you remember. You've grown old and fat and comfy. I never did, I never allowed myself that luxury. They didn't allow me. Ironic that, I always felt. They kept my angry spirit alive with their eternal reminder, their agents and their discreet observation. In doing so, they also kept their own nemesis alive."

His face lifted in bewilderment. "What are you talking about? Have the Omutans been watching you?"

"No, they're all locked up where they belong. It's the other intelligence agencies who have discovered who I am and what I built. Don't ask me how. Somebody must have leaked the information. Somebody weak, Ikela."

"You mean, they know you're here?"

"They don't know exactly where I am. All they know is I escaped from Tranquillity. But now they'll be looking for me. And don't try fooling yourself, they'll track me down eventually. It's what they're good at, very good. The only question now is which one will find me first."

“Mother Mary!”

“Exactly. Of course, if you had prepared the starship for me as you were supposed to, this wouldn’t even be a problem. You stupid, selfish, petty-minded bastard. Do you realize what you’ve done? You have jeopardized everything we ever stood for.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t; and I won’t dignify you by trying to. I’m not even going to listen to any more of your pitiful whining. Now tell me, where are the others? Do we even have a partizan group anymore?”

“Yes. Yes, we’re still together. We still help the cause whenever we can.”

“Are all the originals here?”

“Yes, we’re all still alive. But the other four aren’t in Ayacucho.”

“What about other partizans, do you have a local leadership council?”

“Yes.”

“Then call them to a meeting. Today. They will have to be told what’s happening. We need nationalist recruits for a crew.”

“Yes,” he stammered. “Yes, all right.”

“And in the meantime, start looking for a suitable starship. There ought to be one in dock. It’s a shame I let the *Samaku* go. It would have suited us.”

“But there’s a Confederation-wide quarantine . . .”

“Not where we’re going there isn’t. And you’re a member of the Dorados council, you can arrange for the government to authorize our departure.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Ikela, look at me very closely. I am not playing games with you. You have endangered both my life and the mission you swore to undertake when you took the oath to serve your naval commission. As far as I am concerned, that amounts to treason. Now if an agency grabs me before I can retrieve the Alchemist, I am going to make damn sure they know where the money came from to help you start up T’Opingtu all those years ago. I’m sure you remember exactly what the Confederation law has to say about antimatter, don’t you?”

He bowed his head. "Yes."

"Good. Now start datavising the partizans."

"All right."

Alkad regarded him with a mixture of contempt and worry. That the others would falter had never occurred to her. They were all Garissan navy. Thirty years ago she had secretly suspected that if anyone was destined to be the weak link it would be her.

"I've been moving around a lot since I docked," she said. "But I'll spend the rest of the afternoon in your apartment. I need to clean up, and that's the one place I can be sure you won't tip anyone off about. There'd be too many questions."

Ikela recouped some of his old forcefulness. "I don't want you there. My daughter's living with me."

"So?"

"I don't want her involved."

"The sooner you get my starship prepared, the sooner I'll be gone." She hoisted the backpack's strap over her shoulder and went out into the anteroom.

Lomie glanced up from behind her desk, curiosity haunting her narrow features. Alkad ignored her, and datavised the lift processor for a ride to the lobby. The doors opened, revealing a girl inside. She was in her early twenties, a lot taller than Mzu, with a crown of short dreadlocks at the top of a shaven skull. First impression was that someone had attempted to geneer an elf into existence her torso was so slim, her limbs were disproportionately long. Her face could have been pretty if her personality wasn't so stern.

"I'm Voi," she said after the doors shut.

Alkad nodded in acknowledgement, facing the doors and wishing the lift could go faster.

All movement stopped, the floor indicator frozen between four and three.

"And you're Dr Alkad Mzu."

"There's a nervejam projector in this bag, and its control processor is activated."

"Good. I'm glad you're not walking around unprotected."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ikela's daughter. Check my public record file, if you like."

Alkad did, datavising the lift's net processor for a link to Ayacucho's civil administration computer. If Voi was some kind of agency plant, they'd made a very good job of ghosting details. Besides, if she was from an agency, the last thing they'd be doing was talking. "Restart the lift, please."

"Will you talk to me?"

"Restart the lift."

Voi datavised the lift's control processor, and they started to descend. "We want to help you."

"Who's we?" Alkad asked.

"My friends; there are quite a few of us now. The partizans you belong to have done nothing for years. They are soft and old and afraid of making waves."

"I don't know you."

"Was my father helpful?"

"We made progress."

"They won't help you. Not when it comes to action. We will."

"How did you find out who I am?"

"From my father. He shouldn't have told me, but he did. He's so weak."

"How much do you know?"

"That the partizans were supposed to prepare for you. That you were bringing something to finally give us our revenge against Omuta. Logically it has to be some kind of powerful weapon. Possibly even a planet-buster. He was always afraid of you, they all were. Have they made the proper preparations? I bet they haven't."

"As I said, I don't know you."

Voi leaned over her, furiously intent. "We have money. We're organized. We have people who aren't afraid. We won't let you down. We'd never let you down. Tell us what you want, we'll provide it."

"How did you know I was seeing your father?"

"Lomie, of course. She's not one of us, not a core member, but she's a friend. It's always useful for me to know what my father is doing. As I said, we're properly organized."

"So are children's day clubs." For a moment Alkad thought the girl was going to strike her.

"All right," Voi said with a calm that could only have been

induced by neural nanonic overrides. “You’re being sensible, not trusting a stranger with the last hope our culture owns. I can accept that. It’s rational.”

“Thank you.”

“But we can help. Just give us the chance. Please.” And *please* was obviously not a word which came easy from that mouth.

The lift doors opened. A lobby of polished black stone and curving white metal glinted under large silver light spires. A thirty-year-old unarmed combat program reviewed the image from Alkad’s retinal implants, deciding nobody was lurking suspiciously. She looked up at the tall, anorexically proportioned girl, trying to decide what to do. “Your father invited me to stay at his apartment. We can talk more when we get there.”

Voi gave a shark’s smile. “It would be an honour, Doctor.”

• • •

It was the woman sitting up at the bar wearing a red shirt who caught Joshua’s attention. The red was very red, a bright, effervescent scarlet. And the style of the shirt was odd, though he’d be hard pressed to define exactly what was wrong with the cut, it lacked . . . smoothness. The clincher was the fact it had buttons down the front, not a seal.

“Don’t look,” he murmured to Beaulieu and Dahybi. “But I think she’s a possessed.” He datavised his retinal image file to them.

They both turned and looked. In Beaulieu’s case it was quite a performance, twisting her bulk around in the too-small chair, streamers of light slithering around the contours of her shiny body.

“Jesus! Show some professionalism.”

The woman gave the three of them a demurely inquisitive glance.

“You sure?” Dahybi asked.

“Think so. There’s something wrong with her, anyway.”

Dahybi said nothing; he’d experienced Joshua’s intuition at work before.

“We can soon check,” Beaulieu said. “Go over to her and see if any of our blocks start glitching.”

“No.” Joshua was slowly scanning the rest of the teeming bar. It was a wide room cut square into the rock of Kilifi asteroid’s habitation section, with a mixed clientele mostly taken from ships’ crews and industrial station staff. He was anonymous here, as much as he could be (five people had so far recognized “Lagrange Calvert”). And Kilifi had been a good cover, it manufactured the kind of components he was supposed to be buying for Tranquillity’s defences. Sarha and Ashly were handling the dummy negotiations with local companies; and so far no one had questioned why they’d flown all the way to Narok rather than a closer star system.

He saw a couple more suspicious people drinking in solitude, then another three crammed around a table with sullen sly expressions. I’m getting too paranoid.

“We have to concentrate on our mission,” he said. “If Kilifi isn’t enforcing its screening procedures properly, that’s their problem. We can’t risk any sort of confrontation. Besides, if the possessed are wandering around this freely it must mean their infiltration is quite advanced.”

Dahybi hunched his shoulders and played with his drink, trying not to look anxious. “There are navy ships docked here, and most of the independent traders are combat-capable. If the asteroid falls, the possessed will get them.”

“I know.” Joshua met the node specialist’s stare, refusing to show weakness. “We cannot cause waves.”

“Sure, you said: Don’t draw attention to yourself, don’t talk to the natives, don’t fart loudly. What the hell are we doing here, Joshua? Why are you so anxious to trace Meyer?”

“I need to talk to him.”

“Don’t you trust us?”

“Of course I do. And don’t try such cheap shots. You know I’ll tell all of you as soon as I can. For now, it’s best you don’t know. You trust me, don’t you?”

Dahybi put his lips together in a tired grin. “Cheap shot.”

“Yeah.”

The waitress brought another round of drinks to their alcove. Joshua watched her legs as she wriggled away through the crowd. A bit young for him, mid-teens. Louise’s age. The thought warmed him briefly. Then he saw she was wearing a red handkerchief around her ankle. Jesus, I don’t know which

is worse, the horrors of possession or the pathetic dreams of the Deadnights.

He'd received one hell of a shock the first time he accessed the recording from Valisk. Marie Skibbow possessed and luring naive kids to their doom. She'd been a lovely girl, beautiful and smart, with thoughts as hard as carbotanium composite. If she could be caught, anyone could. Lalonde strummed out far too many resonances.

"Captain," Beaulieu warned.

Joshua saw Bunal approaching their alcove. He sat down and smiled. There wasn't the slightest sign of nerves. But then as Joshua had discovered while asking around his fellow captains, Bunal was overfamiliar with this kind of transaction.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Bunal said pleasantly. "Have you managed to acquire your cargo yet?"

"Some of it," Joshua said. "I'm hoping you were successful with the rest."

"Indeed I was. Most of the information was quite simple to obtain. However, I am nothing if not assiduous in any freelance work I undertake. I discovered that, sadly, what you actually need falls outside our original agreement."

Dahybi gave the man a hateful glare. He always despised bent civil servants.

"And will cost . . . ?" Joshua inquired, unperturbed.

"An additional twenty thousand fuseodollars." Bunal sounded sincerely regretful. "I apologize for the cost, but times are hard at the moment. I have little work and a large family."

"Of course." Joshua held up his Jovian Bank credit disk.

Bunal was surprised by the young captain's swift concession. It took him a moment to produce his own credit disk. Joshua shunted the money over.

"You were right," Bunal said. "The *Udat* did come to this star system. It docked at the Nyiru asteroid. Apparently its captain was hurt when they arrived, he spent almost four days in hospital undergoing neural trauma treatment. When it was complete, they filed a flight plan for the Sol system, and left."

"Sol?" Joshua asked. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. However—and this is where the twenty thousand comes in—their passenger, Dr Alkad Mzu, didn't go

with them. She hired an independent trader called the *Samaku*, and departed an hour later.”

“Flight plan?”

“Filed for a Dorado asteroid, Ayacucho. I even checked traffic control’s sensor data for the flight. They were definitely aligned for Tunja when they jumped.”

Joshua resisted the impulse to swear. Ione was right, Mzu was running to the last remnants of her nation. She must be going for the Alchemist. He flicked another glance at the girl in the red shirt, her head tipped back elegantly as she drank her cocktail. Jesus, as if we don’t have enough problems right now. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. You should also know, for no extra charge, that I’m not the only one to be asking these questions. There are three access requests logged on the Civil Spaceflight Department computer for the same files. One request was made only twenty minutes before mine.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“Bad news?”

“Interesting news,” Joshua grunted. He rose to his feet.

“If there is anything else I can obtain for you, Captain, please call.”

“Sure thing.” Joshua was already walking for the door, Dahybi and Beaulieu a couple of steps behind.

Before he reached the exit, people watching the AV pillar behind the bar were gasping in shock; agitated murmurs of conversation rippled down the length of the room. Perfect strangers asking each other: *Did you access that?* the way they always did with momentous news.

Joshua focused on the AV pillar’s projection, allowing the hazy laserlight sparkle to form its picture behind his eyes. A planet floated below him, its geography instantly familiar. No real continents or oceans, just winding seas and thousands of medium-sized islands. Patches of glowing red cloud squatted over half of the islands, concentrated mainly in the tropic zones—though on this world tropic was a relative term.

“. . . Confederation Navy frigate *Levêque* confirmed that all inhabited islands on Norfolk have now been covered by the reality dysfunction cloud,” the news commentator said. “All contact with the surface has been lost, and it must be as-

sumed that the majority, if not all, of the population has been possessed. Norfolk is a pastoral planet with few spaceplanes available to the local government; because of this no attempt was made to evacuate any inhabitants to the navy squadron before the capital Norwich fell. A statement from Confederation Navy headquarters at Trafalgar said that the *Levêque* would remain in orbit to observe the situation, but no offensive action was being considered at this time. This brings to seven the number of planets known to have been taken over by the possessed.”

“Oh, Jesus, Louise is down there.” The AV image broke up as he turned his head away from the pillar, seeing Louise running over the grassy wolds in one of those ridiculous dresses, laughing over her shoulder at him. And Genevieve, too, that irritating child who was either laughing or sulking. Marjorie, Grant (it would go worse for him, he would resist as long as possible), Kenneth, and even that receptionist at Drayton’s Import. “Goddamnit. No!” I should have been there. I could have got her away.

“Joshua?” Dahybi asked in concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Did you catch that piece about Norfolk?”

“Yes.”

“She’s down there, Dahybi. I left her there.”

“Who?”

“Louise.”

“You didn’t leave her there, Joshua. It’s her home, it’s where she belongs.”

“Right.” Joshua’s neural nanonics were plotting a course from Narok to Norfolk. He didn’t remember requesting it.

“Come on, Captain,” Dahybi said. “We’ve got what we came for. Let’s go.”

Joshua looked at the woman in the red shirt again. She was staring at the AV pillar, abstract pastel streaks from the projection glinting dully on her ebony cheeks. A delighted smile flourished on her lips.

Joshua hated her, her invincibility, the cool arrogance sitting among her enemies. Queen of the bitch demons come to taunt him. Dahybi’s hand tightened around his arm.

“Okay, we’re gone.”

• • •

“Here we are, home at last,” Loren Skibbow said with a histrionic sigh. “Not that we can stay for long. They’ll tear Guyana apart to find us now.”

The apartment was on the highest level of the biosphere’s habitation complex, where gravity was only eighty per cent standard. The penthouse of some Kingdom aristocrat, presumably, furnished with dark active-contour furniture and large hand-painted silk screens; every table and alcove shelf were littered with antiques.

Gerald felt it was a somewhat bizarre setting to wind up in considering the day’s events. “Are you creating this?” When they lived in the arcology, Loren had always badgered him for what she termed a “grander” apartment.

She looked around with a rueful smile and shook her head. “No. My imagination isn’t up to anything so gaudy. This is Pou Mok’s place.”

“The woman you’re possessing? The redhead?”

“That’s right.” Loren smiled and took a step towards him.

Gerald stiffened. Not that she needed any physical signs; his mind was foaming with fear and confusion. “Okay, Gerald, I won’t touch you. Sit down, we have a lot to talk about. And this time I mean talk, not just you telling me what you’ve decided is best for us.”

He flinched. Everything she did and said triggered memories. The unedited past seemed to have become his curse in life.

“How did you get here?” he asked. “What happened, Loren?”

“You saw the homestead, what that bastard Dexter and his Ivets did to us.” Her face paled. “To Paula.”

“I saw.”

“I tried, Gerald. Honestly, I tried to fight back. But it all happened so fast. They were crazy brutes; Dexter killed one of his own just because the boy would slow them down. I wasn’t strong enough to stop it.”

“And I wasn’t there.”

“They’d have killed you, too.”

“At least . . .”

“No, Gerald. You would have died for nothing. I’m glad you escaped. This way you can help Marie.”

“How?”

“The possessed can be beaten. Individually, in any case. I’m not so sure about overall. But that’s for others to fight over, planetary governments and the Confederation. You and I have to rescue our daughter, allow her to have her own life. No one else will.”

“How?” This time it was a shout.

“The same way you were freed: zero-tau. We have to put her in zero-tau. The possessed can’t endure it.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re conscious the whole time. Zero-tau suspends normal energy wave functions, but our souls are still connected to the beyond somehow, that makes us aware of time passing. But only time, nothing else. It is the ultimate sensory deprivation, actually worse than the beyond. At least in the beyond souls have the memories of other souls to feed on, and some perception of the real universe.”

“That’s why,” Gerald murmured. “I knew Kingsford Garrigan was scared.”

“Some can hold out longer than others, it depends on how strong their personality is. But in the end, everyone retreats from the body they possess.”

“There is hope, then.”

“For Marie, yes. We can save her.”

“So that she can die.”

“Everybody dies, Gerald.”

“And goes on to suffer in the beyond.”

“I’m not sure. If it hadn’t been for you and Marie, I don’t think I would have remained with all the other souls.”

“I don’t understand.”

Loren gave him a hapless smile. “I was worried about the two of you, Gerald, I wanted to make sure you were all right. That’s why I stayed.”

“Yes but . . . where else could you go?”

“I’m not certain that question applies. The beyond is strange, there are no separate places within it, not like this universe.”

“So how could you leave?”

"I wouldn't leave it . . ." She fluttered her hands in exasperation as she struggled with the concept. "I just wouldn't be in the same part of it as the rest of them."

"You said there were no different parts."

"There aren't."

"So how—"

"I don't pretend to understand, Gerald. But you can leave the others behind. The beyond isn't necessarily the torment everyone is making it out to be."

Gerald studied the pale salmon carpet, shamed at being unable to look at his own wife. "And you came back for me."

"No, Gerald." Her voice hardened. "We might be husband and wife, but my love isn't that blind. I came back principally for Marie's sake. If it had just been you, I don't think I would have had the courage. I endured the other souls devouring my memories for her sake. Did you know you can see out of the beyond? Just. I watched Marie, and that made the horror tolerable. I hadn't seen her since that day she walked out on us. I wanted to know she was alive and safe. It wasn't easy; I almost abandoned my vigil, then she was possessed. So I stayed, waiting for an opportunity to help, for someone close to you to be possessed. And here I am."

"Yes. Here you are. Who is Pou Mok? I thought the Principality had defeated the possessed, confined them all to Mortonridge."

"They have, according to the news reports. But the three who arrived here on the *Ekwan* with you got to Pou Mok before they left the asteroid. They were smart choosing her; she supplies illegal stimulant programs to the personnel up here, among other things. That's why she can afford this place. It also means she's not included on any file of Guyana's inhabitants, so she never got hauled in to be tested like everyone else. The idea was that even if the three from the *Ekwan* got caught on the planet, Pou Mok's possessor would be safe to begin the process all over again. In theory, she was the perfect provocateur to leave behind. Unfortunately for the three of them, I was the one who came forwards from the beyond. I don't care about their goals, I'm only interested in Marie."

"Was I wrong taking her to Lalonde?" Gerald asked re-

motely. "I thought I was doing the best possible thing for her, for all of you."

"You were. Earth's dying; the arcologies are old, worn out. There's nothing there for people like us; if we'd stayed, Marie and Paula would have had lives no different from us, or our parents, or any of our ancestors for the last ten generations. You broke the cycle for us, Gerald. We had the chance to take pride in what our grandchildren would become."

"What grandchildren?" He knew he was going to start crying any minute. "Paula's dead; Marie hated our home so much she ran away at the first opportunity."

"Good thing she did, Gerald, wasn't it? She was always headstrong, and she's a teenager. Teenagers can never look and plan ahead; having a good time is the only thing they can think of. All she knew was that two months of her life weren't as comfy as the ones which went before, and she had to do some work for the first time as well. Small surprise she ran away. It was a premature taste of adulthood that scared her off, not us being bad parents."

"You know, I perceived her before she was possessed. She'd found herself a job in Durringham, a good job. She was doing all right for herself, better than she could ever do on Earth. Knowing Marie, she didn't appreciate it."

When Gerald found the nerve to glance up, he saw Loren's expression was a twin to his own. "I didn't tell you before. But I was so frightened for her when she ran away."

"I know you were. Fathers always think their daughters can't take care of themselves."

"You were worried, too."

"Yes. Oh, yes. But only that fate would throw something at her she couldn't survive. Which it has. She would have done all right if this curse hadn't been unleashed."

"All right," he said shakily. "What do we do about it? I just wanted to go to Valisk and help her."

"That's my idea, too, Gerald. There's no big plan, though I do have some of the details sorted out. First thing we need to do is get you on the *Quadin*, it's one of the few starships still flying. Right now the Kingdom is busy selling weapons components to its allies. The *Quadin* is departing for Pinjarra as-

teroid in seven hours with a cargo of five-gigawatt maser cannons for their SD network.”

“Just me?” he asked in alarm. “Where are you going?”

“To Valisk, eventually. But we can’t travel together, it’s too risky.”

“I can’t go alone. Really, I can’t. I don’t know how to, not anymore. I can’t think right, not now. I want you to come with me, Loren. Please.”

“No, Gerald. You must do this by yourself.”

“It . . . it’s hard. There are other things in my head.”

“We’re the only chance Marie has. Focus on that, Gerald.”

“Yes. Yes, I will.” He gave her a grave smile. “Where is Pinjarra?”

“It’s in the Toowoomba star system, which is Australian-ethnic. The Kingdom is anxious to keep them locked in to its diplomatic strategy. Their asteroid settlements aren’t very well defended, so they’re being offered upgrades on favourable financial terms.”

Gerald fidgeted with his fingers. “But how do I get on board? We’d never make it into the spaceport, never mind a starship. Maybe if we just asked Ombey’s government if we can go to Valisk. They’ll know we’re telling the truth about wanting to help Marie. And that information about zero-tau would be useful. They’d be grateful.”

“Bloody hell.” Loren regarded the pathetically hopeful smile on his face more with astonishment than contempt. He had always been the forceful one, the go-getter. “Oh, Gerald, what have they done to you?”

“Remember.” He hung his head, probing at his temples in a vain attempt to alleviate some of the sparkling pain inside. “They made me remember. I don’t want that. I don’t want to remember, I just want to forget it all.”

She came over and sat beside him, her arm going around his shoulder the way she used to do with her daughters when they were younger. “Once we free Marie, all this will be over. You can think of other things again, new things.”

“Yes.” He nodded vigorously, speaking with the slow surety of the newly converted. “Yes, you’re right. That’s what Dr Dobbs told me, too; I have to formulate relevant goals for

my new circumstances, and concentrate on achieving them. I must eject myself from the failings of the past.”

“Good philosophy.” Her eyebrows rose in bemusement. “Firstly we have to buy you passage on the *Quadin*. The captain has supplied Pou Mok with various fringe-legal fleks before, which can be used to lever him into taking you. If you’re firm enough with him, Gerald. Are you going to manage that?”

“Yes. I can do that.” He grasped his hands together, squeezing. “I can tell him anything if it will help Marie.”

“Just don’t be too aggressive. Stay polite and calmly determined.”

“I will.”

“Fine. Now money isn’t a problem, obviously, I can give you a Jovian Bank credit disk with about half a million fuseodollars loaded in. Pou Mok also has half a dozen blank passport fleks. Our real problem is going to be your appearance, every sensor in the asteroid is going to be programmed for your features now. I can change the way you look, but only while I’m near you, which is no use at all. They can detect me easily in public places, especially if I’m using my energetic ability. So we’re going to have to give you a permanent alteration.”

“Permanent?” he asked uneasily.

“Pou Mok has a set of cosmetic adaptation packages. She used to keep changing her own face in case the asteroid police became too familiar with it—she’s not even a natural redhead. I think I know enough to program the control processor manually. If I don’t get too close, the packages should be able to give you a basic makeover. It ought to be enough.”

Loren took him through into one of the apartment’s bedrooms and told him to lie down. The cosmetic adaptation packages were similar to nanonic medical packages but with warty bubbles on the outside, holding reserves of collagen ready to be implanted, firming up new contours. Gerald felt the furry inner surface knitting to his skin, then his nerves went dead.

• • •

It took a lot of effort on Gerald’s part not to shy away from the ceiling-mounted sensors in the public hall. He still wasn’t

convinced about the face which appeared each time he looked in the mirror. Ten years younger, but with puffy cheeks and drooping laughter lines, skin a shade darker with an underlying red flush; a face which conveyed his internal worry perfectly. His hair had been trimmed to a centimetre fuzz and coloured a light chestnut—at least there were no silver strands any more.

He walked into the Bar Vips and ordered a mineral water, asking the barman where he could find Captain McRobert.

McRobert had brought two of his crew with him, one of whom was a cosmonik with a body resembling a mannequin: jet-black with no features at all, not even on the head; he was an impressive two hundred and ten centimetres tall.

Gerald tried to retain an impassive expression as he sat at their table, but it wasn't easy. Their steely presence was conjuring up memories of the squad which had captured Kingsford Garrigan in Lalonde's jungle. "I'm Niall Lyshol; Pou Mok sent me," he stuttered.

"If she hadn't, we wouldn't be here," McRobert said curtly. "As it is . . ." He gave the cosmonik a brief signal.

Gerald was offered a processor block.

"Take it," McRobert instructed.

He tried, but the huge black hand wouldn't let go.

"No static charge," the cosmonik said. "No glitches." The block was withdrawn.

"All right, Niall Lyshol," McRobert said. "You're not a possessed, so what the fuck are you?"

"Someone who wants a flight out of here." Gerald exhaled softly, reminding himself of the relaxation exercises Dr Dobbs urged him to employ: cycle down the body and the brain waves will follow. "As someone else who deals with Pou Mok, Captain, you should appreciate the need to keep moving on before people start to take an interest in you."

"Don't pull that bullshit pressure routine on me, boy. I'm not taking anyone who's hot, not with the way things are right now. I don't even know if we're going to leave Guyana, the code two defence alert still hasn't been lifted. Traffic control is hardly going to clear anyone for flight while one of those bastards is running loose up here."

"I'm not hot. Check the bulletins."

“I have.”

“So you’ll take me when the code two is lifted?”

“You’re a complication, Lyshol. I can’t take passengers because of the quarantine, which means you’d have to be listed as crew. You haven’t got neural nanonics, which means the line company would start asking me questions. I don’t like that.”

“I can pay.”

“Be assured: you will.”

“And you’ll have Pou Mok’s gratitude. For what it’s worth.”

“Less than she likes to think. What are you running from?”

“People. Not the authorities. There’s no official trouble.”

“One hundred thousand fuseodollars, and you spend the whole voyage in zero-tau. I’m not having you throwing up all over the life-support capsule.”

“Agreed.”

“Too quickly. A hundred thousand is an awful lot of money.”

Gerald wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep this up; slow thoughts echoed in his skull, telling him that the sanatorium had been a much kinder environment than this. If I went back, Dr Dobbs would understand, he’d make sure the police didn’t punish me. If it wasn’t for Marie . . . “You can’t have it both ways. If I stay here then a lot of secrets are going to get spilt. You probably wouldn’t be able to fly to any of the Kingdom systems again. I think that would bother the line company more than taking on a crewman without neural nanonics; not that they’ll know I don’t have neural nanonics unless you tell them.”

“I don’t like being threatened, Lyshol.”

“I’m not threatening you. I’m asking for help. I need your help. Please.”

McRobert glanced at his companions. “All right. The *Quadin* is docked at bay 901-C, we’re scheduled to depart in three hours. Like I said, I can’t guarantee that time with the code two, but if you’re not there I’m not waiting.”

“I’m ready now.”

“No baggage? You surprise me. Very well, you can pay me

when we get on board. And, Lyshol, don't expect any crew salary."

When the four of them came out of Bar Vips, Gerald gave what he believed to be a surreptitious glance along the public hall. There weren't many people about, the code two alert had hauled in all the asteroid's off-duty military and civil service personnel.

Loren watched him go, hunched up and tragic between his three escorts. They stepped into a lift, and the door closed behind them. She walked the other way down the public hall, a smile playing over her illusory lips.

• • •

After seven and a half hours with over a hundred false alerts and not one genuine sighting, Admiral Farquar was considering running a suppressor program through his neural nanonics. He hated the artificial calm the software brought, but the tension and depression were getting to him. The hunt for the possessed woman was being run from the Royal Navy tactical operations centre. It wasn't quite the operation envisaged while it was being built, but its communications were easily reconfigured to probe the asteroid's net, and its AI had been loaded with the tracker programs developed by Diana Tiernan to hunt possessed across Xingu. Given the size of Guyana, and the density of electronic systems spread throughout the interior, they should have had a result within minutes.

But the woman had eluded them. In doing so, she had forced him to admit to Princess Kirsten that if one could, so could more. There might be any number running around Guyana. For all he knew the entire navy staff could have been possessed, which was why the operations centre kept saying they couldn't find her. He didn't believe it himself (he'd visited the centre personally) but no doubt it was an option the cabinet had to consider. Even he must be considered suspect, though they'd been tactful enough not to say so.

As a result, Guyana had handed over Ombey's Strategic Defence network command to a Royal Navy base in Atherstone. A complete quarantine of the asteroid had been quietly enforced under the guise of the code two defence alert.

So far it had all been for nothing.

The office management computer datavisd him that Captain Oldroyd, his staff security officer, and Dr Dobbs were requesting an interview. He datavisd an acknowledgement, and his office dissolved into the white bubble room of a sensenviron conference room.

“Have you made any progress finding her?” Dobbs asked.

“Not yet,” Farquar admitted.

“That ties in,” the doctor said. “We’ve been running analysis scenarios based on the information we’ve collated so far; and based on that I believe I’ve come up with a rationale for her actions. Extracting Skibbow from our medical facility was slightly puzzling behaviour. It was an awful risk even for a possessed. If the marines had been thirty seconds faster she would never have made it. She must have had an extremely good reason.”

“Which is?”

“I think she’s Loren Skibbow, Gerald’s wife. If for no other reason than what she said to Jansen Kovak: You should try being married to him for twenty years. I checked our file, they were married for twenty years.”

“His wife?”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, I’ve heard stranger.” The admiral faced Captain Oldroyd. “I hope you’ve got some evidence to back up this theory.”

“Yes, sir. Assuming she is who we suspect, her behavioural profile certainly fits her actions to date. First of all, we believe she’s been in Guyana for some time, possibly right from the beginning when the *Ekwan* docked. She has obviously had enough time to learn how to move around without activating any of our tracer programs. Secondly, if she can do that, why hasn’t she launched the kind of takeover effort we saw on Xingu? She’s held back for a reason.”

“Because it doesn’t fit in with her plans,” Dr Dobbs said eagerly. “If the whole asteroid became possessed, her peers would be unlikely to allow Gerald his freedom. This is all personal, Admiral, it’s not part of what’s happening to Mortonridge or New California. She’s completely on her own. I don’t believe she’s any real danger to the Kingdom’s security at all.”

“Are you telling me we’ve shifted the Principality to a code two alert because of a *domestic* matter?” Admiral Farquar asked.

“I believe so,” Dr Dobbs said apologetically. “The possessed are people, too. We’ve had ample proof that they retain a nearly complete range of human emotions. And, er . . . we did put Gerald through quite an ordeal. If what we suspect is true, it would be quite reasonable to assume Loren would do her best to take him away from us.”

“Dear God. All right, so now what? How does this theory help us deal with her?”

“We can negotiate.”

“To what end? I don’t care that she’s a loving wife. She’s a bloody possessed. We can’t have the pair of them living happily ever after up here.”

“No. But we can offer to take better care of Gerald. From her viewpoint, of course,” Dr Dobbs added quickly.

“Maybe.” The admiral would have dearly loved to have found a flaw in the reasoning, but the facts did seem to fit together with uncomfortable precision. “So what do you recommend?”

“I’d like to broadcast over Guyana’s net, load a message into every personal communications processor, blanket the news and entertainment companies. It’ll only be a matter of time before they access it.”

“If she answers she’ll give away her location. She’ll know that.”

“We’ll find her eventually, I’ll make that quite clear. What I can offer is a solution she can accept. Do I have your permission? It will need to be a genuine offer. After all, the possessed can read the emotional content of minds. She’ll know if I’m telling the truth.”

“That’s a pretty broad request, Doctor. What exactly do you want to offer her?”

“Gerald to be taken down to the planet and given an Ombey citizenship. We provide full financial compensation for what we put him through, complete his counselling and therapy. And finally, if this crisis is resolved, we’ll do whatever we can to reunite him with his daughter.”

“You mean that Kiera girl in Valisk?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“I doubt my authority runs to that . . .” He broke off as the office management computer datavised a change in Guyana’s status. The operations centre had just issued a full combat alert.

The admiral opened a channel to the duty officer. “What’s happening?” he datavised.

“The AI has registered an anomaly, sir. We think it could be her. I’ve dispatched a Royal Marine squad.”

“What sort of anomaly?”

“A camera in the spaceport spindle entrance chamber registered a man getting into a transit capsule. When the capsule stopped at section G5 a woman got out. The capsule never stopped at any other section.”

“What about processor glitches?”

“The AI is analysing all the electronics around her. There are some efficiency reductions, but well below the kind of disturbance which we were getting from the possessed down in Xingu.”

The admiral requested a schematic of the spaceport. Section G5 was the civil spaceplane and ion field flyer dock. “Dear God, Dr Dobbs, I think you might have been right after all.”

• • •

Loren floated along the brightly lit tubular corridor towards the airlock. According to the spaceport register, a Kulu Corporation SD2002 spaceplane was docked to it, a thirty-seater craft owned by the Crossen company who used it to ferry staff up to their microgee industrial stations. One of the smallest spaceplanes at Guyana, it was exactly the kind of craft a pair of fairly ignorant desperadoes would try to steal if they wanted to get down to the planet.

There was nobody about. The last person she’d seen had been a maintenance engineer who’d boarded the transit capsule she’d arrived in. She toyed with the idea of letting her energetic ability flare out and mess up some of the electronics in the corridor. But that might make them suspicious, she’d controlled herself for so long that any change now would cause questions. She’d just have to hope that their security programs and sensors would catch her. The change of image

was a subtle enough betrayal, providing their monitor routines were good enough.

The airlock tube was five metres long, and narrower than the corridor, barely two metres wide. She manoeuvred herself into it, only to find the hatch at the far end was shut.

At last, an excuse to use the energistic ability.

There was a surge of electricity around the hatch. She could sense the main power cables behind the azure blue composite walls, thick lines that burnt with an ember glow of current. There were other cables too, smaller and dimmer. It was one of those which had come alive, connected to a small communications block set into the rim of the hatch.

“It’s Loren, isn’t it?” a voice from the block asked. “Loren Skibbow, I’m sure it’s you. My name is Dr Riley Dobbs. I was treating Gerald before you took him away.”

She stared at the block in shock. How the bloody hell had he figured that out?

The power flowed through her body, twisting up from the beyond like a hot spring; she could feel it squirting through every cell. Her mind shaped it as it rose inside her, transforming it into the pattern she wanted, a pattern which matched her dreamy wish. It began to superimpose itself over reality. Sparks shivered over the surface of the hatch.

“Loren, I want to help, and I’ve been given the authority which will allow me to help. Please listen. Gerald is my patient, I don’t want him harmed. I believe the two of us agree on that.”

“Go to hell, Doctor. Better still, I’ll take you there personally. You damaged my husband’s mind. I’m not going to forget that.”

There were noises in the corridor behind her, soft scraping, clinking sounds. When she focused, she could perceive the minds of the marines closing on her. Cold and anxious, but very determined.

“Gerald was damaged by the possession,” Dobbs said. “I was trying to cure him. I want to continue that process.”

The sparks had begun to swirl around the composite of the airlock tube, penetrating below the surface as if they were swimming through the material.

“Under the muzzle of a gun?” she asked scathingly. “I know they’re behind me.”

“The marines won’t shoot. I promise that, Loren. It would be pointless. Shooting would just cost the life of the person you’ve possessed. Nobody wants that. Please, come and talk to me. I’ve already obtained huge concessions from the authorities. Gerald can be taken down to the planet. He’ll be looked after properly, I’ll continue his therapy. Perhaps someday he can even see Marie again.”

“You mean Kiera. That bitch won’t let my daughter go.”

“Nothing is certain. We can discuss this. Please. You can’t leave on the spaceplane. Even if you get in you can hardly pilot it down through the SD network. The only way Gerald can get down to the planet is if I take him.”

“You won’t touch him again. He’s safe in my hiding place now, and you never found me, not in all the time I was there.”

The airlock walls gave out a small creak. All the sparks had blurred together to form a glowing ring of composite encircling her. She smiled tightly. The subterfuge was nearly complete. Dobbs’s intervention had turned out to be a beautiful bonus.

Loren could sense the marines holding back just past the edge of the airlock tube. She took a deep breath, attempting to deflect the knowledge of what was about to come. White fire burst out of her feet with a terrible screeching sound. It fountained into the corridor and broke apart into an avalanche of individual fireballs which careered into the waiting marines.

“No, Loren, don’t, I can help. Please—”

She exerted herself to the full. Dobbs’s voice fractured into a brassy caterwaul before vanishing altogether as the energetic effect crashed every processor within twenty-five metres.

“Don’t,” Pou Mok pleaded from the heart of Loren’s mind. “I won’t tell them where he is. I promise. They’ll never know. Let me live.”

“I can’t trust the living,” Loren told her.

“Bitch!”

The wall of the airlock tube gleamed brighter than the fireballs, then the composite vaporised. Loren flew out of the widening gap, impelled by the blast of air which stampeded away into the vacuum.

“Dear God,” Admiral Farquar grunted. The spaceport’s external sensors showed him the jet of air diminishing. Three marines had followed Loren Skibbow out into space. Their armour suits would provide some protection against decompression, and they had a small oxygen reserve. The duty officer had already dispatched some MSVs to chase after them.

Loren Skibbow was a different matter. For a while she had glowed from within, a fluorescent figure spinning around and around as she left the ruptured dock behind. Now the glow was fading. After a couple of minutes it winked out. The body exploded far more violently than it should have done.

“Locate as much as you can of her, and bring the pieces back,” Admiral Farquar told the duty officer. “We can take a DNA sample; the ISA ought to be able to identify her for us.”

“But why?” Dr Dobbs asked, mortified. “What the hell made her do that?”

“Perhaps they don’t think quite like us, after all,” the admiral said.

“They do. I know they do.”

“When we find Skibbow, you can ask him.”

It was a task which proved harder than expected. There was no response from his debrief nanonics, so the Royal Navy began a physical search of Guyana, monitored by the AI. No room, no service tunnel, and no storage chamber was overlooked. Any space larger than a cubic metre was examined.

It took two and a half days. Pou Mok’s room was opened and searched thirty-three hours after it began. Because it was listed as being rented (currently unoccupied) by someone on Ombey, and the diligent search turned up nothing, it was closed up and codelocked.

The cabinet meeting which followed the end of the search decided that one missing mental patient could not justify keeping the navy’s premier defence base isolated, nor could Ombey do without the products of Guyana’s industrial stations. The asteroid was stood down to a code three status, and the problem of the woman’s identity and Skibbow’s whereabouts handed over to a joint ISA ESA team.

Three and a half days after its original departure time, the *Quadin* left for Pinjarra. Gerald Skibbow wasn’t aware of it, he had been in zero-tau an hour before Loren’s final diversion.

16

The Bar KF-T wasn't up to much, but after a fifty-hour trip squashed into the two-deck life support capsule of an inter-orbit cargo tug with just the captain's family to talk to, Monica Foulkes wasn't about to closet herself away in a barren hotel room. A drink and some company, that's what I need. She sat on a stool up at the bar sipping an imported beer while Ayacucho's meagre nightlife eddied around her. The economic downturn from the quarantine was affecting every aspect of Dorados life, even here. It was ten-thirty P.M. local time and only five couples were braving the dance floor, there were even some tables free. But the young men were still reassuringly on the prowl; she'd already had three offers of a drink.

The only cause for concern was how many of them were wearing red handkerchiefs around their ankles, boys and girls. She couldn't be entirely sure if they wanted to seduce her or simply convert her. Deadnight was becoming an alarming trend; the ESA's head of station in Mapire estimated twenty per cent of the Dorados' teenage population was getting sucked in. Monica would have put it nearer to fifty per cent. Given the blandness of existence among the asteroids she was surprised it wasn't even higher.

Her extended sensory analysis program plotted the tall man's approach, only alerting her to his existence when he was two metres away and his destination obvious.

"Can I get you another bottle?"

Her intended reply perished as soon as she saw the too-long greying hair flopping over his brow. "Sure," she said, grinning whimsically.

He sat on the empty stool beside her and signalled the barmaid for a couple of bottles. "Now this is far more stylish than our last encounter."

“True. How are you, Samuel?”

“Overworked and underpaid. Government employees get the same deal the Confederation over.”

“You forgot unappreciated.”

“No I didn’t,” he said cheerfully. “That’s the benefit of Edenism, everyone contributes to the greater good, no matter what area we excel in.”

“Oh, God.” She accepted her new beer from the barmaid. “An evangelical Edenist. Just my luck.”

“So, what are you doing here?”

“Negotiating armament manufacturing contracts; it actually says I’m a rep for Octagon Exports on my passport.”

“Could be worse.” Samuel tried his beer, and frowned at the bottle with some dismay. “Take me, I’m supposed to be part of the delegation from this system’s Edenist habitats, discussing mutual defence enhancement arrangements. I specialize in internal security procedures.”

Monica laughed, and tipped her bottle at the middle-aged Edenist. “Good luck.” The humour ended. “You must have seen them?”

“Yes. I’m afraid the possessed are definitely inside the barricades.”

“Shit! I meant the Deadnight kids.”

“Ah. Monica, please take care. Our . . . examination of the Dorados has shown up several cadres of possessed. They’re here, and they are expanding. I do not advise you return to Mapire. Our estimation is that it will fall within another three days, probably less.”

“Did you tell the governing council?”

“No. We decided it would cause too much panic and disorder. The council would institute quite draconian measures, and be completely unable to enforce them, which would only worsen the situation. The Dorados do not have the usual civil government structure; for all their size and economic importance, they remain company towns, without adequate law enforcement personnel. In short, the possessed will take over here anyway. We need time to search in peace before they do. I’m afraid Mzu comes before everything, including alerting the population.”

“Oh. Thanks for the warning.”

“My pleasure. Have your assets located Daphine Kigano yet?”

Monica crinkled her face up in distaste. I shouldn't be discussing this, not with him. Standard agency doctrine. But the universe wasn't exactly standard anymore. And the ESA didn't have too many resources here. “No. But we know it's her.”

“Yes. That's what we concluded.”

“A chartered starship carrying one passenger was rather un-subtle. Our station accessed the Department of Immigration's file on the *Samaku*'s docking: one hundred per cent visual confirmation. God knows what she was doing in the Narok system, though.”

“Just trading ships, we hope. An interdiction order has gone out for the *Samaku*, all voidhawks and Confederation Navy ships are alert for it.”

“Good. Look, Samuel, I don't know what your orders are—”

“Originally: find Mzu, prevent her from handing over the Alchemist to the Garissan partizan movement, retrieve the Alchemist. That's the soft option. If we can't do that, then I was instructed to terminate her and destroy her neural nanonics. If we don't get the Alchemist, no one else must have it.”

“Yeah. Pretty much the same as mine. Personally I think the second option would be best all round.”

“Possibly. I must admit that even after seventy-five years in the job I am reluctant to kill in cold blood. A life is a life.”

“For the greater good, my friend.”

Samuel smiled sadly. “I know both the arguments and the stakes involved. However, there is also a new factor to consider. We absolutely cannot allow her or it to fall into the hands of the possessed.”

“God, I know that. Capone with antimatter is bad enough; give him the Alchemist and the Confederation Navy might not be able to contain him.”

“Which means, we really don't want to expedite option two, do we?”

Facing him was the same as receiving a stern glance from a loving grandfather who was dispensing homely wisdom. How infuriating that she had to have the obvious pointed out to her in such a fashion. “How can I argue against that?” She grunted miserably.

“Just as long as you appreciate all the factors.”

“Sure. Consider my wrist firmly smacked. What have your lot got planned for her, then?”

“Following acquisition, Consensus recommended placing her in zero-tau. At the very least until the possessed situation is resolved. Possibly longer.”

“How long?” Monica almost didn’t want to ask, or know.

“Consensus thought it prudent that she remains there until we have a requirement for the Alchemist. It is a large galaxy, after all; there may be other, more hostile xenocs than the Kiint and Tyrathca out there.”

“I was wrong, you’re not an evangelist, you’re a paranoid.”

“A pragmatist, I sincerely hope; as are all Edenists.”

“Okay, Samuel, so pragmatically, what do you want to do next? And please bear in mind that I am a loyal subject of my King.”

“Concentrate on finding her first, then get her away from the Dorados. The argument over custody can come later.”

“Nine-tenths of the law,” she muttered. “Are you offering me a joint operation?”

“Yes, if you’re willing. We have more resources here, I think, which gives us the greater chance of launching a successful extraction mission. But neither of us can afford to dismiss any avenue which will locate her. I am sure your Duke of Salion would approve of any action which guaranteed her removal from the scene right now. You can accompany her on our evacuation flight; and afterwards we would allow a joint custody to satisfy the Kingdom we have not acquired Alchemist technology. Is that reasonable?”

“Yeah, very. We have a deal.”

They touched bottles.

“The local partizan leadership has been called to a meeting here tonight,” she said. “Unfortunately, I don’t know exactly where that is in the asteroid. I’m waiting for our asset to get in touch as soon as it’s over.”

“Thank you, Monica. We don’t know where it is, either. But we’re assuming she will be there.”

“Can you track any of the partizans?”

“It is not easy. But we’ll certainly make every effort.”

For three days the rented office suite which had become the new Edenist intelligence service headquarters in Ayacucho had been the centre of a remarkable breeding program. When the agents of the "defence delegation" team arrived they brought with them seventy thousand geneered spider eggs. Every arachnid was affinity-capable, and small enough to clamber through grilles and scurry through the vast mechanical plexus of lift shafts, maintenance passages, environmental ducts, cable conduits, and waste disposal pipes which knitted the asteroid's rooms and public halls together into a functional whole.

For over seventy hours the tiny infiltrators were coaxed and manipulated along black pipes and through chinks in the rock, slipping around cracks in badly fitted composite panels. Thousands never made it to their required destination. Victims of more predatory creatures, of working insect grids, of security barriers (most common in the corporate areas), sluices of strange liquids, smears of sticky fluids, and the most common failing of all: being lost.

But for every one which didn't make it, five did. At the end of the deployment period the Edenists had visual coverage of sixty-seven per cent of Ayacucho's interior (which was how Samuel found Monica Foulkes so easily). The three voidhawks perched on Ayacucho's docking ledges, along with the ten armed voidhawks holding station inside Tunja's particle disk, and the agents reviewed the spiders on a snapshot rotor, managing a complete sweep every four hours. As a method of locating one individual it was horribly inefficient. Samuel knew that it would only be pure chance if Mzu was spotted during one of the sweeps. It was up to the agents on the ground to lower the odds by procedural work; their dull routine of researching public files, bullying assets, bribing officialdom, and on occasion outright blackmail.

• • •

For thirty years the Garissan partizan movement had pursued a course of consistently lacklustre activity. It funded several anti-Omuta propaganda campaigns to keep the hatred alive among the first of a new generation born to the refugees. Mercenaries and ex-Garissan navy marines were recruited and sent on sabotage missions against any surviving Omutan interests.

There were even a couple of attempts to fly into the Omuta system and attack asteroid settlements, both of which were snuffed by CNIS before the starships ever left dock. But for the last decade the leadership had done little except talk. Membership had dropped away steadily, as had funding, along with any real enthusiasm.

With such shoddy organization and defunct motivation it was inevitable that any intelligence agency which had ever shown an interest in the partizans had collated files on every person who had been a member, or even attended a fringe meeting. Their leadership was perfectly documented, long since consigned to the semi-crank category and downgraded to intermittent monitoring. A status which was now abruptly reversed.

There were five people making up the executive of Ayacucho's partizan group. In keeping with the movement's deterioration none of them followed the kind of security procedures they had obeyed so rigorously in the early days. That sloppiness in conjunction with an encyclopedic knowledge of their daily activity patterns allowed the Edenists to position spiders where they could provide a comprehensive coverage of the leadership's movements in the hours leading up to the meeting.

Samuel and the voidhawks were presented with eyeblink pictures of the partizan leaders making their way through the asteroid. Respectable middle-age professionals now, they all had escorts of bodyguards, keen for any sign of trouble. These entourages were unmistakable, making them easy to follow.

"It looks like either level three or four in section twelve," Samuel told Monica.

She datavised her processor block for a schematic of the asteroid. "It's all offices there, corporate country. That makes sense, it's more secure, and they are all rich. It wouldn't be suspicious for them to be there together."

"Unfortunately it makes life complicated for us. We're having trouble infiltrating that area." He was watching an inverted image of Ikela walking along a corridor at the centre of five boosted bodyguards. They were approaching a junction. A fast check with the voidhawks revealed that there were no more

spiders left ahead. He ordered the one he was using to scuttle along the ceiling after Ikela.

There are UV lights ahead, a voidhawk warned. **The spider is approaching a grade-five clean environment.**

I know, but I need to see which way he turns. It was a strange viewpoint; to Samuel the corridor wasn't particularly large, to the spider it was vast. The two visual interpretations tended to clash confusingly inside Samuel's cortex unless he maintained a high level of concentration. Drab whiteness slid smoothly past galloping legs. Far above him was the sky of hazel carpet. Footsteps crashed against the spider's pressure-sensitive cells. Stalactite mountains clad in expensive black silk marched on in front of the racing arachnid, becoming difficult to resolve as they approached the fork. He just needed a hint . . .

The affinity link vanished amid a violet flash. *Damnation!* A further review showed Samuel no spiders had managed to penetrate the area.

"What is it?" Monica asked as he flinched in annoyance.

"We just lost them."

"So now what?"

He looked around at the other agents in the office suite. "Kit up and move out. We'll cover as many approaches as we can. Monica, are you sure your asset is reliable?"

"Don't fret; we've got him hoisted by the short and curlies. He won't be able to datavise during the meeting, but as soon as it's over we'll know where it was and if she's there. Did any of your infiltration systems see her going in?"

"No," he admitted. "Not even a fifty per cent characteristics match."

"I'm not surprised."

The Edenist agents were putting on slim equipment belts and strapping up shoulder holsters. Monica checked her own maser pistol and ran a diagnostic program through her implants.

"Monica," Samuel said.

She caught the tone. "I know: I'm not in your command network, I'd be in the way if I try to front-line. It's all yours, Samuel."

"Thank you." **Stand by,** he told the voidhawks waiting on

the docking ledge, **if we do grab her we'll need to exit fast.** He led the team out.

• • •

There were only five people in the Tunja system who knew the real reason for forming the Garissan partizan movement. None of them lived on the same asteroid, so that if disaster did strike the others would be there to carry on with the plan.

In Ayacucho it was Ikela, the nominal head of the original five. It suited him to be one of the partizan group's executives rather than the leader. This way he kept up-to-date on the movement's activities while staying out of the limelight. His position was due principally to his financial support rather than any active participation. Again, according to plan.

Dan Malindi, the Ayacucho group's leader, was the first to arrive at the secure conference office of Laxa and Ahmad, the legal firm they were using as cover. He gave Ikela a puzzled, vaguely annoyed glance as he entered. No one knew why Ikela had demanded the meeting at seven hours notice. And the executives weren't people used to being kept in ignorance, not by one of their own. The sight of the normally composed industrialist sitting mutely at the table looking as if he were suffering some kind of fever with the way he was sweating did nothing to ease the tension.

Kaliua Lamu was the second to arrive; a financier who made little secret about his growing ambivalence to the movement. Partizan membership didn't sit well alongside his new-found respectability.

Feira Ile and Cabral arrived together, the most senior ranking figures in the Dorados administration. Feira Ile had been an admiral in the Garissan navy and was now Ayacucho's SD chief, while Cabral had built himself the largest media group in the Dorados. His company's growth and popularity were due to the tabloid nationalism of its editorial policy, which made him a natural choice for the partizans. Most of the executive staff suspected his support was strictly for appearance sake.

Bodyguards and assistants left the room. Dan Malindi glared at the small woman sitting quietly behind Ikela, who obstinately refused to be intimidated into moving.

"She's with me," Ikela said.

Dan Malindi grunted in dissatisfaction and activated the office's security screen. "All right, Ikela, what the hell is this about?"

Ikela gave the woman a respectful gesture, and she stood up, walking to the end of the table opposite Dan Malindi. "My name is Dr Alkad Mzu, I'm here to finish our war with Omuta."

Dan Malindi and Kaliua Lamu both gave her a nonplussed glance. Cabral frowned, ordering a neural nanonics file search. But it was Feira Ile who produced the strongest reaction; he half rose to his feet, openly astonished. "The Alchemist," he murmured. "You built the Alchemist. Holy Mary."

"The what?" Cabral asked.

"The Alchemist," Alkad told them. "It was our super-weapon. I was its designer."

"Feira?" Cabral prompted.

"She's right," the old ex-admiral said. "I was never given any details, the project was classified way above my security rating. But the navy built this . . . thing, whatever it is, just before the genocide. We were going to use it against Omuta." He drew a long breath and looked at the diminutive physicist. "What happened?"

"Our flight was intercepted by blackhawks hired by Omuta," Alkad said. "We never got there. The Alchemist was never used."

"No way," Dan Malindi said. "This is complete bullshit. You appear on the scene thirty years after the event and spin some crap about a missing legend you heard about in some bar. I bet the next stage is asking us for money to search for this Alchemist. In fact, I bet it's going to take a lot of money to find it, right?" He was sneering contemptuously at her when he finished, but somehow her cold smile managed to rob his anger.

"I don't need to search. I know exactly where it is."

"It wasn't lost?" Kaliua Lamu asked. His enthusiasm bought him a disgusted look from Dan Malindi.

"No, it's never been lost. It's been kept safe."

"Where?"

Alkad merely smiled.

"Maybe it does exist," Cabral said. "And our illustrious ad-

miral here was right saying someone called Alkad Mzu built it. How do we know you're her? We can't make the decisions we need to make on the word of some stranger who turns up out of the blue, especially not at this precise time."

Alkad raised an eyebrow. "Captain?"

"I can vouch for her," Ikela said softly. "This is Dr Alkad Mzu."

"Captain?" Dan Malindi asked. "What does she mean?"

Ikela cleared his throat. "It was my rank in the Garissan navy. I used to be captain of the frigate *Chengho*. We were flying escort duty on the Alchemist deployment mission. That's how I know."

"Datavise your command authority code," Feira Ile said sternly.

Ikela nodded reluctantly, and retrieved the code from its memory cell.

"It would appear our colleague is telling the truth," Feira Ile told the silent office.

"Mother Mary," Cabral muttered, glancing at the man he thought he'd known for the last thirty years. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Ikela sank his head into his hands. "The plan operates on a need to know basis only. Up until today you didn't need to know."

"What plan?" Feira Ile snapped.

"To deploy the Alchemist," Alkad said. "After the original mission was crippled, Ikela and four other officers were detailed to sell the antimatter we were carrying. They were supposed to invest that money so there would be sufficient funds to hire a combat-capable starship and equip it to fire the Alchemist once the sanctions were lifted and the Confederation Navy squadron assigned to blockade duties returned home. The only reason you partizans exist is to provide me with a crew that will not flinch from the job that needs to be done." She stared at Ikela. "And now I'm here, on schedule, and I find no ship, and no crew."

"I told you," Ikela shouted. "You can have your ship if that's still what we want. I have more than enough money. Anyone of us in this room has enough money to provide a starship for

you. I have never failed my duty to my people. Don't you ever say that. But things have changed."

"Looks like you've failed to me," Cabral said briskly. "Looks like you've failed a lot of people."

"Think!" Ikela stormed. "Think for the love of Mary what she is proposing. What will the Confederation do to us if we blow up Omuta's star? What revenge will they take?"

"It can do that?" a startled Kaliua Lamu asked. "The Alchemist will destroy their star?"

"On one setting, yes," Alkad said. "I don't intend using that. I propose to simply extinguish the star. No one will die, but their planet and asteroid settlements will have to be evacuated and abandoned. They will become a broken homeless people, as we are. That's fitting, surely?"

"Well yes . . ." He searched around the table for support, finding only uneasy confusion. "But I don't understand. If you survived the blackhawk attack, why didn't you continue with the mission? Why wait thirty years?"

"There were complications," Alkad said tonelessly. "By the time we were in any position to function again the sanctions had been imposed, and the blockade squadron was in place. It was decided to wait until these obstructions were removed, which would give us a much greater chance of success. We did not have limitless government resources anymore, and we only have one chance to get it right. This is the optimum time to strike. We won't have another chance; the intelligence agencies are pursuing me. And they will find me."

Dan Malindi groaned. "Intelligence agencies? Holy Mary, they'll find out where you've been."

"Oh, yes, they'll know you're involved. Does that bother you?"

"Bother me? You bitch! I have a family."

"Yes. I've heard this argument already today. It is beginning to bore me. I have lived the reality of the genocide for thirty years. You, all of you, have just been playing patriot. Each of you has profited in your own field by chanting the cry of nationalism. Well, my being here has put an end to your pathetic game."

"Are you threatening us?" Cabral asked.

"I have always been a threat to your cosy life, even though you never knew I existed."

"What exactly do you want?" Feira Ile asked.

"Two things. A combat-capable starship with a decent crew of committed nationalists. And a secure environment for myself while you prepare them. Do not underestimate the agencies. They now know for certain that the Alchemist is real, which means they will go to any lengths to acquire me."

Ikela stood up, placing his hands on the table and leaning forwards. "I say we cannot do this. Mother Mary, we're sitting here talking about wrecking an entire star system as if it were some kind of difficult business venture. Times have changed, we are not Garissans anymore. I'm sorry if that is painful for you to hear, Doctor, but we're not. We have to look to the future, not the past. This is madness."

"And that is treachery," Cabral said.

"Treachery to what? To a planet that was killed thirty years ago? If that's what it is, then fine, I'm a traitor to it. I don't care."

"Other people might when they get to hear."

"Ikela, I really don't think you're in any position to back out now," Feira Ile said. "Given your mission, you are still a serving officer. That means you are required to discharge your obligations."

"Then I quit, I resign my commission."

"Very well. In that case, I must ask you to hand over the T'Opingtu company to me."

"What?"

"I believe we just heard that it was founded on money provided by the Garissan navy. That means it doesn't belong to you."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Listen, we can't make a snap judgement over this," Kaliua Lamu said. "Ikela's right, we're talking about wiping out an entire solar system."

"I might have known you'd take that attitude," Dan Malindi said.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard. I'm willing to provide as much help as Dr Mzu

wants. What the hell is the Confederation going to do to us if we're armed with Alchemists?"

"There is only one," Alkad said.

"You can build more, can't you?"

She hesitated uncomfortably. "If there was a requirement, it could be duplicated."

"There you are then. You can't leave what's left of the Garissan nation and culture unprotected, can you?"

"You want to start a damn arms race as well?" Ikela yelled. "You're as mad as she is."

"Curb your language. Have you forgotten the possessed?"

"In Mary's name what have they got to do with this?"

"If we were armed with Alchemists, that bastard Capone would think twice before sending his fleet here."

"And who precisely is going to be in charge of these Alchemists?"

"The Dorados council, of course," Dan Malindi said scornfully.

"Exactly, and we all know how much influence you have there."

"Enough!" Alkad slammed her fist down. "I will not supply Alchemists to anyone. You have no conception of what it is capable of. It is not some bigger and better bomb you can use for political advantage. It was built for one purpose, to destroy the people who threatened our world. It will be used for one purpose, our revenge against them." She looked at each of them in turn, furious and sickened that this was all that remained of the planet she was once so proud of. Where was their dignity, their resolution? Could none of them perform one single act of remembrance? "I will give you thirty minutes to debate this. After that you will tell me which of you support me, and which do not."

"I certainly support you," Kaliua Lamu said loudly, but he was talking to her back as she limped away.

The shouting had already begun again before the door closed behind her. All the bodyguards and aides in the ante-room stared; Alkad barely saw them. If she had just known or anticipated the shambles which the partizans had become, then she would have been mentally geared up.

“Alkad?” Voi was bending down, giving the smaller woman an anxious look.

“Don’t mind me, I’ll be all right.”

“Please, I have something to show you. Now.”

The girl took Alkad’s arm, hustling her across the room and out into the corridor. Alkad couldn’t be bothered to protest, although force of habit made her activate a threat analysis program. Her enhanced retinas began scanning the length of the corridor.

“Here,” Voi said triumphantly. She opened her palm to reveal a tiny squashed spider.

“Mother Mary! Have you completely flipped?”

“No, listen. You know you said you thought the intelligence agencies were following you.”

“I should never have told you that. Voi, you don’t know what you’re getting involved with.”

“Oh, yes I do. We started checking the spaceport log. There’s a delegation of Edenists here to discuss strengthening our defences. Three voidhawks brought thirty of them.”

“Yes?”

“Mapire only rated one voidhawk, and six Edenists to discuss our mutual defence with the council. It should be the other way around, the capital should have got the larger delegation, not Ayacucho.”

Alkad glanced at the little brown blob in the girl’s hand, a bad feeling sinking through her. “Go on.”

“So we thought about how Edenists would search the asteroid for you. Adamists would use spy lenses and hack into the communications net to get at public monitor security cameras. Edenists would use bitek systems, either simulants or affinity-bonded animals. We started looking. And here they are. Spiders. They’re everywhere, Alkad. We checked. Ayacucho is totally infested.”

“That doesn’t necessarily prove—” she said slowly.

“Yes it does.” The hand with the crushed blob was shaken violently. “This is from the *Lycosidae* family. Ayacucho’s ecologists never introduced any *Lycosidae*s into the biosphere. Check the public records if you don’t believe me.”

“All sorts of things can get through bio-quarantine; irradiation screening isn’t perfect.”

“Then why are they all male? We haven’t found a single female, not one. It’s got to be so they can’t mate, they won’t reproduce. They’ll die off without causing any sort of ecological imbalance. Nobody will ever notice them.”

Strangely enough, Alkad was almost impressed. “Thank you, Voi. I’d better go back in there and tell them I need more security.”

“Them?” Voi was utterly derisory. “Did they leap to help you? No. Of course not. I said they wouldn’t.”

“They have what I need, Voi.”

“They have nothing we don’t. Nothing. Why don’t you trust us? Trust me? What does it take to make you believe in us?”

“I do believe in your sincerity.”

“Then come with me!” It was an agonized plea. “I can get you out of here. They don’t even have any way to get you out of the office without the spiders seeing.”

“That’s because they don’t know about them.”

“They don’t know, because they’re not concerned about security. Look at them, they’ve got enough bodyguards in there to form a small army. Everybody in the asteroid knows who they are.”

“Truthfully?”

“All right, not everybody. But certainly every reporter. The only reason they don’t say anything is because of Cabral. Anyone coming to the Dorados who really wanted to make contact with the partizan movement wouldn’t need more than two hours to find a name.”

“Mary be damned!” Alkad glanced back at the door to the anteroom, then at the tall girl. Voi was everything her father was not: dedicated, determined, hurting to help. “You have some kind of safe route out of here?”

“Yes!”

“Okay. You can take me out of this section. After that I’ll get in touch with your father again, see what they’re going to do for me.”

“And if they won’t help?”

“Then it looks like you’re on.”

• • •

“Yeah? So, I’m late. Sue me. Listen, this meeting caused me a

shitload of grief. I don't need no lecture from the ESA on contact procedures right now."

...

"Yeah, she's here all right, in the flesh. Mother Mary, she's really got the Alchemist stashed away somewhere. She's not kidding. I mean, shit, she really wants to take out Omuta's star."

...

"Course I don't know where it is, she wouldn't say. But, Mary, Ikela used to be a frigate captain in the Omuta navy. He flew escort on the Alchemist mission. I never knew. Twenty years we've been plotting away together, and I never knew."

...

"Sure you want to know where we are. Look, you're going to come in here shooting, right? I mean, how do I know you're not going to snuff me? This is serious heavy-duty shit."

...

"All right, but if you're lying you'd better make sure you finish me. I'll have you if you don't, no matter what it costs. And hey, even if you do kill me, I can come back and get you that way. Yeah. So you'd better not be fucking me over."

...

"Oh, absolutely. I always believe every word you people say. Okay, listen, we're in Laxa and Ahmad's conference office. The bodyguards are all in the anteroom. Tell your people to be fucking careful when they come in. You let them know I'm on your side, yeah?"

...

"No, she's out in the anteroom. She went out there twenty minutes ago so we could argue about what to do. The vote was three to two for wasting Omuta's star. Guess how I voted."

• • •

"Laxa and Ahmad, the conference office," Monica said. "Mzu's in the anteroom along with the bodyguards."

Go, Samuel ordered.

The twenty Edenist agents closed on the Laxa and Ahmad offices. Floor plans were pulled from the asteroid's civil engineering memory cores. Entry routes and tactics were formulated and finalized while they jogged towards their target, the general affinity band thick with tense exchanges.

Monica kept three paces behind Samuel the whole way. It irked her, and she wasn't looking forwards to her debrief, either. Teaming up with Edenists! But at least this way the Alchemist would be neutered. Providing Samuel kept his part of the agreement. Which she was sure he would do. Although high politics could still screw everything up. God!

It took them four minutes to reach Laxa and Ahmad. One featureless corridor after another. Thankfully there were few people about, with only a handful of workaholics left. They barged past an old man carrying several flek cases, a man and a woman who looked so guilty they were obviously having an affair, a pair of teenage girls, one very tall and skinny and black, the other small and white, both wearing red handkerchiefs around their ankles.

When she reached Laxa and Ahmad the Edenist team was already inside. Two agents stood guard out in the corridor. Monica stepped wearily through the crumpled door, drawing her pistol.

Samuel drew his breath sharply. "Damnation."

"What?" she asked. By then they had reached the conference office anteroom. The partizan bodyguards were all sprawled on the floor with limbs twitching erratically. Six Edenists stood over them, their TIP pistols pointing down. Three scorch lines slashed the walls where laser fire had burned the composite. A pair of spent nerve short-out grenades rolled around on the carpet.

"Where's Mzu?" Monica asked.

Samuel beckoned her into the conference office. The partizan leadership had been caught by the nerve short-out pulses, but the door and security screening had saved them from the worst effects. They were still conscious. Four of them. The fifth was dead.

Monica grimaced when she saw the broad char mark on the side of Ikela's skull. The beam had fractured the bone in several places, roasting the brain to a black pulp. Someone had made very sure his neural nanonics were ruined. "God, what happened here?"

Two Edenist agents were standing behind Feira Ile, their pistol muzzles pressed into his neck. His wrists had been secured in a composite zipcuff behind his back. Crumbs of vomit

were sticking to his lip; he was sweating profusely from the grenade assault, but otherwise defiant. A laser pistol was lying on the table in front of him.

“He shot Ikela,” Samuel said in bewildered dismay. He squatted down beside Ikela’s chair. “Why? What was the point? He was one of yours.”

Feira Ile grinned savagely. “My last duty for the Garissan navy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ikela flew escort duty on the Alchemist. He probably knew where it is. Now he can’t tell you.”

Monica and Samuel swapped a grim glance.

“She’s gone, hasn’t she?” Monica said bitterly.

“It would seem so.”

“Fuck it!” She stamped over to Kaliua Lamu, who had an agent holding him upright in his chair. “Where did Mzu go?” Monica asked.

“Screw you.”

Monica gave an amused glance at the other partizans around the table. “Oh, come on, Kaliua,” she said sweetly. “You were eager enough to tell us this meeting’s location.”

“Liar!”

She took out a Royal Kulu Bank credit disk. “A hundred thousand pounds, wasn’t it?”

“Bitch whore! I never,” he shouted at his comrades. “It wasn’t me. For Mary’s sake, it wasn’t.”

Monica grabbed his chin, and slowly exerted her boosted grip. Kaliua Lamu gagged fearfully at the force which threatened to shatter his jawbone.

“You said I’d better be certain when I finish you. Well, I intend to be extremely thorough extinguishing your life unless I know where she went.”

“I don’t know.”

“Debrief nanonics would be the pleasant option, but we don’t have time for that. Fortunately, old-fashioned pain can still produce some pretty impressive results during field interrogation. And they trained me very well, Kaliua.” She pushed her face centimetres from his bugging eyes. “Would you like to try calling my bluff? Or perhaps you think you’re strong enough to resist me for a couple of hours after I’ve fused your

neural nanonics into ash? Once they're dead you can't block the pain. And the field way to fuse neural nanonics is with electrodes. Crude, but it works. Guess where they're applied."

"No. Please! Don't." His eyes were watering as he started shaking.

"Where then?"

"I don't know. I promise. She was gone when we finished. I told you she was supposed to be waiting outside for us to finish. But she wasn't there."

"Then who did she leave with?"

"It was a girl, my bodyguard said. Ikela's daughter, Voi. She's tall, young. They were talking together and never came back. *Honestly*, that's all I know."

Monica let go of his chin. He slumped back in the chair, trembling in relief.

"A tall girl," Monica whispered. She was looking at Samuel in dawning dismay as the memory blossomed. She hurriedly accessed the neural nanonics memory cell she'd kept running to record the operation.

In the corridor on the way up. Two girls, one tall and black, the other white and small. Pressed against the wall in alarm as she and Samuel ran past. The memory cell image froze. Green neon grid lines closed around the smaller girl, calculating her height. It matched Mzu's. So did the approximated weight.

A backpack fitted with a long shoulder strap hung at the girl's side.

Monica had seen that backpack once before. Never in her life would she need help from neural nanonics to remember that time. The backpack had been flapping behind a small spacesuit-clad figure who was clinging desperately to a rope ladder.

"Dear God, we walked right bloody past her," she told an aghast Samuel. "The bitch is wearing a chameleon suit."

17

Lady Macbeth slipped slowly into place above the docking cradle, her equatorial verniers sparkling briefly as Joshua compensated for drift. Optical-band sensors gave a poor return here; Tunja's ruby glow was insipid even in clear space, and down where Ayacucho lurked among the disk particles it was an abiding roseate gloom. Laser radar guided the starship in until the cradle latches clamped home.

The bay's rim lights sprang up to full intensity, highlighting the hull, their reflected beams twisting about at irregular angles as the thermo-dump panels folded back into the fuselage. Then the cradle started to descend.

In the bridge not a word was spoken. It was the mood which had haunted them all the way from Narok, an infection passed down from captain to crew.

Sarha looked over the bridge at Joshua for some sign of . . . humanity, she supposed. He had flown them here, making excellent time as always. And apart from the kind of instructions necessary to keep the ship humming smoothly, he hadn't put ten words together. He'd even taken his meals alone in his cabin.

Beaulieu and Dahybi had told the rest of the crew of the Norfolk possession, and how concerned Joshua had been for Louise. So at least Sarha knew the reason for his blues, even though she found it slightly hard to believe. This was the Joshua with whom she'd had an affair for over six months last year. He was so easy about the relationship that when they did finally stop sleeping together she'd stayed on as part of the crew without any awkwardness on either side.

Which was why she found it difficult that Joshua could be so affected by what had happened to Louise, by all accounts a fairly simple country girl. He *never* became that entangled. Commitment wasn't a concept which nested in his skull. Part of the fascination was his easygoing nature. There was never any deceit with Joshua, you knew just where you stood.

Perhaps Louise wasn't so simple after all. Perhaps I'm just jealous.

"Going to tell us now, Captain?" she asked.

"Huh?" Joshua turned his head in her general direction.

"Why we're here? We're not chasing Meyer anymore. So who is this Dr Mzu?"

"Best you don't ask."

A circuit of the bridge showed her how irritated everyone was getting with his attitude. "Absolutely, Joshua; I mean, you can't be sure if we're trustworthy, can you? Not after all this time."

Joshua stared at her. Fortunately, belaboured intuition finally managed to struggle through his moping thoughts to reveal the crew's bottled-up exasperation. "Bugger," he winced. Sarha was right, after all they'd been through together these people deserved a better style of captaincy than this. Jesus, I'm picking up Ione's paranoia. Thank God I didn't have to make any real command decisions. "Sorry, I just got hit by Norfolk. I wasn't expecting it."

"Nobody expected any of this, Joshua," Sarha said sympathetically.

"Yeah, right. Okay, Dr Mzu is a physicist, who once worked for the Garissan navy—"

They didn't say much while he told them what the flight was about. Which was probably a good thing, he guessed. It was one hell of a deal he'd accepted on their behalf. How would I feel if they'd dragged me along without knowing why?

When he finished he could see a mild smile on Ashly's face, but then the old pilot always did claim to chase after excitement. The others took it all reasonably stoically;

though Sarha was looking at him with a kind of bemused pique.

Joshua hitched his face up into one of his old come-on grins. "Told you, you were better off not knowing."

She hissed at him, then relented. "Bloody hell, wasn't there anybody else the Lord of Ruin could use?"

"Who would you trust?"

Sarha tried to come up with an answer, and failed hopelessly.

"If anyone wants to bail out, let me know," Joshua said. "This wasn't exactly covered in my job description when you signed on."

"Neither was Lalonde," Melvyn said dryly.

"Beaulieu?" Joshua asked.

"I have always served my captain to the best of my ability," the shiny cosmonik said. "I see no reason to stop now."

"Thanks. All of you. Okay, let's get *Lady Mac* powered down. Then we'll have a quick scout around for the doctor."

• • •

The Dorados Customs and Immigration Service took seventy-five minutes to process the *Lady Mac*'s crew. Given the quarantine, Joshua had been expecting some hassle, but these officers seemed intent on analysing every molecule in the starship. Their documentation was reviewed four separate times. Joshua wound up paying a five-thousand-fuseodollar administration fee to the chief inspector before they were confirmed to be non-possessed, had the appropriate Tranquillity government authorization to be flying, and declared suitable citizens to enter Ayacucho.

The lawyers were waiting for him at the end of the docking bay airlock tube. Three of them, two men and a woman, their unfussy blue suits cloned from some conservative chain-store design program.

"Captain Calvert?" the woman asked. She gave him a narrow frown, as if uncertain he could be the person she wanted.

Joshua rotated slightly so his silver star on his epaulette was prominent. "You got me."

“You are the captain of the *Lady Macbeth*?” Again the uncertainty.

“Yep.”

“I am Mrs Nateghi from Tayari, Usoro and Wang, we represent the Zaman Service and Equipment Company which operates here in the spaceport.”

“Sorry, guys, I don’t need a maintenance contract. We just got refitted.”

She held out a flek with a gold scale of justice symbol embossed on one side. “Marcus Calvert, this is a summons for fees owing to our client since August 2586. You are required to appear before the Ayacucho civil claims court at a date to be set in order to resolve this debt.”

The flek was pressed into Joshua’s palm. “Whaa—” he managed to grunt.

Sarha started giggling, which drew a cool glare from Mrs Nateghi. “We have also filed a court impounding order on the *Lady Macbeth*,” she said frostily. “Please do not try and leave as you did last time.”

Joshua kissed the flek flamboyantly and beamed at the woman. “I’m Joshua Calvert. I think you should be talking to my father. He’s Marcus Calvert.”

If the statement threw her, there was no visible sign. “Are you the *Lady Macbeth*’s current owner?”

“Sure.”

“Then you remain liable for the debt. I will have the summons revised to reflect this. The impounding order remains unaffected.”

Joshua kept his smile in place. He datavised the flight computer for a review of all 2586 log entries. There weren’t any. “Jesus, Dad, thanks a bunch,” he muttered under his breath. No way—absolutely not—would he show the three vultures how fazed he was. “Look, this is obviously an oversight, a computer glitch, something on those lines. I have no intention of contesting the debt. And I shall be very happy to pay off any money owing on *Lady Mac*’s account. I’m sure nobody wants this regrettable misunderstanding to come to court.” He

jabbed a toe at Sarha whose giggles had turned to outright laughter.

Mrs Nateghi gave a brisk nod. "It is within my brief to accept payment in full."

"Fine." Joshua took his Jovian Bank credit disk out of his ship-suit's top pocket.

"The cost in 2586 to the Zaman Company for services rendered comes to seventy-two thousand fuseodollars. I have an invoice."

"I'm sure you do." Joshua held out the credit disk, anxious to be finished.

The lawyer consulted her processor block, a show of formality. "The interest accrued on your debt over twenty-five years comes to two hundred and eighty-nine thousand fuseodollars, as approved by the court."

Sarha's laughter ended in a choke. Joshua had to use a neural nanonics nerve impulse override to stop himself from snarling at the lawyer. He was sure she was doing the same to stop her equally blank face from sneering. Bitch! "Of course," he said faintly.

"And our firm's fee for dealing with the case is twenty-three thousand fuseodollars."

"Yes, I thought you were cheap."

This time, she scowled.

Joshua shunted the money over. The lawyers hauled themselves away down the corridor.

"Can we afford that?" Sarha asked.

"Yes," Joshua said. "I have an unlimited expense account for this trip. Ione's paying." He didn't want to dwell on what she'd say when she saw the bill.

I wonder why Dad left in such a hurry?

Ashly patted Joshua's shoulder. "Real chip off the old block, your dad, eh?"

"I hope he hurries up and possesses someone soon," Joshua said through gritted teeth. "There's a few things I'd like to talk to him about." Then he thought about what he'd just said. Maybe not as funny and cuttingly sarcastic as he'd intended. Because Dad was there in the beyond. Suf-

fering in the beyond. That's if he wasn't already . . . "Come on, let's make a start."

• • •

The club he wanted, according to the spaceport personnel, was the Bar KF-T; that's where the action was. Along with the dealers, pushers, and pimps, and all the rest of the people in the know.

The trouble was, Joshua found after a straight two-hour stint of surfing the tables, they didn't know the one piece of information he needed. The name of Alkad Mzu had not left a heavy impression on the citizens of Ayacucho.

At the end he gave up and went to sit with Ashly and Melvyn at a raised corner table. It gave him a good view over the dance floor, where some nice girls were moving in trim movements. He rolled his beer bottle between his palms, not much interested in the contents.

"It was only a long shot, Captain," Melvyn said. "We ought to start sniffing around the astroengineering companies. Right now they're so desperate for business that even the legitimate ones would happily consider selling her a frigate."

"If she wants to disappear, she has to do it at the bottom of the heap," Joshua said. "You'd think the dealers would have heard something."

"Maybe not," Ashly said. "There's definitely some kind of underground league here. It can't be the same as the usual asteroid independence movements; the Dorados are already sovereign. I got a few hints when they thought I was offering *Lady Mac's* services, plenty of talk about revenge against Omuta. Mzu could have turned to them, after all they're her people. Unfortunately, the likes of you and I can hardly pass ourselves off as long-lost cousins of the cause." He held up his hand, studying it dispassionately.

Joshua looked at his own skin. "Yeah, you've got a point. We're not exactly obvious Kenyan-ethnic stock are we?"

"Dahybi might make the grade."

"I doubt it." His eyes narrowed. "Jesus, will you look at how many of those kids are wearing red handkerchiefs

around their ankles.” Six or seven times that evening while he’d been scouting around teenagers had asked him to take them to Valisk.

“We could do worse than the Deadnights,” Melvyn said broodingly. “At least there aren’t any possessed here.”

“Don’t count on it.” Ashly leaned over the table, lowering his voice. “My neural nanonics suffered a couple of program load errors this evening. Not full glitches, but the diagnostics couldn’t pinpoint the cause.”

“Humm.” Joshua looked at Melvyn. “You?”

“My communications block had a five-second dropout.”

“Some of my memory cells went off-line earlier, too. I should have paid more attention. Shit. We’ve been here barely three hours, and we’ve each been close enough to one to be affected. What does that come to in percentages of the population?”

“Paranoia can be worse than real dangers,” Melvyn said.

“Sure. If they are here, they’re obviously not strong enough to mount an all-out takeover campaign. Yet. That gives us a little time.”

“So what’s our next move?” Melvyn asked.

“Other end of the spectrum, I suppose,” Joshua said. “Contact someone in government who can run discreet checks for us. Or maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to let slip the *Lady Mac* is for hire. If Mzu is here to get help, the only place it’ll come from is the nationalist community. They might even wind up trying to charter us to deploy the damn thing.”

“Too late now,” Ashly said. “We’re officially here to buy defence components for Tranquillity. And we’ve been asking too many questions.”

“Yeah. Jesus, I’m not used to thinking along these lines. I wonder if any of my fellow captains have been approached for a combat charter?”

“Only if she’s actually in this asteroid,” Ashly said. “Nothing to stop the *Samaku* docking at one of the others when it arrived. That’s even if she came here in the first place. We ought to be checking that.”

"I'm not an idiot," Joshua moaned. "Sarha's working on it."

• • •

Sarha's smile appeared a little frayed after the third time Mabaki bumped against her. The crowd in the Bar KF-T weren't that excitable. She could certainly thread her way through without jostling anyone.

Mabaki wagged his eyebrows when she glanced back. "Sorry." He grinned.

It wasn't so much that he bumped her, as where. And how the touch tarried. She told herself a pathetic middle-aged leech was probably going to be one of the smaller tribulations they would encounter on this crazy course Joshua had set.

Just before she gave in and tried a datavise, she located Joshua standing over by the bar (where else, she asked herself). "That's him," she told Mabaki.

Sarha tapped Joshua on the shoulder as he was accepting a beer bottle from the barmaid. "Joshua, I found someone I think can . . ." She trailed off in confusion. It wasn't Joshua. That she of all people could be mistaken was astonishing. But he did look remarkably similar, especially in the treacherously shimmering light thrown out by the dance floor's holographic spray. Same broad chest to accommodate a metabolism geneered for free fall, identical prominent jaw folding back into flat cheeks. But this man's skin was darker, though nothing like the ebony of most Dorado Kenyan-ethnics, and his glossy hair was jet-black rather than Joshua's nondescript brown.

"I'm sorry," she stammered.

"I'm not." He could certainly manage the Joshua charm-grin, too. Possibly even better than Joshua.

"I was looking for someone else."

"I hate him already."

"Goodbye."

"Oh, please, I'm too young for my life to end. And it will when you leave. At least have a drink with me first. He can wait."

“No he can’t.” She began to move away. Some erratic impulse made her look back in perplexity. Damn, the likeness was extraordinary.

His smile widened. “That’s it. You’re making the right choice.”

“No. No, I’m not.”

“At least let me give you my address.”

“Thank you, but we’re not staying.” Sarha forced her legs to work. She just knew her face would be red. How stupidly embarrassing.

“I’m Liol,” he called out after her. “Just ask for Liol. Everybody knows me.”

I’ll bet they do, she thought, especially the girls. The crowd closed around her again, Mabaki tagging along faithfully.

• • •

Second time lucky. Joshua was sitting at a table in a shadowy corner, and he was with Ashly and Melvyn, so there was no mistake this time.

“Officer Mabaki works for the Dorados Immigration Service,” Sarha explained as she pulled up a chair.

“Excellent,” Joshua said. “I’d like to purchase some of your files.”

It cost him fifteen thousand fuseodollars to learn that the *Samaku* had definitely docked at Ayacucho. One passenger had disembarked.

“That’s her,” Mabaki confirmed after Joshua datavised a visual file to him. “Daphine Kigano. You don’t forget women like that.”

“Daphine Kigano, really? Bit of a viper was she?”

“You’re telling me.” Mabaki savoured another sip of the Tennessee Malt Joshua had bought him. “She was some friend or other of Ikela’s. You don’t mess with those sort of connections.”

Joshua datavised the club’s net processor for a civil information core, and accessed a file on Ikela. It was mostly public relations spin released by T’Opingtu, but it gave him an idea of what he was dealing with. “So I see,” he mut-

tered. "Can you tell us what starships have left since Daphine Kigano arrived?"

"That's simple. None. Well, not unless you count the Edenist delegation, but they're from this system's gas giant anyway. There are still some inter-orbit ships flying, but no Adamist starships. The *Lady Macbeth* is the first starship to arrive since the *Samaku* departed."

After Mabaki left a grin spread over Joshua's face. It was the first in a long time which didn't have to be printed there by neural nanonics. "She's still here," he said to the others. "We've got her."

"We've got a lead on her," Melvyn cautioned. "That's all."

"Optimist. Now we know who to ask for, we can start focusing our efforts. I think this Ikela character would be a good place to start. Hell, we can even get a legitimate appointment. T'Opingtu is the kind of company we ought to approach for Tranquillity's SD spares, anyway." He drained his beer bottle and put it back on the table. A flash of movement caught his eye, and he slapped his hand down on the spider which was scuttling clear of the soggy mat.

• • •

"Oh, well," Samuel said. "At least we know why he's here. I suppose Ione Saldana must have commissioned him to track Mzu."

"That stupid little cow," Monica complained. "Doesn't she have any idea what kind of issues she's fooling with? And sending some bloody mercenary on the chase!"

"Lagrange Calvert," Samuel mused. "I suppose she could have done worse. He's certainly got the balls for a mission like this."

"But not the style. God, if he starts blundering around asking questions everyone in the Dorados is going to know Mzu is running loose. Here of all places! I ought to terminate him; it'd save us a nasty headache in the long term."

"I do wish you wouldn't keep on about how much easier life would be if we killed everyone who poses the slightest inconvenience. Calvert is an amateur, he's not going to

bother us. Besides, he won't be the one who stirs up the public." Samuel indicated the row of AV pillars set up along one side of the rented office. Edenist agents were busy monitoring the output of every Ayacucho-based media company.

News of Ikela's death was already breaking, tying it in with reports of a "disturbance" at the offices of Laxa and Ahmad. Police were treating the death as suspicious, refusing to comment to the rovers gathered outside the doors of the legal firm. Although they'd already let slip that they would like to question Kaliua Lamu about the death.

Monica winced at that. She shouldn't have blown him, but they had been desperate for the information. The financier had demanded that Monica protect him from his erstwhile comrades: a request she could hardly refuse. He and his family were already on board one of the Edenist delegation's voidhawks, waiting to be spirited away to safety. "Don't I know it. That Cabral is going to make our life hell," she grumbled. "I don't know why you let him and the other two go."

"You know perfectly well why. What else could we do? For goodness' sake, Feira Ile is Ayacucho's SD chief; and Malindi is president of the Merchant's Association; and both of them sit on the Dorados governing council. I could hardly authorize their abduction."

"I suppose not," she sighed.

"It's not as if they can tell people what they were doing, or even that they were there."

"Don't count on it. They're certainly above the law here; and if any word of Mzu does leak out it'll inflame the nationalist sympathy."

"I think we had better assume it will do. Cabral will make sure of it. After all, he voted to help her retrieve the Alchemist."

"Yes." She let out an exasperated groan. "God, we walked right past her!"

"Ran past," Samuel corrected.

Monica glared at him. "Any sightings?"

“None at all. However we are losing an unusual number of spiders.”

“Oh?”

“Children are going around killing them. It’s some kind of organized game. Several day clubs are running competitions to see who can find the most. There are cash prizes. Clever,” he acknowledged.

“Somebody’s well organized.”

“Yes and no. Children are a most peculiar method of attack, the numbers they can eliminate will inconvenience us rather than block us. If it was another agency that discovered we were infiltrating the asteroid, they would release a tailored virus to kill the spiders.” He cast an inquiring glance. “No?”

She puckered her lips in an ironic smile. “I would imagine that could well be standard operating procedure for some people.”

“So . . . it isn’t an agency, but it is someone who has connections that reach down into local day clubs. And quickly.”

“Not the partizans. They were never that well organized, and their membership is mostly aging reticents. The group that has Mzu?”

“By process of elimination, it must be.”

“Yes, but so far we only know one member, this Voi girl. If there is an inner core of partizans I find it hard to believe the ESA didn’t know about them.”

“And us.” He looked over to the agents monitoring the news, his face flickering through a range of expressions as he exchanged a barrage of questions and answers across the general affinity band. “Interesting.”

“What?” she asked patiently.

“Given Ikela’s mysterious death and his wealth, there’s been no mention of his daughter by any media company. That’s normally the first thing reporters focus on: who’s going to inherit.”

“Cabral’s shielding her.”

“Looks like it.”

“Do you think he could be involved with this new group?”

“Very unlikely. From what we know about him, his partizan involvement was minimal, he was part of it for form’s sake.”

“So what the hell group is Voi mixed up with?”

• • •

Much later, when he had the time to sit down and think about it, Liol gave Lalonde as the reason for being so slow off the mark. He would never have been so sluggish under normal circumstances. But after accessing Kelly Tirrel’s report he hit Ayacucho’s clubs and bars, drinking and stimming out with methodical determination. A lot of people were doing exactly the same thing, but for a different reason. They merely feared the possessed, while Liol had watched his life’s dream crumple in less than a second.

It had always been a dangerous dream. A single hope which has lasted from the earliest days of childhood is not a sound foundation on which to build a life. But Liol had done it. His mother had always told him his father would come back one day; an assurance she kept on repeating through another three husbands and countless boyfriends. He will return, and he’ll take us away with him; somewhere where the sun shines dazzling white and the land is flat and endless. A universe away from the Dorados, worldlets haunted by the momentous horror and tragedy of the past.

The dream—the sure knowledge—of his destiny gave Liol attitude, setting him apart from his peers. His was among the first generation of Garissans born after the genocide. While others suffered from their parents’ nightmares, a young Liol flourished in the expanding caverns and corridors of Mapire. He was the champion of his day club; idolized as reckless by his teeny friends, the first of all of them to get drunk, the first to have sex, the first to try soft drugs, and then not so soft, the first to run a black stimulant program through newly implanted neural nanonics. A genuine been-there-done-that kid, as much as you could go and

do within the limited scope for experience permitted in orbit around Tunja.

His zest even carried over into his early twenties, when the years of his father's non-return were beginning to pile up in an alarming quantity. He still clung to his mother's promise.

A goodly number of his contemporaries emigrated from the Dorados when they reached their majority, a migration worrying to the council. Everyone assumed Liol would be among them, surely the first who would want to seek new opportunities. But he stayed, joining in the effort to build the Dorados into a prime industrial state.

Garissa's refugees had been awarded the settlement rights to the Dorados by the Confederation Assembly as part of their restitutions against Omuta for the genocide. Every multistellar company mining the ore had to pay a licence fee to the council, part of which was used to invest in the asteroids' infrastructure, while the remainder was paid directly to the survivors, and their descendants, by now scattered across the Confederation.

By 2606 this dividend had grown to a respectable twenty-eight thousand fuseodollars per annum. With such a guaranteed income as collateral, Liol had little trouble collecting loans and grants from the bank and the Dorados Development Agency to start his own business. In keeping with his now somewhat unhealthy obsession with space-flight, he formed a company, Quantum Serendipity, specializing in servicing starship electronics. It was a good choice; the number of starship movements in the Tunja system was growing each year. He was awarded subcontracts by the larger service and maintenance companies, working his way up the list of approved suppliers. After two years of steady growth, he leased a docking bay in the spaceport, and made his first bid for a complete starship maintenance service. Year three saw Quantum Serendipity buy a majority share in a small electronics station; by producing the processors in-house he could undercut his competitors and still make a profit.

He now had the majority shares in two electronics stations, owned seven docking bays, and employed seventy people. And six months ago, Quantum Serendipity had landed a service contract for the communications network linking Ayacucho's SD platforms; a rock-solid income which was on the verge of pushing him into a whole new level of operations.

Then news of the possession arrived from the Confederation Assembly, swiftly followed by Kelly Tirrel's report. The first didn't bother Liol half as much as his competitors, with his SD contract he could keep his company afloat throughout the crisis. But the second item, with its hero-of-the-day, super-pilot Lagrange Calvert rescuing little kiddies in his starship. That came close to breaking Liol. It was the end of his world.

None of his friends understood the reason behind his sudden ferocious depression, the worrying benders he launched himself into. But then they had never been told of his dream, and how much it meant to him, that was private. So after a couple of abortive attempts to "cheer him up" had failed dismally amid his tirades of calculatingly vicious abuse, they had left him alone.

Which was why he'd been surprised when the girl in the Bar KF-T had spoken to him. Surprised, and not a little bit blasted. The come-on routine he gave her was automatic, he didn't have to think. It was only when she'd gone that a frown crossed his flattish, handsome face. "Joshua," he said in a drink-fuddled voice. "She called me Joshua. Why did she do that?"

The barmaid, who by now had given up on the idea of lugging him home for the night, shrugged gamely and moved on.

Liol drained his whisky chaser in one swift toss, then datavised a search request into the spaceport registration computer. The answer seemed to trojan a wickedly effective sober-up program into his neural nanonics.

• • •

Alkad had seen worse rooms when she was on the move

thirty years ago. The hotel charged by the hour, catering for starship crews on fast stopovers, and citizens who wanted somewhere quiet and private to indulge any of a variety of vices which modern technology could provide. There was no window, the hotel was cut into rock some distance behind the cliff at the end of the biosphere cavern. It was cheaper that way. The customers never even noticed.

Big holograms covered two of the walls, showing pictures of some planetary city at dusk, its jewelscape of twinkling lights retreating into a horizon of salmon-pink sky. The bed filled half of the floor space, leaving just enough room for people to shuffle around it. There was no other furniture. The bathroom was a utilitarian cubicle fitted with a shower and a toilet. Soaps and gels were available from a pay dispenser.

“This is Lodi Shalasha,” Voi said when they arrived. “Our electronics supremo, he’s made sure the room’s clean. I hope. For his sake.”

The young man rolled off the bed and smiled nervously at Alkad. He was dressed in a flamboyant orange suit with eye-twisting green spirals. Not quite as tall as Voi, and several kilos overweight.

Student type, Alkad categorized instantly, burning with the outrage that came from a head stuffed full of fresh knowledge. She’d seen it a thousand times before when she was a lecturer; kids from an easy background expanding their minds in all the wrong directions at the first taste of intellectual freedom.

His smile was strained when he looked at Voi. “Have you heard?”

“Heard what?” the tall girl was immediately suspicious.

“I’m sorry, Voi. Really.”

“*What?*”

“Your father. There was some kind of trouble at the Laxa and Ahmad offices. He’s dead. It’s all over the news.”

Every muscle in the girl’s body hardened, she stared right through Lodi. “How?”

"The police say he was shot. They want to question Kaliua Lamu."

"That's stupid, why would Kaliua shoot my father?"

Lodi shrugged hopelessly.

"It must have been those people running to the offices. Foreign agents, they did it," Voi said. "We must not let this distract us." She paused for a moment, then burst into tears.

Alkad had guessed it was coming, the girl was far too rigid. She sat Voi down on the bed and put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "It's all right," she soothed. "Just let it happen."

"No." Voi was rocking back and forth. "I must not. Nothing must interfere with the cause. I've got a suppressor program I can use. Give me a moment."

"Don't," Alkad warned. "That's the worst thing you can do. Believe me, I've had enough experience of grief to know what works."

"I didn't like my father," Voi wailed. "I told him I hated him. I hated what he did. He was weak."

"No, Ikela was never weak. Don't think that of your father. He was one of the best navy captains we had."

Voi wiped a hand across her face, simply broadening the tear trails. "A navy captain?"

"That's right. He commanded a frigate during the war. That's how I knew him."

"Daddy fought in the war?"

"Yes. And after."

"I don't understand. He never said."

"He wasn't supposed to. He was under orders, and he obeyed them right up to his death. An officer to the last. I'm proud of him. All Garissans can be proud of him." Alkad hoped the hypocrisy wouldn't taint her voice. She was alarmingly aware how much she needed Voi's people now, whoever they were. And Ikela had almost kept the faith, it was only a white lie.

"What did he do in the navy?" Voi was suddenly desperate for details.

"Later, I promise," Mzu said. "Right now I want you to

activate a somnolence program. Believe me, it's the best thing. We were having a hard enough day before this."

"I don't want to sleep."

"I know. But you need it. And I'm not going anywhere. I'll be here when you wake up."

Voi glanced uncertainly at Lodi, who nodded encouragingly. "All right." She lay back on the bed, shuffled herself comfortable, and closed her eyes. The program took hold.

Alkad stood up and deactivated the chameleon suit. It was painful peeling the hood off her face, the thin fabric stuck possessively to her skin. But the room's cool air was a tonic; she'd sweated heavily underneath it.

She split the seal on her blouse and began to wriggle her arms out of the suit.

Lodi coughed frantically.

"Never seen a naked woman before?"

"Er, yes. But . . . I. That is—"

"Are you just playing at this, Lodi?"

"Playing at what?"

"Being a good-guy radical, a revolutionary on the run?"

"No!"

"Good. Because you're going to see a lot worse than a bare-arsed woman my age before we're done."

His skittish attitude calmed. "I understand. I really do. Er—"

Alkad started on the trousers, they were tighter than the hood. "Yes?"

"Who are you, exactly?"

"Voi didn't explain?"

"No. She just told me to alert the group for possible action. She said we must be careful because the asteroid was probably under covert surveillance."

"She was right."

"Yeah, I know," he said proudly. "I was the one who worked out the Edenists were spreading those spiders."

"Clever of you."

"Thanks. Our junior cadres are cleaning them from critical areas, corridor junctions and places. But I made sure

they skimp around this hotel; I didn't want to draw attention to it."

"A smart precaution. So do these cadres of yours know we're here?"

"No, absolutely not; nobody else knows. I swear. Voi said she wanted a safe room; I even paid cash."

Maybe I can still salvage this after all, Alkad thought. "Tell you what, Lodi; I'm going to have a shower first, then afterwards you can tell me all about this little group of yours."

• • •

As with most crews when they were docked, Joshua liked to book in at a hotel even if it was only for a single night. It wasn't necessarily more convenient than staying in the *Lady Mac*, it just made a change. This time, though, the crew returned to the starship; and Joshua depressurized the airlock tube once they were all back on board. It would hardly stop anyone in an SII suit, but *Lady Mac* had her fair share of internal defence systems. And besides . . . at the back of his mind was the notion that a possessed would be hard-pressed to wear and operate a spacesuit; if Kelly was right, their rampant energistic ability would completely screw up the suit's processors. He sealed himself up in his sleep cocoon with his paranoia reduced to its lowest level in days.

It was a sombre breakfast as they began to drift into the galley cabin and collect their food five hours later. Everyone had accessed the local news companies. Ikela's murder was the premier item.

Ashly glanced at the galley's AV pillar as he plugged his cereal packet into the milk nozzle.

"Got to be a cover-up," the pilot grunted. "Too much smoke, too little fire. The police should have made an arrest by now. Where's someone as prominent as this Lamu character going to hide in an asteroid?"

Joshua glanced up from his carton of grapefruit. "You think Mzu did it?"

"No." Ashly retrieved the now-chilly packet and gulped

down a mouthful of the mushy wheat paste. "I think someone trying to get Mzu did it; Ikela just got in their way. The police must know that. They simply can't blurt it out in public."

"So did they get her?" Melvyn asked.

"Am I psychic?"

"Such questions are irrelevant," Beaulieu said. "We don't have enough information to speculate in this fashion."

"We can certainly speculate on who else is trying to nab her," Melvyn said. "For my money, it's got to be the bloody intelligence agencies. If we can confirm she made it here, so can they. And that's serious trouble, Captain. If they can kill someone like Ikela with impunity, they're not going to worry much about riding over us."

Joshua switched his empty carton of grapefruit for a can of tea and a croissant. He stared around at his crew as he chewed on the bland pastry (another reason he liked hotels, free-fall food was always soft and tacky to avoid crumbs). Melvyn's words were unsettling, none of them were really used to personal, one-on-one danger; starship combat was so very different. Then there was the possibility of encountering the possessed as well. "Beaulieu's right, we don't have enough data yet. We'll spend the morning rectifying that. Melvyn and Ashly, you team up; I want you to concentrate on industrial defence contracts, see if you can find traces of the kind of things Mzu would require for retrieving and deploying the Alchemist. Principally, that'll be a starship, but it'll still need fitting out; if we're really lucky she could have ordered some kind of customized equipment. Dahybi, Beaulieu; try and find out what happened to the Daphne Kigano alias, where she was last seen, her credit disk number, that kind of thing. I'm going to find out what I can about Ikela and his associates."

"What about me?" Sarha asked indignantly.

"You're on duty in here, and you don't let anyone apart from us on board. From now on, there will always be one of us on the bridge. I don't know that there are any possessed in Ayacucho, but I'm not risking it. There's also the

intelligence agencies to consider, along with local security forces, and whoever Mzu is lined up with. I think now might also be an appropriate time to take the serjeants out of zero-tau just in case events turn sour. We can pass them off as cosmoniks easily enough.”

• • •

Ione was finding the whole sensation of independence most peculiar, both individually and in unison with the mirror fragment minds in the other serjeants. Her thoughts were fluttering across the affinity band like birds fleeing a hurricane.

We must try and separate more, she said.

To which her own thoughts replied: **Absolutely.**

She felt like giggling; the kind of giggle that came from being tickled by a merciless lover: unwelcome yet inevitable.

The affinity contact with the other three serjeants reduced, paring down to essential information: location, threat status, environment interpretation. She couldn't help the little frisson of eagerness at the experience; this was the first time she had ever been anywhere outside Tranquillity. Ayacucho might not be much, but she was determined to soak in as much of it as she could.

She was following Joshua out of the transit capsule which had delivered them from the spaceport. The axial chamber was just a low-gee bubble of rock, but at the same time it was a bubble of rock which she hadn't seen before. Her first foreign world.

Joshua got into a waiting tube lift and sat down. She chose the seat opposite him, the composite creaking as it adjusted to her weight.

“This is all so strange,” she said as the lift moved off. “Part of me wants to be next to you.”

His face became immobile. “Jesus, Ione, why the fuck did you shove your personality into the serjeants? Tranquillity's would've been just fine.”

“Why, Joshua Calvert, I do believe you're embarrassed.”

“Who me? Oh, no, I’m quite used to sexless two metre monstrosities making a pass at me.”

“Don’t be so grumpy. It’s unbecoming. Besides, you should be grateful. My instinct is very protective towards you. That might give me an edge.”

Joshua’s retort was lost somewhere in his throat.

The lift’s doors opened on a public hall in the asteroid’s commercial district where several late office workers scurried to work while a pair of mechanoids cleaned the walls and floor. It was less spartan than the axial chamber, with a high, arched roof and troughs of plants spaced at regular intervals. But it was still only a tunnel through rock, nothing exuberant. Unfortunately the serjeant didn’t have lips that could easily be compressed into a pout, otherwise she would have done it. She really wanted to see the biosphere cavern.

Joshua started off down the hall.

“What do you hope to accomplish here?” she asked.

“T’Opingtu is a big company; someone will have been appointed to run it straightaway. And Ikela would make sure his replacement is someone he can trust, someone from his immediate circle. It’s not much, but it’s the best lead we’ve got.”

“I really don’t think you’ll be able to get an appointment today.”

“Don’t be such a downer, Ione. Your trouble is Tranquility is incorruptible and logical, that’s all you’re used to. Asteroids like Ayacucho are neither. The size of the contract I’m going to dangle in their faces will get me straight into the top office. There’s an etiquette to this kind of business.”

“Very well, you get in. Then what?”

“I won’t know until I get there. Remember this is strictly a data acquisition mission, everything is helpful even if it is only negative. So keep your senses open and your memory on full record.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Okay, now we’re primarily interested in anything we

can learn about Ikela's life. We know he was an Garissan refugee, so who did he move with from the past, was he a strong nationalist? Names, contacts, that kind of stuff."

"My personality didn't suffer any damage during the replication process, I can think for myself."

"Wonderful. A bodyguard with an attitude."

"Joshua, darling, this isn't attitude."

He stopped and jabbed a finger at the husky construct. "Now look—"

"That's Pauline Webb," Ione said.

"What? Who?"

Three people were marching down the public hall towards Joshua. Two African-ethnic men flanking a white woman. He didn't like the look of the men at all; they were wearing civilian suits, but combat armour would have been more appropriate. Boosted, and no doubt containing a wide variety of extremely lethal implants.

Pauline Webb stopped a couple of metres short of Joshua and gave the serjeant a curious glance. "Your appointment is cancelled, Calvert. Collect your crew, get back in your starship, and go home. Today."

Joshua produced his most nonchalant grin. "Pauline Webb. Fancy seeing you here."

Her narrowed eyes gave the serjeant another suspicious glance. "This situation is not your concern anymore."

"It is everybody's concern," Ione said. "Especially mine."

"I didn't know you things could operate independently."

"Now you do," Joshua said politely. "So if you'll just step aside . . ."

The man directly in front of Joshua folded his arms and planted his feet slightly apart, a true immovable object. He smiled carnivorously down at Joshua.

"Er, perhaps we could come to an arrangement?"

"The arrangement is simple," Webb said. "If you leave, you get to live."

"Come on, Joshua," Ione said. The serjeant's all-too-human hand closed on his shoulder, forcing him to turn.

“But—”

“Come on.”

“That’s smart advice,” Webb said. “Listen to it.”

Ione let go of his shoulder after a few paces. A fuming Joshua allowed her to escort him back down the hall towards the lift. When he glanced over his shoulder Webb and her two troopers were standing watching him.

“This isn’t her turf,” he hissed at the serjeant. “We could have caused a scene, made trouble for her. The police would have sorted her out as well as us.”

“Any incident with the authorities here would have been resolved in her favour. She’s a CNIS officer assigned to Mzu; the local Navy Bureau would have backed her, and you and I would be in deep shit, not to mention jail.”

“How the hell did Webb know where I was going?”

“I imagine *Lady Mac*’s crew is under clandestine surveillance right now.”

“Jesus!”

“Quite. We will have to withdraw and come up with a new strategy.”

They reached the lift doors, and Joshua datavised for a ride back to the axial chamber. He cast another glance over his shoulder to check on Webb, a sly smile germinating on his face. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?”

“The agencies don’t have her yet. We’re still in with a chance.”

“That’s logical.”

“Of course it’s logical. We may even be able to turn this to our advantage.”

“How?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re back in *Lady Mac*. Everyone’s going to have to undergo decontamination first. Christ knows what sort of covert nanonics they’ve stung us with. We’ll be broadcasting our own thoughts back to them if we’re not careful.”

The lift doors opened and he stepped inside. Someone had slapped half a dozen twenty-centimetre circular holomorph

stickers at random over the walls, with a couple more on the ceiling. One was at head height; it started its cycle, a tight bud of lavender photons swelling out from the centre into the form of a scantily clad teenage cheerleader. She shook her silver baton enthusiastically. "Run, Alkad, run!" she yelled. "You're our last hope; don't let them catch you. Run, Alkad, run!"

Joshua stared at it in stupefaction. "Jesus wept."

The cheerleader winked saucily, and syphoned back down below the sticker's surface. Three more began their cycle.

18

Arnstadt fell to the Organization fleet after a ninety-minute battle above the planet. The Strategic Defence network was hammered into oblivion by Capone's antimatter-powered combat wasps. There had been some advance warning from the Edenists, giving the local navy time to redeploy their ships. Three squadrons of voidhawks had arrived from the habitats orbiting one of the system's gas giants, reinforcing the Adamist vessels.

None of the preparations altered the final outcome. Forty-seven Arnstadt navy ships were destroyed, along with fifteen voidhawks. The remaining voidhawks swallowed away, withdrawing back to the gas giant.

The Organization fleet's transport starships moved unopposed into low orbit, and spaceplanes began to ferry a small army of possessed down to the surface. Like all modern Confederation planets, Arnstadt had few soldiers. There were several marine brigades, which were mainly trained in space warfare techniques and covert mission procedures. Wars in this era were fought between starships. The days of foreign invasion forces marching across enemy territory had vanished before the end of the twenty-first century.

With its SD network reduced to radioactive meteorites flaring through bruised skies, Arnstadt was incapable of offering the slightest resistance to the possessed marching down out of their spaceplanes. Small towns were infiltrated first, increasing the numbers of possessed available to move on to larger towns. The area of captured ground began to increase exponentially.

Luigi Balsmao set up his headquarters in one of the orbit-

ing asteroid settlements. Information on the people captured by the advancing possessed was datavised up to the asteroid where the structure coordination programs written by Emmet Mordden decided if they should be possessed or not. Organization lieutenants were appointed, their authority backed up by the firepower of fleet starships in low orbit.

With the subjugation of the planet confidently under way, Luigi split half of the fleet into squadrons and deployed them against the system's asteroid settlements. Only the Edenist habitats were left alone; after Yosemite, Capone wasn't about to risk a second defeat on such a scale.

Starships were dispatched back to New California, and fresh cargo ships began to arrive soon, bringing with them the basic components for a new SD network along with other equipment to help consolidate the Organization's advance. Rover reporters were allowed to see carefully selected sections of the planet under its new masters: children left non-possessed to run around freely, possessed and non-possessed working side by side to restart the economy, Luigi stamping down hard on any possessed who didn't acknowledge the Organization's leadership.

News of the successful invasion swept across the Confederation, backed up by sensewise recordings from the reporters. Surprise was total. One star system's government—no matter what its nature—taking over another was a concept always considered totally impossible. Capone had proved it wasn't. In doing so he set off a chain reaction of panic. Commentators began to talk about planetary level exponential curves, the most extreme showing the entire Confederation falling to the Organization within six months as the industrial resources of more and more systems were absorbed by Capone's empire.

On the Assembly floor, demands that the Confederation Navy should intervene and destroy the Organization fleet became almost continuous. First Admiral Aleksandrovich had to make several appearances to explain how impractical the notion was. The best the navy could do, he said, was to seek out the source of Capone's antimatter and prevent a

third system from being taken over. Arnstadt was already lost. Capone had secured a victory which couldn't be reversed without a great loss of life. At this stage, such casualties were wholly unacceptable. He also pointed out that, sadly, a great many non-possessed crews were cooperating with the Organization to operate their starships. Without them, the invasion of Arnstadt could never have happened. Perhaps, he suggested, the Assembly should consider introducing an emergency act to deal with any such traitors. Such legislation might, in future, discourage captains seeking to sign up with Capone for short term gain.

• • •

"Escort duties?" André Duchamp asked wearily. "I thought we were here to help defend New California itself. What exactly does this escort duty entail?"

"Monterey hasn't given me a detailed briefing," Iain Girardi said. "But you will simply be protecting cargo ships from attack by the Confederation Navy. Which is exactly what your contract stipulated."

"Hardly," Madeleine growled. "Nor does it say anywhere that we help a deranged dictator who wiped out an entire fucking planet. I say jump out, Captain. Power up the patterning nodes right now and get the fuck out of here while we still can."

"I would have thought this was a more appealing task for you," Iain Girardi said. His acceleration couch webbing peeled back, and he drifted off the cushioning. "The majority of the crews in the cargo ships are non-possessed, and you won't be permanently in range of the Organization's SD platforms. If anything, we're giving you an easier job with less risk for the same money."

"Where would we be going?" André asked.

"Arnstadt. The Organization is shipping industrial equipment there to help restart the planetary economy."

"If they hadn't blown it all to shit in the first place they wouldn't need to *restart* it," Madeleine said.

André shushed her impatiently. "It seems fine to me," he

told Iain Girardi. "However, the ship will require some maintenance work before we can undertake such an assignment. An escort flight is very different from supplementing planetary defences."

Iain Girardi's humour appeared strained for the first time. "Yes. I'll have to discuss the nature of the repairs with Monterey." He datavised the flight computer for a communications channel.

André waited with a neutral smile.

"The Organization will bring the *Villeneuve's Revenge* up to full combat-capable status," Iain Girardi announced. "Your hull and sensor suite will be repaired by us, but you must meet the cost of secondary systems."

André shrugged. "Take it out of our fee."

"Very well. Please dock at Monterey's spaceport, bay VB757. I shall disembark there; you'll be assigned a liaison officer for the mission."

"Non-possessed," Desmond Lafoe said sharply.

"Of course. I believe they want you to take some reporters with you, as well. They'll require access to your sensors during the flight."

"*Merde*. Those filth. What for?"

"Mr Capone is highly focused on the need for accurate publicity. He wants the Confederation to see that he is not a real threat."

"Unlike Arnstadt," Madeleine said swiftly.

André piloted the starship down from its emergence zone to the large asteroid. Spaceflight traffic above New California was heavy: starships raced between the orbital asteroids and the emergence zones, spaceplanes and ion field flyers flew a constant shuttle service from the planet. Although the starship only had sixty-five per cent of its sensor clusters remaining, André kept them fully extended to gather what information he could.

When the flight computer told her Girardi was talking to Monterey again, Madeleine opened an encrypted channel to André: "I don't think we should dock," she datavised.

The captain extended the datavise to include Erick and Desmond. "Why not?"

"Look at those ships out there, if anything there's more activity than before the planet was possessed. I didn't realize how damn professional this Capone Organization is. We're not going to get out of this, André, we're in too deep. The second we dock they'll swarm on board and possess us."

"Then who will crew the ship for them? *Non*, they need us."

"She has a point about the Organization's size and motivation, though," Erick datavised. "The possessed are dependent on us flying the warships, but what happens when there are no more worlds left to invade? Capone took Arnstadt in less than a day, and almost doubled his military resources doing so. He's not going to stop now. If he and the rest of the possessed keep on winning at that rate, there will be no place left for non-possessed anywhere in the Confederation. That's what we'll be helping bring about."

"I know this." André cast a guilty glance at Girardi to make sure he wasn't aware of the conversation. "That is why I agreed to the escort duty."

"I don't get it," Madeleine said.

"Simple, *ma chérie*. The Organization repairs the *Villeneuve's Revenge* for me, fills up our cryogenic fuel tanks, equips us with combat wasps, and sends us off on a flight. Then while we're en route, we vanish. What is to stop us?"

"Their liaison officer, for a start," Desmond said.

"Ha, one man. We can overcome him. Capone has made his greatest mistake in trying to dishonour André Duchamp. It is I who is using them now, for the benefit of my fellow man, *comme il faut*. I am no quisling. And I think we should make sure the reporters know of this savage blow we will strike against Capone."

"You really intend to leave?" Madeleine asked.

"Naturally."

Erick grinned, as best as his new skin would allow him. For once Duchamp's devious nature could actually work for

the best. He opened a new file in his neural nanonics memory cell and started recording the sensor images. CNIS would want to know about the Organization's disposition; though he suspected the New California system would already be under full covert surveillance.

"What about Shane Brandes?" Desmond asked.

André's face darkened. "What about him?"

"How long were you planning to leave him in zero-tau?"

"I could hardly drop him off at Chaumort, it was too small. We want a backwards planet where we can dump him in the middle of a desert or a jungle."

"Lalonde would do," Madeleine said under her breath.

"Well, if you're looking for somewhere he won't come back from," Desmond offered maliciously.

"No," Erick datavised.

"Why not?" André asked. "Give him to the Organization when we dock. It is an excellent idea. Shows them how loyal we are."

"We kill him, or dump him. But not that. You didn't see what they did to Bev."

André flinched. "Very well. But I'm not hanging on to that bastard forever, his zero-tau is costing me power."

Villeneuve's Revenge docked in its designated bay, its crew alert for any treachery from the Organization. There was none to see. As Iain Girardi promised, maintenance teams immediately started to work on the starship's battered hull and defunct sensors. It took eleven hours to withdraw the damaged sections and install new replacements. Integration and diagnostic checks took another two hours to complete.

Once André agreed that they were ready for escort duties, the Organization started loading combat wasps into the launch tubes. An airlock tube slid out from the docking bay wall to connect with the *Villeneuve's Revenge*.

It was Desmond, armed with a machine pistol bought on Chaumort, who went down to the lower deck with Girardi. He made sure the tube was completely empty before opening the hatch and letting the Organization man out. Only

when Girardi had swum down the length of the tube, and closed the far hatch behind him, did he give André the all-clear.

“Send your liaison officer through,” André datavised to the spaceport.

As arranged, the man wore nothing, towing his clothes in a small bag behind him as he came along the tube. Desmond made every test they could think of, requesting complex datavises from the liaison officer’s neural nanonics, exposing him to different processor blocks.

“I think he’s clean,” Desmond datavised.

Madeleine unlocked the manual latches on the hatch to the lower deck.

The liaison officer introduced himself as Kingsley Pryor. To Erick, his subdued behaviour and quiet, stumbling voice indicated someone emerging from shock.

“There will be a convoy of twelve cargo ships departing for Arnstadt in three hours,” Kingsley Pryor told them. “The *Villeneuve’s Revenge* will be one of five combat-capable ships escorting them. Your job is to defend them from any sneak attacks from Confederation Navy ships. If it does happen, they’ll probably use voidhawks against us.” He gave the bridge a thoughtful look. “I wasn’t told there would only be four of you. Is that enough to operate at full combat efficiency?”

“Of course it is,” André responded hotly. “We have survived much worse than a voidhawk attack.”

“Very well. There is one other thing you should know. The Organization is held together by fear and respect, obedience must be total. You have accepted our money and signed on with the fleet, we will not tolerate any disloyalty.”

“You come on my ship, and tell me—” André blustered loudly.

Kingsley Pryor held up a hand. Weak though the gesture was, it silenced Duchamp immediately. Something in the liaison officer’s manner put a great deal of weight behind his authority. “You signed a pact with the devil, Captain. Now I’m explaining the small print. You don’t trust us, fair

enough; we don't really trust you either. I'm sure that now you've seen New California firsthand you've realized just how powerful and dedicated the Organization is, and you're having second thoughts about supporting us. Perfectly natural. After all, it would be very easy for a starship to disappear in the direction of the Confederation. Let me try and dissuade you. While your ship was being repaired, a nuclear explosive was included inside one of the new components. It has a seven-hour timer which must be reset by a code. I do not have that code, so you cannot use debrief nanonics to extract it from me. A liaison officer in one of the other escort ships will transmit that code at us every three hours, resetting the timer. In turn I will transmit the code I have been given at the other ships, which have been similarly modified. If all of us stay together, there will be no problem. If one ship leaves, they will be killing themselves and the crew of another ship."

"Remove it now!" André shouted furiously. "I will not fly under such a blackmail threat."

"It is not blackmail, Captain, it is enforcement, making sure you abide by the terms of your contract. I believe the argument goes along the lines of: If you intended to keep the agreement you made with us you have nothing to worry about."

"I will not fly with a bomb on board. That is final!"

"Then they will come on board, and possess you. And another crew will be found. It is the ship and its capability they want, Captain, not you as an individual."

"This is intolerable!"

For a moment a real anger shone in Kingsley Pryor's eyes. He sneered at André. "So is a free man agreeing to help Capone, Captain." Then the emotion was gone, leaving only the meek expression in its wake. "Shall we get the reporters on board now? We haven't got too much time before we have to be at the jump coordinate."

• • •

Jed Hinton was still a hundred metres from the pub when he

knelt down and took the red handkerchief off his ankle. Koblat's adults were starting to get nettled by Deadnight; kids that followed the cause were being hassled. Nothing serious, some jostling in public places, arguments at home. The usual crap.

Digger, of course, despised the recording; descending into a rage whenever it was mentioned. For once Jed enjoyed a guilty delight at the way he intimidated Miri and Navar, forbidding them to have anything to do with it. Without realizing, he'd altered the political structure of the family. Now it was Jed and Gari who were the favoured ones, the ones who could access Kiera Salter, and talk about her ideas with their friends, and know the taste of freedom.

Jed walked into the Blue Fountain, making out like it was cool for him to be there. Normally he'd be anywhere else, it was Digger's pub. But Digger was busy these days; not working the tunnelling units, but out at the spaceport doing maintenance on the machinery in the docking bays. There were three shifts a day now, supporting the increasing number of flights. Yet although everyone knew perfectly well starships were arriving and departing several times a day, there was no official log. Three times he'd accessed the net and asked the spaceport register for a list of ships docked only to be told there were none.

Fascinated, the Deadnight kids had asked around, and together they'd pieced together the basics of the quarantine-busting operation. They had all been excited that day, starships arriving illegally was *perfect* for them. Beth had smiled at him and said: "Bloody hell, we might just make it to Valisk, after all." Then she'd hugged him. She'd never done that before, not in that way.

He asked the barman for a beer, slowly scanning the pub. A room where the images within the ten-year-old landscape holograms covering the walls were diminishing to blurred smears, their colours fading. The naked rock they covered would be less depressing. Most of the scuffed composite and aluminum tables were occupied. Groups of men sat hunched over their drinks and talked in low tones. Nearly a quarter of

the customers were wearing ship-suits, bright and exotic compared to the clothes favoured by Koblat's residents.

Jed located the crew from the *Rameses X*, the starship's name stencilled neatly on their breast pockets. Their captain was with them, a middle-aged woman with the silver star on her epaulette. He went over.

"I wonder if I could talk to you, ma'am?"

She glanced up at him, faintly suspicious at the respectful tone.

"What is it?"

"I have a friend who would like to go to Valisk."

The captain burst out laughing. Jed flushed as the rest of the crew groaned, trading infuriatingly superior expressions.

"Well, son, I can certainly understand how come your friend is so interested in young Kiera." She winked broadly.

Jed's embarrassment deepened, which must have been obvious to all of them. True, he had spent hours on his processor block with a graphics program, altering the image from the recording. Now the block's small AV pillar could project her lying beside him on the bed at night, or looming over him smiling. At first he'd worried he was being disrespectful, but she would understand the need he had for her. The love. She knew all about love, in its many forms. It was all she spoke of.

"It's what she offers," he stammered helplessly. "That's what we're interested in."

That just brought another round of hearty laughter from the group.

"Please," he said. "Can you take us there?"

The humour sank from her face. "Listen, son, take the advice of an older woman. That recording: it's just a big bull-shit con. They want you there so they can possess you, that's all. There's no paradise waiting at the end of the rainbow."

"Have you been there?" he asked stiffly.

"No. No, I haven't. So you're right, I can't say for certain. Let's just put it down to a healthy dose of cynicism; everybody catches it when they get older." She turned back to her drink.

“Will you take me?”

“No. Look, son, even if I was crazy enough to fly to Valisk, do you have any idea how much it would cost you to charter a starship to take you?”

He shook his head mutely.

“From here, about a quarter of a million fuseodollars. Do you have that kind of money?”

“No.”

“Well, there you are then. Now stop wasting my time.”

“Do you know anyone who would take us, someone who believes in Kiera?”

“Goddamnit!” She screwed around in her chair to glare at him. “Can’t you inbred morons pick up a simple hint when it’s smacked you in the face?”

“Kiera said you’d hate us for listening to her.”

The captain let out an astonished snort of breath. “I don’t believe this. Don’t you see how gullible you are? I’m doing you a favour.”

“I didn’t ask you to. And why are you so blind to what she says?”

“*Blind?* Fuck you, you teeny shit.”

“Because you are. You’re scared it’s true, that she’s right.”

She stared at him for a long moment, the rest of the crew fixing him with hostile stares. They’d probably beat him up in a minute. Jed didn’t care anymore. He hated her as much as he did Digger and all the others with closed minds and dead hearts.

“All right,” the captain whispered. “In your case I’ll make an exception.”

“No,” one of the crew said, his hand going out to hold her arm. “You can’t, he’s only a kid with a hard-on for the girl.”

She shook off the restraining hand and brought out a processor block. “I was going to hand this over to the Confederation Navy, even though it would be difficult to explain away given our current flight schedule. But I think you can have it instead, now.” She took a flek from its slot in the block and slapped it into an astonished Jed’s hand. “Say

hello to Kiera for me. If you aren't too busy screaming while they possess you."

Chairs were pushed back noisily. The crew of the *Rameses X* left their unfinished drinks on the table and marched out.

Jed stood at the centre of a now-silent pub, every eye locked on him. He didn't even notice, he was staring raptly at the little black flek resting in his palm as if it were the key to the fountain of youth. Which in a way, he supposed, it was.

• • •

The *Levêque* was orbiting fifteen thousand kilometres above Norfolk, its complete sensor suite extended to sweep the planet. Despite the Confederation Navy's hunger for information, little data was returning. Slow cyclonic swirls of red cloud had mushroomed from the islands, mating then smoothing out into a placid sheet, sealing the world behind a uniform twilight nimbus. Small ivory tufts of cirrocumulus swam above the polar zones for a few hours, the last defiant speckling of alien colour; but in time even they fell to melt into the veil.

The consolidation was five hours old when the change began. *Levêque's* officers noticed the cloud's light emission level was increasing. The frigate's captain decided to play safe and ordered them to raise their orbit by another twenty thousand kilometres. By the time their main fusion drive ignited, the crimson canopy was blazing brighter than any firestorm. They ascended at five gees, badly worried by the glare expanding rapidly across the stars behind them. Gravitonic sensors reported discordant ripples within the planetary mass below. If the readings were truthful, then the world should be breaking apart. Heavily filtered optical-band sensors revealed the planet's geometry remained unchanged.

Seven gees, and the cloud's surface was kindling to the intensity of a nuclear furnace.

Luca Comar looked upwards in a dreamy daze. The red

cloud guarding the sky above Cricklade manor's steep roof was writhing violently, its gold and crimson underbelly caught by potent microburst vortices. Huge churning strips were being torn open, allowing a fierce white light to slam down. He flung his arms wide, howling a rapturous welcome.

Energy stormed through him at an almost painful rate, bursting from some non-point within to vanish into the raging sky. The woman beside him was performing the same act, her features straining with effort and incredulity. In his mind he could feel the possessed all across Norfolk uniting in this final supreme sacrament.

Boiling fragments of cloud plunged through the air at giddy velocities; corkscrew lightning bolts snapping between them. Their red tint was fading, sinking behind the flamboyant dawn irradiating the universe beyond the atmosphere.

A thick, heavy light poured over Luca. It penetrated straight through his body. Through the mossy grass. Through the soil. The whole world surrendered to it. Luca's thoughts were trapped by the invasion, unable to think of anything but sustaining the moment. He hung suspended from reality as the last surge of energy unwound through his cells.

Silence.

Luca slowly let out his breath. He opened his eyes cautiously. The clouds had calmed, reverting to ruffled white smears. Warm mellow light was shining over the wolds. There was no sun, no single source point, it came from the boundary of the enclosed universe itself. Shining equally, everywhere.

And they'd gone. He could no longer hear the souls in the beyond. Those piercing pleas and promises had vanished. There was no way back, no treacherous chink in the folds of this fresh continuum. He was free inside his new body.

He looked at the woman, who was glancing around in stupefaction.

"We've done it," he whispered. "We escaped."

She smiled tentatively.

He held out his arms, and concentrated. Not the smoke-snorting knight again; the moment required something more dignified. Soft golden cloth settled around his skin, an imperial toga, befitting his mood.

“Oh, yes. Yes!”

The energetic ability was still there, the imposition of will upon matter. But now the cloth had a stronger, firmer texture to the artefacts he'd created before.

Before . . . Luca Comar laughed. In another universe. Another life.

This time it would be different. They could establish their nirvana here. And it would last forever.

• • •

The cluster of five survey satellites from the *Levêque* gradually spread apart as they glided through the section of space where Norfolk should be. Communications links beamed a huge flow of information back to the frigate. Every sensor they had was switched to maximum sensitivity. Two distinct spectrums of sunlight fell on them. Tremulous waves of solar ions dusted their receptors. Cosmic radiation bombardment was standard.

There was nothing else. No gravity field. No magnetosphere. No atmospheric gas. Space-time's quantum signature was perfectly normal.

All that remained of Norfolk was the memory.

• • •

When it was discovered in 2125, Nyvan was immediately incorporated into the celebration of hope which was sweeping Earth in the wake of Felicity's discovery. The second terracompatible planet to be found, a beautiful verdant virgin land, proof the first hadn't been a fluke. Everybody on Earth wanted to escape out to the stars. And they wanted to go there now. That, ultimately, proved its downfall.

By then, people had finally realized the arcologies weren't going to be a temporary shelter from the ruined climate, somewhere to stay while Govcentral cooled the at-

mosphere, cleaned up the pollution, and put the weather patterns back to rights. The tainted clouds and armada storms were here to stay. Anyone who wanted to live under an open sky would have to leave and find a new one.

In the interests of fairness and maintaining its own shaky command over individual state administrations, Govcentral agreed that everyone had the right to leave, without favouritism. It was that last worthy clause, included to pacify several vocal minorities, which in practice meant that colonists would have to be a multi-cultural, multi-racial mix fully representative of the planet's population. No limits were placed on the numbers buying starship tickets, they just had to be balanced. For those states too poor to fill up their quota, Govcentral provided assisted placement schemes so the richer states couldn't complain they were being unfairly limited. A typical political compromise.

By and large, it worked for Nyvan and the other terra-compatible planets being sought out by the new ZTT drive ships. The first decades of interstellar colonization were heady times, when common achievement easily outweighed the old ethnic enmities. Nyvan and its early siblings played host to a unity of purpose rarely seen before.

It didn't last. After the frontier had been tamed and the pioneering spirit flickered into extinction the ancient rivalries lumbered to the fore once again. Earth's colonial governance gave way to local administrations on a dozen planets, and politicians began to adopt the worst jingoistic aspects of late twentieth-century nationalism, leading the mob behind them with absurd ease. This time there were no safeguards of seas and geographical borders between the diverse populations. Religions, cultures, skins, ideologies, and languages were all squeezed up tight in the pinch chamber of urban conglomeration. Civil unrest was the inevitable result, ruining lives and crippling economies.

Overall, the problem was solved in 2156 by the Govcentral state of California, who sponsored New California, the first ethnic-streaming colony, open only to native Californians. Although initially controversial, the trend was swiftly

taken up by the other states. This second wave of colonies suffered none of the strife so prevalent among the first, clearing the way for the mass immigration of the Great Dispersal.

While the new ethnic-streaming worlds successfully absorbed Earth's surplus population and flourished accordingly, the earlier colonies slowly lost ground both culturally and economically: a false dawn shading to a perpetual twilight.

• • •

"What happened to the asteroids?" Lawrence Dillon asked.

Quinn was gazing thoughtfully at the images which the *Tantu's* sensors were throwing onto the hemisphere of holoscreens at the foot of his acceleration couch. In total, eleven asteroids had been manoeuvred into orbit around Nyvan, their ores mined to provide raw material for the planet's industries. Ordinarily, they would develop into healthy mercantile settlements with a flotilla of industrial stations.

The frigate's sensors showed that eight of them were more-or-less standard knots of electromagnetic activity, giving off a strong infrared emission. The remaining three were cold and dark. *Tantu's* high-resolution optical sensors focused on the closest of the defunct rocks, revealing wrecked machinery clinging to the crumpled grey surface. One of them even had a counter-rotating spaceport disk, though it no longer revolved; the spindle was bent, and the gloomy structure punctured with holes.

"They had a lot of national wars here," Quinn said.

Lawrence frowned at him, thoughts cloudy with incomprehension.

"There's a lot of different people live here," Quinn explained. "They don't get on too good, so they fight a lot."

"If they hate each other, why don't they all leave?"

"I don't know. Ask them."

"Who?"

"Shut the fuck up, Lawrence, I'm trying to think. Dwyer, has anyone seen us yet?"

"Yes, the detector satellites picked us up straightaway.

We've had three separate transponder interrogations so far; they were from different defence network command centres. Everyone seemed satisfied with our identification code this time."

"Good. Graper, I want you to be our communications officer."

"Yes, Quinn." Graper let the eagerness show in his voice, anxious to prove his worth.

"Stick with the cover we decided. Call each of those military centres and tell the bastards we've been assigned a monitor mission in this system by the Confederation Navy. We'll be staying in high orbit until further notice, and if any of them want fire support against possessed targets we'll be happy to provide it."

"I'm on it, Quinn." He began issuing orders to the flight computer.

"Dwyer," Quinn said. "Get me a channel into Nyvan's communications net." He floated away from his velvet acceleration couch and used a stikpad to steady himself in front of his big command console.

"Er, Quinn, this is weird, the sensors are showing me like fifty communications platforms in geosync," Dwyer said nervously. He was using grab hoops to hold himself in front of his flight station, his face centimetres from a glowing holoscreen, as though the closer he could get the more understanding of its data he would have. "The computer says they've got nineteen separate nets on this world, some of them don't even hook together."

"Yeah, so? I told you, dickbrain, they got a shitload of different nations here."

"Which one do you want?"

Quinn thought back, picturing the man, his mannerisms, voice, accent. "Is there a North American-ethnic nation?"

Dwyer consulted the information on the holoscreen. "I got five. There's Tonala, New Dominica, New Georgia, Quebec, and the Islamic Texas Republic."

"Gimmie the New Georgia one." Information began to scroll up on his own holoscreen. He studied it for a minute,

then requested a directory function and loaded in a search program.

“Who is this guy, Quinn?” Lawrence asked.

“Name’s Twelve-T. He’s one mean fucker, a gang lord, runs a big operation down there. Any badass shit you want, you go to him for it.”

The search program finished its run. Quinn loaded the address it had found for him.

“Yeah?” a voice asked.

“I want to talk to Twelve-T.”

“Crazy ass mother, ain’t no fucker got that handle living here.”

“Listen, shitbrain, this is his public address. He’s there.”

“Yeah, so you know him, datavise him.”

“Not possible.”

“Yeah? Then he don’t know you. Any mother he need to rap with knows his private code.”

“Okay, the magic word is Banneth. And if you don’t think that’s magic, trace where this call is coming from. Now tell the man, because if I come calling, you’re going out hurting.”

Dwyer gave another myopic squint at his displays. “He’s tracing the call. Back to the satellite already. Hot program.”

“I expect they use it a lot,” Quinn muttered.

“You got a problem up there, motherfucker?” a new voice asked. It was almost as Quinn remembered it, a low purr, too damaged to be smooth. Quinn had seen the throat scar which made it that way.

“No problem at all. What I got up here is a proposition.”

“Where you at, man? What is this monk shit? You ain’t Banneth.”

“No.” Quinn swayed forwards slowly towards the camera lens in the centre of the console and pulled his hood right back. “Run your visual file search program.”

“Oh, yeah. You used to be Banneth’s little rat runner; her whore, too. I remember. So what you want here, ratty?”

“A deal.”

“What you got to trade?”

“You know what I’m riding in?”

“Sure. Lucky Vin ran a trace, he’s pissin’ liquid nitrogen right now.”

“It could be yours.”

“No shit?”

“That’s right.”

“What’ve I gotta do for it, hump you?”

“No, I just want to trade it in. That’s all.”

The whisper lost its cool. “You want to trade in a fucking Confederation Navy frigate? What the fuck for?”

“I need to talk to you about that. But there’s some good quality hardware on board. You’ll come out ahead.”

“Talk, motherfucker? If your hardware’s so shit-hot, how come you wanna dump it?”

“God’s Brother doesn’t always ride to war. There are other ways to bring His word to the faithless.”

“Cut that voodoo shit, man. Damn, I hate that sect shit you arcology freaks use. Ain’t no God, so he sure as shit can’t have no Brother.”

“Try telling that to the possessed.”

“Motherfuck! Smartass motherfucker! That’s what you are, that’s all you are.”

“Do you want to deal or not?” Quinn knew he would; what gang lord could resist a frigate?

“I ain’t promising shit up front.”

“That’s cool. Now I need to know which asteroid to dock with. And it’s going to have to be one which doesn’t ask too many questions. Have you got any weight in orbit?”

“You know it, man, that’s why you come to me. You might talk like you the King of Kulu’s brother, but here it’s me who’s got the juice. And stink this, I don’t trust you, rat runner.”

“With this much firepower behind me, think how much I care. Start fixing things.”

“Fuck you. A strike like this is gonna take a few days to set up, man.”

“You have forty-eight hours; then I want a docking bay

number flashing in front of me. If not, I will smite you from the face of the world.”

“Will you cut that freaky crap—”

Quinn cancelled the circuit and threw his head back laughing.

• • •

It had only taken a few hours for the screen of red cloud to engulf the sky above Exnall. The tenuous beginnings of the early morning had been supplanted by billowing masses of solid vapour sweeping up from the south. Thunder arrived in accompaniment, bass grumbles which seemed to circle and swoop around the town like jittery birds. There was no telling where the sun was now, but its light still seemed to slip through the covering to illuminate the streets in natural tones.

Moyo marched down Maingreen on his mission to find some kind of transport for Stephanie’s children. The more he thought about the prospect, the happier it made him. She was right, as always, it did give him something positive to do. And no, he didn’t want to spend eternity in Exnall.

He passed the doughnut café and the baseball game in the park, oblivious to either. If he searched with his mind, he could perceive the buildings around him like foggy shadows; all space was dark, while matter was amended to a translucent white gauze. Individual objects were hard to distinguish, and small ones almost impossible; but he thought he stood a good chance of recognizing something like a bus.

The street sweeper was busy again. A man in a grey jacket and cloth cap, pushing his broom in front of him as he made his way slowly along the pavement. Every day he had appeared. He never did anything else but sweep the pavements, never talked to anybody, never responded to any attempts at conversation.

Moyo was slowly coming to learn that not all of Exnall’s possessed were adapting readily to their new circumstances. Some, like the sports nuts and café owners were obsessively filling every moment of their day with activity no matter

how spurious, while others would amble around in a listless mockery of their earlier existence. That assessment put his own labours perilously close to the apathetic ones.

A dense collection of shadows at the rear of one of the larger stores caught his attention. When he walked around the building there was a long van parked in the loading bay. It had suffered some damage in the riot; struck by white fire the front two tyres had melted into puddles of sticky plastic, the navy-blue bodywork was blackened, and in some places cracked open, the windshield was smashed. But it was certainly big enough.

He stared at the first tyre, visualizing it whole and functional. Not an illusion, but how the solid matter should actually be structured. The hardened plastic puddle started to flow, amoebic buds swelling up to engulf the naked hub.

“Yo there, man. Having some fun?”

Moyo had been so involved with the tyre he hadn't noticed the man approaching. At first sight the man looked as if he'd grown a dark brown mane; his beard came down to his waist as did the corkscrew locks of his luxuriant hair. A pair of tiny amber hexagonal glasses which were almost curtained by tresses seemed perversely prominent. The flares of his purple velvet trousers were embellished with tiny silver bells which chimed with each step, not in tune, but certainly in keeping.

“Not exactly. Is this your van?”

“Hey, property is theft, man.”

“Property is what?”

“Theft. You're like stealing from what rightfully belongs to all people. That van is an inanimate object. Unless you're into a metallic version of Gaia—which personally I'm not. However, just because it's inert that doesn't mean we can abuse its intrinsic value which is the ability to carry cats where they want to go.”

“Cats? I just want it to ferry some children out of here.”

“Yeah well okay that's cool, too. But what I like mean is that it's like community property. It was built by people, so all people should share it equally.”

“It was built by cybersystems.”

“Oh, no, that’s real heavy-duty corporate shit. Man, they’ve got into your skull big-time. Here, take a toot, Mr Suit, take yourself out of yourself.” He held out a fat reefer which was already alight and sending out a pungent sweetness.

“No thanks.”

“Takes your mind to other realms.”

“I’ve just got back from one, thank you. I have no intention of returning.”

“Yeah, right, dig your point. The baddest trip of them all.”

Moyo couldn’t quite make out what he was confronting. The man didn’t seem like one of the apathetic ones. On the other hand, he obviously hadn’t managed to adapt very well. Perhaps he came from a pre-technology age, where education was minimal and superstition ruled everyone’s life.

“What era do you come from?”

“Ho! The greatest one there ever was. I dug the era of peace, when we were busy fighting the establishment for all the freedom you cats just take for granted. Heck, I was at Woodstock, man. Can you dig that?”

“Um, I’m very happy for you. So you don’t mind if I rebuild the van, then?”

“Rebuild? What are you, some kind of anti-anarchist?”

“I’m someone who’s got children to look after. Unless you’d rather they were tortured by Ekelund’s people.”

The man’s body bucked as if he’d been struck a physical blow; his arms wove in strange jerky motions in front of him. Moyo didn’t think it was a dance.

“I hate your hostility groove, but I dig your motivation. That’s cool. A square cat like you is probably having a lot of trouble adjusting to this situation.”

Moyo’s jaw dropped open. “*I’m* having trouble?”

“Thought so. So like what kind of magical mystery tour are you planning here?”

“We’re taking the children out of Exnall. Stephanie wants to drive up to the border.”

“Oh, man!” A wide smile prised apart layers of hair. “That

is so beautiful. The border again. We're gonna roll this old bus out and set the draft dodgers free in the land of Moun-ties and maple leaves. What a trip! Thank you, man, thank you." He walked over to the battered van and stroked its front wing lovingly. A small wavy rainbow appeared on the bodywork where his hand had touched it.

"What do you mean, we?"

"Come on, man, lighten up. You don't think you can handle that kind of scene alone, do you? The military mind is full of low cunning; you wouldn't get a mile out of town without them throwing up roadblocks across the freeway. Maybe a few of us would fall down some stairs while we're being arrested, too. It happens, man, all of the frigging time. The federal pigs don't give a shit about our rights. But I've been here before, I know how to go sneaky on them."

"You think she'd try and stop us?"

"Who, man?"

"Ekelund."

"Hell, who knows. Chicks like that have got it real hard up their asses. Between you and me, I think they're maybe like aliens. You know, UFO people from Venus. But I can see you're sceptical right now, I won't press it. So how many kids are you planning on squirrelling away in here?"

"About seven or eight, so far."

Without quite understanding how it happened, Moyo found a friendly arm around his shoulder, guiding him to the van's cab.

"That's worthy. I can dig that. Now you just ease yourself up in the driver's seat, or whatever the hell they call it these days, and dream up some controls we can all handle. Once you've done that and I've given us a cool disguise we can hit the road."

Twinkles of light were shooting all over the van's body-work, sketching glowing lines of colour in the damaged composite. It was as if a flock of acidhead fairies had been let loose with spray cans. Moyo wanted to complain at this ideological hijack, but couldn't manage to think up the cor-

rect words. He took the easy option, and sat in the driver's seat like he'd been told.

• • •

There was a gap between the deuterium tank's cryostat ducts and the power feed sub-module which routed superconductor cables to nearby patterning nodes, a narrow crevice amid the boxy, nultherm foam-coated machinery. In the schematics which the flight computer provided, it was listed as a crawlway.

For pigmy acrobats, maybe, Erick thought irascibly. He certainly couldn't wear any protective gear over the SII suit. Sharp corners and bloated tubes jabbed and squeezed against him every time he moved. It couldn't be doing the medical nanonic packages around his arm and torso any good. Thankfully the black silicon covering his skin was an effective insulator, otherwise he would have been either roasted, frozen, or electrocuted long ago.

Along with Madeleine he'd been burrowing through the innards of the *Villeneuve's Revenge* for nine hours now. It was nasty, tiring, stressful work. With his body in the state it was he had to keep a constant check on his physiological status. He was also running a mild relaxant program in primary mode; claustrophobia was a problem prowling wolfishly around the fringes of conscious thought.

The crawlway ended a metre short of the hull, opening out into a hexagonal metallic cave bordered with stress structure girders, themselves spiralled by cables. Erick squirmed out into this cramped space and drew a sharp breath of relief, more psychological than practical given he was breathing through a respirator tube. He switched his collar sensors to scan around, seeing the fuselage plate behind his head. It appeared perfectly normal, a smooth, slightly curving silicon surface, dark grey with red code strips printed around the edges.

With his legs still jammed in the crawlway, Erick pulled the sensor block from the straps securing it to his side. It

contained six separate scanner pads which he slipped out and started fixing to the hull plate and girders.

"Plate 3-25-D is clean," he datavised to André eight minutes later. "No electromagnetic activity; and it's solid, too, no density anomalies."

"Very good, Erick. 5-12-D is next."

"How is Madeleine doing?"

"She is methodical. Between you, eighteen per cent of the possible locations have now been eliminated."

Erick cursed. The four of them had carefully gone over the starship's schematics, working out every possible section of the hull where the device could have been hidden by Monterey's maintenance crews. With Pryor on board observing the bridge, they were limited to two crew searching at any one time, the two supposed to be asleep. It was going to take a long time to cover all the possible areas.

"I still say it's probably a combat wasp. That would be the easiest method."

"*Oui*, but we won't know for sure until you have eliminated all the other options. Who can tell with such treacherous bastards?"

"Great. How long to Arnstadt?"

"We have another five jumps to go. Two of the other escort ships are manoeuvring sluggishly, which gives us additional time. They are probably searching as we are. You have perhaps another fifteen hours, twenty at the outside."

Not enough, Erick knew, not nearly enough. They were going to have to go to Arnstadt. After that he didn't like to think what the Organization would require from them. Nothing as simple as escort duties, that was for certain.

"All right, Captain, I'm on my way to 5-12-D."

• • •

The chamber which the Saldanas used for their Privy Council meetings was called the Fountain Room, a white marble octagon with a gold and opal mosaic ceiling. Imposing three-metre statues stood around the walls, sculpted from a dark rock which had been cut out of Nova Kong, depicting

a toga-clad orator in various inspirational poses. The Fountain Room wasn't as grandiose as some of the state function rooms added to the Apollo Palace in later centuries, but it had been built by Gerald Saldana soon after his coronation for use as his cabinet room. The continuity of power was unbroken since then; the Saldanas were nothing if not respectful for the traditions of their own history.

There were forty-five members of the current Privy Council, including the Princes and Princesses who ruled the Principalities; which meant a full meeting was held only every eighteen months. Normally the King summoned twenty to twenty-five people to advise him, over half of which were nearly always family. Today there were just six sitting around the Fountain Room's triangular mahogany table with its inlaid crowned phoenix. It was the war cabinet, chaired by Alastair II himself, with the Duke of Salion on his left, followed by Lord Kelman Mountjoy, the Foreign Office Minister; on the King's right-hand side was the Prime Minister, Lady Phillipa Oshin; Admiral Lavaquar, the defence chief; and Prince Howard, president of Kulu Corporation. No aides or equerries were present.

Alastair II picked up a small gavel and tapped the much-battered silver bell on the table in front of him. "The fifth meeting of this cabinet committee is now in order. I trust everyone has accessed the latest reports concerning Arnstadt?"

There was a subdued round of acknowledgement from the cabinet.

"Very well. Admiral, your assessment?"

"Bloody worrying, Your Majesty. As you know interstellar conquest has always been regarded as completely impractical. Today's navies exist to protect civil starships from piracy and deter potential aggressors from committing random or sneak assaults. If anyone strikes at us for political or economic reasons they damn well know we will strike back harder. But actually subduing an entire system's population was not a concept any of our strategy groups even considered until today. Ethnically streamed populations are too di-

verse, you simply cannot impose a different culture on a defeated indigenous people, it will never be accepted, and you lose the peace trying to enforce it. QED, conquests are impractical. Possession has changed that. All Confederation worlds are vulnerable to it, even Kulu. Though had the Capone Organization fleet jumped into orbit here, they would have lost.”

“Even armed with antimatter?” Prince Howard inquired.

“Oh, yes. We would have taken a pounding, no doubt about it. But we would have won; in terms of firepower our SD network is second only to Earth’s. The thing which concerns our strategists most is the Organization’s theoretical expansion rate. They have effectively doubled their fleet size by taking Arnstadt. If another five or six star systems were to fall into Capone’s hands, we would be facing parity at the very least.”

“We have distance on our side,” Lady Phillipa said. “Kulu is nearly three hundred light-years from New California. Deploying any kind of fleet over such a distance would be inordinately difficult. And Capone is having trouble resupplying his conquests with He₃, he simply isn’t getting any from the Edenists.”

“Your pardon, Prime Minister,” the admiral said. “But you are taking a too literal interpretation of these events. Yes it would be physically difficult for Capone to subdue Kulu, but the *trend* he is starting would be a different matter indeed. Others returning from the beyond are equally capable, and some have considerably more experience in empire building than he does. Unless planetary governments remain exceptionally vigilant in searching for outbreaks of possession, what happened to New California could easily be repeated. If Capone was all we had to worry about, I would frankly be very relieved. As to the Organization’s He₃ shortage: deuterium can and will be used as a monofuel for starship drives. It’s less efficient and its radiation output has a progressively detrimental effect on the drive tube equipment, but do not imagine for a moment that will prevent them from using it. The Royal Navy has contingency plans

to continue high-level operations in the event that Kulu loses every single He₃ cloudscoop in the Kingdom. We can fly for years, conceivably decades, using deuterium alone should the need arise.”

“So lack of He₃ isn’t going to stop him?” the King asked.

“No, sir. Our analysts believe that given the internal nature of Capone’s Organization he will have to continue his expansion efforts in order to survive. The Organization has no other purpose, growth through conquest is all it is geared up for. As a strategy for maintaining control over his own people it is excellent, but sooner or later he will run into size management problems. Even if he realizes this and tries to stop, his lieutenants will stage a coup. If they didn’t they’d lose their status along with him.”

“He seems to be running New California efficiently enough,” Lord Mountjoy said.

“That’s a propaganda illusion,” the Duke of Salion said. “The agencies have come up with a similar interpretation as the navy. Capone boasts he has established a working government, but essentially it’s a dictatorship backed by the threat of ultimate force. It survives principally because the planetary economy is on a war footing which always distorts financial reality for a while. This idea of a currency based on magic tokens is badly flawed. The energistic ability of the possessed is essentially unlimited, you cannot package it up and redistribute it to the have-nots as if it were some kind of tangible commodity.

“And so far no one has challenged Capone, he’s moved too swiftly for that. But the Organization’s internal political situation won’t last. As soon as any kind of routine is established, people can start to look at how they are being made to live and consider it objectively. We estimate that serious underground opposition groups are going to start forming within another fortnight among both communities. From what we’ve actually seen and what we can filter through the propaganda, it would be very tough for possessed and non-possessed to live peacefully side by side. The society

Capone has built is extremely artificial. That makes it easy to destroy, especially from within.”

Lord Mountjoy smiled faintly. “You mean, we don’t have to do anything but wait? The possessed will wipe themselves out for us?”

“No. I’m not saying that. Our psychologists believe that they cannot form societies as large or as complex as ours. We have system-wide industrial civilizations because that is what it takes to maintain our socioeconomic index. But when you can live in a palace grander than this one simply by wishing it to be, what is the point of having states whose populations run into hundreds of millions? That’s what will eventually neuter Capone; but it doesn’t get rid of the general problem which the possessed present. Not for us.”

“I never thought a military solution was the right one, anyway,” Alastair said with a contrite nod at the admiral. “Not in the long term. So what kind of threat are we facing from the possessed infiltrating us? Have we really caught all of them who were at liberty in the Kingdom? Simon?”

“Ninety-nine point nine per cent, Your Majesty, certainly here on Kulu itself. Unfortunately, I can’t give you absolutes. Sheer probability dictates that several have eluded us. But the AIs are becoming increasingly proficient in tracking them down through the net. And of course, if they begin to build up in any numbers they become easy for us to spot and eradicate.”

“Hardly good for morale, though,” Lady Phillipa said. “Government can’t guarantee you won’t get possessed, but if it does happen don’t worry, we’ll see it.”

“Admittedly inconvenient for individual subjects,” Prince Howard observed. “But it doesn’t affect our overall ability to respond to the threat. And the Kulu Corporation has already built a prototype personal monitor to safeguard against possession.”

“You have?”

“Yes. It’s a simple bracelet stuffed with various sensors which is linked permanently into the communications net. It’ll stretch our bandwidth capacity, but two AIs can keep

real-time tabs on every person on the planet. If you take it off, or if you are possessed, we'll know about it straight-away and where it happened."

"The civil rights groups will love that," she muttered.

"The possessed will not," Prince Howard said levelly. "And it is their opinion which matters the most."

"Quite," Alastair II said. "I shall publicly put on the first bracelet. It ought to help ease public attitude to the notion. This is for their own good, after all."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lady Phillipa conceded with reasonable grace.

"Very well, we cannot guarantee absolute safety for the population, but as my brother says, we can still conduct broad policy. For the moment, I have to be satisfied with that. As to the principal thrust of that broad policy, we must make a decision about Mortonridge. Admiral?"

"My staff tactical officers have been running battle simulations along the lines young Hiltch suggested. His experience has been a lot of help, but for my mind there are an awful lot of variables and unknowns."

"Do we win any of these simulations?" the Duke of Salion asked.

"Yes. Almost all of them, providing we devote sufficient resources. That seems to be the clinching factor every time." He gave the King a worried look. "It's going to be risky, Your Majesty. And it is also going to be extremely costly. We must maintain our current defence status throughout the Kingdom simultaneously with running this campaign. It will take every military reserve we have, not to mention stretching our industrial capacity."

"That should keep the baronies happy," Lady Phillipa said.

Alastair II pretended he hadn't heard. "But it can be done?" he pressed the admiral.

"We believe so, Your Majesty. But it will require the full support of the Edenists. Ideally, I'd also like some material cooperation from the Confederation Navy and our allies. The more we have, the greater chance of victory."

“Very well. Kelman, this is your field. How did your audience with the Edenist ambassador go?”

The foreign minister attempted not to smile at the memory; he still wasn't sure which of them had been the more surprised. “Actually, Ambassador Astor was extremely receptive to the notion. As we know, the old boy doesn't exactly have the easiest of jobs here. However, once I asked, he immediately put the whole embassy over to working on the practical aspects. Their military and technology attachés agree that the Jovian habitats have the capacity to produce Tranquillity serjeants in the kind of quantities we envisage.”

“What about commitment?” Prince Howard asked.

“Such a request would have to be put before their Consensus, but he was sure that given the circumstances Jupiter would consider it favourably. He actually offered to accompany whatever delegation we send and help present the argument for us. It might not sound like much, but I consider such an offer to be significant.”

“Why exactly?” the King asked.

“Because of the nature of their culture. Edenists very rarely enact a Consensus, normally there is no need. They share so much in terms of ethics and motivation that their decisions on most subjects are identical. Consensus is only required when they confront something new and radical, or they are threatened and need to select a level of response. The fact that the ambassador himself is in agreement with our request and that he is willing to argue our case for us is a very positive factor. More than anyone, he understands what it has cost us to ask for their help in the first place, the pride we have swallowed. He can convey that for us.”

“In other words, he can swing it,” Prince Howard said.

“I consider it a high probability.”

The King paused for a moment, weighing up the troubled faces confronting him. “Very well, I think we should proceed to the next stage. Admiral, start to prepare what forces you need to support the liberation of Mortonridge.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Kelman, the immediate burden rests upon your ministry.

The admiral says he requires support from the Confederation Navy and our allies, it will be up to the diplomatic service to secure it. Whatever interests we have, I want them realized. I suggest you confer with the ESA to see what pressure can be applied to anyone displaying less than wholehearted enthusiasm.”

“What level of assets do you want activated?” the Duke of Salion asked cautiously.

“All of them, Simon. We either do this properly or not at all. I am not prepared to commit our full military potential against such a powerful enemy unless we have total superiority. It would be morally unacceptable, as well as politically unsound.”

“Yes, sir, I understand.”

“Excellent, that’s settled then.”

“Um, what about Ione?” Lady Phillipa asked.

Alastair almost laughed openly at the Prime Minister’s meekness. Not like her at all. Everyone did so tiptoe around the subject of Tranquillity in his presence. “Good point. I think it might be best if we employ family here to complement Kelman’s people. We’ll send Prince Noton.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Lord Mountjoy said guardedly.

“Any other topics?” the King asked.

“I think we’ve achieved all our aims, sir,” Lady Phillipa said. “I’d like to announce that plans to liberate Mortonridge are under way. A positive step to regain the initiative will be just what people need to hear.”

“But no mention of the Edenists,” Lord Mountjoy interjected quickly. “Not yet, that still needs to be handled with care.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Whatever you think appropriate,” Alastair told them. “I wish all of you good luck on your respective tasks. Let us hope Our Lord smiles on us, the sunlight seems to be decidedly lacking of late.”



It was only the third time Parker Higgens had been invited

into Ione's apartment, and the first time he'd been in alone. He found himself disturbed by the big window in the split-level entrance lounge which looked out into the circumfluous sea; the antics of the shoals of small fish flashing their harlequin colours as they sped about did not amuse him. Strange, he thought, that the threat of pressure which all that water represented should be so much more intimidating than the vacuum outside the starscraper windows.

Ione welcomed him with a smile and a delicate handshake. She was wearing a yellow robe over a glittering purple bikini, her hair still damp from her swim. Once again, as he had been right from the first moment he saw her, Parker Higgins was captivated by those enchanting blue eyes. His only comfort was that he wasn't alone in the Confederation, millions suffered as he did.

"Are you all right, Parker?" she inquired lightly.

"Yes, thank you, ma'am."

Ione gave the window a suspicious look, and it turned opaque. "Let's sit down."

She selected a small circular table made from a wood so darkened with age it was impossible to identify. A pair of silent housechimps began to serve tea from a bone china set.

"You seem to have made a lot of new friends in Trafalgar, Parker. An escort of four voidhawks, no less."

Parker winced. Did she have any idea how penetrating that irony of hers could be? "Yes, ma'am. The navy science analysts are here to assist with our interpretation of the Laymil recordings. The First Admiral's staff suggested the procedure, and I had to agree with their reasoning. Possession is a terrible occurrence, if the Laymil had a solution we should not stint in our efforts to locate it."

"Please relax, Parker, I wasn't criticising. You did the right thing. I find it most gratifying that the Laymil project has suddenly acquired so much importance. Grandfather Michael was right after all; a fact he must be enjoying. Wherever he is."

"You have no objection to the navy people scrutinizing the recordings, then?"

“None at all. It would be a rather spectacular feather in our cap if we did produce the answer. Although I have my doubts on that score.”

“So do I, ma’am. I don’t believe there is a single answer to this problem. We are up against the intrinsic nature of the universe itself, only God can alter that.”

“Humm.” She sipped her tea, lost in contemplation. “Yet the Kiint seem to have found a way. Death and possession doesn’t bother them.” For the first time ever she saw real anger on the old director’s gentle face.

“They’re not still working here are they, ma’am?”

“Yes, Parker, they’re still here. Why?”

“I fail to see the reason. They knew all along what had happened to the Laymil. Their whole presence here is some absurd charade. They never had any intention of helping us.”

“The Kiint are not hostile to the human race, Parker. Whatever their reasons are, I’m sure they are good ones. Perhaps they were gently trying to nudge us in the right direction. Who knows? Their intellects are superior to ours, their bodies too, in most respects. You know, I’ve just realized we don’t even know how long they live. Maybe they don’t die, maybe that’s how they’ve beaten the problem.”

“In which case they can hardly help us.”

She stared at him coolly over the rim of her cup. “Is this a problem for you, Parker?”

“No.” His jaw muscles rippled as he fought his indignation. “No, ma’am, if you value their input to the project I will be happy to set aside my personal objection.”

“Glad to hear it. Now, there are still four thousand hours of sensorium records in the Laymil electronics stack which we haven’t accessed yet. Even with the new teams you brought it’s going to take a while to review them all. We’ll have to accelerate the process.”

“Osaki Katsura can construct additional reformatting equipment, that ought to speed things along. The only area of conflict I can see is weapons technology. You did say you wished to retain the right of embargo, ma’am.”

“So I did.” He has a point. Do I really want to hand Laymil weapons over to the Confederation, no matter how noble the cause?

It is no longer a relevant question, Tranquillity said. We know why the spaceholms committed suicide. Our earlier assumption that it was inflicted by an external force is demonstrably incorrect. Therefore your worry that the data for some type of superweapon exists is no longer applicable. No superweapon was designed or built.

You hope! What if the spaceholms built one to try and stop the approach of the possessed Laymil ships?

Given the level of their knowledge base at the time of their destruction, any weapons built in defence of the spaceholms would not be noticeably different to our own. They did not think in terms of weapons; whereas there is a case to be made for plotting human history in terms of weapons development. It may well be that anything the Laymil came up with would be inferior.

You can't guarantee that. Their biotechnology was considerably more advanced than Edenist bitek.

It was impressive because of its scale. However, their actual development was not much different to the Edenists. There is little risk of you worsening the situation by allowing unlimited access to the recordings.

But not zero?

Of course not. You know this, lone.

I know it. “I think we'd better rescind that proscription for the time being,” she told Parker Higgs.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Is there anything else we can do to assist the Confederation Navy? Our unique position here ought to count for something.”

“Their senior investigator came up with two suggestions. Apparently Joshua Calvert said he found the original electronics stack in some kind of fortress. If he were to supply us with the coordinate of this structure we could explore it to see what other electronics remain. If one stack can sur-

vive undamaged, then there must be others, or even parts of others. The data in those crystals is priceless to us.”

Oh, dear, Tranquillity said.

Don't you dare go all sarcastic on me, not after Joshua agreed to find the Alchemist. We both agreed he's grown up a lot since that time.

Unfortunately his earlier legacy remains.

Just in time she guarded herself against a scowl. “Captain Calvert isn't here at the moment. But, Parker, I'd advise against too much optimism. Scavengers are notorious braggarts, I'd be very surprised if this fortress he spoke of exists in quite the same condition he claimed.”

Neeves and Sipika may have the coordinate, Tranquillity said. They might cooperate. If not, we are in an official state of emergency; debrief nanonics could be used.

Well done. Send a serjeant in there now to interview them. Make it clear that if they don't tell us voluntarily it'll be extracted anyway. “I'll see what can be done,” she said in the hope of countering his disappointed expression. “What was the other suggestion?”

“A thorough scan of Unimeron's orbital track. If the planet was taken into another dimension by Laymil possessed there may be some kind of trace.”

“Surely not a physical one? I thought we had this argument before.”

“No, not a physical one, ma'am. We thought, instead, there may be some residual energy overspill in the same way the possessed betray their presence. It may be there is a detectable distortion zone.”

“I see. Very well, look into it. I'll authorize any reasonable expenditure for sensor probes. The astroengineering companies should welcome the work now I've stopped ordering weapons for the SD network. We might even get some competitive prices.”

Parker finished his tea, not quite certain he should ask what he wanted to. The responsibilities of the project directorship were sharply defined, but then he was only human. “Are we well defended, ma'am? I heard about Arnstadt.”

Ione smiled, and bent down to scoop Augustine from the floor. He'd been trying to climb the table leg. "Yes, Parker, our defences are more than adequate." She ignored the old director's astonishment at the sight of the little xenoc, and stroked Augustine's head. "Take it from me, the Capone Organization will never get into Tranquillity."

19

Hull plate 8-92-K: lustreless grey, a few scratches where tools and careless gauntlets had caught it, red stripe codes designating its manufacturing batch and CAB permitted usage, reactive indicator tabs to measure radiation and vacuum ablation still a healthy green; exactly the same as all the other hexagonal plates protecting the delicate systems of the *Villeneuve's Revenge* from direct exposure to space. Except it was leaking a minute level of electromagnetic activity. That was what the first scanner pad indicated. Erick hurriedly applied the second over the centre of the source. The sensor block confirmed a radiation emission point. Density analysis detailed the size of the entombed unit, and a rough outline of its larger components.

"I got it, Captain," Erick datavised. "They incorporated it in a hull plate. It's small, electron compressed deuterium tritium core, I think; maybe point two of a kiloton blast."

"You're sure?"

Erick was too tired to be angry. This was his ninth search, and they were all imposing far too much stress on his convalescent body. When he finished each ten-hour session spent snaking through the starship's innards he had to go straight on bridge duty to maintain the illusion of normal shipboard routine for Kingsley Pryor and the eight rover reporters they were carrying. On top of that the Organization had played dirty. Just as he knew they would.

"I'm sure."

"Thank the blessed saints. Finally! Now we can escape these devils. You can deactivate it, can't you, *mon enfant*?"

"I think the best idea would be to detach the plate and use the X-ray lasers to vaporise it as soon as it's clear."

"Bravo. How long will it take?"

"As long as it does. I'm not about to rush."

"Of course."

"Are there any reasonable jump coordinates in this orbit?"

"Some. I will begin plotting them."

Erick slowly swept the rest of the little cavity for any further incongruous processors. Opposite the hull plate was a spiral of ribbed piping, resembling a tightly coiled dragon's tail, which led to a heat exchange pump. He had emerged at its rim, wedged between the curving titanium and a cluster of football-sized cryogenic nitrogen tanks which pressurized the vernier rockets. A small, cramped space, but one providing a hundred crannies and half-hidden curves. It took him half an hour to sweep it properly, forcing himself to be methodical. Not easy with an armed mini-nuke eighty centimetres from his skull, its timer counting down.

When he was satisfied there were no booby triggers or alarms secreted in the cavity, he squirmed around to face the hull and eased himself further out of the crawlway like paste from a tube.

Normally, a starship's hull plates were detached from the outside, with the seam rivets and load pins easily accessible. This was a lot more difficult. The arcane procedure for an internal jettison ran through Erick's neural nanonics, an operation which must surely have been dreamed up by committees of civil servant lawyers on permanent lunch breaks and with no knowledge of astroengineering. It was highly tempting just to shove a fission blade into the silicon and saw around the mini-nuke in a wide circle. Instead he datavised the flight computer to switch off the sector's molecular binding force generator, then applied the anti-torque screwdriver to the first feed coupling. It might have been imagination, but he thought his new AT arm was slower than the other. The nutrient reserves were almost depleted. His thoughts were too cluttered to really bother about it.

Eighty minutes later, the plate was ready. The little cavity swarmed with discarded rivets, load pins, flakes of silicon, and several tool heads he'd lost. His suit sensors were having trouble supplying him with a decent image through all the junk. He slotted the last tools back in his harness and wriggled even further out of the crawlway, feeling around with his toes for a solid foothold to brace himself against. When he was in position he was bent almost double with his back pressing against the plate. He started to shove, his leg muscles straining hard. Physiological monitor programs began signalling caution warnings almost immediately. Erick ignored them, using a tranquillizer program to damp down the swelling worry about the further damage he was causing himself.

The plate moved—neural nanonics recording a minute shift in his posture. Then he was rising in millimetre increments. He waited until the neural nanonics reported the plate had shifted five centimetres, then stopped pressing. Inertia would complete the work now. Cramp persecuted his abdomen.

A wide sliver of silver-blue light shone into the cavity as he retreated back down into the crawlway. One edge of the plate was loose, rising up out of alignment. His suit collar sensors hurriedly reduced their receptivity as the beam animated the rivet fragments into a glittering storm.

The plate lumbered upwards. Erick checked the edges one last time to see if they were all clear, then datavised: "Okay, Captain, it's free. Fire the verniers. Let's separate."

He could actually see the silent eruptions of the tiny chemical rocket nozzles ringing the starship's equator, quick luminous yellow fountains. The hull plate appeared to be moving faster now, receding from the cavity.

Kursk was visible outside. The *Villeneuve's Revenge* was in low orbit, soaking in the wellspring of lambent light shimmering off the planet's cloud-daubed oceans.

It was the Capone Organization's second conquest: a stage three world, six light-years from Arnstadt. With a population of just over fifty million, it was evolving from its

purely planetary-based economic phase to develop a small space industry. Consequently, it was an easy target. There was no SD network, yet it had valuable modern astroengineering stations and a reasonable population. The squadron of twenty-five starships which Luigi Balsmao dispatched to subdue the planet had encountered almost no opposition. Five independent trader starships docked at Kursk's single orbiting asteroid settlement had been armed with combat wasps; but the weapons were third-rate, and the captains less than enthusiastic about flying out to die bravely against the Organization's superior firepower.

Along with the other escort ships, the *Villeneuve's Revenge* had been assigned to the new Organization squadron within eight hours of arriving at Arnstadt. A subdued but furious André was unable to refuse. They had even seen action, firing half a dozen combat wasps against the two defenders who had responded to their arrival.

With their depleted crew numbers, everyone had to be on the bridge during the last stage of the mission, which meant they couldn't continue their search for the bomb. Which in turn meant they couldn't duck out of the final engagement.

With the small battle won, and the planet open to Capone's landing forces, the *Villeneuve's Revenge* had been given orbital clearance duties by the squadron commander. Tens of thousands of tiny fragments thrown out by detonating combat wasps now contaminated space around the planet, each one presenting a serious potential impact hazard to approaching starships. Combat sensor clusters on the *Villeneuve's Revenge* were powerful enough to track anything larger than a snowflake that came within a hundred kilometres of the fuselage. And André was using the X-ray laser cannons to vaporise any such fragment they located.

Erick watched hull plate 8-92-K shrink, a small perfect black hexagon against the glittery deep turquoise ocean. It turned brilliant orange in an eyeblink, then burst apart.

"I think it is time we had a small discussion with Monsieur Pryor," André Duchamp datavisited to his crew.

It was almost as if the Organization's liaison man was expecting them when André datavised his command code to open the cabin door. It was Kingsley Pryor's designated sleep period, but he was fully dressed, floating in lotus position above the decking. His eyes were open, showing no surprise at the two laser pistols levelled at him.

Nor fear, Erick thought.

"We have eliminated the bomb," André said triumphantly. "Which means you have just become surplus to requirements."

"So you're going to slaughter the other crews, are you?" Kingsley said quietly.

"Pardon?"

"I have to transmit a code every three hours—seven at the most, remember? If that doesn't happen one of the other starships will explode. Then they won't be in any position to transmit their code, and another will go. You'll start a chain reaction."

André maintained his poise. "Obviously, we will warn them we are leaving before we jump outsystem. Do you take me for a barbarian? They will have time to evacuate. And Capone will have five ships less." There was a glint in his eye. "I will make sure the rover reporters understand that. My ship and crew are striking right at the heart of the Organization."

"I expect Capone will be devastated at the news. Deprived of a warrior like you."

André glared furiously; he could never manage sarcasm, however crude, and he hated being on the receiving end. "You may inform him yourself. We will return you to him via the beyond." His grip on the laser pistol tightened.

Kingsley Pryor switched his glacial eyes to Erick, and datavised: "You have to stop them murdering me."

The message was encrypted with a Confederation Navy code.

"Knowing the nature of the possessed, I expect that code was compromised a long time ago," Erick datavised back.

"Very likely. But do your shipmates know you are a CNIS

officer? You'd join me in the beyond if they did. And I'll tell them. I have absolutely nothing to lose, now. I haven't for some time."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"I served a duty tour in the CNIS weapons division as a technical evaluation officer. That's why I know who you are, Captain Thakrar."

"As far as I'm concerned that makes you a double traitor, to humanity and the navy. And Duchamp won't believe a word you say."

"You need to keep me alive, Thakrar, very badly. I know which star system the Organization is planning to invade next. Right now, there is no more important piece of information in this whole galaxy. If Aleksandrovich and Lalwani know the target, they can intercept and destroy the Organization fleet. You now have no other duty but to get that information to them. Correct?"

"Filth like you would say anything."

"You can't risk the possibility that I'm lying. I obviously have access to the Organization's command echelons, I wouldn't be in this position if I didn't. Therefore I could quite easily know their overall strategic planning. At the very least, procedure says I should be debriefed."

The decision seemed more enervating than all that time spent in the cavity working on the hull plate. Erick was repelled by the notion that a piece of shit like Pryor could manipulate him. "Captain?" he said wearily.

"*Oui?*"

"How much do you think he's worth if we turn him over to the Confederation authorities?"

André gave his crewman a surprised look. "You have changed since you came on board, *mon enfant*."

Since Tina . . . who wouldn't? "We're going to be in the shit with the Confederation when we return. We did sign up with Capone, remember, and we helped with this invasion. But if we bring them a prize like this, especially if we do it in full view of the rovers, we'll be heroes; it'll wipe the slate clean."

As always, avarice won with Duchamp. His gentle face's natural smile expanded with admiration. "Good thinking, Erick. Madeleine, help Erick stuff this pig into zero-tau."

"Yes, Captain." She pushed off the hatch rim and grabbed hold of Pryor's shoulder. On the way she couldn't resist giving Erick a troubled look.

He couldn't even raise a regretful grin in response. I thought it was over, that getting rid of the bomb would finish it. We would dock at some civilized spaceport, and I could turn them all over to the local Navy Bureau. Now all I've done is swapped one problem for another. Great God Almighty, when is this all going to end?

• • •

The beyond was different, not changed, but the rents which tore open into the real universe fired in flashes of sensation. They enraged and exhilarated the souls which dwelt there; a pathetic taster, a reminder of what used to be. Proof that corporeal life could be theirs again.

There was no pattern to the rents. The beyond did not have a structured topology. They occurred. They ended. And each time a soul would wriggle through to possess. Luck, chance, dictated their appearance.

The souls screamed for more, scrabbling at the residual traces of their more fortunate comrades who had made it though. Pleading, praying, promising, cursing. The tirade was one-way. Almost.

The possessed had the power to look back, to listen harder.

One of them said: We want somebody.

The gibbering souls shrieked their lies in return. I know where they are. I know how to help. Take me. Me! I will tell you.

The chant of a billion tormented entities is not one to be ignored.

Another rent appeared, loud sunlight piercing an ebony cloud. There was a barrier at the top, preventing any soul from surging through into the glory. Its extended existence

igniting an agonized desire within those who flocked around it.

See? A body awaits you, a reward for the information we need.

What? What information?

Mzu. Dr Alkad Mzu, where is she?

The question rippled through the beyond, a virus rumour, passed—ripped—from one soul to another. Until, finally, the woman came forth, rising from the degradations of perpetual mind-rape to embrace and adore the pain which saturated her new body. Feelings rushed in to inflate consciousness: warmth, wetness, cool air. Eyes blinked open, half laughing, half-weeping at the agony of her scalded, skinless limbs. “Ayacucho,” Cherri Barnes coughed to the gangsters standing over her. “Mzu went to Ayacucho.”

• • •

The top secret file contained a report which the First Admiral found even more worrying than any naval defeat. It had been written by an economist on President Haaker’s staff, detailing the strain which possession was placing on the Confederation economy. The major problem was that modern conflicts tended to be resolved by fifteen-minute engagements between opposing squadrons of starships; fast, and usually pretty decisive. It was an exceptional dispute which led to more than three navy engagements.

Possession, though, was shutting down the interstellar economy. Tax revenue was falling, and with it the government’s ability to support its forces on month-long deployment missions. And the Confederation Navy placed the primary drain on everyone’s finances. Enforcing the quarantine was good strategic policy, but it wasn’t going to solve the problem. A new strategy, one which had to include a final solution, had to be found within six months. After that, the Confederation would start to fragment.

Samual Aleksandrovich exited the file as Maynard Khanna ushered the two visitors into his office. Admiral

Lalwani and Mullein, the captain of the voidhawk *Tsuga*, both saluted.

“Good news?” Samuel Aleksandrovich asked Lalwani. It had become a standing joke at the start of their daily situation meetings.

“Not entirely negative,” she said.

“You amaze me. Sit down.”

“Mullein has just arrived from Arnstadt; *Tsuga* has been on intelligence gathering duties in that sector.”

“Oh?” Samuel cocked a thick eyebrow at the youngish Edenist.

“Capone has invaded another star system,” Mullein said.

Samuel Aleksandrovich swore bitterly. “That’s not negative?”

“It’s Kursk,” Lalwani said. “Which is interesting.”

“Interesting!” he grunted. His neural nanonics supplied him with the planet’s file. Not *knowing* the world he was supposed to protect kindled obscure feelings of guilt. Its image appeared on one of the office’s long holoscreens, just a perfectly ordinary terracompatible world, dominated by large oceans.

“Population fifty million plus,” Samuel Aleksandrovich recited from the file. “Hell. The Assembly will combust, Lalwani.”

“They’ve no right,” she said. “Your original confinement strategy is working very effectively.”

“Apart from Kursk.”

She ducked her head in acknowledgement. “Apart from Kursk. But then that isn’t due to the quarantine order failing. The quarantine was intended to prevent stealthy infiltration, not armed invasions.”

Samuel’s mind went back to the classified report. “Let’s hope the noble ambassadors see it that way. Why did you say it was interesting?”

“Because Kursk is a stage three world: no naval forces, no SD network. A pushover for the Organization. However, all they earned themselves was a few orbital industrial stations and a big struggle to quash the planetary population, the ma-

jority of whom live in the countryside, they're still very agrarian. In other words, the possessed are up against small, solid communities of well-armed farmers who have had plenty of advance warning."

"But possessed forces backed up by starships, nonetheless," Samuel observed.

"Yes, but why bother possessing fifty million people who can make no positive contribution to the Organization?"

"Possession makes no sense generally."

"No, but Capone's Organization needs sound economic support, certainly his fleet does. It won't operate without a functioning industrial capacity behind it."

"All right, you've convinced me. So what analysis has your staff come up with?"

"We believe it was principally a propaganda move. A stunt, if you like. Kursk wasn't a challenge to him, and it isn't an asset. Its sole benefit comes from the psychology. Capone has conquered another world. He's a force to be reckoned with, the king of the possessed. That kind of garbage. People aren't going to look at how strategically insignificant Kursk is, all they'll think about is that damn exponential expansion curve. It's going to place a lot of political pressure on us."

"The President's office has requested a briefing on the new development in two hours, sir," Maynard Khanna said. "It will be reasonable to assume the Assembly will follow that up with a request for some kind of large-scale high-visibility military deployment. And a victory. It will be expedient for the politicians to demonstrate the Confederation can strike at the enemy, that they're not sitting back doing nothing."

"Wonderfully precise thinking," Samuel Aleksandrovich grumbled. "National navies have only released seventy per cent of the forces pledged to us; we are barely managing to enforce the quarantine; we can't track down where the hell Capone's antimatter is coming from. Now they expect me to ransack what forces I have to build some kind of interdiction flotilla. I wonder if they'll give me a target, too, because I

certainly can't see one. When will people learn that if we kill the possessed bodies all we're doing is simply adding to the numbers of souls in the beyond; and I doubt the families of those we kill will thank us."

"If I can offer a suggestion, sir," Mullein said.

"By all means."

"As Lalwani said, *Tsuga* has been collecting intelligence from Arnstadt. It's our contention that Capone isn't having it all his own way, not down on the planet itself. The SD platforms are having to fire on almost an hourly basis to support the Organization lieutenants on the surface. There is a lot of resistance down there. The Yosemite Consensus believes that if we were to start harassing the ships and industrial stations Capone has in orbit, it would make life very difficult for him. Constant reinforcement over interstellar distances is going to place a considerable strain on his resources."

"Maynard?" the First Admiral asked.

"Possible, sir. The general staff already has appropriate contingency plans."

"When don't they?"

"Primarily, it would mean the observation voidhawks seeding Arnstadt's orbital space with stealthed fusion mines; a decent percentage should manage to trickle past the SD sensors. Equip them with mass-proximity fuses and any ships down there would be in deep trouble. No one would know when an attack was coming; it would rattle the crews once they realized we were blitzing them. Fast-strike missions could also be mounted against the asteroid settlements; jump a ship in, fire off a random salvo of combat wasps, and jump out again. Something similar to the Edenist attack against Valisk. It would have the advantage that we were mainly destroying hardware rather than people."

"I want the feasibility studies run today," the First Admiral said. "Include Kursk as well as Arnstadt. That'll give me something concrete when I'm called to explain this latest fiasco to the Assembly." He gave the young voidhawk captain

a speculative gaze. "What exactly is Capone's fleet doing right now?"

"Most of it is spread through the Arnstadt system, keeping the asteroid settlements in line until their populations are fully possessed. A lot of captured ships are being flown back to New California, we assume to be armed ready for his next invasion. But it's a slow job; he's probably short of crews."

"For once," Lalwani said sorely. "I can't get over how many of those independent trader bastards went to work for him."

"Recruitment is slowing considerably now the quarantine is in place," Maynard Khanna said. "Even the independent traders are reluctant to take Capone's money now they've heard about Arnstadt, and the Assembly's proclamation must have had some effect."

"That or they're too busy raking it in by breaking the quarantine, I expect." She shrugged. "We've been getting reports; some of the smaller asteroids are still open to flights."

"There are times when I wonder why we bother," Samuel Aleksandrovich marvelled. "Thank you for the briefing, Mullein, and my gratitude to *Tsuga* for a swift flight."

"Has Gilmore made any progress?" Lalwani asked when the captain had left.

"He won't admit it, but the science teams are stumped," Samuel Aleksandrovich said. "All they can come up with is a string of negatives. We're learning a lot about the capabilities of this energistic ability, but nothing about how it is generated. Nor have Gilmore's people acquired any hard data on the beyond. I think that worries me the most. It obviously exists, therefore it must have some physical parameters, a set of governing laws; but they simply cannot detect or define them. We know so much about the physical universe and how to manipulate its fabric, yet this has defeated our most capable theorists."

"They'll keep at it. The research teams at Jupiter have done no better. I know that Govcentral have established a

similar project; and no doubt the Kulu Kingdom will be equally industrious.”

“I think in this instance they might all even be persuaded to cooperate,” Samual Aleksandrovich mused. “I’ll mention it during my presidential briefing, it’ll give Olton something to concentrate on.”

Lalwani shifted around in her chair, leaning forwards slightly as if she was discomfited. “The one piece of genuinely good news is that we believe Alkad Mzu has been sighted.”

“Praise the Lord. Where?”

“The Dorados. Which lends a considerable degree of weight to the report. That’s where seventy per cent of the Garissan refugees finished up. There is a small underground movement there. She’ll probably try to contact them. We infiltrated them decades ago, so there shouldn’t be any problem.”

Samual Aleksandrovich gave his intelligence chief a pensive stare. He had always been able to rely on her utterly. The height of the stakes these days, though, were breaking apart all the old allegiances. Damn Mzu’s device, he thought, the alleged potency of the thing even gnaws at trust. “Which ‘we’ is that, Lalwani?” he asked quietly.

“Both. Most intelligence agencies have assets in the underground.”

“That’s not quite what I meant.”

“I know. It’s going to be down to the agents on the ground, and who reaches her first. For me personally, Edenist acquisition would not be an unwelcome outcome. I know we won’t abuse the position. If CNIS obtains her, then as admiral of the service I will follow whatever orders the Assembly’s Security Commission delivers concerning her disposal. Kulu and the others could give us a problem, though.”

“Yes. What do the Edenists propose to do if you get her?”

“Our Consensus recommends zero-tau storage. That way she will be available should the Confederation ever face an

external threat which needs something as powerful as the Alchemist to defend it.”

“That seems a logical course. I wonder if the Alchemist could help us against the possessed?”

“Supposedly, it’s a weapon of enormous destructive power. If that’s true, then like every weapon we have in our arsenal today, it will be utterly ineffective against the possessed.”

“You’re right of course. Unfortunately. So I suppose we are going to have to depend on Dr Gilmore and his ilk for a solution.” And I wish I had the confidence I should have in him. Saviour-to-be is a terrible burden for anyone to carry around.

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It was the one sight Lord Kelman Mountjoy had never expected to see. His job had taken him to countless star systems; he had stood on a beach to watch a binary dawn over the sea, admired Earth’s astonishing O’Neill Halo from a million kilometres above the north pole, enjoyed lavish hospitality in the most exotic locations. But as Kulu’s foreign minister, Jupiter was always destined to be *verboten*.

Now, though, he accessed the battle cruiser’s sensor suite throughout the entire approach phase. The starship was accelerating at one and a half gees, carrying them down towards the five-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-kilometre orbital band occupied by the Jovian habitats. Two armed void-hawks from the Jovian defence fleet were escorting the warship in. Just a precaution, Astor had assured them. Kelman had accepted gracefully, though most of the Royal Navy officers were less charitable.

The habitat Azara was looming large ahead of them, a circular spaceport disk extending out of its northern endcap. Although Edenism didn’t have a capital, Azara played host to all of the foreign diplomatic missions. Even the Kingdom maintained an embassy at Jupiter.

“I still can’t get used to the scale here,” Kelman confessed as the acceleration began to fluctuate. Their approach was in

its final stages, the battle cruiser flowing through the thick traffic lanes of inter-orbit ships towards the spaceport. "Whenever we build anything large it always seems so ugly. Of course, technically the Kingdom does own one bitek habitat."

"I thought Tranquillity was independent," Ralph Hiltch said.

"Great-grandfather Lukas granted its title to Michael as an independent duchy," Prince Collis said affably. "So, strictly speaking, in Kulu law, my father is still its sovereign. But I'd hate to try and argue the case in court."

"I didn't know," Ralph said.

"Oh, yes. I'm quite the amateur expert on the situation," Prince Collis said. "I'm afraid we do all harbour a rather baroque interest in Cousin Ione and her fiefdom. All of my siblings access the official file on Tranquillity at some time while we're growing up. It's fascinating." Alastair II's youngest child smiled whimsically. "I almost wish I'd been sent with that delegation instead of Prince Noton. No offence," he added for Astor's benefit.

"Your Highness," the Edenist ambassador murmured. "This would seem to be the time for breaking taboos."

"Indeed. And I shall do my best to throw off my childhood prejudices. But it will be hard. I'm not accustomed to the notion of the Kingdom being dependent on anyone."

Ralph looked across the small lounge. All of the acceleration couches had tilted down from the horizontal, transforming into oversized armchairs. Ambassador Astor lay back bonelessly in his, a politely courteous expression on his face, as always. Ralph had no idea how he maintained it without the benefit of neural nanonics.

"Attempting to remedy a situation not of your making is hardly dishonourable, Your Highness."

"Oh, Ralph, do stop blaming yourself for Ombey," Kelman Mountjoy protested. "Everyone thinks you've done a superb job so far. Even the King, which makes it official. Right, Collis?"

"Father thinks very highly of you, Mr Hiltch," the Prince

confirmed. "I dare say you'll be lumbered with a title once this is over."

"In any case, I don't believe this proposed alliance could be said to make the Kingdom dependent on us," Astor said. "Liberating the possessed of Mortonridge is both necessary and advantageous to everyone. And if, afterwards, we understand each other a little better, then surely that's for the best, too."

Kelman exchanged an amused glance with Astor as Ralph Hiltch shuffled around in discomfort. For all that they came from totally different cultures, he and the Edenist shared remarkably similar rationalities. Communication and understanding came swiftly between them. It was a cause of growing dismay to Kelman that the freedom he'd enjoyed all his life, allowing him to develop his intellect, was maintained by guardians such as Ralph and the navy, who could never share his more liberal outlook. Small wonder, he thought, that history showed empires always rotted from the core outwards.

There were checks as soon as they docked. Brief almost-formalities; the inevitable test for static, confirmation that processors worked in their presence; verifications which everybody had to comply with. Including the Prince. Ambassador Astor made sure his own examination was a very public one. And Collis was charm personified to the two Edenists running sensors over him.

Azara's administrator was waiting with a small official reception committee at the spaceport's tube station. In most Edenist habitats, the post of administrator was largely ceremonial; though in Azara's case it had evolved into something approaching Edenism's foreign minister.

Quite a considerable crowd had assembled to see the delegation; mostly young, curious Edenists, and staff from the foreign embassies.

A smiling Collis listened to the administrator's short speech, replied with a few appropriate words, and said he was eager to see the inside of a habitat. The whole group ig-

nored the waiting tube carriage and walked out of the station.

Ralph had never been inside a habitat either. He stood on the lawn outside the tube station and stared along the cylindrical landscape, mesmerized by the beauty of the sight. This was a lush, dynamic nature at its most majestic.

"Makes you wonder why we ever rejected bitek, doesn't it?" Kelman said quietly.

"Yes, sir."

The Prince was mingling among the crowd, smiling and shaking hands. Walkabouts were hardly a novelty for him, but this was unplanned, and he didn't have his usual retinue of ISA bodyguards, just a couple of dour-faced Royal Marines that everyone ignored. He was clearly enjoying himself.

Kelman watched a couple of the girls kiss him, and grinned. "Well, he is a real live prince, after all. I don't suppose they get to meet very many of them around here." He glanced up at the radiant axial light tube and the verdant arch of land overhead. There was something distinctly unnerving about knowing the vast structure was alive, and looking right back at him, its huge thoughts contemplating him. "I think I'm glad to be here, Ralph. And I think you had the right idea to ask for an alliance. This society really has a frightening potential, I never actually appreciated that before. I always thought it would be they who were the losers as a result of our foreign policy. I was wrong: no matter all the barriers and distance we throw up, they won't make the slightest difference to these people."

"It's too late to alter that now, sir. We're free of their energy monopoly. And I'm not sorry about that."

"No, Ralph, I don't suppose you are. But there are more aspects to life than the purely materialistic. I think both our cultures would benefit from stronger ties."

"You could say the same about every star system in the Confederation, sir."

"So you could, Ralph, so you could."

The second general Consensus within a month, and probably not the last within this year, it acknowledged wryly amid itself as it formed.

The most unfortunate aspect of Lord Kelman Mountjoy's request, Consensus decided, is its innate logic. Examination of the war simulations presented to us by Ralph Hiltch show a very real possibility that the liberation of Mortonridge will succeed. We acknowledge those among us who point out that this success is dependent on no further external factors being applied in the favour of the possessed. So already we see the risk rising.

Our major problem derives from the projected victory being almost totally illusory. We have already concluded that physical confrontation is not the answer to possession. Mortonridge simply confirms this. If it takes the combined strength of the two most powerful cultures in the Confederation to liberate a mere two million people on a single small peninsula, then freeing an entire planet by such a method clearly verges on the impossible.

Hopes across the Confederation would be raised to unreasonable heights by success at Mortonridge. Such hopes would be dangerous, for they would unleash demands local politicians will be unable to refuse and equally unable to satisfy. However, for us to refuse the Kingdom's request would cast us in the role of villain. Lord Kelman Mountjoy has been ingenious in placing us in this position.

"I would disagree," Astor told the Consensus. "The Saldanas know as well as us that military intervention is not the final answer. They too are presented with an enormously difficult dilemma by Mortonridge. As they are more susceptible to political pressures, they are responding in the only way possible.

"I would also say this: By sending the King's natural son with their delegation they are signalling the importance they attach to our decision, and an acknowledgement of what must inevitably come to be should our answer favour them. If both of us commit ourselves to the liberation there can be no return to the policies of yesterday. We will have estab-

lished a strong bond of trust with one of the most powerful cultures in the Confederation currently contrary to us. That is a factor we cannot afford to ignore.”

Thank you Astor, Consensus replied, as always you speak well. In tribute of this, we acknowledge that the future must be safeguarded in conjunction with the present. We are presented with an opportunity to engender a more peaceful and tolerant universe when the present crisis is terminated.

Such a *raison d'être* is not a wholly logical one to place ourselves on a war footing. Nor is the kindling of false hope which will be the inevitable outcome.

However, there are times when people do need such a hope.

And to err is human. We embrace our humanity, complete with all those flaws. We will tell the Saldana Prince that until such time that we can provide a permanent solution to possession he may have our support for this foolhardy venture.

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After a five-day voyage, *Oenone* slipped out of its wormhole terminus seventy thousand kilometres above Jobis, the Kiint homeworld. As soon as they had identified themselves to the local traffic control (a franchise run by humans) and received permission to orbit, Syrinx and the voidhawk immediately started to examine the triad moons.

The three moons orbited the planet's Lagrange One point, four million kilometres in towards the F2 star. Equally sized at just under eighteen hundred kilometres in diameter, they were also equally spaced seventy thousand kilometres apart, taking a hundred and fifty hours to rotate about their common centre.

They were the anomaly which had attracted the attention of the first scoutship in 2356. The triad was an impossible formation, too regular for nature to produce. Worse, the three moons massed exactly the same (give or take half a billion tonnes—a discrepancy probably due to asteroid impacts). In other words, someone had built them.

It was to the scoutship captain's credit she didn't flee. But then fleeing was probably a null term when dealing with a race powerful enough to construct artefacts on such a scale. Instead, she beamed a signal at the planet, asking permission to approach. The Kiint said yes.

It was about the most forthcoming thing they ever did say. The Kiint had perfected reticence to an art form. They never discussed their history, their language, or their culture.

As to the triad moons, they were an "old experiment," whose nature was unspecified. No human ship had ever been permitted to land on them, or even launch probes.

Voidhawks, however, with their mass perception ability, had added to the sparse data over the centuries. Using *Oenone's* senses, Syrinx could feel the moons' uniformity; globes of a solid aluminum silicon ore right down to the core, free of any blemishes or incongruities. Their gravity fields pressed into space-time, causing a uniquely smooth three-dimensional stretch within the local fabric of reality. Again, all three fields were precisely the same, and perfectly balanced, ensuring the triad's orbital alignment would hold true for billions of years.

A pale silver-grey in colour, they each had a small scattering of craters. There were no other features; perhaps the strongest indicator to their artificial origin. Nor could centuries of discreet probing by the voidhawks find any mechanical structures or instruments left anywhere. The triad moons were totally inert. Presumably, whatever the "experiment" was, it had finished long ago.

Syrinx couldn't help but wonder if the triad had something to do with the beyond and the Kiint's understanding of their own nature. No human astrophysicist had ever come up with any halfway convincing explanation as to what the experiment could be.

Maybe the Kiint just wanted to see what the shadows would look like from Jobis's surface, Ruben said. The penumbra cones do reach back that far.

It seems a trifle extravagant for a work of art, she countered.

Not really. If your society is advanced enough to build something like the triads in the first place, then logic dictates that such a project would only represent a fraction of your total ability. In which case it might well be nothing other than a chunk of performance art.

Some chunk. She felt his hand tighten around hers, offering comfort in return for the brief hint of intimidation she had leaked into the affinity band.

Remember, he said, we really know very little about the Kiint. Only what they choose to tell us.

Yes. Well I hope they choose to let slip a little more today.

The question over the true extent of the Kiint's abilities nagged at her as *Oenone* swept into a six-hundred-kilometre parking orbit. From space Jobis resembled an ordinary terracompatible world; although at fifteen thousand kilometres in diameter it was appreciably larger, with a gravity of one point two Earth standard. It had seven continents, and four principal oceans; axial tilt was less than one per cent, which when coupled with a suspiciously circular orbit around the star produced only mild climate variations, no real seasons.

For a world housing a race which could build the triads there was astonishingly little in the way of a technological civilization visible. Conventional wisdom had it that as Kiint technology was so advanced it could never resemble anything like human machinery and industrial stations, so nobody knew what to look for; either that or it was all neatly folded away in hyperspace. Even so, they must have gone through a stage of conventional engineering, an industrial age with hydrocarbon combustion and factory farming, pollution and exploitation of natural planetary resources. If so, there was no sign of it ever existing. No old motorways crumbling under the grasslands, no commercial concrete cities abandoned to be swallowed by avaricious jungles. Either the Kiint had done a magnificent job of restoration, or they had achieved their technological maturity a frighteningly long time ago.

Today, Jobis supported a society comprised of villages

and small towns, municipalities perched in the centre of land only marginally less wild than the rest of the countryside. Population was impossible to judge, though the best guesstimate put it at slightly less than a billion. Their domes, which were the only kinds of buildings, varied in size too much for anyone to produce a reliable figure.

Syrinx and Ruben took the flyer down, landing at Jobis's only spaceport. It was situated beside a coastal town whose buildings were all human-built. White stone apartment blocks and a web of small narrow streets branching out from a central marina made it resemble a holiday destination rather than the sole Confederation outpost on this placid, yet most eerily alien of worlds.

The residents were employed either by embassies or companies. The Kiint did not encourage casual visits. Quite why they participated in the Confederation at all was something of a mystery, though one of the lesser ones. Their only interest and commercial activity was in trading information. They bought data on almost any subject from anyone who wanted to sell, with xenobiology research papers and scoutship logs fetching the highest prices. In exchange, they sold technological data. Never anything new or revolutionary, you couldn't ask for anti-gravity machines or a supralight radio; but if a company wanted its product improving, the Kiint would deliver a design showing a better material to use in construction or a way of reconfiguring the components so they used less power. Again, a huge hint to their technological heritage. Somewhere on Jobis there must be a colossal memory bank full of templates for all the old machines they'd developed and then discarded God-alone-knew how long ago.

Syrinx never got a chance to explore the town. She had contacted the Edenist embassy (the largest diplomatic mission on Jobis), explaining her mission, while *Oenone* flew into parking orbit. The embassy staff had immediately requested a meeting with a Kiint called Malva, who had agreed.

She's our most cooperative contact, Ambassador Pyrus

explained as they walked down the flyer's airstairs. **Which I concede isn't saying much, but if any of them will answer you, she will. Have you had much experience dealing with the Kiint?**

I've never even met one before, Syrinx admitted. The landing field reminded her of Norfolk, just a patch of grass designated to accommodate inconvenient visitors. Although it was warmer, subtropical, it had the same temporary feel. Few formalities, and fewer facilities. Barely twenty flyers and spaceplanes were parked outside the one service hangar. The difference to Norfolk came from the other craft sharing the field, lined up opposite the ground-to-orbit machines. Kiint-fabricated, they resembled smaller versions of human ion field flyers, ovoid but less streamlined.

Then why were you sent? Pyrus asked, diffusing a polite puzzlement into the thought.

Wing-Tsit Chong thought it was a good idea.

Did he now? Well I can hardly contradict him, can I?

Is there anything I should know before I meet her?

Not really. They'll either deal with you or not.

Did you explain the nature of the questions I have?

Pyrus waved an empty hand around at the scenery. **You told me when you contacted the embassy. We don't know if they can intercept singular-engagement mode, but I expect they can if they want. Next question of course is would they bother. You might like to ask Malva exactly how important we are to them. We've never worked that out either.**

Thank you. Syrinx patted the top pocket of her ship-tunic, feeling the outline of her credit disk. Eden had loaded it with five billion fuseodollars before she left, just in case. **Will I have to pay for the information, do you think?**

Pyrus gestured at the Kiint transport craft, and a hatch opened, the fuselage material flowing apart. It was close enough to the ground not to need airstairs. Syrinx couldn't quite judge if its belly was resting on the ground, or if it was actually floating.

Malva will tell you, Pyrus said. **I advise total openness.**

Syrinx stepped into the craft. The interior was a lounge, with four fat chairs as the only fittings. She and Ruben sat down gingerly, and the hatch flowed shut.

Are you all right? an anxious *Oenone* asked straight-away.

Of course I am. Why?

You started accelerating at roughly seventy gees and are currently travelling at Mach thirty-five.

You're kidding! Even as she thought it, she was sharing *Oenone's* mind, perceiving herself streaking across a tall mountain range eight hundred kilometres inland from the town at an awesome velocity for atmospheric travel. **They must be very tolerant of sonic booms on this planet.**

I suspect your vehicle isn't producing one. My current orbital position doesn't allow optimum observation, but I can't locate any turbulence in your wake.

According to *Oenone*, the craft decelerated at seventy gees as well, landing some six thousand kilometres from the spaceport field. When she and Ruben stepped out a balmy breeze plucked at her silky ship-tunic. The craft had come to rest in a broad valley, just short of a long lake with a shingle beach. Cooler air was breathing down from the snowcapped peaks guarding the skyline, ruffling the surface of the water. Avocado-green grass-analogue threw thin coiling blades up to her knees. Trees with startlingly blue bark grew in the shape of melting lollipops, colonizing the valley all the way up to the top of the foothills. Birds were circling in the distance; they looked too fat to be flying in the heavy gravity.

A Kiint dome was situated at the head of the lake, just above the beach. Despite the fresh mountain air, Syrinx was perspiring inside her ship-tunic by the time they had walked over to it.

It must have been very old; it was made from huge blocks of a yellow-white stone that had almost blurred together. The weathering had given it a grainy surface texture, which local ivy-analogues put to good use. Broad clusters of tiny flowers dripped out of the dark leaves, raising their pink and violet petals to the sun.

The entrance was a wide arch, its border blocks carved with worn crestlike symbols. A pair of the blue-bark trees stood outside, gnarled from extreme age, half of their branches dead, but nonetheless casting a respectable shadow over the dome. Malva stood just inside, a tractamorphic arm extended, its tip formshifting to the shape of a human hand. Breathing vents issued a mildly spicy breath as Syrxinx touched her palm to impossibly white fingers.

I extend my greetings to you and your mind sibling, Syrxinx, the Kiint broadcast warmly. **Please enter my home.**

Thank you. Syrxinx and Ruben followed the Kiint along the passage inside, down to what must have been the dome's central chamber. The floor was a sheet of wood with a grain close to red and white marble, dipping down to a pool in the middle which steamed and bubbled gently. She was sure the floor was alive, in fact the whole chamber's decor was organic-based. Benches big enough to hold an adult Kiint were like topiary bushes without leaves. Smaller ones had been grown to accommodate the human form. Interlocked patches of amber and jade moss with crystalline stems matted the curving walls, threaded with naked veins of what looked to be mercury. Syrxinx was sure she could see them pulsing, the silver liquid oozing slowly upwards. An aura of soft iridescent light bounced and ricocheted off the glittery surface in playfully soothing patterns.

Above her, the dome's blocks capped the chamber. Except from inside they were transparent; she could see the geometric reticulation quite plainly.

All in all, Malva's home was interesting rather than revelational. Nothing here human technology and bitek couldn't reproduce with a bit of effort and plenty of money. Presumably it had been selected to put Confederation visitors at ease, or damp down their greed for high-technology gadgets.

Malva eased herself down on one of the benches. **Please be seated. I anticipate you will require physical comfort for this session.**

Syrinx selected a seat opposite her host. It allowed her to see some small grey patches on Malva's snowy hide, so pale they could have been a trick of the light. Did grey indicate aging in all creatures? **You are very gracious. Did Ambassador Pyrus indicate the information I would ask for?**

No. But given the trouble which now afflicts your race, I expect it is of some portent.

Yes. I was sent by the founder of our culture, Wing-Tsit Chong. We both appreciate you cannot tell me how we can rid ourselves of the possessed. However, he is curious about many aspects of the phenomenon.

This ancestor of yours is an entity of some vision. It is my regret I never encountered him.

You would be most welcome to visit Jupiter and talk to him.

There would be little point; to us a memory construct is not the entity, no matter how sophisticated the simulacrum.

Ah. That was my first question: Have the souls of Edenists transferred into the neural strata of our habitats along with their memories?

Is this not obvious to you yet? There is a difference between life and memory. Memory is only one component which comprises a corporeal life. Life begets souls, they are the pattern which sentience and self-awareness exerts on the energy within the biological body. Very literally: you think, therefore you are.

Life and memory, then, are separate but still one?

While the entity remains corporeal, yes.

So a habitat would have its own soul?

Of course.

So voidhawks have as well.

They are closer to you than your habitats.

How wonderful, *Oenone* said. Death will not part us, Syrinx. It has never parted captains and ships.

A smile rose to her face, buoyed by the euphoria of the voidhawk's thoughts. **I never expected it to, my love. You were always a part of me.**

And you I, it replied adoringly.

Thank you, Syrinx told Malva. Do you require payment for this information?

Information is payment. Your questions are informative.

You are studying us, aren't you?

All of life is an opportunity to study.

I thought so. But why? You gave up star travel. That must be the ultimate way to experience, to satisfy a curious mind. Why show an interest in an alien race now?

Because you are here, Syrinx.

I don't understand.

Explain the human urge to gamble, to place your earned wealth on the random tumble of a dice. Explain the human urge to constantly drink a chemical which degrades your thought processes.

I'm sorry, she said, contrite at the gentle chide.

Much we share. Much we do not.

That's what puzzles myself and Wing-Tsit Chong. You are not that different from us; ownership of knowledge doesn't alter the way the universe ultimately works. Why then should this prevent you from telling us how to combat the possessed?

The same facts do not bring about the same understanding. This is so even between humans. Who can speak of the gulf between races?

You faced this knowledge, and you survived.

Logic becomes you.

Is that why you gave up starflight? Do you just wait to die knowing it isn't the end?

Laton spoke only the truth when he told you that death remains difficult. No sentient entity welcomes this event. Instinct repels you, and for good reason.

What reason?

Do you embrace the prospect of waiting in the beyond for the universe to end?

No. Is that what happens to Kiint souls, too?

The beyond awaits all of us.

And you've always known that. How can you stand such knowledge? It is driving humans to despair.

Fear is often the companion of truth. This too is something you must face in your own way.

Laton also called death the start of the great journey. Was he being truthful then as well?

It is a description which could well apply.

Syrinx glanced over to Ruben for help, not daring to use the singular engagement mode. She felt she was making progress, of sorts, even if she wasn't sure where it was leading—though some small traitor part of her mind resented learning that Laton hadn't lied.

Do you know of other races which have discovered the beyond? Ruben asked.

Most do. There was a tinge of sadness in Malva's thoughts.

How? Why does this breakthrough occur?

There can be many reasons.

Do you know what caused this one?

No. Though we do not believe it to be entirely spontaneous. It may have been an accident. If so, it would not be the first time.

You mean it wasn't supposed to happen?

The universe is not that ordered. What happens, happens.

Did these other races who found the beyond all triumph like the Kiint?

Triumph is not the object of such an encounter.

What is?

Have you learned nothing? I cannot speak for you, Ruben.

You deal with many humans, Malva, Syrinx said. You know us well. Do you believe we can resolve this crisis?

How much faith do you have in yourself, Syrinx?

I'm not sure, not anymore.

Then I am not sure of the resolution.

But it is possible for us.

Of course. Every race resolves this moment in its history.

Successfully?

Please, Syrinx. There are only differing degrees of resolution. Surely you have realized this of all subjects cannot be a realm of absolutes.

Why won't you tell us how to begin resolving the crisis? I know we are not so different. Couldn't we adapt your solution? Surely your philosophy must allow you some leeway, or would helping us negate the solution entirely?

It is not that we cannot tell you how we dealt with the knowledge, Syrinx. If it would help, then of course we would; to do otherwise would be the infliction of cruelty. No rational sentient would condone that. We cannot advise you because the answer to the nature of the universe is different for each sentient race. This answer lies within yourselves, therefore you alone can search for it.

Surely a small hint—

You persist in referring to the answer as a solution. This is incorrect. Your thoughts are confined within the arena of your psychosocial development. Your racial youth and technological dependence blinds you. As a result, you look for a quick-fix in everything, even this.

Very well. What should we be looking for?

Your destiny.

• • •

The hold-down latches locked the *Tantu* into the docking cradle, producing a mechanical grinding. Quinn didn't like the sound, it was too final, metal fingers grasping at the base of the starship, preventing it from leaving unless the spaceport crew granted permission.

Which, he told himself, they would. Eventually.

It had taken Twelve-T almost a week to organize his side of the deal. After several broken deadlines and threats and high-velocity abuse, the necessary details had finally been datavisited to the *Tantu*, and they'd flown down to Jesus, an

asteroid owned by the government of New Georgia. The flight plan they'd filed with Nyvan's traffic control was for a cryogenic resupply, endorsed and confirmed by the Iowell Service & Engineering Company who had won the contract. As the fuel transfer didn't require the *Tantu's* crew to disembark, there was no requirement for local security forces to check for signs of possession. The whole routine operation could be handled by Iowell's personnel.

When the docking cradle had lowered the frigate into the bay, an airlock tube wormed its way out of the dull metal wall to engage the starship's hatch. Quinn and Graper waited in the lower deck for the environmental circuit to be established.

The next five minutes, Quinn knew, were going to be crucial. He was going to have to use the encounter to establish his control over Twelve-T, while the gang lord would undoubtedly be seeking to assert his superiority at the same time. And although he didn't know it, Twelve-T had a numerical advantage. Quinn guessed there would be a troop of gang soldiers on the other side of the hatch, congested with weapons and hyped-on attitude. It's what he would have done.

What I need, he thought, is the kind of speed which boosting gives the military types. He felt the energistic power shifting inside his body, churning through his muscles to comply with his wishes. Light panels in the airlock chamber began to flicker uncertainly as his robe shrank around his body, eradicating any fabric which could catch against obstructions.

A cold joy of anticipation seeped up within his mind as he prepared to unleash his serpent beast on the waiting foe. For so long now he had been forced to restrain himself. It would be good to advance the work of God's Brother again, to watch pride shatter beneath cruelty.

Twelve-T waited nervously in the docking bay's reception chamber as the airlock pressurized. His people were spread around the dilapidated chamber, wedged behind tarnished support ribs, sheltered by bulky, broken-down cubes

of equipment. All of them covered the ash-grey circular carbonium hatch with their weapons, sensors focused and fire-control programs switched to millisecond response triggers.

That shit Quinn might have raged about the delays, but Twelve-T knew he'd put together a slick operation. This whole deal needed the master's touch. A fucking frigate, for shit's sake! He'd busted his balls arranging for the starship to dock without the cops realizing what was going down. But then the gang had interests all over New Georgia, half their money came from legitimate businesses. Companies like Iowell—a small operation established decades ago—were easy to muscle in on. The spaceport crew did as the union told them, managers could be persuaded to take their cut.

Getting his soldiers up to Jesup had been a bitch, too. Like him, they all had the gang's distinctive silver skull; skin from their eyebrows back to the nape of the neck had been replaced by a smooth cap of chrome flexalloy. Metal and composite body parts were worn like medals, showing how much damage you'd taken for the gang.

Try slipping twenty of them into Jesup without the administration cops taking an interest.

But he'd done it. And now he was going to find out just what the fuck was really going on. Because sure as turds floated to the top, Quinn Dexter wasn't on the level.

The instrument panel beside the hatch let out a weak bleep.

"It's ready," Lucky Vin datavised. "Shit, Twelve-T, I can't get anything from the sensors in the tube. They've crashed."

"Quinn do that, man?"

"I ain't too sure. This place . . . it ain't the maintenance hotspot of the galaxy, you know."

"Okay. Pop the hatch." He opened the datavise to include the rest of his soldiers. "Sharpen up, people, this is it."

The hatch seal disengaged, allowing the actuators to hinge it back. Absolute blackness filled the airlock tube.

Twelve-T craned his neck forwards, scar tissue stretching

tightly. Even with his retinal implants switched to infrared there was nothing to see in the tube. “Screw this—”

The blackness at the centre of the tube bulged out, a bulbous cone devouring the chamber’s photons. Five maser carbines and a TIP pistol fired, skewering the anti-light chimera from every direction. It broke open, petals of night peeling apart from the centre to splash against the chamber walls.

Twelve-T’s neural nanonics began to crash. Blocks clipped to his belt chased them into electronic oblivion. The last datavise he received was from his maser carbine, telling him the power cells were dropping out. He tried to grasp the ten-millimetre machine gun velcroed to his hip, only to find his arm shuddering; the pistonlike actuators he’d replaced the forearm muscles with were seizing up.

A missile composed of tightly whorled shadow swelled up out of the centre of the flowering blackness. Too fast for the eye to follow in real-time—certainly as far as Twelve-T’s faltering retinal implants were concerned—it shot across the chamber and bounced.

The first scream clogged the chamber’s air. One of the soldiers was crumpling up, his body imploding in a series of rapid strikes. He seemed to be dimming, as if he were caught at the middle of a murky nebula. Then his head caved in, and it was blood not the sounds of agony that went spraying across the chamber.

A second soldier convulsed, as if she were trying to jam her head down towards her buttocks. She managed a single bewildered grunt before her spine snapped.

The third victim darkened, his clothes starting to smoulder. Both of his titanium hands turned cherry-red, glowing brightly. When he opened his mouth to scream a column of pink steam puffed out.

Twelve-T had it worked out by then. There was always a translucent cloud around the soldiers as they were slaughtered, a grey shadow that flickered at subliminal speed. His disabled arm levered the machine gun off the velcro, and he turned desperately towards the source of the latest screams.

His soldiers were losing it, flinging themselves at the exit hatch, wrestling with each other in their struggle to escape.

The light panels were turning a dark tangerine and beginning to sputter; black iron grids had materialized across them, growing thicker. Oily smoke began to pour forth. The fractured buzzing sound of the conditioning fans was dying away. Globules of blood oscillated through the air, fringes rippling like restive jellyfish. Twelve-T knew then he'd been fucked. It wasn't Quinn Dexter, rat boy from the arcologies. This was the worst it could possibly get.

He'd never liked Nyvan. But what the fuck, it was his home planet. Now the possessed were going to violate it, subdue every living body. And he was the total fucking asshole who'd let them in.

Another of his soldiers was being chopped apart, haloed in quivering dusk. Pure fury powered Twelve-T's malfunctioning body into a final act of obedience. He swung the machine gun around on the macerated soldier and squeezed back on the trigger. It was only a short burst. A blue flame spat out of the muzzle to the accompaniment of a thunderous roar. Without a neural nanonics operational procedure program to help him, the recoil was far more powerful than he expected. His shoes were ripped free of the stikpad, and he was somersaulting backwards through the air, hollering in surprise.

The universe paused.

"Shatter!" a furious voice bellowed.

The machine gun obeyed, its cool silicolithium fragmenting like a shrapnel grenade. Needle slivers sliced deep into Twelve-T's flesh, some ricocheting off the metal casings of his replacement parts. He was flailing wildly now, trailing fantails of blood from his shredded hand.

"Hold him," someone instructed curtly.

Quinn slowed himself back from the speedstate, energetic currents sinking down to quiescent levels. As they did, the rest of the world began to accelerate. It had been awesome, moving through an airlock chamber populated by statues, time solidified to a single heartbeat. Their time, not

his. God's Brother had granted him impunity from the actions of any non-possessed. What greater sign that he was indeed the chosen one?

"Thank you, my Lord," he whispered, humbled. Planets would truly bow before him now; just as Lawrence had prophesied.

Most of the blood had impacted on a surface, splattering wide into big smears and sticking tenaciously. Grotesque corpses drifted peacefully in the warm air streams. The remnants of the gang were in a sorry state. With four possessed in the airlock chamber and pulsing with malevolent power, their artificial body parts had either frozen or were running out of control. And they were all combat vets, heavily dependent on replacements, almost up to cosmonik level. Lawrence and Graper were plucking weapons from unresisting hands, claws, and wrist sockets.

Quinn kicked off towards Twelve-T. His robe resumed its usual extravagant cut as he glided across the compartment.

Twelve-T was sweating heavily. One of the soldiers whose arms were mostly the original organic was bandaging the gang lord's ruined hands with strips torn from his own T-shirt.

"I admire your strength," Quinn said. "It can be harnessed to serve God's Brother."

"Ain't no God, can't have no fucking—" Pain gripped his left arm, forcing him to cry out. His skin hissed as it rose in huge blisters.

"You wanted to irritate me," Quinn said mildly.

Twelve-T glowered helplessly. He wasn't used to so much pain, none of them were. Neural nanonics always protected them. That meant it was going to get bad, he realized, real bad. Unless . . .

"And I won't allow you to suicide," Quinn said. "I know that's what you were thinking. Everybody does when they grab what's gonna happen."

The strips of cloth bandaging Twelve-T's hands hardened into shiny nylon. Their ends flexed up like blind snakes, then slowly knotted together.

“You’re so close to me, Twelve-T,” Quinn said earnestly. “Your serpent beast is almost free. You would never have become what you are without realizing what your true nature is. Don’t hold back, embrace God’s Brother. Live in the Night with us.”

“You’ll make a mistake, asshole. And I’ll be around waiting for it.”

“I don’t make mistakes. I am the chosen one.”

“Holy fuck.”

“Follow me, Twelve-T. Submit to your true self and know the glory of His word. Betray your people for greed and profit. That way you will never know defeat again. My disciples fuck who they want when they want. They see their enemies burn in torment. Enjoy rewards you have never dared take before. Help me, Twelve-T. Tell me where the asteroid cops are. Shunt your gang’s money into my credit disk. Show me where the spaceplanes are that can take my disciples down to the surface. Do it, Twelve-T.”

“You won’t get down to the planet,” Twelve-T grunted. “People are too frightened of the possessed landing. There’s all kinds of weird checks going on down there. You might have beaten my troops, big deal; but you dead freaks ain’t going to turn my planet into holiday hellpark.”

“You understand nothing,” Quinn said. “I don’t give a fuck about the souls in the beyond. I’m not here to save anyone, least of all them. God’s Brother has chosen me to help Him bring down the Night.”

“Oh, sweet shit,” Twelve-T whimpered. Quinn was a loon. A motherfucking twenty-four-karat loon.

“I want two things from this planet,” Quinn continued. “A starship I can use to take me home to Earth; because that’s where I can hurt the Confederation most. It’ll have to be a cargo ship of some kind, one which Govcentral’s defences will accept is harmless. I’m sure there are plenty docked here right now, right?”

A small jaw muscle twitched on Twelve-T’s face.

“Good,” said Quinn. The gang lord’s thoughts had betrayed him, bitter defeat mingling with the dregs of resent-

ment and anger. "You want to know what the other thing is, don't you? It's simple, I intend Nyvan to be the first planet the Light Brother can bring into His kingdom. I'm going to bring the Night to this planet, Twelve-T. Endless Night. Night without hope. Until He comes from the other side of the beyond to grant you salvation."

Making sure every word was perfectly clear, Twelve-T said: "Go fuck yourself." He braced himself for the retribution.

Quinn laughed softly. "Not that easy, shithead. I told you, I want your help. I need a local smartarse to straighten out crap like a ship and how to sneak my possessed disciples past the pigs guarding the planet. Someone who knows all the access codes around here. And that's you, Twelve-T. As He chose me, so I have chosen you." He glanced around at the gang's remaining soldiers. "We'll open the rest of this worthless trash for possession; then convert all of Jesup. After that, nobody down below will be able to resist us."

"Oh, Jesus, help us," Twelve-T begged. "Please."

"Ain't no God," Quinn mimicked savagely. "So he ain't got no son, has he?" Laughing, he pushed Twelve-T down towards the decking. The gang lord's knees bent, allowing the stikpad to fasten to his trousers. Quinn stood in front of the supplicant and beckoned Lawrence over. "I know you're a tough mother, Twelve-T. If you're possessed you'll only try to fool your new owner, jazz me about as best you can. You and your dumb pride. I can't afford that kind of shit anymore. That means I'm gonna have to squeeze what I want to know out of you myself, so I know you're being honest."

Kneeling before the monster, head bowed, Twelve-T said: "I will never help you."

"You will. I have many ways of binding my disciples to me. For most it is love or fear. For you, I choose dependence." He placed his hands on either side of Twelve-T's silver head. The feat was the converse of a coronation. Quinn lifted the silver cap from the gang lord's skull with an almost gentle reverence. It came loose with a soft sucking sound.

The bone underneath was covered in a sticky red mucus. Ichor dribbled over Twelve-T's face, mingling with sticky tears.

Lawrence took the cap from Quinn, acting as jester to the king. A little mad giggle escaped from the boy's lips as he held it in front of the stricken gang lord, its mirror surface ensuring he witnessed his own reduction to impotent vassal.

Quinn's hands descended again. This time the noise was louder as the bone creaked and split. He lifted the top of the skull high, smiling at the bloody trophy. Twelve-T's naked brain glistened below him, wrapped in delicate membranes, small beads of fluid weeping up from the tightly packed ribbons of tissue.

"Now I can keep a real close eye on what you're thinking," Quinn said.

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“So your group has no organized structure, as such?” Alkad asked.

“We’re organized, all right,” Lodi Shalasha insisted. “But nothing formal. We’re just like-minded people who keep in touch and help each other out.”

Alkad pushed her legs down into the chameleon suit trousers. There was still a residue of cold sweat smearing the fabric from when she’d worn the suit last night. Her nose wrinkled up in distaste, but she kept on working the trousers up her shins. “You said you had junior cadres, the ones clearing the spiders away. That sounds like a regular underground movement hierarchy to me.”

“Not really. Some of us work in day clubs, that way we help to keep the memory of the genocide alive for the children. Nobody should be allowed to forget what was done to us.”

“I approve.”

“You do?” He sounded surprised.

“Yes. The original refugees seem to have forgotten. That’s why I’m in this mess right now.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor; Voi will get you off Ayacucho.”

“Perhaps.” Alkad prided herself that the somnolence program had been for the best. When the girl had woken this morning she’d been subdued, but still functional. The grief for her father was still there, as it should be, but it hadn’t debilitated her.

Over breakfast, Alkad had explained what her priorities were: to get away from the Dorados as fast as possible now her location was blown to the intelligence agencies, and the

remaining principal requirement for a combat-capable starship (she still couldn't bring herself to mention the Alchemist). It would be too much to hope for the ship to be crewed by Garissan patriot types; a mercenary crew would just have to do now. The three of them had discussed possible options, and Voi and Lodi had started arguing over names, who to contact for what.

Voi had left by herself to secure a starship. It would be inviting disaster for Alkad to be seen with her again. As a pair they were too distinctive, however adroit the chameleon suits were at hiding their peripheral features.

"Hey, you've made the news." Lodi waved his communications block enthusiastically. He'd entered a reference search program to monitor the media output. "Access the Cabral NewsGalactic studio."

Alkad struggled the suit on over her shoulders, then datavised the room's net processor for a channel to the studio.

Cabral NewsGalactic was showing a recording of a holomorph sticker which had a young cheerleader shouting: "Run, Alkad, run!"

"Mother Mary," Alkad muttered. "Is this the work of your people?"

"No. I swear. I've never seen one before. Besides, only Voi and I know your name. None of the others even know you exist."

Alkad went back to the studio. A rover reporter was walking down one of Ayacucho's main public halls. The stickers were everywhere. A cleaner mechanoid was trying to spray one off the wall, but its solvent wasn't strong enough. Smears of black semi-dissolved plastic dribbled down the metallic wall panel.

"It is as if a plague has visited Ayacucho," the rover reporter said cheerfully. "The first of these stickers appeared about six hours ago. And if I didn't know better I'd say they've been breeding like bacteria. Police say that the stickers are being handed out to children; and detectives are currently correlating security monitor recordings to see if they

can identify the main distributors. Though sources inside the public prosecutor's office tell me they're not sure exactly what charges could be brought.

"The question everyone is asking is: Exactly who is Alkad, and what is she running from?"

The image went back to the studio anchorman. "Our company's investigations have uncovered one possible answer to the mystery," he said in a sombre bass voice. "At the time of the genocide, the Garissan navy employed a Dr Alkad Mzu to work on advanced defence projects. Mzu is said to have survived the genocide and spent the last thirty years under an assumed name teaching physics at the Dorados university. But now foreign intelligence agencies, acting in response to Omutan propaganda, have started hunting her under the pretext of illegal technology violations. A senior member of the Dorados governing council, who asked not to be named, said today: 'Such an action by these foreign agents is a gross violation of our sovereignty. I find it obscene that the Omutans can lay these unfounded allegations against one of our citizens who has dedicated her life to educating our brightest youngsters. If this is their behaviour after thirty years of sanctions, then we must ask why the Confederation ever lifted those sanctions in the first place. They certainly do not seem to have had the desired effect in remedying the aggressive nature of the Omutan government. Their current cabinet is just a new collar on the same dog.'

"The council member went on to say that if Alkad Mzu turned up at his apartment he would certainly offer her sanctuary, and that every true Dorados citizen would do the same. He said he would not rest until all suspected foreign agents had been expelled from the asteroids."

"Holy Mother Mary," Alkad groaned.

She cancelled the channel and slumped down onto the bed, the suit's hood hanging flaccidly over her shoulder. "I don't believe this is happening. Mother Mary, they're turning me into a media celebrity."

"That's my uncle for you," Lodi said. "Did you check out

the positive bias in those reports? Mary, you'd be elected president tomorrow if we were ever allowed to vote around here."

"Your *uncle*?"

He flinched. "Yeah, sure. Cabral's my uncle. He's made a mint out of exploiting the little-Garissan attitude. I mean, just look at the kind of people living here, they lap it up."

"He's insane. What does he think he's doing giving me this kind of public profile?"

"Whipping up public support in your favour. This kind of propaganda is going to make life ten times harder for the agencies chasing you. Anyone tries to take you out of Ayacucho against your will today, they'll wind up getting lynched."

She stared at him. That eager face which permitted so much inner anger to show without ever dimming the natural innocence. Child of the failed revolutionaries. "You're probably right. But this isn't happening the way I ever expected it to."

"I'm sorry, Doctor." He pulled a worn shoulder bag out of the cupboard. "Do you want to try some of these clothes now?"

He was proffering some long sports shorts and an Ayacucho Junior Curveball Team sweatshirt. With a short cut wig and the chameleon suit reprogrammed, they intended her to walk out of the room as an average sports-mad teenager. A male one.

"Why not?"

"Voi will call soon. We ought to be ready."

"You really believe she can get us off this asteroid in a starship, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Lodi, do you have any idea how difficult that is to arrange, now of all times? Underground movements need to have contacts infiltrated right through the local administrative structure; dedicated, devoted people who will risk everything for the cause. What have you got? You're rich kids who've found a new way to rebel against their parents."

“Yes, and we can use that money to help you, if you’d just let us. Voi taught us that. If we need something, we buy it. That way there’s no network for the agencies to discover and penetrate. We’ve never been compromised. That’s why you stayed in this room all night without anyone storming the door with an assault mechanoid.”

“You may have a point there. I have to admit the old partizans didn’t do too well, did they.” She gave the chameleon suit hood a reluctant grimace, then started to smooth back her hair ready to slip it on.

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Joshua held the petri dish up to the cabin’s light panel, squinting at the clear glass. It looked completely empty; his enhanced retinas couldn’t even find dust motes. But lurking inside the optically pure dish were thirteen nanonic monitor bugs which the medical packages had extracted from *Lady Mac*’s crew and the serjeants. They were subcutaneous implants, agents stinging them by casually brushing up against an unsuspecting victim.

“How come I rated three?” Ashly complained.

“Obvious subversive type,” Sarha said. “Bound to be up to no good.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re all in the clear,” she said. “The medical analysis program can’t spot any unusual infections or viruses. Looks like they weren’t playing nasty.”

“This time,” Joshua said. As soon as the scanners in the starship’s surgery had located the first of the monitor bugs he’d ordered Sarha to run a full biochemical analysis on everyone. Microbes and viruses were far easier to introduce in a target than nanonics.

Fortunately, the agencies had been curious rather than hostile. But this was the sharpest reminder to date of the stakes involved. They’d been lucky thus far. It wouldn’t last, he thought. And he wasn’t the only one who realized that. The cabin had a kind of after-game locker-room atmosphere, with a team that was very relieved to have scraped a draw.

“Let’s start from the beginning,” he said. “Sarha, are we secure now?”

“Yes. These bugs can’t datavise through *Lady Mac*’s screening. They’re only a problem outside.”

“But you don’t know when we got stung?”

“There’s no way of knowing, sorry.”

“Your friend Mrs Nateghi,” Melvyn suggested. “It was rather odd.”

“You’re probably right,” Joshua said reluctantly. “Okay, assume everything we’ve done up until now has been compromised. First off, is there any point in continuing? Jesus, it’s not as if we don’t know she’s here. The bloody news studios have been broadcasting nothing else. Our problem is how difficult it’s going to be to contact her without anyone else tagging along. They’re bound to try and sting us again. Sarha, will our electronic warfare blocks work against these monitor bugs?”

“They should be able to scramble them; we picked up top-of-the-range systems before we left Tranquillity.”

“Fine. From now on, nobody goes into Ayacucho without one. We also take a serjeant each when we venture out. Ione, I want you to carry those chemical projectile guns we brought.”

“Certainly, Joshua,” said one of the four serjeants in the cabin.

He couldn’t tell if it was the one who’d accompanied him earlier. “Right, what kind of data have we pulled in so far? Melvyn?”

“Ashly and I got around to the five major defence contractors, Captain. The only orders coming in are for upgrades to the asteroid’s SD platforms, and there’s precious few of them. We got offered some magnificent discounts when we asked about supplying *Lady Mac* with new systems. They’re absolutely desperate for work. Mzu hasn’t ordered any equipment from anybody. And nobody is refitting starships.”

“Okay. Beaulieu?”

“Nothing, Captain. Daphine Kigano disappeared within

fifteen minutes of arriving here. There's no address for her, no credit records, no hotel booking, no citizenship register, no public record file."

"All right. That just leaves us with Ikela."

"He's dead, Joshua," Dahybi said. "Hardly the best lead."

"Pauline Webb was very keen to stop me having any contact with T'Opingtu's management. Which means that's the direction to take. I've been reviewing every byte I can find on Ikela and T'Opingtu. He came to the Dorados with a lot of money to start up that company. There's no mention of where it came from; according to his biography he used to work for a Garissan engineering company as a junior manager. Which doesn't add up.

"Now if you were Alkad Mzu, on the run and in need of a starship that can deploy the Alchemist, who are you going to go to when you get here? Ikela fits the search program perfectly: the owner of a company which manufactures specialist astroengineering components. Remember she fooled the intelligence agencies for close on thirty years. Whatever plan she formatted with her colleagues after the genocide, it was well thought out."

"Not perfect, though," Ashly said. "If it was, Omuta's star would be turning nova right now."

"The possessed glitched it for them, that's all," Sarha said. "Who could anticipate this quarantine?"

"Whatever," Joshua said. "The point is, T'Opingtu was probably set up to provide Mzu with the means to deploy the Alchemist. Ikela would have made sure that policy continued in the event he didn't live long enough to see her arrive."

"Which he did, but only just," Ashly said. "It must have been the agencies who snuffed him."

"But not Mzu," Melvyn said. "This media campaign backing her sprang up too quickly after the murder. Somebody knows she's out there. Somebody with a shitload of influence, but not in contact with her. It's going to be almost impossible for us to snatch her with public opinion being whipped up like this, Captain."

“Which is exactly the intention,” Dahybi said. “Though it’s more likely aimed at the intelligence agencies rather than us.”

“We’ll deal with that problem if we ever get to it,” Joshua said. “Right now our priority is to establish a trace on Mzu.”

“How?” Sarha asked.

“Ikela has a daughter; according to his public record file she’s the only family he’s got.”

“She’ll inherit,” Beaulieu said bluntly.

“You got it. Her name’s Voi, and she’s twenty-one. She’s our way in to whatever organization her daddy built up in preparation for Mzu.”

“Oh, come on, Joshua,” Ashly protested. “Her father’s just been murdered, she’s not going to make appointments with perfect strangers, let alone tell us anything about the Garissan underground, even if she has any data. Which is questionable. I wouldn’t involve my daughter in anything like that. And the agencies will be wanting to question her, too.”

Joshua wasn’t going to argue. As soon as he reviewed Ikela’s public record file he’d known Voi was the link. Ione would call it his intuition. She might even have been right. The old burn of conviction was there. “If we can just get close to her, we stand a chance,” he said firmly. “Mzu can’t afford to remain here now. She’s going to have to make a break for it, and sooner rather than later. One way or another, Voi will be involved. It’s our best shot.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you,” Dahybi said. “It’s as good a chance as any. But how the hell are you going to get near her?”

“Weren’t you listening?” asked one of the serjeants. “Voi is female and twenty-one.”

Joshua grinned evilly at Dahybi.

“You have got to be joking,” the stupefied node specialist insisted.

“I’ll just lie back and think of the Confederation.”

“Joshua . . .”

Joshua burst out laughing. “Your faces! Don’t worry,

Dahybi, I'm not that conceited. But she will have friends. There are quite a lot of rich entrepreneurs in the Dorados, their kids will cling together in their own little social clique. And I am a starship owner captain, after all. One of them will get us in. All I have to do now is find her." He smiled broadly at his crew, who were regarding him with a mixture of umbrage and resignation. "Time to party."

• • •

Prince Lambert sealed the straps around the lanky girl's wrists, then activated the sensenviron program. His bedroom dissolved into a circular stone-walled chamber at the top of a castle tower, its bed at the centre of the flagstone floor. His male slaves began to file through the iron-bound door. Ten of them stood around the bed, looking down dispassionately at the spread-eagled figure.

He took the remote response collar from under the pillow and fastened it around her neck.

"What is it?" the girl asked, anxiety rising into her voice. She was very young; it was highly probable she'd never heard of the device before.

He kissed her silent, and datavised the collar's activation sequence. The technology was a bastardization of medical nanonic packages, sending filaments to merge with her spinal cord. He could use it to manipulate her body into reacting exactly how he wanted, fulfilling each of the fantasies in turn.

"Do hope I'm not interrupting," one of the slaves said in a sharp female voice.

Prince Lambert gave a start, jumping up from the bed. The girl wailed in dismay as the collar began to knit smoothly with her skin.

He cancelled the sensenviron program, retrieving the reality of his darkened bedroom, and stared at the tall skinny figure which replaced the muscle-bound slave. "For Mary's sake, Voi! I'm going to change this bloody apartment's door code, I should never have let you have it." He squinted at the figure. "Voi?"

She was pulling her chameleon suit hood off, allowing

her little crown of dreadlocks to wriggle free. A wig of unkempt gingerish hair was held carelessly in her hand. Her clothes were standard-issue biosphere agronomist overalls. "I want to talk to you."

His jaw dropped. One hand gestured ineffectually at the girl on the bed, who was tugging at the straps. "Voi!"

"Now." She went back out into the living room.

He swore, then datavised a shutdown order at the collar and started to open the strap seals.

"How old is she?" Voi asked when he emerged into the living room.

"Does it matter?"

"It might to Shea. Has she found out about your little kinks yet?"

"Why the sudden interest in my sex life? Do you miss it?"

"Like a sunbather misses birdcrap."

"That's not what you said at the time."

"Who cares?"

"I do. We were good together, Voi."

"History."

"Then why have you come running back?"

"I need something of yours."

"Mother Mary, that detox procedure was a big mistake. I preferred you as you were before."

"I'm really interested in everything you say, P.L."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I want you to flight prep the *Tekas*, and take me and some friends outsystem."

"Oh, sure, no problem." He collapsed into the living room's leather settee, and favoured her with a pitying gaze. "Any particular destination? New California? Norfolk? Hey, why don't we go for the big one and see if we can break through Earth's SD network?"

"It's important. It's for Garissa."

"Oh, Mary. Your poxy revolution."

"It isn't revolution, it's called honour. Access your dictionary file."

"Haven't got one. And for your information, there's a

civil starflight quarantine in operation. I couldn't fly the *Tekas* away if I wanted to."

"Do you?"

"Yes. All right, one nil. If I'd known about this quarantine in advance I would have left. The Dorados might be home, but I don't think they're the best place to live while the possessed are roaming around. You've got the right idea, Voi, you're just too late."

She held up a flek. "The Dorados governing council flight authorization: it'll be an official voyage."

"How the hell . . ."

"Daddy was on the council. I have his access codes."

Temptation haunted him like a curse. "Is it still valid?"

"Yes. Myself and three others. Deal?"

"There's a few people I'd like to bring along."

"No. You can operate that yacht by yourself, that's why I chose it. This isn't a bloody pleasure cruise, P.L. I need you to fly some complex manoeuvres for me."

"*Tekas* isn't combat-capable, you know. Who are these others?"

"Need-to-know only. And you don't. Do we have a deal?"

"Do we get to try out free-fall sex?"

"If fucking me means you'll fly the yacht for me, fuck away."

"Mother Mary, you are a complete bitch!"

"Deal?"

"All right. Give me a day to wind things up here."

"We leave in three hours."

"No way, Voi. I doubt I could even fill the cryogenic tanks by then."

"Try." She waved the flek. "If you don't; no authorization."

"Bitch."

• • •

The girl was extravagantly attractive; early twenties with lustrous ebony skin and dry chestnut hair that fell just below her bottom. Her dress was a shimmering metallic grey-blue with a skirt hem higher than the dangling ends of her hair.

Melvyn suspected she was a typical insecure rich kid. Though Joshua didn't seem to mind, the two of them were busy French-kissing on the Bar KF-T's dance floor.

"He's a devil for it," Melvyn said peevishly. He felt he should explain to Beaulieu, who was sitting at the table with him. "Never works for me. I mean, fusion specialist is a tough job. And I'm crew, that's glamorous enough, isn't it? But they just bloody stampede at him when we dock. I think he got his pheromones geneered along with everything else." He started searching through the cluster of beer bottles on the table for one that had something left inside. There were rather a lot of them.

"You don't think it's anything to do with the fact he's thirty years younger than you?" the cosmonik asked.

"Twenty-five!" Melvyn corrected indignantly.

"Twenty-five."

"Certainly not."

The cosmonik gave the Bar KF-T another automatic scan. Joshua's direction of investigation was obviously puzzling the intelligence agents who were on observation duty. Melvyn and Beaulieu had identified five of them in the club, making a game of it as they sat drinking beer and waiting for Joshua to score. It wasn't that the agents didn't mix; they drank, they danced, they chatted to people, the betraying factor was the way they maintained a rigid distance from the *Lady Mac's* crew.

Joshua waved a sunny farewell to the girl and sat down at Melvyn's table with a satisfied sigh. "Her name's Kole, and she's invited me to a party this evening."

"I'm surprised she can hold back that long," Melvyn muttered.

"I'm meeting her and her friends at tonight's benefit gig, then they're going on to a private bash at someone's apartment."

"A benefit gig?" Beaulieu questioned.

"Some local MF bands are getting together so they can raise money for Alkad Mzu's legal costs, should she ever need to fight Confederation extradition warrants."

"She's becoming a bloody religion," Melvyn said.

"Looks that way." Joshua started counting the bottles on the table. "Come on, we need to get back to *Lady Mac*." He slipped his arm under Melvyn's shoulder and signalled Beaulieu to help. Between them, they got the drunk fusion specialist to his feet. Ashly and Sarha walked over from the bar. All four serjeants rose from their seats.

None of the agents moved. That would have been too blatant.

A pair of possessed walked into Bar KF-T. A man and woman, dressed in clothes which almost matched current fashions.

Joshua's electronic warfare block datavised an alarm.

"Get down!" the four serjeants shouted in unison.

The threat-response program which had gone primary as soon as the alarm came on sent Joshua diving for cover amid the tables and chairs. He hit the floor, rolling expertly to absorb the impact. A couple of empty chairs went flying as his legs struck them. His crew was following him down; even Melvyn, though his alcohol-polluted nerves made him slower.

Screams broke out across the club as the serjeants drew their stubby machine guns. The agents were also moving, boosted muscles turning their actions into a blur.

Both the possessed gasped at the near-instantaneous reaction to their appearance. An unnerving number of weapons were lining up on them amid the chaos of a terrified and bewildered clientele.

"Freeze," a quadriphonic voice ordered them.

They didn't have functional neural nanonics to run combat programs, but instinct was almost as fast. Both of them started to raise their arms, white fire bursting from their fingertips.

Six machine guns, three semi-automatic pistols, and a carbine opened fire.

Joshua had never heard a chemical projectile weapon before. Ten of them shooting at once was louder than a fusion rocket exhaust. He slammed his hands over his ears. The

fusillade couldn't have lasted more than a couple of seconds. He risked raising his head.

Only the agents (there were actually six—Melvyn had missed one) and the serjeants were standing. Everyone else was on the floor, sprawled flat or curled up in fetal balls. Tables and chairs rolled and spun. The music and dance-floor holograms were still playing.

He heard several peculiar mechanical *snicking* sounds as fresh magazines were slammed into the guns.

Bullets had shredded the wall behind the possessed, chewing apart the composite panelling. Large splatters of blood covered the tattered splinters of composite. The two bodies—

Joshua squirmed at the sight. There wasn't much left to identify as human. A nausea suppression program switched smoothly into primary mode, though that only stopped the physical symptoms.

Moans and cries rose over the music. Several people had been hit by ricochets.

“Joshua!”

It was Sarha. She had her hand clamped around Ashly's left thigh. Blood was staining her fingers scarlet. “He's been hit.”

The pilot was staring with a calm morbid interest at his wound. “Damn stupid thing.” He blinked in confusion.

“Ione,” Joshua shouted. “Medical nanonic.”

One of the serjeants took a package from its equipment belt. Beaulieu was slitting Ashly's trouser fabric with a small metal blade that had slid out of her left wrist attachments. A dribble of grey-green fluid was leaking from a bullet hole in her brass breastplate.

“I say, do be careful,” Ashly murmured.

When the wound had been fully exposed, Sarha slapped the package over it.

“Let's go,” Joshua said. “Beaulieu, take Melvyn. Sarha and I will handle Ashly. Ione, cover us.”

“Now wait a minute,” one of the agents said. Joshua recognized him as one of the heavyweights accompanying

Pauline Webb. "You're staying right here until the police arrive."

It was a barman who had recovered fast enough to think of the financial possibilities that started recording the scene in a memory cell. Later that day and all through the night the news companies repeated it almost constantly. Six armed men in a shouting match with a young starship captain (later everyone realized it was Lagrange Calvert himself) and his crew. The captain saying that no one was going to prevent him from taking his injured friend to get proper treatment. And what authority have you got anyway? Four identical and disturbingly menacing cosmoniks stood between Calvert and the armed men. There was a short pause, then everyone's guns seemed to disappear. The starship crew left the club, carrying their wounded with them.

Anchormen speculated long and loud on the possibility that the six armed men were in fact foreign intelligence agents. Rover reporters tried desperately to hunt them down, with no success.

The police officially confirmed that the two people shot dead by the agents had been possessed (though no details about how they knew for sure were forthcoming). Ayacucho's governing council issued a statement urging everyone to remain calm. Total priority was given to search and identification procedures which were being put into operation to locate any further possessed in the asteroid. All citizens and residents were asked to cooperate fully.

There was no physical expression of panic, no angry mobs gathering in the biosphere cavern, or marches on the council chamber. People were too fearful of what might be lying in wait outside their apartment doors. Those companies and offices which had remained open started to wind down or conduct their businesses purely over the communications net; anything as long as personal contact was reduced. Parents took their children out of day clubs. Emergency services were brought up to full alert status. Company security staff were seconded to the police to help with the search.

By late afternoon several starships had been given official flight authorization by the council. Most of them were taking councillors, their families, and close aides away for conferences or defence negotiations with allies.

“And we can’t stop them,” Monica complained bitterly. She was sitting at the back of the office which the Edenists were using, sipping a mug of instant tea. There was little else for her to do now, which aggravated her intensely. All the ESA’s assets had been activated. None of them had any idea where Mzu was; few had even heard of Voi let alone any underground group the girl was connected with.

Locating Mzu was all down to the Edenist observation operation now, and the slender hope they would get a lucky break.

“She has not embarked on any starship,” Samuel said. “We are sure of that. Both axial chambers have been under constant observation, and not just by us. Nobody who comes within twenty-five per cent of Mzu’s height and mass has passed into the spaceports without being positively identified.”

“Yes yes,” Monica said irritably.

“If we don’t find her in another four hours we are going to withdraw from Ayacucho.”

She’d known it was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier. “That bad?”

“Yes. I’m afraid so.” He had just finished watching another possession through a spider in one of the residential sections. It was the apartment of an ordinary family of five, doing as they’d been advised, staying at home and not allowing anyone else in. Until the police arrived. All three officers were possessed; and after seven minutes so were the family. “We estimate eight per cent of the population has been possessed now. With everyone isolated and sitting tight, it is becoming easier for them to spread. They have taken over the police force in its entirety.”

“Bastards. They’ve gone for officialdom every time since Capone used the police and civil service to take over New California.”

“A remarkably perceptive man, Mr Capone.”

“I don’t suppose it would do any good broadcasting a general warning, now?”

“We think not. There are few weapons available to the general populace; and most of those are energy weapons, which are worse than useless. We would be adding to the suffering.”

“And since that bloody media campaign, nobody would trust us.”

“Exactly.”

“What do we do if Mzu doesn’t escape?”

“That depends on what happens here. If the possessed take Ayacucho out of this universe, the problem is solved, albeit not very satisfactorily. If they remain here, then the voidhawks will enforce a permanent blockade.”

She gritted her teeth, hating the mounting feeling of frustration. “We could try broadcasting a message to her, offer to take her off.”

“I’ve considered it; and I might well use it as a last resort before we evacuate.”

“Great. So now we just sit and pray she walks in front of a spider.”

“You have an alternative?”

“No. I don’t think any of us do.”

“Perhaps not, though I remain intrigued by what Joshua Calvert and his crew were doing in that club.”

“Trying to get laid by the look of it.”

“No. Calvert is shrewd. If you want my guess he is attempting to approach Voi through her friends.”

“He can’t know who her friends are, he doesn’t have the resources. We’ve only got three of her friends on our list, and that took five hours to acquire.”

“Possibly. But he’s already inserted himself in her social strata with that invitation to a party. And it’s a small asteroid.”

“If Voi is hiding Mzu, she’s not going to reveal herself.”

“True.” His grin was childlike in its mischievousness.

“What?” Monica asked in annoyance.

“The irony. From being an amateur irritant, Calvert is now our only lead.”

• • •

Ashly had said very little during the trip back to the spaceport. Joshua guessed the pilot’s neural nanonic programs were busy suppressing the shock. But Sarha didn’t seem unduly worried, and she was monitoring the medical package around his thigh.

Melvyn was doing his best to sober up fast. One of the serjeants had given him a medical nanonic package which was now wrapped around his neck to form a thick collar. It was busy filtering all traces of alcohol out of the blood entering his brain.

Joshua’s only concern was the fluid which was still trickling out of the bullet hole in Beaulieu’s breastplate. Medical nanonics would be of no value at all in treating the cosmonik. None of them had standardized internal systems; each was unique, and proud of it. He wasn’t even sure if she was mostly mechanical or biological underneath her brass carapace.

“How are you doing?” he asked her.

“The bullet damaged some of my nutrient synthesis glands. It’s not critical.”

“Do you have any . . . er, spares?”

“No. That function has multiple redundancy backup. It looks worse than it is.”

“Don’t tell me, just a flesh wound,” Ashly grunted.

“Correct.”

The commuter lift’s doors opened. Two serjeants slid out into the corridor first, checking for any possessed between them and the docking bay’s airlock tube. “Joshua,” one of them called.

His electronic warfare detector block wasn’t acting up. “What?”

“Someone here for you.”

He learned nothing from the tone, so he pushed off with his feet and glided out into the corridor. “Oh, Jesus wept.”

Mrs Nateghi and her two fellow goons from Tayari,

Usoro and Wang were waiting outside the airlock tube. Another man was floating just behind them.

The crew followed Joshua out of the lift.

“Captain Calvert.” Mrs Nateghi’s voice was indecently happy.

“Can’t get enough of me, can you? So what is it this time? A million-fuseodollar fine for littering? Ten years hard labour for not returning my empties to the bar? Penal colony exile for farting in public?”

“Humour is an excellent defence mechanism, Captain Calvert. But I would advise you to have something stronger in court.”

“I’ve just saved your asteroid from being taken over by the possessed. Will that do?”

“I’ve accessed the NewsGalactic recording. You were lying on the floor with your hands over your head the whole time. Captain Calvert, I have a summons for you to be present at a preliminary hearing to establish proceedings which will determine the ownership of the starship *Lady Macbeth*, pursuant to the claim my client has filed upon said ship.”

Joshua stared at her, too incredulous to speak.

“Ownership?” Sarha asked. “But it’s Joshua’s ship; it always has been.”

“That is incorrect,” Mrs Nateghi said. “It was Marcus Calvert’s ship. I have a sensorium recording of Captain Calvert admitting that.”

“He was never trying to deny it. His father is dead. *Lady Mac*’s registration is filed with the CAB. You can’t challenge that.”

“Yes I can.” The man who had been keeping himself behind the other two lawyers slowly edged forwards.

“You!” Sarha exclaimed.

“Me.”

Joshua stared at him, a very unpleasant chill sluicing into his thoughts. The angular, ebony face was . . . Jesus, I know him. But where from? “So who the hell are you?”

“My name is Liol. Liol Calvert, actually. I’m your big half brother, Joshua.”

• • •

The last place Joshua wanted to bring this . . . this *fraud* was the captain's cabin. It was his father's cabin, for Christ's sake, even though most of the old fittings and personal mementos had been removed during the last refit. This was the closest Joshua had ever come to knowing a home.

But Ashly needed the deep-invasion packages in *Lady Mac's* sickbay to remove the bullet in his thigh. That bitch queen Mrs Nateghi wasn't going to be deflected, and the summons was real enough. He also had a mission. So it was back to basics.

As soon as the cabin hatch shut behind them, Joshua asked: "Okay, shithead, how much?"

Liol didn't answer immediately, he was gazing around the cabin. His face carried an expression which was close to trepidation. "I'm finally here," he said falteringly.

"Do you know how many hours I've spent in sensewise simulations learning to fly a starship? I qualified for my C.A.B. pilot's licence when I was just nineteen." He glanced awkwardly at Joshua. "This must be very strange for you, Joshua. It is for me."

"Cut the crap, how much?"

Liol's face cleared. "How much for what?"

"To drop the claim and bugger off, of course. It's a neat scam, I'll give you that. Normally I'd just let the courts break you apart, but I'm a little pushed for time right now. I don't need complications. So name your price, but you'd better make it less than fifty grand."

"Nice one, Josh." Liol smiled and held out his Jovian Bank credit disk, silver side up. Green figures glowed on the surface.

Joshua blinked as he read out the amount of money stored inside: eight hundred thousand fuseodollars. "I don't understand."

"It's very simple, I am your brother. I'm entitled to joint ownership, at the very least."

"Not a chance. You're a con artist who knows how to use a cosmetic adaptation package, that's all. Right now, my

face is as famous as Jezzibella's. You saw an opportunity to make a nuisance of yourself, and remodelled your features."

"This is my face. I've had it ever since I was born, which was before you. Access my public file if you want proof."

"I'm sure someone as smart as you has planted all the appropriate data in Ayacucho's memory cores. You've done your research, and you've shown me you have the money to buy official access codes."

"Really? And what about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes. How come you acquired this ship after my father died? In fact, how did he die? Is he even dead at all? Prove you're a Calvert. Prove you are Marcus's son."

"I didn't acquire it, I inherited it. Dad always wanted me to have it. His will is on file in Tranquillity. Anybody can access it."

"Oh, that's nice. So Tranquillity's public records are beyond reproach, while anything stored in the Dorados was put there by criminals. How convenient. I wouldn't try that one in court if I were you."

"He's my father," Joshua shouted angrily.

"Mine too. And you know it."

"I know you're a fake."

"If you were a true Calvert, you'd know."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Intuition. What does your intuition tell you about me, Josh?"

For the first time in his life, Joshua knew what vertigo must feel like. To be teetering on the edge of some monstrously deep chasm.

"Ah." Liol's grin was triumphant. "Our little family quirk can be a real downer at times. After all, I knew you were real the second I accessed Kelly Tirrel's report. I also know what you're going through, Joshua. I felt exactly the same way about you. All that terrible anger, refusing to believe despite all the evidence. We're more than brothers, we're almost twins."

"Wrong. We don't even come from the same universe."

“What exactly worries you the most, Josh? That I am your brother, or I’m not?”

“I’ll scuttle *Lady Mac* before I let anyone else have her. If you’ve got any intuition, you’ll know how true that is.”

“My mistake.” Liol stroked the acceleration couch beside the hatch, the longing obvious in his eyes. “I can see the ship means as much to you as it does to me. No surprise there, we’ve both got the Calvert wanderlust. Hitting you with a big legal scene first off was bound to create some hostility. But I’ve been waiting for this starship to dock here for every day of my life. Dad left Ayacucho before I was even born. In my mind the *Lady Macbeth* has always been mine. She’s my inheritance, too, Josh. I belong here just as much as you do.”

“A starship only has one captain. And you, asteroid boy, don’t know the first thing about piloting or captaining. Not that it’s relevant, you’ll never be in a position to fly *Lady Mac*.”

“Don’t fight this, Josh. You’re my brother, I don’t want to alienate you. Christ, just finding out you existed was a hell of a shock. Family feuds are the worst kind. Don’t let’s start one the moment we meet. Think how Dad would feel, his sons going at each other like this.”

“You are *not* family.”

“Where was *Lady Macbeth* docked in 2586, Josh? What ports?”

Joshua clenched his fists, a free-fall assault program working out possible trajectories he could leap along. He hated how smug this arrogant bastard was. Wiping that knowing superiority from his ugly flat face would be wonderful.

“The disadvantage with white skin like yours, Josh, is that I can see every blush. It’s a dead giveaway. Me? I always win at poker.”

Joshua seethed silently.

“So, do you want to discuss this sensibly?” Liol asked. “Personally, I’d hate to face Mrs Nateghi across a courtroom.”

"I don't suppose, *Lie*, this sudden urge to acquire a starship has anything to do with your asteroid being overrun by possessed?"

"Lovely." Liol clapped his hands enthusiastically. "You're a Calvert, all right. Never see a belt without wanting to hit below it."

"That's right. So, I'll see you in court here in about a week's time. How does that sound?"

"Would you really abandon your own brother to the possessed?"

"If I had one, probably not."

"I think I'm going to like you after all, Josh. I thought you'd be soft; after all, you've had it dead easy. But you're not."

"*Easy?*"

"Compared to me. You knew Dad. You had the big inheritance waiting. I'd call that easy."

"I'd call that bollocks."

"If you don't believe in your own intuition, a simple DNA profile will tell you if we're related. I'm sure your sick bay could run one for you."

And Joshua was absolutely stumped at that. There was something about this complete stranger that was deeply unsettling, yet obscurely comforting at the same time. Jesus, he does look like me, and he knows about the intuition, and Dad wiped the log for 2586. It's not utterly impossible. But *Lady Mac* is mine. I could never share her.

He stared at Liol for a moment longer, then made a command decision.

The crew were all hanging around on the bridge, along with Mrs Nateghi. Nobody would make eye contact. Joshua shot out of the captain's cabin, rotated ninety degrees, and slapped his feet on a stikpad. "Sarha. Take our guest down to the sick bay. Get a blood sample, use a dagger if you want, and run a DNA profile." He jabbed a finger at Mrs Nateghi. "Not you. You're leaving. Right now."

She ignored him while managing to project her complete

disdain at the same time. "Mr Calvert, what are your instructions?"

"I just told you . . . Oh."

"Thank you so much for your help," Liol said with flawless courtesy. "I'll be in touch with your office if I decide any further legal action is required against my brother."

"Very well. Tayari, Usoro and Wang will be delighted to help. Forcing recidivists to acknowledge their responsibilities is always rewarding."

Combating her amusement, Sarha held up a warning finger as Joshua's face turned beacon red.

"Dahybi, show the lady out, please," he said.

"Aye, Captain." The node specialist gestured generously at the floor hatch and followed Mrs Nateghi through.

Liol flashed Sarha an engaging grin. "You wouldn't really use a dagger on me, would you?"

She winked. "Depends on the circumstances."

"Fancy that, Joshua," one of the serjeants said as the pair of them left the bridge. "There's two of you."

Joshua glared at the bitek construct, then executed a perfect midair somersault and zoomed back into his cabin.

• • •

Alkad's tranquillizer program wasn't nearly strong enough to keep the claustrophobia at bay. Eventually she had to admit defeat and switch a somnolence program to primary. Her only thought as she fell into oblivion was: I wonder who will be there when I wake?

The rendezvous was an elaborate one, which decreased the chances of success. But even that wasn't her main worry. Getting out of Ayacucho undetected was the big problem.

The asteroid had two counter-rotating spaceports, one at each end. The main one was used by starships and larger inter-orbit craft; while the second was mainly for heavy-duty cargo and utility tankers delivering fresh water and liquid oxygen for the biosphere. It was also the operations base for the personnel commuters and MSVs and tugs which flew between the asteroid and its necklace of industrial stations.

Both were under heavy surveillance by agents. There was

no chance of getting through the axial chambers and taking a commuter lift to the docking bays, so Voi had arranged for Alkad and herself to be shipped out in cargo pods.

Lodi and another youth called Eriba, who claimed to be a molecular structures student, worked on a couple of standard pods in one of T'Opingtu's storage facilities. They were converted into heavily padded coffins moulded to hold someone wearing a SII spacesuit. Both boys swore the insulation would prevent any thermal or electromagnetic leakage. The cargo pods would appear perfectly inert to any sensor sweep.

Of course, the insulation meant that Alkad couldn't datavise out for help if anything went wrong and nobody opened her pod. She believed she held her composure pretty well while she allowed them to seal her in. After that there was nothing but the tranquillizer program for the twenty minutes before she sought refuge in sleep.

A tug was scheduled to take the cargo pods out to one of T'Opingtu's foundry stations. From there they would be transferred to an inter-orbit craft that was heading for Mapire.

Alkad woke to find herself in free fall. *At least we got out of the asteroid.*

Her neural nanonics reported they were picking up a datavise.

"Stand by, Doctor, we're cracking the pod now."

She could feel vibrations through her suit, then the collar sensors were showing her slash-lines of red light cavorting around her. The top of the cargo pod came free, and someone in an SII suit and a manoeuvring pack was sliding into view in front of her.

"Hello, Doctor, it's me, Lodi. You made it, you're out."

"Where's Voi?" she datavised.

"I'm here, Doctor. Mary, but that was horrible. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Fine, thank you." As well as relief for herself, she felt strangely glad the girl had come through unscathed.

She made sure she had a secure grip on her crumpled old

backpack before she let Lodi draw her out of the pod. Held in front of him, with the manoeuvring pack puffing out fast streamers of gas, she sank into the *déjà vu* of Cherri Barnes towing her back to the *Udat*. Then, space had been frighteningly empty, with so little light her collar sensors had struggled to resolve anything. Now, she was deep within Tunja's disk, gliding through a redout blizzard. No stars were visible anywhere, the particles were too thick. Their size was inordinately difficult to judge, a grain of dust a centimetre from her nose, or a boulder a kilometre away, both looked exactly the same.

Ahead of her she could see the waiting starship, its fuselage shining a dim burgundy, much darker than the particles skipping across it like twisters of interference in an empty AV projection. Two thermo-dump panels were extended, resembling slow-motion propeller blades as rills of dust swirled around them. The airlock hatch was open, emitting a welcoming beam of white light.

She sank along it, relishing the return of normal colour. They entered a cylindrical chamber with grab hoops, utility sockets, harsh light tubes, environment grilles, and small instrument panels distributed at random. The sensation that reality was solidifying around her was inescapable.

The hatch closed, and she clung to a grab hoop as air flooded in. Her SII suit flowed back into a globe hanging off the collar, and she was inundated with sounds.

"We did it!" Voi was jubilant. "I told you I could get you out."

"Yes, you did." She looked around at them, Voi, Lodi, and Eriba, so dreadfully young to be sucked into this world of subterfuge, hatred, and death. Beaming faces desperate for her approval. "And I'd like to thank you; you did a magnificent job, all of you."

Their laughter and gratitude made her shake her head in wonder. Such odd times.

Five minutes later Alkad was dressed in her old ship-suit, backpack tight against her waist, following Voi into the *Tekas's* upper deck lounge. The yacht was only large enough

for one life-support capsule, with three decks. Despite the lack of volume, the fittings were compact and elegant, everything blending seamlessly together to provide the illusion of ample space.

Prince Lambert was reclining in a deep circular chair, datavising a constant stream of instructions to the flight computer. *Tekas* was under way, accelerating at a twentieth of a gee, though the gravity plane was flicking about.

“Thank you for offering us the use of your ship,” Alkad said after they were introduced.

He gave Voi a sterling glance. “Not at all, Doctor, the least I could do for a national heroine.”

She ignored the sarcasm, wondering what the story was with him and Voi. “So what’s our current status? Did anyone follow you?”

“No. I’m fairly sure about that. I flew outside the disk for a million kilometres before I went through it. Your inter-orbit craft did the same thing, but on the other side. In theory no one will realize we rendezvoused. Even the voidhawks can’t sense what happens inside the disk, not from a million kilometres away, it’s too cluttered.”

Unless they want to follow me right to the Alchemist, Alkad thought. “What about a stealthed voidhawk just outside the disk, or even inside with us?” she asked.

“Then they’ve got us cold,” he said. “Our sensors are good, but they’re not military grade.”

“We’d know by now if we were being followed,” Voi said. “As soon as we rendezvoused they would have moved to intercept.”

“I expect so,” Alkad said. “How long before we can clear the disk and jump outsystem?”

“Another forty minutes. You don’t rush a manoeuvre like this; there are too many sharp rocks out there. I’m going to have to replace the hull foam as it is; dust abrasion is wearing it down to the bare silicon.” He smiled unconvincingly at Alkad. “Am I going to be told what our mission is?”

“I require a combat-capable starship, that’s all.”

“I see. And I suppose that is connected with the work you did for the Garissan navy before the genocide?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ll excuse me if I leave the party before that.”

Alkad thought of the remaining devices in her backpack, and just how tight her security margin had become. “Nobody will force you to do anything.”

“Nice to hear.” He gave Voi another pointed glance. “For once.”

“What jump coordinate does this course give us?” Alkad asked.

“Nyvan,” he said. “It’s a hundred and thirty light-years away, but I can get a reasonable alignment on it without using up too much fuel. Voi told me you wanted a planet with military industrial facilities, and wouldn’t ask too many questions.”

• • •

The last of the starships with official flight authorization had departed ninety minutes earlier when Joshua made his way out of the spaceport. Service and maintenance staff had gone home to be with their families. Utility umbilicals supporting the remaining starships were becoming less than reliable.

Three agents were loitering in the axial chamber, talking in quiet tones. They were the only people there. Joshua gave them a blasé wave as he and his escort of three serjeants emerged from the commuter lift.

One of the agents frowned. “You’re going back in there?” she asked incredulously.

“Try keeping me from a party.”

He could hear the argument start behind him as the lift doors closed. Holomorph sticker cheerleaders began their chant all around him.

“If she’s worried enough to question you openly, then the possessed must be gaining ground,” a serjeant said.

“Look, we’ve been over this. I’m just going to check out the gig, and see if Kole has turned up. If she hasn’t, we head straight back.”

“It would have been much safer if I’d gone alone.”

"I don't think so." Joshua wanted to say more, but the lift was probably overloaded with nanonic bugs. He datavised the net for a channel to *Lady Mac*.

"Yes, Joshua?" Dahybi responded.

"Certain people out here are getting twitchy about the possessed. I want you to monitor the asteroid's internal systems: transportation, power, environment, the net, everything. If any of them start downgrading I want to know right away."

"Okay."

Joshua glanced at the rigid, expressionless face of the nearest serjeant. Right now he really wanted Ione to confide in, to be able to ask her opinion, to talk things through. If anyone knew how to handle awkward family, it was her. Some deep-buried prejudice prevented him from saying anything to the serjeants. "One other thing, Dahybi. Call Liol, tell him to get himself over to the *Lady Mac* right away. Give him a passenger cabin in capsule C. Don't let him on the bridge. Don't give him any access codes for the flight computer. And make sure you check him for possession when he arrives."

"Yes, Captain. Take care."

A datavise couldn't convey emotional nuances, but he knew Dahybi well enough to guess at the amused approval.

"You accept his claim, then?" Ione asked.

"The DNA profile seems similar to mine," Joshua said grudgingly.

"Yes, I'd say ninety-seven per cent compatibility is roughly in the target area. It's not unusual for starship crews to have extended families spread over several star systems."

"Thank you for reminding me."

"If your father was ever anything like you, then it's possible Liol isn't your only sibling."

"Jesus."

"I'm just preparing you for the eventuality. Kelly Tirrel's recording has enhanced your public visibility rating by a considerable factor. Others may seek you out in the same way."

He pulled an ironic face. "Wouldn't that be something? The gathering of the Calverts. I wonder if there are more of us than there are Saldanas?"

"I very much doubt it, not if you include our illegitimates."

"And black sheep."

"Quite. What do you intend to do about Liol?"

"I haven't got a clue. He's not touching the *Lady Mac*, though. Can you imagine having board meetings every time to decide her next destination? It's the opposite of everything I am, not to mention the old girl herself."

"He'll probably come to realize this. I'm sure you can come to some arrangement. He appears to be quite smart."

"The word is smarmy."

"There's very little difference between you."

The lift dropped him off in a public hall a couple of hundred metres from the Terminal Terminus club where the benefit gig was being played. Not everyone was obeying the governing council's request to stay put at home. Kids filled the hall with laughter and shouts. Everyone was wearing a red handkerchief on their ankle.

For a moment Joshua felt disconnected from his own generation. He had formidable responsibilities (not to mention problems); they were just stimheads sliding around their perpetual circuit from one empty good time to the next. They didn't understand the universe at all.

Then a couple of them recognized Lagrange Calvert and wanted to know what it was like rescuing the children from Lalonde, and had there really been possessed in Bar KF-T? They were peppy, and the girls in the group were giving him the eye. He began to loosen up; the barriers weren't so solid after all.

The Terminal Terminus looked like some kind of chasmal junction between tunnels. Big, old mining machines were parked in arching recesses, their conical, worn-down drill mechanisms jutting out into the main chamber. Obsolete mechanoids clung to the ceiling, spider-leg waldos dangling

down inertly. Drinks were served over a long section of heavy-duty caterpillar track.

A fantasy wormhole squatted in the centre, a rippling gloss-black column five metres wide stretching between floor and ceiling. Things were trapped inside, undefined creatures who clawed at the distortion effect in desperate attempts to escape; the black surface bent and distended, but never broke.

“Very tasteful, under the circumstances,” Joshua muttered to a serjeant.

A stage had been set up between two of the mining machines. AV projectors powerful enough to cover a stadium stood on each side.

One of the serjeants went off to guard an emergency exit. The remaining two stuck by Joshua.

He found Kole standing with a group of her friends under one of the mining machines. Her hair had been woven through with silver and chrome-scarlet threads, which every now and then made it fan open like a peacock tail.

He paused for a moment. She was so phony; rich without Dominique’s cosmopolitan verve, and absolute trash compared to Louise’s simple honesty.

Louise.

Kole caught sight of him and squealed happily, kissed him, rubbed against him. “Are you all right? I accessed what happened after I left.”

He grinned brashly, the legend in the flesh. “I’m fine. My . . . er, cosmoniks here are a tough bunch. We’ve seen worse.”

“Really?” She cast a respectful eye over the two serjeants. “Are you male?”

“No.”

Joshua couldn’t tell if Ione was annoyed, amused, or plain didn’t care. On second thought, he doubted the latter.

Kole kissed him again. “Come and meet the gang. They didn’t believe I’d hooked you. Mother, I can’t believe I hooked you.”

He braced himself for the worst.

From her vantage point lounging casually on a coolant feed duct a third of the way up the side of a mining machine, Monica Foulkes watched Joshua greeting Kole's posse of friends. He knew exactly the attitude to take to be accepted within seconds. She took a gulp of iced mineral water as her enhanced retinas scanned the young faces below. It was hot wearing the chameleon suit, but it gave her the skin tone of Ayacucho's Kenyan-ethnic population; "foreign agents" were about as popular as the possessed right now. Except Calvert, of course, she thought sorely, he was being greeted like a bloody hero. Her characterization recognition program ran a comparison against the youngsters she was scanning, and signalled a ninety-five per cent probable match.

"Damn!"

Samuel (now black-skinned, twenty-five years old, and wearing jazzy purple sports gear) looked up from the base of the mining machine. "What?"

"You were right. Kole has just introduced him to Adok Dala."

"Ah. I knew it. He was Voi's boyfriend up until she dumped him eighteen months ago."

"Yes yes, I can access the file for myself, thank you."

"Can you hear what's being said?"

She glanced down contemptuously. "Not a chance. This place is really filling up now. My audio discrimination programs can't filter over that distance."

"Come down please, Monica."

Something in his tone halted any protest. She slithered down the pitted yellow-painted titanium bodywork of the mining machine.

"We have to decide what to do. Now."

She flinched. "Oh, God."

"Do you believe Adok Dala will know where Voi is?"

"I don't think so, but there's no guarantee. And if we snatch Dala now, it isn't going to make a whole lot of difference as far as official repercussions are concerned. He's hardly going to complain about being taken off Ayacucho, is he?"

“You’re right. And it will prevent Calvert from learning anything.”

Joshua’s neural nanonics reported a call from Dahybi. “Two voidhawks from the defence delegation have just left the docking ledge, Captain. Our sensors can’t see much from inside the bay, but we think they’re keeping station five kilometres off the spaceport.”

“Okay, keep monitoring them.”

“No problem. But you should know that Ayacucho is suffering localized power failures. They’re completely random, and the supervisor programs can’t locate any physical problem in the supply system. One of the news studios has gone off-line, as well.”

“Jesus. Start flight prepping *Lady Mac*; I’ll wind things up here and get back to you within thirty minutes.”

“Aye, Captain. Oh, and Liol has arrived. He’s not possessed.”

“Wonderful.”

Kole was still clinging magnetically to his side. No one she’d introduced him to had mentioned Voi. His original idea had been to ask them about Ikela’s murder and see what was said. But now time was running out. He looked around to find out where the serjeants were, hoping Ione wasn’t going to make an issue of pulling out. Hell, we gave it our best.

The compere was striding out on the stage, holding her arms out for silence as the rowdy crowd cheered and started catcalling. She started into her spiel about the Fuckmasters.

“This is Shea,” Kole told him.

It was hard for Joshua to smile; Shea was tall and skinny, almost identical to Voi’s size and height. He datavised his electronic warfare block to scan her, but she was clean. What he saw was real, not a chameleon suit. It wasn’t Voi.

“This is Joshua Calvert,” Kole boasted, raising her voice against the rising whistle of the giant AV projectors. “He’s my starship captain.”

Shea’s melancholia became outright distress. She started crying.

Kole gave her an astonished look. "What's the matter?"

Shea shook her head, lips sealed together.

"I'm sorry," Joshua said, earnestly sympathetic. "What did I do?"

Shea smiled bravely. "It's not you. It's just . . . my boyfriend left this afternoon. He's captaining a starship, too, and that reminded me. I don't know when I'm going to see him again. He wouldn't say."

Intuition was starting a major-league riot in Joshua's skull. The first MF band was strolling onstage. He put a protective arm around Shea's shoulders, ignoring Kole's flash of ire. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink. You can tell me about it. You never know, I might be able to help. Stranger things happen in space."

He signalled the two serjeants frantically, and turned away from the stage just as the AV projectors burst into life. A thick haze of coherent light filled the Terminal Terminus. Even though he was looking away, sensations spirited down his nerves; fragmented signals saturated with crude activant sequences. He felt good. He felt hot. He felt randy. He felt slippery.

A glance back over his shoulder had him sitting on a saddle astride a giant penis, urging it forwards.

Honestly, kids today. When he was younger MF was about the giddy pursuit, how it felt when your partner adored you in return, or spurned you without reason. Making up and breaking up. The infinite states of the heart, not the dick.

The kids around him were laughing and giggling, joyous expressions on their incredulous faces as the AV dazzle poured down their irises. They all swayed from side to side in unison.

"Joshua, four Edenists are coming this way," a serjeant warned.

Joshua could see them in the sparkling light cloud which pervaded the audience. Taller than everyone else, some kind of visor over their eyes, moving intently through the swinging throng.

He grabbed Shea's hand tightly. "This way," he hissed urgently, and veered off towards the mock wormhole in the centre of the club. One of the serjeants cleared a path, forcing people aside. Frowns and snarls lined his route.

"Dahybi," he datavised. "Get the rest of the serjeants out of zero-tau, fast. Secure a route through the spaceport from the axial chamber to *Lady Mac*. I might be needing it."

"It's being done, Captain. Parts of the asteroid's net are crashing."

"Jesus. Okay, we've got the serjeants' affinity to keep communications open if it goes completely. You'd better keep one in the bridge with you."

He reached the writhing black column and looked back. Shea was breathless and confused, but not protesting. The Edenists weren't chasing after him. "What . . . ?" Some sort of struggle had broken out over where he'd left Kole's friends. Two of the tall agents were pulling an inert body between them. It was Adok Dala, unconscious and shaking, victim of a nervejam shot. The other pair of agents and someone else were holding back some irate kids. A nervejam stick was raised and fired.

Joshua turned his head a little too far, and he was tasting nipple while he slid over dark pigmentation as if he were snowboard slaloming, leaving a huge trail of glistening saliva behind him. His neck muscles flicked back a couple of degrees, and the Edenists were retreating, completely unnoticed by the entranced euphoric audience they were shoving their way through. Behind them, Kole's friends clung together; those still standing wept uncomprehendingly over those felled by the violence which had stabbed so unexpectedly into their moment of erotic rapture.

Shea gasped at the scene and made to rush over.

"No," Joshua shouted. He pulled her back, and she recoiled, as frightened by him as the agents. "Listen to me, we have to get out of here. It's only going to get worse."

"Is it the possessed?"

"Yeah. Now come on."

Still keeping hold of her hand he slid around the worm-

hole. It felt like dry rubber against his side, flexing in queasy movements.

"Nearest exit," he told the serjeant in front of him. "Go." It began to plough through tightly packed bodies at an alarming speed. Blissfully unaware people were sent tumbling. Joshua followed on grimly. The Edenists must have wanted Adok Dala for the same reason he wanted Shea. Had he got the wrong friend? Oh, hell.

The cavern wall was only ten metres ahead of him now, a red circle shining above an exit. His electronic warfare block datavised an alarm.

Jesus! "*Ione.*"

"I know," the lead serjeant shouted. It drew its machine gun.

"No," he cried. "You can't, not in here."

"I'm not inhuman, Joshua," the burly figure retorted.

They reached the wall and hurried along to the exit. That was when he realized Kole was still with them.

"Stay here," he told her. "You'll be safe with all these people."

"You can't leave me here," she gasped imploringly. "Joshua! I know what's happening. You can't. I don't want that to happen to me. You can't let them. Take me with you, for Mary's sake!"

And she was just a stricken young girl whose broken hair was flapping wildly.

The first serjeant slammed the door open and went through. "I'll stay here," the second said. The machine gun was held ready in one hand. It took out an automatic pistol and held it in the other. "That's a bonus, these things are ambidextrous. Don't worry, Joshua. They'll suffer if they try and get past me."

"Thanks, Ione." Then he was out in the corridor, urging the two girls along. "Dahybi," he datavised. His neural nanonics reported they couldn't acquire a net processor. "Bugger."

"The other serjeants are securing the spaceport," the ser-

jeant told him. "And the *Lady Mac* is flight prepped. Everything is ready."

"Great." His electronic warfare block was still datavising its alarm. He took his own nine-millimetre pistol out of its holster. Its operating procedure program went primary.

They came to a crossroads in the corridor. And Joshua wasted a second querying the net on the direction he wanted. Cursing, he requested the Ayacucho layout he'd stored in a memory cell. There would be too much risk using a lift now; power supplies were dubious, transport management processors more so. His neural nanonics devised the shortest route to the axial chamber, it seemed depressingly far.

"This way." He pointed down the left hand corridor.

"Excuse me," someone said.

Joshua's electronic warfare block gave out one final warning, then shut down. He whirled around. Standing ten metres down the other corridor were a man and a woman, dressed in heavy black leather jackets and trousers with an improbable number of shiny zips and buckles.

"Run," the serjeant ordered. It stepped squarely into the middle of the corridor and levelled its compact machine gun.

Joshua didn't hesitate. Shoving at the girls, he started running. He heard a few heated words being shouted behind him. Then the machine gun fired.

He took the first turning, desperate to escape from the line of sight. His neural nanonics immediately revised his route. The corridors were all identical, three metres high, three metres wide, and apparently endless. Joshua hated that, trapped in a maze and utterly reliant on a guidance program susceptible to the possessed. He wanted to know exactly where he was, and be able to prove it. Being unaware of his exact location was an alien experience. Human doubt was superseding technological prowess.

He was looking over his shoulder as he took the next turning, making sure the girls were keeping up and there was no sign of any pursuit. His peripheral vision monitor program

indexed the figure striding down the corridor towards him milliseconds before his neural nanonics crashed.

It was a man in white Arab robes. He smiled in simple gratitude as Joshua and the girls stumbled to a halt in front of him.

Joshua swung his pistol around, but the lack of any procedural program meant he misjudged its weight. The arc was too great. Before he could bring it back to line up on the target, a ball of white fire struck his hand.

Joshua howled at the flare of terrible pain as the pistol fell from his grip. No matter how vigorously he waved his arm the deadly white flame could not be dislodged from its grip around his fingers. Oily stinking smoke spouted out.

“Time to say goodbye to your life,” the smiling possessed said.

“Fuck you.”

He could hear the girls crying out behind him, the wails of their revulsion and horror. Shock was diminishing the pain in his hand slightly. He could feel the puke rising in his throat as more and more of his flesh charred. His whole right arm was stiffening. Somewhere behind his assailant a vast crowd of invisible people were whispering all at once. “No.” It wasn’t a coherent word, just a defiant grunt mangled by his contorted throat muscles. I will not submit to that. Never.

A cascade of water burst out of the corridor’s ceiling to the accompanying sound of a high-pitched siren. The edge of the lighting panels turned red and started to flash.

Shea was laughing with brittle hysteria as she withdrew her fist from the fire alarm panel. Dots of blood oozed up from her grazed knuckles. Joshua punched his own hand upwards, straight underneath a nozzle. He roared triumphantly. The white flame vanished in a gust of steam, and he collapsed down onto his knees, his whole body shaking violently.

The Arab regarded the three of them with a degree of aristocratic annoyance, as if any hint of defiance was unprecedented. Water splattered on his dark headgear, turning his robe translucent as it clung to his body.

Joshua raised his head against the icy torrent to snarl at his enemy. His right hand was dead now; a supreme crush of coldness had devoured his wrist. A few spittles of vomit emerged from his mouth before he managed to growl: "Okay, shithead, my turn."

The Arab frowned as Joshua reached into a pocket with his left hand and brought out Horst Elwes's small crucifix. He thrust it forwards.

"Holy Father, Lord of Heaven and the mortal world, in humility and obedience, I do ask Your aid in this act of sanctification, through Jesus the Christ who walked among us to know our failings, grant me Your blessing in this task."

"But I am a Sunni Muslim," the bemused Arab said.

"Eh?"

"A Muslim. I have no belief in your false Jewish prophet." He raised his arms, palms upwards. The deluge of water from the nozzles turned to snow. Every flake stuck to Joshua's ship-suit, smearing him in a coat of slush. Most of his skin was numb now.

"But I believe," Joshua ground out through vibrating teeth. And did. The revelation was as shocking as the cold and the pain. But he'd come to this moment of pure clarity through reason and ordeal. All he knew, all he'd seen, all he'd done; it spoke to him that there was order in the universe. Reality was too complex for chance evolution.

Medieval prophets were a convenient lie, but something had made sense out of the chaos which existed before time began. Something started time itself flowing.

"My Lord God, look upon this servant of Yours before me, fallen to a misguided and unclean spirit."

"Misguided?" The Arab glowered, trickles of static electricity crawling up his robes. "You brain-dead infidel! Allah is the only true—*ohshit*."

The serjeant fired, aiming for the Arab's head.

Joshua drooped limply onto the floor. "That's always how religious arguments end, isn't it?" He was only dimly conscious of the serjeant dragging him out of the downpour. His neural nanonics came back on line, and immediately started

erecting axon blockades. It was a different kind of numbness than the snow had brought, less severe. The serjeant wrapped a medical nanonic package around his hand. A stimulant program coaxed Joshua's brain back to full alertness. He blinked up at the three faces peering down at him. Kole and Shea were clinging together, both of them in a shambles, drenched and stupefied. The serjeant had taken a bad pounding, deep scorch marks crisscrossed its body, all-too-human blood was bubbling out from crusted wounds.

Joshua climbed slowly to his feet. He wanted to smile reassuringly at the girls, but the will just wasn't there. "Are you okay?" he asked the serjeant.

"I'm mobile."

"Good. What about you two, any damage?"

Shea shook her head timidly, Kole was still sobbing.

"Thanks for helping," he said to Shea. "That was fast thinking. I don't know what I would have done without the water. It was all a little bit too close for comfort. But we're through the worst now."

"Joshua," the serjeant said. "Dahybi says that three of the Capone Organization's warships have just arrived."

• • •

Seven Edenists in full body armour were guarding the docking ledge departure lounge. Monica was tremendously glad to see them. Along with Samuel, she'd been covering their retreat from the Terminal Terminus, no easy duty. There had been three encounters with the possessed on the way, and the shapeshifting magicians terrified her. Nerves and neural nanonics were hyped to the maximum. Never once had she given them the opportunity to surrender or back off. Locate and shoot, that was the way to do it. And she noticed that for all his worthiness and respect for life, Samuel was wired pretty much the same.

The lighting panels were flickering and dimming as the group rushed across the lounge towards the airlock door and the waiting crew bus outside. Monica waited until the airlock hatch slid shut before taking her combat programs off line. She flicked the machine gun's safety catch on, and

slowly pulled off her chameleon suit hood. The bus's cool air felt gloriously refreshing as it gusted over her sweat-soaked hair.

"Well, that was easy," she said.

The bus was rolling towards the *Hoya*, the last voidhawk left on the ledge. Nothing else moved on the shelf of smooth dark rock.

"Unfortunately, you might be right," Samuel said. He was bent over the unconscious form of Adok Dala, checking the boy with a sensor from a medical block. "Capone's ships are here."

"What?"

"Don't worry. The Duida Consensus has dispatched a squadron of voidhawks to support us. We are in little physical danger."

An inane impulse made Monica stare out through the bus's window in search of the Organization ships. She could barely make out the non-rotational spaceport, an eclipsed crescent with the funereal red mist of the disk swirling around its edges. "We're a long way from New California. Is this another invasion?"

"No, there are only three ships."

"Then why . . . Oh, God, you don't think he's looking for Mzu as well?"

"It is the most obvious possibility."

They reached the voidhawk, and the bus extended its airlock tube over the upper hull. Despite their situation, Monica glanced around curiously once she was on board. The crew toroid wasn't that much different from an Adamist starship's life-support capsule in terms of technology; it was a lot roomier, though. Samuel led her around the central corridor to the bridge and introduced her to Captain Niveu.

"My thanks to *Hoya*," she said, remembering her etiquette.

"Our pleasure, you have been performing a difficult job under extreme circumstances."

"Tell me about it. What's happening with the Capone ships?"

“They are accelerating down into the disk, though they have made no threatening moves. The squadron from the Duida habitats is here, we’re moving out to join them now. What happens next depends on the Capone ships.”

“We’re under way?” Monica asked. The gravity field was rock steady.

“Yes.”

“Are there any electronic sensors I can access?”

“Certainly.”

Monica’s neural nanonics received a datavise from the bridge’s bitek processor array. *Hoya* was already sliding up through the fringes of the disk, like a bird emerging from a rain cloud. Purple and green symbols outlined the three Capone Organization ships, half a million kilometres away, and heading in towards Ayacucho at a steady third of a gravity. The squadron of voidhawks was clustered together just outside the top of the disk.

“They’re not in any hurry,” Monica observed.

“They probably don’t wish to appear hostile,” Niveu said. “If it came to a battle with us they would lose.”

“Are you going to allow them to dock?”

Niveu glanced at Samuel.

“Consensus is undecided,” Samuel said. “We don’t have sufficient information yet. To attack them without reason is not an action we can undertake lightly.”

“They can’t be here on an assault mission,” Niveu said. “Ayacucho has almost fallen now, attacking it would be pointless. The asteroid’s new masters would probably welcome an alliance with Capone.”

“Destroying them now might be the best course for us all in the long run,” Monica said. “If they walk in, they’ll be able to squeeze every byte of data from Voi’s friends. And if Voi and Mzu didn’t get off, then we really are up shit creek.”

“Good point,” Samuel said. “We must find out what we can. Time to talk to our guest.”

• • •

Only Sarha, Beaulieu, and Dahybi were on the bridge when Joshua sailed through the floor hatch. He’d told the serjeants

to take both girls to capsule C where Melvyn, Liol, and Ashly were waiting in the sick bay.

Sarha's expression was a blend of anger and worry as he drifted past her acceleration couch. "God, Joshua!"

"I'm all right, really." He showed her the medical nanonic which had enveloped his right hand. "All under control."

She scowled as he moved away trailing droplets of cold water. A neat midair twist, and he was lying on his acceleration couch with the webbing folding over him.

"The net has gone completely," Dahybi said. "We can't monitor the asteroid's systems."

"It doesn't matter," Joshua said. "I know exactly what's happening in there. That's why we're leaving."

"Did the girl help?" Beaulieu asked.

"Not yet. I just want to get us clear first. Dahybi, are any of the voidhawks screwing around with our nodes?"

"No, Captain, we can jump."

"Good." Joshua optimistically ordered the flight computer to release the cradle clamps. He was rather pleased to see them disengage, some processors were still working back in the spaceport.

The chemical verniers fired, lifting them straight up out of the bay. Sarha winced as the drab metal wall slid past the tips of the sensor clusters, there was only about five metres clearance. But *Lady Mac* never wavered. As soon as they emerged from the bay Joshua cut the rockets, letting the starship fly free. The sensor clusters sank down into their jump recesses. An event horizon claimed the hull. They jumped half a light year. A second after they emerged energy flashed through the patterning nodes again. This time the jump was three light-years.

Joshua let out a juddering sigh.

Sarha, Beaulieu, and Dahybi looked at him. He was completely motionless, staring at the ceiling.

"Why don't you join the others in the sick bay?" Sarha said compassionately. "Your hand should be checked properly."

"I heard them, you know."

Sarha gave Dahybi an anxious look. The node specialist gave her a curt gesture with his hand.

“Heard who?” she asked. Her webbing peeled back, allowing her to haul herself over to Joshua. A stikpad at the side of his couch captured her feet.

He didn’t acknowledge her presence. “The souls in the beyond. Jesus, they’re real all right, they’re there waiting. One tiny act of weakness, that’s all it takes, and they’ve got you.”

Her fingers stroked his waterlogged hair. “They didn’t get you.”

“No. But they lie and lie about how they can help. I was angry, and stupid enough to think Horst’s damn cross would save me.” He held up the little crucifix and snorted at it. “Jesus, he was a Muslim.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense.”

He looked up at her with bloodshot eyes. “Sorry. They can hurt you very badly, you know. He’d only just started with my hand, that was a warm-up. I don’t know if I could have held out. I told myself I would, or at least that I wouldn’t give in. I think the only way to do that is to die.”

“But you didn’t give in, and you’re still alive, and it’s only you inside your skull. You won, Joshua.”

“Luck, and the tank is about empty.”

“It wasn’t luck you had three serjeants with you. It was healthy paranoia and good planning. You knew the possessed are extremely dangerous, and took it into account. And that’s what we’ll do again next time.”

He gave a nervous laugh. “If I can manage a next time. It’s quite something to look right down into the abyss and see what’s there waiting for you, one way or the other, as possessed or possessor.”

“We were up against it at Lalonde, and we’re still flying.”

“That was different, I was ignorant then. But now I know for sure. We’re going to die, and be condemned to live in the beyond. All of us. Every sentient entity in the universe.” His face screwed up in pain and anger. “Jesus, I can’t believe that’s all there is: life and purgatory. After tens of thousands

of years, the universe finally reveals that we have souls, and then we have the glory snatched right back and replaced with terror. There has to be something more, there *has* to be. He wouldn't do that to us."

"Who?"

"God, he, she, it, whatever. This torment, it's too . . . I don't know. Personal. Why the fuck build a universe that does this to people? If you're that powerful, why not make death final, or make everyone immortal? Why *this*? We have to know, have to find out why it works the way it does. That way we can know what the answer to all this is. We have to find something that's permanent, something which will last until the end of time."

"How do you propose to do that?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know," he snapped, then just as suddenly he was thoughtful again. "Maybe the Kiint. They say they've solved all this. They won't tell us outright, but they might at least point me in the right direction."

Sarha looked down at his intense expression in astonishment. Joshua taking life so seriously was strange, Joshua mounting a crusade was frankly astonishing. For one second she thought that he had been possessed after all. "You?" she blurted.

All the suffering and angst vanished from his angular face. The old Joshua swept back. He started chuckling. "Yeah, me. I might be catching religion a little late in life, but the born-again are always the most insufferable and devout."

"It's more than your hand which needs checking out in the sick bay."

"Thank you, my loyal crew." His restraint webbing parted, allowing him up. "But we're still going to ask the Kiint." He ordered the flight computer to run a full star track search and correlate their exact position. Then he ran an almanac search for Jobis's file.

"Right now?" Dahybi asked tartly. "You're going to throw away all you achieved on Ayacucho just like that?"

"Of course not," Joshua said smoothly.

“Good. Because if we don’t find Mzu and the Alchemist before the possessed do, there probably won’t be any Confederation left for you to save.”

• • •

Adok Dala returned to consciousness with a loud cry. He looked around fearfully at the *Hoya*’s sick bay. Not reassured by his surroundings. Not at all.

Samuel removed the medical nanonic package from the base of his neck. “Easy there. You’re quite safe, Adok. Nobody is going to hurt you here. And I must apologize for the way we treated you in the club, but you are rather important to us.”

“You’re not the possessed?”

“No. We’re Edenists. Well, apart from Monica, here; she’s from the Kulu Kingdom.”

Monica did her best to smile at the nervous boy.

“You’re foreign agents, then?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t tell you anything. I’m not helping you catch Mzu.”

“That’s very patriotic. But we’re not interested in Mzu. Frankly, we hope she got away clean. You see, the possessed are in charge of Ayacucho now.”

Adok moaned in distress, clamping his hand over his mouth.

“What we’d like to know about is Voi,” Samuel said.

“Voi?”

“Yes. Do you know where she is?”

“I haven’t seen her for days. She put us all on standby. It was silly, we had to organize the kids in the day clubs to kill spiders. She said Lodi figured out you were using them to spy on us.”

“Clever man, Lodi. Do you know where he is?”

“No. Not for a couple of days.”

“Interesting. How many are there in this group of yours?”

“About twenty, twenty-five. There’s no real list. We’re just friends.”

“Who started it?”

“Voi. She’d changed when she came out of detox. The genocide became a real cause for her. We just got sucked along by her. Everybody does when Voi gets serious about an issue.”

Monica datavised a request to her processor block, retrieving a memory image from the file she’d recorded at the Terminal Terminus. It had bothered her since the snatch. The last glimpse she had of Joshua Calvert showed him tugging a girl along. She showed the enhanced image to Adok. “Do you know her?”

He blinked blearily at the little screen. Whatever drugs Samuel had administered to loosen his tongue were making him drowsy. “That’s Shea. I like her, but . . .”

“Is she one of your group?”

“Not really, but she’s Prince Lambert’s girlfriend. He’s sort of a member; and she’s done a few things for us occasionally.”

Monica looked at Samuel. “What have we got on this Prince Lambert character?”

“A moment.” He consulted his bitek processor block. “He’s registered as a pilot for the *Tekas*, an executive yacht owned by his family corporation. Monica, it was one of the starships which left Ayacucho this afternoon.”

“Damn it!” She slammed her fist down on one of the cabinets beside Adok Dala’s couch. “Does Voi know Prince Lambert?”

Adok smiled blithely. “Yes. They used to be lovers. He was the reason she wound up in detox.”

Do you have a jump coordinate for the *Tekas*? Samuel asked Niveu.

No. It flew outside our mass perception range. None of the voidhawks registered its jump. But we do have the flight vector. It was an odd course, the ship was heading back down to the disk when it passed beyond us. If it didn’t perform any drastic realignment manoeuvres there are three possible stars it could have flown to: Shikoku, Nyvan, and Torrox.

Thank you. We’ll check them.

Of course. I'll inform Duida's defence command. We'll leave immediately.

• • •

Shea had changed into a grey ship-suit when Joshua floated into the sickbay. She was talking quietly to Liol, but broke off to give him a shy grin. Ashly and Melvyn were busy packing equipment away. One of the serjeants held on to a grab hoop just inside the hatch.

"How are you feeling?" Joshua asked her.

"Fine. Ashly gave me a tranquillizer. I think it helps."

"I wish he'd give me one."

Her grin brightened. "Is your hand very bad?"

He held it up. "Most of the bone is intact, but I'm going to need some clone vat tissue to build the fingers up. The package can't regenerate quite that much."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Tranquillity will pay for it," he said, straight-faced. "Where's Kole?"

"Zero-tau," Melvyn said.

"Good idea."

"Do you want me to go in as well?" Shea asked.

"Up to you. But I need some help before you decide."

"From me?"

"Yes. Let me explain. Contrary to everything the news studios were saying, I'm not a foreign agent."

"I know that, you're Lagrange Calvert."

Joshua smiled. "I knew it would come in useful one day. The thing is, we are looking for Alkad Mzu, but not because of any Omutan propaganda."

"Why then?"

He took her hand in his, squeezing emphatically. "There is a reason, Shea, it's a good reason, but not a very nice one. I'll tell you if you really want to know; because if you're anything like the person I think you are, you'd help us find her if you knew what's actually going on. But if you'll trust me on this, you don't want to know. It's up to you."

"Are you going to kill her?" she asked sheepishly.

"No."

“Promise?”

“I promise. We just want to take her back to Tranquillity where she’s been living since the genocide. As prisons go, it isn’t bad. And if we can get to her in time, it’ll save an awful lot of people. Maybe an entire planet.”

“She’s going to drop a planet-buster on Omuta, isn’t she?”

“Something like that.”

“I thought so,” she said in a tiny voice. “But I don’t know where she is.”

“I think you do. You see, we believe she’s with Voi.”

“Oh, *her*.” Shea’s face darkened.

“Yes, *her*. I’m sorry, this sounds painful for you. I didn’t realize.”

“She and Prince Lambert had a thing. He still . . . well, he’d go back to her if she’d have him.”

“This Prince Lambert is your boyfriend, the starship captain?”

“Yes.”

“Which ship?”

“The *Tekas*.”

“And it left Ayacucho today?”

“Yes. Do you really think Alkad Mzu was on board?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Is he going to be in trouble with the authorities?”

“I couldn’t care less about him. I just want to locate Mzu. Once I’ve done that, once she knows I’m on her tail and watching every move, the threat will be neutered. She’ll have to come back with me then. Now, are you going to tell me where the *Tekas* went?”

“I’m sorry, I wish I could help, but he wouldn’t tell me where they were going.”

“Shit!”

“P.L. is flying the *Tekas* to Nyvan,” Liol said. He looked around inquiringly at the startled faces. “Did I say something wrong?”

“How the bloody hell do you know where he was going?” Joshua demanded.

“P.L.’s a good friend of mine; we grew up together. Quantum Serendipity has the contract to service the *Tekas*. He’s not the most experienced pilot, and Voi had given him a very odd manoeuvre to fly. So I helped him program the flight vector.”

21

André Duchamp had half expected to be shot at by the Ethenthia asteroid's SD platforms when the *Villeneuve's Revenge* jumped into its dedicated emergence zone three thousand kilometres away. He certainly had a lot of explaining to do to the local defence command, followed up by testimony from the rover reporters. When he did finally receive docking permission he assumed the famed Duchamp forcefulness and integrity had won through again.

What actually happened was that while he was busy claiming to be a defector from the Capone Organization, Erick opened a channel to the local Confederation Navy Bureau and asked them to press the local authority for clearance. Even so, the authorities were extremely cautious. Three SD platforms were locked on to the *Villeneuve's Revenge* as it approached the spaceport.

The security teams which ransacked the life-support capsules in search of treachery were exceptionally thorough. André put on a brave face as composite panels were split open and equipment modules broken down into component parts for high-definition scanning. The cabins hadn't exactly been in optimum shape before. It would take weeks to re-assemble the trashed fittings to comply with even the minimum of CAB flight-worthiness requirements.

But Kingsley Pryor was hauled away by the emotionless officers from an unnamed division of the defence forces. A big credit bonus to the intrepid crew who had outsmarted Capone.

The only possible flaw was Shane Brandes. So the *Dechal's* fusion engineer was brought out of zero-tau while

they were still on the approach phase and given a simple ultimatum: cooperate or you're going to be a dead crewman who we're in mourning over. He chose cooperation; explaining to the Ethenthia authorities why they'd abducted him in the first place would have been a little too confusing, he felt.

Thirteen hours after they docked, the last of Ethenthia's security officers departed. André gazed around lugubriously at his bridge. The consoles were little more than open grids of processor boards; walls and decking had been stripped down to the bare metal; environmental ducts were making stressed whining sounds, and dirty condensation was building up on every surface.

"We did it." His clown face exhibited a genuine smile as he looked from Erick, to Madeleine, and finally Desmond. "We're home free."

Madeleine and Desmond began to chuckle, sharing the realization. They really had come through.

"I have a few bottles in my cabin," André said. "If those thieving scum *anglo* police haven't stolen them. We must celebrate. Ethenthia is as good a place as any to sit out this war. We can keep busy with some proper maintenance. I'm sure I can get the insurance to pay for some of this wreckage; after all, we're war heroes now. Who will argue, eh?"

"Tina might," Erick said.

The flatness in the voice dispelled André's smile. "Tina who?"

"The girl we killed on the *Krystal Moon*. Murdered, actually."

"Oh, Erick. Dear *enfant*. You are tired. You have done more work than most."

"Certainly more than you. But what's new there?"

"Erick," Desmond said. "Come now, it has been a terrible time for all of us. Perhaps we should get some rest before we decide what to do next."

"Good suggestion. I admit I haven't quite made up my mind what to do with you yet."

"What *you* are going to do with us?" André asked indig-

nantly. "I think your medical modules are malfunctioning; your brain is being fed the wrong chemicals. Come, we will go to bed, and in the morning none of this will be mentioned again."

"Shut up, you pompous geek," Erick said. It was the contemptuous indifference of the voice which shocked André into silence.

"My problem is that I owe Madeleine and Desmond my life," Erick went on. "But then, if you hadn't been such an asshole, Duchamp, none of us would ever have been put in the crazy position we were. That's the kind of hazard I have to accept when I take on missions like this."

"Missions?" André didn't like the cold passion which had suddenly overtaken his crewman.

"Yes, I'm an undercover officer in the CNIS."

"Oh, fuck," Madeleine grunted helplessly. "Erick . . . Shit, I liked you."

"Yeah. That's my problem, too. I'm in a little bit deeper than I ever expected. We made a good team fighting the possessed."

"So now what?" she asked numbly. "A penal colony?"

"After everything we went through, I'm prepared to make you an offer. I owe you that, I think."

"What sort of offer?" André asked.

"An exchange. You see, I'm your case officer, I'm the one who decides if the Service prosecutes, I'm the one who provides the evidence that we attacked the *Krystal Moon* and killed a fifteen-year-old girl because you're such an incompetent captain you can't keep up the payments on a ship that isn't worth ten fuseodollars."

"Ah! Of course, money is no problem, my dear *enfant*. I can mortgage the ship, it will be done for you by tomorrow. What currency do you—"

"*Shut up!*" Madeleine bellowed. "Just shut the fuck up, Duchamp. What is it, Erick? What's he got to do? Because whatever it is, he's going to do it with a big smile on his fat stupid face."

"I want to know something, Duchamp," Erick said. "And

I think you can tell me. In fact, I'm sure you can. Because it's information which only the vilest, most deceitful pieces of shit in the galaxy are entrusted with." He drifted over until he was centimetres from the captain. Duchamp had started to tremble.

"What is the coordinate of the antimatter station, André?" he asked softly. "I know you know."

André blanched. "I . . . I cannot. Not that."

"Oh, really? Do you know why the Confederation is so unsuccessful in finding antimatter production stations, Madeleine?" Erick asked. "It's because we can't use debrief nanonics on people we suspect of knowing where they are. Nor can we use drugs, or even torture. It's their neural nanonics, you see. The price of learning a station's coordinate is a very special set of neural nanonics. The black cartel supplies them absolutely free of charge. Top-of-the-range, whatever marque you like, but always with one small modification. If they detect the owner is being subjected to any form of interrogation, such as debrief nanonics, they kamikaze. The only way the coordinate is passed on is voluntarily. So what is it, Duchamp?"

"They'll kill me," André whimpered. He made to reach out and clasp Erick's shoulder, but his hand fisted just before contact and drew back. "Did you not hear? They'll kill me!"

"Fucking tell him!" Madeleine shouted.

"*Non.*"

"It won't be a penal colony after the trial," Erick said. "We'll take you away to a quiet little laboratory deep in Trafalgar, and try and see if this time we can beat the kamikaze mechanism."

"They'll know. They always find out. Always!"

"One of the stations is supplying Capone with antimatter. That means the cartel has already lost it to the possessed, so they're not going to care. And what about you? Do you care, do you want Capone to keep winning? And if he does beat us, what do you think he'll do with you when he finally catches up with you?"

"But suppose the station I know of isn't the one?"

“The only good antimatter station is one which has been destroyed. Now what’s it going to be? The CNIS lab? The cartel? Capone? Or do I load a no further action code in your file? Make your mind up.”

“I despise you, *anglo*. I want your precious Confederation to die right in front of you. I want your entire family possessed and made to fuck animals. I want your soul trapped in the beyond for all time. Only then will I have justice for what you and your kind have done to me and my life.”

“The coordinate, Duchamp,” Erick said impassively.

André datavised the star’s almanac file over.

• • •

Lieutenant Commander Emonn Verona, the CNIS’s head of station on Ethenthia, sat behind his desk and stared at Erick in what was almost a state of reverence. “You have the name of the next system Capone intends to invade, *and* an antimatter station coordinate?”

“Yes, sir. According to Pryor, Capone is going to send his fleet to the Toi-Hoi system.”

“Good God. If we can ambush that fleet, we’ve got the bastard cold. He’ll be finished.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right. This bureau’s only goal now is to get your information back to Trafalgar. There aren’t any navy ships stationed here; I’m going to have to signal the Edenist habitats orbiting Golmo and request some voidhawks. That’s fifteen light-hours away.” He eyed the exhausted captain whose skin seemed to be half nanonic packages; the medical ancillary modules fastened to his belt had several orange LEDs winking on them. “We ought to have a voidhawk here within sixteen hours. That’ll give you some time to have a decent rest first.”

“Thanks. All of us got pretty strung out searching the ship for that nuke.”

“I’ll bet. Are you sure you want to drop the charges against Duchamp?”

“Not really. But I gave my word, even though that means nothing to a man like him. Besides, he knows the navy has

a file on him now, he knows we'll be watching him, he'll never trust another crew member again. He'll never be able to fly another illegal flight again. And given the state of that ship, and his own abilities, he isn't going to be able to make enough from legal charters to keep going. The banks will take the *Villeneuve's Revenge* off him. For someone like him, that's worse than a penal colony or the death sentence."

"I hope I never get you at my court-martial," Emonn Verona said.

"He deserves it."

"I know. What do you want to do about Pryor?"

"Where is he now?"

"He's being remanded in custody. There are any number of charges we can bring. I can't believe a Confederation Navy officer turned like that."

"It will be interesting to find out the reason. I think there's a lot more to Kingsley Pryor than we know. The best course would be for me to take him back to Trafalgar. He can be debriefed properly there."

"Okay. I'm going to step up security around the bureau, and I don't want you to leave it until the voidhawk arrives. There's a spare office you can use to sleep in, my executive officer will show you. And I'll organize a medical team to examine you before you depart."

"Thank you, sir." Erick stood up, saluted, and walked out.

Emonn Verona had been fifteen years in the navy, and undercover officers like Erick Thakrar still unnerved him.

The office light panel dimmed for a few seconds, then flickered annoyingly up to its full brightness. Emonn Verona gave it a resigned glare: the damn thing had been getting worse for a couple of days now. He made a note in his neural nanonics general file to get an engineer in once Thakrar was safely on his way.

• • •

Right from the start, Gerald Skibbow had disliked asteroid settlements. They were worse than an arcology; the corridors were claustrophobic, while the biosphere caverns had a

forced grandeur which lessened them considerably. Those initial impressions had come from Pinjarra, where the *Quadin* had left him.

It hadn't taken long, even for someone as ingenuous as himself, to find out that despite the quarantine, non-governmental cargoes were still arriving at Pinjarra from outsystem. They didn't arrive on starships, though, *Quadin* was virtually the only one docked to the asteroid's spaceport, the rest were inter-orbit craft. Hours spent in the bars which their crews used gave him an outline of the operation, and a name: Koblat. An asteroid which was open to quarantine-busting flights, acting as a distribution hub for the Trojan cluster. A berth on an inter-orbit ship returning empty cost him five thousand fuseodollars.

It was the starships Gerald wanted, whose captains might conceivably accept a charter to Valisk. He had money in his Jovian Bank credit disk; so perhaps it was his manner which caused them all to shake their heads and turn their backs on him. He knew he was too anxious, too insistent, too desperate. He'd made progress in controlling the extremes of his behaviour; there were fewer tantrums when his requests were refused, and he really tried to remember to wash and shave and find clean clothes. But still the captains rejected him. Perhaps they could see the ghosts and demons dancing inside his head. They didn't understand. It was Marie they were condemning, not him.

This time he had come very close to screaming at the captain as she made a joke of his pleas. Very close to raising his fists, to punching the truth and the need into her.

Then she had looked into his eyes and realized the danger caged in there, and her smile had emptied away. Gerald knew the barman was watching closely, one hand under the bar to grip whatever it was he used to quell trouble. There was a long moment spent looking down at the captain as silence rippled out from her table to claim the Blue Fountain. He took the time to think the way Dr Dobbs said he should, to focus on goals and the proper way to achieve them, how

to make himself calm when his thoughts were febrile with rage.

The possibility of violence passed. Gerald turned and made for the door. Outside, naked rock pressed in on him, creating a sense of suffocation. There were too few light panels in the corridor. Hologram signs and low-wattage AV projections tried to entice him into other clubs and bars. He shuffled past, reaching the warren of smaller corridors which served the residential section. He thought his rented room was close, the signs at every intersection were confusing, numbers and letters jumbled together; he wasn't used to them yet. Voices rumbled down the corridor, male laughs and jeers, the tone was unpleasant. They were coming from the junction ahead. Dim shadows moved on the walls. He almost stopped and turned around. Then he heard the girl's cry, angry and fearful at the same time. He wanted to run away. Violence frightened him now. The possessed seemed to be at the heart of all conflicts, all evil. It would be best to leave, to call others to help. The girl cried out again, cursing. And Gerald thought of Marie, and how lonely and afraid she must have been when the possessed claimed her. He edged forwards, and glanced around the corner.

At first, Beth had been furious with herself. She prided herself on how urban-wise she was. Koblat might be small, but that didn't mean it had much community spirit. There were only the company cops to keep order; and they didn't much bother unless they'd had their bung. The corridors could get tough. Men in their twenties, the failed rebels who now had nothing in front of them but eighty years work for the company, went together in clans. They had their own turf, and Beth knew which corridors they were, where you didn't go at any time.

She hadn't been expecting any trouble when the three young men walked down the corridor towards her. She was only twenty metres from her apartment, and they were in company overalls, some kind of maintenance crew. Not a clan, nor mates coming back from a clubbing session. Mr Regulars.

The first one whistled admiringly when they were a few metres away. So she gave them the standard blank smile and moved over to one side of the corridor. Then one of them groaned and pointed at her ankle. "Christ, she's wearing one too, a deadie."

"Are ya gay, doll? Fancy giving that Kiera one, do ya? Me too."

They all laughed harshly. Beth tried to walk past. A hand caught her arm. "Where you going, doll?"

She attempted to pull herself free, but he was too strong.

"Valisk? Going to shag Kiera? We not good enough for you here? You got something against your own kind?"

"Let go!" Beth started to struggle. More hands grabbed her. She lashed out with her free arm, but it was no good. They were bigger, older, stronger.

"Little cow."

"She's got some fight in her."

"Hold the bitch. Take that arm."

Her arms were forced behind her back, holding her still. The man in front of her grinned slowly as she twisted about. He grabbed her hair suddenly and pushed her head back. Beth flinched, very near to losing it. His face was centimetres from hers, triumphant eyes gloating.

"Gonna take you home with us," he breathed. "We'll straighten you out good and proper, doll; you won't want girls again, not after we've finished with you."

"Fuck off!" Beth screamed. She kicked out. But he caught her leg and shoved it high into the air.

"Dumb slut." He tugged at the knot which held the red handkerchief around her ankle. "Reckon this might come in useful, guys. She's got a mouth on her."

"You . . . you just bloody well leave her alone."

All four of them stared at the speaker.

Gerald stood in the corridor's junction, his grey ship-suit wrinkled and dirty, hair ruffled, three days of beard shading his face. Even more alarming than the nervejam stick he was pointing at them in a two-handed grip was the way it shook.

He was blinking as if he were having great difficulty focusing.

“Whoa there, fella,” the man holding Beth’s leg said. “Let’s not get excited here.”

“*Get away from her!*” The nervejam stick juddered violently.

Beth’s leg was hurriedly dropped. The hands let go of her arms. Her three would-be rapists began to back off down the corridor. “We’re going, okay? You got this all wrong, fella.”

“Leave! I know what you are. You’re part of it. You’re part of them. You’re helping them.”

The three men were retreating fast. Beth looked at the unstable nervejam stick and the persecuted face behind it, and almost felt like joining them. She tried to get her breathing back under control.

“Thanks, mate,” she said.

Gerald sucked on his lower lip and gradually slid down the wall until he was squatting on his heels. The nervejam stick dropped from his fingers.

“Hey, you okay?” Beth hurried forwards.

Gerald looked up at her with a pathetically placid face and started whimpering.

“Jeeze—” She looked around to make certain her assailants had gone, then hunkered down beside him. Something made her hold back from making a grab for the nervejam. She was desperately uncertain what he’d do. “Listen, they’ll probably come back in a minute. Where do you live?”

Tears started streaming down from his eyes. “I thought you were Marie.”

“No such luck mate, I’m Beth. Is this your corridor?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, do you live near here?”

“Help me please, I have to get to her, and Loren’s left me here all alone. I don’t know what to do next. I really don’t.”

“You’re not the only one,” Beth grunted.

• • •

“Well who is he?” Jed asked.

Gerald was sitting at the dining-room table in Beth’s

apartment, staring at the mug of tea he was holding. It was a pose he'd maintained for the last ten minutes.

"Says his name's Gerald Skibbow," Beth said. "Reckon he's telling the truth."

"Okay. How about you? You all right now?"

"Yeah. Those manky bastards got a real fright. Don't reckon we'll be seeing them again."

"Good. You know, we might be better off if we stop wearing our handkerchiefs. People are getting real uptight about it."

"What? No way! Not now. It says what I am: a Deadnight. If they can't stomach that, it ain't my problem."

"It nearly was."

"It won't happen again." She held up the nervejam and gave a brutish smirk.

"Jeeze. Is that his?"

"Yep. Said I could borrow it."

Jed regarded Gerald in dismayed confusion. "Blimey. Bloke must be pretty far gone."

"Hey." She tapped his belly with the tip of the nervejam. "Watch what you're saying. Maybe he's a little cranky, but he's my mate."

"A *little* cranky? Look at him, Beth, the guy's a walking dunny." He saw the way she tensed up. "Okay. He's your mate. What are you going to do with him?"

"He'll have a room somewhere."

"Yeah, a nice quiet one with lots of padding on the walls."

"Quit that, will you. How much you've changed, huh? We're supposed to be wanting a life where people don't jump down each other's throats the whole time. Least, that's what I thought. Am I wrong?"

"No," he grumbled. Beth these days was hard to understand. Jed had thought she'd appreciate the fact he wasn't making moves on her anymore. If anything that had made her even more intractable. "Hey, look don't worry. My head'll get straightened when we reach Valisk."

Gerald slewed around in his chair. "What did you say?"

“Hey, mate, thought you’d gone switch-off on us there,” Beth said. “How you feeling?”

“What did you say about Valisk?”

“We want to go there,” Jed said. “We’re Deadnights, see. We believe in Kiera. We want to be part of the new universe.”

Gerald stared at him, then gave a twisted giggle. “Believe her? She’s not even Kiera.”

“You’re just like all the others. You don’t want us to have a chance just because you blew yours. That stinks, man!”

“Wait wait.” Gerald held up his arms in placation. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were a Deadnight. I don’t know what Deadnights are.”

“It’s what she said, that Kiera: *Those of us who have emerged from the dead of night can break the restrictions of this corrupt society.*”

“Oh, right, that bit.”

“She’s going to take us away from all this,” Beth said. “Where arseholes like those three blokes don’t do what they did. Not anymore. There won’t be any of that in Valisk.”

“I know,” Gerald said solemnly.

“What? You taking the piss?”

“No. Honestly. I’ve been searching for a way to Valisk ever since I saw the recording. I came here all the way from Ombey on the one hope that I’d find a way. I thought one of the starships might take me.”

“No way, mate,” Jed said. “Not the starships. We tried. The captains have all got closed minds. I told you, they hate us.”

“Yes.”

Jed glanced at Beth, trying to judge what she thought, if he should risk it. “You must have quite a bit of money, you come here from Ombey,” he said.

“More than enough to charter a starship,” Gerald said bitterly. “But they just won’t listen to me.”

“You don’t need a starship.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you how to get to Valisk if you take us with you.

It's ten times cheaper than the way you were planning, but we still can't put that much together ourselves. As you've got to charter a whole ship for the flight anyway, it won't cost you any more for us to be on board."

"All right."

"You'll take us?"

"Yes."

"Promise?" Beth asked, her voice betraying a multitude of vulnerabilities.

"I promise, Beth. I know what it's like to be let down, to be abandoned. I wouldn't do that to anyone, least of all you."

She shifted around uncomfortably, rather pleased by what he'd said, the fatherly way he'd said it. Nobody on Koblat ever spoke to her like that.

"Okay," Jed said. "Here it is: I've got a pickup coordinate timetable for this system." He took a flek from his pocket and slotted it in the desktop block. The block's holoscreen flashed up a complex graphic. "This shows where and when a starship from Valisk will be waiting to take on anyone who wants to go there. All you have to do is charter an inter-orbit craft to get us to it."

• • •

As always, Syrinx found Athene's house relaxing. No doubt Wing-Tsit Chong and the psychological team would call it a return to the womb. And if she found that amusing, she told herself, she must be virtually recovered.

She had returned from Jobis two days earlier. After relating everything she had learned from Malva to Wing-Tsit Chong, *Oenone* had flown to Romulus and a berth in an industrial station.

I suppose I ought to be glad you're flying courier duty for our intelligence service, Athene said. The doctors must think you're recovered.

And you don't? Syrinx was walking with her mother across the garden which seemed to grow shaggier with each passing year.

If you're not sure yourself, how can I be, my dear?

Syrinx grinned, somehow cheered by the uncanny perception. **Oh, Mother, don't fuss. Work is always a great anodyne, especially if you love your work. Voidhawk captains do nothing else.**

I want us flying missions together again, *Oenone* insisted. It is good for both of us.

For a moment, mother and daughter were aware of the gridwork surrounding *Oenone*. Technicians were busy working on the lower hull, installing combat wasp launch cradles, maser cannons, and military-grade sensor pods.

Ah well, Athene said. Looks like I'm outvoted.

I'll be all right, Mother, really. Going straight into the defence force would be a little too confrontational. But courier work is important. We have to act with unity against the possessed; that's vital. Voidhawks have an important role to play in that.

I'm not the one you're trying to convince.

Jesus, Mother. Everyone I know is mutating into a psychiatrist. I'm a big girl now, and my brain's back in good enough shape to make decisions.

Jesus?

Oh. Syrinx could feel the blush rising to her cheeks—only Mother could do that! Someone I met always used it as an expletive. I just thought it was appropriate these days.

Ah, yes. Joshua Calvert. Or Lagrange Calvert, as everyone calls him now. You had quite a thing about him, once, didn't you?

I did not! And why is he called Lagrange Calvert?

Syrinx listened with growing incredulity as Athene explained the events which had occurred in orbit around Murora. **Oh, no, fancy Edenism having to be grateful to him. And what a stupid stunt jumping inside a Lagrange point at that velocity. He could have killed everybody on board. How thoughtless.**

Dear me, it must be love.

Mother!

Athene laughed in delight at being able to needle her

daughter so successfully. They'd come to the first of the big lily ponds which verged one side of the garden. It was heavily shaded now; the rank of golden yews behind it had swelled considerably in the last thirty years, their boughs reaching right across the water. She looked into the black water. Bronze-coloured fish streaked for the cover of the lily pads.

You ought to get the servitor chimps to prune the yews, Syrinx said. They steal too much light. There are far fewer lilies than there used to be.

Why not see what happens naturally?

It's untidy. And a habitat isn't natural.

You never did like losing arguments, did you?

Not at all. I'm always willing to listen to alternative viewpoints.

A burst of good-humoured scepticism filled the affinity band. **Is that why you're turning to religion all of a sudden? I always thought you would be the most susceptible.**

What do you mean?

Remember when Wing-Tsit Chong called you a tourist?

Yes.

It was a polite way of saying that you lack the confidence in yourself to find your own answers to life. You are always searching, Syrinx, though you never know what for. Religion was inevitably going to exert a fascination on you. The whole concept of salvation through belief offers strength to those who doubt themselves.

There's a big difference between religion and spirituality. That is something the Edenist culture is going to have to come to terms with; us, the habitats, and the voidhawks.

Yes, you're uncomfortably right there. I have to admit I was rather pleased to know that Iasius and I will be reunited again, no matter how terrible the circumstances. It does make life more tolerable.

That's one aspect. I was thinking more about transfer-

ring our memories into the habitat when we die. It forms the basis of our entire society. We never feared death as much as Adamists, which always strengthened our rationality. Now we know we're destined to the beyond, it rather makes a mockery of the whole process. Except—

Go on.

Laton, damn him. What did he mean? Him and his great journey, and telling us that we don't have to worry about being trapped in the beyond. And then Malva as good as confirmed he was telling the truth.

You think that's a bad thing?

No. If we're interpreting this properly, there is more to the beyond than eternal purgatory. That would be wondrous.

I agree.

Then why didn't he tell us exactly what awaits? And why would it only be us who escape the entrapment, and not the Adamists?

Perhaps Malva was being more helpful than you realized when she told you the answer lies within us. If you were told, you would not have found it for yourself. You wouldn't have known it, you would simply have been taught.

It had to be Laton, didn't it? The one person we can never truly trust.

Even you can't trust him?

Not even I; despite the fact I owe him my life. He's Laton, Mother.

Perhaps that's why he didn't tell us. He knew we wouldn't trust him. He did urge us to research this thoroughly.

And so far we've failed thoroughly.

We've only just started, Syrinx. And he gave us one clue, the kind of souls that have returned. You encountered them, darling, you have the most experience of them. What type are they?

Bastards. All of them.

Calm down, and tell me what they were like.

Syrinx smiled briefly at the reprimand, then gazed at the pink water lilies, trying to make herself remember Pernik. Something she still shied away from. **I was being truthful. They really were bastards. I didn't see that many. But none of them cared about me, about how much they were hurting me. It didn't bother them, as if they were emotionally dead. I suppose being in the beyond for so long does that to them.**

Not quite. Kelly Tirrel recorded a series of interviews with a possessed called Shaun Wallace. He wasn't callous, or indifferent. If anything he seemed a rather sad individual.

Sad bastards, then.

You're being too flippant. But consider this. How many Edenists are sad bastards?

No, Mother, I can't accept that. You're saying that there's some kind of selection process involved. That something is imprisoning sinners in the beyond and letting the righteous go on this final journey into the light. That cannot be right. You're saying there is a God. One that takes an overwhelming interest in every human being, that cares how we behave.

I suppose I am. It would certainly explain what's happened.

No it doesn't. Why was Laton allowed to go on the great journey?

He wasn't. Souls and memory separate at death, remember? It was Laton's personality operating within Pernik's neural strata that freed you and warned us, not his soul.

Do you really believe this?

I'm not sure. As you say, a God who takes this much interest in us as individuals would be awesome. Athene turned from the pool and slipped her arm through her daughter's. I think I'll keep hoping for another explanation.

Good!

Let's hope you find it for me.

Me?

You're the one gallivanting around the galaxy again. It gives you a much better chance than me.

All we're going to do is pick up routine reports from embassies and agents about possible infiltrations by the possessed, and how local governments are coping with the problem. Tactics and politics, that's all, not philosophy.

How very dull-sounding. She pulled Syrinx a little closer, allowing the worry and concern in her mind to flow freely through affinity. **Are you sure you're going to be all right?**

Yes, Mother. *Oenone* and the crew will take good care of me. I don't want you to worry anymore.

• • •

When Syrinx had left to supervise the last stages of *Oenone's* refit, Athene sat in her favourite chair on the patio and attempted to involve herself in the household routine again. There were plenty of children to supervise at the moment, the adults were all away working long hours, mainly in support of the defence force. Jupiter and Saturn were both gearing up for the Mortonridge Liberation.

You shouldn't try to hold her so tight, Sinon said. It doesn't help her confidence seeing you have so little in her.

I have every confidence, she bridled.

Then show it. Let go.

I'm too frightened.

We all are. But we should be free to face it by ourselves.

How do you feel, then, knowing your soul has gone on?

Curious.

That's all?

Yes. I already exist in tandem with the others of the multiplicity. The beyond is not too different from that.

You hope!

One day we will know.

Let's pray it's later rather than sooner.

Like daughter, like mother.

I don't think I need a priest right now. More like a stiff drink.

Sinner. He laughed.

She watched the shadows deepen under the trees as the light tube enacted a rose-gold dusk. "There can't be a God, can there? Not really."

• • •

He doesn't look terribly happy, Tranquillity said as Prince Noton stepped into one of the ten tube stations which served the hub.

Ione pivoted her perceptual viewpoint through a complete circle, as if she were walking around the Prince. She was intrigued by his air of stubborn dignity, the kind of face and body posture that indicated he knew he was old and outdated but still insisted on interpreting the universe the way he wanted to. He wore the dress uniform of a Royal Kulu Navy admiral, with five small medal pins on his chest. When he removed his cap to climb into the tube carriage there was little hair left, and that grey; a telling sign for a Saldana.

I wonder how old he is? she mused.

A hundred and seventy. He is King David's youngest exowomb sibling. He ran the Kulu Corporation for a hundred and three years until Prince Howard took over in 2608.

How strange. Her attention flicked back to the Royal Kulu Navy battle cruiser docked in the spaceport (the first active duty ship from the Kingdom in a hundred and seventy-nine years). A diplomatic mission of the highest urgency, its captain had said when he requested permission to approach. And Prince Noton had an entourage of five Foreign Office personnel. **He's part of the old order. We're hardly likely to have anything in common. If Alastair wants something from me, surely someone younger would have been a better bet? Maybe even a Princess.**

Possibly. Though it would be hard not to respect

Prince Noton. His seniority is part of the message the King is sending.

For a moment she felt a twist of worry. **I wonder. If anyone knows your true capabilities, it is my royal cousins. I doubt he will ask anything dishonourable.**

Ione had to jog down the last twenty metres of the corridor, fumbling with the seal on the side of her skirt. She had chosen a formal business suit of green tropical weave cotton and a plain blouse; smart but not imperious. Trying to impress Prince Noton with power dressing, she suspected, would be a waste of time.

The tube carriage had already arrived at the station of De Beauvoir Palace, her official residence. Two serjeants were escorting the Prince and his entourage down the long nave. Ione raced across the audience chamber in her stockinged feet, sat behind the central desk, and jammed her shoes on.

How do I look?

Beautiful.

She growled at the lack of objectivity and combed her hair back with a hand. **I knew I should have had this cut.** She glanced around to check the arrangements. Six high-backed chairs were positioned in front of the desk. Human caterers were preparing a buffet in one of the informal reception rooms (housechimps would have been a faux pas given the Kingdom's attitude to bitek, she felt). **Change the lighting.**

Half of the floor-to-ceiling panes of glass darkened; the remainder altered their diffraction angle. Ten large planes of light converged on the desk, surrounding her in a warm astral glow. **Too much—oh, hell.**

The doors swung open. Ione rose to her feet as Prince Noton walked across the floor.

Go around the desk to greet him. Remember you are family, and technically there has never been any rift between us and the Kingdom.

Ione did as she was told, putting on a neutral smile: one she could turn to charm or ice. It was up to him.

When she put out her hand, there was only the slightest

hesitation on Prince Noton's part. He gave her a politely formal handshake. His eyes did linger on her signet ring, though.

"Welcome to Tranquillity, Prince Noton. I'm very flattered that Alastair should honour me with an emissary of your seniority. I only wish we were meeting in happier times."

The staff from the Foreign Office were staring ahead rigidly. If she didn't know better she would have said they were praying.

Prince Noton took an awkwardly long time to answer. "It is a privilege to serve my King by coming here."

Ah! "Touché, cousin," she drawled.

They locked gazes while the Foreign Office staff watched nervously.

"You had to be female, didn't you?"

"Naturally, though it was completely random. Daddy never had any exowomb children. Our family tradition of primogeniture doesn't apply here."

"You hate tradition so much?"

"No, I admire a lot of tradition. I *uphold* a lot of tradition. What I will not tolerate is tradition for tradition's sake."

"Then you must be in your element. Order is falling across the Confederation."

"That, Noton, was below the belt."

He nodded gruffly. "Sorry. I don't know why the King chose me for this. Never was a bloody diplomat."

"I don't know, I think he chose rather well, actually. Sit down, please." She went back to her own chair. Tranquillity showed her the Foreign Office personnel exchanging relieved expressions behind her back. "So what exactly does Alastair want?"

"These fellers." Prince Noton clicked his finger in the direction of a serjeant. "I'm supposed to ask you if we can have their DNA sequence."

"Whatever for?"

"Ombey."

She listened with dawning unease as Prince Noton and

the Foreign Office personnel related the details of the proposed Mortonridge Liberation. **Do you think this will work?**

I don't have the kind of information available to the Royal Navy, so I cannot provide an absolute. But the Royal Navy would not undertake such an action unless they were confident of the outcome.

I can't believe this is the right way to go about saving people who have been possessed. They're going to destroy Mortonridge, and a lot of people will get killed in the process.

Nobody ever claimed war is clean.

Then why do it?

For the overall objective, which is usually political. Certainly it is in this case.

So I can halt it then? If I refuse to give Alastair the sequence.

You can be the voice of sanity, certainly. Who would thank you?

The people who wouldn't get killed, for a start.

Who are the people currently possessed, and would endure any sacrifice to be freed. They do not have the luxury of your academic moral choices.

That's not fair. You can't condemn me for wanting to prevent bloodshed.

Unless you can offer an alternative, I would recommend handing over the sequence. Even if you prevaricated, you would not halt the liberation campaign. At the most you would delay it for a few weeks while the Edenists spliced together a suitable warrior servitor.

You know damn well I don't have any alternative.

This is politics, lone; you cannot prevent the liberation from going ahead. By helping, you will form valuable alliances. Do not overlook that. You are pledged to defend all those who live within me. We may need help to do this.

No we don't. You alone of all the habitats are the final sanctuary against the possessed.

Even that is not definite. Prince Noton is correct: old orders, old certainties, are falling everywhere.

What must I do, then?

You are The Lord of Ruin. Decide.

When she looked at the old Prince, his immobile face, and his impassioned thoughts, she knew there was no choice, that there never had been. The Saldanas had sworn to defend their subjects. And in return their subjects believed in them to provide that defence. Over the Kingdom's history, hundreds of thousands had died to maintain that mutual trust.

"Of course I will provide the DNA sequence for you," Ione said. "I only wish there was more I could do."

• • •

With an irony Ione found almost painful, two days after Prince Noton departed for Kulu with the DNA sequence, Parker Higgs and Oski Katsura told her they had located a Laymil memory of the spaceholm suicide.

Almost all other research work on the Laymil project campus had stopped to allow staff from every division to assist in reviewing the decrypted sensorium memories. However, despite being the prime focus of activity, the Electronics Division was no busier than the last time she had visited. The decryption operation had been finalized, allowing all of the information within the Laymil electronics stack to be reformatted into a human access standard.

"It's only the review process itself which is causing a bottleneck now," Oski Katsura said as she ushered Ione into the hall. "We have managed to copy all of the memories in the stack, so we now have permanent access. In the end, only twelve per cent of the files were scrambled, which leaves us with eight thousand two hundred and twenty hours of recordings available. Though of course we have a team working on the lost sequences."

The Laymil electronics stack had finally been powered down. Technicians were gathered around its transparent environment sphere, checking and disconnecting it from the conditioning units.

"What are you going to do with it?" Ione asked.

"Zero-tau," Oski Katsura said. "Unfortunately, it is really too venerable to be put on exhibition. That is, unless you want it displayed to the public for a little while first?"

"No. This is your field, that's why I appointed you as division chief."

Ione saw the members of the Confederation Navy science bureau mingling with the ordinary project staff at the various research stations in the hall. It was a sign of the times that she drew no more than a few idly curious glances.

Parker Higgins, Kempster Getchell, and Lieria were standing together to watch the technicians prepare the stack for zero-tau.

"End of an era," Kempster said as Ione joined them. He appeared oblivious to any connotations in the statement. "We can't go on depending on stolen knowledge anymore. Much to the distress of the navy people, of course, no giant ray guns for them to play with. Looks like we'll have to start thinking for ourselves again. Good news, eh?"

"Unless you happen to have a possessed knocking on your door," Parker Higgins said coldly.

"My dear Parker, I do access the news studios occasionally, you know."

"How is the search for Unimeron going?" Ione asked.

"From a technical point of view, very well," Kempster said enthusiastically. "We've finished the revised design for the sensor satellite we want to use. Young Renato has taken a blackhawk down to the orbital band we intend to cover to test fly a prototype. If all goes well, the industrial stations will begin mass production next week. We can saturate the band by the end of the month. If there are any unusual energy resonances there, we ought to find them."

It wasn't going to be as quick as Ione had hoped for. "Excellent work," she told the old astronomer. "Oski tells me you have found a memory of the spaceholm suicide."

"Yes, ma'am," Parker Higgins said.

"Did they have a weapon to use against the possessed?"

"Not a physical one, I'm happy to say. They seemed inordinately complacent about the suicide."

“What do the navy people think?”

“They were disappointed, but they concur the spaceholm culture made no attempt to physically defeat the possessed Laymil approaching from Unimeron.”

Ione sat at an empty research station. “Very well.” **Show me.**

She never could get used to the illusive sensorium squeeze of emerging into a Laymil body. This time, her appropriated frame was one of the two male varieties, an egg producer. He was standing amid a group of Laymil, his current family and co-habitees, on the edge of their third marriage community. His clarion heads bugled softly, a keening joined by hundreds of throats around him. The melody was a slow one, rising and falling across the gentle grassy slope. Its echo sounded in his mind, gathered by the mother entity from every community in the spaceholm. Together they sang their lament, a plainsong in unison with the life spirit of the forests and meadows, the shoalminds of the animals, the mother entity. A chant taken up by every spaceholm as the cozened dead approached their constellation.

The aether was resonant with sadness, its weight impressing every organic cell within the spaceholm. Sunspires were dipping to their early and final dusk, draining away the joyful colours he had lived with all his life. Flowers relaxed into closure, their curling petals sighing for the loss of light, while their spirits wept for the greater loss which was to follow.

He linked arms with his mates and children, ready to share death as they shared life: together. The families linked arms. Drinking strength from the greater concord. They had become a single triangle on the valley floor. Component segments of three adults. Inside them, the children, protected, cherished. The whole, a symbol of strength and defiance. As with minds, so with bodies; as with thoughts, so with deeds.

“*Join into rapture,*” he instructed his children.

Their necks wove around, heads bobbing with enchanting

immaturity. *“Sorrow. Fear failure. Death essence triumphant.”*

“Recall essencemaster teaching,” he instructed. *“Laymil species must end. Knowledge brings birthright fulfillment. Eternal exaltation awaits strong. Recall knowledge. Believe knowledge.”*

“Concur.”

Beyond the rim of the spaceholm constellation, the ships from Unimeron slid out of the darkness. Stars gleaming red with the terrible power of the death essence, riding bright prongs of fusion flame.

“Know truth,” the massed choir of spaceholms sang at them. *“Accept knowledge gift. Embrace freedom.”*

They would not. The pernicious light grew as the ships advanced, silent and deadly.

The Laymil in the spaceholms raised their heads to the vertical and bellowed a single last triumphant note. Air rippled at the sound. The sunspires went out, allowing total darkness to seize the interior.

“Recall strength,” he pleaded with his children. *“Strength achievement final amity.”*

“Confirm essencemaster victory.”

The spaceholm mother entity cried into the void. A pulse of love which penetrated to the core of every mind. Deep within its shell, cells ruptured and spasmed, propagating fractures clean through the polyp.

Sensation ended, but the darkness remained for a long time. Then Ione opened her eyes.

“Oh, my God. That was their only escape. They were so content about it. Every Laymil *rushed* into death. They never tried to outrun them; they never tried to fight them. They willfully condemned themselves to the beyond to avoid being possessed.”

“Not quite, ma’am,” Parker Higgins said. “There are some very interesting implications in those last moments. The Laymil didn’t consider they had lost. Far from it. They showed enormous resolution. We know full well how much they worship life; they would never sacrifice themselves and

their children simply to inconvenience the possessed Laymil, for that is all suicide is. There are any number of options they could have explored before resorting to such an extreme measure. Yet the one whose sensorium we accessed made constant references to knowledge and truth derived from the essencemasters. That knowledge was the key to their 'eternal exaltation.' I suspect the essencemasters solved the nature of the beyond. Am I right, Lieria?"

"An astute deduction, Director Higgs," the Kiint said through her processor block. "And one which confirms the statement Ambassador Roulor made to your Assembly. For each race, the solution is unique. Surely you do not anticipate suicide as the answer for the problems facing humankind?"

Parker Higgs faced the big xenoc, his anger visible. "It was more than suicide. It was a victory. They won. Whatever the knowledge was they carried with them, it meant they were no longer afraid of the beyond."

"Yes."

"And you know what it was."

"You have our sympathy, and whatever support we can provide."

"Damn it! How dare you study us like this. We are not laboratory creatures. We are sentient entities, we have feelings, we have fears. Have you no ethics?"

Ione stood behind the trembling director and laid a cautionary hand on his shoulder.

"I am well aware of what you are, Director Higgs," Lieria said. "And I am empathic to your distress. But I must repeat, the answer to your problem lies within you, not us."

"Thank you, Parker," Ione said. "I think we're all quite clear now on where we stand."

The director gave a furious wave of his hand and walked away.

I apologize for his temper, Ione told the Kiint. But as I'm sure you know, this terrifies us all. It is frustrating for us to know you have a solution, even though it cannot apply to us.

Justly so, lone Saldana. And I do understand. History records our race was in turmoil when we first discovered the beyond.

You give me hope, Lieria. Your existence is proof that satisfactory solutions can be found for a sentient race, something other than genocidal suicide. That inspires me to keep searching for our own answer.

If it is of any comfort, the Kiint are praying humans succeed.

Why, thank you.

• • •

Erick was woken by his neural nanonics. He had routinely set up programs to monitor his immediate environment, physical and electronic, alert for anything which fell outside nominal parameters.

As he sat up in the darkened office, his neural nanonics reported an outbreak of abnormal fluctuations in Ethenthia's power supply systems. When he datavised a query at the supervisor programs, it turned out that no one in the asteroid's civil engineering service was even examining the problem. A further review showed that fifteen per cent of the habitation section's lifts appeared to be inoperative. The number of datavises into the net was also reducing.

"Oh, dear God. Not here, too!" He swung his legs off the settee. A wave of nausea twisted along his spine. Medical programs sent out several caution warnings; the team Emonn Verona promised hadn't been to see him yet.

When he datavised the lieutenant commander's address to the office's net processor there was no response. "Bloody hell." Erick pulled on his ship-suit, easing it over his medical packages. There were two ratings standing guard outside the office; both armed with TIP carbines. They came to attention as soon as the door opened.

"Where's the lieutenant commander?" Erick asked.

"Sir, he said he was going to the hospital, sir."

"Bugger. Right, you two come with me. We're getting off this asteroid, right away."

“Sir?”

“That was an order, mister. But in case you need an incentive, the possessed are here.”

The two of them swapped a worried glance. “Aye, sir.”

Erick started accessing schematics of the asteroid as they went through the Navy Bureau and out into the public hall. He followed that up by requesting a list of starships currently docked at the spaceport. There were only five; one of which was the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, which cut his options down to four.

His neural nanonics designed a route to the axial chamber which didn't use any form of powered transportation. Seven hundred metres, two hundred of which were stairs. But at least the gravity would be falling off.

They went in single file, with Erick in the centre. He ordered both ratings to put their combat programs into primary mode. People turned to stare as they marched down the middle of the public hall.

Six hundred metres to go. And the first stairwell was directly ahead. The hall's light panels started dimming.

“Run,” Erick said.

• • •

Kingsley Pryor's cell measured five metres by five. It had one bunk, one toilet, and one washbasin; there was a small AV lens on the wall opposite the bed, accessing one local media company. Every surface—fittings, floor, walls—was the same blue-grey lofriction composite. It was fully screened, preventing any datavises.

For the last hour the light panel on the ceiling had been flickering. At first, Kingsley had thought the police were doing it to irritate him. They had been almost fearful as they escorted him from the *Villeneuve's Revenge* with a Confederation Navy officer. A member of the *Capone Organization*. It was only to be expected that they would try to re-establish their superiority with such sad psychology, demonstrating who was in control. But the shifts of illumination had been too fitful for any determined effort. The AV images were also fragmenting, but not at the same time as

the light. Then he found the call button produced no response.

Kingsley realized what was happening, and sat patiently on his bunk. Quarter of an hour later the humming sound from the conditioning grille fan faded away. Nothing he could do about it. Twice in the next thirty minutes the fan started up again briefly, once to blow in air which stank of sewage. Then the light panel went out permanently. Still Kingsley sat quietly.

When the door did finally open, it shone a fan of light directly across him, highlighting his almost prim posture. A werewolf crouched in the doorway, blood dripping from its fangs.

“Very original,” Kingsley said.

There was a confused puppylike *yap* from the creature.

“I really must insist you don’t come any closer. Both of us will wind up in the beyond if you do. And you’ve only just got here, haven’t you?”

The werewolf outline shimmered away to reveal a man wearing a police uniform. Kingsley recognized him as one of his escorts. There was a nasty pink scar on his forehead which hadn’t been there before.

“What are you talking about?” the possessed man asked.

“I am going to explain our situation to you, and I want you to observe my thoughts so that you know I’m telling the truth. And after that, you and your new friends are going to let me go. In fact, you’re going to give me every assistance I require.”

• • •

A hundred and fifty metres to the axial chamber. They were almost at the top of the last flight of stairs when the well’s lights went out. Erick’s enhanced retinas automatically switched to infrared. “They’re close,” he shouted in warning.

A narrow flare of white fire fountained up the centre of the stairwell, arching around to burst over the rating behind him. He grunted in pain and swung around, firing his TIP

carbine at the base of the streamer. Purple sparks bounced out of the impact point.

"Help me," he cried. A smear of white fire was cloaking his entire shoulder. Terror and panic were negating all the suppression programs which his neural nanonics had doused his brain with. He stopped firing to flail at the fire with his free hand.

The other rating slithered past Erick to fire back down the stairs. A flat circle of brilliant emerald light sprang over the floor of the stairwell, then started to rise as if it were a fluid. The flare of white fire withdrew below its surface. Shadows were just visible beneath it, darting about sinuously.

The burned rating had collapsed onto the stairs. His partner was still shooting wildly down into the advancing cascade of light. The TIP pulses were turning to silver spears as they penetrated the surface, trailing bubbles of darkness.

The next door was eight metres above Erick. The ratings would never last against the possessed, he knew, a few seconds at best. That few seconds might enable him to escape. The information he had was *vital*, it had to get to Trafalgar. Millions of innocents depended on it, on him. Millions. Against two.

Erick turned and flung himself up the last few steps. In his ears he could hear a voice shouting: ". . . two of my crew are dead. Fried! Tina was fifteen years old!"

He barged through the door, ten per cent gravity projecting him in a long flat arc above the corridor floor, threatening to crack his head against the ceiling. The persecuting noises and fog of green light shut off as the door slid shut behind him. He touched down, and powered himself in another long leap forwards along the corridor. Neural nanonics outlined his route for him as if it were a starship vector plot; a tube of orange neon triangles that flashed past. Turning right. Right again. Left.

Gravity had become negligible when he heard the scream ahead of him. Fifteen metres to the axial chamber. That was all; fifteen bloody metres! And the possessed were ahead of him. Erick snatched at a grab hoop to halt his forwards

flight. He didn't have any weapons. He didn't have any backup. He didn't even have Madeleine and Desmond to call on, not anymore.

More screams and pleas were trickling down the corridor from the axial chamber as the possessed chased down their victims. It wouldn't be long before one of them checked this corridor.

I have to get past. Have to!

He called up the schematic again, studying the area around the axial chamber. Twenty seconds later, and he was at the airlock hatch.

It was a big airlock, used to service the spaceport spindle. The prep room which led to it had dozens of lockers, all the equipment and support systems required to maintain space hardware, even five deactivated free-flying mechanoids.

Erick put his decryption program into primary mode and set it to work cracking the first locker's code. He stripped off his ship-suit as the lockers popped open one after the other. Physiological monitor programs confirmed everything he saw as the fabric parted. Pale fluid tinged with blood was leaking out of his medical nanonic packages where the edges were peeling from his flesh; a number of red LEDs on the ancillary modules were flashing to indicate system malfunctions. His new arm was only moving because of the reinforced impulses controlling the muscles.

But he still functioned. That was all that mattered.

It was the fifth locker which contained ten SII spacesuits. As soon as his body was sealed against the vacuum he hurried into the airlock, carrying a manoeuvring pack. He didn't bother with the normal cycle, instead he tripped the emergency vent. Air rushed out. The outer hatch irised apart as he secured himself into the manoeuvring pack. Then the punchy gas jets fired, sending him wobbling past the hatch rim and out into space.

• • •

André hated the idea of Shane Brandes even being inside the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. And as for the man actually helping repair and reassemble the starship's systems . . . *merde*. But

as with most events in André's life these days, he didn't have a lot of choice. Since the showdown with Erick, Madeleine had retreated into her cabin and refused to respond to any entreaties. Desmond, at least, performed the tasks requested of him, though not with any obvious enthusiasm. And, insultingly, he would only work alone.

That just left Shane Brandes to help André with the jobs that needed more than one pair of hands. The *Dechal's* ex-fusion engineer was anxious to please. He swore he had no allegiance to his previous captain, and harboured no grudges or ill will towards the crew of the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. He was also prepared to work for little more than beer money, and he was a grade two technician. One could not afford to overlook gift horses.

André was re-installing the main power duct in the wall of the lower deck lounge, which required Shane to feed the cable to him when instructed. Someone glided silently through the ceiling hatch, blocking the beam from the bank of temporary lights André had rigged up. André couldn't see what he was doing. "Desmond! Why must . . ." He gasped in shock. "You!"

"Hello again, Captain," Kingsley Pryor said.

"What are you doing here? How did you get out of prison?"

"They set me free."

"Who?"

"The possessed."

"*Non*," André whispered.

"Unfortunately so. Ethenthia has fallen."

The anti-torque tool André was holding seemed such a pitiful weapon. "Are you one of them now? You will never have my ship. I will overload the fusion generators."

"I'd really rather you didn't," Pryor datavised. "As you can see, I haven't been possessed."

"How? They take everybody, women, children."

"I am one of Capone's liaison officers. Even here, that carries enormous weight."

"And they let you go?"

“Yes.”

A heavy dread settled in André’s brain. “Where are they? Are they coming?” He datavised the flight computer to review the internal sensors (those remaining—curse it). As yet no systems were glitching.

“No,” Pryor said. “They won’t come into the *Villeneuve’s Revenge*. Not unless I tell them to.”

“Why are you doing this?” As if I didn’t know.

“Because I want you to fly me away from here.”

“And they’ll let us all go, just like that?”

“As I said, Capone has a lot of influence.”

“What makes you think I will take you? You blackmailed me before. It will be simple to throw you out of the airlock once we are free of Ethenthia.”

Pryor smiled a dead man’s smile. “You’ve always done exactly as I wanted, Duchamp. You were always supposed to break away from Kursk.”

“Liar.”

“I have been given other, more important objectives than ensuring a third-rate ship with its fifth-rate crew stay loyal to the Organization. You have never had any free will since you arrived in the New California system. You still don’t. After all, you don’t really think there was only one bomb planted on board, do you?”

• • •

Erick watched the *Villeneuve’s Revenge* lift from its cradle. The starship’s thermo-dump panels extended, ion thrusters took over from the verniers. It rose unhurriedly from the spaceport. When he switched his collar sensors to high resolution he could see the black hexagon on the fuselage where plate 8-92-K was missing.

He didn’t understand it, Duchamp was making no attempt to flee. It was almost as if he was obeying traffic control, departing calmly along an assigned vector. Had the crew been possessed? Small loss to the Confederation.

His collar sensors refocused on the docking bay he was approaching, a dark circular recess in the spaceport’s grid-iron exterior. It was a maintenance bay, twice as wide as an

ordinary bay. The clipper-class starship, *Tigara*, which sat on the docking cradle seemed unusually small in such surroundings.

Erick fired his manoeuvring pack jets to take him down towards the *Tigara*. There were no lights on in the bay; all the gantries and multi-segment arms were folded back against the walls. Utility umbilicals were jacked in, and an airlock tube had mated with the starship's fuselage; but apart from that there was no sign of any activity.

The silicon hull showed signs of long-term vacuum exposure—faded lettering, micrometeorite impact scuffs, surface layer ablation stains—all indicating hull plates long overdue for replacement. He drifted over the blurred hexagons until he was above the EVA airlock, and datavisited the hatch control processor to cycle and open. If anyone was on board, they would know about him now. But there were no datavisited questions, no active sensor sweeps.

The hatch slid open, and Erick glided inside.

Clipper-class starships were designed to provide a speedy service between star systems, carrying small high-value cargoes. Consequently, as much of their internal volume as possible was given over to cargo space. There was only one life-support capsule, which accommodated an optimum crew of three. That was the principal reason Erick had chosen the *Tigara*. In theory, he would be able to fly it solo.

Most of the starship systems were powered down. He kept his SII suit on as he moved through the two darkened lower decks to the bridge. As soon as he was secured in the captain's acceleration couch he accessed the flight computer and ordered a full status review.

It could have been a lot better. *Tigara* was in the maintenance bay for a complete refit. One of the fusion generators was inoperative, two energy patterning nodes were dead, heat exchangers were operating dangerously short of required levels, innumerable failsoft components had been allowed to decay below their safety margins.

None of the maintenance work had even been started. The

owners hadn't been prepared to commit that much money while the quarantine was in force.

Dear Lord, Erick thought, the *Villeneuve's Revenge* was in better condition than this.

He datavised the flight computer to disengage the bay's airlock tube, then initiated a flight prep procedure. The *Tigara* took a long time to come on-line. At every stage he had to order backup sequences to take over, or override safety programs, or re-route power supplies. He didn't even bother with the life-support functions, all he wanted was power in the energy patterning nodes and secondary drive tubes.

With a fusion generator active, he ordered some sensor clusters to deploy. An image of the bay filled his mind, overlaid with fragile status graphics. He scanned the electromagnetic spectrum for any traffic, but there was only the background hash of cosmic radiation. Nobody was saying anything to anybody. What he wanted was someone asking Ethenthia what was happening, why they'd gone off the air. A ship close by that could help.

Nothing.

Erick fired the emergency release pins which the docking cradle's load clamps were gripping. Verniers sent out a hot deluge of gas which shimmered across the bay's walls, shaking loose blankets of thermal insulation from the gantries. *Tigara* rose a metre off its cradle, straining at the nest of umbilical hoses jacked into its rear fuselage. The snapfree couplings began to break, sending the hoses writhing.

The starship was low on cryogenic fuel; he couldn't afford to waste delta-V reserve aligning himself on an ideal vector. The astrogration program produced a series of options for him.

None of them were what he'd been hoping for. So what else was new?

The last of the umbilicals broke, and the *Tigara* lurched up out of the bay. Erick ordered the flight computer to extend the communications array and align it on Golmo and the Edenist habitats orbiting there. Sensor clusters began to

sink down into their recesses as energy poured into the patterning nodes.

The flight computer alerted him that an SD platform was sweeping the ship with its radar. Then it relayed a signal from traffic control into his neural nanonics.

“Is that you, Erick? We think it’s you. Who else is this stupidly ballsy? This is Emonn Verona, Erick, and I’m asking you: Don’t do it. That ship is completely fucked; I’ve got the CAB logs in front of me. It can’t fly. You’re only going to hurt yourself, or worse.”

Erick transmitted a single message to Golmo, then retracted the communications array down into its jump configuration. The SD platform had locked on. Some of the patterning nodes were producing very strange readings in the prejump diagnostic run-through. CAB monitor programs flashed up jump proscription warnings. He switched them off.

“Game over, Erick. Either return to the docking bay or you join our comrades in the beyond. You don’t want that. Where there’s life, there’s hope. Right? Of all people, you must believe that.”

Erick ordered the flight computer to activate the jump sequence.

22

The hellhawk *Socratous* was a flat V-shaped mechanical spacecraft with a grey-white fuselage made up from hundreds of different component casings, a veritable jigsaw of mismatched equipment, not all of it aeronautic. Two long engine nacelles were affixed to the stern, transparent tubes filled with a heavy opaque gas which fluoresced its way through the spectrum in a three-minute cycle.

It was an impressive sight as it slid down out of the starfield for a landing on Valisk's docking ledge. Had it been real, it would be capable of taking on an entire squadron of Confederation Navy ships with its exotic weapons.

The illusion popped as a crew bus rolled across the ledge towards it. *Socratous* reverted to a muddy-brown egg-shape with a crew toroid wrapped around its midsection. Rubra could just see two small ridges on the rear quarter which hadn't been there before. They corresponded roughly with the nacelles of the fantasy starship. He wondered if the tumours would be benign. Did the energistic ability prevent metastasis from exploding inside possessed bodies as the wished-for changes became less illusion and cells multiplied to obey the will of the dominant soul? It seemed an awfully complex requirement for such a crude power, modifying the molecular structure of DNA and taming the mitosis process. The apparent milieu of their energistic ability was blasting holes through solid walls and contorting matter into new shapes; he'd never seen any demonstrations of subtlety.

Perhaps the whole possession problem would burn itself out in an orgy of irreversible cancer. Few of the returned

souls were content with the physical appearance of the bodies they had claimed.

How superbly ironic, Rubra thought, that vanity could be the undoing of entities who had acquired near-godlike powers. It was also a dangerous prospect, once they realized what was happening. Those people remaining free would become even more valuable, the attempts to possess them ever more desperate. And Edenism would be the last castle to besiege.

He decided not to mention the prospect to the Kohistan Consensus. It was another small private advantage; no one else in the Confederation had such a unique and extensive vantage point of the possessed and their behaviour as him. He wasn't sure if he could exploit the knowledge, but he wasn't going to give it away until he was certain.

A sub-routine of his principal personality was designated to observe the aberrant melanomata and carcinomas developing on the possessed inside the habitat. If the growths turned malignant the current situation would change drastically right across the Confederation.

The crew bus had left the *Socratous* to trundle back across the ledge. Kiera and about forty of her cronies were flocking into a reception lounge. When the bus docked, it disgorged about thirty-five Deadnight kids. Eager besotted youngsters with red handkerchiefs worn proudly around their ankles and wonder in their eyes that they'd reached the promised land after so much difficulty.

Damn it, you have to stop these flights, Rubra complained to the Kohistan Consensus. **That's nearly two thousand victims this week. There must be something you can do.**

We really cannot interdict every hellhawk flight. Their objective does not affect the overall balance of strategic events, and is relatively harmless.

Not to these kids it isn't!

Agreed. But we cannot be everyone's keeper. The effort and risk involved in arranging clandestine ren-

deztvous to pick up the Deadnights is disproportionate to the reward.

In other words, as long as the hellhawks are busy with this, they can't cause much trouble elsewhere.

Correct. Unfortunately.

And you used to call me a heartless bastard.

Everybody is suffering from the effects of possession. Until we discover a solution to the entire problem, all we can hope for is to reduce it to an absolute minimum wherever possible.

Right. I'd like to point out that when Kiera reaches the magic number, it's me who is going to be the one suffering.

That is some time off yet. Asteroid settlements have been alerted to these clandestine rendezvous flights. There should be less of them in future.

I bloody well knew I could never trust you lot.

We did not inflict any of this on you, Rubra. And you are quite welcome to transfer into the neural strata of one of our habitats should it look like Kiera Salter is preparing to shift Valisk out of this universe.

I'll keep it in mind. But I don't think you'll need to welcome this particular prodigal. Dariat is almost ready. Once he comes over, it'll be Kiera who is going to have to worry about where I shift Valisk.

Your attempt at subversion is a risky strategy.

That's how I built Magellanic Itg, through sheer balls. It's also why I rejected you. You don't have any.

This is not getting us anywhere.

If it works, I'll be able to start fighting back on a level you can't conceive of. Risk makes you alive, that's what you never understood. That's the difference between us. And don't try coming over all smarmy superior with me. It's me who's got an idea, me who stands a chance. Have you got any suggestions to make, an alternative?

No.

Exactly. So don't lecture me.

We would urge caution, though. Please.

Urge away.

Rubra dismissed the affinity link with his usual contempt. Circumstances might have forced him into an alliance with his old culture; but all the renewed contact had done was convince him how right he had been to reject them all those centuries ago.

He switched his primary routine's attention inward. The group of newly arrived Deadnights had been split up and taken away to be opened for possession. A temporary village had sprung up at the base of the northern endcap, extravagant tents and small cosy cottages for the possessed to dwell in. A smaller version of the camps which ringed the starscraper foyers halfway down the interior. The teams Kiera had working to make the starscrapers safe were finding progress difficult. And in any case, the possessed didn't entirely trust the areas they claimed to have secured. Rubra had never stopped his continual harassment. Nearly ten per cent of the servitor population had been killed as he deployed them on sneak attacks, but he still managed to eliminate a couple of possessed every day.

Separated from their companions, the Deadnights were easily overwhelmed. Piteous screams and pleas hung over the village like smog.

One of Rubra's newest monitor routines alerted him to a minuscule electrical discrepancy within the starscraper where Tolton was hiding. He had discovered electricity was the key to locating Bonney Lewin when she was using her energistic ability to fox his visual observation. A series of extremely sensitive routines which now monitored his own bioelectric patterns could sometimes detect a possessed from the backwash of their energistic power. In effect, the entire polyp structure had become an electronic warfare detector. It was hardly reliable, but he was constantly refining the routines.

He tracked down the wraithish presence to the twenty-seventh floor vestibule where it was moving towards the stairwell muscle membrane door. Visually, the vestibule was empty. At least, according to his local autonomic sub-rout-

tines it was. The current in one of the organic conductor cables buried behind the wall fluctuated subtly.

Rubra reduced the power to the electrophorescent cells covering the polyp ceiling. The visual image remained the same for a couple of seconds, then the ceiling darkened. It should have been instantaneous. Whatever was causing the electrical disturbance stopped moving.

He opened a channel to Tolton's processor block. "Get going, boy. They're coming for you."

Tolton rolled off the bed where he'd been dozing. He'd been staying in the apartment for five days. The original occupant's wardrobes had been ransacked for a new ensemble. He'd accessed a good number of the MF and bluesense fleks in the lounge. And he'd sampled all of the imported delicacies in the kitchen, washing them down with fine wines and a lot of Norfolk Tears. For a suffering social poet, he'd adapted to hedonism with the greatest of ease. Small wonder there was a graceless scowl on his face as he snatched up his leather trousers and wriggled his bulk into them.

"Where are they?"

"Ten floors above you," Rubra assured him. "Don't worry, you've got plenty of time. I've got your exit route ready for you."

"I've been thinking, maybe you ought to steer me toward some weapons hardware. I could start evening up the score a little."

"Let's just concentrate on the essentials, shall we? Besides, if you get close enough to a possessed to use a weapon, they're close enough to turn it against you."

Tolton addressed the ceiling. "You think I can't handle it?"

"I thank you for the offer, son, but there are just too many of them. You staying free is my victory against all of them, don't blow it for me."

Tolton clipped the processor block to his belt and fastened his straggly hair back in a ponytail. "Thanks, Rubra. We all got it way wrong about you. I know it don't mean shit to you

probably, but when this is over, I'm going to tell the whole wide Confederation what you done."

"That's one MF album I'll buy. First in a long time."

Tolton stood in front of the apartment's door, breathed in like a yogamaster, flexed his shoulders like a sport pro warming up, nodded briskly, and said: "Okay, let's hustle."

Rubra felt an obdurate burst of sympathy and, strangely enough, pride as the poet stepped out into the vestibule. When Kiera started her takeover he assumed Tolton would last a couple of days. Now he was one of only eighty non-possessed left. One of the reasons he'd survived was because he followed instructions to the letter; in short, he trusted Rubra. And Rubra was damned if Bonney would get him now.

The invisible energistic swirl was on the move again, descending the stairwell. Rubra started to modify the output of the electrophorescent cells in the ceiling. HELLO, BONNEY, he printed. I HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR YOU.

The swirl stopped again.

COME ON, TALK TO ME. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO LOSE?

He waited. A column of air shimmered silver, as if a giant cocoon had sprung up out of the polyp. Rubra experienced it most as a slackening of pressure in the local sub-routines; a pressure he hadn't even been aware of until then. Then the silver air lost its lustre, darkening to khaki. Bonney Lewin stood on the stairs, her Enfield searching for hazards.

"What proposition?"

ABANDON YOUR CURRENT VICTIM, I WILL GIVE YOU A BETTER ONE.

"I doubt it."

DOESN'T KIERA WANT DARIAT ANYMORE?

Bonney gave the glowing letters a thoughtful stare. "You're trying to sucker me."

NO. THIS IS GENUINE.

"You're lying. Dariat hates you; he's totally bonkers about beating seven bells out of you. If we help him, he'll succeed."

SO WHY HASN'T HE COME TO YOU FOR HELP?

“Because he’s . . . weird.”

NO. IT IS BECAUSE USING YOU TO DEFEAT ME WOULD MEAN HAVING TO SHARE THE POWER WHICH WOULD RESULT FROM HIS DOMINATION OF THE NEURAL STRATA. HE WANTS IT ALL. HE HAS SPENT THIRTY YEARS WAITING FOR AN OPPORTUNITY LIKE THIS. DO YOU THINK HE WILL GIVE THAT AWAY? AND AFTER ME, KIERA IS GOING TO BE NEXT. THEN PROBABLY YOU.

“So you hand him over to us. That still doesn’t make any sense; either way, we get to nail you.”

DARIAT AND I ARE PLAYING OUR OWN GAME. I DO NOT EXPECT YOU TO UNDERSTAND. BUT I DO NOT INTEND TO LOSE TO HIM.

She worried at a fingernail. “I don’t know.”

EVEN WITH MY HELP, HE WILL BE DIFFICULT TO CATCH. DO YOU FEAR FAILURE?

“Don’t try working that angle on me, it’s pathetic.”

VERY WELL. SO DO YOU ACCEPT?

“Difficult one. I really don’t trust you. But it would be a superb hunt, you’ve got me there. I haven’t had a single sniff of that tricky little boyo yet, and I’ve been trying for long enough.” She shouldered her rifle. “All right, we’ve got a deal. But just remember, if you are trying to get me to walk into some ten-thousand-volt power cable, I can still come back. Kiera’s recording is hauling in thousands of morons. I’ll return in one of them, and then you’ll wish all you had to worry about was Dariat.”

UNDERSTOOD. FIND A PROCESSOR BLOCK AND SWITCH IT TO ITS BASIC ROUTINES, THAT SHOULD KEEP IT FUNCTIONING. I WILL UPDATE YOU ON HIS LOCATION.

• • •

Dariat walked along the shoreline of the circumfluous salt-water reservoir as the light tube languished to a spectacular golden-orange. The cove was backed by a decaying earth bluff which tipped an avalanche of the pink Tallok-aboriginal grass onto the sand. Curving outgrowths of the xenoc plant resembled a meandering tideline, which gave him the impression of walking along a spit between two different coloured seas. The only sounds were of the water lapping

against the sand, and the birds crying out as they flew back to land for the night.

He had walked here many times as a child, an era when being alone meant happiness. Now he welcomed the solitude again; it gave him the mindspace to think, to formulate new subversion routines to insert into the neural strata; and he was free of Kiera and her greed and shallow ambitions. That second factor was becoming a dominant one. They had been looking for him ever since the Edenists destroyed the industrial stations. With both his knowledge of the habitat and energistically enhanced affinity it was absurdly easy to elude them. Few ever ventured down to the vast reservoir, preferring to cling to the camps around starscraper foyers. Without the tubes, it was a long journey across the grassland where malevolent servitor creatures lay in wait for the negligent.

Trouble, Rubra announced.

Dariat ignored him. He could hide himself from the possessed easily enough. None of them knew enough about affinity to access the neural strata properly. As a consequence he no longer bothered hiding himself from Rubra anymore, nor did he bother with the linen-suited persona. It was all too stressful. The price of release came in the form of taunts and nerve games emanating from Rubra with unimaginative regularity.

She's found you, Dariat, she's coming for you. And boy is she pissed.

Certain he'd regret it, Dariat asked: **Who?**

Bonney. There's nine of them heading right at you in a couple of trucks. I think Kiera was saying something about returning with your head. Apparently, attachment to your body was considered optional.

Dariat opened his affinity link with the neural strata just wide enough to hitch onto the observational sub-routines. Sure enough, two of the rugged trucks which the rentcops used were arrowing across the rosy grassland. "Shit." They were heading straight for the cove, with about five kilometres left to go. **How the hell did she find me?**

Beats me.

Dariat stared straight up, following the line of the coast which looped behind the light tube. **Is there someone above me with a high-rez sensor?**

If there is, I can't spot them. In any case, I doubt a sensor would work for a possessed.

Binoculars? Hell, it hardly matters.

He couldn't see the trucks with his eyes yet, the tall grass hid them. And his mind couldn't perceive their thoughts, they were too far away. So just how had they found him?

There is a tube station at the end of the cove, Rubra said. They'll never be able to catch you in that. I can take you to anywhere in the habitat.

Thanks. And you'll be able to run a thousand volts through me as soon as I step inside a carriage. Or had you forgotten?

I don't want you blown into the beyond. You know that. I've made my offer, and it stands. Come into the neural strata. Join your mind with me. Together we will annihilate them. Valisk can be purged. We will take them to dimensions where simply existing is an agony for them. Both of us will have revenge.

You're crazy.

Make your mind up. I can hide you for a while while you decide. Is it to be me? Or is it to be Kiera?

Dariat was still receiving the image of the trucks from the sensitive cells. They were rocking madly over the uneven ground as the drivers held them at their top speed.

I think I'll take a while longer to make up my mind. Dariat started jogging for the tube station. After a minute, the trucks swung around to intercept him. "Bloody hell." Horgan's body was reasonably fit, but he was only fifteen years old. Dariat's imagination bestowed him with athlete's legs, bulky slabs of muscle packed tight under oil-glossed skin. His speed picked up.

I wonder what that kind of overdrive does to your blood sugar levels? I mean, the power has to come from

somewhere. Surely you're not converting the energetic overspill from the beyond directly into protein?

Save the science class till later. He could see the station ahead of him, a squat circular polyp structure bordering the bluff, like some kind of storage tank half-buried in the sand. The trucks were only a kilometre away. Bonney was standing up in the passenger seat of the lead vehicle, aiming her Enfield at him over the windscreen. Motes of white fire punched into the sand around him. He ducked down for the last fifty metres, using the bluff as cover as he scuttled for the station entrance.

Inside, two broad escalators spiralled around each other, their steps moving sedately. A garishly coloured tubular hologram punctured the air up the centre of the shaft, adverts sliding along it. Dariat leapt onto the down escalator and sprinted recklessly, hands barely touching the rail.

He made it to the bottom just as the trucks braked outside; Bonney charged towards the entrance. There was a carriage waiting on the station, a shiny white aluminum bullet. Dariat stopped, panting heavily, staring at the open door.

Get in!

Rubra's mental voice contained a strong intimation of alarm, which Dariat could hardly credit. **If you're fucking me, I'll come back. I'll promise myself to Anstid for that one wish to be granted.**

Imagine my terror. I've told you, I need you intact and cooperative. Now get in.

Dariat closed his eyes and took a step forwards, directly into the carriage. The door slid shut behind him, and there was a faint vibration as it started accelerating along the track. He opened his eyes.

See? Rubra taunted. Not such a bogey man after all.

Dariat sat down and took some deep breaths to calm his racing heart. He used the sensitive cells to watch an apoplectic Bonney Lewin jump down from the empty platform to fire her Enfield along the dark tunnel. She was screaming obscenities. The accompanying hunters were standing well

back. One of her boots was treading on the magnetic guide rail.

Fry her, Dariat said. Now!

Oh, no. This is much more fun. This way I get to find out if the dead can have heart attacks.

You are a complete bastard.

That's right. And to prove it, I'm going to show you Anastasia's secret now. The one thing she never showed you.

Dariat was instantly wary. **More lies.**

Not this time. Don't tell me you don't want to find out. I know you, Dariat. Fully. I've always known. I know what she means to you. I know how much she means to you. Your memory of her was strong enough to power a grudge over thirty years. That's almost inhuman, Dariat. I respect it enormously. But it leaves you wide open to me. Because you want to know, don't you? There's something I've got, or heard, or saw, that you didn't. A little segment of Anastasia Rigel you don't have. You won't be able to live with that knowledge.

I'll be able to ask her soon. Her soul is waiting for me in the beyond. When I've dealt with you, I'll go to her, and we'll be together again.

Soon will be too late.

You're unbelievable, you know that?

Good. I'll take you there.

Whatever you like. Dariat pushed his weariness behind the thought, showing just how unconcerned he was. Behind that, clutched away from the bravado and outward confidence, his teenage self huddled in worry. That same self which so idolized her. Now there was the chance, the remotest possibility that the image was flawed, less than honest. The doubt cut into him, weakening the core of resolution which had supported him for so terribly long.

Anastasia would never keep anything from him. Would she? She loved him, she said so. The last thing she ever said, ever wrote.

Rubra guided the tube carriage to a starscraper lobby sta-

tion and opened the door. **It's waiting on the thirty-second floor.**

Dariat glanced cautiously out onto the little station and the wide passage which led to the lobby itself. His mind could sense the thoughts of the possessed camped outside the lobby. No one showed any interest in him. He hurried across the floor to the bank of lifts in the centre, reaching them unnoticed.

The lift deposited him at the thirty-second-floor vestibule. A completely normal residential section; twenty-four mechanical doors leading to apartments, and three muscle membranes for the stairwells. One of the mechanical doors slid open to show a darkened living room.

Dariat could sense someone inside, a dozing mind, its thought currents placid. When he tried to use the observation sub-routines for the bedroom he found he couldn't, Rubra had wiped them.

Oh, no, my boy, you go right in there and face your fate like a man.

Dariat flinched. But . . . one unaware non-possessed. How bad could it be? He walked into the apartment, ordering the electrophorescent cells to full intensity. Thankfully, they responded.

It was a woman who lay on the big bed, a duvet had worked downwards to reveal her shoulders. Her skin was very black, with the minute crinkles which spelt out the onset of middle age and the start of weight problems for anyone without much geneering in their ancestry. A tangle of finely braided jet-black hair was fanned out over the pillows, every strand tipped with a moondust-white bead.

She groaned sleepily as the light came on, and turned over. Despite a face which cellulite was busy inflating, she had a petit nose.

NO! For one moment horror claimed his senses. She was similar to Anastasia. Features, colour, even the age was almost right. If a medical team had gone out to the tepee, they might have reanimated the body, a hospital might conceivably have used extensive gene therapy to regenerate the

dead brain cells. It could be done, for the President of Gov-central or Kulu's heir apparent, the effort would be made. But not a Starbridge girl regarded as vermin by the personality of the habitat in which she dwelt. The cold shock subsided.

Whoever she was, as soon as she saw him, she screamed.

"It's all right," Dariat said. He couldn't even hear his own voice above her distraught wails.

"Rubra! One of them's here. Rubra, help me."

"No," Dariat said. "I'm not. Well . . ."

"Rubra! RUBRA."

"Please," Dariat implored.

That silenced her.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I'm running from them myself."

"Uh huh?" Her gaze darted to the door.

"Really. Rubra brought me here, too."

The duvet was readjusted. Slim bronze and silver bracelets tinkled as she moved.

Dariat's chill returned. They were exactly the same kind of bracelets Anastasia wore. "Are you a Starbridge?"

She nodded, wide-eyed.

Wrong question, Rubra said. Ask her what her name is.

He hated himself. For giving in, for playing to Rubra's rules. "Who are you?"

"Tatiana," she gulped. "Tatiana Rigel."

Rubra's mocking, triumphant laughter shook his skull from the inside. **Got it now, boy? Meet Anastasia's little sister.**

• • •

Another day, another press conference. At least this new technology had progressed beyond flashbulbs; Al had always hated them back in Chicago. More than once he had been photographed raising a hand to ward off the brilliant bursts of light; photos which the papers always ran, because it looked as if he were trying to hide, confirming his guilt.

He had held the press conference in the Monterey

Hilton's big ballroom, sitting at a long table with his back to the window. The idea was that the reporters would see the formation of victorious fleet ships which had just returned from Arnstadt, and were holding station five kilometres off the asteroid. Leroy Octavius said it should make an impressive backdrop for the dramatic news announcement.

Except the starships weren't quite in the right coordinate, so they were only just visible when rotation did bring them into view; the reporters had to look around the side of the table to see them. And everybody knew the Organization had conquered Arnstadt and Kursk, it wasn't new even though this made it sort of official.

Drama and impact, that was the sole purpose. So Al sat at the long table with its inappropriate vases of flowers; Luigi Balsmao on one side, and a couple of other ship captains on the other. He told the reporters how easy it had been to break open Arnstadt's SD network, the eagerness of the population to accept the Organization as a government after a "minimum number" of key administrative people had been possessed. How the star system's economy was turning around.

"Did you use antimatter, Al?" Gus Remar asked. A weary veteran of these affairs now, he reckoned he knew what liberties he could take. Capone did have a weird sense of honour operating; nobody got blasted for trying to work an angle, only outright opposition earned his disapprobation.

"That's a dumb kinda question, pal," Al replied, keeping the scowl from his face. "What do you want to ask that for? We got plenty of interesting dope on how the Organization is curing all sorts of medical problems which the non-possessed bring to our lieutenants. You people, you always look for the bad side. It's like a goddamn obsession with you."

"Antimatter is the biggest horror the Confederation knows, Al. People are bound to be interested in the rumours. Some of the ships' crews say they fired antimatter powered combat wasps. And the industrial stations here are producing antimatter confinement systems. Have you got a production station, Al?"

Leroy Octavius, who was standing behind Al, leaned for-

wards and whispered something in his ear. Some of the humour returned to Al's stony face. "I can neither confirm nor deny the Organization has access to invincible weapons."

It didn't stop them from asking again and again. He lost the press conference then. There wasn't any chance to read out the dope Leroy had prepared on the medical bonus, and how they'd prevented the kind of food shortages on Arnstadt which were being reported as affecting other possessed worlds.

Asked at the end if he was planning another invasion, Al just growled: "Wait and see," then walked out.

"Don't worry about it, we'll embargo the whole conference," Leroy said as they took a lift down to the bottom of the hotel.

"They ought to show some goddamn respect," Al grunted. "If it wasn't for me they'd be possessed and screaming inside their own heads. Those bastards never fucking change."

"You want us to lean on them a little?" Bernhard Allsop asked.

"No. That would be stupid. The only reason the Confederation news companies take our reports is because they're from non-possessed." Al hated it when Bernhard tried to be tough and demonstrate his loyalty. I should have him wasted, he's becoming a complete pain in the ass.

But wasting people wasn't so easy these days. They'd come back in another body, and carry a grudge the size of Mount Washington.

Goddamn the problems kept hitting on him.

• • •

The lift doors opened on the hotel's basement, a windowless level given over to environmental machinery, large pumps, and condensation-smear tanks. A boxing ring had been set up at the centre, surrounded by the usual training paraphernalia of exercise bikes, histeps, weights, and punch bags: Malone's gym.

Whenever he wanted to loosen up, Al came down here. He'd always enjoyed sports back in Chicago; going to the game was an *event* in those days. One he missed. If he could

bring back the Organization, and the music, and the dancing from that time, he reasoned, then why not the sports, too?

Avram Harwood had run a check on professions listed in the Organization's files, and found Malone, who claimed to have worked as a boxing trainer in New York during the 1970s.

Al marched into the gym area trailed by five of his senior lieutenants, Avram Harwood, and a few other hangers-on like Bernhard. It was noisy in the basement anyway, with the pumps thrumming away, and in the gym with music playing and men pounding away at leather punch bags you had to shout to be heard. This was the way it should be: the smell of leather and sweat, grunts as sparring blows hit home, Malone yelling out at his star pupils.

"How's it going?" Al asked the trainer.

Malone shrugged, his heavy face showing complete misery. "Today's people, they gone soft, Al. They don't want to hit each other, they think it's immoral or something. We ain't gonna find no Ali or Cooper on this world. But I got a few contenders, kids who've had it hard. They're working out okay." A fat finger indicated the two young men in the ring. "Joey and Gulo, here, they could have what it takes."

Al cast an eye over the two boxers dancing around in the ring. Both of them were big, fit-looking kids, wearing colourful protective gear. He knew enough about the basics to see they were holding themselves right, though they were concentrating too much on defence.

"I'll just watch awhile," Al told Malone.

"Sure thing, Al. Help yourself. Hey! Gulo, close the left, the left, asswipe."

Joey saw his opening and landed a good right on Gulo's face. Gulo went for a body lock, and both of them bounced on the ropes.

"Break, break," the ref cried.

Al pulled up a stool and gazed contentedly at the two combatants. "All right, what's the order of play for today? Speak to me, Avvy." The ex-mayor's body twitches were getting worse, Al noticed. And some of the weals still hadn't healed

over despite a couple of attempts by Al's possessed lieutenants to heal them. Al didn't like having so much resentment and hostility festering close by. But the guy sure knew how to administrate; replacing him now would be a bitch.

"We now have fifteen delegations from outsystem who have arrived," Avram Harwood said. "They all want to see you."

"Outsystem, huh?" Al's flagging interest started to perk up. "What do they want?"

"Your assistance, basically," Avram said. He didn't hide his displeasure.

Al ignored it. "For what?"

"All of them are from asteroid settlements," Patricia Mangano said. "The first bunch that came here are from Toma, that's in the Kolomna system. Their problem is that the asteroid only has a population of ninety thousand. That gives them enough energistic power to shift it out of this universe easily enough. But then they realized that spending the rest of eternity inside a couple of modestly sized biosphere caverns which are totally dependent on technology wasn't exactly going to be a whole load of fun. Especially when nearly a third of the possessed come from pre-industrial eras."

"Goddamn, this is what I've been telling people all along," Al said expansively. "There ain't no point in vanishing whole planets away, not until we got the Confederation licked."

Several of the trainee boxers had drifted over to stand close by. As if aware of the growing interest, Joey and Gulo were increasing their efforts to knock each other senseless. Malone's rapid-fire monotone picked up momentum.

"So what has this got to do with me?" Al asked.

"The Toma people want to move everyone to Kolomna."

"Je-zus!"

"They want our fleet to help them. If we chose Kolomna as our next invasion target we will receive their total cooperation for as long as you want it. Every industrial station in the system will be given over to supporting the fleet, every

starship captured will be converted to carry weapons or troops, they'll bring the planetary population into order along Organization lines. They say they want to sign up as your lieutenants."

Al was flattered, it turned his whole day around.

Out in the ring, both boxers were perspiring heavily. Blood was trickling out of Gulo's mouth. Joey's left eye was bruised. Cheers and whistles were swelling from the spectators.

"Risky," Luigi said. "Kolomna is First Admiral Aleksandrovich's homeworld. He probably wouldn't take too kindly to it. I wouldn't I was him. Besides, we're still getting things in order for Toi-Hoi."

Al rocked back on the stool and materialized one of his Havanas, its end was already alight. "I'm not too worried about that Admiral getting pissed with me, not with what I've got in store for him. Any chance we can split the fleet, send some ships to Kolomna?"

"Sorry, boss, that's some of the bad news I've got for you," Luigi said. "The Confederation is really hassling us bad at Arnstadt. They've got voidhawks flying above both poles dropping invisible bombs on the SD platforms in orbit. Stealth, the bastards call it. We're losing a shitload of hardware every day. And the non-possessed population are putting up some resistance—quite a lot, actually. The new lieutenants we've appointed are having to use a whole load of force to establish our authority. It gives them a sense of independence, so we have to use the SD platforms to make them see reason, too. Except the Confederation is knocking the platforms out one at a time, so instead we gotta use starships to substitute, and they're just as vulnerable."

"Well, fuck it, Luigi," Al stormed. "Are you telling me, we're gonna lose?"

"No way!" an indignant Luigi protested. "We're launching our own patrols up above the poles. We're hassling them right back, Al. But it takes five or six of our ships to block one of their goddamn voidhawks."

"They're bogging us down out there," Silvano Richmann

said. "It's quite deliberate. We're also losing ships out among Arnstadt's settled asteroids. The voidhawks make lightning raids, fling off a dozen combat wasps and duck away before we can do anything about it. It's a shitty way of fighting, Al, nothing is head on anymore."

"Modern navies are built around the concept of rapid tactical assault," Leroy said. "Their purpose is to inflict damage over a wide front so that you have to overstretch your defences. They've adopted a guerilla policy to try and wear down our fleet."

"Fucking cowards' way of fighting," Silvano grumbled.

"It'll get worse," Leroy warned. "Now they've seen how effective it is against Arnstadt, they'll start doing it here. New California's SD network is just as vulnerable to stealth mines. Our advantage is that the Organization is now up and running on the planet. We don't need to enforce it the way we do on Arnstadt. I think we only used a ground strike ten times last week."

"Twelve," Emmet corrected. "But we do have a lot of industrial capacity in orbit. I'd hate to lose much of it to a stealth strike campaign. Our outer system asteroid settlements really aren't supplying us with anything like the material they should be, production simply doesn't match capacity at all."

"That's because we essentially have the same problem as the outsystem delegations," Leroy said.

"Go on," Al said glumly; he was rolling the cigar absently between his fingers, its darkened tip pointing down. But he still hadn't taken his eyes off the fight. Joey was sagging now, swaying dazedly, while the blood from Gulo's face was flowing freely down his chest to splatter the floor of the ring. No bell was going to be rung; it wouldn't finish now until one of them fell.

"Every possessed wants to live on a planet," Leroy said. "Asteroids don't have an adequate population base to sustain a civilization for eternity. We've started to see a lot of inter-orbit craft heading towards New California from the

settlements. And for every possessed on their way, there are another ten waiting for the next ship.”

“Goddamnit,” Al shouted. “When those skid-row assholes get here, you send them right back where they came from. We need those asteroid factories working at full steam ahead. You got that?”

“I’ll notify SD Command,” Leroy said.

“Make sure they know I ain’t fucking joking.”

“Will do.”

Al relit his cigar by glaring at it. “Okay, so, Luigi, when can we start to take out the Toi-Hoi system?”

Luigi shrugged. “I’ll be honest with you, Al, our original timetable ain’t looking too good here.”

“Why not?”

“We thought we’d almost double the fleet size with Arnstadt’s ships. Which we have done. But then we need a lot of them to keep order in that system, and reliable crews are getting hard to find. Then there’s Kursk. We made a mistake with that one, Al, the place ain’t worth a bucket of warm spit. It’s those hillbilly redneck farmers. They just won’t roll over.”

“That’s where Mickey is right now,” Silvano said. “He’s trying to run an offensive which will bring them to heel. It’s not easy. The tricky bastards have taken to the countryside. They’re hiding in trees and caves, a whole load of places the satellite sensors can’t find them. And the Confederation is hitting us big-time with those stealth weapons, like Arnstadt was just a warm-up. We’re losing three or four ships a day.”

“I think Luigi is right when he said we made a mistake invading Kursk,” Emmet said. “It’s costing us a bundle, and returning zippo. I say pull the fleet out; let the possessed on the ground take care of the planet in their own time.”

“That’ll mean the Organization won’t have any clout there,” Patricia said. “Once everyone’s possessed, they’ll snatch it clean out of the universe.”

“The only thing it ever gave to us was propaganda,” Leroy said. “We can’t work that angle anymore. Emmet’s right. I don’t think we should be aiming at any planet lower

than stage four, one that can replace our losses, as a minimum requirement.”

“That sounds solid to me,” Al agreed. “I don’t like losing Kursk, but spelt out like that I don’t see that we’ve got one whole hell of a choice. Luigi, get Mickey back here, tell him to bring all the ships and as many of our soldiers as he can. I want to go for Toi-Hoi as soon as you can load up with supplies. People will think we’ve stalled otherwise; and it’s important to keep the momentum going.”

“You got it, boss. I’d like to send Cameron Leung as the messenger, if you ain’t using him. It’ll be the quickest way, cut down on any more of our losses.”

“Sure, no problem. Send him pronto.” Al blew a smoke ring at the distant ceiling. “Anything else?”

Leroy and Emmet gave each other a resigned look.

“There’s a lot of currency cheating going on,” Emmet said. “I suppose you could call it forgery.”

“Je-zus, I thought you rocket scientists had that all figured out.”

“Foolproof, you said,” Silvano said with a demon’s grin.

“It should have been,” Emmet insisted. “Part of it is due to the way it’s being implemented. Our soldiers aren’t being entirely honest about the amount of time the possessed are devoting to redeeming their energetic debts. People are starting to complain. There’s a lot of restlessness building up down there, Al. You’re going to have to make it clear to the lieutenants how important it is to stick with the rules. The economy we’ve rigged up is shaky enough already without suffering this confidence crisis. If it fails, then we lose control and the planet goes wild, just like Kursk. You can’t use the SD platforms to waste everyone who disagrees with us; we need to be subtle about how we keep the majority in line.”

“All right, all right.” Al waved a hand, nettled at the schoolmaster tone Emmet was using.

“Based on what we’ve seen so far, I’m not sure a wild possessed population could even feed themselves. Certainly the cities would have to be abandoned as soon as the supply

infrastructure collapses. You do need a large area of land under cultivation to support a city like San Angeles.”

“Will you cut this *crap*. I fucking understand, okay? What I want to know is, what are you going to do about it?”

“It’s about time you met with the groundside lieutenants again, Al,” Leroy said. “We can build on the fleet’s return, show how together we are up here, how they’d be nothing without us. Make them toe the line.”

“Oh, Jesus H. Christ, not another fucking tour. I just got back!”

“You’re in charge of two star systems, Al,” Leroy said matter-of-factly. “There are some things which have to be done.”

Al winced. The fatboy manager was right, as goddamn always. This wasn’t a game to be picked up when he felt like it, this was different from before. In Chicago he’d climbed on the back of the power structure to advance himself; now he was the structure. That was when he finally realized the responsibility, and enormity, of what he’d created.

If the Organization crashed, millions—living and resurrected—would fall beside him, their hopes smashed on the rocks of his selfish intransigence. Alcatraz was the result of his last brush with hubris. Alcatraz would be bliss compared to the suffering focused on him should he fail again.

The fight which was limping to its conclusion was no longer the centre of attention; most of the possessed in the gym were staring at him strangely. They could see the muddle and horror in his mind. Leroy and Avram were waiting, puzzled by the sudden, uneasy silence.

“Sure thing, Leroy,” Al said meekly. “I know what I’m in charge of. And I ain’t never been scared of doing what has to be done. Remember that. So set up that tour. You got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Makes a fucking change. Right, you guys all know what you gotta do. Do it.”

Gulo landed one final blow in Joey’s stomach which sent him staggering backwards to collapse in a corner. Malone

hopped over the ropes to examine the fallen man. Gulo stood over them, uncertain what to do next. Blood was dripping swiftly from his chin.

“Okay, kid,” Malone said. “That’s it for the day.”

Al flicked his cigar away and stood by the ropes. He beckoned Gulo over. “You did pretty damn good out there, boy. How long you been training?”

Gulo slipped a blood-soaked gumshield from his mouth. “Nine days, Mr Capone, sir,” he mumbled. Little flecks of blood splattered Al’s suit jacket as he wheezed painfully.

Al took hold of the kid’s head with one hand and turned it from side to side, examining the bruises and cuts inside the sparring helmet. He concentrated hard, feeling a cold tingle sweeping along his arm to infect the kid’s face through his fingertips. The bleeding stopped, and the grazed bruising deflated slightly. “You’ll do okay,” Al decided.

• • •

Jezzibella was lounging on the circular bed. A wall-mounted holoscreen showed her an image of the gym relayed by a sensor high in the ceiling. Emmet, Luigi, and Leroy clustered together, discussing something in sober tones, their amplified murmurs filling the bedroom.

“Hard day at the office, lover?” Jezzibella asked. It was a persona of toughness wrapping a tender heart. Her face was very serious, fine features slightly flushed. A longish bob hairstyle cupped her cheeks.

“You saw it,” he said.

“Yeah.” She uncurled her legs and stood up, wrestling with the fabric of her long silky white robe. There was no belt, and it was open to the waist, allowing a very shapely navel to peek out. “Come here, baby. Lie down.”

“Best goddamn offer I’ve had all day.” He was bothered by his own lack of enthusiasm.

“Not that; you need to relax.”

Al grunted disparagingly, but did as he was told. When he was lying on his back he stuck his hands behind his head, frowning at the ceiling. “Crazy. Me of all people; I should’ve known what was going to happen with the money.

Everyone skims and everyone scams. What made me think my soldiers were going to be square shooters?"

Jezzibella planted a foot on either side of his hips, then sat down. Her robe's fabric must have carried one hell of a static charge, he guessed, there was no other reason why it should cling to her skin at all the strategic zones. Her fingers dug into the base of his neck, thumbs probing deep.

"Hey, what is this?"

"I'm trying to get you to relax, remember? You're so tense." Her fingers were moving in circles now, almost strumming his hot muscle cords.

"That's good," he admitted.

"I should really have some scented oils to do this properly."

"You want I should try and dream some up?" He wasn't too certain he could imagine smells the way he could shapes.

"No. Improvising can be fun, you never know what you might discover. Turn over, and get rid of your shirt."

Al rolled over, yawning heavily. He rested his chin on his hands as Jezzibella began to move her fingertips along his spine.

"I dunno what I hate most," Al said. "Retreating from Kursk, or admitting how right that shitty slob Leroy was."

"Kursk was a strategic withdrawal."

"Running away is running away, doll. Don't matter how you dress it up."

"I think I've found something that might help you with Arnstadt."

"What's that?"

She leaned over to the bedside cabinet and picked up a small processor block, tapping the keyboard. "I only saw this recording today. Leroy should have brought it to me earlier. Apparently it's all over the Confederation. We got it from one of the outsystem delegations that arrived to plead with you."

The holoscreen switched from the gym to showing Kiera Salter lounging on her boulder.

“Yep, that certainly perks me up,” Al said cheerfully.

Jezzibella slapped his rump. “Just you behave, Al Capone. Forget her tits, listen to what she’s saying.”

He listened to the enticing words.

“She’s actually rather good,” Jezzibella said. “Especially considering it’s AV only, no naughty sensory activants to hammer home the message. I could have done it better, of course, but then I’m a professional. But that recording is pulling in dissatisfied kids from every asteroid settlement that ever received a copy. They call it Deadnight.”

“So? Valisk is one of those frigging freaky habitat places. She’s hardly gonna be a threat to us no matter how many people go there.”

“It’s how they get there which interests me. Kiera has managed to take over Valisk’s blackhawks, they call them hellhawks.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. And all they’re doing is ferrying idiot kids to the habitat. She is facing the same problem as all the possessed asteroid settlements. They’re not the kinds of places you want to spend eternity in. My guess is that she’s trying to beef up Valisk’s population so the ones already there don’t push to land on a planet. It makes sense. If they did move, Kiera wouldn’t be top dog anymore.”

“So? I never said she was dumb.”

“Exactly. She’s organized. Not on the scale you are, but she’s smart, she understands politics. She’d make an excellent ally. We can supply her with people a lot faster than she can acquire them through clandestine flights. And in return, she loans us a couple of squadrons of these hellhawks, which the fleet desperately needs. They’d soon put a stop to the Confederation’s stealth attacks.”

“Damn!” He shuffled around inside the cage of her legs to see her poised above him, hands on her hips, content smile on her lips. “That’s good, Jez. No it ain’t, it’s fucking brilliant. Hell, you don’t need me, you could run this Organization by yourself.”

“Don’t be silly. I can’t do what you do to me, not solitaire.”

He growled hungrily and reached for the robe. Marie Skibbow’s golden face smiled down on them as more and more of their clothing vanished, some into thin air, some into torn strips.

• • •

The First Admiral waited until Captain Khanna and Admiral Lalwani seated themselves in front of his desk, then datavised the desktop processor for a security level one sensenviron conference. Six people were waiting around the oval table in the featureless white bubble room which formed around him. Directly opposite Samual Aleksandrovich was the Confederation Assembly President, Olton Haaker, with his chief aide Jeeta Anwar next to him; the Kulu ambassador, Sir Maurice Hall, was on her left, accompanied by Lord Elliot, a junior minister from the Kulu Foreign Office; the Edenist ambassador, Cayeaux, and Dr Gilmore took the remaining two chairs.

“This isn’t quite our usual situation briefing today, Admiral,” President Haaker said. “The Kulu Kingdom has made a formal request for military aid.”

Samual Aleksandrovich knew his face was showing a grimace of surprise, his sensenviron image, however, retained a more dignified composure. “I had no idea any of the Kingdom worlds were under threat.”

“We are not facing any new developments, Admiral,” Sir Maurice said. “The Royal Navy is proving most effective in protecting our worlds from any strikes by possessed starships. Even Valisk’s hellhawks have stopped swallowing into our systems to peddle their damnable Deadnight subversion. And our planetary forces have contained all the incursions quite successfully. With the sorry exception of Mortonridge, of course. Which is why we are requesting your cooperation and assistance. We intend to mount a liberation operation, and free the citizens who have been possessed.”

“Impossible,” Samual said. “We have no viable method of purging a body of its possessor. Dr Gilmore.”

“Unfortunately, the First Admiral is correct,” the navy scientist said. “As we have found, forcing a returned soul to relinquish a body it has captured is extremely difficult.”

“Not if they are placed in zero-tau,” Lord Elliot said.

“But there are over two million people on Mortonridge,” Samual said. “You can’t put that many into zero-tau.”

“Why not? It’s only a question of scale.”

“You’d need . . .” Samual trailed off as various tactical programs went primary in his neural nanonics.

“The help of the Confederation Navy,” Lord Elliot concluded. “Exactly. We need to move a large number of ground troops and matériel to Ombey. You have transport and assault starships which aren’t really involved with enforcing the civil starflight quarantine. We’d like them to be reassigned to the campaign. The combined resources of our own military forces, our allies, and the Confederation Navy ought to be sufficient to liberate Mortonridge.”

“Ground troops?”

“We will initially be providing the Kingdom with half a million bitek constructs,” Ambassador Cayeaux said. “They should be able to restrain individual possessed, and force them into a zero-tau pod. Their deployment will insure the loss of human life is kept to a minimum.”

“*You* are going to help the Kingdom?” Samual couldn’t be bothered to filter his surprise out of the question. But . . . the Edenists and the Kingdom allied! At one level he was pleased, prejudice can be abandoned if the incentive is great enough. What a pity it had to be this, though.

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“The Edenist constructs will have to be backed up by a considerable number of regular soldiers to hold the ground they take,” Sir Maurice said. “We would also like you to assign two brigades of Confederation Marines to the campaign.”

“I’ve no doubt your tactical evaluations have convinced

you about the plausibility of this liberation,” Samual said. “But I must go on record as opposing it, and certainly I do not wish to devote my forces to what will ultimately prove a futile venture. If this kind of combined effort is to be made, it should at least be directed at a worthwhile target.”

“His Majesty has said he will go to any lengths to free his subjects from the suffering being inflicted on them,” Lord Elliot said.

“Does his obligation only extend to the living?”

“Admiral!” Haaker warned.

“I apologize. However you must appreciate that I have a responsibility to the Confederation worlds as a whole.”

“Which so far you have demonstrated perfectly.”

“So far?”

“Admiral, you know the status quo within the Confederation cannot be maintained indefinitely,” Jeeta Anwar said. “We cannot afford it.”

“We have to consider the political objectives of this conflict,” Haaker said. “I’m sorry, Samual, but logic and sound tactics aren’t the only factors at play here. The Confederation must be seen to be doing something. I’m sure you appreciate that.”

“And you have chosen Mortonridge as that something?”

“It is a goal which the Kingdom and the Edenists think they can achieve.”

“Yes, but what would happen afterwards? Do you propose to take on every possessed planet and asteroid in a similar fashion? How long would that take? How much would it cost?”

“I sincerely hope such a process would not have to be repeated,” Cayeaux said. “We must use the time it takes to liberate Mortonridge to search for another approach to the problem. However, if there is no answer, then similar campaigns may indeed have to be mounted.”

“Which is why this first one must succeed,” Haaker said.

“Are you ordering me to redeploy my forces?” Samual asked.

“I’m informing you of the request the Kulu Kingdom and

the Edenists have made. It is a legitimate request made by two of our strongest supporters. If you have an alternative proposal, then I'll be happy to receive it."

"Of course I don't have an alternative."

"Then I don't think you have any reason to refuse them."

"I see. If I might ask, Ambassador Cayeaux, why does your Consensus agree to this?"

"We agreed to it for the sake of the hope it will provide to all the living in the Confederation. We do not necessarily approve."

"Samual, you've done a magnificent job so far," Lalwani said. "We know this liberation is only a sideshow, but it will gain us a great deal of political support. And we are going to need every scrap of support we can find in the coming weeks."

"Very well." Samual Aleksandrovich paused in distaste. What upset him most was how well he understood their argument, almost sympathising with it. Image had become the paramount motivation, the way every war was fought for politicians. But in this I am no different from military commanders down the centuries, we always have to play within the political arena in order to fight the real battle. I wonder if my illustrious predecessors felt so soiled? "Captain Khanna, please ask the general staff to draw up fleet redeployment orders based on the request from the Kulu Kingdom ambassador."

"Yes, sir."

"I wish your King every success, Ambassador."

"Thank you, Admiral. We do not wish to disrupt your current naval operations. Alastair does understand the importance of the role you are playing."

"I'm glad of that. There are going to be some difficult decisions for all of us ahead; his patronage will be essential. As I have said from the beginning, this requires an ultimate solution that can never be purely military."

"Have you considered the proposal Capone made?" Sir Maurice asked. "I know if any of the possessed can be seen

in terms of a conventional enemy, it's him. But could bitek construct bodies be made to work?"

"We examined it," Maynard Khanna said. "In practical terms it is completely inviable. The numbers are impossible. A conservative estimate for the Confederation's current population is nine hundred billion, which averages out at just over one billion per star system. Even if you assume only ten dead people for everyone living, there must be approximately ten trillion souls in the beyond. If they were each given a construct body, where would they live? We would have to find between three to five thousand new terracompatible planets for them. Clearly an impossible task."

"I would contend that number," Cayeaux said. "Laton quite clearly said that not every soul remains imprisoned in the beyond."

"Even if it was only a single trillion, that would still mean locating several hundred planets for them."

"Laton's information interests me," Dr Gilmore said. "We have been assuming all along that it is incumbent on us to provide a final solution. Yet if souls can progress from the beyond to some other state of existence, then clearly it is up to them to do so."

"How would we make them?" Haaker asked.

"I'm not sure. If we could just find one of them who would cooperate we could make so much more progress; someone like that Shaun Wallace character who was interviewed by Kelly Tirrel. Those we have here in Trafalgar are all so actively hostile to our investigation."

Samual thought about making a comment concerning relevant treatment and behaviour, but Gilmore didn't deserve public rebukes. "I suppose we could try a diplomatic initiative. There are several isolated asteroid settlements which have been possessed and yet haven't moved themselves out of the universe. We could make a start with them; send a message asking them if they will talk to us."

"An excellent proposal," Haaker said. "It would cost very little, and if we obtain a favourable response I would be prepared to give a joint research project my full support."

• • •

The sensenviron ended, leaving Dr Gilmore alone in his office. He did nothing for several minutes while the last part of the meeting ran through his mind. A man who prided himself on his methodical nature, the embodiment of the scientific method, he wasn't angry with himself, at the most he felt a slight irritation that he hadn't reasoned this out earlier. If Laton was correct about souls moving on, then the beyond was not the static environment he had assumed until now. That opened up a whole range of new options.

Dr Gilmore entered the examination room containing Jacqueline Couteur to find the staff on an extended break. Both quantum signature sensor arrays were missing from the overhead waldo arms. The electronics lab was rebuilding them once again, a near-continual process of refinement as they sought out the elusive transdimensional interface.

Jacqueline Couteur was being fed. A trolley had been wheeled in beside the surgical bed, sprouting a thick hose which hung just over her mouth. Her black head restraint had been loosened slightly, allowing her to switch between the two nipples; one for water, the other a meat paste.

Dr Gilmore walked through to stand next to the surgical bed. Her eyes followed his movement.

"Good morning, Jacqueline; how are you today?"

Her eyes narrowed contemptuously. Little wisps of steam licked up from the electrodes pressing against her skin. She opened her mouth and circled the plastic nipple with her tongue. "Fine, thank you, Dr Mengele. I'd like to speak to my lawyer, please."

"That's interesting. Why?"

"Because I'm going to sue you for every fuseodollar you own, and then have you shot down to a penal world in a one-way capsule. Torture is illegal in the Confederation. Read the Declaration of Rights."

"If you are in discomfort, you should leave. We both know you can do that."

"We're not discussing my options at the moment. It is

your actions which are in question. Now may I have my one phone call?"

"I had no idea an immortal soul had civil rights. You certainly don't show your victims much in the way of autonomy."

"My rights are for the courts to decide. By denying me access to legal representation for such a test case you are compounding your crime. However, if it bothers you, then I can assure you that Kate Morley would like to see a lawyer."

"Kate Morley?"

"This body's co-host."

Dr Gilmore gave an uncertain smile. This wasn't going to plan at all. "I don't believe you."

"Again, you take the role of the court upon yourself. Do you really think Kate enjoys being strapped down and electrocuted? You are violating her basic human rights."

"I'd like to hear her ask for a lawyer."

"She has just done that. If you don't believe me, try running a voice print analysis. She said it."

"This is absurd."

"I want my lawyer!" Her voice rose in volume. "You, Marine, you are sworn to uphold the rights of Confederation citizens. I want a lawyer. Get me one."

The captain of the marine guard looked at Dr Gilmore for guidance. Everyone on the other side of the glass partition was staring in.

Dr Gilmore relaxed and smiled. "All right, Jacqueline. You cooperate with us, we'll cooperate with you. I will raise the topic with the First Admiral's legal staff to see if they consider you are entitled to legal representation. But first I want you to answer a question for me."

"The accused have a right of silence."

"I'm not accusing you of anything."

"Clever, Doctor. Ask then. But don't insult me by asking me to incriminate myself."

"When did your body die?"

"In 2036. Do I get my lawyer now?"

“And you were conscious the whole time you were in the beyond?”

“Yes, you moron.”

“Thank you.”

Jacqueline Couteur gave him a highly suspicious glance. “That’s it?”

“Yes. For now.”

“How did that help you?”

“Time passes in the beyond. That means it is subject to entropy.”

“So?”

“If your continuum decays, then the entities within it can die. More pertinently, they can be killed.”

• • •

“She wants a *what?*” Maynard Khanna asked.

Dr Gilmore flinched. “A lawyer.”

“This is a joke, right?”

“I’m afraid not.” He sighed reluctantly. “The problem is, while ordinarily I would dismiss such a request as sheer nonsense, it has opened something of a debate among the investigating staff. I know the Intelligence Service has extremely wide-ranging powers that supersede the Declaration of Rights; but personality debrief is normally conducted by another division. I’m not saying that what we’re doing to Couteur and the others isn’t necessary, I would just like to establish that our orders were drafted correctly, that is: legally. Naturally, I don’t wish to bother the First Admiral with such trivia at this time. So if you could raise the matter with the Provost General’s office I’d be grateful. Just for clarification, you understand.”

• • •

In appearance, Golomo was no different from any of the other gas giants found among the star systems of the Confederation. A hundred and thirty-two thousand kilometres in diameter, its ring band slightly denser than usual, its storm bands a raucous mix of twirled vermilion, pale azure, splashed with coffee-cup swirls of white strands. The ab-

normality for which it was renowned lurked several hundred kilometres below the furrowed surface of the outer cloud layer, down where the density and temperature had risen considerably. That was where the Edenists whose habitats colonized the orbital space above located life; a narrow zone where pressure reduced the speed of the turbulence, and the strange hydrocarbon gases developed an easy viscosity. Single cells like airborne amoebas, but the size of a human fist, could survive there. They always clustered together in great colonies, resembling blankets of beluga. Why they did it, nobody could work out, none of them were specialized, all of them were independent. Yet to find singletons was unusual, at least in the areas so far observed by the probes, which admittedly was a minute percentage of the planet.

At any other time, Syrinx would dearly have loved to pay the research sites a visit. The old curiosity was still itching when *Oenone* slid out of its wormhole above the gas giant.

Other days, other priorities, the voidhawk chided.

Syrinx felt a hand patting hers; affinity was filled with if not quite sympathy, then certainly tolerance. She gave Ruben a droll glance and shrugged. **Okay, another time.** She borrowed the voidhawk's powerful affinity voice to identify them to the Golomo Consensus; SD sensors were already locking on.

The routine for each system they visited was identical: impart a summary of the Confederation's strategic disposition, then there were accounts of new developments in neighbouring systems, which asteroids and planets faced the possibility of takeovers. In exchange, the Consensus provided an intelligence update on the local system. *Oenone* could cover two, sometimes three star systems a day. So far the picture of conditions they were building up was depressing. The Edenist habitats were managing to stay on top of the situation, remaining loyal to the designated isolation and confinement policies. Adamist populations were less observant. Everywhere she went there were complaints about the hardships resulting from the quarantine, Edenist worries of local navies falling short of their designated du-

ties, stories of illegal starship flights, a steady trickle of asteroids falling to the possessed, of political manoeuvring and advantage-trading.

We are generally more law abiding than Adamists, Oxley said. And there are more of them than us. That's bound to produce a weighted picture.

Don't make excuses for them, Caucus said.

Lack of education, and fear, Syrinx said. That's what's doing it. We have to make allowances, I suppose. But at the same time, their attitude is going to be a real problem in the long term. In fact, it might mean there won't even be a long term as far as they're concerned.

Apart from the Kulu Kingdom, and one or two other of the more disciplined societies, Ruben's suggestion was infected with irony.

She delayed her answer as she became aware of a growing unease in Golomo's Consensus. Voidhawks from the local defence force were popping in and out of wormholes, filling the affinity band with an excited buzz. **What is the problem?** she inquired.

We are confirming that the Ethenthia asteroid settlement has fallen to possession, Consensus informed Oenone and its crew. We have just received a message from its Confederation Navy Bureau concerning the arrival of a CNIS captain, Erick Thakrar, from Kursk. According to the bureau chief, Thakrar had obtained information of an extremely important nature. A voidhawk was requested to carry the captain and his prisoner to Trafalgar. Unfortunately there is a fifteen-hour delay to Ethenthia. In the intervening time the possessed appear to have . . .

Along with everyone else attuned to Consensus, Syrinx and her crew were immediately aware of the incoming message. Habitat senses perceived it as a violet star-point of microwaves, shining directly at Golomo from Ethenthia.

"This is Erick Thakrar, CNIS captain; I'm the one Emonn Verona told you about. Or at least I hope he did. God. Anyway, the possessed have taken over Ethenthia now. You

probably know that by now. I managed to make it to a starship, the *Tigara*, but they're on to me. Listen, the information I've got is *vital*. I can't trust it to an open com link; if they find out what I know, it'll become useless. But right now this ship is totally fucked, and I'm not much better. I've got a partial alignment on the Ngeuni system, but there's barely anything about it in this almanac. I think it's a stage one colony. If I can't transfer to a flightworthy starship there, I'll try and slingshot back here. God, the SD platform is locking on. Okay, I'm jumping now—"

Ngeuni is a stage one colony, *Oenone* responded immediately.

Syrinx was automatically aware of its spatial location eleven light years away. When correlated with Ethenthia's current position the alignment must have been very tenuous indeed. If Thakrar's ship was as bad as he implied . . .

The colony is still in its start-up stage, *Oenone* continued. **However, there may be some starships available.**

This is something I should follow up, Syrinx told Consensus.

We concur. It will be another day before Thakrar returns here, assuming his ship remains flightworthy.

We'll check Ngeuni to see if he got there. Even as she spoke, energy was flowing through the voidhawk's patterning cells.

• • •

Stephanie heard a loud mechanical screeching sound followed by a raucous siren blast. She grinned around at the children sitting at the kitchen table. "Looks like your uncle Moyo has found us some transport."

Her humour faded when she reached the bungalow's front porch. The bus which was parked on the road outside was spitting light in every spectrum; its bodywork a tight-packed mass of cartoon flowers growing out of paisley fields. LOVE, PEACE, and KARMA flashed in nightclub neon on the sides. The darkest areas were its gleaming chrome hubcaps.

Moyo climbed down out of the cab, busily radiating em-

barrassment. The doors at the back of the bus hissed open, and another man climbed down. She'd never seen anyone with so much hair before.

The children were crowding around her, gazing out eagerly at the radiant carnival apparition.

"Is that really going to take us to the border?"

"How do you make it light up?"

"Please, Stephanie, can I get inside?"

Stephanie couldn't say no to them, so she waved them on with a casual gesture. They swarmed over the small front lawn to examine the wonderment.

"I can see how this should help us avoid any undue attention," she said to Moyo. "Have you lost your mind?"

A guilty finger indicated his new companion. "This is Cochrane, he helped me with the bus."

"So it was your idea?"

"Surely was." Cochrane bowed low. "Man, I *always* wanted a set of wheels like this."

"Good. Well now you've had it, you can say goodbye. I have to take these children out of here, and they're not going in that *thing*. We'll change it into something more suitable."

"Won't do you no good."

"Oh?"

"He's right," Moyo said. "We can't sneak about, not here. You know that. Everybody can sense everything in Morton-ridge now."

"That's still no reason to use this . . . this—" She thrust an exasperated arm out towards the bus.

"It's like gonna be a mobile Zen moment for those with unpure thoughts," Cochrane said.

"Oh, spare me!"

"No really. Any cat catches sight of that bus and they're gonna have to confront like their inner being, you know. It's totally neat, a soul looking into its own soul. With this, you're broadcasting goodness at them on Radio Godhead twenty-four hours a day; it's a mercy mission that makes mothers weep for their lost children. My Karmic Crusader bus is going to shame them into letting you through. But like

if you hit on people with a whole heavy military scene, like some kind of covert behind-the-lines hostility raid, you'll waste all those good vibes your karma has built up. It'll make it easy for all the cosmically uncool redneck dudes running loose out there to make it hard for us."

"Humm." He did make an odd kind of sense, she admitted grudgingly. Moyo gave her a hopeful shrug, a loyalty which lent her a cosy feeling. "Well, we could try it for a few miles I suppose." Then she gave Cochrane a suspicious look. "What do you mean, us?"

He smiled and held his arms out wide. A miniature rainbow sprang up out of his palms, arching over his head. The children laughed and clapped.

"Hey, I was at Woodstock, you know. I helped rule the world for three days. You need the kind of peaceful influence I exert over the land. I'm a friend to all living things, the unliving, too, now."

"Oh, hell."

• • •

Erick still hadn't activated the life-support capsule's internal environmental systems. He was too worried what the power drain would do to the starship's one remaining functional fusion generator. There certainly wasn't enough energy stored in the reserve electron matrix cells to power up the jump nodes.

Ngeuni's star was a severe blue-white point a quarter of a light-year away. Not quite bright enough to cast a shadow on the hull, but well above first magnitude, dominating the starfield. His sensor image was overlaid with navigation graphics, a tunnel of orange circles which seemed to be guiding the *Tigara* several degrees south of the star. After five jumps he was still matching delta-v.

Thankfully, the clipper's fusion drive was capable of a seven-gee acceleration, and they weren't carrying any cargo. It meant he had enough fuel to align the ship properly. Getting back to Golomo was going to be a problem, though.

The flight computer warned him that the alignment ma-

oeuvre was almost complete. *Tigara* was flashing towards the jump coordinate at nineteen kilometres per second. He started to reduce thrust and ordered the fusion generator to power up the nodes. As soon as the plasma flow increased he started receiving datavisid caution warnings. The confinement field which held the ten-million-degree stream of ions away from the casing was fluctuating alarmingly.

Erick quickly loaded an emergency dump order into the flight computer, linking it to a monitor. If the confinement field fell below five per cent the generator would shut down and vent.

For some reason he was devoid of all tension. Then he realized his medical program was flashing for attention. When he accessed it, he saw the packages were filtering out a deluge of toxins and neurochemicals from his bloodstream at the same time as they were issuing chemical suppressors.

He grinned savagely around the SII suit's oxygen tube. Neutering his own reflexes at precisely the time he needed them the most. Too many factors were building up against him. And still it didn't really bother him, not snug in the heart of his semi-narcotic hibernation.

The flight computer signalled that the jump coordinate was approaching. Sensors and heat dump panels began to sink down into their recesses. The main drive reduced thrust to zero. Erick fired the ion thrusters, keeping the *Tigara* on track.

Then the energy patterning nodes were fully charged. Finally he felt a distant sense of relief, and reduced the fusion generator output. The straining confinement field surged as the plasma stream shrank by ninety per cent inside half a second. Decaying failsoft components didn't respond in time. An oscillation rippled along the tokamak chamber, tearing the plasma stream apart.

The *Tigara* jumped.

It emerged deep inside the Ngeuni system; at that instant a perfect inert sphere. The poise was shattered within an instant as the raging plasma tore through the tokamak's casing and ripped out through the hull, loosing incandescent

swords of ions in all directions. A chain reaction of secondary explosions began as cryogenic tanks and electron matrices detonated.

The ship disintegrated amid a blaze of radioactive gases and ragged molten debris. Its life-support capsule came spinning out of the core of the explosion; a silvered sphere whose surface was gashed by veins of black carbon where energy bursts and tiny fragments had peppered the polished nultherm foam.

As soon as it was clear of the boiling gases, emergency rockets fired to halt the capsule's wild tumbling motion, a solid kick into stability. The beacon began to broadcast its shrill distress call.

23

Like most enterprises mounted by governments and institutions on Nyvan, the Jesup asteroid was chronically short of finance, engineering resources, and qualified personnel. The rock's major ore reserves had been mined out a long time ago. Ordinarily, the revenue would have been invested in the development of the asteroid's astroengineering industry. But the New Georgia government had diverted the initial wind-fall income to pay for more immediate and voter-friendly projects on the ground.

After the ore was exhausted, Jesup spent the next decades limping along both economically and industrially. Fledgling manufacturing companies shrank back to service subsidiaries and small indigenous armament corporations. Its aging infrastructure was maintained one degree from breakdown. Of the three planned biosphere caverns only one had ever been completed, leaving a vast number of huge empty cavities spaced strategically throughout the rock which would have been the kernels of fresh mining activity.

It was when Quinn was striding along one of the interminable bare-rock tunnels linking the discarded cavities that he sensed the first elusive presence. He stopped so abruptly that Lawrence almost bumped into him.

"What was that?"

"What?" Lawrence asked.

Quinn turned full circle, slowly scanning the dust-en-crusted rock of the wide tunnel. Dribbles of condensation ran along the curving walls and roof, cutting small forked channels through the ebony dust as they generated fragile miniature stalactites. It was as if the tunnel were growing a

fur of cactus spikes. But there was no place for anyone to hide, only the waves of shadow between the widely spaced lighting panels.

His entourage of disciples waited with nervous patience. After two days of slickly brutal initiation ceremonies the asteroid now belonged to him. However, Quinn remained disappointed with the number of true converts among the possessed. He had assumed that they of all people would despise Jesus and Allah and Buddha and the other false Gods for condemning them to an agonizing limbo. Showing them the path to the Light Bringer ought to have been easy. But they continued to demonstrate a bewildering resistance to his teachings. Some even interpreted their return to be a form of redemption.

Quinn could find nothing in the tunnel. He was sure he had caught a wisp of thought which didn't belong to any of the entourage; it had been accompanied by a tiny flicker of motion, grey on black. First reaction was that someone was sneaking along behind them.

Irritated by the distraction, he strode off again, his robe rising to glide above the filthy rock floor. It was cold in the tunnel, his breath turning to snowy vapour before his eyes. His feet began to crunch on particles of ice.

A frigid gust of air swept against him, making an audible *swoosh*. His robe flapped about.

He stopped again, angry this time. "What the fuck is going on here? There's no environmental ducts in this tunnel." He held up a hand to feel the air, which was now perfectly still.

Someone laughed.

He whirled around. But the disciples were looking at each other in confusion. None of them had dared mock his bewilderment. For a moment he thought of the unknown figure at the spaceport on Norfolk, the powerful swirl of flames he had unleashed. But that was light-years away, and no one else had escaped the planet except the Kavanagh girl.

"These tunnels are always acting erratically, Quinn," Bonham said. Bonham was one of the new converts, pos-

sessing Lucky Vin's body, which he was twisting into a ghoulish form, bleaching the skin, sharpening the teeth, and swelling the eyes. Thick animal hair was sprouting out of his silver skull. He said he had been born into a family of Venetian aristocrats in the late nineteenth century, killed before his twenty-seventh birthday in the First World War, but only after having tasted both the decadence and blind cruelty of the era. A taste which had become a voracious appetite. He had needed no persuading to embrace Quinn's doctrines.

"I asked one of the maintenance chappies, and he said it's because there aren't any ducts in the tunnels to regulate them properly. There are all sorts of weird surges."

Quinn wasn't satisfied. He was sure he'd sensed someone sneaking about. A dissatisfied grunt, and he was on his way once more.

No further oddities waylaid him before he reached the cavity where one of the teams was working. It was an almost spherical chamber, with a small flat floor, acting as a junction to seven of the large tunnels. A single fat metal tube hung downwards from the apex, rattling loudly as it blew out a wind of warm dry air. Quinn scowled up at it, then went over to the knot of five men working to secure the fusion bomb to the floor.

The device's casing was a blunt cone, seventy centimetres high. Several processor blocks had been plugged into its base with optical cables. The men stopped working and stood up respectfully as Quinn approached.

"Did anyone come through here earlier?"

They assured him no one had. One of them was non-possessed, a technician from the New Georgia defence force. He was sweating profusely, his thoughts a mixture of dread and outrage.

Quinn addressed him directly. "Is everything going okay?"

"Yes," the technician murmured meekly. He kept glancing at Twelve-T.

The gang lord was in a sorry state. Tiny jets of steam spluttered out of his mechanical body parts. Rheumy crusts

were building up around the rim of bone in which his brain was resting, as though candle wax were leaking out. The membrane that clothed his brain had thickened (as Quinn wished) but was now acquiring an unhealthy green tint. He was blinking and squinting constantly as he fought the pain.

Quinn followed the man's gaze with pointed slowness. "Oh, yeah. The most feared gangster on the planet. Real hard-arsed mother who isn't gonna believe in God's Brother no matter what I do to him. Pretty dumb, really. But the thing is, he's useful to me. So I let him live. As long as he doesn't stray too far from me, he keeps on living. It's sort of like a metaphor, see? Now, you going to be a hard-arse?"

"No, sir, Mr Quinn."

"That's fucking smart." Quinn's head came forward slightly from the umbra of the hood to allow a faint light to strike his ashen skin. The technician closed his eyes to hide from the sight, lips mumbling a prayer.

"Now is this bomb going to work?"

"Yes, sir. It's a hundred megaton warhead, they all are. Once they're linked into the asteroid's net we can detonate them in sequence. As long as there are no possessed near them, they'll function properly."

"Don't worry about that. My disciples won't be here when Night dawns in the sky." He turned back to the tunnel, giving it a suspicious look. Again he had the intimation of motion, a flicker no larger than the flap of a bird's wing, and twice as fast. He was sure that someone had been watching the incident. A spoor of trepidation hung in the air like the scent of a summer flower.

When he stood at the entrance he could see the line of light panels shrink into distance before a curve took them from sight. The gentle sound of pattering water was all that emerged. He was half expecting to see that same blank human silhouette which had appeared at the hangar on Norfolk.

"If you are hiding, then you are weaker than me," he told the apparently empty shaft. "That means you will be found

and brought before me for judgement. Best you come out now.”

There was no response.

“Have it your way, shithead. You’ve seen what happens to people I don’t like.”

• • •

The rest of Quinn’s day was spent issuing the instructions that would cause Night to fall on the innocent planet below. He commanded New Georgia’s SD network now. It would be a simple matter for the platforms to interfere with Nyvan’s two other functional networks, and various national sensor satellites. Under cover of this electronic warfare barrage, spaceplanes would slide down undetected to the surface. Every nation would be seeded by a group of possessed from Jesup. And Nyvan’s curse of national antagonism would prevent a unified planetary response to the problem, which was the only response that could ever stand a chance of working.

The possessed would conquer here, probably with greater ease than anywhere in the Confederation. They were a single force, knowing nothing of borders and limits.

As for those who would actually be sent down, Quinn chose carefully. A couple of the devout for every spaceplane to make sure they followed their flight vectors and landed at the designated zone, but the rest were ones for whom only fear and his own proximity kept in line: unbelievers. It was quite deliberate. Free of his thrall, they would do what they always did, and seek to possess as many people as they could.

He didn’t care that he would not be there to move among them and bring the word of God’s Brother. Norfolk had shown him that mistake. Conversion on an individual basis was totally impractical when dealing with planetary populations.

Quinn’s duty, and that of the disciples, was the same as all priests; they were simply to prepare the ground for God’s Brother to walk upon, to build the temples and prepare the

sacrament. It was He who would bring the final message, showing all the light.

The spaceplanes were only half of the scheme. Quinn was preparing to dispatch inter-orbit ships to the three derelict asteroids under the command of his most trusted followers. Those worthless rocks had now become a cornerstone in his plans to advance the Night.

• • •

It was after midnight when Quinn returned to the tunnel. This time he was by himself. He stood motionless under the arching entrance for a full minute, allowing whoever was there to notice him. Then he raised a hand and fired a single bolt of white fire at the electrical cable which ran along the crest of the tunnel. All the light panels went out.

“Now we will know which of us is the master of darkness,” he shouted into the black air. He searched with his mind alone as he walked forwards, aware of the rock as an insubstantial pale grey tube around him. It was all that existed in a blank universe.

Feeble zephyrs of cold air rustled his robe. While out on the very cusp of perception, a tiny buzz increased; similar to the Babel of the beyond, but so much weaker.

He experienced no fright, nor even curiosity at confirming such an alien phenomenon existed. The Lords who battled for the heart of the universe and its denizens worked in ways he could never understand. All he had was his strength, and the knowledge that he knew himself. He would never quail, no matter what.

“I got you now, fuckers,” Quinn whispered back at the tremulous voices.

As if in response, the air grew colder, its churning stronger. He concentrated hard, trying to focus his eldritch sight on the air currents themselves. Elusive, twisting strands; they were hard for his mind to grasp. But he persisted, seeking out the points where heat was draining out of the gas molecules.

As he delved further and further into the convoluted tides of energy a tide of light began to thicken in the air around

him, sending faint streaks of colour dancing across the tunnel. It was as if the atmosphere's atoms had expanded into vast vacuous blobs, rushing around each other in frantic motion. When he slashed at one of the gliding luminescent baubles, his hand was a matt-black shape that passed clean through the hazy apparition. His fingers closed, snatching at nothing.

The misty glowing ball changed direction, ploughing through the others of its kind, rushing away from Quinn.

"Come back!" Quinn bellowed in fury, and let loose a blast of white fire in the direction it had gone. The aerial swell of colour shrank back from the bolt of energy.

Quinn saw them then, people huddled together in the darkness of the tunnel. Illuminated by the energistic discharge, they had dour, frightened faces. All of them were staring at him.

The energy bolt vanished, and with it the vision. Quinn gaped at the nebulous shoal which bobbed in agitation. They were flowing away from him steadily, picking up speed.

He thought he knew what they were, then. A whole group of possessed who had discovered how to make themselves invisible. His own energistic power began to boil through his body, mimicking the patterns inside the effervescent air. It was inordinately difficult, requiring almost his entire strength. As the energy crackled around him in the novel formation he realized what was happening. This was an effect similar to the one sought by the wild possessed on their quest to escape this universe, forcing open one of the innumerable chinks in quantum reality.

Quinn persevered, exerting himself fully, clawing at the elusive opening. After all, if they could do it, he, the chosen one, could achieve the same state. He hurried after the fleeing spectres, down the tunnel to the cavity where the bomb had been placed. The very last thing he could allow was a whole group of souls out of his control or sight.

His emergence into the new realm was gradual. The shadow outlines of matter which his mind perceived began to

take on more substance, becoming less translucent. His skin tingled, as if he were passing through a membrane of static. Then he was there. Weight was different, his body felt as if it were lighter than a drop of rain. He realized he wasn't breathing. His heart had stopped, too. Though, somehow, his body still functioned. Sheer willpower, he supposed.

He walked into the cavity to find them all, maybe a couple of hundred people; men, women and children. A large knot were gathered around the fusion bomb; if it wasn't for their blatant dismay they could have been praying to it. They were turning to face him; a collective fearful gasp went up. Children were clutched to their parents. Several held up shaking hands to ward him off.

"Peekaboo," Quinn said. "I see you, arseholes."

There was something wrong, something different between him and them. His own body glowed from the energetic power he was exerting, an image of vigour. They, by contrast, were uniformly pallid, almost monochrome. Wasted.

"Nice try," he told them. "But there's nowhere you can hide from God's Brother. Now I want you to all come back to reality with me. I won't be too hard; I've learned a useful trick tonight." He fixed his eyes on a teenage lad with flowing hair and smiled.

The lad shook his head. "We can't return," he stammered.

Quinn took five fast steps forwards and made a grab for the lad's arm. His fingers didn't exactly connect, but they did slow down as they passed through the sleeve. The lad's arm suddenly flared with brilliant colour, and he screeched in shock, stumbling backwards. "Don't," he pleaded. "Please, Quinn. It hurts."

Quinn studied his pain-furrowed face, rather enjoying the sight. "So you know my name, then."

"Yes. We saw you arrive. Please leave us alone. We can't harm you."

Quinn prowled along the front rank of the cowed group, looking at each of them as they pressed together. All of them

shared the same dejection, few could meet his gaze. "You mean you were like this when I came here?"

"Yes," the lad replied.

"How? I was the first to bring the possessed here. What the fuck are you?"

"We're . . ." He glanced around at his peers for permission. "We're ghosts."

• • •

The hotel suite was two stories from the ground, which gave it a gravity field roughly a fifth of that which Louise was used to on Norfolk. She found it even more awkward than free fall. Every movement had to be well thought out in advance. Genevieve and Fletcher didn't much care for it either.

And then there was the air, or rather the lack of it. Both of Phobos's biosphere caverns were maintained at a low pressure. It was an intermediate stage, double that of Mars to help people en route to the planet to acclimatize themselves. Louise was glad she wasn't going down to the surface; each breath was a real effort to suck enough oxygen down into her lungs.

But the asteroid was a visual thrill—once she got used to the ground curving up over her head. The balcony gave them an excellent view across the parkland and fields. She would have loved to walk through the forests; many of the trees were centuries old. Their dignity reassured her, making the worldlet seem less artificial. From where she stood on the balcony she could see several cedars, their distinctive layered grey-green boughs standing out against the more verdant foliage. There had been no time for such leisurely activities, though. As soon as they'd left the *Far Realm*, Endron had booked them in here (though it was her money which paid for the suite). Then they'd been out shopping. She thought she would enjoy that, but unfortunately, Phobos was nothing like Norwich. There were none of the city's department stores and exclusive boutiques. Their clothes had all come from the SII general merchandise depository which was half shop, half warehouse, but of course none of them

fitted her or Gen. Their bodies were a completely different shape to the asteroid's Martian and Lunar residents. Everything they chose had to be made-up. After that had come processor blocks (everyone in the Confederation used them, Endron explained, certainly travellers). Genevieve had plumped for one with a high-wattage AV projector and went on to load it with over fifty games from the depository's central memory core. Louise bought herself a block which could control the medical nanonic package around her wrist, allowing her to monitor her own physiological state.

Equipped and appearing like any normal visiting Confederation citizen, Louise had then accompanied Endron to the hostelrys frequented by spaceship crews. It was a rerun of her attempts to buy passage off Norfolk, but this time she had some experience in the matter, and Endron knew his way around Phobos. Between them they took a mere two hours to find the *Jamrana*, an inter-orbit cargo ship bound for Earth, and agree on a price for Louise and the others.

That just left the passports.

Louise dressed herself in a tartan skirt (with stiffened fabric to stop it dancing up in the low gravity), black leggings, and a green polo-neck top. Clothes were the same as computers, she thought. After using the *Far Realm's* flight computer she could never go back to the stupid keyboard-operated terminals on Norfolk, and now she had a million styles of dress available, none of them shaped by absurd concepts of what was *appropriate* . . .

She went out into the lounge. Genevieve was in her bedroom, the thin sounds of music and muffled dialogue leaking through the closed door as yet another game was run through her processor block. Louise didn't strictly approve, but objecting now would seem churlish, and it did keep her out of mischief.

Fletcher was sitting on one of the three powder-blue leather settees which made up the lounge's conversation area. He was sitting with his back to the glass window. Louise glanced at him, then the view which he was ignoring.

"I know, my lady," he said quietly. "You believe me fool-

ish. After all, I have undertaken a voyage between the stars themselves, in a ship where I swam through the air with the grace of a fish in the ocean.”

“There are stranger things in the universe than asteroid settlements,” she said sympathetically.

“As ever, you are right. I wish I could understand why the ground above us doesn’t fall down to bury us. It is ungodly, a defiance of the natural order.”

“It’s only centrifugal force. Do you want to access the educational text again?”

He gave her an ironic smile. “The one which the teachers of this age have prepared for ten-year-old children? I think I will spare myself repeated humiliation, my lady Louise.”

She glanced at her gold watch, which was almost the last surviving personal item from Norfolk. “Endron should be here in a minute. We’ll be able to leave Phobos in a few hours.”

“I do not relish our parting, lady.”

It was the one topic which she had never mentioned since the day when they had flown up to the *Far Realm*. “You are still intent on going down to Earth, then?”

“Aye, I am. Though in my heart I fear what awaits me there, I will not shirk from the task I have found for my new body. Quinn must be thwarted.”

“He’s probably there already. Goodness, by the time we reach the O’Neill Halo all of Earth could be possessed.”

“Even if I knew that beyond all doubt, I would still not allow myself to turn back. I am truly sorry, Lady Louise, but my course is set. But do not worry yourself unduly, I will stay with you until you have found passage to Tranquillity. And I will make sure that there are no possessed on your vessel before it casts off.”

“I wasn’t trying to stop you, Fletcher. I think I’m a little fearful of your integrity. People in this age always seem to put themselves first. I do.”

“You put your baby first, dearest Louise. Of that resolution, I am in awe. It is my one regret that by embarking on my own reckless venture that I will in all likelihood never

now meet your beau, this Joshua of whom you speak. I would dearly like to see the man worthy of your love, he must be a prince among men.”

“Joshua isn’t a prince. I know now he is nowhere near perfect. But . . . he does have a few good points.” Her hands touched her belly. “He’ll be a good father.”

Their eyes met. Louise didn’t think she had ever seen so much loneliness before. In all the history texts they’d reviewed, he had always taken care to avoid any which might have told him what became of the family he’d left behind on Pitcairn Island.

It would have been so very easy for her to sit beside him and put her arms around him. Surely a person so alone deserved some comfort? What made her emotions worse was that she knew he could see her uncertainty.

The door processor announced that Endron was waiting. Louise made light of the moment with a chirpy smile and went to fetch Genevieve from her room.

“Do we all have to go?” a reticent Genevieve asked Endron. “I’d reached the third strata in Skycastle. The winged horses were coming to rescue the princess.”

“She’ll still be there when we get back,” Louise said. “You can play it on the ship.”

“He needs you there for a full image scan,” Endron said. “No way out of it, I’m afraid.”

Genevieve looked thoroughly disgusted. “All right.”

Endron led them along one of the public halls. Louise was slowly mastering the art of walking in the asteroid’s effete gravity field. Nothing you could do to stop yourself leaving the ground at each step; so push strongly with your toes, angling them to project you along a flat trajectory. She knew she’d never be as fluid as the Martians no matter how much practise she had.

“I wanted to ask you,” Louise said as they slid into a lift. “If you’re all Communists, how can the *Far Realm*’s crew sell Norfolk Tears here?”

“Why shouldn’t we? It’s one of the perks of being a crew member. The only thing we don’t like about bringing it in is

paying import duty. And so far we haven't actually done that."

"But doesn't everybody own everything anyway? Why should they pay for it?"

"You're thinking of super-orthodox communism. People here retain their own property and money. No society could survive without that concept; you have to have something to show for your work at the end of the day. That's human nature."

"So you have landowners on Mars as well?"

Endron chuckled. "I don't mean that sort of property. We only retain personal items. Things like apartments are the property of the state; after all, the state pays for them. Farming collectives are allocated their land."

"And you accept that?"

"Yes. Because it works. The state has enormous power and wealth, but we vote on how it's used. We're dependent on it, and control it at the same time. We're also very proud of it. No other culture or ideology would ever have been able to terraform a planet. Mars has absorbed our nation's total wealth for five centuries. Offworlders have no idea of the level of commitment that requires."

"That's because I don't understand why you did it."

"We were trapped by history. Our ancestors modified their bodies to live in a Lunar gravity field before the ZTT drive was built. They could have sent their children to settle countless terracompatible worlds, but then those children would have needed geneering to adapt them back to the human 'norm.' Parent and child would have been parted at birth; they wouldn't have been descendants, just fosterlings in an alien environment. So we decided to make ourselves a world of our own."

"If I have followed this discourse correctly," Fletcher said. "You have spent five centuries turning Mars from a desert to a garden?"

"That's right."

"Are you really so powerful that you can rival Our Lord's handiwork?"

"I believe He only took seven days. We've got a long way to go yet before we equal that. Not that we'll ever do it again."

"Is the whole Lunar nation emigrating here now?" Louise asked, anxious to halt Fletcher's queries. She had caught Endron giving him puzzled glances at odd times during the voyage. It was something to watch out for; she was used to his naivete, thinking little of it. Others were not so generous.

"That was the idea. But now it's happened, the majority of those living in the Lunar cities are reluctant to leave. Those who do come here to settle are mostly the younger generation. So the shift is very gradual."

"Will you live on Mars once you've finished flying starships?"

"I was born in Phobos; I find skies unnatural. Two of my children live in Thoth city. I visit when I can, but I don't think I would fit in down there anyway. After all this time, our nation is finally beginning to change. Not very swiftly, but it's there, it's happening."

"How? How can communism change?"

"Money, of course. Now the terraforming project no longer absorbs every single fuseodollar earned by our state industries, there is more cash starting to seep into the economy. The younger generation adore their imported AV blocks and MF albums and clothes, they are placing so much value on these status symbols, ignoring our own nation's products purely for the sake of difference, which they see as originality. And they have a whole planet to range over; some of us actually worry that they might walk off into the countryside and reject us totally. Who knows? Not that I'd mind if they do discard our tenets. After all, it is their world. We built it so they could know its freedom. Trying to impose the old restrictions on them would be the purest folly. Social evolution is vital if any ethnic-nationhood is to survive; and five centuries is a long time to remain static."

"So if people did claim land for themselves, you wouldn't try to confiscate it back?"

“Confiscate? You say that with some malice. Is that what the Communists on your world say they’re going to do?”

“Yes, they want to redistribute Norfolk’s wealth fairly.”

“Well, tell them from me, it won’t work. All they’ll ever do is cause more strife if they try and change things now. You cannot impose ideologies on people who do not embrace it wholeheartedly. The Lunar nation functions because it was planned that way from the moment the cities gained independence from the companies. It’s the same concept as Norfolk, the difference being your founders chose to write a pastoral constitution. Communism works here because everybody supports it, and the net allowed us to eliminate most forms of corruption within the civil service and local governing councils that plagued most earlier attempts. If people don’t like it, they leave rather than try and wreck it for everyone else. Isn’t that what happens on Norfolk?”

Louise thought back to what Carmitha had said. “It’s difficult for the Land Union people. Starflight is expensive.”

“I suppose so. We’re lucky here, the O’Neill Halo takes all our malcontents, some asteroids have entire low-gee levels populated by Lunar émigrés. Our government will even pay your ticket for you. Perhaps you should try that on Norfolk. The whole point of the Confederation’s diversity is that it provides every kind of ethnic culture possible. There’s no real need for internal conflict.”

“That’s a nice idea. I ought to mention it to Daddy when I get back. I’m sure a one-way starship ticket would be cheaper than keeping someone at the arctic work camps.”

“Why tell your father? Why not campaign for it yourself?”

“Nobody would listen to me.”

“You won’t be your age forever.”

“I meant, because I’m a girl.”

Endron gave her a mystified frown. “I see. Perhaps that would be a better issue to campaign about. You’d have half of the population on your side from day one.”

Louise managed an uncomfortable smile. She didn’t like having to defend her homeworld from sarcasm, people

should show more courtesy. The trouble was, she found it hard to defend some of Norfolk's customs.

Endron took them to one of the lowest habitation levels, a broad service corridor which led away from the biosphere cavern, deep into the asteroid's interior. It was bare rock, with one wall made up from stacked layers of cable and piping. The floor was slightly concave, and very smooth. Louise wondered how old it must be for people's feet to have worn it down.

They reached a wide olive-green metal door, and Endron datavised a code at its processor. Nothing happened. He had to datavise the code another two times before it opened. Louise didn't dare risk a glance at Fletcher.

Inside was a cathedral-sized hall filled with three rows of high voltage electrical transformers. Great loops of thick black cabling emerged from holes high up in the walls, stretching over the aisles in a complicated weave that linked them to the fat grey ribbed cylinders. There was a strong tang of ozone in the air.

A flight of metal stairs pinned against the rear wall led up to a small maintenance manager's office cut into the rock. Two narrow windows looked down on the central aisle as they walked towards it, the outline of a man just visible inside. Fletcher's alarm at the power humming savagely all around them was clear in the sweat on his forehead and hands, his small, precisely controlled steps.

The office had a large desk with a computer terminal nearly as primitive as the models Louise used on Norfolk. A large screen took up most of the back wall, its lucidly coloured symbols displaying the settlement's power grid.

There was a Martian waiting for them inside; a man with very long snow-white hair brushed back neatly and a bright orange silk suit worn in conjunction with a midnight-black shirt. He carried a slim, featureless grey case in his left hand.

Faurax didn't know what to make of his three new clients at all; if they hadn't been with Endron he wouldn't even have let them into the office. These were not the times to dabble in his usual sidelines. Thanks to the current Confed-

eration crisis, the Phobos police were becoming quite unreasonable about security procedures.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” he said after Endron had introduced everybody. “Why haven’t you got your own passports?”

“We had to leave Norfolk very quickly,” Louise said. “The possessed were sweeping through the city. There was no time to apply to the Foreign Office for passports. Although there’s no reason why we shouldn’t have been issued with them, we don’t have criminal records or anything like that.”

It even sounded reasonable. And Faurax could guess the kind of financial package which the *Far Realm’s* crew would engineer concerning their passage. Nobody wanted questions at this stage.

“You must understand,” he said, “I had to undertake a considerable amount of research to obtain the Norfolk government’s authentication codes.”

“How much?” Louise asked.

“Five thousand fuseodollars. Each.”

“Very well.”

She didn’t even sound surprised, let alone shocked. Which tweaked Faurax’s curiosity; he would have dearly liked to ask Endron who she was. The call he’d got from Tilia setting up the meeting had been very sparse on detail.

“Good,” he said, and put his case on the desk, datavising a code at it. The upper surface flowed apart, revealing a couple of processor blocks and several fleks. He picked up one of the fleks, which was embossed with a gold lion: Norfolk’s national symbol. “Here we are. I loaded in all the information Tilia gave me; name, where you live, age, that kind of thing. All we need now is an image and a full body bioelectric scan.”

“What do we have to do?” Louise asked.

“First, I’m afraid, is the money.”

She gave a hollow laugh and took a Jovian Bank credit disk from her small shoulder bag. Once the money had been shunted over to Faurax’s disk, he said: “Remember not to

wear these clothes when you go through the Halo's immigration. These images were supposedly taken on Norfolk before you left, and the clothes are new. In fact, I'd advise dumping them altogether."

"We'll do that," Louise said.

"Okay." He slotted the first flek into his processor block and read the screen. "Genevieve Kavanagh?"

The little girl smiled brightly.

"Stand over there, dear, away from the door."

She did as he asked, giving the sensor lens a solemn stare. After he'd got the visual image filed, he used the second processor block to sweep her so he could record her bioelectric pattern. Both files were loaded into her passport, encrypted with Norfolk's authentication code. "Don't lose it," he said and dropped the flek into her hand.

Louise was next. Faurax found himself wishing she were a Martian girl. She had a beautiful face, it was just her body which was so alien.

Fletcher's image went straight into his passport flek. Then Faurax ran the bioelectric sensor over him. Frowned at the display. Ran a second scan. It took a long time for his chilly disquiet to give way into full blown consternation. He gagged, head jerking up from the block to stare at Fletcher. "You're a—" His neural nanonics crashed, preventing him from datavisaging any alarm. The air solidified in front of his eyes; he actually saw it flowing like a dense heat shiver, contracting into a ten centimetre sphere. It hit him full in the face. He heard the bone in his nose break before he lost consciousness.

Genevieve squealed in shock as Faurax went crashing to the floor, blood flowing swiftly from his nose.

Endron looked at Fletcher in total shock, too numb to move. His neural nanonics had shut down, and the office light panel was flickering in an epileptic rhythm. "Oh, my God. No! Not you." He glanced at the door, gauging his chances.

"Do not try to run, sir," Fletcher said sternly. "I will do whatever I must to protect these ladies."

"Oh, Fletcher," Louise groaned in dismay. "We were almost there."

"His device exposed my nature, my lady. I could do naught else."

Genevieve ran over to Fletcher and hugged him tightly around his waist. He patted her head lightly.

"Now what are we going to do?" Louise asked.

"Not you as well?" Endron bewailed.

"I'm not possessed," she said with indignant heat.

"Then what . . . ?"

"Fletcher has been *protecting* us from the possessed. You don't think I could stand against them by myself, do you?"

"But, he's one of them."

"One of whom, sir? Many men are murderers and brigands, does that make all of us so?"

"You can't apply that argument. You're a possessed. You're the enemy."

"Yet, sir, I do not consider myself to be your enemy. My only crime, so it sounds, is that I have died."

"And come back! You have stolen that man's body. Your kind want to do the same to mine and everyone else's."

"What would you have us do? I am not so valiant that I can resist this release from the torture of the beyond. Perhaps, sir, you see such weakness as my true crime. If so, I plead guilty to that ignominy. Yet, know you this, I would grasp at such an escape every time it is offered, though I know it to be the most immoral of thefts."

"He saved us," Genevieve protested hotly. "Quinn Dexter was going to do truly beastly things to me and Louise. Fletcher stopped him. No one else could. He's not a bad man; you shouldn't say he is. And I won't let you do anything horrid to him. I don't want him to have to go back there into the beyond." She hugged Fletcher tighter.

"All right," Endron said. "Maybe you're not like the Capone Organization, or the ones on Lalonde. But I can't let you walk around here. This is my home, damn it. Maybe it is unfair, and unkind that you suffered in the beyond. You're

still a possessor, nothing changes that. We are opposed, it's fundamental to what we are."

"Then you, sir, have a very pressing problem. For I am sworn to see these ladies to their destination in safety."

"Wait," Louise said. She turned to Endron. "Nothing has changed. We still wish to leave Phobos, and you know Fletcher is not a danger to you or your people. You said so."

Endron gestured at the crumpled form of Faurax. "I can't," he said desperately.

"If Fletcher opens your bodies to the souls in the beyond, who knows what the people who come through will be like," Louise said. "I don't think they will be as restrained as Fletcher, not if the ones I've encountered are anything to judge by. You would be the cause of Phobos falling to the possessed. Is that what you want?"

"What the hell do you think? You've backed me into a corner."

"No we haven't, there's an easy way out of this, for all of us."

"*What?*"

"Help us, of course. You can finish recording Fletcher's passport for us, you can find a zero-tau pod for Faurax and keep him in it until this is all over. And you'll know for certain that we've gone and that your asteroid is safe."

"This is insane. I don't trust you, and you'd be bloody stupid to trust me."

"Not really," she said. "If you tell us you'll do it, Fletcher will know if you're telling us the truth. And once we're gone you still won't change your mind, because you could never explain away what you've done to the police."

"You can read minds?" Endron's consternation had deepened.

"I will indeed know of any treachery which blackens your heart."

"What do you intend to do once you reach Tranquillity?"

"Find my fiancé. Apart from that, we have no plans."

Endron gave Faurax another fast appraisal. "I don't think I have a lot of choice, do I? If you stop this electronic war-

fare effect, I'll get a freight mechanoid to take Faurax to the *Far Realm*. I can use one of the on board zero-tau pods without anyone asking questions. Lord knows what I'll say when this is over. They'll just fling me out of an airlock, I expect."

"You're saving your world," Louise said. "You'll be a hero."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

• • •

The cave went a long way back into the polyp cliff, which allowed Dariat to light a fire without having to worry about it being spotted. He'd chosen the beach at the foot of the endcap as today's refuge. Surely here at least he and Tatiana would be safe? There were no bridges over the circumfluous reservoir. If Bonney came for them she'd have to use either a boat or one of the tube carriages (however unlikely that was). Which meant that for once they'd have a decent warning.

The hunter's ability to get close before either he or Rubra located her was unnerving. Even Rubra seemed genuinely concerned by it. Dariat never could understand how she ever located them in the first place. But locate them she did. There hadn't been a day since he met Tatiana when Bonney hadn't come after them.

His one guess was that her perception ability was far greater than anyone else's, allowing her to see the minds of everybody in the habitat. If so, the distance was extraordinary; he couldn't feel anything beyond a kilometre at the most, and ten metres of solid polyp blocked him completely.

Tatiana finished gutting the pair of trout she'd caught, and wrapped them in foil. Both were slipped into the shallow hole below the fire. "They ought to be done in about half an hour," she said.

He smiled blankly, remembering the fires he and Anastasia had made, the meals she had prepared for him. Campfire cooking was an outlandish concept to him then. Used to regulated, heat inducted sachets, he was always impressed by the cuisine she produced from such primitive arrangements.

“Did she ever say anything about me?” he asked.

“Not much. I didn’t see much of her after she set herself up as a mistress of Thoale. Besides which, I was discovering boys myself about then.” She gave a raucous laugh.

Apart from the physical resemblance, it was difficult to accept any other connection between Tatiana and Anastasia. It was inconceivable that his beautiful love would have ever grown into anything resembling this cheery, easygoing woman, with an overloud voice. Anastasia would have kept her quiet dignity, her sly humour, her generous spirit.

It was hard for him to feel much sympathy for Tatiana, and harder still to tolerate her behaviour, especially given their circumstances. He persisted, though, knowing that to desert her now would make him unworthy, a betrayal of his own one love.

Damn Rubra for knowing that.

“Whatever she did say, I’d appreciate you telling me.”

“Okay. I suppose I owe you that at least.” She settled herself more comfortably into the thin sand, her bracelets tinkling softly. “She said her new boy—that’s you—was very different. She said you’d been hurt by Anstid since the day you were born, but that she could see the real person buried underneath all the pain and loneliness. She thought she could free you from his thrall. Strange, she really believed it; as if you were some sort of injured bird she’d rescued. I don’t think she realized what a mistake she’d made. Not until the end. That was why she did it.”

“I am true to her. I always have been.”

“So I see. Thirty years planning.” She whistled a long single note.

“I’m going to kill Anstid. I have the power now.”

Tatiana began to laugh, a big belly rumble that shook her loose cotton dress about. “Ho yes, I can see why she’d fall for you. All that sincerity and retention. Cupid tipped his arrows with a strong potion that day you two met.”

“Don’t mock.”

Her laughter vanished in an instant. Then he could see the resemblance to Anastasia, the passion in her eyes. “I would

never mock my sister, Dariat. I pity her for the trick Tarrug played on her. She was too young to meet you, too damn young. If she'd had a few more years to gather wisdom, she would have seen you are beyond any possible salvation. But she was young, and stupid the way we all are at that age. She couldn't refuse the challenge to do good, to bring a little light into your prison. When you get to my age, you give lost causes a wide passage."

"I am not lost, not to Chi-ri, not to Thoale. I will slay Anstid. And that is thanks to Anastasia, she broke that Lord's spell over me."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, listen to him. Stop reading the words, Dariat, learn with your heart. Just because she told you the names of our Lords and Ladies, doesn't mean you know them. You won't kill Anstid. Rubra is not a realm Lord, he's a screwed-up old memory pattern. Sure, his bananas mind makes him bitter and vindictive, which is an aspect of Anstid, but he's not the real thing. Hatred isn't going to vanish from the universe just because you nuke a habitat. You can see that, can't you?"

Yes, go on, boy, answer the question. I'm interested.

Fuck off!

Pity you never went to university; the old school of hard knocks is never quite enough when you need to stand up for yourself in the intellectual debating arena.

Dariat made an effort to calm himself, aware of the little worms of light scurrying over his clothing. A sheepish grin unfurled on his lips. "Yes, I can see that. Besides, without hatred you could never know how sweet love is. We need hatred."

"That's more like it." She started applauding. "We'll make a Starbridge of you yet."

"Too late for that. And I'm still going to nuke Rubra."

"Not before I'm out of here, I hope."

"I'll get you out."

Yeah, and whose help are you going to need for that?

"How?" Tatiana asked.

“I’ll be honest. I don’t know. But I’ll find a way. I owe you and Anastasia that much.”

Bravo, Sir Galahad. In the meantime, three ships have arrived.

So?

So they’re from New California, a frigate and two combat-capable traders. I think our current status quo might be changing.

• • •

The voidhawks on observation duty perceived the three Adamist starships emerge from their ZTT jump twelve thousand kilometres out from Valisk. As their thermo-dump panels, sensor clusters, and communications arrays deployed, the voidhawks started to pick up high-bandwidth microwave transmissions. The ships were beaming out news reports all over the Srinagar system, telling everyone who was interested how well the Organization was doing, and how New California was prospering. There were several long items on the possessed curing injuries and broken bones in the non-possessed.

The one thing the voidhawks couldn’t intercept was the signal between the ships and Valisk. Whatever was said, it resulted in eight hellhawks arriving to escort the New California starships to the habitat’s spaceport.

Alarmed by the implication of Capone extending his influence into the Srinagar system, Consensus requested Rubra monitor developments closely. For once, he wasn’t inclined to argue.

• • •

Kiera waited for Patricia Mangano at the end of the passageway which led up to the axial chamber three kilometres above her. Without the tube carriages, every ascent and descent had to be on foot. Starting at the axial chamber, the passageway contained a ladder for the first kilometre, then gave way to a staircase for the final two as the curvature became more pronounced. It ended two kilometres above the base of the endcap, emerging from the polyp shell onto a shelflike plateau which was reached by a switchback road.

Thankfully, similar plateaus around the endcap gave them admission to the docking ledge lounges. Which meant they'd all but stopped using the counter-rotating spaceport.

If Patricia was annoyed by the time and physical effort it took her to descend, it was hidden deeper than Kiera's perception was able to discern. Instead, when Capone's envoy emerged into the light, she smiled with a simple delight as she looked around. Kiera had to admit, the little plateau was an excellent vantage point. The distinct bands of colour which comprised Valisk's interior shone lucidly in the light tube's relentless emission.

Patricia shielded her eyes with one hand as she gazed about the worldlet. "Nothing anybody says can prepare you for this."

"Didn't you have habitats in your time?" Kiera asked.

"Absolutely not. I'm strictly a twentieth-century gal. Al prefers us as his lieutenants, that way we understand each other better. Some modern types, I can only comprehend about one word in ten."

"I'm from the twenty-fourth century myself. Never set foot on Earth."

"Lucky you."

Kiera gestured at the open-top truck parked at the end of the road. Bonney was sitting in the backseat, ever vigilant.

Kiera switched on the motor and began the drive down the road. "I'll warn you from the start, anything you say in the open is overheard by Rubra. We think he tells the Edenists just about everything that goes on in here."

"What I have to say is private," Patricia said.

"I thought so. Don't worry, we have some clean rooms."

• • •

It wasn't too difficult for Rubra to infiltrate the circular tower at the base of the northern endcap. He just needed to be careful. The possessed could always detect small animals like mice and bats, which were simply blasted by a bolt of white fire. So he had to resort to more unusual servitors.

Deep in the birthing caverns of the southern endcap, incubators were used to nurture insects whose DNA templates

had been stored unused since the time when Valisk was germinated. Centipedes and bees began to emerge, each one affinity-controlled by a sub-routine.

The bees flew straight out into the main cavern, where they hovered and loitered among all the temporary camps set up around the starscraper lobbies. Coverage wasn't perfect, but they provided him with a great deal of information about what went on inside the tents and cottages, where his usual perception was blocked.

The centipedes were carried aloft by birds, to be deposited on the roof of the tower and other substantial buildings. Like the spiders which the Edenist intelligence agency used to infiltrate their observation targets, they scuttled along conditioning ducts and cable conduits, hiding just behind grilles and sockets where they could scrutinize the interior.

Their deployment allowed Rubra and the Kohistan Consensus to watch as Kiera led Patricia Mangano into Magellanic Itg's boardroom. Patricia had one assistant with her, while Kiera was accompanied by Bonney and Stanyon. No one else from Valisk's new ruling council had been invited.

"What happened?" Patricia asked after she had claimed a chair at the big table.

"In what respect?" Kiera replied cautiously.

"Come on. You've got your hellhawks flitting about the Confederation with impunity to bring back warm bodies. And when they get here, the habitat looks like it's a Third World refugee camp left over from my own century. You're living in the iron age, here. It doesn't make any sense. Bitek is the one technology that keeps working around us. You should be lording it up in the starscraper apartments."

"Rubra happened," Kiera said bitterly. "He's still in the neural strata. The one expert we had on affinity who could possibly remove him has . . . failed. It means we've got to go through the starscrapers a centimetre at a time to make them safe. We're getting there. It'll take time, but we've got eternity, after all."

"You could leave."

"I don't think so."

Patricia lounged back, grinning. "Ah, right. That would mean evacuating to a planet. How would you keep your position and authority there?"

"The same way Capone does. People need governments, they need organizing. We're a very socially oriented race."

"So why didn't you?"

"We're doing all right here. Have you really come all this way just to take cheap shots?"

"Not at all. I'm here to offer you a deal."

"Yes?"

"Antimatter in return for your hellhawks."

Kiera glanced at Bonney and Stanyon; the latter's face was alive with interest. "What exactly do you think we can do with antimatter?"

"The same as us," Patricia said. "Blow Srinagar's SD network clean to hell. *Then* you'll be able to get off this dump. The planet will be wide open to you. And as you'll be running the invasion, you'll be able to shape whatever society springs up among the possessed down there. That's the way it works for the Organization. We begin it, we rule it. Whether it works here, depends on how good you are. Capone is the best."

"But not perfect."

"You have your problems, we have ours. The Edenist voidhawks are causing a lot of disruption to our fleet activities. We need the hellhawks to deal with them. Their distortion fields can locate the stealth bombs being flung at us."

"Interesting proposition."

"Don't try and bargain, please. That would be insulting. We have an irritant; you have a potential disaster looming."

"If you don't take too much offence at the question, I'd like to know how much antimatter you'll deliver."

"As much as it takes, and the ships to deploy them, providing you can keep your end. How many hellhawks can you offer?"

"We have several out collecting Deadnight kids. But I can probably let you have seventy."

“And you can keep them under control, make them follow orders?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How?”

Kiera gloated. “It’s not something you’ll ever be able to duplicate. We can return the souls possessing the hellhawks directly into human bodies. That’s what they all want eventually, and that’s what we’ll give them, providing they obey.”

“Smart. So do we have a deal?”

“Not with you. I’ll travel to New California myself and talk to Capone. That way we’ll both know how much we can trust the other.”

• • •

Kiera hung back after Patricia left the boardroom. “This changes everything,” she said to Bonney. “Even if we don’t get enough antimatter to knock over Srinagar, it’ll give us the deterrence to prevent another voidhawk attack.”

“It looks like it. Do you think Capone is on the level?”

“I’m not sure. He must need the hellhawks pretty badly, or he wouldn’t have offered us the antimatter. Even if he’s got a production station, it won’t exactly be plentiful.”

“You want me to come with you?”

“No.” The tip of her tongue licked over her lips, a fast movement by a lash of forked flesh. “We’re either going to be leaving here for Srinagar, or I’ll deal with Capone to provide us with enough bodies to fill the habitat. Either way, we won’t be needing that shit Dariat anymore. See to it.”

“You bet.”

• • •

Can you stop the hellhawks from leaving? Rubra asked.

No, the Kohistan Consensus said. Not seventy of them. They are still armed with a considerable number of conventional combat wasps.

Bugger.

If Kiera does acquire antimatter combat wasps from Capone, we don’t think we will be able to provide an ad-

equate level of reinforcement to Srinagar's Strategic Defence network. The planet may fall to her.

Then call in the Confederation Navy. Srinagar's been paying its taxes, hasn't it?

Yes. But there is no guarantee the navy will respond. Its resources are being deployed over a wide area.

Then call Jupiter. They're bound to have spare squadrons.

We will see what can be done.

Do that. In the meantime, there are some important decisions to be taken. By me and Dariat both. And I don't think Bonney Lewin is going to give us much more time.

• • •

Erick was sure that the explosion, followed by the capsule's equally violent stabilization manoeuvre, had torn loose some of his medical nanonic packages. He could feel peculiar lines of pressure building up under the SII suit, and convinced himself it was fluid leakage. Blood or artificial tissue nutrient from the packages and their supplements, he wasn't sure which. Over half of them no longer responded to his datavises.

At least it meant they couldn't contribute to the medical program's dire pronouncements of his current physiological state. His right arm wouldn't respond to any nerve impulses at all, nor was he receiving any sensation from it. The only positive factor was a confirmation that blood was still circulating inside the new muscles and artificial tissue.

There wasn't much he could do to rectify the situation. The capsule's reserve electron matrices didn't have enough power to activate the internal life-support system. The thin atmosphere was already ten degrees below zero, and falling rapidly. Which meant he was unable to take the suit off and replace the nanonic packages. And just to twist the knife, an emergency survival gear locker containing fresh medical nanonic packages had popped open in the ceiling above him.

Backup lighting had come on, casting a weak pale blue glow across the compartment. Frost was forming on most of

the surfaces, gradually obscuring the few remaining active holoscreen displays. Various pieces of refuse had been jolted loose from their nesting places to twirl whimsically through the air, throwing avian-style shadows across the acceleration couches.

Potentially the most troubling problem was the intermittent dropouts from which the flight computer's datavises were suffering. Erick wasn't entirely sure he could trust its status display. It still responded to simple commands, though.

With his personal situation stable for a moment, he instructed the capsule's sensors to deploy. Three of the five responded, pistonlike tubes sliding up out of the nultherm foam coating. They began to scan around.

Astrogration programs slowly correlated the surrounding starfield. If they were working correctly, then the *Tigara* had emerged approximately fifty million kilometres from the coordinate he was aiming for. Ngeuni was only an unremarkable blue-green star to one side of the glaring A2 primary.

He wasn't sure if they would pick up the capsule's distress beacon. Stage one colonies did not have the most sophisticated communications satellites. When he instructed the capsule's phased array antenna to focus on the distant planet, it didn't acknowledge. He repeated the instruction, and there was still no activity.

The flight computer ran a diagnostic, which gave him a System Inviabile code. Without actually going outside to examine it, there was no way of telling what was wrong.

Alone.

Cut off.

Fifty million kilometres from possible rescue.

Light-years from where he desperately needed to be.

All that was left for him now was to wait. He began switching off every piece of equipment apart from the attitude rockets, the guidance system which drove them, and the computer itself. Judging by the frequency of the thruster firings, the capsule was venting something. The last diagnostic

sweep before he shut down the internal sensors couldn't pinpoint what it was.

After he'd reduced the power drain to a minimum, he pressed the deactivation switch for his restraint webbing. Even that seemed reluctant to work, taking a long time to fold back below the side of the cushioning. At this movement, levering himself up from the couch, fluid stirred across his abdomen. He found that by moving very slowly, the effect (and perhaps the harm) was moderated.

Training took over, and he began to index the emergency gear which had deployed from the ceiling. That was when the emotional shock hammered him. He suddenly found himself shaking badly as he clung to a four person programmable silicon dinghy.

Indexing his position! Like a good little first-year cadet.

A broken laugh bubbled around the SII suit's respirator tube. The glossy black silicon covering his eyes turned permeable to vent the salty fluid burning his squeezed up eyelids.

Never in his life had he felt so utterly helpless. Even when the possessed were boarding the *Villeneuve's Revenge* he'd been able to do something. Fight back, hit them. Orbiting above New California with the Organization poised to obliterate them at the first false move, he'd been able to store most of the sensor images. There had always been something, some way of being positive.

Now he was humiliatingly aware of his mind crumbling away in mimicry of his tattered old body. Fear had risen to consume him, flowing swiftly out of the dark corners of the bridge. It produced a pain in his head far worse than any physical injury ever could.

Those muscles which still functioned disobeyed any lingering wishes he might have, leaving him ignominiously barnacled to the dinghy. Every last reserve of determination and resolve had been exhausted. Not even the ubiquitous programs could shore up his mentality anymore.

Too weak to continue living, too frightened to die: Erick Thakrar had come to the end of the line.

• • •

Eight kilometres west of Stonygate, Cochrane tooted the horn on the Karmic Crusader bus and turned off the road. The other three vehicles in the convoy jounced over the grass verge and came to a halt behind it.

“Yo, dudettes,” Cochrane yelled back to the juvenile rioters clambering over the seats. “Time out for like the big darkness.” He pressed the red button on the dash, and the doors hissed open. Kids poured out like a dam burst.

Cochrane put his purple glasses back on and climbed down out of the cab. Stephanie and Moyo walked over to him, arm in arm. “Good place,” she said. The convoy had halted at the head of a gentle valley which was completely roofed over by the rumbling blanket of crimson cloud, rendering the mountain peaks invisible.

“This whole righteous road trip is one major groove.”

“Right.”

He materialized a fat reefer. “Hit?”

“No thanks. I’d better see about cooking them some supper.”

“That’s cool. I can’t psyche out any hostile vibes in this locale. I’ll like keep watch, make sure the nazgul aren’t circling overhead.”

“You do that.” Stephanie smiled fondly at him and went to the back of the bus, where the big luggage hold was. Moyo started pulling out the cooking gear.

“We should manage to reach Chainbridge by tomorrow evening,” he said.

“Yes. This isn’t quite what I expected when we started out, you know.”

“Predictability is boring.” He put a big electric camping grille on the ground, adjusting the aluminum legs to make it level. “Besides, I think it’s worked out for the best.”

Stephanie glanced around the improvised campsite, nodding approval; nearly sixty children were scampering around the parked vehicles. What had started off as a private

mission to help a handful of lost children had rapidly snow-balled.

Four times during the first day they had been stopped by residents who had told them where non-possessed children were lurking. On the second day there were over twenty children packed on board; that was when Tina Sudol had volunteered to come with them. Rana and McPhee joined up on the third day, adding another bus.

Now there were four vehicles, and eight possessed adults. They were no longer making a straight dash for the border at the top of Mortonridge. It was more of a zigzag route, visiting as many towns as they could to pick up children. Ekelund's people, who had evolved into the closest thing to a government on Mortonridge, maintained the communications net between the larger towns, albeit with a considerably reduced bit capacity than previously. News of Stephanie's progress had spread widely. Children were already waiting for the buses when they reached some towns; on a couple of occasions dressed smartly and given packed lunches by the possessed who had taken care of them. They had borne witness to some very tearful partings.

After the children had eaten and washed and been settled in their tents, Cochrane and Franklin Quigley sliced branches off a tree and piled them up to form a proper campfire. The adults came to sit around it, enjoying the yellow light flaring out to repel the clouds' incessant claret illumination.

"I think we should forget going back to a town when we're done with the kids," McPhee said. "All of us get along okay, we should try a farm. The towns are starting to run out of food, now. We could grow some and sell it to them. That would give us something to do."

"He's been back a whole week, and he's already bored," Franklin Quigley grunted.

"Bore-*ing*," Cochrane said. He blew twin streams of smoke out of his nostrils. They spiralled through the air to jab at McPhee's nose like a cobra.

The giant Scot made a pass of his hand, and the smoke

wilted, turning to tar and splattering on the ground. "I'm not bored, but we have to do something. It makes sense to think ahead."

"You might be right," Stephanie said. "I don't think I'd like to live in any of the towns we've passed through so far."

"The way I see it," said Moyo, "is that the possessed are developing into two groups."

"*Please* don't use that word," Rana said. Sitting cross-legged next to the flamboyantly feminine Tina Sudol, Rana appeared fastidiously androgynous with her short hair and baggy blue sweater.

"What word?" Moyo asked.

"Possession. I find it offensive and prejudicial."

"That's right, babe," Cochrane chortled. "We're not possessors, we're just like dimensionally disadvantaged."

"Call our cross-continuum placement situation whatever you wish," she snapped back. "You cannot alter the fact that the term is wholly derogatory. The Confederation's military-industrial complex is using it to demonize us so they can justify increased spending on their armaments programs."

Stephanie pressed her face into Moyo's arm to smother her giggles.

"Come on, we're not exactly on the side of the saints," Franklin observed.

"The perception of common morality is enforced entirely by the circumstances of male-dominated society. Our new and unique circumstances require us to re-evaluate that original morality. As there are clearly not enough living bodies to go around the human race, sensory ownership should be distributed on an equitable basis. It's no good the living protesting about us. We have as much right to sensory input as they do."

Cochrane took the reefer from his mouth and gave it a sad stare. "Man, I wish I could manifest your trips."

"You ignore him, darling," Tina Sudol said to Rana. "He's a perfect example of male brutality."

"I suppose a fuck is out of the question tonight, then?"

Tina sucked in her cheeks theatrically as she glowered at the unrepentant hippie. "I'm only interested in men."

"And always have been," McPhee said, in an unsubtle whisper.

Tina flounced her glossy, highlighted hair back with a manicured hand. "You men are animals, all of you, simply *rancid* with hormones. No wonder I wanted to escape that *prison* of flesh I was in."

"*The two groups*," Moyo said, "seem to be divided into those that stay put, like the café proprietors, and the restless ones—like us I suppose, though we're an exception. They complement each other perfectly. The wanderers go around playing tourist, drinking down the sights and experiences. And wherever they go, they meet the stayers and tell them about their journeys. That way both types get what they want. Both of us exist to relish experience; some like to go out and find it, others like it brought to them."

"You think that's what it's going to be like from now on?" McPhee asked.

"Yes. That's what we'll settle down into."

"But for how long? Wanting to see and feel is just a reaction from the beyond. Once we've had our fill, human nature will come back. People want to settle down, have a family. Procreation is our biological imperative. And that's one thing we never can do. We will always be frustrated."

"I'll like give it a try," Cochrane said. "Me and Tina can make babies in my tepee anytime."

Tina gave him a single disgusted look, and shuddered.

"But they wouldn't be yours," McPhee said. "That isn't your body, and it certainly isn't your DNA. You will never have a child again, not one of your own. That phase of our lives is over, it cannot be regained no matter how much of our energistic ability we expend."

"You're also forgetting the third type walking among us," Franklin said. "The Ekelund type. And I do know her. I signed up with her for the first couple of days. She seemed to know what she was doing. We had 'objectives' and 'target assignments,' and 'command structures'—and God help

anyone who disobeyed those fascists. She's a straight power nut with a Napoleonic complex. She's got her little army of wannabe toughs running around in combat fatigues thinking they're reborn special forces brigades. And they're going to keep sniping away at the Royal Marines over the border until the Princess gets so pissed with us she nukes Mortonridge down to the bedrock."

"That situation won't last," McPhee said. "Give it a month, or a year, and the Confederation will fall. Don't you listen to the whispers in the beyond? Capone is getting his act together out there. It won't be long before the Organization fleet jumps to Ombey. Then there will be nobody left for Ekelund to fight, and her command structure will simply fade away. Nobody is going to do what she tells them for the rest of time."

"I don't want to live for the rest of time," Stephanie said. "I really don't. That's almost as frightening as being trapped in the beyond. We're not made to live forever, we can't handle it."

"Lighten up, babe," Cochrane said. "I don't mind giving eternity a try; it's the flipside which is the real bummer."

"We've been back a week, and Mortonridge is already falling apart. There's hardly any food left, nothing works properly."

"Give it a chance," Moyo said. "We're all badly shocked, we don't know how to control this new power we've got, and the non-possessed want to hunt us down and fling us back. You can hardly expect instant civilization under those circumstances. We'll find a way to adjust. As soon as the rest of Ombey is possessed we'll take it out of this universe altogether. Once that happens, things will be different. You'll see; this is just an interim stage." His put his arm around her as she leaned into him. She kissed him lightly, mind shining with appreciation.

"Yo, love machines," Cochrane said. "So while you two screw like hot bunnies for the rest of the night, who's going into town to track down some food?"



Got a beacon, Edwin announced. His mind was hot with triumph.

Around *Oenone's* bridge, the communal tension level reduced with a strong mental sigh. They had arrived above Ngeuni twenty minutes ago. Every sensor extended. The crew in alert status one. Weapons powered up. Ready for anything. To retrieve Thakrar. To fight possessed starships that had captured Thakrar.

And there had been nothing. No ships in orbit. No response from the small development company advance camp on the planet.

Oenone accelerated into a high polar orbit, and Edwin activated every sensor they had.

It's very weak, some kind of capsule emergency signal. Definitely the *Tigara's* identification code, though. The ship must have broken up.

Lock on to it, please, Syrinx said. She was aware of the astrogration data from the sensors flooding into the bitek processor array. From that, she and *Oenone* understood exactly where the signal was in relation to themselves.

Go.

The voidhawk swallowed through a wormhole that barely had any internal length at all. Starlight blue-shifted slightly as it twisted into a tight rosette, kissing the hull, then expanding. A life-support capsule was spinning idly ten kilometres in front of the terminus as *Oenone* shot out. Local space was smeared with scraps of debris from the *Tigara's* violent end. Syrinx could feel the capsule's mass in her mind as it hung in *Oenone's* distortion field. Sensors and communications dishes in the lower hull pods swung around to point at the dingy sphere.

There's no response from the capsule, Edwin said. **I'm registering some power circuits active in there, but they're very weak. And it's been venting its atmosphere.**

Oxley, Serina, take the MSV over there, Syrinx ordered. **Bring him back.**



Oenone's crew watched through Serina's armour suit sensors as she crept through the decks of the life-support capsule, searching for Captain Thakrar. It was a shambles inside, with equipment torn off bulkheads, hatches jammed, lockers broken open to send junk and old clothes floating free. The air had gone, allowing several pipes to burst and release globules of fluid, which had subsequently frozen solid. She had to use a high-powered fission cutter on the latches around the final hatch before she could worm her way into the bridge. At first she didn't even recognize the SII-suited figure clutching at one of the emergency supply cases on the ceiling. Granules of frost had solidified on him as they had on every surface, glinting a dusty grey in the beams thrown out by her helmet lights. In his fetal position he looked like some kind of giant mummified larva.

At least he got into a suit, Oxley said. Is there any infrared emission?

Check the electronic warfare block first, Syrinx said.

Negative electronic warfare emission. He's not possessed. But he is alive. The suit's a couple of degrees above ambient.

Are you sure it's not just natural body heat residue? Those suits are a good insulator. If he's alive, then he hasn't moved since the frost formed on him. That must have been hours ago.

Serina's bitek processor block converted her affinity voice into a straight datavise. "Captain Thakrar? Are you receiving this, sir? We're Edenists from Golomo; we received your message." The ice-encrusted figure didn't move. She waited a moment, then made her way towards him. **I've just datavised his suit processor for a status update. He's still breathing. Oh, damn.**

They all saw it at the same time: ancillary medical modules anchored to Thakrar by small plastic tubes which burrowed through the SII suit material. Two of the modules had red LEDs shining under their coating of frost, the others were completely dark. The tubes had all frozen solid.

Get him back here, Syrix instructed. **Fast as you can, Serina.**

• • •

Caucus was waiting with a stretcher right outside the MSV's airlock. *Oenone* had stopped generating a gravity field in the crew torus so that Serina and Oxley could tow Thakrar's inert form through the cramped little tube without too much difficulty. He was shedding droplets as they went, the layer of frost melting in the warm air. They got him onto the stretcher, and *Oenone* immediately reinstated gravity in the torus, tugging the crew down to the decking again. Oxley held on to the dead medical modules as they raced around the central corridor to the sick bay.

Deactivate the suit, please, Caucus told Serina as the stretcher was wheeled under the diagnostic scanner. She issued the order to the suit's control processor, which examined the external environment before obeying. The black silicon retreated from Thakrar's skin, sliding from his extremities to glide smoothly toward his throat. Dark fluids began to stain the stretcher. Syrix wrinkled her nose up at the smell, putting a hand over her nose.

Is he all right? *Oenone* asked.

I don't know yet.

Please, Syrix, it is him who is hurt, not you. Please don't remember like this.

I'm sorry. I didn't know I was being so obvious.

To the others, perhaps not.

It does make me remember, I won't deny that. But his injuries are very different.

Pain is pain.

My pain is only a memory, she recited; in her mind it was Wing-Tsit Chong's voice which spoke the phrase. **Memo-ries do not hurt, they only influence.**

Caucus winced at the sight which was unveiled. Thakrar's lower right arm was new, that much was obvious. The medical packages wrapped around it had shifted, opening large gashes in the translucent immature skin. AT muscles lay exposed, their drying membranes acquiring a nasty septic tint.

Scars and skin grafts on the legs and torso were a livid red against the snowy skin. The remainder of his packages appeared to have withered, green surfaces crinkling up like aging rubber, pulling the edges back from the flesh they were supposed to heal. Sour nutrient fluids dripped out of torn inlet plugs.

For a moment, all Caucus could do was stare in a kind of revolted dismay. He simply didn't know where to start.

Erick Thakrar's bruised eyelids slowly opened. What alarmed Syrinx the most was the lack of confusion they showed.

"Can you hear me, Erick?" Caucus said in an overloud voice. "You're perfectly safe now. We're Edenists, we rescued you. Now please don't try and move."

Erick opened his mouth, lips quivering.

"We're going to treat you in just a moment. Are your axon blocks functional?"

"No!" It was very clear, very determined.

Caucus picked up an anaesthetic spray from the bench. "Is the program faulty, or have your neural nanonics been damaged?"

Erick brought his good arm around and pressed his knuckles into Caucus's back. "No, you will not touch me," he datavised. "I have a nerve burst implant. I will kill him."

The spray fell from Caucus's hand to clatter on the deck.

Syrinx could barely credit what was happening. Her mind instinctively opened to Caucus, offering support to his own frightened thoughts. All the crew were doing the same.

"Captain Thakrar, I am Captain Syrinx, this is my void-hawk *Oenone*. Please deactivate your implant. Caucus was not going to harm you."

Erick laughed, an unsteady gulp which shook his whole body. "I know that. I don't want to be treated. I'm not going back, not out there. Not again."

"Nobody is going to send you anywhere."

"They will. They always do. You do, you navy people. Always one final mission, one little bit of vital information to collect, then it will all be over. It never is, though. Never."

“I understand.”

“Liar.”

She gestured to the outlines of the medical packages visible through her ship-tunic. “I do have some knowledge of what you have been through. The possessed had me for a brief time.”

Erick gave her a scared glance. “They’ll win. If you saw what they can do, you’ll know that. There’s nothing we can do.”

“I think there is. I think there must be a solution.”

“We’ll die. We’ll become them. They’re us, all of us.”

Captain? I’ve got a clean shot at him.

Syrinx was aware of Edwin, out in the central corridor, a maser carbine raised. The blank muzzle was pointing at Erick Thakrar’s back. A feed from the weapon’s targeting processor showed it was aimed precisely on Thakrar’s spinal column. The coherent microwaves would sever his nerves before he could use the implant.

No, she said. **Not yet. He deserves our efforts to talk him out of this.** For the first time in a long time, she was angry at an Adamist for being just that, an Adamist. Closed mind, locked up tight in its skull. No way of knowing what others were thinking, never really knowing love, kindness, or sympathy. She couldn’t take the simple truth to him directly. Not the easy way.

“What do you want us to do?” she asked.

“I have information,” Erick datavised. “Strategic information.”

“We know. Your message to Golomo said it was important.”

“I will sell it to you.”

There was a collective burst of surprise from the crew.

“Okay,” Syrinx said. “If I have the price on board, you will have it.”

“Zero-tau.” Erick’s face became pleading. “Tell me you have a pod on board. For God’s sake.”

“We have several.”

“Good. I want to be put inside. They can’t get to you in there.”

“All right, Erick. We’ll put you in zero-tau.”

“Forever.”

“What?”

“Forever. I want to stay in zero-tau forever.”

“Erick . . .”

“I thought about this; I thought about it a lot, it can work. Really it can. Your habitats can resist the possessed. Adamist starships don’t work for them, not properly. Capone is the only one who has any military ships, and he won’t be able to keep them going for long. They’ll need maintenance, spares. He’ll run out eventually. Then there won’t be any more invasions, only infiltrations. And you won’t let your guard down. We will, Adamists will. But not you. In a hundred years from now there will be nothing left of our race, except for you. Your culture will live forever. You can keep me in zero-tau forever.”

“There’s no need for this, Erick. We can beat them.”

“No,” he brayed. “Can’t can’t can’t.” The effort of speaking made him cough painfully. His breathing was very heavy now. “I’m not going to die,” he datavised. “I’m not going to be one of them; not like little Tina. Dear little Tina. God, she was only fifteen. Now she’s dead. But you don’t die in zero-tau. You’re safe. It’s the only way. No life, but no beyond, either. That’s the answer.” Very slowly, he took his hand away from Caucus. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have hurt you. Please, you have to do this for me. I can tell you where Capone is going to invade next. I can give you the coordinate of an antimatter station. Just give me your word, as an Edenist, as a voidhawk captain; your word that you will take my pod to a habitat, and that your culture will always keep me in zero-tau. Your word, please, it’s so little to ask.”

What do I do? she asked her crew.

Their minds merged, awash with compassion and distress. The answer, she felt, was inevitable.

Syrinx walked over and took Erick’s cold, damp hand in hers. “All right, Erick,” she said softly. Wishing once more

for a single second of genuine communication. "We'll put you in zero-tau. But I want you to promise me something in return."

Erick's eyes had closed. His breathing was very shallow now as he datavised several files into the toroid's net. Caucus was exuding concern at the read-out from the diagnostic scanner. **Hurry**, he urged.

"What?" Erick asked.

"I want your permission to take you out of zero-tau if we find a proper solution to all this."

"You won't."

"But if we do!"

"This is stupid."

"No it isn't. Edenism was founded on hope, hope for the future, the belief that life can get better. If you have faith in our culture to preserve you for eternity, you must believe in that. Jesus, Erick, you have to believe in something."

"You are a very strange Edenist."

"I am a very typical Edenist. The rest just don't know it yet."

"Very well, deal."

"I'll talk to you soon, Erick. I'll be the one who wakes you up and tells you."

"At the end of the universe, perhaps. Until then . . ."

24

Alkad Mzu hadn't seen snow since she left Garissa. Back in those days she'd never bothered indexing a memory of winter in her neural nanonics. Why waste capacity? The season came every year, much to Peter's delight and her grudging acceptance.

The oldest human story of all: I never knew what I had until I lost it.

Now, from her penthouse in the Mercedes Hotel, she watched it falling over Harrisburg, a silent cascade as inexorable as it was gentle. The sight made her want to go outside and join the children she could see capering about in the park opposite.

The snow had begun during the night, just after they landed at the spaceport, and hadn't let up in the seven hours since. Down on the streets tempers were getting shorter as the traffic slowed and the pavements turned slippery with the slush. Ancient municipal mechanoids, backed up by teams of men with shovels, struggled to clear the deep drifts which blockaded the main avenues.

The sight didn't exactly bode well. If the Tonalá nation's economy was so desperate that they used human labour to clean the streets of their capital . . .

So far Alkad had managed to keep her objective in focus. She was proud of that; after every obstacle thrown in her way she had proved herself resourceful enough to keep the hope alive. Even back on the *Texas* she'd thought she would soon be retrieving the Alchemist.

Nyvan had done much to wreck her mood and her confidence. There were starships docked at the orbiting asteroids,

and the local astroengineering companies could probably provide her with the equipment she wanted; yet the decay and suspicion native to this world made her doubt. The task was slipping from her grasp once more. Difficulties were piling up against her, and now she had no more fallback positions. They were on their own now: she, Voi, Lodi, and Eriba, with money as their only resource. True to his word, Prince Lambert had taken the *Tekas* out of orbit as soon as they'd disembarked. He said he was flying to Mondul, it had a strong navy, and he knew people there.

Alkad resisted accessing her time function. Prince Lambert must have made his third ZTT jump by now, and another potential security hazard was no more.

"That's a new one," Eriba announced. He was stretched out along the settee, bare feet dangling over the armrest. It meant he could just see the holoscreen on the far wall. A local news show was playing.

"What is?" Alkad asked him. He had been consuming news ever since they arrived, switching between the holoscreen and the communications net's information cores.

"Tonala has just ordered every border to be closed and sealed. The cabinet claims that New Georgia's actions are overtly hostile, and other nations can't be trusted. Apparently, the SD networks are still blasting each other with electronic warfare pulses."

Alkad grimaced. That clash had been going on when the *Tekas* arrived. "I wonder how that affects us? Are those the land borders, or are they going to prohibit spaceflight as well?"

"They haven't said."

The door chimed as it admitted Voi. She strode into the big living room shrugging out of her thick navy-blue coat and shaking grubby droplets of melted snow on the white carpet. "We've got an appointment for two o'clock this afternoon. I told the Industry Ministry we were here to buy defence equipment for the Dorados, and they recommended the Opia company. Lodi ran a check through the local data

cores, and they own two asteroid industrial stations along with a starship service subsidiary.”

“That sounds promising,” Alkad said guardedly. She had left all the organization to Voi. The agencies would be looking for her; zipping around town would be asking for trouble. As it was, using the Daphne Kigano passport when they arrived was a risk, but she didn’t have any others prepared.

“Promising? Mary, it’s spot on. What do you want, the Kulu Corporation?”

“I wasn’t criticising.”

“Well it sounded like it.”

Voi had slowly reverted to her original temper during the voyage. Alkad wasn’t sure if the waspy girl was recovering from her father’s death or reacting to it.

“Has Lodi found out if there are any suitable starships for hire?”

“He’s still checking,” Voi said. “So far he’s located over fifty commercial vehicles stranded insystem due to the quarantine. Most of them are docked in low orbit stations and the asteroid ports. He’s running performance comparisons against the requirements you gave us. I just hope he can find us one at a Tonala facility. Did you hear about the border restrictions? They’re even closing down net interface points with the other nations.”

“That’s a minor problem compared to the one we’ll have crewing the ship.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our flight is not the kind of job you normally give mercenaries. I’m not sure money will guarantee loyalty for this mission.”

“Why didn’t you say so, then? Mary, Alkad, how can I help if you keep complaining after the fact? Be more cooperative.”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” Alkad said mildly.

“Is there anything else we should know?”

“I can’t think of anything, but you’ll be the first to be told if I do.”

“All right. Now, I’ve arranged for a car to take us to

Opia's offices. The security company which supplied it is also providing bodyguards. They will be here in an hour."

"Good thinking," Eriba said.

"Elementary thinking," Voi shot back. "We're foreigners who have arrived in the middle of an Assembly-imposed quarantine. That's hardly an optimum low-visibility scenario. I want to downgrade our risk to a minimum."

"Bodyguards ought to help, then," Alkad said prosaically. "You should go and take a rest before we visit Opia. You haven't slept since we landed. I'll need you to be fresh for the negotiations."

Voi gave a distrustful nod, and went into her bedroom.

Alkad and Eriba exchanged a glance and smiled simultaneously.

"Did she really say *low-visibility scenario*?" he asked.

"Sounded like it to me."

"Mary, that detox therapy was a bad idea."

"What was she like before?"

"About the same," he admitted.

Alkad turned back to the window and the snow softening the city skyline.

The door chimed again.

"Did you order something from room service?" she asked Eriba.

"No." He gave the door a worried look. "Do you think it's the bodyguards Voi hired?"

"They're very early, then; and if they're professional they would datavise us first." She picked up her shoulder bag and selected one of the devices inside. When she datavised the penthouse's net processor to access the camera in the corridor outside there was no response. The cut crystal wall lights began to flicker. "Stop!" she told Eriba, who had drawn his laser pistol. "That won't work against the possessed."

"Do you think . . ."

He trailed off just as Voi burst back into the lounge. She was gripping a maser carbine tight in her hand.

The penthouse's entrance door swung open. Three people

were standing behind it, their features lost in the darkened corridor.

“Do not come in,” Alkad said loudly. “My weapons will work, even against you.”

“Are you quite sure, Doctor?”

Sections of Alkad’s neural nanonics were dropping out. She datavised a primer code at the small sphere she held in her hand before she lost even that ability. “Fairly sure. Do you want to be the first experimental subject?”

“You haven’t changed; you were always so confident you were right.”

Alkad frowned. It was a female voice, but she couldn’t place it. She didn’t have the processing power left in her neural nanonics to run an audio comparison program. “Do I know you?”

“You used to. May we come in, please? We really aren’t here to harm you.”

Since when did the possessed start saying please? Alkad thought the circumstances out and said: “It only needs one of you to speak. And if you’re not a threat, stop glitching our electronics.”

“That last request is difficult, but we will try.”

Alkad’s neural nanonics started to come back on-line. She quickly re-established full control over the device.

“I’ll call the police,” Voi datavised. “They can send a Tac Squad. The possessed won’t know until it’s too late.”

“No. If they wanted to hurt us, they would have done it by now. I think we’ll hear what she has to say.”

“You shouldn’t expose yourself to a negative personal safety context. You are the only link we have to the Alchemist.”

“Oh, shut up,” Alkad said aloud. “All right, come in.”

The young woman who walked into the penthouse was in her early twenties. Her skin was several shades lighter than Alkad’s, though her hair was jet black, and her face was rounded by a little too much cellulite for her to be pretty; it fixed her expression to one of continual shy resentment. She wore a long tartan-print summer dress, with a kilt-style skirt

that had been the fashion on Garissa the year of the genocide.

Alkad ran a visual comparison program search through her memory cells. "Gelai? Gelai, is that really you?"

"My soul, yes," she said. "Not my body. This is just an illusion, of course." For a moment the solid mirage vanished, revealing a teenaged Oriental girl with fresh jagged scars on her legs.

"Mother Mary!" Alkad croaked. She'd hoped the tales of torture and atrocity were just Confederation propaganda.

Gelai's usual profile returned. The flicker of exposure was so fast, it made Alkad's mind want to believe Gelai's was the true shape; the abused girl was something decency rejected.

"What happened?" Alkad asked.

"You know her?" Voi demanded indignantly.

"Oh, yes. Gelai was one of my students."

"Not one of your best, I'm sorry to say."

"You were doing all right, as I recall."

"This enhances stress relief nicely," Voi said. "But you haven't told us why you're here."

"I was killed in the planet-buster attack," Gelai said. "The university campus was only five hundred kilometres from one of the strikes. The earthquake levelled it. I was in my residence hall when it hit. The thermal flash set half of the building alight. Then the quake arrived; Mary alone knows how powerful it was. I was lucky, I suppose. I died in the first hour. That was reasonably quick. Compared to a lot of them, anyway."

"I'm so sorry," Alkad said. She had rarely felt so worthless; confronted by the pitiful evidence of the greatest failure it was possible to have. "I failed you. I failed everybody."

"At least you were trying," Gelai said. "I didn't approve at the time. I took part in all the peace demonstrations. We held vigils outside the continental parliament, sang hymns. But the media said we were cowards and traitors. People actually spat on us in the streets. I kept going, though, kept

protesting. I thought if we could just get our government to talk to the Omutans, then the military would stop attacking each other. Mary, how naive.”

“No, Gelai, you weren’t naive, you were brave. If enough of us had stood for that principle, then maybe the government would have tried harder to find a peaceful solution.”

“But they didn’t, did they?”

Alkad traced Gelai’s cheeks with her finger, touching the past she’d thought was so far behind her, the cause of the present. Feeling the ersatz skin was all she needed to know she had been right to do what she’d done thirty years ago. “I was going to protect you. I thought I’d sold my very soul so that you would all be safe. I didn’t care about that. I thought you were worth the sacrifice; all you bright young minds so full of the silliest hopes and proudest ideals. I would have done it, too, for you. Slain Omuta’s star, the biggest crime in the galaxy. And now all that’s left of us are the ones like these.” She waved a hand limply at Voi and Eriba. “Just a few thousand kids living in rocks that mess with their heads. I don’t know which of you suffered the worst fate. At least you had a taste of what our people might have achieved if we’d lived. This new generation are just poor remnants of what they could’ve been.”

Gelai puffed up her lips and stared firmly at the floor. “I wasn’t sure what I was going to do when I came here. Warn you or kill you.”

“And now?”

“I didn’t realize why you were doing it, why you went off to help the military. You were this aloof professor that we were all a bit in awe of, you were so smart. We respected you so much, I never gave you human motives, I thought you were a lump of chilled bitek on legs. I see I was wrong, though I still think you are wrong to have built anything as evil as the Alchemist.”

Alkad stiffened. “How do you know about the Alchemist?”

“We can see this universe from the beyond, you know. It’s very faint, but it’s there. I watched the Confederation Navy

trying to get people off Garissa before the radiation killed them. I've seen the Dorados, too. I even saw you a few times in Tranquillity. Then there are the memories that we tear from each other. Some soul I encountered knew about you. Perhaps it was more than one, I don't know. I never kept count; you don't, not when you do that hundreds of times a day. So that's how I know what you built, although no one knows what it is. And I'm not the only one, Doctor; Capone knows about it too, and quite a few other possessed."

"Oh, Mother Mary," Alkad groaned.

"They've shouted into the beyond, you see. Promised every soul bodies if they cooperated in finding you."

"You mean the souls are watching us now?" Voi asked.

Gelai smiled dreamily. "Yes."

"Fuck!"

Mzu glanced at the penthouse's door, which was closed on Gelai's two companions. "How many possessed are on Nyvan?"

"Several thousand. It will belong to us within a week."

"That doesn't leave us much time," Alkad said.

Voi and Eriba were starting to look panic-stricken.

"Forget the Alchemist," Voi said heatedly. "We must get ourselves outsystem."

"Yes. But we have a few days grace. That gives us time to be certain about our escape, we can't afford a mistake now. We'll charter a ship as we always intended; Opia's service subsidiary can do that for us. But I don't think there will be enough time to have the carrier built. Ah well, if it comes to it, we can always load the Alchemist onto a combat wasp."

"You can fit it on a combat wasp?" Voi was suddenly intrigued. "Just how big is it?"

"You don't need to know."

The tall girl scowled.

"Gelai, will you warn us if any of the possessed come close?"

"Yes, Doctor, we'll do that much. For a couple of days anyway, just while you find a ship. Are you really going to use the Alchemist after all this time?"

“Yes, I am. I’ve never been as sure about it as I am now.”

“I don’t know if I want you to, or not. I can never accept that revenge wrought on such a scale is right. What can it ever achieve except make a few bitter old refugees feel better? But if you don’t use it against Omuta, then someone else will take it from you and fire it at another star. So if it must be fired, then I suppose I’d rather it was Omuta.” Naked distress swarmed over her face. “Funny how we all lose our principles at the end, isn’t it?”

“You haven’t,” Alkad told her. “Killed by the Omutans, thirty years in the beyond, and you would still spare them. The society that can produce you is a miracle. Its destruction was a sin beyond anything our race had committed before.”

“Except perhaps possession.”

Alkad slipped her arms around the distraught girl and hugged her. “It will be all right. Somehow, this dreadful conflict will finish up without us destroying ourselves. Mother Mary wouldn’t condemn us to the beyond forever, you’ll see.”

Gelai broke away to study Mzu’s face. “You think so?”

“Strange as it seems for a semi-atheist, yes. But I know the structure of the universe better than most, I’ve glimpsed order in there, Gelai. There has always been a solution to the problems we’ve posed. Always. This won’t be any different.”

“I’ll help you,” Gelai said. “I really will. We’ll make sure all three of you get off the planet unharmed.”

Mzu kissed her forehead. “Thank you. Now what about the two who came with you, are they Garissans as well?”

“Ngong and Omain? Yes. But not from the same time as me.”

“I’d like to meet them. Ask them to come in, then we can all decide what to do next.”

• • •

“What bloody high life?” Joshua challenged. “Listen, I risked everything—balls included—to earn the money to refit *Lady Mac*. You wouldn’t catch me crawling to the

banks and finance companies like you did. True Calverts are independent. I'm independent."

"How we established ourselves was due entirely to circumstances," Liol retorted. "My only prospect came from the Dorados Development Agency grants. And by God did I take it. Quantum Serendipity was built up from nothing. I'm self-made and proud of it, I wasn't born with your kind of privileges."

"Privileges? All Dad left me was a broken down starship and eighteen years unpaid docking fees. Hardly a plus factor."

"Crap. Just living in Tranquillity is a privilege which half of the Confederation aspires to. A plutocrat's paradise floating in the middle of a xenoc gold mine. You were never not going to make money. All you had to do was stick your hand out to grab a nugget or two."

"They tried to kill me in that fucking Ruin Ring."

"Then you shouldn't have been so sloppy, should you? Earning your wealth is always only half of the problem. Hanging on to it, now that's tough. You should have taken precautions."

"Absolutely," Joshua purred. "Well I've certainly learned that lesson. I'm hanging on to what I've got now."

"I'm not going to stop you from captaining *Lady Mac*. But . . ."

"*If it's of any interest*," Sarha announced loudly. "We've emerged in the middle of a hostile electronic environment. I've got two of Nyvan's SD networks asking for our flight authorization at the same time they're saturating our sensors with overload impulses."

Joshua grunted disparagingly, and returned his attention to the datavised displays from the flight computer. He chided himself for the lapse, it wasn't like him not to pay attention to the jump emergence sequence. But when you've got a so-called brother with a lofriction conscience . . .

Sarha was right. Space between Nyvan and its orbiting asteroids was being subjected to a variety of powerful electronic disruption effects. *Lady Mac's* sensors and discrimination

programs were sophisticated enough to pierce most of the clutter; Nyvan's SD networks were using archaic techniques, it was the sheer wattage behind them that was causing the trouble.

With Sarha's help, Joshua managed to locate the network command centres and transmit *Lady Mac's* standard identification code, followed by their official Tranquillity flight authorization. Only Tonala and Nangkok responded, giving him permission to approach the planet. New Georgia's SD network, based at Jesup, remained silent.

"Keep trying them," Joshua told Sarha. "We'll head in anyway. Beaulieu, how are you doing tracing the *Tekas*?"

"Give me a minute more, Captain, please. This planet has a very strange communications architecture, and their usual interfaces seem to be down today. I expect that is a result of the network barrage. I am having to access several different national nets to find out if the ship arrived."

On the other side of the bridge from the cosmonik, Ashly snorted bitterly. "Boneheads, nothing on this damned world ever changes. They always brag about how different they are to each other; I never noticed myself."

"When were you here last?" Dahybi asked.

"About 2400, I think."

Joshua watched Liol slowly turn his head to look at the pilot; his eyebrow was raised in quizzical dissension.

"When?" Liol asked.

"Twenty-four hundred. I remember it quite well. King Aaron was still on Kulu's throne. There was some kind of dispute between Nyvan's countries because the Kingdom had sold one of them some old warships."

"Right," Liol said. He was waiting for the punch line.

Lady Mac's crew propagated dispassionate expressions right across the bridge.

"I've found a reference," Beaulieu said. "The *Tekas* arrived yesterday. According to Tonala's public information core it had an official flight authorization issued by the Dorados council. It docked at one of their national low orbit stations, the *Spirit of Freedom*, then departed an hour later;

with a flight plan filed for Mondul. Four people disembarked, Lodi, Voi, Eriba, and Daphine Kigano.”

“Jackpot,” Joshua said. He datavised traffic control for an approach vector to the *Spirit of Freedom*. After the eighth attempt, traffic control confirmed contact through the jamming and gave him a vector.

• • •

Spirit of Freedom was Tonala’s main low-orbit civil spaceport, orbiting seven hundred and fifty kilometres above the equator. A free-floating hexagonal grid two kilometres in diameter and a hundred metres thick. Tanks, lounges, corridor tubes, thermal-dump panels, and docking bays were sandwiched between the framework of grey-white alloy struts, tapering spires extended out from each corner, tipped with a cluster of fusion drive tubes to hold the structure’s attitude stable.

As well as a port for commercial starships and cargo spaceplanes, it was also the flight hub for the huge tugs which brought down the metal mined from Floreso asteroid. Several of the heavy-duty craft were keeping station alongside the *Spirit of Freedom* as *Lady Mac* approached; open lattice pyramids with a clump of ten big fusion drive tubes at the tip, and load attachment points at each corner.

They were designed to ferry down four ironbergs apiece. Seventy-five thousand tonnes of spongesteel: incredibly pure metal foamed with nitrogen while it was still in its molten state. Floreso’s industrial teams solidified it into a squat pear shape, with a base that was scalloped by twenty-five gently rounded ridges. After that, the ironbergs were attached to the tugs for a three-week flight, spiralling down into a slightly elliptical two-hundred-kilometre orbit. For the last two days of the voyage, electric motors in the load attachment points would spin them up to one rotation per minute. In effect, they became the biggest gyroscopes in the galaxy, their precession keeping them perfectly aligned as they flew free along the final stretch of their trajectory.

Injecting the ironbergs into the atmosphere was an inordinately difficult operation for the tugs, requiring extreme

precision. Each ironberg had to be at the correct attitude, and following its designated flight path exactly, so that its blunt base could strike the upper atmosphere at an angle which would create the maximum aerobrake force. Once its velocity started to drop off, gravity would pull it down in a steepening curve, which created yet more drag, accelerating the whole process. Hypersonic airflow around the scalloped base would also perpetuate the spin, maintaining stability, keeping it on track.

If everything went well—if the asteroid crews had got the internal mass distribution balanced right, if the injection point was correct—the ironberg would be aerobraked to subsonic velocity about five kilometres above the ocean. After that, nothing else mattered, no force in the universe could affect that much mass hanging in the sky in a standard gravity field. It fell straight down at terminal velocity to splash into the water amid an explosion of steam that resembled the mushroom cloud of a small nuclear bomb. And there it bobbed among the waves, its foamed interior making it buoyant enough to float without any aids.

When all four ironbergs from one tug had splashed down, the recovery fleet would sail in. The ironbergs would be towed into a foundry port ready to be broken up and fed to Tonala's eager mills. An abundant supply of cheap metal, obtained without any ecological disturbance, was a healthy asset to the nation's economy.

So not even the chaotic electronic war being fought between the SD networks was allowed to interrupt the operation. The tugs around the *Spirit of Freedom* continued to receive their regular maintenance schedule. SII-suited engineering crews crawled over the long struts, while MSVs and tankers drifted in close attendance. The service craft were the only other vehicles flying apart from *Lady Mac*. Joshua had a trouble-free approach, making excellent time. As they flew over the station, sensors showed him eleven other starships nestled snugly in the docking bays.

The inspection from port officers was one he was expecting; checking everyone on board for possession, then going

through the life-support capsules and the two ancillary craft with electronic warfare blocks to make sure there were no unexplained glitches. Once they'd been cleared, Joshua received an official datavised welcome from Tonalá's Industry Ministry, with an invitation to discuss his requirements and how local firms could help. They were also authorized to fly *Lady Mac*'s spaceplane down to Harrisburg.

"I'll take a pair of serjeants, Dahybi, and Melvyn," Joshua announced. "You too, Ashly, but you stay in the spaceplane in case we need evacuating. Sarha, Beaulieu, I want *Lady Mac* maintained at flight-ready status. Same procedure as before, we may have to leave in a hurry, so keep monitoring groundside, I want to be told if and when the crap hits the fan."

"I can come with you," Liol said. "I know how to handle myself if it gets noisy down there."

"Do you trust my command judgement?"

"Of course I do, Josh."

"Good. Then you stay up here. Because my judgement is that you won't follow my orders."

• • •

It was dark in Jesup's biosphere cavern now, a permanent joyless twilight, and cold. Quinn had ordered it so. The solartubes strung out along the axial gantry were producing an enfeebled opalescent glow, whose sole purpose was to show people where they were going.

As a result, an impossible autumn had visited the lush tropical vegetation. After a futile search twisting around on their stems in search of light, the leaves were yellowing. In many places they had begun to fall, their edges crisping black from the bitter air. Already the neat filigree of pretty streams was clogging with soggy mush, overspill channels were blocked, pools were flooding the surrounding ground.

The experience of accelerated decay was one which Quinn savoured. It demonstrated his power over his surroundings. No reality dysfunction this, making things different as long as you didn't blink. This was solid change, irreversible. Potent.

He stood before the stone altar which had been built in the park, studying the figure bound to the inverted cross on top. It was an old man, which in some ways was good. This way Quinn confirmed his zero-rated compassion; only children held equal status.

His loyal disciples stood in a circle around him, seven of them clad in blood-red robes. Faces shone as bright as their minds, fuelled by greed and ominous desire.

Twelve-T was also in attendance, sagging with the formidable burden of merely staying alive. His maltreated head was permanently bowed now. No possessed was imposing change upon him, but he was becoming almost Neanderthal in his posture.

Outside the elite coterie the acolytes formed a broad semicircle. All of them were wearing grey robes with the hoods thrown back. Their faces illuminated by the unnaturally hot bonfires flanking the altar, a flickering topaz light caressing their skin with fake expressions.

Quinn could sense several ghosts standing among them. They were frightened and demoralized as always and, as he had discovered, utterly harmless. They were completely unable to affect any aspect of the physical world. Trivial creatures with less substance than the shadows they craved.

In a way he was glad they were attending. Spying. This ceremony would show them what they were dealing with. They could be tyrannized, he was sure, in that they were no different from any other human. He wanted them to realize that he would never hesitate to inflict what pain he could upon them if they chose not to obey.

Satisfied, Quinn sang: "We are the princes of the Night."

"We are the princes of the Night," the acolytes chorused, it was a sound similar to the threat of thunder beyond the horizon.

"When the false lord leads his legions away into oblivion, we will be here."

"We will be here."

The old man was shaking now, moving his lips in prayer. He was a Christian priest, which was why Quinn had se-

lected him. A double victory. Victory over the false lord. And victory for the serpent beast. Taking a life for no reason other than you wished it, for the pain it would cause others.

Such sacrifices had always focused on authority and its enforcement. A spectacle to coerce the weak. In pre-industrial times, this rite might have been about the summoning of dark witchcraft; but in an age of nanonic technology man had long surpassed magic, black or white. The sect arcology had known and encouraged the value of image, the psychology of precise brutality. And it worked.

Who now among this gathering would stand to challenge him? It was more ordination than anything else, confirming his right to reign.

He held out a hand, and Lawrence placed the dagger in his palm. Its handle was an elaborate ebony carving, but the blade was plain carbotanium and very sharp.

The priest cried out as Quinn slid the tip into his paunchy abdomen. It deepened to a whimper as Quinn recited: "Accept this life as a token of our love and devotion."

"We love you, and devote ourselves to you, Lord," growled the acolytes.

"God grant you deliverance, son," the priest choked.

Blood was running down Quinn's arm, splattering the altar. "Go fuck yourself."

Lawrence laughed delightedly at the priest's anguish. Quinn was immensely proud of the boy; he'd never known anyone to offer himself up to God's Brother so unreservedly.

The priest was dying to the harsh cheers of the acolytes. Quinn could sense the old man's soul rising from the body, twining like smoke in a listless sky to vanish through a chink in reality. He pressed himself forwards to lick ravenously at the ephemeral stream with a narrow black tongue, enraptured.

Then another soul was pushing back down the trickle of energy, surging into the body.

"Shithead!" Quinn spat. "This body is not for you. It is our sacrament. Get the fuck out of it."

The skin on the priest's upside-down face began to flow

like treacle. The features twisted themselves through a hundred and eighty degrees so that the mouth was superimposed on the forehead. Then the skin hardened again and the eyes snapped open.

Quinn took a pace back in surprise. It was his own face staring at him.

“Welcome to the beyond, you little prick,” it told him. Then it smiled wickedly. “Remember this part?”

A streamer of white fire lashed out of the knife which was plunged deep into the priest’s chest. It struck Twelve-T’s right arm, puncturing his chrome and steel wrist. The smoking mechanical hand dropped to the floor, fingers wagging as if they were playing piano keys. His wrist joint was reduced to a jagged bracelet of metal with green hydraulic fluid spraying out, and the frayed end of a power cable fluttering about.

“Do it!” the forged face yelled.

Twelve-T lunged towards Quinn, shoving his broken arm forwards. A mad smile cracked his face.

Lawrence wailed: “No,” and flung himself into Twelve-T’s path.

The broken wrist joint rammed into Lawrence’s throat. A bright spark of electricity twinkled at the end of the ragged power cable as it touched the boy’s skin.

Lawrence shrieked as his whole body silently detonated into sunlight brilliance. He froze with his arms still outstretched, a frantic expression etched on his face. The light was so fierce he became translucent—a naked angel bathing in the heart of a star. Then his extremities began to shrivel, turning black. He had time to shriek once more before the internecine fire ate him away.

The dreadful light shrank, revealing a patch of baked earth and droppings of fine white ash. Twelve-T lay next to it where he had stumbled, the fall jolting his brain out of his half skull like wine from a goblet. It was rolling over the grass.

“Ah well,” said the forged face. “I guess we both lost this time around. Be seeing you, Quinn.” It began to untwist, re-

verting to the priest's startled death rictus. The incursive soul flowed away, retreating into the beyond.

"COME BACK!" Quinn roared.

There was a last ironic laugh, and his tormenter was gone.

For all his power and strength, there was nothing Quinn could do. Absolutely nothing. His impotence was an agonizing humiliation. He screamed, and the altar shattered, sending the priest's battered body tumbling. The acolytes began to run. Quinn kicked Twelve-T's brain, and the grisly organ burst apart, sending a splat of gore across his terrified disciples. He turned back and discharged a bolt of searing white fire into the priest's remnants. The body ignited instantly, but the flames were only an effete mockery of the incendiary heat which had consumed Lawrence.

The disciples shrank away as Quinn sent blast after blast of white fire into the pyre, reducing the body and the crumbling stones to radiant magma. When they reached the boundary of light given off from the bonfires, they too turned and fled after the acolytes.

Only the ghosts remained, safe from the fury of the black-robed figure in their secluded lifeless realm. After a while they saw him sink to his knees and make the sign of the inverted cross on his chest.

"I will not fail you, my Lord," he said quietly. "I will quicken the Night as I promised. All I ask as the price of my soul is that when it has fallen you bring me the fucker who did this."

He rose and made his way out of the park. This time he was truly alone. Even ghosts quailed before the terrifying thoughts alight inside his head.

• • •

Hoya was the first of the four voidhawks to emerge above Nyvan. Niveu and his crew immediately began scanning the local environment for threats.

"No ships within twenty thousand kilometres," he said, "but the SD networks are shooting off electronic warfare blitzes at each other. Looks like the nations are in their usual confrontational state."

Monica accessed the sensor suite in the voidhawk's lower hull, and the starfield projected into her mind came alive with vivid coloured icons. Two more voidhawks were holding formation a hundred kilometres away. As she watched, another wormhole terminus opened to disgorge the fourth. "Are we being targeted by the platforms?" she asked. She appreciated the way the Edenists unfailingly spoke out loud in her presence, keeping her informed. But their display symbology was very different to that used by the Royal Navy, she hadn't quite mastered the program yet.

"There are very few specific targets," Samuel said. "The networks appear intent on jamming and disrupting every processor out to geosync orbit."

"Is it safe for us to approach?"

Niveu shrugged. "Yes. For now. We'll monitor the local news to find out what's going on. If there's any indication of them advancing the hostilities to an active stage, I'll review the situation again."

"Does your service have any stations down there?" she asked Samuel.

"There are some assets, but we don't have any active operatives. We don't even have an embassy. There's no gas giant in this system, it was colonized long before their presence was deemed necessary to develop an industrialized economy. Frankly, the price of having to import all their He₃ is partly responsible for Nyvan's current state."

"It also means we have no backup," Niveu said.

"Okay, let me have a communications circuit. We have a couple of embassies and several consuls. They should be monitoring starship traffic."

It took a long time to establish contact. After hours subjected to the output from the SD platforms, the national civil communications satellites were now almost completely inoperative. She eventually got around the problem by aligning one of *Hoya's* antennae directly on the cities she wanted, which limited her to those on the half of the planet ahead of the voidhawks.

"Mzu's here," she said at last. "I got through to Adrian

Redway, our station chief in the Harrisburg embassy. The *Tekas* arrived yesterday. It docked at Tonalá's principal low orbit station, and four people took a spaceplane down to Harrisburg. Voi was one of them, and so was Daphine Kigano."

"Excellent," Samuel said. "Is the *Tekas* still here?"

"No. It departed an hour later. And no other starship has left since. She's still down there. We've got her."

"We have to go in," Samuel told Niveu.

"I understand. But you should know that several governments are claiming New Georgia has fallen to the possessed. New Georgia is denying it of course, though it does seem as though they have lost their asteroid, Jesup. Apparently Jesup dispatched some inter-orbit ships to the three abandoned asteroids. It is being heralded as a breach of sovereignty, which of course is taken extremely seriously here."

"Could the ships be carrying escapees?" Monica asked.

"It is possible, I suppose. Although I can't think of any reason why anyone should consider those asteroids to be a refuge; they were badly damaged in the '32 conflict. No one even bothered to salvage them. But we ought to know what the Jesup ships are doing before too long; the governments which own the abandoned asteroids have dispatched their own ships to investigate."

"If it turns out those ships from Jesup are crewed by possessed, then the situation will deteriorate rapidly," Samuel said. "The other governments are unlikely to come to New Georgia's aid."

"True enough," Monica said pensively. "They're more likely to nuke the whole country."

"I don't imagine we will be staying long," Samuel said. "And we will have the flyers with us, we can evacuate within minutes."

"Yeah sure. There's one other thing."

"Oh?"

"Redway said one other starship has arrived since the *Tekas* left. The *Lady Macbeth*, she's docked at Tonalá's main low-orbit station."

“How intriguing. The Lord of Ruin obviously knew what she was doing when she chose this Lagrange Calvert.”

Monica was sure there was a note of admiration in his voice.

The four voidhawks accelerated in towards Nyvan. After receiving permission from traffic control, they slotted into a six-hundred-kilometre orbit, adopting a diamond formation. Four ion field flyers left their hangars and curved down towards the planet, heading into the huge swirl of angry cloud that covered most of Tonala.

• • •

Jesup’s Strategic Defence control centre had been hollowed out of the rock deep behind the habitation section. It was New Georgia’s ultimate citadel: safe from any external attack which didn’t actually crack Jesup open, equipped with enough security systems to fend off an open mutiny by the asteroid’s population, and fitted with a completely independent environmental circuit. No matter what happened to Jesup and New Georgia’s government, the SD officers could continue to fight on for weeks.

Quinn waited for the monolithic innermost door to slide open, displaying a serenity that was harrowing in its depth. Only Bonham accompanied him now as he strode around the asteroid, the other disciples were too afraid.

There had been a few modifications to the control centre. Console technology had devolved considerably; in most cases processors and AV projectors had abated to a simple telephone. A whole rank of the black and silver machines were lined up along a wall, where they were jangling incessantly. A group of officers in stiff grey uniforms were snatching up the handsets as fast as they could. In front of them was a big square table with a picture of Nyvan and its orbiting asteroids covering its surface. Five young women were busy moving wooden markers across it with long poles.

The adrenaline-powered clamour faltered as Quinn walked in. There was no sign of any face inside his robe’s hood; light fell into the oval opening never to return. Only

the pearl-white hands emerging from his sleeves suggested a human was in residence.

“Keep going,” he told them.

The voices sprang back, far louder than before so as to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment.

Quinn went over to the commander’s post, a pulpitlike podium which overlooked the table. “What is the problem?”

Shemilt, who was running the control centre, saluted sharply. He was wearing a heavily decorated Luftwaffe uniform from the Second World War, every inch the Teutonic warrior aristocrat. “I regret to inform you, sir, that ships have been sent to intercept our teams working in the other asteroids. The first will make contact in forty minutes.”

Quinn studied the table; it was becoming cluttered. Four vultures were grouped together just above the planet. New Georgia’s SD platforms were diamond-studded pyramids. Ruby pentagons showed opposing platforms. Three red-flagged markers were being shoved slowly over the starmap. “Are they warships?”

“Our observation stations are having a lot of trouble in this foul weather, but we don’t think so. Not frigates, anyway. I expect they will be carrying troops, though; they’re definitely big enough for that.”

“Don’t get too carried away, Shemilt.”

Shemilt stood to attention. “Yes, *sir*.”

Quinn pointed at one of the red flags. “Can our SD platforms hit these ships?”

“Yes, sir.” Shemilt pulled a clipboard off a hook inside his command post and flicked through the typewritten sheets. “Two of them are in range of our X-ray lasers, and the third can be destroyed with combat wasps.”

“Good. Kill the little shits.”

“Yes, sir.” Shemilt hesitated. “If we do that, the other networks will probably shoot at us.”

“Then shoot back, engage every target you can reach. I want an all-out confrontation.”

Activity around the table slowed as operators glanced at

Quinn. Resentment was building in their thoughts, capped, as always, by fear.

“How do we get out, Quinn?” Shemilt asked.

“We wait. Space warfare is very fast, and very destructive. By the end of today, there won’t be a working laser cannon or a combat wasp left orbiting Nyvan. We’ll get hit a few times, but fuck, these walls are two kilometres thick. This is the mother of all fallout shelters.” He gestured at the table, and every marker ignited, yellow candlelike flames squirting out black smoke. “Then when it’s over, we can fly away in perfect safety.”

Shemilt nodded hurriedly, using speed to prove he’d never doubted. “I’m sorry, Quinn, it’s obvious really.”

“Thank you. Now kill those ships.”

“Yes, sir.”

Quinn left the control centre with Bonham scurrying after him, always trailing by a few paces. The giant door slid shut behind them, its bass grumbles echoing along the broad corridor.

“Are there really enough ships here to take everyone off?” Bonham asked.

“I doubt it. And even if there were, the spaceport will be a prime target.”

“So . . . some of us should leave early, then?”

“Fast, Bonham, very fast. That’s probably why you got where you did.”

“Thank you, Quinn.” He quickened his steps; Quinn’s voice was slightly fainter.

“Of course, if they see me leaving now, they’d know I’d abandoned them. Discipline would go straight to shit.”

“Quinn?” He could hardly hear the dark figure at all now.

“After all, it’s not as if you could bind them . . .”

Bonham squinted at the figure he was now almost running to catch up with. Quinn seemed to be gliding smoothly over the rock floor without moving his legs. His black robe had faded to grey. In fact it was almost translucent. “Quinn?” This latest performance was frightening him more than anything to date. The anger and wrath which Quinn ra-

diated so easily were simple to understand, almost reassuring in comparison. This though, Bonham didn't know if it was something being done to Quinn, or something he was doing to himself. "What is this? Quinn?"

Quinn had become completely transparent now, only the slightest rippling outline of rock betrayed his position; even his thoughts were evaporating from Bonham's perception. He stumbled to a halt. Panic set in. Quinn was no longer present anywhere in the corridor.

"Holy Christ, now what?"

He felt a breath of cold air strike his face. He frowned.

A bolt of white fire smashed into the back of his skull. Two souls were cast out of the corpse as it collapsed onto the floor, both of them keening in dread at the fate which awaited.

"Wrong God." A chuckle drifted down the empty corridor.

• • •

When Joshua landed just after midday local time, rumour was blanketing Harrisburg as thickly as the snow. It seemed to be the one weapon in the armoury of the possessed which was the same the Confederation over. The more people heard, the less they knew, the more fearful they became. One freak outbreak of urban mythology and entire populations would become paralysed, either that or regress straight into survivalist siege mode.

On most worlds, government assurances and rover reporters on the scene managed to restart the engines of ordinary existence. People would creep sheepishly back to work and wait for the next canard of Genghis Khan riding a Panzer tank into the suburbs.

Not on Nyvan. Here governments were the ones gleefully shooting out savage accusations at their old antagonists. A coordinated global response to the prospect of the possessed landing was never even considered, a realpolitik impossibility.

As soon as they landed Joshua loaded a search request into the city's commercial data core. The number of armed

guards and lack of flights at the spaceport made his intuition rebel. He knew they didn't have much time; the quiet approach—questions, contacts, money—would never work here.

They hired a car and set off down hotel row, a potholed six-lane motorway which linked the spaceport to the city ten kilometres away. Only two lanes were cleared of snow, and there was hardly any other traffic.

Dahybi used his electronic warfare detector block to sweep the eight-seater cabin for bugs. "Seems clean," he told the others.

"Okay," Joshua said. "Our processor technology is probably more advanced than the locals, but don't count on it for a permanent advantage. I need to find her as fast as we can, which is going to mean sacrificing subtlety."

As they approached the hotel they'd booked, Joshua datavised an update into the car's control processor. The car swept past the hotel's entrance, heading for the city.

"There goes our deposit," Melvyn complained.

"It bothers me," Joshua said. "Ione, are we being followed?"

One of the serjeants was sitting at the back of the cab, pointing a small circular sensor pad through the rear window. "One car, possibly two. I think there are three people in the first one."

"Probably some kind of local security police," Joshua decided. "I'd be surprised if they weren't keeping tabs on foreigners right now."

"So what do we do about them?" Dahybi asked.

"Not a damn thing. I don't want to give them an excuse to interfere." He accessed the car's net processor and established an encrypted link to the spaceplane. "What's your situation, Ashly?"

"So far so good. I'll have the electron matrices completely recharged in another three minutes. That'll expand your options."

"Good. We'll keep a channel open to you from now on. If

the city's net starts to crash, come get us. That's our cut-off point."

"Aye, Captain. *Lady Macbeth* just fell below the horizon, so I've lost contact. Every civil communications satellite is out now."

"If their situation alters, they'll change orbit and re-establish a link. Sarha knows what to do."

"I certainly hope so. Before I lost contact, Beaulieu told me four voidhawks have arrived. They're heading for low orbit."

"They must have come from the Dorados," Joshua decided. "Ashly, when *Lady Mac* comes back on-line, tell Sarha to monitor them as best she can. And let me know if any of their spaceplanes land."

• • •

The snowfall had thickened considerably by the time Joshua's car reached the address his search program had identified for him. It reduced Harrisburg to a sequence of shabby granite streets that were hard to tell apart. Nothing was alive apart from people, wrapped in their insulated coats as they kicked their way through the pavement slush. Hologram billboards and neon signs were all that remained unaffected by the weather, flashing and morphing as always.

"I should have brought Liol down," Joshua muttered, half to himself. "He said he wanted a taste of exotic worlds."

"You're going to have to come to terms with him eventually, Joshua," Melvyn said.

"Maybe. Jesus, if he just wasn't such a pushy bastard. Can't you tell him to lighten up, Ione? You spend a lot of time talking to him."

"It didn't work before," one of the serjeants said.

"You've already told him?"

"Let's say I've been through the procedure earlier. He's not the only one who needs to relax, Joshua. Neither of you are going to make any progress the way you both carry on."

He wanted to explain. How it was. How he didn't feel quite so alone anymore, and how that left him troubled. How he wanted to welcome his brother, but at the same time

knew him so well he didn't trust him. To be honest with him would be seen as a weakness. Liol was the interloper. Let him make the first gesture. I saved his arse from the Dorados, I was the honourable one, and what thanks do I get?

When he glanced around the car, he knew that anything he said which verged on truth would make him sound petulant. A year ago I would've told the lot of them to bugger off. Jesus, life was simpler then, when there was just me. "I'll do what I can," he conceded.

Their car turned off the street and dipped down into an underground garage. The building it served was a ten-storey block with small shops at street level (half of them empty), and the upper floors given over to offices and design bureaux.

"Going to tell us why we're here now?" Dahybi asked as they climbed out of the car.

"Simple," Joshua said. "When you need a job doing fast and effectively, go to a professional."

The office of Kilmartin and Elgant, Data Security Specialists, was on the seventh floor. There was nobody behind the desk in the reception room. Joshua paused for a second, expecting a secretarial program to query them, but the desktop processor wasn't switched on. The inner door slid open when he approached it.

In a rash of optimistic bravado accompanying their firm's launch, Kilmartin and Elgant had taken a fifty-year lease on sufficient floor space to house fifteen operatives. There were still enough desks for fifteen in the open-plan office; seven of them had dust covers thrown over processors which were fairly dubious even by Nyvan's technological standards; four desks had niches where processors used to be; one patch of carpet showed imprints where a desk used to stand.

Only one desk had a decent cluster of modern blocks, which shared the surface with a thoroughly dead potted plant. Two men were sitting behind it, staring intently into the hazy aura of an AV pillar. The first was tall, young, and broad-shouldered, sporting a long blond ponytail tied with a colourful leather lace. He wore an expensive black suit, tai-

lored to provide maximum freedom of movement. He was not openly belligerent, but had a presence that would make people think twice before tackling him. The second was well into middle age, dressed in a faded grey-brown jacket, tufty chestnut hair askew. He looked as if he belonged behind the complaints desk in a tax office.

They regarded Joshua and his odd delegation with mild surprise.

Joshua looked from one to the other, slightly uncertain as intuition tickled his skull. Then he clicked his fingers decisively and pointed at the younger of the two. "I bet you're the data expert and your friend handles the combat routines. Good disguise, right?"

The aura from the AV pillar faded as the younger man tilted his chair back and put his hands behind his head. "Clever. Are we expecting you, Mr . . . ?"

Joshua gave a faint smile. "You tell me."

"All right, Captain Calvert, what do you want?"

"I need to access some information, and fast. Can you manage that for me?"

"Sure. Nationwide net access, no problem, whatever file you want. Hey listen, I know what this place looks like. Forget that. Talent isn't something you can eyeball. And I'm so far on top of things I'm getting oxygen starvation. Someone's search program locates my public file, I know about it before they do. You came down from the *Lady Macbeth* an hour ago. One of your crew is still with your spaceplane. Want to know how much the service company is ripping you off for your electron matrix recharge? You're in the right place."

"I don't care. Money doesn't concern me."

"Okay, I think we've reached interface here." He turned to his colleague and muttered something. The older man gave him a disgruntled look, then shrugged. He walked out of the office, giving the two serjeants a curious glance as he passed.

"Richard Keaton." The athletic young man leaned over

the desk, holding his hand out and smiling broadly. "Call me Dick."

"I certainly will." They shook hands.

"Sorry about Matty, there. He's got enough implants to chop up a squad of marines. But he gets overprotective, and I don't need him hovering right now. Smart of you to see which of us was which. I don't think anyone's ever done that before."

"Your secret's safe with me."

"So what can I do for you, Captain Calvert?"

"I need to find someone."

Keaton raised a forefinger. "If I could just interrupt. First, there is my fee."

"I'm not going to quibble. I might even pay a bonus."

One of the sergeants tapped a foot pointedly on the worn carpet.

"Nice to hear, Captain. Okay then; my fee is one flight off this planet on the *Lady Macbeth*, just as soon as you leave. Destination: who cares."

"That's an . . . unusual fee. Any particular reason?"

"Like I said, Captain, you came to the right place. This might not be the biggest firm in town, but I fish the data streams. There are possessed on Nyvan. They've already taken over Jesup, that wasn't just propaganda by our up-standing government. The electronic warfare barrage in orbit? That was cover to help them get down here. There aren't too many in Tonalá yet—not according to the Special Investigation Bureau, anyway. But they're spreading through the other countries."

"So you want to be gone?"

"I sure do. And I figure you won't be here when they reach Harrisburg, either. Look, I won't be any trouble on board. Hell, shove me into zero-tau, I don't mind."

Joshua didn't have the time to argue. Besides, taking Keaton with them actually reduced the risk of exposure. A flight off Nyvan wasn't such a high price. "You bring only what you've got with you; I'm not waiting while you go

home to pack. We don't have any slack built into our mission profile."

"We have a deal, Captain."

"Very well, welcome aboard, Dick. Now, the person I want is called Dr Alkad Mzu, alias Daphine Kigano. She arrived on the starship *Tekas* last night with three companions. I don't know where she is or who she might attempt to contact; however, she will be trying to stay hidden." He datavised over a visual file. "Find her."

• • •

Twenty thousand kilometres above Nyvan, the Organization frigate *Urschel* emerged from its ZTT jump. It was swiftly followed by the *Raimo* and the *Pinzola*. They were nowhere near a designated emergence zone, but only the four void-hawks were aware of their arrival. None of Nyvan's gravitonic-distortion detector satellites were functioning; the waves of electronic warfare assaults had crashed them beyond repair.

After five minutes assessing the local situation, their fusion drives came on, pushing them towards a low-orbit injection point. Once they were on their way, Oscar Kearn, the small flotilla's commander, concentrated on the eternal, beseeching voices crying into his head.

Where is Mzu? he asked them.

The possessed among the crew, including Cherri Barnes, joined his silky cajoling, adding to the tricky promises he made. Theirs was a multiple chant which hummed through the beyond, a harmonic passed between every desperate soul. It agitated them, its very existence a taunt; plots and scheming were an exquisitely tortuous reminder of what lay on the other side of their dreadful continuum, what they could partake of once again if they just helped.

Where is Mzu?

What is she doing?

Who is with her?

There are bodies waiting for worthy hosts. Millions of bodies, out here among the light and air and *experience*, held ready for Capone's friends. One could be yours. If—

Where is Mzu? Exactly?

Ah.

When they reached a five hundred kilometre orbit, each of the frigates dispatched a spaceplane. The three black delta-shapes sliced down through Nyvan's atmosphere, their tapering noses lining up on Tonala, hidden behind the planet's curvature seven thousand kilometres ahead.

Oscar Kearn ordered the frigates to manoeuvre again, and they began to raise their orbit.

• • •

"This really doesn't look good," Sarha said. "The sensors are showing three of them. I don't think their transponders are responding to the station."

"You don't think?" Beaulieu queried.

"Who knows? Those bloody SD platforms are still at it. I doubt we could pick up an em pulse through all this jamming."

"What are their drive exhausts like?" Liol asked.

Sarha ignored the datavised displays inside her skull long enough to fire a disgusted glance at him. The three of them were alone on *Lady Mac's* bridge. All the remaining serjeants were down in B capsule, guarding the airlock tube. "What?" There were times when he was a little bit too much like Joshua, that is: quite infuriating.

"If there are possessed on board, they'll be affecting the ship's systems," Liol recited. "Their drives will fluctuate. The recordings from Lalonde taught us that. Remember?"

Sarha didn't trust herself to answer directly. Yes he was like Joshua, gallingly right the whole time. "I'm not sure our discrimination programs will be much use at this distance. I can't get a radar lock to determine their velocity."

"Want me to try?"

"No thank you."

"When Josh said don't give me access to the flight computer, I don't think he meant I wasn't supposed to help you survive an assault by the possessed," Liol said peevishly.

"You will be able to ask him directly soon," Beaulieu

said. "We should be over Ashly's horizon in another ninety seconds."

"Those ships are definitely heading for a rendezvous with the *Spirit of Freedom*," Sarha said. "The optical image is good enough for a rough vector analysis."

"I'd like to point out that the three highly similar ships which appeared at the Dorados before we left were all from New California," Liol said.

"I am aware of that," Sarha snarled back.

"Jolly good. I'd hate to be possessed by anyone I didn't know."

"What are the voidhawks doing?" Beaulieu asked.

"I don't know. They're on the other side of the planet." Sarha was uncomfortably aware of the perspiration permeating her shipsuit. She datavisised the conditioning grille above her for some cool, dry air—cooler, dryer air. And to think, I'd always been slightly envious about Joshua having command of a starship. "I'm disengaging the airlock," she told the other two. "Station staff might try to come on board once they realize those starships are heading here." It was a logical action. And actually doing something made her feel a whole lot better.

"I've got the spaceplane beacon," Beaulieu announced.

"You're still intact, then?" Ashly datavisised.

"Yeah, still here," Sarha replied gamely. "What's your situation?"

"Stable. Nothing much is moving at the spaceport. The four Edenist flyers arrived half an hour ago. They're parked about two hundred metres away from me right now. I tried datavisising them, but they're not answering. A whole group of people set off into town as soon as they landed. There were cars here waiting for them."

The flight computer signalled that Joshua was coming on line. "Any signs of possession on the planet yet?" he asked.

"I'd have to say yes, Captain," Beaulieu told him. "The national nets are suffering considerable degrees of dropout. But there's no real pattern to it. Several countries don't have a single glitch."

“They will,” Joshua datavised.

“Joshua, three Adamist starships appeared an hour ago,” Sarha datavised. “We believe they sent some spaceplanes or flyers down to the planet; they were in the right orbit for it. Liol thinks they’re the same Organization ships that were at the Dorados.”

“Oh, well, if the starflight expert says so . . .”

“Josh, those frigates are heading for this station,” Liol datavised.

“Oh, Jesus. Okay, get clear of the station. And, Sarha, try to get a positive ident.”

“Will do. How are things your end?”

“Promising, I think. Expect us . . . today, what . . . outcome.”

“I’m losing the link,” Beaulieu warned. “Heavy interference, and it’s focused directly at us.”

“Josh, let me have access authority for the flight computer. Sarha and Beaulieu are being overloaded up here, for Christ’s sake. I can help.”

“. . . think . . . mummy’s boy . . . on my ship . . . fucking . . . because I’ll . . . first . . . trust . . .”

“Lost them,” Beaulieu said.

“The frigates have started jamming us directly,” Sarha said. “They know we’re here.”

“They’re softening up the station for an assault,” Liol said. “Give me the access codes, I can fly *Lady Mac* away.”

“No, you heard Joshua.”

“He said he trusted me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Look, you two have to operate the on-board systems, monitor the electronic warfare battle, and now you’ve got to watch the frigates as well. If we launch now they might think we’re going to defend the station. Can you fly *Lady Mac* and fight at the same time as everything else?”

“Beaulieu?” Sarha asked.

“Not my decision, but he does have a point. We need to leave, now.”

“Sarha, Josh is all emotionally tangled up when it comes

to me. Fair enough, I didn't handle him well. But you can't endanger his life and ours on a single bad decision made from ignorance. I'll do my best here. Trust me. Please."

"All right! Damn it. But fusion drive authority only. You're not jumping us anywhere."

"Fine." And the dream finally happened, just as he'd always known it would. *Lady Mac's* flight computer opened to him, and all the systems were on-line, filling his mind with glorious wing-sweeps of colour. They fitted just perfectly.

He designated the procedure menus he needed, bringing the thrusters and drive tubes up to active flight status. Beaulieu and Sarha were working smoothly together, activating the remaining on board systems. Umbilicals retracted from the fuselage, and the cradle started to elevate them out of the shallow docking bay. The viewfield which the flight computer was datavisising at him expanded as more of *Lady Mac's* sensor clusters lifted above the rim. Three bright, expanding stars were ringed in antagonistic red as they crept up over the curvature of the brilliant blue horizon.

Liol fired the verniers to take them off the cradle, not caring if the other two could see the stupid smile on his face. For a moment, all the envy and bitterness returned, the irrational pique he'd felt when he first learned that Joshua existed, a usurper brother who was captaining the ship which was rightfully his. This was the rush that belonged to him. The power to traverse the galaxy.

One day, he and Joshua were going to have to settle this.

But not today. Today was when he proved himself to his brother and the crew. Today was when he started living the life he knew belonged to him.

When they were a hundred metres above the docking bay, Liol fired the secondary drive, selecting a third of a gee acceleration. *Lady Mac* immediately veered off the vector he'd plotted. He pumped a fast correction order into the flight computer, deflecting the exhaust angle. Overcompensating. "Wowshit!" The acceleration couch webbing gripped him tighter.

“The spaceplane hangar is empty,” Sarha said wittingly. “That means our mass distribution is off centre. Perhaps you’d care to bring the level seven balance calibration programs on-line?”

“Sorry.” He searched desperately around the flight control menus and found the right program. *Lady Mac* juddered back onto her original vector.

“Joshua is going to throw me out of the airlock,” Sarha decided.

• • •

It had taken some time for Lodi to get used to having Omain sitting in the hotel suite with him. A possessed for Mary’s sake! But Omain turned out to be quiet and polite (a little sad, to be honest), keeping out of the way. Lodi slowly managed to relax, though this must surely be the strangest episode in his life. Nothing was ever going to out-weird this.

At first he had jumped every time Omain even spoke. Now, he was relatively cool about the whole scene. His processor blocks were spread out over one of the tables, enabling him to cast trawl programs into the net streams, fishing out relevant information. It was what he did best, so Voi had left him to it while she, Mzu, and Eriba went to the Opia company. His main concern at the moment was monitoring the civil situation now the government had closed the borders. Voi wanted to make sure they would be allowed to get back into orbit. So far, it looked as if they could. There had even been one piece of good luck, the first since they arrived at Nyvan. A starship called *Lady Macbeth* had docked at the *Spirit of Freedom*, and it was exactly the type of ship Mzu wanted.

“They are asking for her,” Omain said.

“Huh?” Lodi cancelled the datavised displays, blinking away the afterimage the graphics left in his mind.

“Capone’s people are in orbit,” Omain said. “They know Mzu is here. They are asking for her.”

“You mean you can tell what’s going on in orbit? Mary! I can’t, not with all the interference from the SD platforms.”

“Not tell, exactly. This is whispered gossip, distorted by

the many souls it has passed through. I have only the vaguest notion of the facts.”

Lodi was fascinated. Once he began talking, Omain knew some seriously interesting facts. He'd lived on Garissa, and was quite willing to share his impressions. (Lodi had never summoned the courage to ask Mzu what their old world was like.) From Omain's melancholic descriptions it sounded like a good place to live. The Garissans, Lodi was sure, had lost more than their world by the sound of it; their whole culture was different now, too tight-arsed and Western-ethnic orientated.

One of the processor blocks datavised a warning into Lodi's neural nanonics. “Oh, bollocks!”

“What is it?”

They had to speak in raised voices, almost shouting at each other. Omain was sitting in the corner of the living room furthest from Lodi, it was the only way the blocks would remain functional.

“Someone has accessed the hotel's central processor. They've loaded a search program for the three of us, and it's got a visual reference for Mzu, too.”

“It cannot be the possessed, surely?” Omain said. “Neural nanonics don't function for us.”

“Might be the Organization ships. No. They'd never be able to access Tonala's net from orbit, not with the platforms still going at it. Hang on, I'll see what I can find out.” He felt almost happy as he started retrieving tracker programs from the memory fleks he'd brought. The net dons in this city probably had ten times the experience he'd got from snooping around Ayacucho's communications circuits, but his programs were still able to flash back through the junctions, tracing the origin of the searchers.

The answer sprang into his mind just as the hotel's central processor crashed. “Wow, that was some guardian program. But I got them. You know anything about a local firm called Kilmartin and Elgant?”

“No. But I haven't been here long, not in this incarnation.”

“Right.” Lodi twitched a smile. “I’ll see what . . . that’s odd.”

Omain had risen from his chair. He was frowning at the suite’s double door. “What is?”

“The suite’s net processor is down.”

The door chimed.

“Did you . . .” Lodi began.

Something very heavy smashed into the door. Its panels bulged inwards. Splintering sounds were spitting out of the frame.

“Run!” Omain shouted. He stood before the door, both arms held towards it, palms outwards. His face was clenched with effort. The air twisted frantically in front of him, whipping up a small gale.

Another blow hammered the door, and Omain was sent staggering backwards. Lodi turned to run for the bedroom. He was just in time to see a fat three-metre-long serpent slither vertically up the outside of the window. Its huge head reared back, levelling out to stare straight at him. The jaws parted to display fangs as big as fingers. Then it lunged forwards, shattering the glass.

• • •

From his elevated position in the command post, Shemilt studied the ops table below him. One of the girls leaned over and pushed a red-flagged marker closer to the deserted asteroid.

“In range, sir,” she reported.

Shemilt nodded, trying not to show too much dismay. All three of the inter-orbit ships were in range of New Georgia’s SD network now. And Quinn had not returned to change his orders. His very specific orders.

If only we weren’t so bloody terrified of him, Shemilt thought. He still felt sick every time he remembered the zero-tau pod containing Captain Gurtan Mauer. Quinn had opened it up during two of the black mass ceremonies.

If we all grouped together—But of course, death was no longer the end. Throwing the dark messiah into the beyond would solve nothing.

There was a single red telephone in his command post. He picked up the handset. "Fire," he ordered.

• • •

Two of the three inter-orbit ships on their way to find out what the teams from Jesup were doing in the deserted asteroids were struck by X-ray lasers. The beams shone clean through the life support capsules and the fusion drive casings. Both crews died instantly. Electronics flash evaporated. Drive systems ruptured. Two wrecks tumbled through space, their hulls glowing a dull orange, vapour squirting from split tanks.

The third was targeted by a pair of combat wasps.

The officers of the other two national SD networks saw them streaking away from New Georgia's platform, heading towards the helpless inter-orbit ship. They requested and received fire authority codes. By then the attacking combat wasps had begun dispensing their submunitions drones. Infrared decoys shone like micro-novas amid the shoal of drive exhausts; electronic warfare pulses screamed at the sensors of any SD platform within five thousand kilometres. The offensive was a valid tactic; combat wasps launched to try to protect the remaining ship were confused for several seconds. A time period which in space warfare was critical.

A flock of one-shot pulsers finally got close enough to discharge into the remaining inter-orbit ship, killing it immediately. That didn't prevent the kinetic missiles from arrowing in on it at thirty-five gees. Nor submunitions with nuclear warheads from detonating when they were within range.

Lady Mac's sensors picked up most of the brief battle, though the overspill from the electronic warfare submunitions overlapping the general assault waged by the SD platforms caused several overload dropouts.

"This is becoming a seriously hazardous location," Sarha mumbled. The external sensor image was quivering badly as if something was shaking the starship about. Artificial circles of green, blue, and yellow were splashing open against

the starfield like raindrop graffiti. Intense blue-white flares started to appear among them.

"It just went nuclear," Beaulieu said. "I don't think I've seen overkill on that scale before."

"What the hell is going on up there?" Sarha asked.

"Nothing good," Liol said. "A possessed would have to be very determined to make a trip to one of those abandoned asteroids; there are no biospheres left, that'll leave them heavily dependent on technology."

"How are the Organization ships reacting?" Sarha asked. Twenty minutes after *Lady Mac* had left the *Spirit of Freedom*, the three frigates had docked. Quarter of an hour after that all communication with the station had ceased. They were now holding orbit eight hundred kilometres ahead of *Spirit of Freedom*, which gave their sensors a reasonable resolution.

"I'm way ahead of you," Liol said. "Two of them are launching—wait, they all are. They're going down into a lower orbit. Damn, I wish we could see what the voidhawks are doing."

"I'm registering activity within the station's defence sensor suite," Beaulieu said. "They're sweeping us."

"Liol, take us another five hundred kilometres away."

"No problem."

Sarha consulted the orbital display. "We'll be over Tonalá in another thirty minutes. I'm going to recommend Joshua pulls out."

"There's a lot of ship movements beginning down here," Beaulieu said. "Two more low-orbit stations are launching ships; and those are the ones we can see."

"Bugger it," Sarha grunted. "Okay, go to defence-ready status."

Lady Mac's standard sensor clusters retreated down into their recesses; the smaller, bulbous combat sensors slid smoothly upwards to replace them, gold-chrome lenses reflecting the last twinkling explosions in high orbit. Her combat wasp launch tubes opened.

All around her, Nyvan's national navies and SD platforms were switching to the same status.

• • •

Since arriving at Jesup, Dwyer had spent almost every hour helping to modify the bridge systems of the cargo clipper *Mount's Delta*. Given his minimal technical background, his time was spent supervising the non-possessed technicians who did most of the installation.

The bridge compartment was badly cramped, which meant only a couple of people could work in it at any one time. Dwyer had become highly proficient at dodging flying circuit boards and loose console covers. But he was satisfied with the result, which was far less crude than the changes they'd made to the *Tantu*. With the huge stock of component spares available in the spaceport, the consoles looked as if they'd slipped off the factory production line mere hours earlier. Their processors were now all military grade, capable of functioning while they were subjected to the energetic effect of the possessed. And the flight computer had been augmented until it was capable of flying the ship following the simplest of verbal orders.

This time there was none of the black sculpture effect, every surface was standard. Quinn had insisted the clipper's life support capsule must stand up to inspection when they arrived at Earth. Dwyer was confident he had reached that objective.

Now he was hovering just outside the small galley alcove on the mid-deck watching a female technician replacing the old hydration nozzles with the latest model. A portable sanitation sucker hovered over her shoulder, its fan humming eagerly as it ingested the occasional stale globule which burped out of the tubes she'd unscrewed.

The unit's hum rose sharply, becoming strident. A draught of cold air brushed Dwyer's face.

"How's it going?" Quinn asked.

Dwyer and the technician both yelped in surprise. The clipper's airlock was in the lower deck, and the floor hatch was closed.

Dwyer spun around, grabbing at support struts to wrestle

his inertia back under control. Sure enough, Quinn was sliding down through the ceiling hatch from the bridge. His robe's hood was folded back, sticking to his shoulders as if he were in his own private gravity field. For the first time in days his flesh tone was almost normal. He grinned cheerfully at Dwyer.

"God's Brother, Quinn. How did you do that?" Dwyer glanced over his shoulder to check the floor hatch again.

"It's like style," Quinn said. "Some of us have it . . ." He winked at the female technician and flung a bolt of white fire straight into her temple.

"Fuck!" Dwyer gasped.

The corpse banged back into the galley alcove. Tools fluttered out of her hands like iron butterflies.

"We'll dump her out of the airlock when we're under way," Quinn said.

"We're leaving?"

"Yes. Right now. And I don't want anyone to know."

"But . . . what about the engineering crew in the bay's control centre? They have to direct the umbilical retraction."

"There is no more crew. We can relay the launch instructions to the management computer through the bay's datanet."

"Whatever you say, Quinn."

"Come on, you'll enjoy Earth. I know I will." He performed a somersault in midair, and slow-dived back up through the hatch.

Dwyer took a moment to compose himself, clenching his hands so the way his fingers trembled didn't show, then followed Quinn up into the bridge.

• • •

Anger and worry isolated Alkad from the mundanities of the drive back to the hotel. She hadn't thought this fast and hard since the days she was working on the Alchemist theory. Options were closing all around her, like the sound of prison doors slamming shut.

The meeting with two of Opia's vice presidents had been a typical sounding-you-out session. All very cordial, and

achieving very little. They had agreed on the principle of the company finding her a starship and crew, which at some yet-to-be-specified time would be equipped with specialist defence systems for duties in the Dorados' defence force.

The one hold she had over them was the prospect that this would be the first order by the Dorados council; and if all went smoothly, more would follow. Possibly a great deal more.

Greed had taken root. She had seen it so many times before in the industrialists who had been supplying Garissa's navy.

They would have followed her requests, ignoring the oddities of the situation. She was convinced of it. Then just as the meeting was winding down the Tonalá government announced a state of emergency. New Georgia's SD platforms had opened fire on three ships, one of which belonged to Tonalá. Such an action, the Defence Ministry insisted, proved beyond any doubt that the possessed had captured Jesup, that the New Georgia government was lying, and possibly even possessed itself.

Once again Nyvan's national factions were at war with each other.

The Opia executives loaded a program for a crestfallen expression into their neural nanonics. Sorry, but the contract would have to go into suspension. Temporarily. Just until Tonalán might have reigned triumphant.

The car drew up underneath the sweeping portico of the Mercedes Hotel. Ngong was first out, scouring the broad street for threats. Now they had him and Gelai protecting them, Alkad had dispensed with the security firm Voi had hired; although they'd kept the company's car with its armoured bodywork and secure circuitry.

There wasn't much traffic on the street. The team of men shovelling snow had vanished, leaving the dilapidated mechanoids to struggle on by themselves. Ngong nodded and beckoned. Alkad eased herself off the seat and scurried over to the lobby's rotating door, Gelai a pace behind her the whole time. They had told her of the Organization's ships

during the trip back. It baffled Alkad how Capone had ever heard of her. But there was no disguising Gelai's rising concern.

The five of them bundled into the penthouse lift, which rose smoothly. Only the annoying flicker of the light panel betrayed Gelai and Ngong for what they were.

Alkad ignored the lighting. The state of emergency was dangerous. It wouldn't be long before Tonala retaliated against New Georgia's SD network. Those starships docked above Nyvan would be pressed into service, if the captains didn't simply ignore the quarantine and leave. She would soon be trapped here without any transport and the Capone Organization closing in. Unless she did something fast, she would belong to the possessed one way or the other, and with her came the Alchemist.

The spectre of what the device could do to the Confederation if it was used on a target other than Omuta's star was now preying on her mind. What if it was used against Jupiter? The Edenist habitats would die, Earth would be deprived of the He₃ without which it could never survive. Or what if it was used against Sol itself? What if it was switched to the nova function?

There had never been any conceivable prospect of this before. I was always in control. Mother Mary forgive my arrogance.

She cast a sideways glance at Voi, who was looking as irritable as always with the lift's progress. Voi would never entertain any change in their mission priorities. The concept of failure was not allowed for.

Like me at that age.

I have to get off this planet, she realized abruptly. I have to reopen the options again. I can't let it end like this.

The lift's floor indicator said they were three floors below the penthouse when Gelai and Ngong exchanged a questioning glance.

"What's the matter?" Voi asked.

"We can't sense Omain, or Lodi," Gelai said.

Alkad immediately tried to datavise Lodi. There was no

response. She ordered the lift to stop. "Is there anyone up there?"

"No," Gelai said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Of all the facets of possession, the perception ability fascinated Alkad the most. She'd only just started considering the mechanism of possession. The whole concept would ultimately mean quantum cosmology having to be completely restructured again. So far, she'd made very little theoretical progress.

"I told him to stay put," Voi said indignantly.

"If his neural nanonics aren't responding, then this is rather more serious than him simply wandering off," Alkad told her.

Voi pulled a face, unconvinced.

Alkad ordered the lift to restart.

Gelai and Ngong were standing in front of the doors when they opened on the penthouse vestibule. Trickle of static skipped over their clothes as they readied themselves for trouble.

"Oh, Mary," Eriba said. The double doors to the penthouse had been smashed apart.

Gelai waved the others back as she edged cautiously into the living room. Alkad heard an intake of breath.

The body Omain had been possessing was lying across one of the big settees, covered with deep scorch marks. Snow was blowing in through a gaping hole in the window.

Ngong hurriedly checked the other rooms. "No body. He's not here," he told them.

"Oh, Mother Mary, now what?" Alkad exclaimed. "Gelai, have you got any idea who did this?"

"None. Aside from the obvious that it was some possessed."

"They know about us," Voi said. "And now Lodi's been possessed, they know too much about us. We must leave immediately."

"Yes," Alkad said reluctantly. "I suppose so. We'd better

go directly to the spaceport, see if we can hook up with a starship there.”

“Won’t they know we’re going to do that?” Eriba said.

“What else can we do? This planet can’t help us anymore.”

One of the processor blocks on the table let out a bleep. Its AV projector sparkled.

Alkad looked straight into it. And she was looking out through a set of eyes at a man dressed in a traditional Cosack costume.

“Can you hear me, Dr Mzu?” he asked.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“My name is Baranovich, not that it particularly matters. The important fact here is that I have agreed to work for Mr Capone’s Organization.”

“Oh, shit,” Eriba groaned.

Baranovich smiled and held a small circular mirror up. Alkad could see Lodi’s frightened face reflected in the surface.

“So,” Baranovich said. “As you can see, we have not harmed your comrade. This is his datavise you are receiving. If he was possessed, he would be unable to do this. No? Say something, Lodi.”

“Voi? Dr Mzu? I’m sorry. I couldn’t—Look there are only seven of them. Omain tried . . .” Something hissed loudly behind him. The image blurred. Then he blinked.

“A brave boy.” Baranovich clapped Lodi on the shoulder. “The Organization has a place for those with such integrity. I would hate to see another come to use this body.”

“You might have to,” Alkad said. “I cannot consider swapping a lone man for the device, no matter how well I know him. There have been far bigger sacrifices made to get me to this point. I would be betraying those who made them, and that I can never do. I’m sorry, Lodi, really I am.”

“My dear doctor,” Baranovich said. “I was not offering you Lodi in exchange for the Alchemist. I am simply using him as a convenient instrument through which I can deal with you, and perhaps demonstrate our intent.”

"I don't need to deal with you."

"Your pardon, Doctor, I believe you do. You will not get off this planet unless the Organization takes you off. I think you know that now. After all, you weren't going to try and run to the spaceport, now were you?"

"I'm not about to discuss my departure arrangements with you."

"Bravo, Doctor. Resistance to the very end. I respect that. But please understand, the circumstances in which you find yourself have changed radically since you began your quest for vengeance. There will be no revenge against Omuta anymore. What would be the point? In a few short months Omuta as it is today will not exist. Whatever you can do to it will not exceed the coming of possession. Will it, Doctor?"

"No."

"So you see, you have only yourself to consider now, and what will happen in your personal future. The Organization can offer you a decent future. You know that with us millions of valuable people remain unpossessed, and secure in their jobs. You can be one of them, Doctor. I have the authority to offer you a place with us."

"In return for the Alchemist."

Baranovich shrugged magnanimously. "That is the deal. We will take you—and your friends too if you want them—off this planet today, before the orbital battle becomes any worse. Nobody else will do that. You either stay here and become possessed, an eternity spent in the humiliation of physical and mental bondage; or you come with us and live out the rest of your life as fruitfully as possible."

"As destructively as possible, you mean."

"I doubt the Alchemist would have to be used many times, not if it's as good as rumour says. Yes?"

"It wouldn't need many demonstrations," Alkad agreed slowly.

"Alkad!" Voi protested.

Baranovich beamed happily. "Excellent, Doctor, I see you are acknowledging the truth. Your future *is* with us."

“There’s something you should know,” Alkad said. “The activation code is stored in my neural nanonics. If I am killed and moved into another body in a bid to make me more compliant, I will not be able to access them. If I am possessed, the possessor will not be able to access them. And, Baranovich, there are no copies of the code.”

“You are a prudent woman.”

“If I come with you, then my companions are to be given passage to a world of their choice.”

“No!” Voi shouted.

Alkad turned from the projection and told Gelai: “Keep her quiet.”

Voi squirmed helplessly as the possessed woman pinned her arms behind her back. A gag solidified out of thin air to cover her mouth.

“Those are my terms,” Alkad told Baranovich. “I have spent most of my life in pursuit of my goal. If you do not agree to my terms, then I will not hesitate to defy you in the only way I have left. I have that determination, it is the one real weapon I have always had. You have pushed me into this position, do not doubt that I will use it.”

“Please, Doctor, there is no need for such vehemence. We will be happy to carry your young friends to a safe place.”

“All right. We have a deal.”

“Excellent. Our spaceplanes will pick you and your friends up at the ironberg foundry yard outside the city. We’ll be waiting at Disassembly Shed Four with Lodi. Be there in ninety minutes.”

25

Admiral Motela Kolhammer and Syrinx arrived at the First Admiral's office just as the Provost General was coming out. He almost bumped into them, head down and scowling. Kolhammer was given a brief grunt of apology before he strode off, chased by three aides in an equally flustered mood. The admiral gave them a curious look before stepping into the office.

Captain Maynard Khanna and Admiral Lalwani were sitting in front of the First Admiral's desk. Two more blue-steel chairs were distending up out of the circular pools of silver on the floor.

"What was all that about?" Kolhammer asked.

"We have a small legal problem with one of our guests," Lalwani said dryly. "It's just a question of procedures, that's all."

"Bloody lawyers," Samuel Aleksandrovich muttered. He gestured Kolhammer and the voidhawk captain to sit.

"Is it relevant to Thakrar's information?" Kolhammer asked.

"No, fortunately." Samuel smiled a fast welcome at Syrinx. "My thanks to *Oenone* for such a swift flight."

"I'm happy to be contributing, sir," Syrinx said. "Our journey time from Ngeuni was eighteen hours."

"That's very good."

"Good enough?" Kolhammer asked.

"We believe so," Lalwani said. "According to our New California surveillance operation, Capone is only just starting to refuel and rearm his fleet again."

"How up-to-date is that information?" Kolhammer asked.

“There’s a voidhawk flight each day from the Yosemite Consensus, so at the most we’re only thirty hours behind. According to the Consensus, it will be another week at the most before they’re ready to launch.”

“At Toi-Hoi, allegedly,” Kolhammer mused. “Sorry to play the heretic, but how reliable is this Captain Thakrar?”

Syrinx could only give an empty gesture. If only I had some way of imparting Erick’s intensity, his devotion, to them. “I have no doubt Captain Thakrar’s data is genuine, Admiral. Apart from his unfortunate collapse at the finish of his mission he’s proved an absolute credit to the CNIS. Capone does intend to invade Toi-Hoi next.”

“I accept the information as essentially accurate,” Lalwani affirmed. “We really are going to be able to intercept the Organization fleet.”

“Which is going to eliminate the Capone problem completely,” Maynard Khanna said. “With him gone, all we have to concern ourselves with is the quarantine.”

“And that damnfool Mortonridge Liberation which the Kingdom’s foisted on to us,” Kolhammer complained.

“Psychologically, the elimination of Capone’s fleet will be considerably more important,” Lalwani said. “Capone is interpreted as a far more active threat by Confederation citizens—”

“Yeah, thanks to the damn media,” Kolhammer said.

“—so when they see there is no further chance of his fleet appearing in their skies, and the navy has achieved that for them, we will have a great deal more leverage with the Assembly when it comes to implementing our policy.”

“Which is?” Samuel Aleksandrovich asked sardonically. “Yes, yes, Lalwani. I know. I simply don’t welcome the notion of holding things together while we pray that Gilmore and all the others like him can find a solution for us; it smacks of inactivity.”

“The more we thwart them, the more we can expect them to cooperate in finding a solution,” she said.

“Very optimistic,” Kolhammer said.

Samual datavised a request into his desktop processor and

the fat AV cylinder hanging from the middle of the ceiling began to sparkle. "This is our current strategic disposition," he said as the chairs swivelled their occupants around to face the projection. They were looking down on the Confederation stars from galactic south, where tactical situation icons orbited around the suns of inhabited worlds like technicolour moons. At the centre, Earth's forces were portrayed by enough symbols to form a ring of gas giant proportions. "You're going to get your chance, Motela," the First Admiral said quietly. "That 1st Fleet squadron you assembled to deal with Laton is the only possible force we can engage Capone with. We don't have time to put anything else together."

Kolhammer studied the projection. "What does the Yosemite Consensus estimate Capone's fleet size to be this time?"

"Approximately seven hundred," Lalwani said. "Numerically, that's slightly down on last time. Arnstadt is tying up a lot of his mid-capacity ships. However, he has acquired a disturbing number of Arnstadt's navy ships. Consensus believes the fleet will contain at least three hundred and twenty front-line warships. The rest are made up from combat-capable traders and civil craft modified to carry combat wasps."

"And they're armed with antimatter," Kolhammer said. "My squadron has a maximum of two hundred ships. We both went to the same academy, Lalwani, you need a two to one advantage to guarantee success. And that's just theoretically."

"The Organization crews are not highly motivated or efficient," she replied. "Nor do their ships function at a hundred per cent capacity with possessed on board screwing up the systems."

"Neither of which will matter a damn to their damn forty-gee combat wasps once they're launched. They function just fine."

"I will assign you half of the 1st Fleet vessels here at Avon," the First Admiral said. "That will bring your strength

up to four hundred and thirty, including eighty voidhawks. In addition, Lalwani has suggested that we request support from every Edenist Consensus within a seventy-light-year radius of Toi-Hoi.”

“Even if they only release ten per cent of their voidhawks, that should give you nearly three hundred and fifty voidhawks,” she said.

“Seven hundred and eighty front-line warships,” Kolhammer said. “A force that big is very cumbersome.”

Lalwani turned from the projection to give him a reproachful stare. She found him grinning straight at her.

“But I think I can cope.”

“Our tactical staff want to use Tranquillity as the rendezvous point,” Khanna said. “It’s only eighteen light-years from Toi-Hoi; which means you can be there in five hours once you know the Organization fleet is on its way.”

“One ship takes five hours, yes, but we’re dealing with nearly eight hundred. I wasn’t joking about such a force being cumbersome. Why don’t the tactical staff want us to use Toi-Hoi itself?”

“Capone must have it under observation. If he sees that kind of task force arrive he’ll simply abort and choose another target. We’d be back at square one. Tranquillity is close, and it’s not an obvious military base. Once our observation operation confirms the Organization fleet is leaving for Toi-Hoi a voidhawk will fly directly to Tranquillity and alert you. You can be at Toi-Hoi before Capone’s ships arrive. You can destroy them as they jump in.”

“Perfect tactics,” Kolhammer said, almost to himself. “How long before the rest of the 1st Fleet ships can join the squadron?”

“I’ve already issued recall orders,” the First Admiral said. “The bulk will be at Trafalgar within fifteen hours. The remainder can fly directly to Tranquillity.”

Kolhammer consulted the AV projection again, then datavisaged a series of requests into the desktop processor. The scale changed, expanding while the viewpoint slipped around to put Toi-Hoi at the centre. “The critical factor here

is that Tranquillity is secure. We need to prevent any ship from leaving, and also make sure it's not under any kind of stealth observation before we arrive."

"Suggestion?" Samual asked.

"It'll be four and a half days before the task force gets to Tranquillity. But Meredith Saldana's squadron is still at Cadiz, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Khanna said. "The ships were docked at a 7th Fleet supply base. The Cadiz government requested they remain and support local forces."

"So, a voidhawk could reach Cadiz within . . ." He gave Syrinx an inquiring glance.

"From Trafalgar? Seven to eight hours."

"And Meredith could get to Tranquillity in a further twenty hours. Which would give him almost three days to check local space for any kind of clandestine surveillance activity, as well as preventing any locals from leaving."

"Get the orders drafted," the First Admiral told Khanna. "Captain Syrinx, my compliments to the *Oenone*, I'd be obliged if you can convey them to Cadiz for me."

Now this is real flying, *Oenone* said excitedly.

Syrinx concealed her own delight at the voidhawk's enthusiasm. "Of course, Admiral."

Samual Aleksandrovich cancelled the AV projection. He felt the same kind of anxiety that had beset him the day he turned his back on his family and his world for a life in the navy. It came from standing up and taking responsibility. Big decisions were always made solo; and this was the biggest in his career. He couldn't remember anyone sending close-on eight hundred starships on a single combat assignment before. It was a frightening number, the firepower to wreck several worlds. And by the look of him, Motela was beginning to acknowledge the same reality. They swapped a nervous grin.

Samual stood up and put out his hand. "We need this. Very badly."

"I know," Kolhammer said. "We won't let you down."



Nobody in Koblat's spaceport noticed the steady procession of kids slipping quietly down the airlock tube in bay WJR-99 where the *Leonora Cephei* was docked. Not the port officials, not the other crews (who would have taken a dim view of Captain Knox's charter), and certainly not the company cops. For the first time in Jed's life, the company's policy meant that things were swinging his way.

The spaceport's internal security surveillance systems were turned off, the CAB docking bay logs had been disabled, customs staff were on extended leave. No inconvenient memory file would ever exist of the starships that had come and gone since the start of the quarantine; nor would there be a tax record of the bonuses everyone was earning.

Even so, Jed was taking no chances. His small chosen tribe convened in the day club where he and Beth checked them over, making them take off their red handkerchiefs before dispatching them up to the spaceport at irregular intervals.

There were eighteen Deadnights he and Beth reckoned they could trust to keep quiet; and that was stretching the *Leonora Cephei's* life-support capacity to its legal capacity. Counting himself and Beth, there were four left when Gari finally arrived. That part was pre-arranged; if both of them had been gone from the apartment for the whole day, their mother might have wondered what they were up to. What had definitely not been arranged was Gari having Navar in tow.

"I'm coming, too," Navar said defiantly as she saw Jed's face darken. "You can't stop me."

Her voice was that same priggish bark he had come to loathe over the last months, not just the tone but the way it always got what it wanted. "Gari!" he protested. "What are you doing, doll?"

His sister's lips squeezed up as a prelude to crying. "She saw me packing. She said she'd tell Digger."

"I will, I swear," Navar said. "I'm not staying here, not when I can go and live in Valisk. I'm going, all right."

“Okay.” Jed put his arm around Gari’s quivering shoulders. “Don’t worry about it. You did the right thing.”

“No she bloody didn’t,” Beth exclaimed. “There’s no room on board for anyone else.”

Gari started crying. Navar folded her arms, putting on her most stubborn expression.

“Thanks,” Jed said over his sister’s head.

“Don’t leave me here with Digger,” Gari wailed. “Please, Jed, don’t.”

“No one’s leaving you behind,” Jed promised.

“What then?” Beth asked.

“I don’t know. Knox is just going to have to find room for one more, I suppose.” He glared at Gari’s erstwhile antagonist. How bloody typical that even now she was messing things up, right when he thought he was going to escape the curse of Digger forever. By rights he should deck her one and lock her up until they’d gone. But in the world Kiera promised them, all animosities would be forgiven and forgotten. Even a mobile pain-in-the-arse like Navar. It was an ideal he was desperate to achieve. Would dumping her here make him unworthy of Kiera?

Seeing his indecision, Beth stormed: “Christ, you’re so useless.” She rounded on Navar, the nervejam suddenly in her hand. Navar’s smirk faded as she found herself confronting someone who for once wasn’t going to be wheedled or threatened. “One word out of you, one complaint, one show of your usual malice, and I use this on your bum before I shove you out of the airlock. Got that?” The nervejam was pressed against the end of Navar’s nose for emphasis.

“Yes,” the girl squeaked. She looked as miserable and frightened as Gari. Jed couldn’t remember seeing her so disconcerted before.

“Good,” Beth said. The nervejam vanished into a pocket. She flashed Jed a puzzled frown. “I don’t know why you let her give you so much grief the whole time. She’s only a girly brat.”

Jed realized he must be blushing as red as Gari. Explanations now would be pointless, not to mention difficult.

He pulled his shoulder bag out from under the table. It was disappointingly light to be carrying everything he considered essential to his life.

• • •

Captain Knox was waiting for them in the lounge at the end of the airlock tube: a short man with the flat features of his Pacific-island ancestry, but the pale skin and ash-blond hair which one of those same ancestors had bought as he geenered his family for free-fall endurance. His light complexion made his anger highly conspicuous.

"I only agreed to fifteen," he said as Beth and Jed drifted through the hatch. "You'll have to send some back; three at least."

Jed tried to push his shoes onto a stikpad. He didn't like free fall, which made his stomach wobble, his face swell, and clogged his sinuses. Nor was he much good at manoeuvring himself by hanging on to a grab hoop and using his wrists to angle his body. Inertia fought every move, making his tendons burn. When he did manage to touch his sole to the pad there was little adhesion. Like everything else in the inter-orbit ship, it was worn down and out-of-date.

"Nobody is going back," he said. Gari was clinging to his side, the mass of her floating body trying hard to twist him away from the stikpad. He didn't let go of the grab hoop.

"Then we don't leave," Knox said simply.

Jed saw Gerald Skibbow at the back of the lounge; as usual he was in switch-off, staring at the bulkhead with glazed eyes. Jed was beginning to wonder if he had a serious habit. "Gerald." He waved urgently. "Gerald!"

Knox muttered under his breath as Gerald came awake in slow stages, his body twitching.

"How many passengers are you licensed for?" Beth asked.

Knox ignored her.

“What is it?” Gerald asked. He was blinking as if the light were too bright.

“Too many people,” Knox said. “You’ve gotta chuck some off.”

“I have to go,” Gerald said quietly.

“No one is saying you don’t, Gerald,” Beth said. “It’s your money.”

“But my ship,” Knox said. “And I’m not carrying this many.”

“Fine,” Beth said. “We’ll just ask the CAB office how many people you’re licensed to carry.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“If you won’t carry us, then return the fee and we’ll find another ship.”

Knox gave Gerald a desperate glance, but he looked equally bewildered.

“Just three, did you say?” Beth asked.

Sensing things were finally flowing in his favour, Knox smiled. “Yes, just three. I’ll be happy to fly a second charter for your friends later.”

Which was rubbish, Beth knew. He was only worried about his own precious skin. A ship operating this close to the margin really would be hard put to sustain nineteen Deadnights plus the crew. It was the first time Knox had shown the slightest concern about the flight. The only interest he’d shown in them before was their ability to pay. Which Gerald had done, and well over the odds, too. They didn’t deserve to be pushed around like this.

But Gerald was totally out of the argument, back in one of his semi-comatose depressions again. And Jed . . . Jed these days was focused on one thing only. Beth still hadn’t made up her mind if she was annoyed about that or not.

“Put three of us in the lifeboat, then,” she said.

“What?” Knox asked.

“You do have a lifeboat?”

“Of course.”

Which is where he and his precious family would shelter if anything did go wrong, she knew. “We’ll put the three

youngest in there. They'd be the first in anyway, wouldn't they?"

Knox glared at her. Ultimately, though, money won the argument. Skibbow had paid double the price of an ordinary charter, even at the inflated rates flights to and from Koblat were currently worth.

"Very well," Knox said gracelessly. He datavised the flight computer to close the airlock hatch. Koblat's flight control was already signalling him to leave the docking bay. His filed flight plan gave a departure time of five minutes ago, and another ship was waiting.

"Give him the coordinate," Beth told Jed. She took Gerald by the arm and gently began to tug him to his couch.

Jed handed the flek over to Knox, wondering how come Beth was suddenly in charge.

The *Leonora Cephei* rose quickly out of the docking bay; a standard drum-shaped life-support capsule separated from her fusion drive by a thirty-metre spine. Four thermo dump panels unfolded from her rear equipment bay, looking like the cruciform fins of some atmospheric plane. Ion thrusters flared around her base and nose. Without any cargo to carry, manoeuvring was a lot faster and easier than normal. She rotated through ninety degrees, then the secondary drive came on, pushing her out past the rim of the spaceport.

Before *Leonora Cephei* had travelled five kilometres, the *Villeneuve's Revenge* settled onto the waiting cradle of bay WJR-99. Captain Duchamp datavised a request to the spaceport service company for a full load of deuterium and He₃. His fuel levels were down to twenty per cent, he said, and he had a long voyage ahead.



The clouds over Chainbridge formed a tight stationary knot of dark carmine amid the ruby streamers which ebbed and swirled across the rest of the sky. Standing behind Moyo as he drove the bus towards the town, Stephanie could sense the equally darkened minds clustered among the buildings.

There were far more than there should have been; Chainbridge was barely more than an ambitious village.

Moyo's concern matched hers. His foot eased off the accelerator. "What do you want to do?"

"We don't have a lot of choice. That's where the bridge is. And the vehicles need recharging."

"Go through?"

"Go through. I can't believe anyone will hurt the children now."

Chainbridge's streets were clogged with parked vehicles. They were either military jeeps and scout rangers or lightly armoured infantry carriers. Possessed lounged indolently among them. They reminded Moyo of ancient revolutionary guerillas, with their bold-print camouflage fatigues, heavy lace-up boots, and shoulder-slung rifles.

"Uh oh," Moyo said. They had reached the town square, a pleasant cobbled district bounded by tall aboriginal leghorn trees. Two light-tracked tanks were drawn up across the road. The machines were impossibly archaic with their iron slab bodywork and chuntering engines coughing up diesel smoke. But that same primitive solidity gave them a unique and unarguable menace.

The Karmic Crusader had already stopped, its cheap effervescent colours quite absurd against the tank's stolid armour. Moyo braked behind it.

"You stay in here," Stephanie said, squeezing his shoulder. "The children need someone. This is frightening for them."

"This is frightening for me," he grouched.

Stephanie stepped down onto the cobbles. Sunglasses spread out from her nose in the same fashion as a butterfly opening its wings.

Cochrane was already arguing with a couple of soldiers who were standing in front of the tanks. Stephanie came up behind him and smiled pleasantly at them. "I'd like to talk to Annette Ekelund, please. Would you tell her we're here."

One of them glanced at the Karmic Crusader and the in-

quisitive children pressed against its windscreen. He nodded, and slipped away past the tanks.

Annette Ekelund emerged from the town hall a couple of minutes later. She was wearing a smart grey uniform, its leather jacket lined in scarlet silk.

“Oh, wow,” Cochrane said as she approached. “It’s Mrs Hitler herself.”

Stephanie growled at him.

“We heard you were coming,” Annette Ekelund said in a tired voice.

“So why have you blocked the road?” Stephanie asked.

“Because I can, of course. Don’t you understand anything?”

“All right, you’ve demonstrated you’re in charge. I accept that. None of us has the slightest intention of challenging you. Can we go past now, please?”

Annette Ekelund shook her head in bemused wonder. “I just had to see you for myself. What do you think you’re doing with these kids? Do you think you’re saving them?”

“Frankly, yes. I’m sorry if that’s too simple for you, but they’re really all I’m interested in.”

“If you genuinely cared, you would have left them alone. It would have been kinder in the long run.”

“They’re children. They’re alone now, and they’re frightened now. Abstract issues don’t mean very much compared to that. And you’re scaring them.”

“Not intentionally.”

“So what is all this martial jingoism for? Keeping us under control?”

“You don’t show a lot of gratitude, do you? I risked everything to bring lost souls back to this world, including yours.”

“And so you think that gives you a shot at being our empress. You didn’t risk anything, you were compelled, just like all of us. You were simply the first, nothing more.”

“I was the first to see what needed to be done. The first to organize. The first to fight. The first to claim victory. The first to stake out our land.” She swept an arm out towards a

squad of troops who had taken over a pavement café on the other side of the square. "That's why they follow me. Because I'm right, because I know what needs to be done."

"What these people need is some kind of purpose. Mortonridge is falling apart. There's no food left, no electricity, nobody knows what to do. With authority comes responsibility. Unless you're just a bandit queen, of course. If you're a real leader, you should apply your leadership skills where they'll do the most good. You made a start, you kept the communications net working, you gave most towns a council of sorts. You should have built on that."

Annette Ekelund grinned. "What exactly were you before? They told me you were just a housewife."

"It doesn't matter," Stephanie said, impatient with the whole charade. "Will you let us through?"

"If I didn't, you'd only find another way. Of course you can go through. We even have a few children scooting around the town that you can take with you. See? I'm not a complete monster."

"The buses need recharging first."

"Naturally." Ekelund sighed. She beckoned to one of the tank guards. "Dane will show you where a working power point is. Please don't ask us for any food, I haven't got enough to spare. I'm having trouble supplying my own troops as it is."

Stephanie looked at the tanks; if she concentrated hard she could make out the fantasm shapes of the farm tractor mechanoids behind the armour. "What are you and your army doing here?"

"I would have thought that was obvious. I've taken that responsibility you prize so highly. I'm protecting Mortonridge for you. We're only thirty kilometres from the fire-break they slashed across the top of the ridge; and on the other side, the Saldana Princess is preparing. They're not going to leave us alone, Stephanie Ash. They hate us and they fear us. It's a nasty combination. So while you go gallivanting around doing your good deeds, just remember who's holding back the barbarians." She started back for

the tanks, then paused. "You know, one day you're really going to have to decide where your loyalties lie. You said you'd fight to stop them throwing you back; well if you do, it'll be at my side."

"Ho wow, one iron-assed lady," Cochrane muttered.

"Definitely," Stephanie agreed.

Dane climbed into the Karmic Crusader with Cochrane and showed them the way to a line of warehouses which served the wharf. Their long roofs were all made from solar collector panels. When the buses were plugged in, Stephanie called her people together and told them what Ekelund had said.

"If any of you want to wait here while the buses go to the firebreak, I'll understand," she said. "The Kingdom military might get nervous about four large vehicles heading towards them."

"They won't shoot us out of hand," McPhee said. "Not as long as we don't cross the line. They'll be curious."

"Do you think so?" Tina said anxiously. A large lace handkerchief was pressed to her lips.

"I've been there," Dane said. "It was a scout mission. I watched them watching me. They won't start any trouble. Like your friend said, they'll be curious."

"We're almost there." Stephanie's fixed smile betrayed her nerves. "Just a few more hours, that's all." She glanced back at the buses, putting on a cheerful expression as she waved at the children pressed up against the windows. They had all picked up on the gloomy aura of the darkened clouds overhead. "McPhee, Franklin; give me a hand with them will you. We'll let them stretch their legs here and use a toilet."

"Sure."

Stephanie let Moyo hold her for a moment. He planted a kiss on her forehead. "Don't give up now."

She smiled shyly. "I won't. Can you take a look in the warehouses for me, see if you can find some working toilets. If not, we'll have to make do with tissues and the river."

“I’ll go check.”

The big sliding doors of the closest warehouse were open. It was used to store tubing, row after row of floor-to-ceiling stacks. All its lights were off, but there was enough pink-tinged sunlight coming through the doors for him to see by. He started checking around for an office.

Silent forklift mechanoids were standing in the aisles, holding up bundles of tubing that had been destined for urgent delivery. It wouldn’t take much effort to start them up again, he thought. But what would be the point? Did a society of possessed need factories and farms? Some infrastructure was necessary, yes, but how much and of what kind? Something simple and efficient, and extremely long-lasting. He was quietly glad that kind of decision wasn’t his.

A pyramid of tubing shielded the man from Moyo’s perception. So he convinced himself later. Whatever the reason, he didn’t notice him until he had rounded a corner and was barely five metres away. And he wasn’t a possessed. Moyo knew his own kind, the internal glimmer of cells excited by the energistic overspill. This man’s bioelectric currents were almost black, while his thoughts were fast and quiet. He was excessively ordinary in appearance; wearing pale green trousers, a check shirt, and a sleeveless jacket with DataAxis printed on its left breast pocket.

Moyo was chilled by a rush of panic. Any non-possessed creeping around here had to be a spy, which meant he’d be armed, most likely with something potent enough to terminate a possessed with minimum fuss.

White fire punched out of Moyo’s palm, an instinctive response.

The seething streamer splashed against the man’s face and flowed around him to strike the tubing behind him. Moyo grunted in disbelief. The man simply stood there as if it were water pouring over him.

The white fire dimmed, its remnants retreating into Moyo’s hand. He whimpered, expecting the worst. I’m going to be blown back into the beyond. They’ve found a

way of neutralizing our energistic power. We've lost. There's only the beyond now. For always.

He closed his eyes. Thinking with fond longing: Stephanie.

Nothing happened. He opened his eyes again. The man was looking at him with a mildly embarrassed expression. Behind him, molten metal was dribbling down the side of the stacked tubing.

"Who are you?" Moyo asked hoarsely.

"My name's Hugh Rosler. I used to live in Exnall."

"Did you follow us here?"

"No. Although I did watch your bus leave Exnall. It's just coincidence I'm here now."

"Right," Moyo said carefully. "You're not a spy then?"

The question was one which Rosler apparently found quite amusing. "Not for the Kulu Kingdom, no."

"So how come the white fire didn't affect you?"

"I have a built-in resistance. It was thought we should have some protection when this time came around. And the reality dysfunction ability has proved inordinately useful over the years. I've been in a few tight corners in my time; completely inadvertently I might add. I'm not supposed to be obtrusive."

"Then you are an agent. Who do you work for?"

"Agent implies an active role. I only observe, I'm not part of any faction."

"Faction?"

"The Kingdom. The Confederation. Adamists. Edenists. The possessed. Factions."

"Uh huh. Are you going to shoot me, then, or something?"

"Good heavens no. I told you, I'm here purely on observation duty."

What was being said, apparently in all sincerity, wasn't helping to calm Moyo at all. "For which faction?"

"Ah. That's classified, I'm afraid. Technically, I shouldn't even be telling you this much. But circumstances have

changed since my mission began. These things aren't quite so important today. I'm just trying to put you at ease."

"It's not working."

"You really do have nothing to fear from me."

"You're not human, are you?"

"I'm ninety-nine per cent human. That's good enough to qualify, surely?"

Moyo thought he would have preferred it if Hugh Rosler had launched into an indignant denial. "What's the one per cent?"

"Sorry. Classified."

"Xenoc? Is that it? Some unknown race? We always had rumours of pre-technology contact, men being taken away to breed."

Hugh Rosler chuckled. "Oh, yes, good old Roswell. You know I'd almost forgotten about that; the papers were full of it for decades afterwards. But I don't think it ever really happened. At least, I never detected any UFOs when I was on Earth, and I was there quite a while."

"You were . . . ? But . . ."

"I'd better be going. Your friends are starting to wonder where you've got to. There's a toilet in the next warehouse which the children can use. The tank is gravity fed, so it's still working."

"Wait! What are you observing us for?"

"To see what happens, of course."

"Happens? You mean when the Kingdom attacks?"

"No, that's not really important. I want to see what the outcome is for your entire race now that the beyond has been revealed to you. I must say, I'm becoming quite excited by the prospect. After all, I have been waiting for this for a very long time. It's my designated goal function."

Moyo simply stared at him, astonishment and indignation taking the place of fear. "How long?" was all he managed to whisper.

"Eighteen centuries." Rosler raised an arm in a cheery wave and walked away into the shadows at the back of the warehouse. They seemed to lap him up.

“What’s the matter with you?” Stephanie asked when Moyo shambled slowly out into the gloomy light of the rumbling clouds.

“Don’t laugh, but I think I’ve just met Methuselah’s younger brother.”

• • •

Louise heard the lounge hatch slide open, and guessed who it was. His duty watch had finished fifteen minutes ago. Just long enough to show he wasn’t in any sort of rush to see her.

The trouble with the *Jamrana*, Louise thought, was its layout. Its cabin fittings were just as good as those in the *Far Realm*, but instead of the pyramid of four life-support capsules, the inter-orbit cargo craft had a single cylindrical life-support section riding above the cargo truss. The decks were stacked one on top of the other like the layers of a wedding cake. To find someone, all you had to do was start at the top, and climb down the central ladder. There was no escape.

“Hello, Louise.”

She reached for a polite smile. “Hello, Pieri.”

Pieri Bushay had just reached twenty, the second oldest of three brothers. Like most inter-orbit ships, *Jamrana* was run as a family concern; all seven crew members were Bushays. The strangeness of the extended family, the looseness of its internal relationships, was one which Louise found troubling; it was more company than any family she understood. Pieri’s elder brother was away serving a commission in the Govcentral navy, which left his father, twin mothers, brother, and two cousins to run the ship.

Small wonder that a young female passenger would be such an attraction to him. He was shy, and uncertain, which was endearing; nothing like the misplaced assurance of William Elphinstone.

“How are you feeling?”

His usual opening line.

“Fine.” Louise tapped the little nanonic package behind her ear. “The wonders of Confederation technology.”

“We’ll be flipping over in another twenty hours. Halfway there. Then we’ll be flying ass . . . er, I mean, bottom backwards to Earth.”

She was impatient with the fact it was going to take longer to fly seventy million kilometres between planets than it had to fly between stars. But at least the fusion drive was scheduled to be on for a third of the trip. The medical packages didn’t have to work quite so hard to negate her sickness. “That’s good.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to datavise the O’Neill Halo to see if there’s a ship heading for Tranquillity?”

“No.” That had been too sharp. “Thank you, Pieri, but if a ship is going, then it’s going, if not, there’s nothing I can do. Fate, you see.”

“Oh, sure. I understand.” He smiled tentatively. “Louise, if you have to stay in the Halo till you find a starship, I’d like to show you around. I’ve visited hundreds of the rocks. I know what’s hot out there, what to see, what to miss. It would be fun.”

“Hundreds?”

“Fifty, at least. And all the major ones, including Nova Kong.”

“I’m sorry, Pieri, that doesn’t mean much to me. I’ve never heard of Nova Kong.”

“Really? Not even on Norfolk?”

“No. The only one I know is High York, and that’s only because we’re heading to it.”

“But Nova Kong is famous; one of the first to be flown into Earth orbit and be made habitable. Nova Kong physicists invented the ZTT drive. And Richard Saldana was the asteroid’s chairman once; he used it as his headquarters to plan the Kulu colonization.”

“How fabulous. I can’t really imagine a time when the Kingdom didn’t exist, it seems so . . . substantial. In fact all of Earth’s prestarflight history reads like a fable to me. So, have you ever visited High York before?”

"Yes, it's where the *Jamrana* is registered."

"That's your home, then?"

"We mostly dock there, but the ship's my real home. I wouldn't swap it for anything."

"Just like Joshua. You space types are all the same. You've got wild blood."

"I suppose so." His face tightened at the mention of Joshua; the guardian angel fiancé Louise managed to mention in every conversation.

"Is High York very well organized?"

He seemed puzzled by the question. "Yes. Of course. It has to be. Asteroids are nothing like planets, Louise. If the environment isn't maintained properly you'd have a catastrophe on your hands. They can't afford not to be well organized."

"I know that. What I meant was, the government. Does it have very strong law enforcement policies? Phobos seemed fairly easygoing."

"That's the devout Communists for you; they're very trusting, Dad says they always give people the benefit of the doubt."

It confirmed her worries. When the four of them had arrived at the *Jamrana* a couple of hours before its departure, Endron had handed over their passport fleks to the single Immigration Officer on duty. He had known the woman, and they'd spoken cheerfully. She'd been laughing when she slotted the fleks into her processor block, barely glancing at the images they stored. Three transient offworlders with official documentation, who were friends of Endron . . . She even allowed Endron to accompany them on board.

That was when he'd taken Louise aside. "You won't make it, you know that, don't you?" he asked.

"We've got this far," she said shakily. Though she'd had her doubts. There had been so many people as they made their tortuous way to the spaceport with the cargo mechanoid concealing Faurax's unconscious body. But

they'd got the forger on board the *Far Realm* and into a zero-tau pod without incident.

"So far you've had a lot of luck, and no genuine obstacle. That's going to end as soon as the *Jamrana* enters Gov-central-controlled space. You don't understand what it's going to be like, Louise. There's no way you'll ever get inside High York. Look, the only reason you ever got inside Phobos was because we smuggled you in, and no one bothered to inspect the *Far Realm*. You got out, because no one is bothered about departing ships. And now you're heading straight at Earth, which has the largest single population in the Confederation, and runs the greatest military force ever assembled—a military force which along with the leadership is very paranoid right now. Three forged passports are not going to get you in. They are going to run every test they can think of, Louise, and believe me, Fletcher is not going to get through High York's spaceport." He was almost pleading with her. "Come with me, tell our government what's happened. They won't hurt him, I'll testify that he's not a danger. Then after that we can find you a ship to Tranquillity, all above board."

"No. You don't understand, they'll send him back to the beyond. I saw it on the news; if you put a possessed in zero-tau it compels them out of the body they're using. I can't turn Fletcher in, not if they're going to force him back there. He's suffered for seven centuries. Isn't that enough?"

"And what about the person whose body he's possessing?"

"I don't know!" she cried. "I didn't want any of this. My whole planet's been possessed."

"All right. I'm sorry. But I had to say it. You're doing a damn sight worse than playing with fire, Louise."

"Yes." She held on to his shoulder with one hand to steady herself and brushed her lips to his cheek. "Thank you. I'm sure you could have blown the whistle on us if you really wanted to."

His reddening cheeks were confirmation enough. "Yeah,

well. Maybe I learned from you that nothing is quite black and white. Besides, that Fletcher, he's so . . .”

“Decent.”

Louise gave Pieri the kind of look that told him she was immensely interested in every word he spoke. “So what will happen when we arrive at High York, then? I want to know everything.”

Pieri started to access all his neural nanonic-filed memories of High York spaceport. With luck, and a surfeit of details, he could make this last for a good hour.

• • •

The Magistrature Council was the Confederation's ultimate court. Twenty-five judges sat on the Council, appointed by the Assembly to deal with the most serious violations of Confederation law. The majority of cases were the ones brought against starship crews captured by navy ships, those accused of piracy or owning antimatter. Less common were the war crimes trials, inevitably resulting from asteroid independence struggles. There were only two possible sentences for anyone found guilty by the Magistrature: death, or deportation to a penal colony.

The full Magistrature Council also had the power to sit in judgement of sovereign governments. The last such sitting had determined, in absentia, Omuta to be guilty of genocide, and ordered the execution of its cabinet and military high command.

The Council's final mandate was the authority to declare a person, government, or entire people to be an Enemy of Humanity. Laton had been awarded such a condemnation, as had members of the black syndicates producing antimatter, and various terrorists and defeated warlords. Such a proclamation was essentially a death warrant which empowered a Confederation official to pursue the renegade across all national boundaries and required all local governments to cooperate.

That was the pronouncement the Provost General was now aiming to have applied against the possessed. With that

in the bag, the CNIS would be free to do whatever they wanted to Jacqueline Couteur and the other prisoners in the demon trap. But first her current status had to be legally established, if she was a hostile prisoner under the terms of the state of emergency, or a hapless victim. In either case, she was still entitled to a legal representative.

The courtroom in Trafalgar chosen for the preliminary hearing was maximum security court three. It had none of the trimmings of the public courts, retaining only the very basic layout of docks, desks for the prosecution and defence counsels, the judge's bench, and a small observer gallery. There was no permitted or designated place for the media or the public.

Maynard Khanna arrived five minutes before the hearing was scheduled to begin, and sat at the front of the small gallery. As someone used to the order of military life, he had an intense distrust and dislike of the legal profession. Lawyers had abolished the simple concept of right and wrong, turning it into degrees of guilt. And in doing so they cut themselves in for fees which came only in large multiples of a navy captain's salary.

The accused were entitled to a defence, Maynard conceded, but he still never understood how their lawyers avoided feeling equally guilty when they got them off.

Lieutenant Murphy Hewlett sat down behind Maynard, pulling unhappily at the jacket of his dress uniform. He leaned forward and murmured: "I can't believe this is happening."

"Me neither," Maynard grumbled back. "But the Provost General says it should be a formality. No court in the galaxy is going to let Jacqueline Couteur walk out of the door."

"For God's sake, Maynard, she shouldn't even be let out of the demon trap. You know that."

"This is a secure court; and we can't give her defence lawyer an opportunity to mount an appeal on procedural grounds."

"Bloody lawyers!"

"Too right. What are you doing here, anyway?"

“Provost General’s witness. I’m supposed to tell the judge how we were in a war situation on Lalonde, which makes Couteur’s capture legitimate under the Assembly’s rules of engagement. It’s in case her lawyer goes for a wrongful jurisdiction plea.”

“You know, this is the first time I’ve ever disagreed with the First Admiral. I said we should just keep her in the demon trap, and screw all this legal crap. Gilmore is losing days of research time over this.”

Murphy hissed in disgust and sat back. For the eighth time that morning, his hand ran over his holster. It contained a nine-millimetre semi-automatic pistol, loaded with dum dum bullets. He loosened the cover, allowing his fingers to rest on the grip. Yesterday evening he had spent two hours at the range in the officers’ mess, shooting the weapon without any aid from neural nanonics programs. Just in case.

An eight-strong marine squad and their sergeant, each of them armed with a machine gun, marched the four prisoners into the court. Jacqueline Couteur was the first in line, dressed in a neat grey suit. If it hadn’t been for the carbottanium manacles she would have been a picture of middle-class respectability. A slim sensor bracelet had been placed around her right wrist, monitoring the flow of energy through her body. She looked around, noting the marine guards at each of the three doors. Then she saw Murphy Hewlett scowling, and grinned generously at him.

“Bitch,” he grunted under his breath.

The marine squad sat Jacqueline in the dock and fastened her manacles to a loop of chain. The other three possessed—Randall, Lennart, and Nena—were made to sit on the bench beside her. Once their manacles were secured, the marines took up position behind them. The sergeant datavised his processor block to check that the sensor bracelets were working, then gave the clerk of the court a brief nod.

The four defence lawyers were ushered in. Jacqueline manoeuvred a polite welcoming smile into place. This was

the third time she'd seen Udo DiMarco. The lawyer wasn't entirely happy to be appointed her counsel, he'd admitted that much to her, but then went on to say he'd do his best.

"Good morning, Jacqueline," he said, doing his nervous best to ignore the marines behind her.

"Hello, Udo. Did you manage to obtain the recordings?"

"I filed a release request with the court, yes. It may take some time; the navy claims their Intelligence Service research is classified and exempt from the access act of 2503. I'll challenge that, of course, but as I said this is all going to take some time."

"They tortured me, Udo. The judge has to see those recordings. I'll walk free in seconds if the truth is ever known."

"Jacqueline, this is only a preliminary hearing to establish that all the required arrest procedures were followed, and clarify your legal custody status."

"I wasn't arrested, I was abducted."

Udo DiMarco sighed and plunged on. "The Provost General's team is going to argue that as a possessor you have committed a kidnap, and are therefore a felon. That will give them a basis for holding you in custody. They're also arguing that your energetic power constitutes a new and dangerous weapons technology, which will validate the Intelligence Service's investigation. Please don't expect to walk out of court this morning."

"Well I'm sure you'll do your best." She gave him an encouraging smile.

Udo DiMarco flexed his shoulders uncomfortably and withdrew to the defence counsel's bench. His sole comfort was the fact that the media weren't allowed in; no one would know he was defending a possessed. He datavised his processor block, reviewing the files he'd assembled. Ironically, he could put up quite a good case for Couteur's release, but he'd made the decision five minutes after having the case dumped on him that he was only going to make a show of defending her. Jacqueline could never know, but Udo DiMarco had a lot of family on New California.

The clerk of the court rose to his feet and announced: "Please stand for Judge Roxanne Taynor. This Magistrature Council court is now in session."

Judge Taynor appeared at the door behind the bench. Everyone stood, including the four possessed. Their movement meant the marine guards had to alter the angle they were pointing their machine guns. For a moment their concentration was less than absolute. Everybody's neural nanonics crashed. The lighting panels became incandescent. Four balls of white fire exploded around the machine guns, smashing them into a shower of molten fragments.

Murphy Hewlett bellowed a wordless curse, yanking his pistol up, thumb flicking at the safety catch. Like most people he was caught halfway to his feet, an awkward position. A brutally white light was making him squeeze his eyelids closed; retinal implants were taking a long time to filter out the excess photons. The sound of the detonating machine guns was audible above the startled cries. He swung the pistol around to line up on Couteur. Marines were screaming as their hands and lower arms were shredded along with their weapons. The lights went out.

From dazzling brilliance to total blackness was too much for his eyes. He couldn't see a thing. A machine gun fired. Muzzle blasts sent out a flickering orange light.

The possessed were all moving. Fast. The gunfire turned their motions into speedy flickers. They'd run straight through the dock, smashing the tough composite apart. Fragments tumbled through the air.

Two lightning streaks of white fire lashed out, striking a couple of marines. The lawyers were scrambling for the closest door. Roxanne Taynor was already through the door to her chambers. One of the marines was standing in front of it, sweeping her machine gun in a fast arc as she tried to line it up on a possessed.

"Close the doors!" Murphy yelled. "Seal this place."

A machine gun was firing again as the light from the white fire shrank away. People screamed as they dived and

stumbled for cover. Ricochets hummed lethally through the blackness.

Murphy caught sight of Couteur in the segments of illumination thrown out by another burst of gunfire. He twisted his pistol around and fired five shots, anticipating her direction for the last two. Dumdum bullets impacted with penetrating booms. Murphy dropped to his knees and rolled quickly. A pulse of white fire ripped through the air where he'd been standing. "Shit!" Missed her.

He could hear a siren wailing outside. Sensor modules on the walls were starting to burn, jetting out long tongues of turquoise flame which dissolved into a fountain of sparks. Three more bolts of white fire zipped over the gallery seats. There were heavy thuds of bodies hitting the floor.

When he risked a quick glance above the seat backs he could see Nena and Randall crouched low and zigzagging towards the door behind him. Eyeblick image of the door to one side of the smashed dock: three marines standing in defensive formation around it, almost flinging a lawyer out into the corridor beyond. But the door behind him was still open. It was trying to slide shut, but the body of a dead marine was preventing it from closing.

Murphy didn't have an option. They couldn't be allowed out into Trafalgar, it was inconceivable. He vaulted over the seats just as an odd rosette of white fire spun upwards from behind the judge's bench. It hit the ceiling and bounced, expanding rapidly into a crown made up from writhing flames which coiled around and around each other. The three marines guarding the door fired at it as it swooped down at them, bullets tearing out violet bubbles which erupted into twinkling starbursts. Murphy started firing his pistol at Randall as he sprinted for the door, trigger finger pumping frantically. Seeing the dumdum rounds rip ragged chunks out of the possessed's chest. Shifting his aim slightly. Half of Randall's neck blew away in a twister of blood and bone chippings. A screaming Nena cartwheeled backwards in panic, limbs thrashing out of control.

The crown of agitated white fire dropped around one of

the marines like an incendiary lasso. It contracted with vicious snapping sounds, slicing clean through his pelvis. His machine gun was still firing as his torso tumbled down, spraying the whole courtroom with bullets. He tried to say something as he fell, but shock had jammed his entire nervous system. All that came out was a coughed grunt as his head hit the ground. Dulled eyes stared at his legs which were still standing above him, twitching spastically as they slowly buckled.

The other two marines froze in terror. Then one vomited.

“*Close it!*” Murphy gagged. “For Christ’s sake, get out and close it.” His eyes were hot and sticky with fluid, some of it red. His foot hit something, and he half tripped flinging himself at the gap. He landed flat on the dead marine and rolled forwards. Figures were running around at the far end of the corridor, confused movements blurring together. White fire enveloped his ankle.

“Does it hurt? We can help.”

“No, fuck you!” He flopped onto an elbow and aimed the pistol back through the door, firing wildly. Pain from his ankle was making his hand shake violently. Noxious smoke sizzled up in front of him.

Then hands were gripping his shoulders, pulling him back along the floor. Bullish shouts all around him. The distinctive thud of a Bradfield slammed against his ears, louder than thunder in the close confines of the corridor. A marine in full combat armour was standing above him, firing the heavy-calibre weapon into the courtroom. Another suited marine was pulling the corpse clear of the door.

Murphy’s neural nanonics started to come back on-line. Medical programs established axon blocks. The courtroom door slid shut, locks engaging with a *clunk*. A fire extinguisher squirted thick white gas against Murphy’s smouldering dress uniform trousers. He flopped down onto the corridor floor, too stunned to say anything for a while. When he looked around he could see three people he recognized from the court, all of them ashen-faced and stupefied, slumped against the walls. The marines were tending

to two of them. That was when Murphy realized the corridor floor was smeared with blood. Spent cartridge cases from his pistol rolled around.

He was dragged further away from the courtroom door, allowing the marine squad to set up two tripod-mounted Bradfields, pointing right at the grey reinforced silicon.

“Hold still,” a woman in a doctor’s field uniform told him. She began to cut his trousers away; a male nurse was holding a medical nanonic package ready.

“Did any of them get out?” Murphy asked weakly. People were tramping up and down the corridor, paying no attention to him.

“I don’t know,” the doctor said.

“Fuck it, find out!”

She gave him a calculating look.

“Please?”

One of the marines was called over. “The other doors are all closed,” he told Murphy. “We got a few people out, but the possessed are safely locked up in there. Every exit is sealed tight. The captain is waiting for a CNIS team to advise him what to do next.”

“A few people?” Murphy asked. “A few people got out?”

“Yeah. Some of the lawyers, the judge, court staff, five marines. We’re proud of the fight you put up, sir, you and the others. It could have been a lot worse.”

“And the rest?”

The marine turned his blank shell helmet towards the door. “Sorry, sir.”

• • •

The roar of the machine gun ended, leaving only the screams and whimpers to fester through the darkened courtroom. Maynard Khanna could hear his own feeble groans contributing to the morass of distress. There was little he could do to prevent it, the tiniest movement sent sickening spires of pain leaping into his skull. A gout of white fire had struck him seconds into the conflict, wrapping around his leg like a blazing serpent, felling him immediately. His temple had struck one of the seats, dazing him badly. After

that, all the noise and flaring light swarmed around him, somehow managing to leave him isolated from the fray.

Now the white fire had gone, leaving him alone with its terrible legacy. The flesh from his leg had melted off. But his bones had remained intact, perfectly white. He could see his skeletal foot twitching next to his real one, its tiny bones fitting together like a medical text.

The splintered remnants of the dock were burning with unnatural brightness, throwing capering shadows on the wall. Maynard turned his head, crying out as red stars gave way to an ominous darkness. When he flushed the involuntary tears from his eyes he could see the heavy door at the back of the court was shut.

They hadn't got out!

He took a few breaths, momentarily puzzled by what he was doing in the dark, the waves of pain seemed to prevent his thoughts from flowing. The screams had died, along with every other sound except for the sharp crackling of the flames. Footsteps crunched through the debris. Three dark figures loomed above him; humanoid perhaps, but any lingering facet of humanity had been bred out generations ago.

The whispers began, slithering up from a bottomless pit to comfort him with the sincerity of a two-timing lover. Then came the real pain.

• • •

Dr Gilmore studied the datavised image he was receiving direct from Marine Captain Rhodri Peyton's eyes. He was standing in the middle of a marine squad which was strung out along one of the corridors leading to maximum security court three. Their machine guns and Bradfields were deployed to cover the engineering officers who were gingerly applying sensor pads to the door.

When Dr Gilmore attempted to access the officers' processor blocks there was no response. The units were too close to the possessed inside the courtroom. "Have they made any attempt to break out?" he asked.

"No, sir," Rhodri Peyton datavised. His eyes flicked to brown scorch lines on the walls just outside the door.

“Those marks were caused when Lieutenant Hewlett was engaging them. There’s been nothing since then. We’ve got them trapped, all right.”

Gilmore accessed Trafalgar’s central computer and requested a blueprint of the courtroom. There were no service tunnels nearby, and the air-ducts weren’t large enough for anyone to crawl down. It was a maximum security court after all. Unfortunately it wasn’t the kind of security designed with the possessed in mind. He knew it would only be a matter of time before they got out. Then there really would be hell to pay.

“Have you confirmed the number of people in the courtroom?”

“We’re missing twelve people, sir. But we know at least four of those are dead, and the others sustained some injuries. And Hewlett claims he terminated one of the possessed, Randall.”

“I see. That means we now have a minimum of eleven possessed to contend with. That much energistic potential is extremely dangerous.”

“This whole area is sealed, sir, and I’ve got a squad covering each door.”

“I’m sure you have, Captain. One moment.” He datavised the First Admiral and gave him a brief summary. “I have to advise we don’t send the marines in. Given the size of the courtroom and the number of possessed, I’d estimate marine casualties of at least fifty per cent.”

“Agreed,” the First Admiral datavised back. “The marines don’t go in. But are you certain everyone in there is now possessed?”

“I think it’s an inevitable conclusion, sir. This whole legal business was quite obviously just a ploy by Couteur to gain a foothold here. That many possessed represent a significant threat. My guess is that they may simply try to tunnel their way out; I expect they’ll be able to dissolve the rock around them. They must be neutralized as swiftly as possible. We can always acquire further individuals to continue my team’s research.”

“Dr Gilmore, I’d remind you that my staff captain is in there, along with a number of civilians. We must make at least one attempt to subdue them. You’ve had weeks to research this energistic ability, you must be able to suggest something.”

“There is one possibility, sir. I accessed Thakrar’s report; he used decompression against the possessed when they tried to storm the *Villeneuve’s Revenge*.”

“To kill them.”

“Yes. But it does indicate a weakness. I was going to recommend that we vent the courtroom’s atmosphere. That way we wouldn’t have to risk opening one of the doors to fire any sort of weapon in there. However, we could try gas against them first. They can force matter into new shapes, but I think altering a molecular structure would probably be beyond them. It needn’t even be a chemical weapon, we could simply increase the nitrogen ratio until they black out. Once they’ve been immobilized, they could be placed into zero-tau.”

“How would you know if a gas assault worked? They destroyed the sensors, we can’t see in.”

“There are a number of electronic systems remaining in the courtroom; if the possessed do succumb to the gas those systems should come back on line. But whatever we do, Admiral, we will have to open the door at some stage to confirm their condition.”

“Very well, try the gas first. We owe Maynard and the others that much.”

• • •

“We’re not going to have much time to get out,” Jacqueline Couteur said.

Perez, who had come into Maynard Khanna’s body a few minutes earlier, was struggling to keep his thoughts flowing lucidly under a torrent of pain firing in from every part of his new frame. He managed to focus on some of the most badly damaged zones, seeing the blood dry up and torn discoloured flesh return to a more healthy aspect. “*Mama*, what did you do to this guy?”

“Taught him not to be so stubborn,” Jacqueline said emotionlessly.

He winced as he raised himself up onto his elbows. Despite his most ardent wishes, his damaged leg felt as if fireworms were burrowing through it. He could *imagine* it whole and perfect, and even see the image forming around reality, but that wasn't quite enough to make it so. “Okay, so now what?” He glanced around. It was not the most auspicious of environments to welcome him back. Bodies were straddling the court's wrecked fittings, small orange fires gnawed hungrily at various jagged chunks of composite, and hatred was beaming through each of the doors like an emotive X ray.

“Not much,” she admitted. “But we have to look for some kind of advantage. We're at the very centre of the Confederation's resistance to us. There must be something we can do to help Capone and the others. I had hoped we could locate their nuclear weapons. The destruction of this base would be a significant blow to the Confederation.”

“Forget that; those marines were good,” Lennart said grudgingly. He was standing in front of the judge's bench, one hand pulling on his chin as he gazed intently at the floor. “You know, there's some kind of room or corridor about twenty metres straight down.” The tiling started to flow away from his feet in fast ripples, exposing the naked rock below. “It won't take long if we break this rock together.”

“Maybe,” Jacqueline said. “But they'll know we're doing it. Gilmore will have surrounded us with sensors by now.”

“What then?” asked one of the others they'd brought back. “For Christ's sake, we can't stay in here and wait for the Confederation Marines to bust down the door. I've only just returned. I'm not giving this body up after only ten minutes. I couldn't stand that.”

“Christ?” Jacqueline queried bitingly.

“You might have to anyway,” Perez said. “We all might wind up back there in the beyond.”

“Oh, why?” Jacqueline asked.

“This Khanna knows of an ambush the Confederation Navy is planning against Capone. He is confident they will destroy the Organization fleet. Without Capone to crack new star systems open, we’re going to be stalled. Khanna is convinced the quarantine will prevent possession from spreading to any new worlds.”

“Then we must tell Capone,” Jacqueline said. “All of us together must shout this news into the beyond.”

“Fine,” Nena said. “Do that. But what about us? How are we going to get out of here?”

“That is a secondary concern for us now.”

“Not for me it bloody well isn’t.”

When Jacqueline scowled at her, she saw beads of sweat pricking the woman’s brow. Nena was swaying slightly, too. Some of the others looked as if they were exhausted, their eyes glazing over. Even Jacqueline was aware her body had grown heavier than before. She sniffed the air suspiciously, finding it contaminated with the slightly clammy ozone taint of air-conditioning.

“What exactly is the navy planning to do to Capone?” she asked.

“They know he’s going to attack Toi-Hoi. They’re going to hide a fleet at Tranquillity, and intercept him when they know he’s on the way.”

“We must remember that,” Jacqueline said firmly, fixing each of them in turn with a compelling stare. “Capone must be told. Get through to him.” She ignored everything else but the wish that the air in the courtroom was pure and fresh, blown down straight from some virgin mountain range. She could smell a weak scent of pine.

One of the possessed sat down heavily. The others were all panting.

“What’s happening?” someone asked.

“Radiation, I expect,” Jacqueline said. “They’re probably bombarding us with gamma rays so they don’t have to come in to deal with us.”

"Blast a door open," Lennart said. "Charge them. A few of us might get through."

"Good idea," Jacqueline said.

He pointed a finger at the door behind the judge's bench, its tip wavering about drunkenly. A weak crackle of white fire licked out. It managed to stain the door with a splatter of soot, but nothing more. "Help me. Come on, together!"

Jacqueline closed her eyes, imagining all the clean air in the courtroom gathering around her and her alone. A light breeze ruffled her suit.

"I don't want to go back," Perez wailed. "Not there!"

"You must," Jacqueline said. Her breathing was easier now. "Capone will find you a body. He'll welcome you. I envy you for that."

Two more of the possessed toppled over. Lennart sagged to his knees, hands clutching at his throat.

"The navy must never know what we discovered," Jacqueline said thickly.

Perez looked up at her, too weak to plead. It wouldn't have been any use, he realized, not against that mind tone.

• • •

The shaped electron explosive charge sliced clean through the courtroom door with a lightning-bolt flash. There was very little blowback against the marine squad crouched fifteen metres away down the corridor. Captain Peyton yelled "Go!" at the same time as the charge was triggered. His armour suit's communications block was switched to audio, just in case the possessed were still active.

Ten sense-overload ordnance rounds were fired through the opening as the wrecked door spun around like a dropped coin. A ferocious blast of light and sound surged back along the corridor. The squad rushed forward into the deluge.

It was a synchronized assault. All three doors into the courtroom were blown at the same time. Three sets of sense-overload ordnance punched in. Three marine squads.

Dr Gilmore was still hooked into Peyton's neural nanonics, receiving the image direct from the captain's shell hel-

met sensors. The scene which greeted him took a while to interpret. Dimming flares were sinking slowly through the air as tight beams of light from each suit formed a crazy jumping crisscross pattern above the wrecked fittings. Bodies lay everywhere. Some were victims of the earlier fight. Ten of them had been executed. There was no other explanation. Each of the ten had been killed by a bolt of white fire through the brain.

Peyton was pushing his way through a ring of nearly twenty marines that had formed in the middle of the courtroom. Jacqueline Couteur stood at the centre, her shape blurred by a grey twister that had formed around her. It looked as if she'd been cocooned by solid strands of air. The twister was making a high-pitched whining sound as it undulated gently from side to side.

Jacqueline Couteur's hands were in the air. She gazed at the guns levelled against her with an almost sublime composure. "Okay," she said. "You win. And I think I may need my lawyer again."

26

There were nearly three thousand people in the crowd which assembled outside the starscraper lobby. Most of them looked fairly pissed at being summoned, but nobody actually argued with Bonney's deputies when they came calling. They wanted a quiet life. On a planet they could have just walked away into the wilderness; here that option did not exist.

Part of the lobby's gently arching roof had crumpled, a remnant of an early battle during their takeover of the habitat. Bonney started to walk up the pile of rubble. She held a processor block in one hand, turning it so she could see the screen.

"Last chance, Rubra," she said. "Tell me where the boyo is, or I start getting serious." The block's screen remained blank. "You overheard what Patricia said. I know you did, because you're a sneaky little shit. You've been manipulating me for a while now. I'm always told where he is, and he's always gone when I get there. You're helping him as much as you're helping me, aren't you? Probably trying to frighten him into cooperating with you. Was that it? Well, not anymore, Rubra, because Patricia has changed everything; we're playing big boys' rules now. I don't have to be careful, I don't have to respect your precious, delicate structure. It was fun going one on one against all those little bastards you stashed around the place. I enjoyed myself. But you were cheating the whole time. Funny, that's what Dariat warned us about right from the start." She reached the roof, and walked to the edge above the crowd. "You going to tell me?"

The screen printed: THOSE LITTLE DEADNIGHT GIRLS THAT COME HERE, YOU REALLY ENJOY WHAT YOU DO WITH THEM, DON'T YOU, DYKE?

Bonney dropped the processor block as if it were a piece of used toilet paper. "Game over, Rubra. You lose; I'm going to use nukes to crack you in half."

Dariat, I think you'd better listen to this.

What now?

Bonney, as usual. But things have just acquired an unpleasant edge. I don't think Kiera should have left her unsupervised.

Dariat hooked into the observation routines in time to see Bonney raise her hands for silence. The crowd gazed up at her expectantly.

"We've got the power of genies," she said. "You can grant yourself every wish you want. And we still have to live like dogs out in these shantytowns, grabbing what food we can, whipped into line, told where we can and can't go. Rubra's done that to us. We have starships for fuck's sake. We can travel to another star system in less time than it takes your heart to beat once. But if you want to go from here to the endcap, you have to walk. Why? Because that shit Rubra won't let us use the tubes. And up until now, we've let him get away with it. Well, not anymore."

Passionate lady, Dariat said uncomfortably.

Psycho lady, more like. They're not going to disobey her, they wouldn't dare. She's going to marshal them together and send them after you. I can't keep you ahead of an entire habitat of possessed hunting you. For once, boy, I'm not lying.

Yeah. I can see that. Dariat went over to the fire at the back of the cave. It had almost burnt out, leaving a pyramid of coals cloaked in a powder of fine grey ash. He stood looking at it, feeling the slumbering heat contained within the pink fragments.

I have to decide. I can't beat Rubra. And Rubra will be destroyed by Kiera when she returns. For thirty years I

would have welcomed that. Thirty fucking years. My entire life.

But he's willing to sacrifice his mental integrity, to join my thoughts to his. He's going to abandon two centuries of his belief that he can go it alone.

Tatiana stirred on the blanket and sat up, bracelets chinking noisily. Sleepy confusion drained from her face. "That was a strange dream." She gave him a shrewd glance. "But then this is a strange time, isn't it?"

"What was your dream?"

"I was in a universe which was half light, half darkness. And I was falling out of the light. Then Anastasia caught me, and we started to fly back up again."

"Sounds like your salvation."

"What's the matter?"

"Things are changing. That means I have to decide what to do. And I don't want to, Tatiana. I've spent thirty years not deciding. Thirty years telling myself this was the time I was waiting for. I've been a kid for thirty years."

Tatiana rose and stood beside him. He refused to meet her gaze, so she put an arm lightly on his shoulder. "What do you have to decide?"

"If I should help Rubra; if I should join him in the neural strata and turn this into a possessed habitat."

"He wants that?"

"I don't think so. But he's like me, there's not much else either of us can do. The game's over, and we're running out of extra time."

She stroked him absently. "Whatever you decide, I don't want you to take me into account. There are too many issues at stake, big issues. Individuals don't matter so much; and I had a good run against that Bonney. We annoyed her a lot, eh? That felt nice."

"But individuals do matter. Especially you. It's odd, I feel like I've come full circle. Anastasia always told me how precious a single life was. Now I have to decide your fate. And I can't let you suffer, which is what's going to happen if Rubra and I take on the possessed together. I'm

responsible for her death, I can't have yours on my hands as well. How could I ever face her with that weighing on my heart? I have to be true to her. You know I do." He tilted his head back, his voice raised in anger. "Do you think you've won?"

I never even knew we were fighting until this possession happened, Rubra said sadly. You know what hopes I had for you in the old days, even though you never shared them. You know I never wanted anything to spoil my dreams for you. You were the golden prince, the chosen one. Fate stopped you from achieving your inheritance. That's what Anastasia was, for you and for me. Fate. You would call it an act of Thoale.

You believe all this was destined to be?

I don't know. All I know is that our union is the last chance either of us has to salvage something from all this shit. So now you have to ask yourself, do the living have a right to live, or do the dead rule the universe?

That's so like you, a loaded question.

I am what I am.

Not for very much longer.

You'll do it?

Yes.

Come in then, I'll accept you into the neural strata.

Not yet. I want to get Tatiana out first.

Why?

We may be virtually omnipotent after I come into the neural strata, but Bonney and the hellhawks still have the potential to damage the habitat shell very badly. I doubt we can quell them instantaneously, yet they will know the second I come into the neural strata. We are going to have a fight on our hands, I don't want Tatiana hurt.

Very well, I will ask the Kohistan Consensus for a voidhawk to take her off.

You have a method?

I have a possible method. I make no promises. You'd

better get yourselves along to the counter-rotating spaceport before Bonney starts her hunt.

• • •

It wasn't merely a hunting party Bonney was organizing. She was keenly aware that Dariat could always flee her in the tube carriages, while she was reduced to chasing after him in one of the rentcop force's open-top trucks. If Dariat was to be caught, then she would first have to cripple his mobility.

The crowd she had assembled was split into teams, given specific instructions, and dispatched to carry them out. Each major team had one of her deputies to ensure they didn't waver.

Every powered vehicle in the habitat set out from the starscraper lobby, driving along the tracks through the overgrown grass. Most of them travelled directly to the other camps ringing starscraper lobbies, coercing their occupants into Bonney's scheme. It was a domino effect, spreading rapidly around Valisk's midsection.

Kiera had wanted the tubes left alone so that when they moved Valisk out of the universe the transport system could be brought back on-line to serve them. Bonney had no such inhibitions. The possessed made their reluctant way into the starscraper lobbies, and down into the first-floor stations. There they combined their energetic power and started to systematically smash the tube tunnels. Huge chunks of polyp were torn out of the walls and roof to crash down on the magnetic guide rail. Power cables were ripped up and shorted out. Carriages were fired, adding to the blockages and sending thick plumes of black smoke billowing deep into the tunnels. Management processor blocks were blasted to cinders, exposing their interface with Valisk's nerve fibres. Wave after wave of static discharges were pumped at the raw ends, sending what they hoped were pulses of pure pain down into the neural strata.

Bolstered by their successful vandalism, and Rubra's apparent inability to retaliate, the possessed began to move en masse down into the starscrapers. They sent waves of ener-

gistic power surging ahead of them, annihilating any mechanical or electrical system, wrecking artefacts and fittings. Every room, every corridor, every stairwell, were searched for non-possessed. Floor by floor they descended, recapturing the heady excitement and spirit of the original takeover. Unity infected them with strength. Individuals began to shapeshift into fantastic monsters and Earthly heroes. They weren't just going to flush out the traitor enemy, they were going to do it with malevolent finesse.

Hellhawks fluttered up from the docking ledges and began to spiral around the tubular starscrapers: an infernal flock peering into the bright oval windows with their potent senses, assisting their comrades inside.

Together they would flush him out. It was only a matter of time now.

• • •

Dariat sat opposite Tatiana in the tube carriage they took from the southern endcap. "We're going to put you in one of the spaceport's emergency escape pods," he told her. "It's going to be tough to start with, they launch at about twelve gees to get away fast. But it only lasts for eight seconds. You can take that. There's a voidhawk squadron from Kohistan standing by to pick you up as soon as you're clear."

"What about the possessed?" she asked. "Won't they try and stop me, shoot at me or something?"

"They won't know what the hell's going on. Rubra is going to fire all two hundred pods at once. The voidhawks will swallow in and snatch your pod before the hellhawks even know you're out there."

A smirk of good-humoured dubiety stroked Tatiana's face. "If you say so. I'm proud of you, Dariat. You've come through when it really counts, shown your true self. And it's a good self. Anastasia would be proud of you, too."

"Why, thank you."

"You should enjoy your victory, take heart from it. Lady Chi-ri will be smiling on you tonight. Bask in that warmth."

"We haven't won yet."

“You have. Don’t you see? After all those years of struggle you’ve finally beaten Anstid. He hasn’t dictated what you’re doing now. This act is not motivated by hatred and revenge.”

Dariat grinned. “Not hatred. But I’m certainly enjoying putting one over on that witch queen Bonney.”

Tatiana laughed. “Me too!”

Dariat had to grab at his seat as the carriage braked sharply. Tatiana gasped as she clung to one of the vertical poles, hanging on frantically as the lights began to dim.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

The carriage juddered to a halt. The lights went out, then slowly returned as the vehicle’s backup electron matrix came on line.

Rubra?

Little bastards are smashing up the station you were heading for. They’ve cut the power to the magnetic rail, I haven’t even got the reserve circuits.

Dariat hooked into the neural strata’s observation routines to survey the damage. The starscraper station was a scene of violent devastation. Smouldering lumps of polyp were chiselled out of the tunnel by invisible surges of energy; the guidance rail writhed and flexed, screaming shrilly as its movements yanked its own fixing pins out of the floor; severed electrical cables swung from broken conduits overhead, spitting sparks. Laughter and catcalls rang out over the noise of the violence.

A rapid flick through other stations showed him how widespread the destruction was.

Bloody hell.

Damn right, Rubra said. She’s overdosing on the fury routine, but she’s playing smart with it.

A schematic of the tube network appeared in Dariat’s mind. **Look, there are plenty of alternative routes left up to the spindle.**

Yes, right now there are. But you’ll have to go back two stations before I can switch you to another tunnel. I can’t restore power to the rail in your tunnel, they’ve

fucked the relays. The carriage will have to make it there on its own power reserve. You'd almost be quicker walking. And by the time you get there, the possessed will have wrecked a whole lot more stations. Bonney's thought this out well; the way she's isolating each stretch of tunnel will break up the entire network in another forty minutes.

So how the hell do we get to the spindle now?

Forwards. Go up to the station and walk though it. I can bring another carriage to the tunnel on the other side; that'll get you directly up to the endcap.

Walk through? You're kidding.

There's only a couple of possessed left to guard each station after they've had their rampage. Two won't be a problem.

All right, do it.

The lights dipped again as the carriage slid forwards slowly.

"Well?" Tatiana asked.

Dariat began to explain.

Starscrapers formed the major nodes in the habitat's tube network; each of them had seven stations ringing the lobby, enabling the carriages to reach any part of the interior. Individual stations were identical; chambers with a double-arch ceiling and a central platform twenty metres long which served two tubes. The polyp walls were a light powder-blue, with strips of electrophorescent cells running the entire length above the rails. There were stairs at each end of the platform, one set leading up to the starscraper lobby, the other an emergency exit to the parkland.

In the station ahead of Dariat, the possessed finished their wrecking spree and went off up the stairs to start searching the starscraper. As Rubra predicted, they left two of their number behind to watch over the four tunnel entrances. Smoke from the attack was layering the air. Flames were still licking around the big piles of ragged polyp slabs blocking the end of each tunnel. Several hologram adverts flashed on and off overhead; an already damaged projector

suffering from the proximity of the possessed turned the images to a nonsense splash of colours.

Given that the fire was dying away naturally, the two possessed were somewhat bemused when, seven minutes after everyone else left, the station's sprinklers suddenly came on.

Dariat was three hundred metres down the tube tunnel, helping Tatiana out of the carriage's front emergency hatch. The tunnel had only the faintest illumination, a weak blue glow coming from a couple of narrow electrophorescent strips on the walls. It curved away gently ahead of him, putting enough solid polyp between him and the station to prevent the two possessed from perceiving him.

Tatiana jumped down the last half metre and steadied herself.

"Ready?" Dariat asked. He was already using the habitat's sensitive cells to study the pile of polyp they would have to climb over to get into the station. It didn't look too difficult, there was an easy metre and a half gap at the top.

"Ready."

Let's go, Dariat said.

The two possessed guards had given up any attempt to shield themselves from the torrent of water falling from the sprinklers. They were retreating back to the shelter of the stairs. Their clothes had turned to sturdy anoraks, streaked with glistening runnels. Every surface was slick with water now: walls, platform, floor, the piles of polyp.

Rubra overrode the circuit breakers governing the cables which powered the tube, then shunted thirteen thousand volts back into the induction rail. It was the absolute limit for the habitat's integral organic conductors, and three times the amount the carriages used. The broken guide rail jumped about as it had while it was being tormented by the possessed. Blinding white light leapt out of the magnetic couplings as it split open. It was as though someone had fired a fusion drive into the station. Water droplets spraying out of the overhead nozzles fluoresced violet, and vaporized. Metal surfaces erupted into wailing jets of sparks.

At the heart of the glaring bedlam, two bodies ignited, flaring even brighter than the seething air.

It wasn't just the one station, that would have drawn Bonney's attention like a combat wasp's targeting sensor. Rubra launched dozens of attacks simultaneously. Most of them were electrical, but there were also mass charges of servitor animals, as well as mechanoids switched back on, slashing around indiscriminately with laser welders and fission blades as energistic interference crashed their processors.

Reports of the tumult poured into the starscraper lobby where Bonney had set up her field headquarters. Her deputies shouted warnings into the powerful walkie-talkies they used to keep in contact with each other.

As soon as the blaze of white light shone down the tunnel, Dariat started to run towards it. He kept hold of Tatiana's hand, pulling her onwards. A loud caterwaul reverberated along the tunnel.

"What's Rubra doing to them?" she shouted above the din.

"What he had to."

The abusive light died and the sound faded away. Dariat could see the pile of polyp now, eighty metres ahead. A crescent-shaped sliver of light straddled it, seeping in from the station beyond.

Their feet began to splash through rivulets of water flowing down the tunnel. Tatiana grimaced as they reached the foot of the blockage, and hitched her skirt up.

Bonney listened to the frantic shouting all around her, counting up the incidents, the number of casualties. They'd got off lightly. And she knew that was wrong.

"Quiet," she bellowed. "How many stations attacked? Total?"

"Thirty-two," one of the deputies said.

"And over fifty attacks altogether. But we've only lost about seventy to eighty people in the stations. Rubra's just getting rid of the sentries we posted. If he wanted to seri-

ously harm us he'd do it when the wrecking crews were down there."

"A diversion? Dariat's somewhere else?"

"No," she said. "Not quite. We know he uses the tubes to get around. I'll bet the little shit's in one right now. He must be. Only we've already blocked him. Rubra is clearing the sentries out of the way so Dariat can sneak through. That's why he spread the attacks around, so we'd think it was a blanket assault." She whirled around to face a naked polyp pillar and grinned with malicious triumph. "That's it, isn't it, boyo? That's what you're doing. But which way is he going, huh? The starscrapers are dead centre." She shook her head in annoyance. "All right you people, get sharp. I want someone down in each and every station Rubra attacked. And I want them down there now. Tell them to make sure they don't step in the water, and be on the lookout for servitors. But get them down there."

The image of her yelling orders at her deputies boiled into Dariat's mind like a particularly vigorous hangover. He had just reached the top of the polyp pile and squeezed under the ceiling. The station was filled with thick white mist, reducing visibility to less than five metres. Condensation had penetrated everywhere, making this side of the polyp mound dangerously unstable.

Smart bitch, Rubra said. I didn't expect that.

Can you delay them?

Not in this station, I can't. I haven't got any servitors nearby, and the cables have all burnt out. You'll have to run.

Image relay of a deputy with a walkie-talkie pressed to his ear hurrying across the lobby above. "I'm on it, I'm on it," he was yelling into the mike.

"Tatiana, move it!" Dariat shouted.

Tatiana was still wriggling along on her belly as she slithered over the top of the pile. "What's the matter?"

"Someone's coming."

She gave one final squirm and freed her legs. Together

they scooted down the side of the pile, bringing a minor avalanche of slushy gravel with them.

“This way.” Dariat pointed into the mist. His perception filled in glass-grey outlines of the station walls through the swirls of cold vapour, enabling him to see the tunnel entrance. Valisk’s sensitive cells showed him the carriage waiting a hundred and fifty metres further on. They also showed him the deputy reaching the top of the stairs.

“Wait here,” he told Tatiana, and vaulted up onto the platform. His appearance changed drastically, the simple one-piece thickening to an elaborate purple uniform, complete with gold braid. The most imposing figure to dominate his youth: Colonel Chaucer. A weekly AV show of a renegade Confederation officer, a super vigilante.

Rubra was laughing softly in his head.

The deputy was halfway down the stairs when he started to slow up. He raised the walkie-talkie. “Somebody’s down here.”

Dariat reached the bottom of the stairs. “Only me,” he called up cheerfully.

“Who the hell are you?”

“You first. This is my station.”

The deputy’s mind revealed his confusion as Dariat started up towards him with powerful, confident strides. This was not the action of someone trying to hide.

Dariat opened his mouth wide and spat a ball of white fire directly at the deputy’s head. Two souls bawled in terror as they vanished into the beyond. The body tumbled past Dariat.

“What’s happening?” The walkie-talkie was reverting back to a standard communications block as it clattered down the stairs. “What’s happening? Report. Report.”

There’s four more on their way up from the first floor, Rubra said. Bonney ordered them to the station as soon as the deputy said he sensed someone.

Shit! We’ll never make it to the carriage. They can outrun Tatiana no problem.

Call her up. I’ll hide you in the starscraper.

What?

Just move!

“Tatiana! Up here, now!” He was aware of all the lift doors in the lobby sliding open. The four possessed had reached the bottom of the first-floor stairs. Tatiana jogged along the platform. She gave the corpse a quick, appalled glance.

“Come on.” Dariat caught her hand and tugged hard. Her expression was resentful, but the rising anxiety in his voice spurred her. They raced up the stairs together.

Daylight shone through the circular lobby’s glass walls. It had suffered very little damage; scorch marks on the polyp pillars and cracked glass were the only evidence that the possessed had arrived to search the tower.

Dariat could hear multiple footsteps pounding up one of the stairwells on the other side of the lobby, hidden by the central bank of lifts. His perception was just starting to register their minds emerging from behind the shield of polyp. Which meant they’d also be able to sense him.

He scooped Tatiana up, ignoring her startled holler, and sprinted for the lifts. Huge muscles pumped his legs in an effortless rhythm. She weighed nothing at all.

The phenomenal speed he was travelling at meant there was no chance at all of slowing once he passed the lift doors; he would have needed ten metres to come to a halt. They slammed straight into the rear wall. Tatiana shrieked as her shoulder, ribs, and leg hit flat on, with Dariat’s prodigious inertia driving into her. Then his face smacked into silvery metal, and there was no energistic solution to the blast of pain jabbing into his brain. Blood squirted out of his nose, smearing the wall. As he fell he was dimly aware of the lift doors sliding shut. The light outside was growing inordinately bright.

Dariat reeled around feebly, clutching at his head as if the pressure from his fingers alone could squeeze the bruises back down out of existence. Slowly the pain subsided, which allowed him to concentrate on vanquishing the remainder. “Ho fuck.” He slumped back against a wall and let

his breathing calm. Tatiana was lying on the lift floor in front of him, hands pressed against her side, cold sweat on her brow.

“Anything broken?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. It just hurts.”

He went onto his hands and knees and crawled over to her. “Show me where.”

She pointed, and he laid his hand on. With his mind he could see the smooth glowing pattern of living flesh distorted and broken below his fingers, the fissures extending deep inside her. He willed the pattern to return to its unblemished state.

Tatiana hissed in relief. “I don’t know what you did, but it’s better than a medical nanonic.”

The lift stopped at the fiftieth floor.

Now what? Dariat asked.

Rubra showed him.

You are one evil bastard.

Why, thank you, boy.

• • •

Stanyon was leading the possessed down through the starscraper in pursuit of Dariat. He’d started off with thirty-five under his command, and that number was rapidly swelling as Bonney directed more and more from neighbouring starscrapers to assist him. She’d announced she was on her way herself. Stanyon was going balls-out to find Dariat before she arrived. He got hot just thinking about the praise (and other things) Kiera would direct at the champion who erased her *bête noire* from the habitat.

Eight different teams of possessed were searching, assigned a floor each. They were working their way steadily downwards, demolishing every mechanical and electrical device as they went.

He strode out of the stairwell onto the thirty-eighth-floor vestibule. For whatever reason, Rubra was no longer putting up any resistance. Muscle-membrane doors opened obediently, the lighting remained on, there wasn’t a servitor in sight. He looked around, happy with what he found. The

floor's mechanical utilities office had been broken open, and the machinery inside reduced to slag, preventing the sprinklers from being used. Doors into the apartments and bars and commercial offices were smashed apart, furniture and fittings inside were blazing with unnatural ferocity. Big circles of polyp flooring were cracking under the intense heat, grainy white marble surface blackening. Wisps of dirty steam fizzed up from the crannies.

"Die," Stanyon snarled. "Die a little bit at a time. Die hurting big."

He was walking towards the stairwell door when his walkie-talkie squawked: "We got him! He's down here."

Stanyon snatched the unit from his belt. "Where? Who is this? Which floor are you on?"

"This is Talthorn the Greenfoot; I'm on floor forty-nine. He's just below us. We can all sense him."

"Everybody hear that?" Stanyon yelled gleefully. "Fiftieth floor. Get your arses down there." He sprinted for the stairwell.

• • •

"They're coming," Dariat said.

Tatiana flashed him a worried-but-brave grin, and finished tying the last cord around her pillow. They were in a long-disused residential apartment; its polyp furniture of horseshoe tables and oversized scoop armchairs dominating the living room. The chairs had been turned into cushion nests to add a dash of comfort. The foam used to fill the cushions was a lightweight plastic that was ninety-five per cent nitrogen bubbles.

They were, Rubra swore, perfect buoyancy aids.

Dariat tried on his harness one last time. The cords which he'd torn from the gaudy cushion fabric held a pillow to his chest and another against his back. Seldom had he felt so ridiculous.

His doubt must have leaked onto his face.

If it works, don't try to fix it, Rubra said.

Ripe, from someone who's devoted his existence to meddling.

Game set and match, I won't even appeal. Would you like to get ready?

Dariat used the starscraper's observation routines to check on the possessed. There were twelve of them on the floor above. A rock-skinned troll was leading the pack; followed by a pair of cyber-ninjas in black flak jackets; a xenoc humanoid that was all shiny amber exoskeleton and looked like it could rip metal apart with its talons; a faerie prince wearing his forest hunting tunic and carrying a long-bow in one hand, a walkie-talkie in the other; three or four excessively hairy Neanderthals; and regular soldiers in the uniforms of assorted eras.

"The loonies are on the warpath tonight," Dariat muttered under his breath. "Finished?" he asked Tatiana.

She shifted her front pillow around and tightened the last strap to hold it in place. "I'm ready."

The bathroom's muscle-membrane door parted silently. Inside was an emerald-green suite: a circular bath, vaguely Egyptian in design, matched by the basin, bidet, and toilet. They were still all in perfect condition. It was the plumbing which had degraded. Water was dripping from the brass shower head above the bath; over the years it had produced a big orange stain on the bottom. Slimy blue-green algae was growing out of the plug. The sink was piled high with bars of soap; so old and dry now that they'd started to crumble, snowing flecks over the rim.

Dariat stood in the doorway, with Tatiana pressed against him, looking eagerly over his shoulder. "What's supposed to be happening?" she asked.

"Watch."

A bass crunching sound was coming from the toilet. Cracks appeared around its base, expanding rapidly outwards. Then the whole bowl lurched upwards, spinning around precariously before toppling over. A two-metre circle of floor around it was rising up like a miniature volcanic eruption. Polyp splintered with a continual brassy crackling. A fine jet of water sprayed out of the fractured flush pipe.

“Lord Tarrug, what are you doing?” Tatiana asked.

“That’s not Tarrug, that’s Rubra,” Dariat told her. “No dark arts involved.”

Affinity with the local sub-routines allowed him to feel the toilet’s sphincter muscle straining as it contorted in directions it was never intended, rupturing the thin shell of polyp floor. It halted, fully expended. The cone which it had produced quivered slightly, then stilled. Dariat hurried over. There was a crater at the centre, leading down to an impenetrable darkness. The muscle tissue which made up the sides was a tough dark red flesh, now badly lacerated. Pale yellow fluid was oozing out of the splits, running down to disappear in the unseen space below.

“Our escape route,” Dariat said, echoing Rubra’s pride.

“A toilet?” she asked incredulously.

“Sure. Don’t go squeamish on me now, please.” He sat on the edge of the sphincter and swung his legs over the crater. It was a three-metre slither down into the sewer tubule below. When his feet touched the bottom he knelt down and held a hand out. His skin began to glow with a strong pink light. It revealed the tubule stretching on ahead of him, a circular shaft just over a metre in diameter, and angled slightly downwards.

“Throw the pillows down,” he said.

Tatiana dropped them, peering over the edge of the crater with a highly dubious expression. Dariat shoved the two harnesses into the tubule, and started to worm his way in after them. “When I’m in, you follow me, okay?” He didn’t give her the chance to answer. It was awkward going, pushing the pillows ahead of him as he crawled along. The grey polyp was slippery with water and fecal sludge. Dariat could hear Tatiana grunting and muttering behind him as she discovered the residue smearing the sides.

There were ridges encircling the tubule every four metres, peristaltic muscle bands that assisted the usual water flow. Despite Rubra expanding them wide, they formed awkward constrictions which Dariat had to pull himself through. He had just squeezed past the third when Rubra

said: **They've reached the fiftieth floor. Can you sense them?**

Not a chance. So in theory they won't be able to find me.

They know the general direction, and they're heading towards the apartment.

Dariat was too intent on inching himself along to review the images. **What about the rest?**

On their way down. The stairwells are absolutely packed. It's like a freak-show stampede out there.

He elbowed his way through another muscle band. The light from his hand showed the tubule walls ending two metres ahead. A thick ring of muscle membrane surrounded the rim. Beyond that was a clear empty space. He could hear a steady patter of rain in the darkness.

"We made it," he shouted.

His only answer was another outbreak of grunted curses.

Dariat pushed the filthy pillows and their tangled cords over the edge, hearing them splash into the water. Then he was sliding himself over.

The main ingestion tract into which the sewer tubule emptied ran vertically up the entire height of the starscraper. It collected the human waste, discarded organic matter, and dirty water from every floor and carried it down to the large purification organs at the base of the starscraper. They filtered out organic compounds which were pumped back to the principal nutrient organs inside the southern endcap via their own web of specialist tubules. Poisons and toxins were disposed of directly into space. Fresh water was recirculated up to the habitat's storage reservoirs and parkland rivers.

Normally the main ingestion tract was a continual waterfall. Now, though, Rubra had closed the inlet channels and reversed the flow from the purification organs, allowing the water level to rise up the tract until it was level with the fiftieth floor.

The cold surface closed over Dariat's head, and he felt his feet clear the tubule. A couple of swift kicks and he sur-

faced, puffing a spray of droplets from his mouth. Thankfully this water was clean—relatively.

He held an arm up in the air, a sharp blue flame flickering up from his fingertips. Its light showed the true extent of the tract: twenty metres in diameter, with walls of neutral grey polyp that had the same crinkly surface texture as granite. Sewer tubule outlets formed black portals all around, their muscle-membrane rims flexing like fish mouths. The pillows were bobbing about a few metres away.

Tatiana had pushed her shoulders past the tubule's muscle membrane, and was craning her head back to look around. The tract's height defeated the illumination thrown out by Dariat's small flame, revealing barely fifteen metres of the walls above the water level. A heavy shower was falling out of the darkness which roofed them, chopping up the water's surface with small ripples.

"Come on, out you come," Dariat said. He swam back to her and helped ease her through the opening. She gasped at the water's chilly grip, arms thrashing about for a moment.

Dariat retrieved the two sets of pillows and strapped himself into the harness. He had to tie Tatiana's cords for her, the cold had numbed her fingers. When he was finished, the sewer tubules all started to close silently.

"Where are we going now?" Tatiana asked nervously.

"Straight up." He grinned. "Rubra will pump fresh water back into the base of the tract. It should take about twenty minutes to reach the top. But expect an interruption."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

• • •

Stanyon arrived at the fiftieth floor to find it in turmoil. The vestibule was packed with excitable possessed. None of them seemed to know what was going on.

"Anybody seen him?" Stanyon shouted. Nobody had.

"Search around, there must be some trace. I want the teams that were searching floors thirty-eight and thirty-nine to go down to fifty-one and check it out."

“What’s happening?” Bonney’s voice asked from the walkie-talkie; there was a lot of crackling interference.

Stanyon held the unit to his face, pulling out more aerial. “He’s dodged us again. But we know he’s here. We’ll have him any minute now.”

“Make sure you stick with procedure. Remember it’s not just Dariat we’re up against.”

“You’re not the only council member left. I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m a minute away from the lobby. I’ll join you as fast as I can.”

He gave the walkie-talkie a disgusted look and switched it off. “Terrific.”

“Stanyon,” someone called from the other end of the vestibule. “Stanyon, we’ve found something.”

It was the troll, the faerie prince, and both of the cyber-ninjas who had broken into the apartment. They were hanging around the bathroom door when Stanyon arrived. He pushed his way past them impatiently.

The sides of the ruptured toilet sphincter had sagged, squeezing more of the yellow fluid out. It was running down the outside of the cone to smear the surrounding dune of polyp chippings. Water from the fractured pipe was sloshing over the floor.

Stanyon edged forwards, and peered cautiously over the crater’s lip. There was nothing to see, nothing to sense. He pointed at the smaller of the two cyber-ninjas. “You, go see where it leads to.”

The cyber-ninja looked at him. Red LEDs on his visor flashed slowly, an indolent blinking to mirror the thoughts they fronted.

“Go on,” Stanyon said impatiently.

After a brief rebellious moment, the cyber-ninja dematerialized his flak jacket and lowered himself down into the sewer tubule.

• • •

Dariat had been worried about the undercurrents. Needlessly, as it turned out. They were rising fast up the giant

tract with only the occasional swirl of bubbles twisting around them. It was still raining heavily, but the whole process was eerily silent.

He maintained the small flame burning coldly from his fingers, mainly for Tatiana's benefit. There was nothing to see above them, only the empty blackness. They slid smoothly past the intermittent circlets of closed tubules with monotonous regularity, their only real measure of progress.

Dariat was warm enough, circulating heat through his skin to hold the water's numbing encroachment at bay. But he did worry about Tatiana. She'd stopped talking, and her chattering teeth were clearly audible. That left him alone with his own thoughts of what was to come. And the whispers of the damned, they were always there.

Rubra, have you ever heard of someone called Alkad Mzu? he asked.

No. Why?

Capone is very interested in finding her. I think she's some kind of weapons expert.

How the hell do you know what Capone wants?

I can hear it. The souls in the beyond are calling for her. They're quite desperate to find her for the Organization.

Affinity suddenly gave him a sense of space opening around him. Then an astonishingly resolute presence emerged from the new distance. Dariat was at once fearful and amazed by its belief in itself, a contentment which was almost the opposite of hubris; it knew and accepted itself too well for arrogance. There was a nobility about it which he had never experienced, certainly not during the life he had led. Yet he knew exactly what it was.

Hello, Dariat, it said.

The Kohistan Consensus. I'm flattered.

It is intriguing for us to communicate with you. It is a rare opportunity to talk to any non-Edenist, and you are a possessor as well.

Make the most of it, I won't be around for much longer.

The action you and Rubra are undertaking is an honourable one, we applaud your courage. It cannot have been easy for either of you.

It was realistic.

His answer was accompanied by Rubra's emission of irony.

We would like to ask a question, Consensus said. Several, in fact.

On the nature of possession, I assume. Fair enough.

Your current viewpoint is unique, and extremely valuable to us.

It's going to have to wait a minute, Rubra said. They've found the toilet.

• • •

The cyber-ninja had squeezed down into the sewer tubule and was squirming along on his belly. His mind tone was one of complete disgust. Pale violet light illuminated the lenses on his low-light enhancement goggles, casting a faint glow across the polyp directly in front of him. "They were in here," he yelled back over his shoulder. "This shit's all been smeared around."

"Yes!" Stanyon banged a fist against the muscle-membrane door. "Get down there," he told the second cyber-ninja. "Help him."

The cyber-ninja did as he was told, sitting on the edge of the crater and slinging his legs over.

"Anyone know where these pipes lead?" Stanyon asked.

"I've never been in one myself," the faerie prince said airily. "But it'll empty into the lower floor eventually. You could try searching down there. Unless, of course, he's simply popped up inside someone else's john and walked out."

Stanyon gave the slack cone an irritated look. The prospect of Dariat simply walking through the habitat's pipes to escape in the throng was intolerable. But with everyone wearing their illusionary form it would be ap-

pallingly easy. Why can we never *organize* ourselves properly?

With extreme reluctance he switched the walkie-talkie back on. "Bonney, come in please."

Rubra opened the sphincter muscle below every single toilet on the forty-ninth, fiftieth, and fifty-first floor. It was an action which nobody noticed. There were over a hundred and eighty possessed milling around on those three levels, with more still arriving. Some were obediently searching through the rooms; most were now there simply for a piece of the action. As there was no organized plan, none of them were suspicious when all the remaining apartment doors slid open. At the same time, emergency fire-control doors quietly closed off the lift shafts.

Dariat pulled Tatiana to his chest and held her tight, locking his fingers together behind her back. "Stay with it," he said. The surface of the water was just rising over the sewer tubules of the twenty-first floor.

Bonney reached the twelfth floor well ahead of the five deputies accompanying her. She could hear them clumping down the stairwell above her. They competed against her heart hammering away inside her ribs. So far she didn't feel any fatigue, but she knew she'd have to slow down soon. It was going to take a good twenty minutes to reach the fiftieth floor.

"Bonney," her walkie-talkie said. "Come in please."

She started down the stairs to the thirteenth floor and raised the walkie-talkie to her face. "Yes, Stanyon."

"He's vanished into the pipes. I've sent some of my people after him; but I don't know where they all lead to. It's possible he might have doubled back on us. It might be an idea to leave some guards in the lobby."

"Fuckhead." Bonney slowed to a halt as mystification overshadowed her initial anger. "What pipes?"

"The waste pipes. There's kilometres of them under the floors. We found one of the toilets all smashed up. That's how he got in there."

"You mean sewer pipes?"

“Yeah.”

Bonney stared at the wall. She could sense the thought routines gliding through the neural strata a metre or so behind the naked polyp. In his own fashion, Rubra was staring right back at her. He was content.

She didn't know anything about the sewer pipes, except how obvious they were in hindsight. And Rubra had absolute control over every single environmental aspect of the habitat. Dariat had been spotted for a few brief seconds, which had sent everyone chasing after him. Then he'd vanished. If the sewers could hide him so thoroughly, he should never have been found in the first place.

“Out!” she yelled at the walkie-talkie. “Get out of there! Stanyon, for fuck's sake, move!”

Rubra opened the muscle-membrane rims of the sewer tubules which served the forty-ninth, fiftieth, and fifty-first floors. The pressure exerted by a thirty-storey-high column of water filling the ingestion tract was a genuinely irresistible force.

Stanyon saw the cyber-ninja bullet out of the cone of ruined muscle to smash against the ceiling. The gust of air which blew him there gave way to a massive fist of water which howled upwards to strike the spread-eagled man full on. Its roar was pitched at roughly the level of a sense-overload sonic. Stanyon's skin blistered scarlet as his capillaries ruptured. Before he could even scream the bathroom was filled with high-velocity rain which knocked him to his feet as if he were being hammered by a fusillade of rubber bullets. He crashed back into the bath where a slim laser-straight pillar of water had burst out of the plug hole. It might just as well have been a chain saw.

Throughout the three condemned floors, every bathroom, every kitchen, and every public toilet were host to the same lethal eruption of water. The lights had gone out, and into this tormented night came the water itself, icy foaming waves that rushed through rooms and vestibules like a horizontal guillotine.

Tatiana cried out fearfully as the water began to drop.

The two of them began to circulate around the edge of the ingestion tract; slowly to start with, then picking up speed. Small waves rippled back and forth, slapping against each other to produce wobbling spires. A loud gurgling sound rose as the water fell faster.

Dariat watched in dismay as the surface tilted. At the centre of the tract it was discernibly lower than it was at the walls. They began to spiral in towards it. The gurgling grew louder still.

Rubra!

Don't worry. Another thirty seconds, that's all.

Bonney was helpless against the torrent of anguish rushing around her; the flock of souls arising from those trapped below to depart the universe, their sobs of bitterness and fright striking her harder than any physical blow. They were too near, too strong, to avoid; raw emotion amplified to insufferable levels.

She fell to her knees, muscles knotted. Tears dripped steadily from her eyes. Her own soul was in danger of being pulled along with them, a migration which commanded attendance. She fisted her hands and punched the polyp step. The pain was no more than a gentle tweak against the compulsion to join the damned once more. So she punched again, harder. Again.

Finally the carnage was over, the three floors filled to capacity with water. Narrow fan-sprays of water squirted out from the rim seals on several of the lift fire-control doors, filling the empty shafts with a fine drizzle, but the doors themselves held against the pressure. As did the stairwell muscle-membrane doors on the fifty-second floor, preventing the lower half of the starscraper from flooding. Pulverised bodies that had pressed against the ceiling were sinking slowly as pockets of air leaked out of their wounds, trailing ribbons of blood as they went.

• • •

The starscraper's ingestion tract did strange things to the gurgling sound produced by the frothing water, channelling it into an organlike harmonic that rattled Tatiana's bones.

She was inordinately glad when it began to subside. Dariat was moaning feebly in her embrace as if he were in great pain. The flame he'd produced had snuffed out, leaving them in absolute blackness. Although she couldn't see anything, she knew the water was slowing, its surface levelling out. The cold was giving her a pounding headache.

Dariat started coughing. "Bloody hell."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'll survive."

"What happened?"

"We're not being chased anymore," he said flatly.

"So what's next?"

"Rubra is going to start pumping water back into the tract. We should reach the top in about fifteen minutes." He held up his hand and rekindled the little blue flame. "Think you can last that long?"

"I can last."

• • •

Bonney walked slowly out of the starscraper lobby, still shivering despite the balmy parkland air ruffling her khaki jacket. Nearly a dozen possessed were loitering outside on the grass. They were gathered together in small clusters, talking quietly in worried tones. When she appeared, all conversation ended. They stared at her, thoughts dominated by resentment, their expressions hard, unforgiving. It was the germ of the revolution.

She gazed back at them, coldly defiant. But she knew they would never take orders from her again. The authority of Kiera's council had drowned back there in the starscraper. If she wanted to go up against Dariat and Rubra now, it would be on her own. One on one, the best kind of hunt there was. She brought a hand up to her face, licking the bloody grazes which scarred each knuckle. Her smile made those possessed closest to her back away.

There were several trucks parked beside the lobby. She chose the nearest and twisted the accelerator hard. Spinning tyres tore up long scars of grass as she tugged the steering

wheel around. Then the truck was speeding away from the lobby, heading for the northern endcap.

Her walkie-talkie gave a bleep. "Now what?" Rubra asked. "Come on, it was a grand hunt, but you lost. Drive over to a decent bar, have a drink. My treat."

"I haven't lost yet," she said. "He's still out there. That means I can win."

"You've lost everything. Your so-called colleagues are evacuating the starscrapers. Your council is busted. There's going to be nothing left of Kiera's little empire with this lot running around out of control."

"That's right, there's nothing left. Nothing except me and the boyo. I'm going to catch him before he can escape. I worked that one out already. You're helping him reach the spaceport. Lord knows why, but I can still spoil your game, just as you did mine. That's justice. It's also fun."

• • •

One wacko lady, Dariat commented.

She's genuine trouble, though. Always has been, Rubra said.

And continues to be so by the look of it. Especially if she gets to the spindle before me. Which is a good possibility. The water was now up to the second floor. Dariat could see the top of the ingestion tract now, the black tube puncturing a bubble of hazy pink light.

Another ninety seconds brought him level with the floor of the cistern chamber. He had emerged into the centre of a big hemispherical cavern whose walls were pierced by six huge water pipe outlets. Ribbons of water were still trickling across the sloping floor to the lip of the tract.

He struck out for the edge with a strong sidestroke, towing Tatiana along. She was almost unconscious; the cold had penetrated her body to the core. Even with his energetic strength, hauling her out of the water was tough going. Once she was clear he flopped down beside her, wishing himself warm and dry. Steam began to pour out of their clothes.

Tatiana tossed her head about, moaning as if she were

caught in a nightmare. She sat up with a spasm of muscle, her few remaining bangles chiming loudly. Vapour was still effervescing out of her dress and dreadlocks. She blinked at it in amazement. "I'm warm," she said in astonishment. "I didn't think I would ever be warm again."

"The least I could do."

"Is it over now?"

The wishful childlike tone made him press his lips together in regret. "Not quite. We still have to get up to the spaceport; there's a route through these water pipes which will eventually take us to a tube tunnel, we don't have to go up to the surface. But Bonney survived. She'll try to stop us."

Tatiana rested her chin in her hands. "Lord Thoale is testing us more than most. I'm sure he has his reasons."

"I'm not." Dariat lumbered to his feet and untied the pillow harness. "I'm sorry, but we have to get going."

She nodded miserably. "I'm coming."

• • •

The search teams which Bonney and her deputies had organized were wending their way out of Valisk's starscrapers. Shock from the flooding was evident in their shuffling footsteps and tragic eyes. They emerged from the lobbies, consoling each other as best they could.

It shouldn't have happened, was the thought which rang among them like an Edenist Consensus. They'd made it back to the salvation of reality. They were the chosen ones, the lucky ones, the blessed. Eternal life, and the precious congruent gift of sensation, had been within their grasp. Now Rubra had shown them how tenuous that claim was.

He was able to do that because they remained in a universe where his power was a match to theirs. It shouldn't be like that. Whole planets had escaped from open skies and Confederation retribution, while they stayed to entrap new bodies. Kiera's idea—and it had been a good one, bold and vigorous. Eternity spent within the confines of a single habitat would be a difficult prospect, and she had seen a way forwards.

That was why they'd acquiesced to her rule and that of the council, because she'd been right. At the start. Now though, they had increased their numbers, Kiera had flown off to negotiate their admission to a dangerous war, and Bonney committed them against Rubra to satisfy her personal vendettas.

No more. No more risks. No more foolhardy adventures. No more sick savagery of hunting. The time had come to leave it all behind.

• • •

The truck raced along the hardened track which countless wheels had compacted across the semi-arid plain surrounding Valisk's northern endcap. Bonney had the throttle at maximum, the axial motors complemented by her energetic power. Small flattened stones and cracked ridges which lay along the track sent the vehicle flying through the air in long shallow hops.

Bonney didn't even notice the jouncing, which would have caused whiplash injuries to any non-posessed riding beside her. Her mind was focused entirely on the endcap whose base was five kilometres in front of her. She imagined her beefy old vehicle beating the sleek tube capsule slicing along its magnetic rail in the tunnel below her. The one she knew he would be riding.

Up ahead she could just make out the dark line of the switchback road which wound up to the small plateau two kilometres above the plain. If she could only reach the passageway entrance before Dariat got out of the sewer tunnels and into a tube carriage she might conceivably reach the axis chamber before him.

A feeling of contentment began to seep into her mind. An insidious infiltration which called on her to respond, to generate her own dreamy satisfaction, to pledge it to the whole.

"Bastards!" She slapped furiously at the steering wheel, anger insulating her from the loving embrace which was rising up all around her. They had begun it, the gathering of power, the sharing, linking their wills. They'd submitted, *capitulated*, to their craven fear. Valisk would soon sail

calmly out of this universe, sheltering them from any conceivable threat, committing them to a life of eternal boredom.

Well not for her. One of the hellhawks could take her off, away where there was struggle and excitement. Only after she'd dealt with Dariat, though. There would be time. There *had* to be.

The truck's speed began to pick up. Her stubborn insistence was diverting a fraction of the prodigious reality dysfunction which was coalescing around the habitat. The utterly implausible was becoming hard fact.

Bonney laughed gleefully as the truck shot along the track, ripping up a churning cloud of thick ochre dust behind it. While all around her, the tiny clumps of scrub grass, cacti, and lichen sprawls were sprouting big adventitious flower buds. The bland desert was quietly and miraculously transforming itself into a rich colour-riot garden as Valisk's new masters prepared to enact their vision of paradise.

• • •

The Kohistan Consensus had a thousand and one questions on the nature of possession and the beyond. Dariat sat quietly in the tube carriage taking him to the axis chamber and tried to supply answers for as many as he could. He even let them hear the terrible cries of the lost souls that infested his every thought. So that they'd know, so they'd understand the dreadful compulsion driving each possessor.

I feel strange, Rubra announced. It's like being drunk, or light-headed. I think they're starting to penetrate my thought routines.

No, Dariat said. He was aware of it himself now, the reality dysfunction starting to pervade the polyp of the shell. In the distance, a chorus of minds were singing a joyous hymn of ascension. They're getting ready to leave the universe. We don't have much time.

We can confirm that, the Consensus said. Our void-hawks on observation duty are reporting large squalls of red light appearing on your shell, Rubra. The hell-

hawks appear most agitated. They are leaving their docking pedestals.

Don't let it happen, boy, Rubra said. Come into me, please, transfer over now. We can win, we can stop them taking Valisk to their bloody haven. We can screw them yet.

Not with Tatiana here. I won't condemn her to that. We've still got time.

Bonney's almost at the plateau.

And we're almost at the base of the endcap. This carriage can go straight up to the axis chamber. She's got to climb three kilometres of stairs. We'll make it easily.

• • •

Blue smoke spouted out of the truck's tyres as Bonney skid-braked the vehicle outside the passageway's dark entrance. When she jumped down from the driver's seat her sharp upper teeth were protruding over her lower lip, producing a permanent feral grin. Her painfully red-rimmed eyes narrowed to lethargic slits as she gazed up at the steepening cliff of grey polyp in front of her, as if puzzled by its appearance. Every movement took on a dullard's slowness. Breath wheezed heavily out of her nostrils.

She ignored the passageway and stood perfectly still, bringing her arms to rest in front of her so her hands crossed above her crotch. Her head drooped, bowing deeply, the eyes closing completely.

• • •

What the hell is she doing now? Dariat asked. **She was frantic to get up there.**

It looks like she's praying.

Somehow, I really doubt that.

The tube carriage reached the base of the endcap and started to sweep up the slope towards the hub. An urgent whining sound permeated the inside. Dariat could feel it slowing, then it accelerated again.

Damn it, I'm getting power dropouts right across the habitat. That's in the sections of myself I can still per-

ceive. I'm shrinking, boy, there are places where my thoughts have ceased. Help me!

The reality dysfunction is strengthening. Five minutes. Hang on for five more minutes.

• • •

Bonney's khaki suit was darkening, at the same time its texture changed to a glossier aspect. She was starting to hunch up, her legs bowing out and becoming spindly. Pointed ears emerged from a shortening crop of hair. There was no suit anymore, only a black pelt.

She suddenly raised her rodent head and emitted an ear-piercing screech through a circular mouth caged by fangs. Eyes glittered a devilish red. She opened what had been her arms to spread her new wings wide. The leathery membrane was thin enough to be translucent, revealing a lace-work of minute black veins beneath the dark amber surface.

Oh, fuck, Rubra exclaimed. No bloody way! I don't care what she looks like, she weighs too much to fly.

That won't matter anymore, Dariat said. The reality dysfunction is powerful enough to sustain her; we're in the universe of fables, now. If she wants to fly, she will.

Bonney ran a couple of paces across the plateau, then her wings gave a fast downwards sweep, and she was airborne. She beat her wings steadily, rising quickly, her triumphant screeching echoing over the blank polyp. Her flight curved around sharply as she gained altitude, evolving into a spiral as the beats became smoother, more insistent.

She'll catch me, a stricken Dariat said. She's going to reach the axis chamber before me. I'll never get Tatiana out. "Anastasia!" he cried. "My love, it can't end like this. Not again. I can't fail you again."

Tatiana stared at him in fright, not understanding.

Do something, he begged.

Like what? Rubra's mental voice was faint, lacking interest.

Remember your classics, the Kohistan Consensus said. Before today, Icarus and Daedalus were the only people

ever to fly with their own wings. Only one survived. Think what happened to Icarus.

Bonney was already three hundred metres above the plateau, swooping upwards on a tempestuous thermal, when she noticed the change. The light was altering, which it could never do in a habitat. She shifted her balance, twisting on a wingtip, howling at the sheer exhilaration of the wind buffeting her face. The cylindrical landscape stretched out in front of her, dabbed with curving smears of flushed red cloud. For the first time, the lively sparkle coming off the circumfluous reservoir was absent. The entire band of water seemed to be darkened; she could barely see a single feature on the southern endcap. Yet around her the light was growing. That should never be. Both endcaps were always maintained in a dappled shade. The effect was due entirely to the nature of the light tube, a slender cylindrical mesh of organic conductors which mimicked the shape of the habitat itself. At each end the mesh narrowed to a near solid bundle of cable which suspended the main segment between the two hubs. The plasma it contained dwindled to a mild violet haze eight hundred metres from the hub itself.

She could now see that horn of ions retreating from the southern hub as Rubra increased the power flowing through the cables at that end. The magnetic field was expanding to squeeze the plasma along the tube. At the northern end, he cut the power completely to one specific section of the mesh. Plasma rushed out of the gap, inflating flamboyantly as it liberated itself from the constricting flux lines.

From Bonney's position it was as if a small fusion bomb had detonated above her, sending its billowing mushroom cloud hurtling downwards.

"All this," she cried disbelievingly, "for me?"

The air caught in the cup of the endcap was torn asunder by the racing plasma, sending her spinning madly, broken wings wrapping her body like a velvet cloak. Then the wave front of inflamed atoms swept across her like the breath of an enraged sun-god. It had none of the fury and strength of a genuine fusion explosion; by the time it

reached her the plasma was nothing more than a tenuous electrically charged fog that was rapidly losing cohesion. But nevertheless, it was moving five times faster than any natural tornado, and with a temperature of tens of thousands of degrees. Her body disintegrated into splinters of vivid copper light which trailed contrails of black smoke all the way down to the resplendent desert far below.

• • •

A siren started to whistle as soon as Dariat broke the hatch seal; half of the corridor lighting panels turned red, flashing urgently. He ignored the clamour and floated through the small metallic airlock chamber.

The escape pod was a simple one-deck sphere, four metres in diameter, with twelve thickly padded acceleration couches laid out petal fashion. Dariat emerged from a hatch set at their centre. There was only one instrument panel, barely more than a series of power-up switches. He flicked them all on, watching the status schematics turn green.

Tatiana hauled herself gingerly through the airlock, looking dangerously queasy. Her dreadlocks swarmed around her head, their beads making tiny *clacking* sounds as they knocked against each other.

“Take any couch,” Dariat instructed. “We’re coming on line.”

She rotated herself carefully into one of the couches. Webbing unfurled from its sides to creep over her.

Dariat took the couch opposite to her, so that they were feet to feet. **Are the other pods armed?**

Yes. Most of them. Dariat, I don’t exist on the other side of the starscrapers anymore; I see nothing, I feel nothing, I don’t even think down there.

A minute more, that’s all. He reached up and pressed the launch sequencer. The airlock hatch hinged down. “I’m going to leave soon, Tatiana. Horgan will be back in charge of his own body again. Take care of him, he’s only fifteen. He’s going to be suffering.”

“Of course I will.”

"I . . . I know Rubra only forced us together to put pressure on me. But I'm still glad I met you."

"Me too. It laid a lot of old demons to rest. You showed me I was wrong."

"How?"

"I thought she'd made a mistake with you. She hadn't. The cure just took a very long time. She's going to be proud of you when you finally catch up with her."

Two-thirds of Valisk's shell was now fluorescing a lambent crimson; dazzling dawn-red light shone out of the starscraper windows. Inside, the possessed were united, they could perceive the entire habitat now. The flow of its fluids and gases through the plexus of tubules and pipes and ducts was as intimate to them as the blood pumping around their own veins and arteries. Rubra's flashing thought routines, too, were apparent, snapping through the neural strata like volleys of sheet lightning. Under their auspices his thoughts were slowing and dimming, retreating down the length of the cylinder as their will to banish the curse of him from their lives grew dominant.

They knew now of all the remaining non-possessed Rubra had hidden throughout the interior. Twenty-eight had survived Bonney's pursuit, cowering in obscure niches and alcoves dotted about the shell structure, frightened and uncertain at the ruby glimmer that was emerging within the polyp. The possessed didn't care about them, not anymore. That struggle was over. They even perceived Dariat and Tatiana lying prone on the escape pod's acceleration couches as the computer counted down the seconds. Nobody objected if they wanted to leave.

Profound changes were propagating outside the habitat. Nanonic-sized interstices flicked open, only to decay within milliseconds. The incessant foam of fluctuations was creating distortion waves similar to those generated by voidhawks. But these lacked any sort of order or focus. Chaos had visited local space-time, weakening the fabric around the shell.

Furious hellhawks swarmed above the northern endcap.

Harpies and hyperspace starships spun and swooped around each other at hazardous velocities, their flights dangerously unstable as the massive distortion effects buffeted them as a tempest treated leaves.

The bodies! they clamoured to these possessed snug inside who were capable of affinity. **Kiera promised us the bodies in zero-tau. If you leave now we will never have them. You are condemning us to a life in these constructs.**

Sorry, was the only, sheepishly embarrassed reply.

Combat sensors deployed as the hunger for retribution reverberated across the affinity band. Activation codes were loaded into combat wasps.

If we are denied eternity in human form, then you will join us in the same abyss.

The only functional thought routines Rubra had left were those in the northern endcap. Everything else was blank to him, his senses amputated. A few mysterious images were still reaching him from those bitek processors which interfaced him with the electronic architecture of the counter-rotating spaceport. Wavering sepia pictures of empty corridors, stationary transit capsules, and barren external grid sections. With them came the data streams from the spaceport's communications network.

And he'd almost lost interest in it. Dariat, he thought, had left the transfer too late; the boy was too caught up in his obsession and guilt. The end is here, night is finally eclipsing me after all these centuries. A shame. A crying shame. But at least they'll remember my name with a curse as they vegetate their way through eternity.

He jettisoned every escape pod in the spaceport.

Now, Dariat sighed.

Twelve gees rammed him down into the acceleration couch. His vision disappeared into a purple sparkle. And after thirty years the neural strata no longer resisted him.

Two entities—two egos—collided. Memories and personality patterns merged at a fundamental level. Hostility, antipathy, anger, regret, shame, an abundance of it all pour-

ing out from both sides, and there could be no hiding from it anymore. The neural strata thrummed from collective moments of outraged pique as secrets long hidden were exposed to searing scrutiny. But the indignation cooled as the two differing strands of thought began the process of twining and integrating into a functional whole.

One half brought size to the mating, the huge neural strata, alive yet quiescent under the spell of the reality dysfunction; from the other half came the energistic effect, small in a single human, but with unlimited potential. For the first five seconds of the transfer, Dariat's essence was operating within a section of the neural strata only a few cubic metres in volume. At that level it was sufficient to halt the reality dysfunction of the possessed from paralysing any more of the neural strata. As the integration progressed and the thought routines amalgamated and multiplied it began to expand. More and more of the neural strata awoke to accommodate it.

The horrified possessed, quite literally, watched their dreams shatter around them.

Okay, you fuckers, bespoke Valisk's new personality. **PARTY'S OVER.**

As soon as the escape pods launched, a hundred voidhawks from the Kohistan Consensus swallowed in. Their appearance ten kilometres from Valisk's counter-rotating spaceport startled the already frantic hellhawks. The gulf between the two antagonistic swarms of bitek starships was slashed by targeting lasers and radar pulses.

Do not engage any targets, the voidhawks ordered. **The habitat is to be left intact, the escape pods must not be harmed.**

Two hellhawks immediately launched a salvo of combat wasps. Solid rockets had barely propelled them clear of their launch cradles before they were struck by X-ray lasers from the voidhawks. It was a perfect demonstration of the disadvantage the hellhawks suffered in any short-range combat situation. The energistic effect downgraded their electronic systems to a woefully inferior state.

Wormhole interstices sprang open, and the hellhawks dived down them, eluding any further conflict, abandoning their erstwhile abode with nothing more dangerous than a backwash of obscenities and threats.

Over two hundred escape pods were plunging away from Valisk's spaceport. Solid fuel rockets burned a glaring topaz, gifting the drab grey gridiron of the spaceport with an unrivalled dawn. As the distended skirts of flame and smoke died away, a cluster of five voidhawks surged forwards to intercept a single pod.

Tatiana knew Dariat had gone; his body had shrunk somehow, not in size, but certainly in presence. It was as if the terrible crush of acceleration had left him behind, diminishing the teenage boy lying on the couch. Horgan began to wail. She released her webbing and floated over to him. Her own free-fall nausea forgotten in the face of someone whose suffering was far worse.

"It's all right," Tatiana whispered as she hugged him. "It's all over now. He's left you for good." She even managed to surprise herself at the note of regret which had crept into her voice.

The voidhawks rendezvoused with Tatiana's pod, claimed its occupants, then swooped away from the habitat at seven gees. Valisk was now host to a war of light. The original red fluorescence was besieged by a vigorous purple shimmer sweeping down the shell from the northern endcap. As the purple area grew in size, so it grew in intensity.

Ten minutes after the escape pods were launched, the last glimmer of red was extinguished. The voidhawks were seven hundred kilometres away when it happened, and still retreating at two gees. Nobody quite knew what constituted a safe separation distance. Then their distortion fields detected Valisk's mass starting to reduce. The last image of the habitat which their sensor blisters received was of a purple-white micro-star blazing coldly. At the core of the photonic rupture, space itself broke down as bizarre energy patterns exerted a catastrophic stress.

When the glare faded and space regained its equipoise there was no evidence of the habitat's existence. However hard the voidhawks probed, they could find no residue of energy, no particles larger than a mote of dust. Valisk had neither vaporized nor shattered, it had simply and cleanly departed the universe.

27

The Kulu embassy was situated just outside Harrisburg's central governmental district; a five-storey building in the civic tradition, granite block walls and elaborately carved windows. Slender turrets and retro-modernist sculptures lined the roof in an attempt to grant the stark facade some degree of interest. To no avail; Harrisburg's ubiquitous granite reduced the most ornate architecture to the level of a neo-Gothic fortress. Even the setting, in one of the wealthier districts laid out with parks, wide streets, and century-old trees, didn't help. An office cube was an office cube, no matter what cosmetics it dabbed on.

Its neighbours comprised rich legal practices, capital-city headquarters of large companies, and expensive apartment blocks. Directly opposite, in an office which claimed to be an aircraft charter broker, Tonalá's security police kept a twenty-four hour watch on everyone who went in or out. Forty minutes ago they had gone up to alert condition amber three (foreign covert action imminent) when five large, screened cars from the diplomatic fleet slid down into the embassy's underground car park. None of the officers on duty were sure if that particular alert status applied in this case; according to their colleagues at the city spaceport, the cars were full of Edenists.

The arrival of Samuel and his team had drawn considerable interest from staff inside the embassy, too. Curious, slightly apprehensive faces peered out of almost every doorway as Adrian Redway led Monica Foulkes and her new allies through the building. They took a lift eight stories below

ground, to a floor which didn't exist on any blueprints logged on the city council's civil engineering computer.

Adrian Redway stopped at the door to the ESA station's operational centre and gave Samuel an awkward look. His eyes slid over the tall Edenist's shoulders to the other six Edenists waiting patiently in the corridor.

"Listen," he said heavily. "I don't mean to be an oaf about this. But we do run and correlate our entire Tonala asset network from here. Surely, you don't all need to come in?" His eyebrows quivered hopefully.

"Of course not," Samuel said graciously.

Monica gave a disgruntled sigh. She knew Samuel well enough now not to need affinity to hear the thought in his head: strange concept. If one Edenist went inside, then technically all of them did. Her hand fluttered towards him in a modestly embarrassed gesture. He winked back.

The operations centre could have been the office of any medium-sized commercial enterprise. Air-conditioned yet strangely airless, it had the standard desks with (more sophisticated than usual) processor blocks, big wall screens, ceiling-mounted AV pillars, and side offices with heavily tinted glass walls. Eleven ESA staffers were sitting in big leather chairs, monitoring what they could of the planet's current military and politico-strategic situation. Information was becoming a precious resource as Tonala's communications net started to suffer glitches; the only certainty gained from the overall picture was how close the orbital situation was getting to all-out confrontation.

Tonala's state of emergency had been matched by that of the other nations. Then in the last twenty minutes Tonala's high command had confirmed it had lost the *Spirit of Freedom* station to unknown foreign elements. In response, five warships had been dispatched to intercept the *Urschel*, *Raimo*, and the *Pinzola* to try to find out what had happened. Every other government was complaining that their deployment at this time constituted a deliberately provocative act.

Adrian led Monica and Samuel through into a conference room on the far side of the operations centre. "My chief an-

alyst gives us two hours tops before the shooting starts for real,” he said glumly as he sat at the head of the table.

“I hate to say this, but that really is secondary to our mission,” Monica said. “We must secure Mzu. She cannot be killed or captured. It would be a disaster for the Confederation.”

“Yeah, I accessed the report,” Adrian said glumly. “The Alchemist by itself is bad enough, but in the hands of the possessed . . .”

“A fact you may not have yet,” Samuel said. “The frigates *Urschel*, *Raimo*, and *Pinzola* are all Organization starships. Capone must know Dr Mzu is here; his representatives will not demonstrate any restraint or subtlety at all. Their actions could well trigger the war.”

“Jeeze, they sent some spaceplanes down after they arrived. Nobody knows where the hell to, the planetary sensor coverage is wiped.”

“What about local air defence coverage for the city?” Monica asked.

“Reasonably intact. Kulu supplied the hardware about eleven years ago; hardly top grade but it’s still functioning. The embassy has an over-the-shoulder feed from the Tonalá defence force headquarters.”

“So if the Organization spaceplanes approach Harrisburg you’ll be able to warn us.”

“No problem.”

“Good, that ought to give us a couple of minutes breathing space. Next question, did you find her?”

Adrian pretended offence. “Of course we found her,” he said, grinning. “We’re the ESA, remember?”

“Right; truth is always worse than rumour. Where is she?”

Adrian datavised the officer running the surveillance mission on Mzu. “She booked in at the Mercedes Hotel, or rather Voi did, as soon as they arrived. They made very little effort to cover their tracks; Voi used a credit disk registered under an alias, but it’s still got her bioelectric pattern. I mean, how amateur can you get?”

“They’re not even amateurs, they’re just kids,” Samuel

said. "They eluded us on their home ground because we were rushed. Out here they're completely defenceless against any professional agency."

"Voi did approach a local security firm," Adrian said. "But she hasn't followed it up. Her request for bodyguards was cancelled. They seem to have linked up with some locals instead. We're not sure who they are. There certainly aren't any Garissa partizan cadres on Nyvan."

"How many locals?" Monica asked.

"Three or four, we think. As we don't know who they are, it's hard to be sure."

"Any interest from other agencies?"

"There have been three probes launched into the hotel's computer system. We couldn't get an origin on any of them. Whoever it was, their blocker programs are first rate."

"Is Mzu still at the Mercedes?" Monica asked.

"Not at this exact moment; but she is on her way back there from a meeting with the Opia company. Her group is passing themselves off as representatives from the Dorados defence force, which gives them a valid reason to buy armaments. I should be receiving a report on the meeting from our asset in the company any minute."

"Fine," Monica said. "We'll intercept her at the hotel."

"Very well." Adrian gave her an edgy glance. "The local police won't appreciate that."

"Sad, but irrelevant. Can you load a priority flight clearance authorization into the city's air defence network?"

"Sure, we supplied it, we have the ultimate authority codes."

"Fine, stand by to do it for the Edenist flyers. We'll use them to evac as soon as we've acquired her."

"The Kingdom will probably get expelled from this entire system if you pull a stunt like that," Adrian said. "If there's one thing Nyvan's nations hate more than each other, it's outsystem foreigners."

"Mzu wanted somewhere that was dishonest and greedy enough to supply her with weapons on a no-questions-asked basis. If this planet had built themselves a decent civilization

in the first place, she wouldn't even be here. They've only themselves to blame. I mean, they've had five centuries for God's sake."

Samuel groaned chidingly.

Adrian paused, not meeting Monica's stare. "Um, my second surveillance team leader is reporting in. I've had them following that Calvert character, as you asked."

"Yes?" There was a sense of grudging inevitability in this moment, Monica thought.

"The captain contacted a data security expert as soon as he landed, a Richard Keaton. It would seem Keaton has done a good job for him. In fact, he probably originated one of the probes into the hotel computer. They're currently in a car which is heading in the general direction of the Mercedes Hotel. He'll get there before you can."

"Shit! That bloody Calvert."

"Do you want him eliminated?"

"No," Samuel said. He stopped Monica's outburst with a firm stare. "Any action at the hotel now will draw the police to it before we can get there. Our interception will be difficult enough as it is."

"All right," she grumbled.

"My team could intercept Mzu for you," Adrian said.

Monica was tempted—anything to get this *resolved*. "How many have you got on her?"

"Three cars, seven personnel."

"Mzu has at least four people with her," Samuel said.

"Agreed," Monica said regretfully. "That's too many, and God knows what they're carrying, especially these unknown locals. We have to guarantee first attempt success. Tell your team to continue their observation, Adrian, we'll join them as soon as we can."

"Do you think she'll resist?" Adrian asked.

"I would hope not," Samuel said. "After all, she is not stupid; she must know Nyvan's situation is decaying by the minute. That may well make this easier for us. We should start with an open approach to fly her outsystem. Once she

realizes she has to leave with us, either willingly or by force, it would be logical for her to capitulate.”

“Easier?” Monica gave him a pitying look. “This mission?”

• • •

“Mother Mary, *why?*” Voi demanded as soon as the five of them crowded back into the penthouse lift. “You can’t sell out now. Think of what you’ve been through—Mary, what we’ve done for you. You can’t hand it over to Capone!”

Her impassioned outburst stopped dead as Alkad turned to stare at her. “Do not argue with one of my decisions ever again.”

Even Gelai and Ngong were daunted by the tone, but then they could sense the thoughts powering her.

“As Baranovich made quite clear, the Omuta option is now closed to me,” Alkad said. “Worthless piece of trash though he is, he happens to be right. You cannot begin to imagine how much I resent that, because it means the one thing I never allowed myself to think in thirty years has become real. Our vengeance has become irrelevant.”

“Nonsense,” Voi said. “You can still hit the Omutans before the possessed do.”

“Please don’t display your ignorance in public, it’s offensive.”

“Ignorance, you bitch. Mary, you’re giving the Alchemist to Capone. Giving it! You think I’m going to keep quiet about that?”

Alkad squared her shoulders; with an immense effort she spoke in a level voice to the ireful girl. “You are a simple immature child, with an equally childish fixation. You have never once thought through the consequences should your wish be granted, the suffering it will cause. For thirty years I have thought of nothing else. I created the Alchemist, Mary have mercy on me. I understand the full reality of what it can do. The responsibility for that machine is mine alone. I have never, nor will ever, shirk that. To do so would be to divorce myself from what remains of my humanity. And the consequences of the possessed obtaining it are very

bad indeed. Therefore I will accept Baranovich's offer to leave this doomed planet. I will lead Capone's forces to the Alchemist. And I will then activate it. It will never be available for anyone to study and duplicate."

"But—" Voi looked around the others for support. "If you activate it, surely . . ."

"I will die. Oh, yes. And with me will die the one man I ever loved. We've been separated for thirty years, and I still love him. That purely human entanglement doesn't matter. I will even sacrifice him for this. Now do you understand my commitment and responsibility? Maybe I will come back as a possessor, or maybe I will stay in the beyond. Whatever my fate, it will be no different to any other human being. I am afraid of that, but I don't reject it. I'm not arrogant enough to think I can cheat our ultimate destination.

"Gelai and Ngong have shown me that we do retain our basic personality. That's good, because if I do come back in someone else's body, my resolve will remain intact. I *will* not build another Alchemist. Its reason for being is gone, it must go too."

Voi bent her knees slightly so her eyes were closer to Alkad's face, as if that would give her a deeper insight into the physicist's mind. "You really will, won't you? You'll kill yourself."

"I think kamikaze is a more appropriate term. But don't worry, I'm not going to dragoon you two along. I don't even consider this to be your fight, I never did. You're not Garisans, not really; you have no reason to dip your hands into blood this deep. Now be quiet and pray to Mother Mary that we can save something from this pile of shit, and get the pair of you as well as Lodi out of here. But be assured, I still consider you expendable to my goal." She turned to Gelai. "If either of you have any objection to this, then speak now, please."

"No, Doctor," Gelai said. There was the faintest smile on her lips. "I don't object. In fact, I'm rather glad it won't be used against a planet by you or Capone. But believe me, you don't want to kill yourself; once you've known the beyond,

the pressure Capone can exert by promising you a body is going to be extraordinary.”

“I know,” Alkad said. “But choice has never played a large part in my life.”

• • •

Tonala’s state of emergency had drastically reduced the volume of road traffic in the capital. Normally, the churning wheels of the afternoon gridlock would turn the snow to mush and spray it over the pedestrians. Now, however, the big flakes were beginning to accumulate on the roads. Harrisburg’s civic mechanoids were losing their battle to clear it away.

The transport department considered the effects such an icy blanket would have on brake response time, and ordered a general speed reduction to avoid accidents. The proscription was datavised into the control processor of individual vehicles.

“You want me to neutralize the order for this car?” Dick Keaton asked. Joshua gave the data security expert an edgy glance as he tried to decide. The answer was yes, but he said, “No,” anyway, because speeding when you’re a suspect foreigner in a nation on the brink of war and being followed by two local police cars is an essentially dumb thing to do.

Thanks to the general lack of cars, their tail was a prominent one, keeping a precise fifty metres behind. Its presence didn’t have much effect on Joshua and his companions. The two serjeants were as vigilant as mechanoids, while Melvyn stared out at the city covered in its crisp grey mantle, the opposite of Dahybi who sat hunched up in his seat, hands clasped and paying no attention to their surroundings, almost as if he were at prayer. Dick Keaton was enjoying the ride, a pre-teen excitement which Joshua found annoying. He was trying to balance mission priorities at the same time as he reviewed what he was going to say to Mzu. A sincere but insistent invitation to return to Tranquillity, point out the shit she was in, how he had a starship waiting. It wasn’t that he was bad with words, but these were just so damn important. Exactly how do you tell the semi-psychotic owner of a

doomsday device to come along quietly and not make any fuss?

His communications block accepted Ashly's secure datavise and relayed it straight into his neural nanonics.

"New development," Ashly reported. "The Edenist flyers just activated their ion fields."

"Are they leaving?"

"No sign of that yet. They're still on the ground, but they're in a rapid response condition. Their agents must be close to Mzu."

"Bugger. Any news from orbit?"

"Not a thing. *Lady Macbeth* isn't due above the horizon for another eight minutes, but the spaceplane sensors haven't detected any low-orbit weapons activity yet."

"Okay. Stand by, we're approaching the hotel now. I might need you in a hurry."

"Do my best. But if these flyers don't want me to lift off, it could get tricky."

"*Lady Mac* is your last resort. She can take them out. Use her if you have to."

"Understood."

Dahybi was leaning forward in his seat to catch a glimpse of the Mercedes Hotel as the car swept along the last two hundred metres of road.

"That park would make a handy landing spot for Ashly," Melvyn commented.

"Acknowledged," Joshua said. He squinted through the windscreen as the car turned onto the loop of road which led to the hotel's broad portico. There was a car already parked in front of the doors.

Joshua datavised a halt order into their car's control processor, then directed it to one of the parking slots outside the portico. Tyres crunched on the virgin snow as they pulled in.

The two police cars stopped on the road outside.

"What is it?" Dick Keaton asked, he was almost whispering.

Joshua pointed a forefinger at the car under the portico. Several people were climbing in.

“That’s Mzu,” one of the serjeants said.

After so long on the trail, so much endured, Joshua felt something akin to awe now he could finally see her. Mzu hadn’t changed much from the visual file stored in his neural nanonics during their one brief encounter. Features and hair the same, and she was wrapped up well in a thick navy-blue coat, but the flaky professor act had been dumped. This woman carried a deadly confidence.

If he’d ever doubted the Alchemist and Mzu’s connection to it, that ended now.

“What do you want to do?” Dahybi asked. “We can stop her car. Make our pitch now.”

Joshua held up a hand for silence. He’d just noticed the last two people getting into the car with Mzu. It wasn’t a premonition he got from them, more like fear hot-wired direct into his brain. “Oh, Jesus.”

Melvyn’s electronic warfare blocks datavised a warning. He accessed the display. “What the hell?”

“I don’t want to alarm you guys,” Dick Keaton said. “But the people in the next car are giving us a real unfriendly look.”

“Huh?” Joshua glanced over.

“And they’re aiming a multiband sensor at us, too,” Melvyn said.

Joshua returned the hostile stare from the two ESA agents in the car parked beside them. “Oh, fucking wonderful.”

“She’s leaving,” one of the serjeants called.

“Jesus,” Joshua grumbled. “Melvyn, are you blocking that sensor?”

“Absolutely.” He gave the agents a broad toothy smile.

“Okay, we follow her. Let’s just hope she’s going somewhere I can have a civilized chat.”

• • •

The five embassy cars carrying Monica, Samuel, and a mixed crew of ESA and Edenist operatives disregarded the city’s new speed limit altogether as they raced for the hotel.

All the security police did was follow and observe; they were anxious to see where this was all leading.

They were still a kilometre from the Mercedes Hotel when Adrian Redway datavised Monica to advise her that Mzu was on the move again. "There's definitely only four people with her this time. The observation team launched a skyspy outside the hotel. It looks like there's been some sort of fight in the penthouse. Do you want access?"

"Please."

The image from the small synthetic bird hovering above the park filled her brain. Its artificial tissue wings were flapping constantly to hold it steady in the middle of the snow-storm, producing an awkward juddering. A visual-wavelength optical sensor was scanning across the penthouse's broad windows. One of them had a large jagged hole in the middle.

"I can see a lot of glass on the carpet," Monica datavised. "Something came in through that window, not out."

"But what?" Adrian asked. "That's the twenty-fifth floor."

Monica continued her review. The living-room doors had been smashed open. Long black scorch marks were chiselled deep into the one lying on the floor.

Then she switched focus to a settee. There was a foot dangling over the armrest.

"No wonder Mzu was in a hurry to leave again," she said out loud. "The possessed have tracked her down."

"Her car isn't heading for the spaceport," Samuel said. "Could the two locals with her be possessed?"

"Possible," Monica agreed hesitantly. "But the observation team said she seemed to be leading the others. They didn't think she was being coerced."

"Calvert has started following her," Adrian datavised.

"Okay. Let's see where they're all so eager to get to." She datavised the car's control processor to catch up with the observation team's vehicles.

• • •

"Someone else has now joined us," Ngong said. His voice was split between amusement and surprise. "That makes over a dozen cars now."

“And poor old Baranovich said to come alone,” Alkad said. “Is he in one of them?”

“I don’t know. One car certainly has some possessed in it.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Voi asked.

Alkad sank down deeper into her seat, getting herself comfortable. “Not really. This is like old times for me.”

“What if they stop us?”

“Gelai, what are the police thinking?”

“They’re curious, Doctor. Make that very curious.”

“That’s okay then; as long as they aren’t going to stop us we’re all right. I know the agencies, they will want to know where we’re going first before they make their move.”

“But Baranovich—”

“They’re his problem, not ours. If he doesn’t want me followed then it’s up to him to do something about it.”

• • •

Alkad’s car navigated itself along Harrisburg’s abandoned streets at a doggedly legal speed. Despite that, they made good progress, leaving the closely packed buildings of the city centre behind to venture out into the more industrial suburbs. Thirty minutes into the journey, the last of the urban clutter was discarded behind them. The slightly elevated roadway cut straight across a flat alluvial plain that was open all the way to the sea eighty kilometres away. It was a vast expanse of huge fallow fields from which tractor mechanoids and tailored bugs had eradicated any unauthorized vegetation. Trees were stunted and bent by the wind that blew in from the shore, standing hunched along the line of the drainage canals which had been dug to tame the rich black soil.

Nothing moved off the road, no animals or vehicles. They were driving across a snow desert. Large, stiff flakes were hurled horizontally against the car by the wind, taxing the guarantee of the lofriction windshield to stay clear. Even so, that didn’t prevent them from seeing the fifteen cars which were now following them, a convoy that made no attempt to hide itself.



Adrian Redway had settled himself into one of the chairs in the ESA's operation centre and datavised his desktop processor for a filter program to access the station's incoming information streams. Even with the filter he was almost overwhelmed by the quantity of data available. Neural nanonics assigned priority gradings. Sub-routines took over from his mind's natural cross-indexing ability, leaving his consciousness free to absorb relevant details.

He focused on Mzu, principally through the observation team, then defined a peripheral activity key to alert him of any incoming factors which would affect her situation. The rate at which external events were developing on Nyvan made it unlikely he would be able to secure Monica much advance warning, but as a veteran of twenty-eight years ESA service he knew even seconds could change the entire outcome of a field operation.

"It has to be the ironberg foundry yard," he datavised to Monica after they had been driving over the farmland for twenty uneventful minutes.

"We think so, too," Monica replied. "Are the foundry's landing pads equipped with beacon guidance? If she's looking for a spaceplane pickup, they'll need a controlled approach in this weather."

"Unless they have military-grade sensors. But yes, the foundry's pads have beacons. I wouldn't like to vouch for their reliability, mind. I doubt they've been serviced since the day they were installed."

"Okay, can you run a data sweep of the foundry? And if you can access it, a security sensor review would be helpful. I'd like to know if there's anyone there waiting for her."

"I don't think you quite understand what you're asking for, that foundry is big. But I'll put a couple of my analysts on it. Just don't expect too much."

"Thanks." She gave Samuel a forlorn look. "Something wrong?"

The Edenist had been accessing their exchange via his bitek processor block. "I am reminded of the time she left

Tranquillity. We were all following after her rather like this, and look what happened that time. Possibly we should be the ones taking the initiative. If the foundry is her intended destination, she may well have a method of eluding us already in place.”

“Could be. But the only way of stopping her now is to shoot the car. That would bring the police storming in.”

Samuel accessed the ESA operations centre computer and reviewed the security police deployment status. “We are a long way from their designated reinforcements; and we can have the flyers here in minutes. Hurting the feelings of the Tonalá government is an irrelevance compared to securing the Alchemist. Mzu has done us a favour by coming to such a remote place.”

“Yeah. Well, if you’re willing to bring your flyers in to evac us, I’m certainly prepared to commit our people. We’ve got enough firepower to stomp on the police if—” She broke off as Adrian datavised again.

“The city air defence network has just located those missing Organization spaceplanes,” he told her. “They’re heading right at you, Monica; three of them coming in over the sea at Mach five. Looks like you were right about the foundry being a pickup zone.”

“My God, she is selling out to Capone. What a bitch.”

“Looks that way.”

“Can you direct the city network to shoot the spaceplanes?”

“Yes, if they get closer, but at the moment they’re out of range.”

“Will they be in range at the foundry?” Samuel asked.

“No. The network doesn’t have any missiles, it’s all beam weapons. Tonalá relies on its SD platforms to kill any threat approaching from outside its boundaries.”

“The flyers,” Monica asked Samuel. “Can they intercept?”

“Yes.” **Launch please**, he instructed the pilots.

Monica datavised her armour suit management processor to run a readiness diagnostic, then pulled her shell helmet on

and sealed it. The other agents began checking their own weapons.

• • •

“Joshua, the flyers are all leaving,” Ashly datavised.

“I was wondering about that,” Joshua replied. “We’re only about ten kilometres from the ironberg foundry now. Mzu must have arranged some kind of rendezvous there. Dick’s been running some checks for us; he says that sections of the foundry electronics are glitched. There could be some possessed up ahead.”

“Do you need an evac?”

Joshua glanced around the car. Melvyn and Dahybi weren’t giving anything away, while Dick Keaton was merely curious. “We’re not in any danger yet,” one of the sergeants said.

“No. But if it happens, it’s going to happen fast; and we’re not in the strongest position.”

“You can’t pull out now. We’re too close.”

“You’re telling me,” he muttered. “All right, we’ll keep on her for now. If we can get close enough to make our offer, well and good. But if the agencies start getting aggressive, then we back off. Understood, Ione?”

“Understood.”

“I may be able to offer some assistance,” Dick Keaton said.

“Oh?”

“The cars in this convoy are all local models. I have some program commands which could cause trouble in their control processors. It might help us get closer to your target.”

“If we start doing that to the agencies, they’ll use their own electronic warfare capability on us,” Melvyn said. “That’s if they don’t just use a TIP carbine. Everybody knows what’s at stake.”

“They won’t know it’s us,” Dick Keaton said.

“You hope,” Melvyn said. “They’re good, Joshua. No offence to Dick, but the agencies have entire departments of computer science professors writing black software for them.”

Joshua enjoyed the idea of screwing up the other cars, but the way they were driving further and further into isolation was a big mitigating factor. Normal agency rules of minimum visibility wouldn't apply out here. If he upset the status quo, Melvyn was probably right about the reaction he'd get. What he really wanted was *Lady Mac* above the horizon to give them some fire support, although even her sensors would struggle to resolve anything through this snowstorm, and she wasn't due up for another forty minutes. "Dick, see what you can do to strengthen our car processors against agency software. I'll use your idea if it looks like she's getting away from us."

"Sure thing."

"Ashly, can you launch without causing undue attention?"

"I think so. There has to be someone observing me, but I'm not picking up any active sensor activity."

"Okay, launch and fly a low-visibility holding pattern ten kilometres from the yard. We'll shout for you."

• • •

The four Edenist flyers picked up velocity as they curved around the outskirts of Harrisburg, hitting Mach two thirty kilometres from the coast. Their smoothly rounded noses lined up on the ironberg foundry. Snowflakes flowing through their coherent magnetic fields sparkled a vivid blue around the forward fuselages, then vaporised to fluorescent purple streamers. To anyone under their path, it appeared as though four sunburst comets were rumbling through the atmosphere.

It was the one failing of Kulu's ion field technology that it could never be successfully hidden from sensors. The three Organization spaceplanes streaking in from the sea spotted them as soon as they lifted from the spaceport. Electronic warfare arrays were activated, seeking to blind the flyers with a full-spectrum barrage. Air-to-air missiles dropped out of their wing recesses and shot ahead at Mach ten.

The Edenist flyers saw them coming through the electronic hash. They peeled away from each other, arcing

through the sky in complex evasion manoeuvres. Chaff and signature decoys spewed out of the flyers. Masers locked on and fired continuous pulses at the incoming drones.

Explosions thundered unseen above the farmland. Some of the missiles succumbed to the masers, while others followed their programs to detonate in preloaded patterns. Clouds of kinetic shrapnel threw up lethal blockades along the trajectories they predicted the flyers would use. But there were too few missiles left to create an effective kill zone.

The flyers stormed through.

It should have ended then, a duel between energy beam weapons and fuselage shielding, the two opponents so far away that in all probability they would never even see each other. But the snow forbade that; absorbing maser and thermal induction energy, cutting the effective strike range of both sides to less than five hundred metres. Flyers and spaceplanes had to get close to each other, spiralling around and around, looping, twisting, diving, climbing. Aggressors desperate to keep their beams on one point of their target's fuselage; targets frantic to keep moving, spinning to disperse the energy input. A genuine dogfight developed. Pilots blinded by the snow and clouds, dependent on sensors harassed by unremitting electronic warfare impulses. Given that both the flyers and the spaceplanes were multi-role craft, the manoeuvres lacked any real acrobatic innovation. Predication programs were the true knights of the sky, allowing pilots to keep a steady lock on their opponents. The flyers' superior agility began to pay dividends. The spaceplanes were limited by the ancient laws of aerodynamic lift and stability, restricting their tactics to classical aerial manoeuvres. While the flyers could move in any direction they wanted to providing their fusion generators had enough power.

The Organization was always going to lose.

One by one, the crippled spaceplanes tumbled out of the sky. Two of them smashed into the frozen soil outside the foundry yard, the third into the sea.

Overhead, the flyers closed formation and began to circle the vast foundry yard in anticipation of claiming their prize.

Urschel and *Pinzola* slid up over the horizon. Warned by the screams of souls torn back into the beyond, they knew what to look for. X-ray lasers stabbed down four times, their power unchecked by gravid clouds or swirling ice crystals.

• • •

The docking cradle rose out of the spaceport bay, exposing the fuselage of the *Mount's Delta* to a blaze of sunlight. At this juncture of a normal departure, a starship would spread its thermo-dump panels before it disengaged. Quinn told Dwyer to switch their heat exchange circuits to an internal store. Umbilical feeds withdrew from their couplings in the lower hull, then the hold-down latches retracted.

"Fly us fifty kilometres along Jesup's spin axis," Quinn said. "Then hold us there."

Dwyer flicked a throat mike down from his headset and muttered instructions to the flight computer. Ion thrusters lifted the clipper-class ship clear of the bay, then the secondary drive came on. *Mount's Delta* accelerated away at a fifteenth of a gee, following a clean arc above the surface of the counter-rotating spaceport.

Quinn used the holoscreens surrounding his acceleration couch to display images from the external sensor suite. Nothing else moved around the gigantic asteroid. The surrounding industrial stations had been shut down for days and were now drifting out of alignment. An inert fleet of personnel commuters, MSVs, inter-orbit cargo craft, and tankers were all docked to Jesup's counter-rotating spaceport, filling nearly every bay.

As soon as the starship rose away from the apex of the spaceport, Quinn switched the optical sensors to track the other asteroids. Dwyer watched the screens in silence as the three deserted asteroids appeared. This time there was movement visible, tiny stars were closing on the dark rocks at high velocity.

"Looks like we're just in time," Quinn said. "The nations

are getting upset about losing their ships.” He spoke briefly into his mike, instructing the flight computer.

Four secure military-grade laser communicators deployed from the starship’s fuselage. One pointed back at Jesup, while the other three acquired a lock on the abandoned asteroids. Each one fired an ultraviolet beam at their target, its encrypted code requesting a response. In answer, four similar ultraviolet beams transfixed the *Mount’s Delta*. Impossible to intercept or interfere, they linked Quinn into the equipment his teams had been setting up.

Diagrams flashed up on the bridge screens as modulated information flooded back along the beams. Quinn entered a series of codes and watched in satisfaction as the equipment acknowledged his command authority.

“Ninety-seven nukes on-line,” he said. “By the look of it, they’re rigging another five as we speak. Dumb arseholes.”

“Is that enough?” Dwyer asked anxiously. Loyalty would probably not be any defence if things weren’t going precisely to plan. He just wished he knew what that plan was.

Quinn’s grin was playful. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

• • •

“No survivors,” Samuel said. “None.” His dignified face betrayed a profound sorrow, one hardened by the grey light of the snow-veiled landscape.

For Monica the loss was heightened by the terrible remoteness of the event. A few swift diffuse flashes of light lost among the occluded sky above the convoy, as if sheet lightning were flaring amid the snowstorm. They had seen and heard nothing of the decimated flyers crashing on the eastern edge of the foundry yard.

We have the pilots safe, the *Hoya* told Samuel and the other Edenists. Fortunately the flyers’ shielding held out long enough for the transfer to complete.

Thank you, that’s excellent news, Samuel said. “But not their souls,” he whispered under his breath.

Monica heard him, and met his gaze. Their minds were a unison of grief, less than affinity but certainly sharing awareness.

“Practicalities,” he said forlornly.

“Yes.”

The car gave a fast unexpected lurch as the brakes suddenly engaged, then cut out. Everyone inside was flung forwards against their seat straps.

“Electronic warfare,” shouted the ESA electronics expert who was riding with them. “They’re glitching our processor.”

“Is it the possessed?” Monica asked.

“No. Definitely coming through the net.”

The car braked again. This time the wheels locked for several seconds, starting to skid across the slushy road before an emergency program released them.

“Go to manual,” Monica instructed. She could see other cars in the convoy twisting and slithering across the dual roadway. One of the police vehicles hit the safety barrier and shot down the embankment into a frozen ditch, spraying snow as it went. Another of the big embassy cars thumped into the rear of Monica’s car, crunching some of the bodywork. The impact spun them around. Monica’s armour suit stiffened as she was shaken from side to side.

“It’s not affecting Mzu,” Samuel said. “She’s pulling away from us.”

“Disable the police cars,” Monica told the electronics expert. “And that bloody Calvert, too.” She felt a sincerely unprofessional glee as she ordered that, but it was perfectly legitimate. By separating herself and Mzu from the police and Calvert she was reducing the opportunity for interference in the mission goal.

Their driver finally seemed to master the intricacies of the car’s manual controls, and they shot forwards, weaving around the other disorientated cars. “Adrian?” Monica datavised.

“With you. Nobody here can origin that electronic warfare outbreak.”

“Doesn’t matter, we’re on top of it.”

“Calvert’s in front of us,” the driver said. “He’s right on Mzu’s tail, this hasn’t affected him at all.”

“Shit!” Monica directed her shell helmet sensors to switch to infrared, and just caught the pink blob of Calvert’s car hidden by snow a hundred and twenty metres ahead of them. Behind her, two embassy cars were already pulling away from the stalled police vehicles, while another one was creeping along the verge, trying to get around.

“Adrian, we’re going to need an evac. Fast.”

“Not easy.”

“What do you fucking mean? Where are the embassy’s Royal Marine utility planes? They should be on backup, for God’s sake!”

“They’re both liaising with the local defence force. It would have been suspicious if I’d called them back.”

“Do it now!”

“I’m on it. You should have one there in about twenty minutes.”

Monica thumped an armoured fist into the seat, splitting some of the fabric. The car was racing on through the snow, surprisingly stable for one under manual control. Four sets of headlights were visible behind them. A fast datavised review informed Monica they were all embassy cars, which gave her some satisfaction.

She put her machine gun down and picked up a maser carbine, then undid her seat belt.

“Now what?” Samuel asked as she leaned forward to get a better view through the windscreen.

“Joshua Calvert, your time is up.”

“Uh oh,” said the electronics expert. He looked up in reflex.

• • •

Ashly approached the ironberg foundry yard from the west, following five minutes behind the Edenist flyers. The spaceplane’s forward passive sensor suite revealed the basics of the missile launch and dogfight. Then the X-ray lasers had fired from orbit. He held his breath as the sensors reported a microwave radar beam sweep across the fuselage. It came from the starships seven hundred kilometres above.

Now is not a good time to die. Especially as I know

what's in store if I do. Kelly was right: screw fate and destiny, just spend the rest of time in zero-tau. I think I might try that if I get out of this.

Nothing happened.

Ashly let out a shudder of breath, finding his palms sweating. "Thank you whoever thought up low-visibility profiling," he said out loud. With its top-grade stealth systems active, the spaceplane was probably invisible to any sensor on, or orbiting, Nyvan. His only worry had been an infrared signature, but the thick snow eradicated that.

He ordered the spaceplane's computer to open a secure channel to Tonalá's net, hoping no one with heavy weaponry would detect the tiny signal. "Joshua?" he datavisied.

"Jesus, Ashly, we thought you'd been hit."

"Not in this machine."

"Where are you?"

"Thirty kilometres from the foundry yard. I'm about to go into a holding pattern. What's happening down there?"

"Some idiot used electronic warfare on the cars. We're okay; Dick hardened our programs. But the police are out of it for the moment. We're still on Mzu's tail. I think a couple of embassy cars are behind us, maybe more."

"Is Mzu still heading for the foundry yard?"

"Looks like it."

"Well unless the cavalry comes up over the hill, we're the only pickup she's got left. There's nothing flying within my sensor range."

"Unless they're stealthed, too."

"You've always got to look on the bleak side, haven't you?"

"Just being cautious."

"Well if they're stealthed, I . . ." Ashly broke off as the flight computer warned him of another radar sweep emanating from the starships. The beam was configured differently this time, a ground scan profile. "Joshua, they're hunting you. Get out! Get out of the car!"

Every electronic warfare block in the embassy car was datavisaging frantic alerts.

We are being targeted by the Organization frigates, Samuel told *Hoya* and Niveu. There was little he could do to conceal his rising panic. Once, the knowledge that his memories would be held safely in the *Hoya* would have been enough for him. Now he wasn't so sure that was all that mattered. **You must stop them. If they kill Mzu, it's all over.**

The snow-lashed sky behind the car flashed purple.

After tens of kilometres of entirely passive pursuit across the tundralike farmland, the Tonala security police had been caught out badly by the sudden electronic warfare attack. Of all the cars, theirs came off worst, leaving them scattered across both roadways as their surveillance suspects, quite infuriatingly, dodged around them as if they were nothing more than inconvenient roadcones. It took time for them to rally; processors had to be disengaged to allow the manual controls to be activated, officers from cars that had gone over the embankment or smashed into the barrier sprinted for cars that were still functional, swiping huge gobs of crash cushion foam from their suits. Once they had reorganized they began to drive fast after their quarry.

It meant that their cars were still bunched together, supplying the Organization starships with the biggest target. Oscar Kearn, uncertain which one contained Mzu, decided to start there and eliminate the other cars one at a time until her soul was claimed by the beyond. With that, they would have won. Bringing her back, one way or another, was all that mattered. Now the spaceplanes had been destroyed, she would have to die. Fortunately, as an ex-military man himself, he had prepared his fallback options. So far Mzu had proved amazingly elusive, or just plain lucky. He was determined to put an end to that.

The ironberg foundry yard pickup had been planned in some detail with Baranovich, its location and timing quite critical. Although Oscar Kearn hadn't actually mentioned *how* critical to the newly allied Cossack, nor why. But he

was satisfied that if things went bad for the Organization on the ground, Mzu would never survive.

Firstly, the frigates would be overhead, able to initiate a ground strike. And if she somehow escaped that . . .

While the Organization starships were docked with the *Spirit of Freedom* they had gained command access to the tugs delivering Tonala's ironbergs for splashdown. A small alteration had been made to the trajectory of one tug.

Far above Nyvan's ocean, to the west of Tonala, an ironberg was already slipping through the ionosphere. This time, no recovery fleet would be needed. No ships would be employed to tow it on a week-long voyage to the foundry yard.

It was taking the direct route.



The first X-ray laser blast struck the police car which was lying down the embankment, hood embedded in the ditch. It vaporized in a violent shock wave, sending droplets of molten metal, roasted earth, and superheated steam churning into the air. All the snow within a two-hundred-metre radius was ripped from the ground before the heat turned it back into water. The other car abandoned on the road was somersaulted over and over, smashing its windows and sending wheels spinning through the air.

The first explosion made Alkad wince. She glanced out of the rear window, seeing an orange corona slowly shrinking back down into the road.

"What the hell did that?" Voi asked.

"Not us," Gelai said. "Not one of the possessed, not even a dozen. We don't have that much power."

A second explosion sounded, rattling the car badly.

"It's me," Alkad said. "They want me."

Another explosion lit up the sky. This time the pressure wave pushed at their car, sending it skidding sideways before the control processor could compensate.

"They're getting closer," Eriba cried. "Mother Mary, help us."

"There's not much She can do for us now," Alkad said. "It's up to the agencies."



The four voidhawks were in a standard five-hundred-kilometre equatorial parking orbit above Nyvan when *Hoya* received Samuel's frantic call. Their position allowed them to shadow the Organization frigates which were strung out along a high-inclination orbit. At the time, only the *Urschel* and the *Pinzola* were above the ironberg foundry yard's horizon. *Raimo* was trailing them by two thousand kilometres.

Although it was four thousand kilometres from the *Urschel* and *Pinzola*, *Hoya's* sensors could just detect the brilliant purple discharge in the clouds below the Organization frigates as they fired on a fourth car. The voidhawk began to accelerate at seven gees, followed by its three cousins. All four went to full combat alert status. A salvo of fifteen combat wasps slid out of *Hoya's* lower hull cradles, each one charging away in a different direction at thirty gees, leaving the voidhawk at the centre of an expanding and dimming nimbus of exhaust plasma. After five seconds, the drones curved around to align themselves on the Organization frigates.

Urschel and *Pinzola* had no choice but to defend themselves. Their reaction time was hardly optimum, but twenty-five combat wasps flew out of each frigate to counter the attackers, antimatter propulsion quickly pushing them up to forty gees. The frigates broke off their attack on the cars, realigning their X-ray lasers ready for the inevitable swarm of submunitions.

Raimo launched its own salvo of combat wasps in support of its confederates, opening up a new angle of attack against the voidhawks. Two of them responded with defensive salvos.

Over a hundred combat wasps launched in less than twenty seconds. The glare from their drives shimmered off the nighttime clouds below, a radiance far exceeding any natural moonlight.

Despite the continuing electronic warfare emission from the SD platforms, none of the orbiting network sensors

could miss such a deadly spectacle. Threat analysis programs controlling each network initiated what they estimated was an appropriate level of response.

• • •

Officially, Tonalá's ironberg foundry yard sprawled for over eighteen kilometres along the coast, extending back inland between eight and ten kilometres according to the lie of the land. That, anyway, was the area which the government had originally set aside for the project in 2407, with an optimism which matched the one prevalent during Floreso's arrival into Nyvan orbit three years earlier. Apart from the asteroid's biosphere cavern, the foundry became Tonalá's largest ever civil engineering development.

It started off in a promising enough fashion. First came a small coastal port to berth the tugs which recovered the ironbergs from their mid-ocean splashdown. With that construction under way, the engineers started excavating a huge seawater canal running parallel to the coastline. A hundred and twenty metres wide and thirty deep, it was designed to accommodate the ironbergs, allowing them to be towed into the Disassembly Sheds which were to be the centrepiece of the yard. The main canal branched twenty times, sprouting kilometre-long channels which would each end at a shed.

After the first seven Disassembly Sheds were completed, an audit by the Tonalan Treasury revealed the nation didn't require the metal production capacity already built. Funds for the remaining Disassembly Sheds were suspended until the economy expanded to warrant them. That was in 2458. Since then, the thirteen unused branch canals gradually choked up with weeds and silt until they eventually became nothing more than large, perfectly rectangular saltwater marshes. In 2580, Harrisburg University's biology department successfully had them declared part of the national nature park reserve.

Those Disassembly Sheds which did get built were massive cuboid structures, two hundred metres a side, and very basic. An immense skeletal framework was thrown up, bridging the end of the branch canal, then cloaked in flat

composite panels. A vertical petal door above the canal allowed the ironberg egress. Inside, powerful fission blades on the end of gantry arms performed a preprogrammed dissection, slicing the ironberg into thousand-tonne segments like some gigantic metal fruit.

A second network of smaller canals connected the Disassembly Sheds with the actual foundry buildings, allowing the bulky, awkwardly shaped segments of spongesteel to be floated directly to the smelter intakes. The desolate land between the Disassembly Sheds, foundry buildings, and canals was crisscrossed by a maze of roads, some no more than dirt tracks, while others were broad decaying roadways built to carry heavy plant during the heady early days of construction. None of them had modern guidance tracking cables; foundry crews didn't care, they knew the layout and drove manually. It meant that any visitors venturing deep into the yard invariably took wrong turnings. Not that they could ever get lost, the gargantuan Disassembly Sheds were visible for tens of kilometres, rising up out of the featureless alluvial plain like the blocks some local god had forgotten to sculpt mountains out of during Nyvan's creation. They made perfect navigational reference aides. Under normal conditions.

• • •

The road was over eighty years old; coastal winters had washed soil away from under it and frozen the surface, flexing it up and down until it snapped. There wasn't a single flat stretch anywhere, a fact disguised by fancifully wind-sculpted drifts of snow. Alkad's car lumbered along at barely more than walking pace as the suspension rocked the body from side to side.

They'd driven into the yard at a dangerously high speed along the roadway. A fifth car had been wiped out behind them, then the blasts of energy from space seemed to stop. Alkad datavised the car's control processor to turn off at the first junction. According to the map she had loaded into her neural nanonics memory cell, the Disassembly Sheds were strung out across the yard's northern quadrant.

But as she was rapidly discovering: the map is not the territory.

“I can’t see a bloody thing,” Voi said. “I don’t even know if we’re on a road anymore.”

Eriba peered forwards, his nose almost touching the windshield. “The Sheds have to be out there somewhere. They’re huge.”

“The guidance processor says we’re heading north,” Alkad said. “Keep looking.” She glanced out of the back window to see the car following her bouncing about heavily, its headlight beams slashing about through the snow. “Can you sense Baranovich?” she asked Gelai.

“Faintly, yes.” Her hand waved ahead and slightly to the left. “He’s out there; and he’s got a lot of friends with him.”

“How many?”

“About twenty, maybe more. It’s difficult at this distance, and they’re moving about.”

Voi sucked her breath in fiercely. “Too many.”

“Is Lodi with them?”

“Possibly.”

A massive chunk of machinery lay along the side of the road, some metallic fossil from the age of greater ambitions. Once they’d passed it, a strong red-gold radiance flooded over the car. A faint roar made the windows tremble.

“One of the smelters,” Ngong said.

“Which means the Disassembly Sheds are on this side.” Voi pointed confidently.

The road became smoother, and the car picked up speed. Its tyres began to squelch through slush that had melted in the radiance of the smelter. They could see the silhouette of the furnace building now, a long black rectangle with hangarlike doors fully open to show eight streams of radiant molten metal pouring out of the hulking smelter into narrow channels which wound away deeper into the building. Thick jets of steam were shooting out of vents in the roof. Snowflakes reverted to sour rain as they fell through them.

Alkad yelled in fright, and datavised an emergency stop order to the car’s control processor. They juddered to a halt

two metres short of the canal. A segment of ironberg was sliding along sedately just in front of them, a tarnished silver banana shape with its skin pocked by millions of tiny black craters.

The sky above turned a brilliant silver, stamping a black and white image of the canal and the ironberg segment on the back of Alkad's retina. "Holy Mother Mary," she breathed.

The awesome light faded.

"My processor block's crashed," Eriba said. He was twisting his head around, trying to find the source of the light. "What was that?"

"They're shooting at the cars again," Voi said.

Alkad datavised the car's control processor, not surprised when she couldn't get a response. It confirmed the cause: emp. "I wish it was only that," she told them, marvelling sadly at their innocence. Even now they didn't grasp the enormity of what was involved, the length to which others would go. She reached under the dashboard and twisted the release for the manual steering column. Thankfully, it swung up in front of a startled Eriba. "Drive," she instructed. "There'll be a bridge or something in a minute. But just drive."

• • •

"Oh, bloody hell," Sarha grumbled. "Here we go again."

Lady Mac's combat sensor clusters were relaying an all-too-clear image of space above Nyvan into her neural nanonics. Ten seconds ago all had been clear and calm. The various SD platforms were still conducting their pointless electronic war unabated. Ships were moving towards the three abandoned asteroids, two squadrons of frigates from different nations were closing on Jesup; while Tonala's low-orbit squadron was moving to intercept the Organization ships. This orbital chess game between the nations could have gone on for hours yet, allowing Joshua and the others plenty of time to get back up to the ship, and for all of them to jump the hell away from this deranged planet.

Then the Organization frigates had started shooting. The

voidhawks accelerated out of parking orbit. And space was full of combat wasps.

“Velocity confirmed,” Beaulieu barked. “Forty gees, plus. Antimatter propulsion.”

“Christ,” Liol said. “Now what do we do?”

“Nothing,” Sarha snapped. So far, the conflict was ahead of them and at a slightly higher altitude. “Standby for emp.” She datavised a procedural stand-by order into the flight computer. “Damn, I wish Joshua were here, he could fly us out of this in his sleep.”

Liol gave her a hurt look.

Four swarms of combat wasps were in flight, etching dazzling strands of light across the darkened continents and oceans. They began to jettison their submunitions, and everything became far too complicated for the human mind to follow. Symbols erupted across the display Sarha’s neural nanonics provided as she asked the tactical analysis program for simplified interpretations.

Nyvan’s nightside had ceased to become dark, enlivened by hundreds of incandescent exhausts blurring together as they engaged each other. It was the fusion bombs which went off first, then an antimatter charge detonated.

Space ahead of *Lady Mac* went into blazeout. No sensor was capable of penetrating that stupendous energy release.

Tactically, it wasn’t the best action. The blast destroyed every combat wasp submunitions friend or foe within a hundred kilometres, while its emp disabled an even larger number.

“Damage report?” Sarha asked.

“Some sensor damage,” Beaulieu said. “Backups coming on-line. No fuselage energy penetration.”

“Liol!”

“Uh? Oh. Yeah. Flight systems intact, generators on-line. Attitude stable.”

“The SD platforms are launching,” Beaulieu warned. “They’re really letting loose. Saturation assault!”

“I can get us out of here,” Liol said. “Two minutes to jump altitude.”

“No,” Sarha said. “If we move, they’ll target us. Right now we stay low and inert. We don’t launch, we don’t emit. If anything does lock on, we kill it with the masers and countermeasure its launch origin. Then you shift our inclination three degrees either way, not our altitude. Got that?”

“Got it.” His voice was hot and high.

“Relax, Liol, everyone’s forgotten about us. We just stay intact to pick Joshua up, that’s our mission, that’s all we do. I want you cool for a smooth response when it comes. And it will. Use a stim program if you have to.”

“No. I’m all right now.”

Another antimatter explosion obliterated a vast section of the universe. Broken submunitions came spinning out of the epicentre.

“Lock on,” Beaulieu reported. “Three submunitions. One kinetic, two nukes. I think; catalogue match is sixty per cent. Twenty gees only, real geriatrics.”

“Okay,” Sarha said, proud to find how calm she was. “Kick-ass time.”

• • •

A deluge of light from the second antimatter explosion revealed the Disassembly Sheds to all the cars speeding across the foundry yard. A row of blank two-dimensional squares receding to the horizon.

“Go for it!” Alkad urged.

Eriba thumbed the throttle forwards. The snow was abating now, revealing more of the ground ahead, giving him confidence. Furnaces glowed in the distance, coronas of slumbering dragons smeared by flurries of grey flakes. The battered road took them past long-forsaken fields of carbon concrete where ranks of sun-bleached gantries stood as memorials to machinery and buildings aborted by financial reality. Pipes wide enough to swallow the car angled up out of the stony soil like metallized worms; their ends capped by rusting grilles which issued strange heavy vapours. Lonely wolf-analogues prowled among the destitute technological carcasses, skulking in the shadows whenever the car’s headlights ventured close.

Seeing the other cars falling behind, Eriba aimed for a swing bridge over the next small canal. The car wheels left the floor as it charged over the apex of the two segments. Alkad was flung forwards as it banged down on the other side.

“That’s Shed Six,” Voi said, eagerly looking out of a side window. “One more canal to go.”

“We’re going to make it,” Eriba shouted back. He was completely absorbed by the race, adrenaline rush giving his world a provocative edge.

“That’s good,” Alkad said. Anything else would have sounded churlish.

The snow clouds above the yard were slowly tearing open, showing ragged tracts of evening sky. It was alight with plasma fire; drive exhausts and explosions merging and expanding into a single blanket of iridescence that was alive with choppy internal tides.

Joshua kinked his neck back at a difficult angle to watch it. The car jounced about, determined to deny him an uninterrupted view. Since the first antimatter bomb’s emp had wrecked their car’s electronics Dahybi had been driving them manually. It was a bumpy ride.

Another antimatter explosion turned the remaining clouds transparent. Joshua’s retinal implants prevented any lasting damage to his eyes, but he still had to blink furiously to clear the brilliant purple afterimage away.

“Jesus, I hope they’re all right up there.”

“Sarha knows what she’s doing,” Melvyn said. “Besides, we’ve got another twenty minutes before they’re above the horizon, and that blast was almost directly overhead.”

“Sure, right.”

“Hang on,” Dahybi called.

The car shot over a swing bridge, taking flight at the top. They thumped down, skittling sideways until the rear bumper smacked into the road’s side barrier. A wicked grinding sound told them they’d lost more bodywork until Dahybi managed to straighten out again.

“She’s pulling ahead,” Melvyn pointed out calmly.

“Can you do any fucking better?” Dahybi yelled back.

Joshua couldn't remember the composed node specialist ever getting so aggrieved before. He heard another *crunch* behind them as the first embassy car cleared the bridge.

“Just keep on her,” Joshua said. “You're doing fine.”

“Where the hell is she going?” Melvyn wondered out loud.

“More to the point, why doesn't she care that this circus procession is following her?” Joshua replied. “She has to be pretty confident about whoever she's meeting.”

“Who or what.” Melvyn sucked in a breath. “You don't think the Alchemist is hidden around here, do you? I mean, look at this place, you could lose a squadron of starships out here.”

“Don't let's imagine things worse than they are,” Joshua said. “My main concern is those two possessed with her.”

“I should be able to deal with them,” a serjeant said. It touched one of the weapons clipped to its belt.

Joshua managed a twitched smile. It was becoming harder for him to associate these increasingly combat-adept serjeants with the old sweet, sexy Ione.

“What's the Alchemist?” Dick Keaton asked.

When Joshua turned back to their passenger, he was startled by the flood of curiosity emanating from the man. It was what he imagined Edenist affinity must be like. The emotion *dominated*. “Need to know only, sorry.”

Dick Keaton seemed to have some trouble returning to his usual blasé cockiness.

It bothered Joshua quite badly for some reason. The first glimpse of something hidden behind the mask. Something very wrong, and very deeply hidden.

“They're changing direction,” Dahybi warned.

Mzu's car had left the narrow road which ran between the swing bridges, turning onto a more substantial road which led towards Disassembly Shed Four. Dahybi tugged the steering column over as far as it would go, almost missing the junction as they careered around after her.

After standing up against two centuries of saltwater cor-

rosion, cheap slipshod maintenance, bird excrement, algae, and in one memorable instance a small aircraft crash, the walls and roof of Disassembly Shed Four were in a sorry state. Despite that, the structure's scale was still impressive to the point of intimidating. Joshua had seen far bigger buildings, but not in isolation like this.

"Joshua, look at the last car," a serjeant said.

Five other cars were still part of the chase. Four of them were big towncars from the Kulu embassy; all smooth dark bodies with opaque windows and powerful fanbeam headlights. The fifth had started out an ordinary car with dark green bodywork; now it was some primitive monstrosity with bright scarlet paint that was covered in brash stickers. Six round headlights were affixed to a lattice of metal struts which covered the front grille. Primitive it might have been, but it was closing up fast on the last embassy car, its broad tyres giving it excellent traction on the slush.

"Jesus, they're in front and behind."

"This might be a good time for us to retire gracefully," Melvyn said.

Joshua glanced ahead. They were already in the shadow thrown by Disassembly Shed Four. Mzu's car was almost at the base of the colossal wall, and braking to a halt.

It was very tempting. And he was in an agony of denial not knowing what had happened to *Lady Mac*.

"Trouble," Dick Keaton said. He was holding up a processor block, swinging it around to try to locate something. "Some kind of electronic distortion is focusing on us. Don't know what kind, it's more powerful than the emp though."

Joshua ordered his neural nanonics to run a diagnostic. The program never completed. "Possessed!" intuition was screaming at him. "Out, everybody out. Go for cover."

Dahybi slammed the brakes on. The doors were opening before they stopped. Mzu's car was fifteen metres in front of them, stationary and empty.

Joshua threw himself out of the car, taking a couple of fast

steps before flinging himself flat onto the slush. One of the serjeants hit the road beside him.

A tremendous jet of white fire squirted down from the shed. It swamped the top of the car, sending ravenous tentacles curling down through the open doors. Glass blew out, and the interior combusted instantly, burning with eerie fury.

Ione knew exactly what she had to do, one consciousness puppeting two bodies. As soon as the first wave of heat swelled overhead she was rising, adopting a crouch position. Four hands were bringing four different guns to bear. As there was one serjeant on either side of the car, she could triangulate the source of the energistic attack perfectly: a line of dirt-greyed windows thirty metres up the shed wall. Two of them had swung open.

She opened fire. First priority was to suppress the possessed, give them so much to worry about they'd be unable to continue their own assault. Two of the guns she held were rapid-fire machine pistols, capable of firing over a hundred bullets a second. She used them in half-second bursts, swinging them in fast arcs. The windows, surrounding panels, stress rods, and secondary structural girders disintegrated into an avalanche of scything chips as the bullets savaged them. The heavy-calibre rifles followed, explosive-tipped shells chewing ferociously at the edges of the initial devastation. Then she began slamming rounds into the panelling where she estimated the walkway the possessed were using was situated.

"Go!" she bellowed from both throats. "Get inside, there's cover there."

Joshua rolled over fast and started sprinting. Melvyn was right behind him. There was nothing to hear above the bone-jarring vibration of the rifles, no pounding footsteps or shouts of alarm. He just kept running.

A streamer of white fire churned through the air above him. It was hard to distinguish in the light fluxing down from the orbital battle. The foundry yard was soaked in a

brightness twice as great as the noonday sun, a glare made all the worse by the snow.

Ione saw the fire coming right at her down one half of her vision and pointed the rifle and machine gun along the angle of approach. She held the triggers down on both of them, bullets flaring indigo as if they were tracer rounds. The white fire struck, and she cancelled the serjeant's tactile nerves, banishing pain. Her machine-gun magazine was exhausted, but she kept on firing the rifle, holding it steady even though the fire burned away her eyes along with her leathery skin.

Then her consciousness was in only one of the bitek constructs; she could see the flaming outline of the other fall to the ground. And shadows were flittering in the dusk behind the yawning hole she'd blasted in the wall. She slapped a new magazine in the machine gun and raised both barrels.

Joshua had just passed Mzu's car when the explosive round went crack mere centimetres from his skull. He flinched, throwing his arms up defensively. A small door in the shed wall just in front of him disintegrated. It took a tremendous act of trust, but he kept on going. Ione had opened the way. There had to be some kind of sanctuary in there.

• • •

Alkad Mzu didn't regard the interior of Disassembly Shed Four as sanctuary, exactly, but she was grateful to reach it nonetheless. The cars were still pursuing her, berserk high-speed skids and swerves across the road showing just how intent their occupants were. At least inside the shed she could choose her opponents.

Just as Ngong closed the small door she caught a glimpse of the surviving police cars leaping the swing bridge, their blue and red strobes flashing. The snow was hot with irradiated light from the battle above, and growing ever brighter. Ngong clanged the door shut and slammed the bolts across.

Alkad stood waiting for her retinal implants to adjust to the sombre darkness. It took them longer than it should; and

her neural nanonics were totally off-line. Baranovich was close.

They made their way forwards through a forest of metal pillars. The shed's framework structure extended some distance from the panel wall it was supporting, uncountable trusses and struts melding together in asymmetric junctions. Looking straight up, it was impossible to see the roof, only the labyrinthine intertexture of black metal forming an impenetrable barrier. Each tube and I-beam was slick with water, beads of condensation tickled by gravity until they dropped. With the shed's conditioning turned off, the inside was a permanent drizzle.

Alkad led the others forwards, out from under the artless pillars. There was no ironberg in the huge basin at the middle of the shed, so the water was slopping quietly against the rim. The cranes, the gantry arms with their huge fission blades, the mobile inspection platforms, all of them hung still and silent around the sides of the central high bay. Sounds didn't echo here, they were absorbed by the prickly fur of metal inside the walls. Scraps of light escaped through lacunas in the roof buttresses, producing a crisscross of white beams that always seemed to fade away before they reached the ground. Big seabirds scurried about through the air, endlessly swapping perches as if they were searching for the perfect vantage point.

"Up here, Dr Mzu," a voice called out.

She turned around, head tilted back, hand held in a salute to shield her face from the gentle rain. Baranovich was standing on a walkway forty metres above the ground, leaning casually against the safety railing. His colourful Cossack costume shone splendidly amid the gloom. Several people stood in the shadows behind him.

"All right," she said. "I'm here. Where's my transport off-planet? From what I can see, there's some difficulty in orbit right now."

"Don't get smart with me, Doctor. The Organization isn't going to be wiped out by one small war between SD platforms."

“Lodi is up there,” Gelai said quietly. “The other possessed are becoming agitated by the approaching cars.”

“I don’t suppose it will,” Alkad shouted back. “So our arrangement still stands. You let Lodi go, and I’ll come with you.”

“The arrangement, Doctor, was that you come alone. But I’m a reasonable man. I’ll see to it that you reach the Organization. Oh, and here’s Lodi.”

He was flung over the safety barrier just as Ione’s guns started to demolish the windows and panelling. His screams were lost amid the roar of the explosive rounds. Arms windmilled in pathetic desperation, their motion caught by the strobe effect of the explosions. He hit the carbon concrete with a dreadful wet thud.

“See, Doctor? I let him go.”

Alkad stared at the lad’s body, desperate to reject what she’d seen. It was, she realized in some shock, the first time she’d actually witnessed somebody being killed. Murdered.

“Mother Mary, he was just a boy.”

Voi whimpered behind her.

Baranovich was laughing. Those on the walkway with him joined hands. A plume of white fire speared down towards Alkad.

Both Gelai and Ngong grabbed hold of her arms. When the white fire hit, it was like a sluice of dazzling warm water. She swayed backwards under the impact, crying out from surprise rather than pain. The strike abated, leaving her itching all over.

“Step aside,” Baranovich shouted angrily. “She belongs to us.”

Gelai grinned evilly and raised a hand as if to wave. The walkway under Baranovich’s feet split with a loud brassy creak. He gave a dismayed yell and made a grab for the safety rail.

“Run!” Gelai urged.

Alkad hesitated for an instant, looking back at Lodi’s body for any conceivable sign of life. There was too much

blood for that. Together with the others, she pelted back to the relative safety of the metal support pillars.

"I can't die yet," she said frantically. "I have to get to the Alchemist first. I have to, it's the only way."

A figure stepped out in front of her. "Dr Mzu, I presume," said Joshua. "Remember me?"

She gaped at him, too incredulous to speak. Three other men were standing behind him; two of them were nervously pointing machine guns at Gelai and Ngong.

"Who is *this*?" a very confused Voi asked.

Alkad gave a little laugh that was close to hysteria. "Captain Calvert, from Tranquillity."

Joshua clicked his heels and did a little bow. "On the button, Doc. I'm flattered. And *Lady Mac*'s in orbit here ready to take you back home. The Lord of Ruin is pretty pissed at you for disappearing, but she says she'll forgive you providing your nasty little secret stays secret forever."

"You work for Ione Saldana?"

"Yeah. She'll be here in the sort-of flesh in a minute to confirm the offer. But right now, my priority is to get you and your friends out of here." He gave Gelai and Ngong the eye. "Some of your friends. I don't know what the story with these two is, but I'm not having—" The cold, unmistakable shape of a pistol muzzle was pressed firmly into the back of his neck.

"Thank you, Captain Calvert," Monica's voice purred with triumph. "But us professionals will take it from here."



The air on board the *Urschel* was clotted by rank gases and far too much humidity. Those conditioning filters still functioning emitted an alarmingly loud buzzing as fan motors spun towards overload. Innumerable light panels had failed, hatch actuators were unreliable at best, discarded food wrappers fluttered about everywhere.

Cherri Barnes hated the sloppiness and disorder. Efficiency on a starship was more than just habit, it was an essential survival requirement. A crew was utterly dependent on its equipment.

But two of the possessed (her fellow possessed, she tried to tell herself) were from the late nineteenth–early twentieth century. Arrogant oafs who didn't or wouldn't understand the basic preconditions of shipboard routine. And their so-called commander, Oscar Kearn, didn't seem too bothered, either. He just assumed that the non-possessed crew would go around scooping up the shit. They didn't.

Cherri had given up advising and demanding. She was actually quite surprised that they'd survived the orbital battle for so long—although antimatter-powered combat wasps did load the odds in their favour. And for once the non-possessed were understandably performing their duties with a high level of proficiency. There was little for the possessed to do except wait. Oscar Kearn occupied himself by studying the hologram screen displays, and muttering the odd comment to his non-possessed subordinate. In reality he was contributing little, other than continually urging their combat wasps be directed at the voidhawks. The concept of keeping a reserve for their own defence seemed elusive.

When the explosions and energy cascades outside the hull were reaching an appalling crescendo, Cherri slipped quietly out of the bridge. Under ordinary combat conditions the companionways linking the frigate's four life-support capsules should have been sealed tight. Now, she glided past open hatches as she made her way along to B capsule's maintenance engineering deck. As soon as she was inside she closed the ceiling hatch and engaged the manual lock.

She pulled herself over to one of the three processor consoles and tapped the power stud. Not being able to datavise the frigate's flight computer was a big hindrance; she wasn't used to voice response programs. Eventually, though, she established an auxiliary command circuit, cutting the bridge officers out of the loop. The systems and displays she wanted slowly came on-line.

Combat wasps and their submunitions still flocked through space above Nyvan, though not quite as many as before. And the blanket electronic warfare interference had

ended; quite simply, there were no SD platforms left intact to wage that aspect of the conflict.

One of the ten phased array antennae positioned around the *Urschel's* hull focused on the *Lady Macbeth*. Cherri pulled herself closer to the console's mike.

"Is anyone receiving this? Sarha, Warlow, can you hear me? If you can, use a five-millimetre aperture signal maser for a direct com return. Do not, repeat not lock on to *Urschel's* main antenna."

"Signal acknowledged," a synthesised voice replied. "Who the hell is this?"

"Warlow, is that you?"

"No, Warlow isn't with us anymore. This is Sarha Mitcham, acting first officer. Who am I speaking with?"

"Sarha, I'm sorry, I didn't know about Warlow. It's Cherri Barnes, Sarha."

"God, Cherri, what the hell are you doing on an Organization frigate?"

Cherri stared at the console, trying to get a grip on her raging emotions. "I . . . I belong here, Sarha. I think. I don't know anymore. You just don't know what it's like in the beyond."

"Oh, fuck, you're a possessor."

"Guess so. Not by choice."

"Yeah. I know. What happened to *Udat*, Cherri? What happened to you?"

"It was Mzu. She killed us. We were a complication to her. And Meyer . . . she had a grudge. Be careful of her, Sarha, be very careful."

"Christ, Cherri, is this on the level?"

"Oh, yes, I'm on the level."

"Acknowledged. And . . . thanks."

"I haven't finished. Joshua's down on Nyvan chasing after Mzu, we know that much."

"Okay, he's down there. Cherri, please don't ask me why. I can't discuss it."

"That's okay. I understand. It doesn't matter; we know about the Alchemist, and you know we know. But you have

to tell Joshua to back off, he must get away from Mzu. Right away. We know we can't get her offplanet now our spaceplanes are gone. That means the Organization has only one option. If she's dead, she'll have to join us."

"Is that why *Urschel* and *Pinzola* were shooting at the ground?"

"Yes. But that's not all—"

• • •

The timid, halting voice echoed around *Lady Macbeth's* bridge. It sent something like cold electricity racing down Liol's nerves. He turned his head to look at Sarha, who seemed equally stupefied.

"Is she for real?" he asked, praying the answer would be no. Events seemed to be pushing them towards an inevitable active response. Despite his outward bravado back on the station, he had distinctly mixed feelings about piloting *Lady Mac* under conditions any more adverse than their current ones—though a rogue part of his mind was determined that Sarha would never know that. Egotism was obviously the opposite trait of his intuition, the Calvert family's Achilles heel.

"I knew her," was all Sarha would say, and that reluctantly. "Beaulieu, can you confirm that ironberg's trajectory?"

"I will have to use active sensor analysis to obtain its precise flight path."

"Do it."

"We're thirty minutes from Joshua's horizon," Liol said. Alternative orbital trajectories were flashing through his mind as he datavised the flight computer for possible vectors.

"Nothing I can do about that," Sarha said. "We can try calling him through the Tonalá communications net."

"The net: bollocks. You know there isn't a working processor left on that planet after all this emp activity. I can drop us down; if we skim the atmosphere we can be above his horizon in eight minutes."

"No! If we start changing our orbit we'll be targeted."

“There’s nothing left out there *to* target us. Access the sensors, damn you. The combat wasps are all spent.”

“They’ve deployed all their submunitions, you mean.”

“He’s my brother!”

“He’s my captain, and we can’t risk it.”

“*Lady Mac* can beat any poxy submunitions. Take fire control, I can pilot this manoeuvre.”

“Ironberg trajectory confirmed,” Beaulieu said. “Barnes was telling the truth. It’s heading straight at them.”

“Altitude?” Sarha asked. “Can we nuke it?”

“Ninety kilometres. That’s too deep into the ionosphere for the combat wasps. They can’t operate in that kind of pressure.”

“Shit!” Sarha groaned.

“Get positive, Sarha,” Liol demanded. “We have to get over Joshua’s horizon.”

“I’ve got lock-on,” Beaulieu said calmly. “Two nukes, active seeker heads. They acquired our radar emission.”

Sarha initiated the maser cannon targeting program without conscious thought. Her brain was churning with too much worry and indecision to actually think. Bright violet triangles zeroed the approaching submunitions.

“Would Josh leave one of us down there?” Liol asked.

“You piece of shit!” The masers fired, triggered by the heatlash in her mind. Both submunitions broke apart, their fusion drives dying.

“We can beat them,” Beaulieu said.

The imperturbability of the cosmonik’s synthetic voice chided Sarha. “Okay. I’ll handle fire control. Beaulieu, switch to active sensors, full suite; I want long-range warning of any incoming hostiles. Liol, take us down.”

• • •

They were hammering on the maintenance engineering deck’s hatch. Its edges had started to shine cherry-red, paint was blistering.

Cherri gave the circle of metal a jaded look. “All right, all right,” she mumbled. “I’ll make it easy all around. Besides, what would you lot ever know about fraternity?”

After the hatch's locking mechanism melted away, an equally hot Oscar Kearn dived through the smouldering rim. Any hope of retribution died instantly as he saw the figure curled up and sobbing dejectedly in front of the console. The soul of Cherri Barnes had already vacated the flesh, retreating to the one place where he was never going to chase after her.

• • •

Monica finally felt as though she was regaining control of the mission. There were twelve operatives with her in the Disassembly Shed providing overwhelming firepower, and their evac craft was on the way. None of their processor blocks were working, nor their neural nanonics. Everyone had taken off their shell helmets so they could see; the sensors were glitched, too. The lack of protection made her nervous, but she could live with that. I've got Mzu!

She applied some pressure to the pistol barrel at the side of Calvert's neck, and he moved aside obediently. One of the Edenists claimed his machine gun. He didn't protest when he was made to stand with his three compatriots, all of them with their hands in the air and covered by a couple of operatives.

"Doctor, please take your hand away from that backpack," Monica said. "And don't try to datavise any activation codes."

Alkad shrugged and held her hands up. "I can't datavise anything anyway," she said. "There are too many possessed in here."

Monica signalled one of the operatives to retrieve Mzu's backpack.

"You were in Tranquillity," Alkad said. "And the Dorados too, if I'm not mistaken. Which agency?"

"ESA."

"Ah. Yet some of your friends are obviously Edenists. How odd."

"We both consider your removal from this planet to be of paramount importance, Doctor," Samuel said. "However, you have my assurance you will not be harmed."

“Of course,” Alkad told them equitably. “If I am, we all know who I’ll end up with.”

“Exactly.”

Gelai looked up. “They’re coming, Doctor.”

Monica frowned. “Who?”

“The possessed from the Organization,” Alkad told her. “They’re up in the shed’s framework somewhere.”

The operatives responded smoothly, scanning the metal lattice above them for any sign of movement. Monica stepped smartly over to Alkad’s side and grabbed her arm. “Okay, Doctor, we’ll take care of them, now let’s move.”

“Damn,” Samuel said. “The police are here.”

Monica glanced back to the hole blown into the wall where they’d entered. Two Edenists had been left to cover their retreat back to the cars. “We can deal with them.”

Samuel gave a resigned grimace. The operatives formed a protective cordon around Monica and Mzu and started to walk back towards the wall.

Monica realized that Joshua and the others were hurrying after them. “Not you,” she said.

“I’m not staying in here,” Joshua said indignantly.

“We can’t—” Samuel began.

A portcullis slammed down out of the tangle of girders above. It struck two of the operatives, punching them to the ground. The valency generators in their armour suits were glitched, preventing the fabric from stiffening into protective exoskeletons as they should have done. Long iron spikes along the bottom of the portcullis punctured the suit fabric, skewering their bodies to the wet carbon concrete.

Four of the operatives opened fire with their machine guns, shooting straight up. Bullets ricocheted madly, grazing sprays of sparks off the metal.

Training compelled Monica to look around and locate the follow up. It was coming at her from the left, a huge pendulum blade swinging straight at Mzu. If her neural nanonics had been on line and running threat response programs she might have made it. As it was, boosted muscles slewed her weight around to pirouette Mzu out of the blade’s arc. They

went tumbling onto the floor together. The blade caught Monica's left leg a glancing blow. Her armoured boot saved her foot from being severed, but her ankle and lower shinbone were shattered by the impact. Shock dulled the initial pain. She sat up, groaning in dismay, and clutched at the ruined bones. Bile was rising in her throat, and it was very difficult to breathe.

Something extraordinarily heavy hit her shoulder, sending her sprawling. Joshua landed on the ground right beside her, rolling neatly to absorb the impact. A burst of hatred banished Monica's pain. Then the blade sliced through the air where she had been a second before, a tiny whisper the only sound of its passing. Pendulum, she thought dazedly, it comes back.

One of the embassy operatives raced over to Monica. He was holding a square medical nanonic package and cursing heavily. "It's glitched, too, I can't get a response."

Joshua glanced at the package glove covering his hand. Ever since he'd come into the shed, it had been stinging like crazy. "Tell me about it," he grumbled.

Gelai joined them, squatting down, her face full of concern. She put her hand over Monica's ankle.

The original intensity of the pain had frightened Monica, but this was plain horrifying. She could feel the fragments of bone shifting around inside her skin, she could even see the suit's trouser fabric ripple around Gelai's hand—her *glowing* hand. Yet it didn't hurt.

"I think that's it," the bashful girl said. "Try standing."

"Oh, my God. You're a . . ."

"Didn't you professionals know?" Joshua said evilly.

Samuel dodged around the pendulum and crouched beside them, alert, his machine gun pointing high. "I thought you'd been hit," he said as Monica gingerly applied some weight to her left foot.

"I was. She cured me."

He gave Gelai a fast appraisal. "Oh."

"We'd better get going," Monica said.

"They'll hit us again if we move."

“They’ll hit us if we stay.”

“I wish I could see them,” he moaned, blinking away the drizzle. “There’s no target for us. Shooting wild is pointless, there’s too much metal.”

“They’re up there,” Gelai said. “Three of them are just above the pendulum hinge. They’re the ones giving it substance.”

Samuel jerked his head about. “Where?”

“Above it.”

“Damn it.” If he could have just switched his retinal implants to infrared there might have been something other than mangled blackness. He fired his machine gun anyway, sluicing the bullets over the area he imagined Gelai was talking about. The magazine was spent in less than a second. He ejected it and slapped in a fresh one—mindful of how many were left clipped to his belt. When he looked up again, the pendulum had vanished. Instead, a length of thick black cabling was swaying to and fro. “That’s it? Did I get them?”

“You hurt two,” Gelai told him. “They’re backing off.”

“Hurt? Great.”

“Come on,” Monica said. “We can get to the cars.” She raised her voice. “Random suppression fire, vertical. I want those bastards fleeing us. Okay, *move*.”

Eight machine guns opened fire into the overhead lattice as everyone rushed towards the hole in the wall.

High above them, and safe in his web of metal cables, Baranovich looked out of a filthy window at the three Tonalan police cars drawn up outside. There were long skid marks in the snow behind each of them, evidence of their hard braking. One other surviving police car was chasing after the twenty-first-century rally car, siren blaring and lights flashing as they both tore along the bottom of the shed wall. Dark-clad officers were advancing towards the embassy cars.

“Let’s liven things up a little,” he said above the fractious roar of the machine guns and whining ricochets. He joined hands with the three possessed beside him. Together they

launched a huge fireball and sent it curving down on one of the stationary police cars.

The response was immediate and overwhelming. After having their car processors glitched, then crashing, being shot at by starship X-ray lasers, losing their suspects, and now having to verify whether the embassy cars were occupied by armed ESA operatives, the Tonalan security police were by now understandably a little tense. Every weapon they had was abruptly trained on Disassembly Shed Four.

Monica was twenty metres from the smashed door when the ancient, brittle panels were bombarded by hollow-case bullets, TI pulses, maser beams, and small EE rounds. Blinding light ruptured the gloom ahead of her. She hit the floor hard as white-hot fragments slashed through the air. Smoking particles rained down around her, sizzling on the moist concrete. Several landed on her head, singeing through her hair to sting her scalp.

“THIS IS THE POLICE. ABANDON YOUR WEAPONS. COME OUT ONE AT A TIME WITH YOUR BLOCKS AND IMPLANTS DEACTIVATED. YOU WILL NOT BE TOLD AGAIN.”

“Holy fuck,” Monica grunted. She raised her head. A huge strip of the wall had vanished; maleficent shifting light from the orbital battle shone in. It illuminated a multitude of broken girders whose fractured ends dripped glowing droplets. The framework structure emitted a distressed groan; weakened junctions were snapping under the stress of the new loading, starting a chain reaction. She could see whole levels of metal bending then dropping in juddery motions.

“Move!” she shouted. “It’s going to land on us.”

A flare of white fire billowed down out of the darkness, pummelling an operative to her knees. Her screams vanished beneath the plangent crackling of her armour suit and skin igniting.

Four machine guns opened up in response.

“No,” Monica said. That was exactly what they wanted. It was a near-perfect snare manoeuvre, she admitted angrily as

she flung her arms over her head again. And we blundered right into it.

The security police heard the machine guns and opened fire once more.

Baranovich hadn't been expecting quite such an emphatic rejoinder from the forces of law and order—these modern weapons were so fearsomely powerful. Twice now the weakened framework had shifted around him, forcing him to snatch at the girders and reinforce their solidity with his energistic power. That was dangerous. The metal was grounding out the EE rounds, and while he was some distance away from their impact zone, those kind of voltages were lethal to a possessed and it only took one wild shot.

When the second round of shooting started he jumped down onto the nearest walkway and sprinted away. His impressive costume's shiny leather boots changed to yankee-style trainers with inch-thick soles; a fervent hope in his mind that imagined rubber would be as effective an insulator as the real stuff. He could sense others of his group on the move, shaken by the ferocity of the attack.

Joshua looked up to see the last frayed streamers of electrons writhing down the metal pillars. The whole of the smashed-up framework above and around him was grinding loudly. It was going to collapse any second. Self-preservation kicked in strong—fuck Mzu, I'm going to die if I stay here. He scrambled to his feet and slapped Melvyn, who still had his hands over his head, face jammed against the floor.

"Shift it, both of you, now!" He started running, out from under the framework, and angling away from the gigantic hole the police had blown in the wall. There were a lot of footsteps splashing through the puddles behind him. He scanned around quickly. It wasn't just Melvyn, Dahybi, and Keaton who were following him; all the agency operatives and Mzu's wacko entourage were coming too. Everybody racing across the Disassembly Shed's high bay floor in pursuit as if he were showing them the way to salvation. "Jesus wept!" He didn't want this! Just having Melvyn and Dahybi

coming with him across an open space would have proved tempting for the possessed, but Mzu too . . .

Unlike the Baranovich group who had set up the meeting, the ESA and the Edenists who had unlimited access to the Kulu embassy's memory files, and the security police who knew their home territory, Joshua didn't quite appreciate the layout of the Disassembly Sheds. Even their madcap drive through the foundry yard hadn't conclusively demonstrated to him that the canals ran straight through the centre of every shed. So he certainly didn't know that the only way over the water was a bridge which ran along the door above the smaller canal.

What he did know was that there was a perilously dark and wide gulf in the floor ahead of him, and getting closer very fast. Only now did he hear the gentle slopping of the water, and realize what it was. He nearly went sprawling headlong as he came to a confounded halt a metre from the edge, arms flapping eccentrically for balance. He turned to see everyone rushing en masse towards him, because they'd thought he knew what he was doing, and there hadn't been time to ask questions. Behind them, Baranovich's possessed were mustering on the walkway, garish costumes agleam in the rainy dusk.

Alkad was running with her head ducked down, forcing her game leg along. Gelai and Ngong were on either side of her, holding her tight. A bubble of air around the three of them swirled with tiny glimmers of silver light.

Baranovich's laughter poured out into the vast enclosed space of the central high bay. He pointed, and Joshua could do nothing but stare dumbly as the bolt of white fire streaked across the intervening space straight at him.

Dick Keaton was leading the pack of desperadoes on the floor of the high bay, running hard. He was less than four metres from an aghast Joshua when Baranovich's fire bolt hit the data security expert clean between his shoulder blades. It burst open in a spectacular cloud of dancing twisters that drained away into the drizzle. And Dick Keaton was completely unharmed.

“Close one,” he jeered happily. His arms wrapped around Joshua, momentum carrying the pair of them over the edge of the central basin just as the mutilated framework collapsed. Fractured girders were tossed out of the crumpling wreckage in all directions, clanging loudly as they hit the floor. A huge split tore up the wall like a lightning bolt in reverse. It was a hundred and seventy metres high when it finally stopped. The framework structure settled into an uneasy silence.

The black water in the ironberg basin was freezing. Joshua yelled out as it closed around him, seeing bubbles bumble past his face. The cold shock was intense enough to make his heart jump—frightening him badly. Salt water rushed into his open mouth. And—Jesus, *thank you*—his neural nanonics came back on-line.

Nerve impulse overrides squeezed his throat muscles tight, preventing any water flooding his lungs. Analysis of his spinning inner ears revealed his exact orientation. His thrashing became purposeful, shunting him straight up.

He broke surface to draw down a huge desperate gulp of air. People in flexible armour suits were flying through the air above him; human lemmings landing in the basin with a tremendous splash. He saw Mzu, her small figure unmistakable in its prim business suit.

Keaton shook his head dog-fashion, blowing his cheeks out. “Hell, it’s cold.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Joshua demanded. “They hit you dead on, and it never even blistered you.”

“Right question, sir, but unfortunately the wrong pronoun. As I once said to Oscar Wilde. Stumped him completely; he wasn’t quite as hot on the riposte as legend says.”

All Joshua could do was cough. The cold was crippling. His neural nanonics were battling hard to prevent his muscles from cramping. And they were going to lose.

White fire smashed against the basin rim five metres above him. Radiant dribbles of magma ran down the basin wall.

“What in God’s name did you bring us here for?” Monica shouted.

“I didn’t fucking bring you!”

Her hand grabbed the front of his ship-suit. “How do we get out?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.”

She let go, her arm shaking badly. Another strike of white fire lashed above them. The rim was outlined like a dawn horizon from orbit.

“They can’t hit us here,” Samuel said, his long face was dreadfully strained.

“God, so what,” Monica answered. “They’ve only got to walk over here and we’ll be dead.”

“We won’t last that long. Hypothermia will get us before then.”

Monica glared at Joshua. “Can anyone see some steps?”

“Dick,” Joshua said. “Are your neural nanonics working?”

“Yes.”

“Access the shed’s management computer. Find us a way out. Now!”

This is a last-ditch madness, I know, Samuel called to the *Hoya*. But is there anything you can do?

Nothing. I am so sorry. You’re too far away, we cannot provide fire support.

We’re retreating, Niveu told him, his tone full of savage regret. It’s this diabolical antimatter. We’ve fired every combat wasp in defence, and they’re still coming through. The nations have gone insane, every SD platform went offensive. *Ferrea* was damaged by a gamma ray pulser, and *Sinensis* had to swallow out to avoid a direct impact. There’s only the two of us left now. We can’t last much longer. Do you wish to transfer? We can delay a few seconds more.

No. Go, warn the Consensus.

But your situation—

Doesn’t matter. Go!

“Half the shed’s processors are glitched,” Dick Keaton said. “The rest are in standby mode. It’s been mothballed.”

“What?” Joshua had to shout to make his mouth work. His kicks to tread water were difficult now.

“Mothballed. That’s why there’s no ironberg in here. The small canal leaks. They drained it for repairs.”

“Drained it? Let me have the file.”

Keaton datavised it over, and Joshua assigned it to a memory cell. Analysis programs went primary, tearing into the information. What he wanted was a way to drain the basin, or at the very least a ladder. Which wasn’t quite what he found when the schematics display rose into his mind. “Ione!” he shouted. “Ione.” His voice was pathetically weak. He worked his elbows, swivelling around to face Samuel. “Call her.”

“Who?” the bewildered Edenist asked.

“Ione Saldana, the Lord of Ruin. Call her with affinity.”

“But—”

“Do it or we’re going to die in here.”

• • •

The gee force on *Lady Macbeth*’s bridge began to abate, sliding down from a tyrannical eight to an unpleasant three.

He certainly flies the same way as Joshua, Sarha thought. The few seconds she’d spared from fire control to monitor their vector had shown her a starship which was keeping pretty close to the course which the navigation program had produced. Not bad for a daydreamer novice.

“The *Urschel* is accelerating,” Beaulieu said. “Seven gees, they’re going for altitude. Must be a jump.”

“Good,” Sarha said firmly. “That means no more of those bloody antimatter combat wasps.”

All three of them had cheered when the *Pinzola* was struck by a fusion blast. The resulting explosion as all the frigate’s antimatter confinement chambers were destroyed had blown half of *Lady Mac*’s sensors, and *Pinzola* had been eleven thousand kilometres away, almost below the horizon.

The orbital conflict had been played out hard and fast over the last eleven minutes. Several starships had been hit,

but over fifteen had risen to a jump altitude and escaped. There were no more SD platforms left in low orbit, although plenty of combat wasps were still prowling. But they were all a long way from *Lady Mac*. That was Sarha's prime concern. As Beaulieu had said, the old girl could cope with Nyvan's geriatric weapons. They had a couple of new scars on the hull from kinetic debris, and three radioactive hot spots from pulser shots. But the worst of it was over now.

"Gravitonic distortion," Beaulieu said. "Another void-hawk has left."

"Sensible ship," Sarha muttered. "Liol, how long until we're over Joshua's horizon?"

"Ninety seconds—mark."

She datavised an order into the starship's communications system. The main dish slid out of its recess and swung around, pointing at the horizon ahead.

• • •

Ione eased herself around the metal pillar to take another look into the shed's high bay. The possessed up on the walkway were squirting a continual stream of white fire at the rim of the basin. That must mean Joshua and the others were still alive.

Now appeared to be the optimum time to enter the fray. She had hung back ever since she'd sprinted into the shed ahead of the agency operatives. This whole situation was so fluid, the outcome could well be decided by who had the greatest tactical reserve. She wasn't quite sure where that decision had come from; some tactics file her 'original' self and Tranquillity had loaded into the serjeant, or internal logic. How much inventiveness she owned in this aspect she wasn't sure of. But wherever it had come from, it had been proved right.

She had watched the events play out from the cover of the framework, hovering on the brink of intervention. Then the police had arrived and fouled up everything. And Joshua had fled across the high bay to the basin.

She couldn't work that one out. It was seawater in the

basin, which must be close to the freezing point. Now he was pinned down.

If she could get a clear shot at the walkway the possessed were using, she might be able to bring them all crashing down. But she wasn't sure how effective even the heavy-calibre rifle would be against such a concentration of energetic power.

Ione. Ione Saldana?

Cold accompanied the affinity call, she knew exactly what it was like to be immersed in the basin. **Agent Samuel**, she acknowledged.

I have a message.

He widened his mind still further. She looked out at anguished heads bobbing in the water. Joshua was right in front of her, hair plastered down over his forehead. His throat laboured hard to force the words out. "Ione—shoot—out—the—small—canal—lock—gate—blow—that—fucker—away—good—and—be—quick—we—can't—last—long."

She was already running towards the end of the shed. There was a rectangular gap in the framework structure over the small canal. It framed the door which slid up to allow the ironberg segments through. The bottom of the door closed to within a metre of the water itself. Below that, she could see the two lock gates which held back the water while the canal outside was being repaired. They were solid metal, tarnished by age, and thick with fronds of sapphire-coloured seaweed.

She squatted down beside the edge of the canal and fired the heavy-calibre rifle. Trying to puncture the gates themselves would be hopeless, they weren't made from any modern laced-molecule alloy, but their thickness made them completely impenetrable. Instead, the explosive-tipped shells pounded into the canal's old carbon-concrete walls, demolishing the hinges and their mountings.

The gates moved slightly as water squirted around the crumbling concrete. Their top hinges were almost wrecked, making them gradually pivot downwards, a motion which prised them further apart. A V-shaped gap appeared between

them, with water gushing out horizontally. Ione fired again and again, concentrating on one wall now, mauling it to smithereens. One of the hinges gave way.

Look out, Samuel warned. They have stopped attacking us. That must mean—

Ione saw the shadows shifting behind her, knowing what it meant. Then the shadows were fading away as the light grew brighter. She switched her aim to the stubborn gate itself, using the explosions to punch it down, adding their weight to that of the water.

White fire engulfed her.

The gates were wrenched apart, and the water plummeted into the empty canal beyond.

“Go with it,” Joshua datavised as the first stirrings of a current stroked his faltering legs. “Stay afloat.”

A waterfall roar reverberated around the shed’s high bay, and he was pulled along the basin wall. The others were twirling around him. Quiet, unseen currents sucked them towards the end of the basin where it narrowed like a funnel into the small canal. They started to pick up speed as they drew closer to the mouth. Then the basin was behind them. Water was surging along the canal.

“Joshua, please acknowledge. This is Sarha, acknowledge please, Joshua.” His neural nanonics told him the signal was being routed to his communication block via the spaceplane. Everyone, it seemed, had survived the orbital battle.

“I’m here, Sarha,” he datavised. The canal water was boiling tempestuously as it flowed under the door, dipping down sharply; and he was racing towards it at a hazardous rate. It was becoming very hard to keep afloat, even here where the level was sinking. He tried a few feeble side-strokes to get away from the wall where the churning was at its worst.

“Joshua, you’re entering into an emergency situation.”

Two curling vortex waves recoiled off the canal walls to converge above him as he passed under the shed door. “No shit!” The waves closed over his head. Neural nanonics triggered a massive adrenaline secretion, enabling him to fight

his way back to the surface with recalcitrant limbs. Distorted daylight and iron-hard foam crashed around him as he floundered back into the air.

“I’m serious, Joshua. The Organization has tampered with one of the ironbergs. They altered its aerobrake trajectory so that it will land on the foundry yard. If they can’t get Mzu offplanet with them, they want her dead so she’ll have to join the Organization that way. It’s timed to crash after the spaceplane pickup was scheduled, so that if anything went wrong they’d still win.”

The canal opened up ahead of Joshua, a rigid gully stretching away to the foundry building three kilometres distant. Water rampaged along it, a thundering white-water torrent which propelled him along helplessly. He wasn’t alone. Voi came close enough for him to touch if the pounding water hadn’t been so strong, snatching her away again immediately.

“Jesus, Sarha, this *is* after the spaceplanes were scheduled.”

“I know. We’re tracking the ironberg, it’s going to hit you in seven minutes.”

“What? Nuke the bastard, now, Sarha.”

The leading edge of the water reached the first section of scaffolding, a lattice of heavy walkways, cage lifts, and machinery platforms. It swept the lower members away, toppling the rest of the structure. The stronger segments held together for a few seconds as the spume rolled them along, then after a few revolutions they began to break apart, metal poles sinking to the bottom.

“We can’t, Joshua. It’s already in the lower atmosphere. The combat wasps can’t reach it.”

The water reached the second stretch of scaffolding. This was larger than the first, supporting big construction mechanoids and concrete hoppers. Their weight lent a degree of stability to the edifice as the water seethed around it; several members broke free, but it managed to remain relatively intact against the initial onrush.

“Don’t worry, Joshua,” Ashly datavised. “I’m on my way.

Fifty seconds and I'll be there. We'll be airborne long before the ironberg crashes. I can see the sheds already."

"No, Ashly, stay back, there are possessed here; a lot of them. They'll hit the spaceplane if they see you."

"Target them for me; I've got the masers."

"Impossible." He saw the scaffolding up ahead and knew this was his one chance. The physiological monitor program had been issuing cautions for some time: the cold was killing him. His muscles were already badly debilitated, slow to respond. He had to get out of the water while he had some strength left. "Everybody," he datavised, "grab the scaffolding or just crash into it if that's all you can manage. But make sure you don't go past. We have to get out."

The first rusty poles were coming up very fast. He reached out a hand. None of his fingers worked inside the medical package glove, not even when his neural nanonics commanded them. "Mzu?" he datavised. "Get to the scaffolding."

"Acknowledged."

It wasn't much practical use to him, but the relief that she was still alive kept that small core flame of hope flickering. The mission wasn't an utter disaster, he still had purpose. Surprisingly important right now.

Dahybi had already reached the scaffolding, hugging a post as the water stormed past. Then Joshua was there, trying to hook his arm around a V-junction and shift his head out of the way at the same time to avoid a crack on the temple. The metal banged against his chest, and he never even felt it.

"You okay?" Dahybi datavised.

"Fucking wonderful."

Voi was flashing past, just succeeding in jamming an arm on a pole.

Joshua inched himself further into the shaking structure. There was a ladder two metres away, and he flopped against it. The water wasn't quite so strong now, but it was rising fast.

Mzu came thumping into the end of the scaffolding.

“Mother Mary, my ribs,” she datavised. Samuel landed beside her, and wrapped a protective arm around her.

Joshua clambered up the ladder, thankful it was at a low angle. Dahybi followed him. Two more operatives caught the scaffolding, then Monica snagged herself. Gelai and Ngong swam quite normally across the canal, the cold having no effect on them at all. They grabbed the scaffolding and started shoving the numb survivors up out of the water.

“Melvyn?” Joshua datavised. “Where are you, Melvyn?” He’d been one of the first to reach the canal after Ione blew the lock gate. “Melvyn?” There wasn’t even a carrier band from the fusion specialist’s neural nanonics.

“What’s happening?” Ashly datavised. “I can’t acquire any of you on the sensors.”

“Stay back, that’s an order,” Joshua replied. “Melvyn?”

One of the ESA operatives floated past, facedown.

“Melvyn?”

“I’m sorry, Captain Calvert,” Dick Keaton datavised. “He went under.”

“Where are you?”

“End of the scaffolding.”

Joshua looked over his shoulder, seeing the limp figure suspended in the crisscross of poles thirty metres away. He was alone.

Jesus no. Another friend condemned to the beyond. Looking back at reality and begging to return.

“That’s all of us, now,” Monica datavised.

Altogether six of the operatives from the combined Edenist/ESA team had survived along with her and Samuel. Eriba’s corpse was swirling past amid a scum of brown foam. Fifteen people, out of the twenty-three who had entered Disassembly Shed Four, more if you counted the two sergeants.

“What now?” Dahybi asked.

“Climb,” Joshua told him. “We’ve got to get up to the top of the scaffolding. Our spaceplane is on its way.”

“So is a bloody ironberg.”

“Gelai, where are the possessed?” Joshua croaked.

“Coming,” she said. “Baranovich is already out of the shed. He won’t let the spaceplane land.”

“I don’t have a weapon,” Monica said. “There’s only two machine guns left between all of us. We can’t hold them back.” Her body was trembling violently as she crawled along a narrow conveyer belt connected to one of the concrete hoppers.

Joshua went up another three rungs on the ladder, then sagged from the effort.

“Captain Calvert,” Mzu datavised. “I won’t give anybody the Alchemist no matter what. I want you to know that. And thank you for your efforts.”

She’d given up, sitting huddled limply in a junction. Ngong was holding her, concentrating hard. Steam began to spout out of her suit. Joshua looked around at the rest of them, defeated and tortured by the cold. If he was going to do anything to salvage this, it would have to be extreme.

“Sarha, give me fire support,” he datavised.

“Our sensor returns are being corrupted,” she replied. “I can’t resolve the foundry yard properly. It’s the same effect we encountered on Lalonde.”

“Jesus. Okay, target me.”

“Joshua!”

“Don’t argue. Activate the designator laser and target my communications block. Do it. Ashly, stand by. The rest of you: come on, move, we have to be ready.” He took another couple of steps up the ladder.

Lady Macbeth’s designator laser pierced the wispy residue of snow clouds. A slim shaft of emerald light congested with hazy sparkles as gusting snowflakes evaporated inside it. It was aligned on a road three hundred metres away.

“Is that on you?” Sarha asked.

“No, track north-east, two-fifty metres.”

The beam shifted fast enough to produce a blurred sheet of green light across the sky.

“East eighty metres,” Joshua instructed. “North twenty-five.”

His retinal implants had to bring their strongest filters on line as the scaffolding was swamped by brilliant green light.

“Lock coordinate—mark. Preclude one-five-zero metres. Switch to ground-strike cannon. Spiral one kilometre. Scorch it, Sarha.”

The beam moved away, its colour blooming through the spectrum until it was a deep ruby-red. Then its intensity grew; snowflakes drifting into it no longer evaporated, they burst apart. Thick brown fumes and smoking pumice gravel jetted up from the disintegrating carbon concrete at its base. It changed direction, curving around to gouge a half-metre groove in the ground. A perfect circle three hundred metres in diameter was etched out in polluted flame, with the canal scaffolding at the centre. Then the beam began to speed up, creating a hollow cylinder of vivid red light which expanded inexorably. The ground underneath it ignited, vaporizing the cloak of snow into a rolling cloud which broiled the land ahead of the beam.

It slashed across the corner of Disassembly Shed Four. Cherry-red embers flew out of the panels up the entire height of the wall. A thin sliver of composite and metal began to peel away from the bulk of the shed. Then the laser struck it again. It cut a deeper chunk this time, which started to pitch over in pursuit of the first. Both of them were surrounded by a cascade of embers. The beam continued around on its spiral.

Disassembly Shed Four died badly, chopped into thin curving slices by the relentless laser. The individual wedges collapsed and crumpled against each other, softened and sagging from the immense thermal input to descend in slippery serpentine riots. When almost a fifth of it had gone, the remaining framework could no longer sustain itself. The walls and roof buckled groggily, twisting and imploding. Its final convulsions were illuminated by the laser, which continued to chop the falling wreckage into ribbons of slag. Steam geysers roared upwards as pyrexia debris slithered into the basin, flattening out to obscure the bubbling ruin in a virgin-white funeral shroud.

Nothing could survive the ground strike. The security police raced for their cars as soon as it began, only to be overtaken by the outwards spiral. Baranovich and his fellow possessed took refuge back in the Disassembly Shed under the assumption that anything that massive was bound to be safe. When that folly was revealed, some of them dived into the canal, only to be parboiled. A couple of hapless foundry yard staff on their way to investigate the noises and light coming from the mothballed shed were caught and reduced to a fog of granular ash.

The laser beam vanished.

Secure at the vestal centre of the remorseless sterilization he had unleashed, Joshua datavised the all-clear to Ashly. The spaceplane streaked out of the roiling sky to land beside the canal. Joshua and the others waited at the top of the scaffolding, hunched up as the warm wind created by the laser's passage blew against them.

"Hanson evac service," Ashly datavised as the airstairs slid out from the airlock. "Close shaves a speciality. Shift your arses, we've only got two minutes till it hits."

Alkad Mzu was first up the airstairs, followed by Voi.

"I won't take you as you are," Joshua told Gelai and Ngong. "I can't, you know that." Monica and Samuel were standing behind the two ex-Garissans, machine guns cradled ready.

"We know," Gelai said. "But do you know you will be in our position one day?"

"Please," Joshua said. "We don't have time for this. None of us are going to jeopardize Mzu now, not after what we've been through to get her. Not even me. They'll shoot you, and I won't try to stop them."

Gelai nodded morosely. Her black skin faded to a pasty white as the possessing soul relinquished control, ruffled ginger hair tumbled down over her shoulders. The girl sank to her knees, jaw open to wail silently.

Joshua put his arms under her shoulders to carry her into the spaceplane. Samuel was doing the same for the old man who had been possessed by Ngong.

“Dick, give me a hand,” Joshua grunted as he reached the bottom of the airstairs.

“Sorry, Captain,” Dick Keaton said. “But this is where necessity dictates we part company. I have to say, though, it’s been quite an experience. Wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

“Jesus, there’s an ironberg falling on us!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be perfectly safe. And I can hardly come with you now my cover’s been blown, now can I?”

“What the fuck are you?”

“Closer, Captain.” He grinned. “Much closer, this time. Goodbye, and good luck.”

Joshua glared at the man—if that’s what he really was—and hauled the semi-conscious girl up the airstairs.

Keaton stood back as the spaceplane took off, its compressor efflux whipping his ice-speckled hair about. He waved solemnly as it pitched up and accelerated away over the ruined smoking land.

High in the western sky, a red dot glimmered malevolently, growing larger by the second.

The spaceplane cabin canted up sharply, slinging Joshua back into a chair. Acceleration was two gees and rising fast. “What’s our status, Ashly?”

“Good. We’ve got an easy twenty seconds left. Not even a real race against the clock. Did I tell you about the time when I was flying covert landings for the Marseilles Militia?”

“You told me. Pump the cabin temperature up, please, we’re freezing back here.” He accessed the spaceplane’s sensor suite. They were already two kilometres high, well out over the lacklustre grey sea. The ironberg was level with them, and sinking rapidly.

Joshua, who had grown up in a bitek habitat and captained a faster-than-light starship for a living, regarded it in dismayed awe. Something that big simply did not belong in the air. It was falling at barely subsonic velocity, spinning with slow elegance to maintain its trajectory. A thick braided vapour trail streaked away from its rounded tip, creating a

perfectly straight line through the sky before rupturing two hundred metres higher up when the massive horizontal shock waves created by its turbulence crashed back together. Aerobrake friction made its scalloped base shine a baleful topaz at the centre, grading down to bright coral pink at the rim.

For the doomed staff left in the yard the strangest aspect of its drop was the silence. It was unreal, looking up at the devil's fist as it descended upon you, and hearing nothing but the lazy squawking of seabirds.

The energy burst from seventy-five thousand tonnes of steel striking the ground at three hundred metres per second was cataclysmic. The blast wave razed the remaining Disassembly Sheds, sending hundreds of thousands of shattered composite panels ripping through the air. They were instantly ignited by the accompanying thermal release, crowning the maelstrom with a raging halo of flame. Last came the ground shock, a mini-quake which rippled out for several kilometres through the boggy soil, plucking the huge smelters from the skeletal remains of their furnace buildings and flinging them across the marshy wasteland at the rear of the yard. The sea retreated hastily from the catastrophe, deserting the shoreline in a series of huge breakers which fought against the incoming tide for several minutes. But in the end, the tremors ceased, and the water came rushing back to obliterate any last sign that the yard had ever existed.

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"Ho, man, that is just orgasmic," Quinn said. The bridge's holoscreens were pumping out a blaze of white light as the first of the antimatter explosions blossomed above Nyvan. So much destruction excited him; he could see hundreds of combat wasps in flight above the night-side continents. "God's Brother is helping us, Dwyer. This is His signal to start. Just look at those mothers go at it. There won't be a single nuke left on the planet to fight off the fall of Night."

"Quinn, the other nations are firing combat wasps at Jesup. We're naked out here, we've got to jump."

“How long till they arrive?”

“Three, four minutes.”

“Plenty of time,” Quinn said smoothly. He checked the communications displays to ensure the starship’s secure lasers were still linked with Jesup and the three abandoned asteroids. “An occasion like this, I ought to say something, but fuck it, I’m not in the dignity business.” He typed in the arming code and watched as the display symbology turned a beautiful dangerous red. His finger went straight to the execute command key and tapped it eagerly.

Ninety-seven fusion bombs detonated; the majority of them one-hundred-megaton blasts.

The sensors which were protruding above the fuselage of *Mount’s Delta* observed Jesup wobble. Quinn had ordered his trusted disciples to place the bombs in a line below the biosphere cavern where the rock was thinnest. Huge flakes of rock fell away from the asteroid’s crinkled outer surface, allowing jets of raw plasma to stab out. It was a precision application of force, splitting the rock clean open. The biosphere cavern was ruined instantly as nuclear volcanoes erupted out of the floor to exterminate all the life it sustained. Shock waves hurtled through the rock, opening up immense fracture patterns and shattering vast sections already weakened from centuries of mining.

Centrifugal force took over from the bombs to complete the destruction, applying intolerable torque stresses on the remaining sections of rock. Hill-sized chunks of regolith crumbled away, rotation flinging them clear. Tornadoes of hot, radioactive air poured into space, forming a thin cyclone around the fragmenting asteroid.

Quinn slammed a fist into his console. “Fucked!” he yelled victoriously. “Totally fucking fucked. I did it. Now they’ll know His might is for real. The Night is going to fall, Dwyer, sure as shit floats to the top.”

Sensors aligned on the three abandoned asteroids revealed similar scenes of devastation.

“But—Why? Why, Quinn?”

Quinn laughed joyfully. “Back on Earth we learned

everything there was to know about climate, all those doomsdays waiting to bite our arses if we aren't good obedient little Govcentral mechanoids. Don't violate the environmental laws else you'll wind up drowning in your own crap. Garbage like that. Everybody knows the entire flek-load, the whole arcology from the tower nerds to the subtown kids. I heard about nuclear winters and dinosaur killers before I could walk." He banged a finger on the holo-screen's surface. "And this is it. Earth's nightmare out of the box. Those rocks are going to pulverize Nyvan. Doesn't matter if they smash down on land or water; they're going to blast gigatonnes of shit up into the atmosphere. I'm not talking some crappy little smog layer up in the sky, it's going to *be* the fucking sky. Wet black soot stretching from the ground to the stratosphere, so thick it'll give you cancer just breathing it for five minutes. They'll never see sunlight again, never. And when the possessed take over the whole fucking ball game down there, it still ain't going to help them. They can shunt Nyvan out of the universe, but they haven't got the power to clean the air. Only He can do that. God's Brother will bring them light." Quinn hugged Dwyer energetically. "They'll pray to Him to come and liberate them. They can't do anything else. He is their only salvation now. And I did it for Him. Me! I've brought Him a whole fucking planet to join His legions. Now I know it works, I'm going to do it to every planet in the Confederation. Every single one, that's my crusade now. Starting with Earth."

Secure communications lasers slid back down inside the fuselage, along with the sensors; and the *Mount's Delta* vanished inside an event horizon. Behind it, the low-orbit battle ran its course, the protagonists unaware of the true holocaust growing above them. The four tremendous clouds of rocky detritus were expanding at a constant rate, watched by the horrified surviving asteroids. Seventy per cent of the mass would miss the planet. But that still left thousands of fragments which would rain down through the atmosphere over the next two days. Each one would have a destructive potential hundreds of times greater than the ironberg. And with

their planet's electronics reduced to trash, its spaceships smashed, its SD platforms vaporized, and its astroengineering stations in ruins, there was absolutely nothing Nyvan's population could do to prevent the onrush. Only pray.

Just as Quinn prophesied.

28

The *Leonora Cephei*'s radar was switched to long-range scanning mode, searching for any sign of another ship. After five hours gliding inertly along its orbital path, there hadn't been a single contact.

"How much longer do you expect me to muck in with this charade of yours?" Captain Knox asked scathingly. He indicated the holoscreen which was displaying the ship's radar return. "I've seen Pommy cricket teams with more life in them than this bugger."

Jed looked at the console; its symbology meant nothing to him, for all he knew the flight computer could be displaying schematics for *Leonora Cephei*'s waste cycling equipment. He felt shamed by his own technological ignorance. He only ever came into the compartment when he was summoned by Knox; and the only summonses he got was when the captain found something new to complain about. He now made damn sure he brought Beth and Skibbow with him each time; it made the whole experience a little less like being humiliated by Digger.

"If this is the coordinate, they'll be here," Jed insisted. This was the right time for the rendezvous. So where was the starship? He didn't want to look at Beth again. She didn't appear entirely sympathetic to his plight.

"Another hour," Knox said. "That's what I'll give you, then we head for Tanami. There are some cargoes for me there. Real ones."

"We'll wait a damn sight more than one hour, matey," Beth said.

"You get what you paid for."

"In that case we'll be here for six months; that's how much cash we bloody well shelled out."

"One hour." Knox's pale skin was reddening again; he wasn't used to his command decisions being questioned on his own bridge.

"Balls. We're here for as long as it takes, pal. Right, Jed?"

"Er. Yes. We should wait a bit longer." Beth's silent contempt made him want to cringe.

Knox gestured broadly in mock-reasonableness. "Long enough for the oxygen to run out, or can we head for port before that?"

"You regenerate the atmosphere," Beth said. "Stop being such a pain. We wait until our transport turns up. That's final."

"You flaming kids, you're all crazy. You don't see my children becoming Deadnights. Deadheads more like. What do you think is going to happen to you if you ever reach Valisk? That Kiera is bullshitting you."

"No she's not!" Jed said heatedly.

Knox was surprised at his resentment. "Okay, kid. I understand, I used to let my balls think for me when I was your age." He winked at Beth.

She glowered back at him.

"We wait as long as it takes," Gerald said quietly. "We are going to Valisk. All of us. That's what I paid you for, Captain." It was hard for him to be silent when people talked about Marie, especially the way they talked about her, as if she were some kind of communal girlfriend. Since the voyage started he had managed to hold his tongue. He found life a lot easier on board the small ship; the simple daily routine in which everything was laid out for him in advance was quite a comfort. So what they said about Marie, their idolization of the demon who controlled her, didn't snarl him up with anguish. They spoke from ignorance. He was wise to that. Loren would be proud of him for exercising such control.

"All right, we'll wait awhile," Knox said. "It's your charter." It always embarrassed him when Skibbow spoke. The

man had *episodes*, you never knew how he was going to behave. So far there had been no anger or violence. So far.

Fifteen minutes later, Captain Knox's little quandaries and problems were banished as the radar detected a small object three kilometres away which hadn't been there a millisecond before. There was the usual weird peripheral fuzz indicating a wormhole terminus, and the object was expanding rapidly. He accessed the *Leonora Cephei*'s sensors to watch the bitek starship emerging.

"Oh, sweet Christ Almighty," he groaned. "You crazy bastards. We're dead meat now. Bloody dead!"

Mindor slipped out of the wormhole terminus and stretched its wings wide. Its head swung around so that one eye could fix the *Leonora Cephei* with a daunting stare.

Jed looked into one of the bridge's AV pillars, seeing the huge hellhawk flap its wings in slow sweeps, closing the distance with deceptive speed. Disquiet gave way to a kind of reverence. He whooped enthusiastically and hugged Beth. She grinned indulgently back at him.

"That's something, huh?"

"Sure is."

"We did it, we bloody did it."

A terrified Captain Knox ignored the babbling, insane kids and ordered the main communications dish to point at Pinjarra so he could call the Trojan cluster capital for help. Not, he guessed, that it would do the slightest good.

Rocio Condra was ready for it. After several dozen clandestine pickups he knew exactly how the captains reacted to his appearance. Out of the eight short-range defence lasers secured to his hull, only three were still functioning, and that was only because they utilized bitek processor control circuitry. The rest had succumbed to the vagaries of his energetic power, which he could never quite contain. He targeted the dish as it started to track around, and sent a half-second pulse into its central transmission module.

"Do not attempt to contact anyone," he broadcast.

"I understand," a shaken Knox datavised.

"Good. Are you carrying Deadnights for transfer?"

“Yes.”

“Stand by for rendezvous and docking. Tell them to be ready.”

The monster bird folded its wings as it manoeuvred closer to the spindly inter-orbit craft. Its outline began to waver as it rolled around its long axis; feathers giving way to dull green polyp, avian shape reverting to the earlier compressed-cone hull. There were changes, though: the scattered purple rings were now long ovals, mimicking its feather pattern. Of the three rear fins, the central one had shrunk, while the two outer ones had elongated and flattened back.

With the roll manoeuvre complete, *Mindor*'s life-support module lay parallel to the *Leonora Cephei*. Rocio Condra extended the airlock tube. Now, he could sense the minds inside the inter-orbit ship's life-support capsule. It contained the usual split between trepidatious crew and ridiculously exuberant Deadnights. This time there was an addition, a strange mind, dulled yet happy, with thoughts moving in erratic rhythms.

He watched with idle curiosity through the internal optical sensors as the Deadnights came aboard. The interior of the life-support module had come to resemble a nineteenth-century steamship, with a profusion of polished rosewood surfaces and brass fittings. According to the pair of possessed, Choi-Ho and Maxim Payne, who served as maintenance crew, there was also a fairly realistic smell of salt water. Rocio was pleased with the realism, which was far more detailed and solid than the possessed usually achieved. That was due to the nature of the hellhawk's neuron cell structure which contained hundreds of subnodes arranged in processorlike lattices. They were intended to act as semi-autonomic regulators for his technological modules. Once he had conjured up the image he wanted and loaded it into a subnode it was maintained without conscious thought, and with an energistic strength unavailable to an ordinary human brain.

The last few weeks had been a revelation to Rocio Con-

dra. After the initial bitter resentment, he had discovered that life as a hellhawk was about as rich as it was possible to have, although he did miss sex. And he'd been talking to some of the others about that; theoretically they could simply grow the appropriate genitalia (those that didn't insist on imagining themselves as techno starships). If they accomplished that, there was no real reason to go back into human bodies. Which of course would make them independent of Kiera. For an entity that lived forever, the variety which would come from trying out a new creature's body and life cycle every few millennia might just be the final answer to terminal ennui.

Accompanying the revelation was a growing resentment at the way Kiera was using them—to which the prospect of fighting for Capone was a worrying development. Even if he was offered a human body now, Rocio was doubtful he wanted to go with the habitat. He wasn't frightened of space like the rest of the returned souls, not anymore, not possessing this magnificent creature. Space and all its emptiness was to be loved for its freedom.

Gravity returned slowly as Gerald drifted through the airlock tube, his shoulder bag in tow. The airlock compartment he landed in was almost identical to the one he had left behind. But it was larger, its technology more discreet, and outside the hatch Choi-Ho and Maxim Payne greeted him with smiles and comforting words where behind Knox and his eldest son had stood guard over their hatch with TIP carbines and scowls.

"There are several cabins available," Choi-Ho said. "Not enough for everyone, so you'll probably have to double up."

Gerald smiled blankly, which came over more as a frightened grimace.

"Pick any one," she told him kindly.

"When will we get there?" Gerald asked.

"We have a rendezvous in the Kabwe system in eight hours, after that we'll be going back to Valisk. It should be about twenty hours."

"Twenty? Is that all?"

“Yes.”

“Twenty.” It was said with deference. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, quite sure.” People were starting to bunch up in the airlock behind him; all of them curiously reluctant to push past. “A cabin,” she suggested hopefully.

“Come on, Gerald, mate,” Beth said breezily. She took his arm and pulled gently. He walked obediently down the corridor with her. He only stopped once, and that was to look over his shoulder and say an earnest, “Thank you,” to an oddly intrigued Choi-Ho.

Beth kept going right to the end of the U-shaped corridor. She thought it would be best to get Gerald a cabin away from the rest of the Deadnights. “Can you believe this place?” she said. She was walking on a deep red carpet past portholes that shone brilliant beams of sunlight into the corridor (although she couldn’t see out through them). The doors were all golden wood. In her usual sweatshirt, two jackets, and baggy jeans she felt uncomfortably out of place.

She peered around a door and found an empty cabin. There were two bunk beds clipped to a wall, and a small sliding door to the bathroom. The plumbing was similar to the toilet in the *Leonora Cephei*, except this was all heavy brass with small white glazed ceramic buttons.

“This ought to do you,” she said confidently. A quiet pule made her turn around. Gerald was standing just inside the door, his knuckles pressed into his mouth.

“What’s the matter, Gerald?”

“Twenty hours.”

“I know. But that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure. I want to be there, to see her again. But she’s not her anymore, not my Marie.”

He was quaking. Beth put an arm around his shoulders and eased him down onto the bottom bunk. “Easy there, Gerald. Once we’re at Valisk, all this is going to seem like a bad dream; honestly, mate.”

“It doesn’t end there, it starts there. And I don’t know what to do, I don’t know how to save her. I can’t put her in zero-tau by myself. They’re so strong, and evil.”

“Who, Gerald? Who are you talking about? Who’s Marie?”

“My baby.”

He was crying now, his head pressed into her shoulder. She patted the back of his neck instinctively.

“I don’t know what to do,” he gasped out. “She’s not here to help me.”

“Marie’s not here?”

“No. Loren. She’s the only one that can help me. She’s the only one who can help any of us.”

“It’s all right, Gerald, really, you’ll see.”

The reaction wasn’t what she expected at all. Gerald started a hysterical laugh which was half screams. Beth wanted to let go and get out of the cabin fast. He’d flipped, totally flipped now. The only reason she kept hold of him was because she didn’t know what would happen if she didn’t. He might get worse.

“Please, Gerald,” she begged. “You’re frightening me.”

He grabbed both of her shoulders, squeezing hard enough to make her flinch. “Good!” His face had reddened with anger. “You should be frightened, you stupid, stupid little girl. Don’t you understand where we’re going?”

“We’re going to Valisk,” Beth whispered.

“Yes, Valisk. That doesn’t frighten me, I’m bloody terrified. They’re going to torture us, hurt you so bad you’ll beg a soul to possess you and stop them. I know they will. That’s all they ever do. They did it to me before, and then Dr Dobbs made me go through it again, and again and again just so he could know what it was like.” The anger drained out of him, and he sagged forwards into her awkward embrace. “I’ll kill myself. Yes. Maybe that’s it. I can help Marie that way. I’m sure I can. Anything’s better than possession again.”

Beth started rocking him as best she could, soothing him as she would any five-year-old who’d woken from a nightmare. The things he was saying plagued her badly. After all, they only had Kiera’s word that she was building a fresh society for them. One recording that promised she was differ-

ent from the rest. "Gerald?" she asked after a while. "Who's this Marie you want to help?"

"My daughter."

"Oh. I see. Well how do you know she's at Valisk?"

"Because she's the one Kiera's possessing."

Rocio Condra parted his beak in what passed for a smile. The sensor in Skibbow's cabin wasn't the best, and his affinity link with its bitek processor suffered annoying dropouts. But what had been said was plain enough.

He wasn't entirely sure how he could use the knowledge, but it was the first sign of any possible chink in Kiera's armour. That was a start.

• • •

Stephanie could finally see the end of the red cloud cover. The heavy ceiling had been dropping closer to the ground for some time now as the convoy drove unimpeded along the M6. Individual clumps and streamers churned against each other in a motion reminiscent of waves crashing on rocks, bright slivers of pink and gold rippled among the distorted underbelly. They acted like a conductor for a current of pure agitation. The will of the possessed was being thwarted, their shield against the sky arrested by the Kingdom's firebreak.

The cliff of white light sleeting down along the boisterous edge appeared almost solid. Certainly it took her eyes a while to acclimatize, slowly resolving the grainy shadows which crouched at the end of the road.

"I think it might be a good idea to slow down now," Moyo said in her ear.

She applied the brakes, reducing their speed to a crawl. The other three buses behind matched her caution. Two hundred metres from the flexing curtain of sunlight she stopped altogether. The cloud base was only four or five hundred metres high here, hammering on the invisible boundary in perpetual ferment.

Two sets of bright orange barriers had been erected across the road. The first was under the edge of the cloud, some-

times bathed in red light, sometimes in white; the second was three hundred metres north, guarded by a squad of Royal Marines. Behind them, several dozen military vehicles were drawn up on the hard shoulder, armoured troop transports, ground tanks, general communications vehicles, lorries, a canteen, and several field headquarters caravans.

Stephanie opened the bus doors and stepped down onto the road. The thunder was an aggressive growl here, warning outsiders to keep back.

“What did they do to the grass?” Moyo shouted. Just inside the line of sunlight, the grass was dead, its blades blackened and desiccated. Already it was crumbling into dust. The dead zone lay parallel to the border of the red cloud as far as the eye could see, forming a rigid stripe that cut cleanly across every contour.

Stephanie looked along the broad swath of destruction, trees and bushes had been burned to charcoal stumps. “Some kind of no-man’s-land, I suppose.”

“That’s a bit extreme, isn’t it?”

She laughed, and pointed up at the glowing cloud.

“Okay, you got a point. What do you want to do next?”

“I’m not sure.” She resented her indecision immediately. This was the culmination of enormous emotional investment. For all that, the practicalities of the moment had been ignored. I almost wish we were still travelling, it gave me such a sense of satisfaction. What have we got after this?

Cochrane, McPhee, and Rana joined them.

“Some terminally unfriendly looking dudes we have here,” Cochrane yelled above the thunder. The marines lining the barrier were motionless, while more were hurrying from the cluster of vehicles to reinforce them.

“I’d better go and talk to them,” Stephanie said.

“Not alone?” Moyo protested.

“I’ll look a lot less threatening than a delegation.” A white handkerchief sprouted from Stephanie’s hand; she held it up high and clambered over the first set of barriers.

Lieutenant Anver watched her coming and gave his squad their deployment assignments, sending half of them out to

flank the road and watch for any other possessed trying to sneak over, not that they'd ever get past the satellites. His helmet sensors zoomed in for a close-up on the woman's face. She was squinting uncomfortably at the light as she emerged from under the dappled shadow of the red cloud. A pair of sunglasses materialized on her face.

"Definitely possessed, sir," he datavised to Colonel Palmer.

"We see that, thank you, Anver," the colonel replied. "Be advised, the security committee is accessing your datavise now."

"Sir."

"There's no other activity along the firebreak," Admiral Farquar datavised. "We don't think she's a diversion."

"Go see what she wants, Anver," Colonel Palmer ordered. "And be very careful."

"Yes, sir."

Two of his squad slid a section of the barrier aside, and he stepped forwards. For all that it was only a hundred-metre walk, it lasted half of his life. He spent the time trying to think what to say to her, but when they stopped a few paces from each other, all he said was: "What do you want?"

She lowered her hand with the handkerchief and gave him a cautious smile. "We brought some children out. They're in the buses back there. I, um . . . wanted to tell you so you wouldn't . . . you know." The smile became one of embarrassment. "We weren't sure how you'd react."

"Children?"

"Yes. About seventy. I don't know the exact number, I never actually counted."

"Does she mean non-possessed?" Admiral Farquar datavised.

"Are these children possessed?"

"Of course not," Stephanie said indignantly. "What do you think we are?"

"Lieutenant Anver, this is Princess Kirsten."

Anver stiffened noticeably. "Yes, ma'am."

"Ask her what she wants, what the deal is."

“What do you want for them?”

Stephanie’s lips tightened in anger. “I don’t *want* anything. Not in return, they’re just children. What I’d like is an assurance that you military types aren’t going to shoot them when we send them over.”

“Oh, dear,” Princess Kirsten datavised. “Apologize to her, Lieutenant, on my behalf, please. And tell her that we’re very grateful to her and those with her for bringing the children back to us.”

Anver cleared his throat, this wasn’t quite what he expected when he started his lonely walk out here. “I’m very sorry, ma’am. The Princess sends her apologies for assuming the worst. We’re very grateful to you for what you’ve done.”

“I understand. This isn’t easy for me, either. Now, how do you want to handle this?”

Twelve Royal Marines came back to the buses with her; volunteers, without their armour suits and weapons. The bus doors were opened, and the children came down. There were a lot of tears and running around in confusion. Most of them wanted a last kiss and a hug from the adults who had rescued them (Cochrane was especially popular), much to the amazement of the marines.

Stephanie found herself almost in tears as the last batch started off down the broad road, clustering around the big marine; one of them was even being given a piggyback. Moyo’s arm was around her shoulders to hold her tight.

Lieutenant Anver came over to stand in front of her and saluted perfectly (to which Cochrane managed a quite obscene parody). He looked badly troubled. “Thank you again, all of you,” he said. “That’s me saying it, I can’t datavise under the cloud.”

“Oh, do take care of the little darlings,” Tina said, sniffing hard. “Poor Analeese has the most dreadful cold, none of us could cure her. And Ryder hates nuts; I think he’s got an allergy, and—” She fell silent as Rana squeezed her forearm.

“We’ll take care of them,” Lieutenant Anver said gravely. “And you, you take care of yourselves.” He glanced point-

edly out to the firebreak where a procession of vehicles was massing around the barrier to greet the children. "You might want to do that away from here." A crisp nod at Stephanie, and he was walking back towards the barrier.

"What did he mean?" Tina asked querulously.

"Wowee." Cochrane let out a long breath. "We like *did it*, man, we showed the forces of bad vibes not to mess with us."

Moyo kissed Stephanie. "I'm very proud of you."

"Ugh," Cochrane exclaimed. "Don't you two cats ever stop?"

A smiling Stephanie leaned forwards and kissed him on his forehead, getting hair caught on her lips. "Thank you, too."

"Will somebody tell me what he meant," Tina said. "Please."

"Nothing good," McPhee said. "That's a fact."

"So now what do we do?" Rana asked. "Go round up another group of kids? Or split up? Or settle that farm we talked about? What?"

"Oh, stay together, definitely," Tina said. "After everything we've done I couldn't bear losing any of you, you're my family now."

"Family. That's cosmic, sister. So like what's your position on incest?"

"I don't know what we'll decide," Stephanie said. "But I think we should take the lieutenant's advice, and do it a long way away from here."

• • •

The spaceplane rose out of Nyvan's stratosphere on twin plumes of plasma flame, arching up towards its orbital injection coordinate a thousand kilometres ahead. Submunitions were still peppering space with explosions and decoy flares, while electronic warfare drones blasted gigawatt pulses at any emission they could detect. Now its reaction drive rockets were on, the spaceplane was no longer invisible to the residuals of the combat wasp battle.

Lady Macbeth flew cover a hundred kilometres above it, sensors and maser cannon deployed to strike any missile which acquired lock-on. The starship had to make continual adjustments to its flight vector to keep the spaceplane within its protective radius. Joshua watched its drive flaring, reducing velocity, accelerating, switching altitude. Five times its masers fired to destroy incoming submunitions.

By the time the spaceplane had reached orbit and was manoeuvring to dock, the sky above Nyvan had calmed considerably. Only three other starships were visible to *Lady Mac*'s sensors, all of them were frigates belonging to local defence forces. None of them seemed interested in *Lady Mac*, or even each other. Beaulieu began a thorough sensor sweep, alert for the inevitable chaotic showers of post-explosion debris which would make low orbit hazardous for some time to come. Some of the returns were odd, making her redefine the sweep's parameters. *Lady Mac*'s sensors shifted their focus away from the planet itself.

Joshua slid cleanly through the hatchway into the bridge. His clothes had dried out in the hot air of the spaceplane's cabin, but the dirt and stains remained. Dahybi's ship-suit was in a similar state.

Sarha gave him an apprehensive glance. "Melvyn?" she asked quietly.

"Not a chance. Sorry."

"Bugger."

"You two did a good job up here," Joshua said. "Well done, that was some fine piloting to stay above the spaceplane."

"Thanks, Josh."

Joshua looked from Liol, who was anchored to a stikpad by the captain's acceleration couch, to Sarha, whose expression was utterly unrepentant.

"Oh, Jesus, you gave him the access codes."

"Yes, I did. My command decision. There was a war up here, Joshua."

It wasn't, he decided, worth making an issue out of, not in view of everything else that was happening. "That's why I

left you in charge,” he said. “I had confidence in you, Sarha.”

She frowned suspiciously. He *sounded* sincere. “So you got Mzu, then. I hope it was worth it.”

“For the Confederation I suppose it is. For individuals . . . you’d have to ask them. But then individuals have been dying because of her for some time now.”

“Captain, please access our sensor suite,” Beaulieu said.

“Right.” He rolled in midair, and landed on his acceleration couch. The images from the external sensor clusters expanded into his mind. Wrong. They had to be wrong. “Jesus wept!” His brain was already acting in conjunction with the flight computer’s astrogration program to plot a vector before he’d fully admitted the reality of the tide of rock descending on the planet. “Prepare for acceleration, thirty seconds—mark. We have to leave.” A fast internal sensor check showed him his new passengers hurrying towards couches; images superimposed with purple and yellow trajectory plots that wriggled frantically as he refined their projected trajectory.

“Who did that?” he asked.

“No idea,” Sarha said. “It happened during the battle, we didn’t even know until afterwards. But it sure as hell wasn’t random combat wasp strikes.”

“I’ll monitor the drive tubes,” Joshua said. “Sarha, take systems coverage, please. Liol, you’ve got fire control.”

“Aye, Captain,” Liol said.

It was a strictly neutral tone. Joshua was satisfied with that. He triggered *Lady Mac*’s fusion drives, bringing them up to a three-gee acceleration.

“Where are we going?” Liol asked.

“Bloody good question,” Joshua said. “For now I just want us out of here. After that, it rather depends on what Ione and the agents decide, I expect.”

• • •

There must be someone who knows. One of you.

We know it is real. We know it is hidden.

Two bodies await. A male and a female. Youthful, splendid. Do you hear them? Do you taste them? Pleading for one

of you to enter them. You can. All the riches and pleasures of reality can be yours again. If you have the admission price, one tiny piece of information. That's all.

She didn't hide it by herself. She had help from somebody. Probably many. Were you one?

Ah. Yes. You. You are being truthful. You know.

Come then. Come forwards, come through. We reward you with—

He cried out in wonder and misery as he struggled his way into the victim's agonized nervous system. There was pain, and shame, and humiliation to cope with; tragic, terrible pleas from the body's true soul. One by one, he faced them down, mending the broken flesh, suppressing and ignoring the protest, until there was only his own shame left. Not so easily abandoned.

"Welcome to the Organization," said Oscar Karn. "So, you were part of Mzu's mission?"

"Yes. I was with her."

"Good. She's a clever woman, that Mzu. I'm afraid she's eluded us once again, thanks to that traitor bitch Barnes. Even so, only the amazingly resourceful can duck an ironberg when it's falling on their heads. I didn't realize what I was dealing with before. I don't suppose she would have helped us even if we had caught her. She's like that, tough and determined. But now her luck's run out. You can tell me, can't you? You know where the Alchemist is."

"Yes," Ikela said. "I know where it is."

• • •

Alkad Mzu floated into the bridge, accompanied by Monica and Samuel. She acknowledged Joshua with a small twitch of her lips, then blinked when she saw Liol. "I didn't know there were two of you."

Liol grinned broadly.

"Before we all start arguing over what to do with you, Doctor," a serjeant said. "I'd like you to confirm the Alchemist does or did exist."

Alkad tapped her toe on a stikpad beside the captain's couch, preventing herself from drifting about. "Yes, it exists.

And I built it. I wish to Mary I hadn't, now, but the past is past. My only concern now is that it doesn't fall into anybody's hands, not yours, and certainly not the possessed."

"Very noble," Sarha said, "from someone who was going to use it to kill an entire planet."

"They wouldn't have been killed," Alkad said wearily. "It was intended to extinguish Omuta's star, not turn it nova. I'm not an Omutan barbarian; they're the ones who kill entire worlds."

"Extinguish a star?" Samuel mused in puzzlement.

"Please don't ask for details."

"I propose Dr Mzu is taken back to Tranquillity," the serjeant said. "We can formalize the observation to insure she doesn't pass the information on. I don't think you will anyway, Doctor, but intelligence agencies are highly suspicious entities."

Monica consulted Samuel. "I can live with that," she said. "Tranquillity is neutral territory. It isn't all that different to our original agreement."

"It isn't," Samuel agreed. "But, Doctor, you do realize you cannot be allowed to die. Certainly not until the problem of possession has been resolved."

"Fine by me," Alkad said.

"What I mean, Doctor, is that when you are very old, you must be placed in zero-tau to prevent your soul from entering the beyond."

"I will not give anyone the Alchemist technology, no matter what the circumstances."

"I'm sure that is your intention at the moment. But how will you feel after a hundred years trapped in the beyond? A thousand? And to be indelicate, the choice is not yours to make. It is ours. You lost the right to self-determination when you built the Alchemist. If you give yourself enough power to make a galaxy fear you and what you can achieve, you abrogate that right to those whom your actions affect."

"I agree," the serjeant said. "You will be placed in zero-tau before you die."

"Why not just put me in now?" Alkad said crustily.

“Don’t tempt me,” Monica said. “I know the kind of contempt you moron intellectuals hold the government services in. Well listen good, Doctor, we exist to protect the majority so they can run around living their lives as decently and as best they can. We protect them from *shits* like you, who never fucking stop to think what you’re doing.”

“You didn’t protect my bloody planet, did you!” Alkad yelled back. “And don’t you dare lecture me on responsibility. I’m prepared to die to stop the Alchemist being used by anybody else, especially your imperialist Kingdom. I know my responsibilities.”

“You do now. *Now* you realize what a mistake you made, now people are dying just to keep your precious arse safe.”

“Okay, that’s it,” Joshua said loudly. “We’re all agreed where the doc is going, end of discussion. Nobody is going to start shouting about moral philosophy on my bridge. We’re all tired, we’re all emotional. Pack it in, the pair of you. I’m going to plot a course to Tranquillity, you go to your cabins and cool off. We’ll be home inside of two days.”

“Understood,” Monica said through clenched teeth. “And . . . thank you for getting us off. It was—”

“Professional?”

She almost snapped back at him, but that grin . . . “Professional.”

Alkad cleared her throat. “I’m sorry,” she said apologetically. “But there is a problem. We can’t go straight back to Tranquillity.”

Joshua massaged his temple and asked: “Why not?” if only to stop Monica from flying at Mzu’s throat.

“The Alchemist itself.”

“What about it?” Samuel asked.

“We have to collect it.”

“All right,” Joshua said in a far-from-reasonable tone. “Why?”

“Because it isn’t secure where it is.”

“It’s managed to stay secure for thirty years. Jesus, just take the secret of its location to zero-tau with you. If the agencies haven’t found it by now, they never will.”

“They won’t have to look anymore, nor will the possessed, especially if our current situation continues for more than a few years.”

“Go on, we may as well hear it all.”

“There were three ships on our strike mission against Omuta,” Alkad said. “The *Beezling*, the *Chengho*, and the *Gombari*. *Beezling* was the Alchemist’s deployment vessel, I was on board; the other two were our escort frigates. We were intercepted by blackhawks before we could deploy the Alchemist. They destroyed the *Gombari*, and hit us and the *Chengho* pretty badly. We were left for dead in interstellar space. Neither of us could jump, and the nearest inhabited star was seven light-years away.

“After the attack, we spent a couple of days repairing our internal systems, then we rendezvoused. It was Ikela and Captain Prager who came up with the eventual solution. *Chengho* was smaller than *Beezling*, it didn’t need as many energy patterning nodes to perform a ZTT jump. So the crew removed some of the *Beezling*’s intact nodes and installed them in the *Chengho*. We didn’t have the proper tools for that kind of job; and then the nodes had different power ratings and performance factors, they had to be completely reprogrammed. It took us three and a half weeks, but we did it. We rebuilt ourselves a ship that could make a ZTT jump—not very well, and not very far, but it was functional. That was when things started to get difficult. The *Chengho* was too small to take both crews, even for just a small jump. There was only one life-support capsule, and it could hold eight of us at a push. We knew we couldn’t risk a flight back to Garissa, the nodes would never last that long, and we guessed that Omuta would have launched some kind of big attack by then. After all, that’s why we’d been dispatched in the first place, to stop them. So we jumped to the nearest inhabited star system, Crotone. The idea was that we’d charter a ship and get back to Garissa that way. Of course, when we arrived at Crotone, we heard about the genocide.

“Ikela and Prager had even formulated a worst case option. Just in case, they said. We’d brought some antimatter

with us on the *Chengho*; if we sold that together with the frigate it would fetch millions. Assuming the Garissan government no longer existed, we would have all the money we needed to operate independently for decades.”

“The Stromboli Separatist Council,” Samuel said suddenly.

“Right,” Alkad acknowledged. “That’s who we sold it to.”

“Ah, we never did find out how they got their antimatter. They blew up two of Crotone’s low-orbit port stations with the stuff.”

“After we left, yes,” Alkad said.

“So Ikela took the money and founded T’Opingtu.”

“Correct; once we found out that the Confederation Assembly granted the Dorados to the survivors of the genocide, all seven navy officers were given an equal share. The plan was for them to invest the money in various companies, the profits from which would be used to help fund the partisans. We needed committed nationalists to crew the ship that they were supposed to prepare for me. After that, they would buy or charter a combat-capable starship to complete the Alchemist mission. As you know, Ikela didn’t fulfill the last part of the plan. I don’t know about the others.”

“Why wait thirty years?” Joshua asked. “Why didn’t you just hire a combat-capable starship as soon as you had the money from the sale of the frigate, and go straight back to the *Beezling*?”

“Because we couldn’t be sure exactly where it was. You see, we didn’t just repair the *Chengho*. There were thirty people and the Alchemist left behind on the *Beezling*. Suppose the *Chengho* didn’t make it, or suppose we were caught and interrogated by the CNIS or some other agency? There was even the possibility the blackhawks might return. We had to plan for all those factors as well, the remaining crew had to be given their chance, too.”

“They went into zero-tau,” Joshua said. “How does that prevent you from knowing the exact coordinate?”

“Yes, obviously they went into zero-tau, but that’s not all. We also repaired their reaction drive. They flew a vector to

an uninhabited star which was only two and a half light-years away.”

“Jesus, a sub-light-speed journey through interstellar space? You’ve got to be kidding. That’s impossible, it would take—”

“Twenty-eight years, we estimated.”

“Ah!” Realization came to Joshua like the silent detonation of Norfolk Tears after it hit the stomach. He felt a surge of admiration for those lost desperate crews of thirty years ago. Not caring what the odds were, just going for it. “They used antimatter propulsion.”

“Yes. We transferred every gram from our remaining combat wasps into the *Beezling*’s confinement chambers. It was enough to accelerate them up to about nine per cent light-speed. So now tell me, Captain, how difficult would it be to locate a ship that is moving away from its last known coordinate at eight or nine per cent light-speed? And if you did find it, how would you rendezvous?”

“Not possible. Okay, you have to wait until the *Beezling* decelerated and arrived at that uninhabited star. How come you didn’t make a dash for them two years ago?”

“Because we weren’t sure just how efficient the drive would be over such a long period of use. Two years gave us an adequate safety margin; and of course as it turned out, the sanctions would be over. There was always a remote chance the Confederation Navy blockade squadron would detect us, after all it’s their job to be looking for sanction-buster starships emerging in odd places around Omuta. So after we sold the *Chengho* we decided on thirty years.”

“You mean the *Beezling* is just orbiting that star waiting for you to make contact?” Liol asked.

“Yes. Providing everything worked as it was supposed to. They are supposed to wait for another five years; the time is irrelevant in zero-tau, but the support systems cannot last indefinitely. If they hadn’t been contacted by then, either by myself and the *Chengho* crew, or the Garissan government, they were to destroy the Alchemist and start signalling for help. Uninhabited star systems within the Confederation

boundaries are inspected on a regular basis by navy patrol ships to make sure they aren't being used by antimatter production stations. They would have been rescued eventually."

Joshua glanced around to the serjeant, wishing the construct had some way of displaying emotion; he'd like to know what Ione made of the story. "Makes sense," he said. "What do you want to do?"

"We have to see if the *Beezling* completed its journey," the serjeant said.

"And if it has?" Samuel asked.

"Then the Alchemist must be destroyed. After that, any surviving crew will be taken back to Tranquillity."

"Question, Doc," Joshua said. "If anybody sees the Alchemist, will that give them a clue to its nature?"

"No. You have no worries on that score, Captain. There is however someone among the crew who could tell you how to build another. His name is Peter Adul, he will have to remain in Tranquillity with me. After that, you will be safe again."

"Okay, what's the star's coordinate?"

It was a long time before Alkad said: "Mother Mary, this is not what was meant to be."

"Nothing ever is, Doc. I learned that long ago."

"Ha! You're too young."

"Depends how you fill the years, doesn't it?"

Alkad Mzu datavised the coordinate over.

• • •

A wormhole terminus is opening, Tranquillity announced.

At the time, Ione was standing knee deep in the warm water of the cove, rubbing Haile's flank with a big yellow bath sponge. She straightened her back and began wringing out the sponge. Her real attention was focused on a point in space a hundred and twenty thousand kilometres away from the habitat where the vacuum's gravity density was building rapidly. Three SD platforms orbiting the emergence zone locked their X-ray lasers on to the terminus as it expanded. Five patrol blackhawks accelerated in at four gees.

A large voidhawk slipped out of the two-dimensional rent. **Oenone, Confederation Navy ship SLV-66150, requesting approach and docking permission, it said. Our official flight authentication code follows.**

Granted, Tranquillity replied after it verified the code. The SD platforms were switched back to alert status. Three of the blackhawks resumed their patrol, while the remaining two curved around to form an escort as *Oenone* accelerated in towards the habitat.

“I’m going to have to leave you,” Ione said.

Jay Hilton’s vexed face peeped over the top of Haile’s gleaming white back. “What is it this time?” she asked petulantly.

“Affairs of state.” Ione started wading towards the shore. She scooped some water up and tried to flush the sand out of her bikini top.

“You always say that.”

Ione gave the disgruntled girl a forlorn smile. “Because it always is, these days.” **Sorry,** she added.

Haile formshifted the tip of an arm into a human hand and waved. **Goodbye, Ione Saldana. I have much sorrow you are leaving, my endlegs itch like hell.**

Haile!

I form a communication wrongness? I have shame.

Not wrong, exactly.

Gladness. That was a Joshua Calvert expression. Much favoured.

Ione snapped her teeth together. That bloody Calvert! Anger gave way to something more confusing, a sort of resentment . . . possibly. Hundreds of light-years away, and he still intrudes. **It would be. Please don’t use it around Jay.**

Understanding is me. I have a great many human emphasis phrases conveyed by Joshua Calvert.

I’ll bet you have.

I want properness in my communication. I ask your assistance in reviewing my word collection. You may edit me.

Yes, all right.

Much gladness!

Ione took another pace, then laughed. Reviewing everything Joshua had said to the young Kiint would take hours. Hours she hadn't been spending on the beach of late. Haile was becoming very crafty.

Jay leaned against her friend, watching Ione put her sandals on and start back up the path to the tube station. There was a slightly distracted expression on the woman's face, that Jay knew meant she was busy talking to the habitat personality. She didn't like to dwell on the topic. More than likely, it would be the possessed again. That was all the adults talked about these days, and it was never reassuring talk.

Haile's arm twined around Jay's, the tip stroking her gently.

You taste of sadness.

"I don't think these horrible possessed will ever go away."

They will. Humans are clever. You will find a way.

"I hope so. I do want Mummy back."

Shall we build the castles of sand now?

"Yes!" Jay grinned enthusiastically and started splashing her way back up to the beach. They'd made the discovery together that Haile with her tractamorphic arms was the universe's best ever builder of sand castles. With Jay directing, they had made some astonishing towers along the shoreline.

Haile emerged from the water in a small explosion of spray. **Betterness. You have happiness again.**

"So do you. Ione promised to come back for the words."

It is the best niceness when the three of us play together. She knows this really.

Jay giggled. "She turned purple when you said that. Good job you didn't say fuck to her."

• • •

The Oenone, Ione reflected. **Why do I know that name?**

Atlantis.

Oh, yes.

And a certain interception in the Puerto de Santa

Maria star system. We received an intelligence update from the Confederation Navy last year.

Oh, bloody hell, yes.

Captain Syrinx wishes to talk to you.

Ione sat down in the tube carriage and began towelling her hair. **Of course.** The affinity contact broadened, allowing Syrinx to proffer her identity trait.

Captain, Ione acknowledged.

I apologize for the haste, but please be advised a Confederation Navy squadron will start arriving in another nine minutes and thirty seconds—mark.

I see. Is Tranquillity in danger?

No.

What then?

I am carrying the squadron's commander, Admiral Meredith Saldana. He requests an interview at which he can explain our full strategic situation to you.

Granted. Welcome to Tranquillity. The captain faded from the affinity band.

She was curious about you, Tranquillity said. **It was quite plain from her emotional content.**

Everybody's always curious about me. She borrowed the habitat's external senses to observe local space. They were in Mirchusko's umbra, with Choisya and Falsia hovering just above the gas giant's crescent horizon. Apart from the flotilla of blackhawks on patrol around the habitat's shell, there was little spaceship activity. The *Oenone* was the first starship to arrive in seventy-six hours. Some MSVs and personnel commuters continued to glide between the counter-rotating spaceport and Tranquillity's bracelet of industrial stations, but they were running a much reduced flight schedule. A lone dazzle-point of fusion flame was rising up past the drab grey loop of the Ruin Ring, an He₃ tanker en route from the habitat's cloudscoop to the spaceport. **Program the squadron's arrival into the SD platforms,** she said. **And warn the blackhawks, we don't want any mistakes.**

Naturally.

Meredith Saldana. That's two family visits in less than a month.

I don't think this is a family visit.

You're probably right.

• • •

It was a suspicion which was proved unpleasantly correct soon after Syrinx and the admiral were shown into the audience chamber of De Beauvoir Palace. As she listened to Meredith Saldana explain the proposed ambush of Capone's fleet at Toi-Hoi a swarm of ambiguous feelings lay siege to her mind.

I don't want to involve us in front line campaigns, she confided to Tranquillity.

To be pedantic, we're in the campaign, not the front line itself. And the eradication of the Organization fleet is not a strategic opportunity which can be overlooked.

No choice?

No choice.

I still think we're too important for this.

But safe. The safest place in the Confederation, remember that.

We hope. I'd hate to put that to the test, right now.

I don't see how it will. Not from this action. We will essentially be a supply and rendezvous base.

"Very well," she told the admiral. "You have my permission to use Tranquillity for your task force's port station. I'll see that you get all the He₃ you need."

"Thank you, ma'am," Meredith said.

"I'm slightly concerned by this flight restriction you wish to place on starships until the ambush, although I do appreciate the logic behind it. I currently have over twenty black-hawks deploying sensor satellites around the orbit where the Laymil home planet used to be. It's extremely important research work. I'd hate to see it jeopardized."

"They would only have to be recalled for three or four days at the most," Syrinx said. "Our scheduling is very tight, here. Surely a small delay wouldn't effect the research too much?"

"I'll recall them for now. But if you're still here after a week, I'll have to review the policy. As I said, this is part of the effort to find an overall solution. That is not to be regarded lightly."

"Believe me, we don't, ma'am," Meredith said.

She stared at him, trying to work out what was going on behind his blue eyes. But his answering stare offered no clue. "I have to say, I find it ironic that Tranquillity has become so important to the Confederation and the Kingdom after all this time," she said.

"Ironic or pleasing? Chance has finally brought you the chance to vindicate your grandfather's actions."

There was no humour in his tone, which surprised her. She'd assumed he would be more sympathetic than Prince Noton. "You think Grandfather Michael was wrong?"

"I think he was wrong to pursue such an unorthodox course."

"Unorthodox to the family, perhaps. But I assure you it's not chance which has brought us together. This whole situation will prove how right he was to act on his foresight."

"I wish you every success."

"Thank you. And who knows, one day I might earn your approval, too."

For the first time, he produced a grudging smile. "You don't like losing arguments, do you, Cousin Ione?"

"I am a Saldana."

"That much is painfully obvious."

"As are you. I don't think every Confederation admiral would have coped as well as you at Lalonde."

"I did not cope well. I ensured my squadron survived; most of it, anyway."

"A Confederation officer's first duty is to follow orders. Second duty is to the crew. So I believe," she said. "As your original orders didn't cover what you encountered, I'd say you did all right."

"Lalonde was . . . difficult," he said heavily.

"Yes. I know all about Lalonde from Joshua Calvert."

Syrinx, who had been looking considerably ill at ease

while the two Saldanas conducted their verbal fencing, glanced sharply at Ione, her eyebrows raised in interest.

“Oh, yes,” Meredith reflected. “Lagrange Calvert. Who could forget him?”

“Is he here?” Syrix asked. “This is his registered port.”

“He’s away at the moment, I’m afraid,” Ione told her. “But I’m expecting him back any day now.”

“Good.”

Ione couldn’t quite fathom the Edenist’s attitude. **Why do you think she’s interested in Joshua?**

I have no idea. Unless she wants to punch him on the nose for Puerto de Santa Maria.

I doubt it. She’s an Edenist, they don’t do things like that. You don’t suppose she and Joshua . . . ?

I doubt it. She’s an Edenist, they have more taste.

• • •

Athene didn’t want him to come to the house. It would be too upsetting for the children, she explained. Though they both knew it was she who was discomfited by the whole idea; keeping him away was a way of establishing a psychological barrier.

Instead, she chose one of the spaceport reception lounges in the habitat’s endcap. There was nobody else in the spacious room when she arrived, not that there could be any mistake. The hulking figure was sitting on a deep settee in front of the long window, watching service crews bustling around the voidhawks on their pedestals outside. It was a squadron assigned to assist the Kulu Kingdom in the Mortonridge Liberation campaign, one of them would soon be transporting him to Ombey.

I missed this, he said, not turning around, **I watched the voidhawks through the sensitive cells, of course, but I still miss this. The habitat perception doesn’t provide any sense of urgency. And my emotions were not suppressed exactly, but less colourful, not so keenly felt. Do you know, I think I’m actually becoming excited.**

She walked over to the settee, an extraordinary sense of

trepidation simmering in her mind. The figure stood, revealing its true height, several centimetres taller than she. As with all Tranquillity serjeants, its exoskeleton was a faint ruddy colour, although a good forty per cent of its body was covered in bright green medical nanonic packages. It held up both hands, and turned them around, studying them intently, its eyes just visible at the back of their protective slits.

I must be quite a sight. They force-cloned all the organs separately, then stitched them together. Serjeants take fifteen months to grow to full size usually; that would be far too long. So here we are, Frankenstein's army, patched together and rushed off the assembly line. The packages should have done their work before we reach Ombey.

Athene's shoulders drooped, mirroring the dismay in her mind. **Oh, Sinon, what *have* you done?**

What I had to. The serjeants must have some controlling consciousness. And seeing as how there were all us individual personalities already available . . .

Yes, but not you!

Somebody has to volunteer.

I didn't want you to be one.

I'm just a copy, my darling, and an edited down one at that. My real personality is still in the neural strata, suspended for now. When I get back, or if this serjeant is destroyed, I'll return to the multiplicity.

This is so wrong. You've had your life. It was a wonderful life, rich and exciting, and full of love. Transferring into the multiplicity is our reward for living true to our culture, it should be like being a grandparent forever, a grandparent with the largest family of relatives in the universe. You carry on loving, and you become part of something precious to all of us. She looked up at the hard mask that was its face, her own frail cheeks trembling. You don't come back. You just don't. It's not right, Sinon, it isn't. Not for us, not for Edenists.

If we don't help the Kingdom to liberate Mortonridge, there may not be any Edenists for very much longer.

No! I won't accept that. I never have. I believe Laton if no one else does. I refuse to fear the beyond like some inadequate Adamist.

It's not the beyond we have to worry about, it's those that have returned from it.

I was one of those who opposed this Mortonridge absurdity.

I know.

By committing ourselves to it, we're no better than animals. Beasts lashing out; it's filthy. Humans can be so much more.

But rarely are.

That's what Edenism was supposed to be about, to lift us above this primitivism. All of us.

The serjeant put its arm out towards her, then withdrew it hurriedly. Shame leaked out into the affinity band. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to come. I see how much this hurts you. I just wanted to see you with my own eyes one last time.

They're not your own eyes; and you're not even Sinon, not really. I think that's what I hate most about this. It's not just Adamist religions the beyond undermines, it's ruined the whole concept of transference. What's the point? You are your soul, if you are anything. The Kiint are right, simulacrum personalities are nothing more than a sophisticated library of memories.

In our case, the Kiint are wrong. The habitat personality has a soul. Our individual memories are the seeds of its consciousness. The more there are of us in the multiplicity, the richer its existence and heritage becomes. Knowledge of the beyond hasn't ruined our culture. Edenism can adapt, it can learn and grow. Surmounting this time intact will be our triumph. And that's what I'm fighting for, to give us that physical chance. I know the Mortonridge Liberation is a fraud, we all do. But that doesn't stop it from being valid.

You're going to kill people. However careful you are, however well intentioned you are, they will die.

Yes. I didn't start this, and I won't be the one who stops it. But I must play my part. To do nothing would be to sin by omission. What I and the others do on Morton-ridge might buy you enough time.

Me?

You, Consensus, the Adamist researchers, maybe even priests. All of you have to keep looking. The Kiint found a way to face the beyond and survive. It's here somewhere.

I'll do what I can, which at my age is very limited.

Don't underestimate yourself.

Thank you. You haven't been edited down that much, you know.

Some parts of me can't be edited, not if I want to keep being me. Bearing that in mind, I have one last favour to ask of you.

Go on.

I'd like you to explain this to Syrinx for me. I know my little Sly-minx, she'll go nova when she hears I volunteered for this.

I'll tell her. I don't know if I can explain, but . . .

The serjeant bowed as best the medical packages would allow. **Thank you, Athene.**

I can't give you my blessing. But do please take care.

. . .

There was no lavish farewell party this time. Monterey had a more serious, less triumphant air these days. But Al chose the Hilton's ballroom anyway to watch the fleet coming together, and to hell with any bad feelings and resentment it stirred up in his head. He stood in front of the window, gazing out at the starships clustered around Monterey. There were over a hundred and fifty of them, dwindling away until the more distant ones were nothing more than big stars. Ion thrusters fired microsecond jets of gauzy blue neon to keep their attitude locked. MSVs and personnel commuters swam among them, delivering new crew and combat wasps.

The stealthed mines which the voidhawks from Yosemite had scattered were no more, returning space around New California to a more peaceful state. Even the voidhawks sent to observe the Organization were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their inspection high above New California's poles.

As if to emphasise the change in local strategic fortunes, a hellhawk hurtled past the Hilton tower, twisting about in complex curves to dodge the stationary Adamist starships. It was one of the harpies, a red-eyed beast with a hundred-and-eighty-metre wingspan and a vicious-looking beak.

Al pressed himself up against the window to watch as it skirred around the asteroid. "Go you beaut," he yelled after it. "Go get 'em. Go!"

A small puff of pink dust erupted from nowhere as a stealthed spyglobe was masered. The hellhawk performed a victory roll, wingtip feathers standing proud to twist the solar wind.

"Wow!" Al pulled back from the window, smiling magnanimously. "Ain't that something else?"

"Glad I can live up to my part of the bargain," Kiera said with cool objectivity.

"Lady, after this, you got as many fresh bodies as you want for Valisk. Al Capone knows how to reward his friends. And believe me, this is what I call friendly."

A serene smile ghosted her beautiful young face. "Thank you, Al."

The cluster of Organization lieutenants at the rear of the ballroom kept their expressions stoic, while their minds palpitated with jealousy. Al liked that; introduce a new favourite in court, and see how the old-timers bid to prove themselves. He sneaked a look at Kiera's profile; she was wearing a loose-fitting purple blouse and second-skin-tightness trousers, hair tied back with fussy decorum. Her face was beguiling, with its prim features kept firmly under control. But smouldering deep behind it was the old familiar illness of powerlust. She had more class than most, but she wasn't so different.

“How we doing, Luigi?” Al bellowed.

“Pretty good, Al. The hellhawk crews say they should have cleared away every mine and spyglobe in another thirty-two hours. We’re pushing those asshole voidhawks back further and further, which means they can’t launch any more crap at us. They don’t know what we’re doing anymore, and they can’t hurt us so bad. It makes one hell of a difference. The fleet’s shaping up great now. The guys, they’re getting their morale back, you know.”

“Glad to hear it.” Which was an understatement. It had been looking bad for a while, what with the voidhawks launching their unseen weapons and the lieutenants down on the planet abusing their authority to carve themselves out some territory. Funny how all problems locked together. Now the hellhawks had arrived the situation in space was improving by the hour. The crews were no longer living in constant fear of a strike by a stealthed mine, which improved their efficiency and confidence by orders of magnitude. People on the ground sensed the fresh tide above them and wanted to play ball again. The number of beefs was dropping; and the guys Leroy had working the Treasury electric adding machines said fraud was levelling out—not falling yet, but shit you couldn’t expect miracles.

“How do you keep the hellhawks in line?” Al asked.

“I can guarantee them human bodies when their work’s finished,” Kiera said. “Bodies which they can go straight into without having to return to the beyond first. They’re very special bodies, and you don’t have any.”

“Hey.” Al spread his arms wide, puffing out a huge cloud of cigar smoke. “I wasn’t trying to muscle in on you, sister. No way. You got a neat operation. I respect that.”

“Good.”

“We need to talk terms about another squadron. I mean, between you and me, I’m in deep shit over Arnstadt—pardon my French. The goddamn voidhawks there are wasting a couple of my ships each day. Something’s gotta be done.”

Kiera gave a noncommittal moue. "And what about this fleet? Won't you need a squadron to protect it from void-hawks at Toi-Hoi?"

Al didn't need to consult Luigi over that one, he could sense the hunger in the fleet commander's mind. "Now you come to mention it, it might not be a bad idea."

"I'll see to it," Kiera said. "There should be another group of hellhawks returning to Valisk today. If I dispatch a messenger now, they should be back here within twenty-four hours."

"Sounds pretty damn good to me, lady."

Kiera raised her walkie-talkie, and pulled a long length of chrome aerial out of it. "Magahi, would you return to Monterey's docking ledge, please."

"Roger," a crackling voice said from the walkie-talkie. "Give me twenty minutes."

Al was aware of an uncomfortable amount of satisfaction in Kiera's mind. She was pretty sure she'd just won something. "Couldn't you just tell Magahi to go straight back to the habitat?" he inquired lightly.

Kiera's smile widened gracefully. It was the same welcoming promise which had ended the Deadnight recording. "I don't think so. There's a big security factor if we radio the order; after all there are still some spyglobes out there. I don't want the Edenists to know Magahi is flying escort on a frigate convoy."

"Escort? What frigates?"

"The frigates carrying the first batch of my antimatter combat wasps to Valisk. That was your part of the bargain, Al, wasn't it?"

Damn the bitch! Al's cigar had gone out. Emmet said their stocks of antimatter were nearly exhausted, and the fleet needed every gram to insure success at Toi-Hoi. He looked at Leroy, then Luigi. Neither of them could offer him a way out. "Sure thing, Kiera. We'll get it organized."

"Thank you, Al."

Tough little ironass. Al couldn't decide if he respected that or not. He didn't need any more complications right

now. But he was awful glad that she was lining up on his side.

He took another sidelong look at her figure. Who knows? We could get to be real close allies. Except Jez would kill me for real . . .

The ballroom's huge double doors swung open to admit Patricia and someone Al had never seen before. A possessed man, who managed to cringe away from Patricia at the same time as he scampered along beside her. Judging by the perilously fragile state of his thoughts he had only just come into his new body.

He saw Al, and made an effort to compose himself. Then his eyes darted to the huge window. His discipline crumpled. "Holy cow," he whispered. "It is true. You are going to invade Toi-Hoi."

"Who the fuck is this goofball?" Al shouted at Patricia.

"His name's Perez," she said calmly. "And you need to listen to him."

If it had been anyone else who spoke to him like that, they would've been kiboshed. But Patricia was one he really trusted. "You're shitting me, right?"

"Think what he just said, Al."

Al did. "How did you know about Toi-Hoi?" he asked.

"Khanna! I got it from Khanna. She told me to tell you. She said one of us must get through. Then she killed me. She killed all of us. No, not killed, executed, that's what she did, executed us. Smash smash smash with the white fire. Straight through my brain. That bitch! I'd only been back for five minutes. Five goddamn minutes!"

"Who told you, fella? Who's this she you got the beef with?"

"Jacqueline Couteur. Back in Trafalgar. The Confederation Navy got her banged up in the demon trap. I hope she rots there. Bitch."

Patricia smiled a superior I-told-you-so, which Al acknowledged frugally. He put his arm around Perez's shaking shoulders, and proffered the man a Havana. "Okay, Perez. You got my word, the word of Al Capone, which is

the toughest currency of all, that nobody here is gonna send you back into the beyond again. Now, you wanna start at the beginning for me?"

29

Earth.

A planet whose ecology was ruined beyond repair: the price it paid for elevating itself to be the Confederation's supreme industrial and economic superpower. Overpopulated, ancient, decadent, and utterly formidable. This was the undeniable imperial heart of the human dominion.

It was also home.

Quinn Dexter admired the images building up on the bridge's holoscreens. This time he could savour them with unhurried joy. Their official Nyvan flight authority code had been accepted by Govcentral Strategic Defence Command. As far as anyone was concerned, they were a harmless ship sent by a tiny government to buy defence components.

"Traffic control has given us a vector," Dwyer said. "We have permission to dock at the Supra-Brazil tower station."

"That's good. Can you fly it?"

"I think so. It's tough, we have to go around the Halo, and they've given us a narrow flight path, but I can handle that."

Quinn nodded his permission without saying anything. Dwyer had been a perfect pain in the arse for the whole voyage, making out how difficult everything was before the flight computer performed whatever was required with faultless efficiency. An extraordinarily transparent attempt to show how indispensable he was. But then Quinn knew the effect he had on people, it was part of the fun.

Dwyer was immediately busy talking to the flight computer. Icons flurried over the console displays. Eight minutes later they were under power, accelerating at a third of a gee to curve southwards around the O'Neill Halo.

“Are we going down to the planet first?” Dwyer asked. He was growing progressively twitchier in contrast to Quinn’s deadly calm. “I didn’t know if you wanted to take over an asteroid.”

“Take over?” Quinn asked faintly.

“Yeah. You know, bring them the gospel of God’s Brother. Like we did for Jesus and the other three.”

“No, I don’t think so. Earth isn’t so arse backwards as Nyvan, it would never be that simple to convene the Night here. It must be corrupted from within. The sects will help me do that. Once I show them what I’ve become they’ll welcome me back. And of course, my friend Banneth is down there. God’s Brother understands.”

“Sure, Quinn, that’s good. Whatever you say.” The communications console beeped for attention, which Dwyer happily gave it. Script flowed down one of the screens, which only amplified his distress as he read it. “Hell, Quinn, have you seen this?”

“God’s Brother gave me a great many gifts, but being psychic isn’t one of them.”

“It’s the clearance procedures we have to comply with after we dock. Govcentral security wants to ensure no possessed are on board.”

“Fuck that.”

“Quinn!”

“I do hope, I really fucking do hope that you’re not questioning me, Dwyer.”

“Shit, no way, Quinn. You’re the man, you know that.” His voice was verging on hysteria.

“Glad to hear it.”

The Brazilian orbital tower sprouted from the very heart of the South American continent, extending fifty-five thousand kilometres out into space. When it was in Earth’s penumbra, as it was when the *Mount’s Delta* approached, it was invisible to every visual sensor. However, in other electromagnetic wavelengths, and particularly the magnetic spectrum, it *gleamed*. A slim golden strand of impossible

length, with minute scarlet particles skimming along it at tremendous speed.

There were two asteroids attached to the tower. Supra-Brazil, the anchor, was in geostationary orbit thirty-six thousand kilometres above the ground, where it had been mined to extract the carbon and silicon used in the tower's construction. The second asteroid sat right at the tip, acting as a mass counterbalance to ensure the anchor remained stable, and damp down any dangerous harmonic oscillations in the tower which built up from running the lift capsules.

Because Supra-Brazil was the only section of the tower that was actually in orbit, it was the one place where ships could dock. Unlike every settled asteroid it didn't rotate, nor were there any internal biosphere caverns. The three-hundred-metre-diameter tower ran cleanly through the rock's centre; its principal structure perfectly black and perfectly circular. Positioned around the lower segment that stretched down to Earth were twenty-five magnetic rails along which the lift capsules rode, delivering tens of thousands of passengers and up to a hundred thousand tonnes of cargo a day. The other segment, reaching up to the counterbalance, supported a single rail, which was used barely once a month to ferry inspection and maintenance mechanoids to the individual section platforms.

The surface of the asteroid was covered with docking bays and all the usual spaceport support equipment. After three hundred and eighty-six years of continual operation, and the tower's steady capacity expansion, there wasn't a square metre of rock left visible.

Even with the Confederation quarantine operating, over six thousand ships a day were still using it, the majority of them from the Halo. They approached by positioning themselves ahead of the port, a long ribbon of diverse craft dropping down from a higher orbit. Navigation strobes and secondary drives produced twinkling cataracts of light as they split into a complex braid of traffic lanes a kilometre above the surface to reach their allocated bays. Departing

ships formed an equally intricate helical pattern as they rose away into a higher orbit.

Mount's Delta slotted into its designated traffic lane, gliding around the vast stem of the tower to dock in the floor of a valley formed by pyramids of heat exchangers, tanks, and thermo-dump panels, three times the size of the Egyptian originals. When the docking cradle had drawn it down into the bottom of the bay, a necklace of lights around the rim came on, illuminating every centimetre of the hull. Figures in black space armour were secured around the bay walls, ready to deal with anyone trying to leave the ship by irregular means.

"Now what?" Quinn asked.

"We have to give the security service total access to our flight computer. They're going to run a complete diagnostic to make sure there aren't any unexplained glitches anywhere in the ship. They'll also monitor us through the internal sensors at the same time. Once they're satisfied there's no glitch we're allowed out into the bay. We have to undergo a whole series of tests, including datavises from our neural nanonics. *Quinn*, we haven't got any bloody neural nanonics, and a starship's crew always have them fitted. Always!"

"I told you," Quinn's hollow voice said from deep within his hood, "I will deal with it. What else?"

Dwyer gave the display a wretched stare. "Once we've been cleared, we're put in a secure holding area while the ship is searched by an armed security team. After it's cleared, we will be allowed out."

"I'm impressed."

Dwyer's communications console was showing a demand from the port's security service to access the flight computer. "What do we do?" he shrieked. "We can't fly away, we can't comply. We're trapped. They'll storm us. They'll have projectile weapons we can't beat. Or they'll rip the capsule bulkhead open and decompress us. Or electrocute us with—"

"You're trapped." It was only a tiny whisper, but it stopped Dwyer's rant dead.

“You can’t! Quinn, I did everything you asked. Everything! I’m loyal. I’ve always been fucking loyal to you.”

Quinn extended an arm, a single white finger emerging from the end of his black sleeve.

Dwyer threw out both hands. White fire screamed out of his palms to lash at the black-robed incarnation of Death. Bridge consoles flickered madly as corkscrews of pale flame bounced off Quinn, flashing through the air to bury themselves in bulkheads and equipment.

“Finished?” Quinn asked.

Dwyer was sobbing.

“You’re weak. I like that. It means you’ll serve me well. I will find you again, and use you.”

Dwyer evacuated his stolen body just before the first burn of pain smashed along his spinal cord.

• • •

The security team assigned to the *Mount’s Delta* knew something was wrong as soon as the starship docked. Its routine datavises began to drop out for seconds at a time. When the bay’s management officer tried to contact the captain there was no reply. A level one alert was declared.

The docking bay and its immediate surroundings were sealed up and isolated from the rest of Supra-Brazil. One squad of combat officers and another of technical experts were rushed to the docking bay to complement the original team. Communications lines were opened to an advisory panel made up from senior commanders in the Govcentral Internal Security Directorate and the Strategic Defence force.

Four minutes after it docked, the clipper-class starship’s datavises had returned to normal, but there was still no response from the captain nor any other member of the crew. The security advisory panel authorized the team to go to the next stage.

A datalink umbilical jacked into a socket on the starship’s hull. The GISD’s most powerful decryption computers were brought on line to crack the flight computer’s access codes; it took less than thirty seconds. The nature of the bridge’s

modified processors and programs were obvious: customized to be run by possessed. Almost simultaneously, the sensors began relaying their images from the interior of the small life-support capsule. There was nobody inside. However, there was one anomaly whose cause wasn't immediately apparent. A thick red paste was splashed across almost every surface in the bridge. Then an eyeball drifted past one of the sensors, and that mystery was solved—leaving a bigger paradox. The blood hadn't yet congealed. Some one or thing on board had slaughtered the crew member only minutes ago. GISD could not permit an unknown threat to remain at large; if the possessed had developed a fresh method of attack it had to be investigated.

An airlock tube extended out from the side of the bay. After arming themselves with chemical explosive fragmentation grenades and submachine guns, five GISD combat officers advanced through it to the life-support capsule. Each of them encountered a small squall of cold air in the tube as they pulled themselves along, barely noticeable through their armour.

Once inside, they opened every storage locker and cabinet to try to locate the missing crew members. There was nobody to be found. Even the flight computer confirmed no atmosphere was being consumed.

An engineering crew from the port was sent in to strip down the life-support capsule. It took them six hours to remove every single fitting, including the decking. The advisory council was left with an empty sphere seven metres in diameter with severed cables and hoses poking through sealed inlets. A meticulous examination of the flight computer records, evaluating power consumption, command interfaces, fuel expenditure, and utilities usage showed that there must have been two people on board when the *Mount's Delta* docked. But DNA analysis on the blood and tissue smearing the bridge showed it had all come from one body.

The *Mount's Delta* was powered down, and its cryogenic tanks emptied. Then the entire ship was slowly and methodically cut up into sections, from the support framework to

the fusion generators, even the energy patterning nodes. No unit or module bigger than a cubic metre was left intact.

The media, of course, soon discovered the “ghost flight” from Nyvan; and rover reporters swarmed around the bay, demanding and bribing information from anyone they could find connected to the security operation. It wasn’t long before they managed to gain legal access to a sensor in the bay itself thanks to two judges whose motives were somewhat financially inclined. Several tens of millions of people in Earth’s arcologies started accessing the investigation directly, watching the starship being cut up by mechanoids, and waiting eagerly for a possessed to be captured.

• • •

Quinn saw no reason to stay inside the dry deprivation of the ghost realm once he had passed unseen through all the security checks; he rematerialized and sat in a luxurious active contour leather seat in the lift capsule’s Royale Class lounge. He was near one of the panoramic windows, which would allow him to watch the dawn rise over South America as he descended vertically towards it at three thousand kilometres an hour. With his hawkish, stressed face and expensively conservative blue silk suit he slotted perfectly into the character of an aristocratic businessman.

For the last quarter of the journey down the tower he sipped his complimentary Norfolk Tears, which was continually topped up by a stewardess, and gave the AV projector above the cocktail bar an occasional glance. Earth’s media companies competed enthusiastically to update him on the progress of the search through the dissected components of the *Mount’s Delta*. If the rest of the lounge wondered at his intermittent guffaws of contempt, Earth’s obsessive cult of personal privacy forbade them from enquiring as to the reason.

• • •

Jed spent most of the voyage sitting on the pine floorboards in the *Mindor’s* lounge, gazing out at the starfield. There had never been a time in his life when he felt more content. The

stars themselves were beautiful seen like this, and every now and then the hellhawk would swallow through a wormhole. That was exciting, even though there wasn't much to see then, just a kind of dark grey fog swirling around outside that was never quite in focus. Coupled with the sense of invulnerability generated by riding in the hellhawk was the anticipation of Valisk, never stronger than now.

I did it. For the first time in my life I set myself a solid goal and saw it through. Against some pretty nasty odds, too. Me and all the other kids from nowhere, we made it to Valisk. And Kiera.

He had brought his modified recording of her, although he no longer needed it. Every time he closed his eyes he could see that smile, thick soft hair falling over her bare shoulders, perfectly rounded cheeks. She would congratulate him personally when they arrived. She must, because he was the leader. So they would probably get to talk, because she'd want to know how difficult it was for them, how they had struggled. She would be sympathetic, because that was her nature. Then perhaps—

Gari and Navar bounded into the lounge, laughing happily together. Some kind of truce had been declared since they came on board. A minor omen, Jed thought; things were steadily getting better.

“What are you doing?” Gari asked.

He grinned up at her and gestured to the window with its thick rim of brass. “Just looking. So what are you two doing?”

“We came to tell you. We just talked to Choi-Ho. She says this is the last swallow before we get to Valisk. Another hour, Jed!” Her face rose with elation.

“Yeah, another hour.” He snatched another glance at the alien greyness outside. Any minute now they'd be back in real space. Then he realized Beth wasn't here to witness their triumph. “Back in a minute,” he told the two girls.

The *Mindor* was quite crowded now. The rendezvous in the Kabwe system had brought another twenty-five Dead-nights on board. Everyone was doubling up in the cabins.

He walked right to the end of the main corridor, where the light was slightly darker. “Beth?” He gave her cabin door a fast knock and turned the handle. “Come on, girl, we’re almost there. You’ll miss the—”

Both of Beth’s jackets and her lace-up boots were lying on the floor, looking like they’d just been flung there. Beth herself was stirring on the bed, a skinny hand clawing lank strands of hair away from her face as she peered around blearily. Gerald Skibbow was next to her, sound asleep.

Indignation and pure anger made it impossible for Jed to move.

“What is it?” Beth grunted.

Jed couldn’t believe it; she didn’t display the slightest hint of shame. Skibbow was old enough to be her bloody great-grandfather! He glared at her, then stomped out, slamming the door loudly behind him.

Beth stared after him, her puzzled thoughts slowly slotting together. “Oh, Jeeze, you’ve got to be bloody joking,” she groaned. Not even Jed was that stupid. Surely? She swung her legs out from under the duvet, taking care not to pull it off Gerald. It had taken her hours to get him to sleep. Holding him, reassuring him.

Despite her best efforts, she did dislodge the cover. The fabric seemed to stick to her jeans, and her sweatshirt was all twisted around, making every movement difficult.

Gerald Skibbow woke with a cry, looking around fearfully. “Where are we?”

“I don’t know, Gerald,” she said as calmly as she could. “I’ll go find out, then I’ll bring you back some breakfast. Okay, mate?”

“Yes. Um, I think so.”

“You go slip into the shower. Leave everything else to me.” Beth laced her boots up, then retrieved one of her jackets from the floor. She gave the inside pocket a determined pat to make sure the nervejam was there before she left the cabin.

• • •

Rocio Condra sensed the voidhawks waiting before he even

started to emerge from the wormhole terminus. Seven of them, spiralling slowly around the point where he expected Valisk to be.

The terminus closed behind him, and he spread his wings wide, letting the thin streamers of solar ions gust against the feathers. All he did was glide along his orbital path while he tried to understand. Confusion was almost total. At first he thought he might even have emerged above the wrong gas giant, however unlikely that was. But no, this was Opuntia, its system of moons easily distinguishable. He could even feel the mass of Valisk's wrecked industrial stations in their proper coordinate. The only thing missing was the habitat itself.

What has happened to Valisk? he asked his erstwhile enemies. **Did you destroy it?**

Obviously not, one of the voidhawks replied. **There is no debris. Surely you can sense that?**

I can sense that. But I don't understand.

Rubra and Dariat finally settled their differences, and merged. The entire neural strata became possessed, creating an enormously powerful reality dysfunction. Valisk left the universe, taking everyone inside with it.

No!

I am not lying to you.

My body is inside. Even as he protested, he knew he wasn't really bothered. The decision he had been nerving himself up to make had been taken for him. He allowed energy to flow through his patterning cells, exerting pressure on a particular point in space.

Wait, the voidhawk called. **You have nowhere to go. We can help, we want to help.**

Me, join your culture? I don't think so.

You have to ingest nutrients to sustain yourself. You know that, even the possessed have to eat. Only habitats can provide you with the correct fluids.

So can most asteroid settlements.

But how long will the production machinery function

when the settlement becomes possessed? You know they have no interest in such matters.

One of them does.

Capone? He will send you to fight to earn your food. How long will you last? Two battles? Three? With us you will be safe.

There are other tasks I can perform.

For what purpose? Now Valisk has gone, you have no human body into which you can return. They cannot reward you, only threaten.

How do you know that was promised to us?

From Dariat; he told us everything. Join us. Your assistance would be invaluable.

Assistance for what?

Finding a solution to this whole crisis.

I have solved it for myself. Energy flashed through the cells, forcing an interstice open. The wormhole's non-length deepened to accept his bulk.

The offer remains, the voidhawk proclaimed. **Consider it. Come back to us at any time.**

Rocio Condra closed the interstice behind his tail. His mind instinctively retrieved the coordinate for New California from the *Mindor*'s infallible memory. He would see what Capone had to offer before making any hasty decisions. And the other hellhawks would be there; whatever final choice they made, they would make it together.

After he explained what had happened to Choi-Ho and Maxim Payne, they agreed not to burden the Deadnights with the knowledge that their false dream had ceased to be.

• • •

Jay peeled the gold insulating wrapper off her chocolate and almond ice cream; it was her fifth that morning. She lay back happily on her towel and started licking the nuts off the ice cream's surface. The beach was such a lovely place, and her new friend made it just about perfect.

"Sure you don't want one?" she asked. There were several more sweets scattered over the warm sand; she had

stuffed her bag full of them when she left the pediatric ward that morning.

No, with many thanks, Haile said. **Coldness makes me sneeze. The chocolate tastes like raw sugar with much additional acid.**

Jay giggled. "That's mad. Everyone likes chocolate."

Not I.

She bit off a huge chunk and let it slither around her tongue. "What do you like?"

Lemon is acceptable. But I am still milking from my parent.

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting how young you are. Do you eat solid stuff when you're older?"

Yes. In many months away.

Jay smiled at the wistfulness carried by the mental voice. She had often felt the same at her mother's rules, restrictions designed purely to stop her enjoying herself. "Do your parents all go out for fancy meals and things in the evening like we do? Are there Kiint restaurants?"

Not here in the all around. I know not exactly about our home.

"I'd love to see your home planet. It must be super, like the arcologies but clean and silver, with huge towers built right up into the sky. You're so advanced."

Some of our worlds have that form, Haile said with cautious uncertainty. **I believe. Racial history cosmology educational have not fully begun yet.**

"That's okay." Jay finished the treat. "Gosh, that's lovely," she mumbled around the freezing mouthful. "I didn't have any ice cream the whole time I was on Lalonde. Can you imagine that!"

You should ingest properly balanced dietary substances. Ione Saldana says too much niceness is bad for you. Query correctness?

"Completely wrong." Jay sat up and tossed the ice cream stick into her bag. "Oh, Haile, that's wonderful!" She scrambled to her feet and ran over to the baby Kiint. Haile's trac-tamorphic arms were withdrawing from the sand castle like

a nest of snakes that had been routed. She'd built a central tapering tower two and a half metres tall, surrounded by five smaller matching pinnacles; elaborate arching fairy bridges linked them all together. There were turrets leaning out of the sides at cockeyed angles, rings of pink shell windows, and a solid fortress wall with a deep moat around the outside.

"Best yet." Jay stroked the Kiint's facial ridge just above the breathing vents. Haile shivered in gratitude, big violet eyes looked directly into Jay.

I like, muchness.

"We should build something from your history," Jay said generously.

I have no intricacy to contribute, only home domes, the Kiint said sadly. **Our full past has not been made available. I must do much growth before I am ready for acceptance.**

Jay put her arms around the Kiint's neck, pressing up against her supple white hide. "That's all right. There are lots of things Mummy and Father Horst wouldn't tell me, either."

Much regret. Little patience.

"That's a shame. But the castle looks great now it's finished. I wish we had some flags to stick on top. I'll see what I can find to use for tomorrow."

Tomorrow the sand will be dry. The top will crumble in air, and we must start again.

Jay looked along the row of shapeless mounds that now ran along the shoreline. Each one carried its own particular memory of joy and satisfaction. "Honestly, Haile, that's the whole point. It's even better when there's a tide, then you can see how strong you've built."

So much human activity is intentionally wasteful. I doubt my ever knowing you.

"We're simple, really. We always learn more from our mistakes, that's what Mummy says. It's because they're more painful."

Much oddness.

“I’ve got an idea; we’ll try and build a Tyrathca tower tomorrow. That’s nice and different. I know what they look like, Kelly showed me.” She put her hands on her hips and considered the castle warmly. “Pity we can’t build their Sleeping God altar, or whatever it was, but I don’t think it would balance, not if you make it out of sand.”

Query Sleeping God altar or whatever?

“It was sort of like a temple that you couldn’t get inside. The Tyrathca on Lalonde all sat around it and worshipped with chanting and stuff. It was this shape, really elaborate.” Her hands swept through the air in front of the Kiint, tracing broad curves. “See?”

Lacking perception, I. This is worship like your ritual to support Jesus the Christ?

“Um, sort of, I suppose. Except their God isn’t our God. Theirs is sleeping somewhere far away in space; ours is everywhere. That’s what Father Horst says.”

There are two Gods, query?

“I don’t know,” Jay said, desperately wishing she hadn’t got on to this topic. “Humans have more than two Gods, anyway. Religion is funny, especially if you start thinking about it. You’re just sort of supposed to believe. Until you get old, that is, then it all becomes theology.”

Query theology?

“Grown-up religion. Look here, don’t you have a God?”

I will query my parents.

“Good; they’ll explain everything much better than me. Come on, let’s go and wash this horrid sand off, then we can go riding together.”

Much welcome.

• • •

The Royal Kulu Navy ion field flyer swept in over Mortonridge’s western seaboard, its glowing nose pointed directly at the early morning sun. Ten kilometres to the south, the red cloud formed a solid massif right across the horizon. It was thicker than Ralph Hiltch remembered. None of the penin-

sula's central ridge of mountains had managed to rise above it; they'd been swallowed whole.

The upper surface was as calm as a lake during a breathless dawn. Only when it started to dip earthwards along the firebreak border were the first uneasy stirrings visible—while right on the edge there appeared to be a full-scale storm whipping up individual streamers. Ralph had the uncomfortable impression that the cloud was aching to be let free. Perhaps he was picking up the emotional timbre of the possessed who created it? In this situation he could never be quite sure that any feeling was the genuine article.

He thought he could see a loose knot swirling along the side of the cloud, a twist of vermilion shadow amid the scarlet, keeping pace with his flyer. But when he ordered the sensor suite to focus on it, all he could see were random patterns. A trick of the eye, then, but a strong one.

The pilot began to expand the ion field, reducing the flyer's velocity and altitude. Up ahead, the grey line of the M6 was visible, slicing clean across the virgin countryside. Colonel Palmer's advance camp was situated a couple of kilometres outside the black firebreak line. Several dozen military vehicles were drawn up along the side of the motorway, while a couple were speeding along the carbon concrete towards the unnervingly precise band of incinerated vegetation.

Any possessed marching up to the end of the red cloud would see a predictably standard garrison operation being mounted with the Kingdom's usual healthy efficiency. What they couldn't see was the new camp coming together twenty-five kilometres further to the north; a city of programmable silicon laid out in strict formation which was erupting across the endless green undulations of the peninsula's landscape. With typical military literalism it had been named Fort Forward. Over five hundred programmable silicon buildings had already been activated, two-storey barracks, warehouses, mess halls, maintenance shops, and various ancillary structures; though as yet its only residents were the three battalions of Royal Kulu Marine Engineers

whose job it was to assemble the camp. Their mechanoids had ploughed the ground up around each building, installing water and sewage pipes, power lines, and datalinks. Huge drums of micro-mesh composite were being unrolled over the fresh soil to provide roads which wouldn't turn to instant quagmires. Five large filter pump houses had been established on the banks of a river eight kilometres away to feed the expanding districts.

Mechanoids were already busy digging out vast new utility grids ready for more buildings, giving an indication of just how big Fort Forward would be when it was completed. Long convoys of lorries were using the M6 to deliver matériel from the nearest city spaceport, fifty kilometres away. Though that arrangement would soon be cancelled as Fort Forward's own spaceport became operational. Marine engineers were levelling long strips of land in preparation for three prefabricated runways. The spaceport's hangars and control tower had been activated two days ago so that technical crews could fit and integrate their systems.

When Ralph's battleship emerged above Ombey he had seen nine Royal Navy Aquilae-class bulk transport starships in parking formation around a low-orbit port station along with their escort of fifteen front-line frigates. There were only twenty-five of the huge transporters left on active service; capable of carrying seventeen thousand tonnes of cargo they were the largest starships ever built, and hugely expensive to fly and maintain. Kulu was gradually phasing them out in favour of smaller models based on commercial designs.

They were being supported by big old delta-wing CK500-090 Thunderbird spaceplanes, the only atmospheric craft capable of handling the four-hundred-tonne cargo pods carried by the Aquilae transporters. Again, a fleet on the verge of retirement; they had been the first consignment ferried to Ombey by the transports. Most of the Thunderbirds had spent the last fifteen years in mothball status at the Royal Navy's desert storage facility on Kulu. Now they were being

reactivated as fast as the maintenance crews could fit new components from badly depleted war stocks.

Even more portentous than the buildup of navy ships were the voidhawks. Nearly eighty had arrived so far, with new ones swallowing in every hour, their lower hull cargo cradles full of pods (which could be handled by conventional civil flyers). Never before had so many of the bitek starships been seen orbiting a Kingdom world.

Ralph had experienced the same kind of uncomfortable awe he'd known at Azara as he observed them flitting around the docking stations. He was the one who had started this, creating a momentum which had engulfed entire star systems. It was unstoppable now. All he could do was ride it to a conclusion.

The ion field flyer landed at Colonel Palmer's camp. The colonel herself was waiting for him at the base of the airstairs, Dean Folan and Will Danza prominent in the small reception committee behind her, both grinning broadly.

Colonel Palmer shook his hand, giving his new uniform a more than casual inspection. "Welcome back, Ralph, or should I say sir?"

He wasn't completely used to the uniform himself yet, a smart dark blue tunic with three ruby pips glinting on his shoulder. "I don't know, exactly. I'm a general in the official Liberation campaign army now, its very first officer. Apart from the King, of course. The formation was made official three days ago, announced in the court of the Apollo Palace. I've been appointed chief strategic coordination officer."

"You mean you're the Liberation's numero uno?"

"Yeah," he said with quiet surprise. "I guess I am at this end."

"Rather you than me." She gestured northwards. "Talk about coming back with reinforcements."

"It's going to get wonderfully worse. One million bitek serjeants are on their way, and God alone knows how many human troops to back them up. We've even had mercenaries volunteering."

"You accepted them?"

"I've no idea. But I'll use whatever I'm given."

"All right, so what are your orders, sir?"

He laughed. "Just keep up the good work. Have any of them tried to break out?"

She turned her head to face the wall of angry cloud, her expression stern. "No. They stick to their side of the firebreak. There have been plenty of sightings. We think they're keeping an eye on us. But it's only my patrols who are visible to them." A thumb jabbed back over her shoulder. "They don't know anything about all this."

"Good. We can't keep it secret forever, of course; but the longer the better."

"Some kids came out last week. It was the first interesting thing to happen since you left."

"Kids?"

"A woman called Stephanie Ash bused seventy-three non-possessed children right up to the firebreak. Gave the roadblock guard a hell of a fright, I can tell you. Apparently she'd collected them from all over the peninsula. We evacuated them to a holding camp. I think your friend Jannike Dermot has got her experts debriefing them on conditions over there."

"Now that's a report I'd like to access." He squinted at the red cloud. That elusive knot of shadow seemed to have returned. It was elliptical this time, hanging over the M6. It didn't take much imagination to suspect it of staring at him. "I think I'll take a closer look before I set up my command at Fort Forward," he announced.

Will and Dean rode shotgun on the Marine Corps runabout which took him up to the orange roadblock. It was good to talk with them again. They'd been attached to Palmer's brigade as combat liaison for the agency, supporting the various technical teams Roche Skark had dispatched to the firebreak. Both of them wanted to know every detail of his meetings with the King. They were annoyed he wouldn't datavise his visual files of Prince Edward playing at the Apollo Palace, but they were confidential. And so

grows the mystique, Ralph thought, amused that he should be contributing to it.

The marines at the roadblock saluted smartly as Ralph and the Colonel arrived. Ralph chatted to them as cordially as he could manage. They didn't seem to mind the red cloud; he found it intimidating in the extreme. It loomed barely three hundred metres above him, vigorous thrashing streamers packed so close together there was no gap between them, layer upon layer stacked up to what seemed like the edge of space. The sonorous reverberations from its internal brawling was diabolically attuned to the harmonic of human bones. Millions of tonnes of contaminated water hanging suspended in the air by witchcraft, ready to crash down like the waterfall at the end of the world. He wondered how little effort on behalf of the possessed it would take to do just that. Could it be he really had underestimated their power? It wasn't the scale of the cloud which perturbed him so much as the *intent*.

"Sir," one of the barrier guards shouted in alarm. "Visible hostile, on foot, three hundred metres."

Dean and Will were abruptly standing in front of Ralph, their gaussguns pointing across the firebreak.

"I think this is enough front-line inspection for today," Colonel Palmer said. "Let's get you back to the runabout, please, Ralph."

"Wait." Ralph looked between the two G66 troopers to see a single figure walking up the M6. A woman dressed in a neatly cut leather uniform, her face stained warrior-scarlet by the nimbus of the seething clouds. He knew exactly who it was, in fact he would almost have been disappointed if she hadn't appeared. "She's not a threat. Not yet, anyway."

He slipped between Will and Dean to stand full square in the middle of the road, facing her down.

Annette Ekelund stopped at the forwards barrier on her side of the firebreak. She took a slim mobile phone from her pocket, extended its ten-centimetre aerial, then tapped in a number.

Ralph's communications block announced a channel opening. He switched it to audio function.

"Hello, Ralph. I thought you would come back, you're the kind that does. And I see you've brought some friends with you."

"That's right."

"Why don't you bring them on over and join the party?"

"We'll pick our own time."

"I have to say I'm disappointed; that's not quite what we agreed to back in Exnall, now is it? And with a Saldana Princess, too. Dear me, you can't trust anyone these days."

"A promise made under duress is not legally binding. I'm sure you'll have enough lawyers on your side to confirm that."

"I thought I explained all this to you, Ralph. We can't lose, not against the living."

"I don't believe you. No matter what the cost, we must defeat you. The human race will end if you are allowed to win. I believe we deserve to keep on going."

"You and your ideals, the original Mr Focused. No wonder you found a profession which allowed you to give loyal service. It suits you perfectly. Congratulations, Ralph, you have found yourself, not everyone can say that. In another universe, one that isn't so warped as this, I'd envy you."

"Thank you."

"There was a nasty little phrase coined in my era, Ralph; but it's still appropriate today, because it too came from a dogmatic soldier in a pointless war. *We had to destroy the village in order to save it.* What do you think you're going to do to Mortonridge and its people with this crusade of yours?"

"Whatever I have to."

"But we'll still be here afterwards, Ralph, we'll always be here. The finest minds in the galaxy have been working on this problem. Scientists and priests scurrying for hard answers and bland philosophies. Millions—billions of man-hours have already been spent on the quandary of what to do with us poor returned souls. And they've come up with noth-

ing. Nothing! All you can do is mount this pathetic, vindictive campaign of violence in the hope that some of us will be caught and thrown into zero-tau.”

“There isn’t an overall solution yet. But there will be.”

“There can’t be. We outnumber you. It’s simple arithmetic, Ralph.”

“Laton said it can be done.”

She chuckled. “And you believe him?”

“The Edenists think he was telling the truth.”

“Oh, yes, the newest and most interesting of all your friends. You realize, don’t you, that they could well survive this while you Adamists fall. It’s in their interest for this monstrous diversion to work. Adamist planets will topple one by one while your Confederation is engrossed here.”

“And what about the Kiint?”

There was a slight pause. “What about them?”

“They survived their encounter with the beyond. They say there is a solution.”

“Which is?”

He gripped the communications block tighter. “It doesn’t apply to us. Each race must find its own way. Ours exists, somewhere. It will be found. I have a lot of faith in human ingenuity.”

“I don’t, Ralph. I have faith in our sick nature to hate and envy, to be greedy and selfish, to lie. You forget, for six centuries I couldn’t hide from the naked emotions which drive all of us. I was condemned to them, Ralph. I know exactly what we are in our true hearts, and it’s not nice, not nice at all.”

“Tell that to Stephanie Ash. You don’t speak for all the possessed, not even a majority.”

Her stance changed. She no longer leaned casually on the barrier but stood up straight, her head thrust forwards challengingly. “You’ll lose, Ralph, one way or the other. You, personally, will lose. You cannot fight entropy.”

“I wish your faith wasn’t so misdirected. Think what you could achieve if you tried to help us instead.”

“Stay away from us, Ralph. That’s what I really came here to tell you. One simple message: Stay away.”

“You know I can’t.”

Annette Ekelund nodded sharply. She pushed the phone’s aerial back in and closed the little unit up.

Ralph watched her walk back down the M6 with a degree of sorrow he hadn’t expected. Shadows cavorted around her, hoaxing with her silhouette before swallowing her altogether.

“Ye gods,” Colonel Palmer muttered.

“That’s what we’re up against,” Ralph said.

“Are you sure a million serjeants is going to be enough?”

Ralph didn’t get to answer. The discordant bellows of thunder merged together into a continuous roar.

Everyone looked up to see the edge of the red cloud descending. It was as if the strength of the possessed had finally waned, allowing the colossal weight of water to crash down. Torrents of gaudy vapour plunged out of the main bank, hurtling earthwards faster than mere gravity could account for.

Along with the others, Ralph sprinted away from the roadblock, neural nanonics compelled a huge energy release from his muscle tissue, increasing his speed. Animal fear was pounding on his consciousness to turn and fire his TIP pistol at the virulent cascade.

His neural nanonics received a plethora of datavises from SD Command on Guyana. Low-orbit observation satellites were tracking them. Reports from patrols and sensors positioned along the firebreak: the whole front of cloud was moving.

“SD platforms are now at Ready One status,” Admiral Farquar datavised. “Do you want us to counterstrike? We can slice that bastard apart.”

“It’s stopping,” Will yelled.

Ralph risked a glance over his shoulder. “Wait,” he datavised to the admiral. A hundred and fifty metres behind him, the base of the cloud had reached the ground, waves rebounding in all directions to furrow the surface. But the bulk

of it was holding steady, not advancing. Even the thunder was muffled.

“They are not aggressing, repeat, not aggressing,” Ralph datavised. “It looks like . . . hell, it looks as though they’ve slammed the door shut. Can you confirm the situation along the rest of the firebreak?”

When he looked from side to side, the cloud was clinging to the scorched soil as far as his enhanced retinas could see. A single, simple barrier that curved back gently until it reached an apex at about three kilometres high. In a way it was worse than before; without the gap this was so uncompromisingly final.

“Confirm that,” Admiral Farquar datavised. “It’s closed up all the way along the firebreak. The coastline edges are lowering, too.”

“Great,” Colonel Palmer swore. “Now what?”

“It’s a psychological barrier, that’s all,” Ralph said quietly. “After all, it’s only water. This changes nothing.”

Colonel Palmer slowly tilted her head back, scanning the height of the quivering fluorescent precipice. She shivered. “Some psychology.”

• • •

lone.

A chaotic moan fluttered out between her lips. She was sprawled on her bed, sliding quietly into sleep. In her drowsy state, the pillow she was cuddling could so easily have been Joshua. **Oh, now what, for Heaven’s sake? Can’t I even dream my fantasies anymore?**

I am sorry to disturb you, but there is an interesting situation developing concerning the Kiint.

She sat up slowly, feeling stubbornly grumpy despite Tranquillity’s best efforts to emphasise its tender concern. It had been a long day, with Meredith’s squadron to deal with on top of all her normal duties. And the loneliness was starting to get to her, too. **It’s all right.** She scratched irritably at her hair. **Being pregnant is making me feel dreadfully randy. You’re just going to have to put up with me being**

like this for another eight months. Then you'll have post-natal depression to cope with.

You have many lovers to choose from. Go to one. I want you to feel better. I do not like it when you are so troubled.

That's a very cold solution. If getting physical was all it took, I'd just swallow an antidote pill instead.

From what I observe, most human sex is a cold activity. There is an awful lot of selfishness involved.

Ninety per cent of it is. But we put up with that because we're always looking for the other ten per cent.

And you believe Joshua is your ten per cent?

Joshua is floating somewhere between the ninety and the ten. I just want him right now because my hormones are completely out of control.

Hormonal production does not usually peak until the later months of a pregnancy.

I always was an early developer. A swift thought directed at the opaqued window allowed a dappled aquamarine light into the bedroom. She reached lethargically for her robe. All right, self-pity hour over. Let's see what our mysterious Kiint are up to. And God help you if it isn't important.

Lieria has taken a tube carriage to the StClément starscraper.

So bloody what?

It is not an action which any Kiint has performed before. I have to consider it significant, especially at this time.

• • •

Kelly Tirrel hated being interrupted while she was running her Present Time Reality programs. It was an activity she was indulging more often these days.

Some of the black programs she had bought were selective memory blockers, modified from medical trauma erasure programs, slithering deep into her natural brain tissue to cauterize her subconscious. They should have been used under supervision, and it certainly wasn't healthy to sup-

press the amount of memory she was targeting, nor for as long. Others amplified her emotional response to perceptual stimuli, making the real world slow and mundane in comparison.

One of the pushers she'd met while she was making a documentary last year had shown her how to interface black programs with standard commercial sensenvirons to produce PTRs. Such integrations were supposedly the most addictive stim you could run. Compulsive because they were the zenith of denial. Escape to an alternative personality living in an alternative reality, where your past with all its inhibitions had been completely divorced, allowing only the present to prevail. Living for the now, yet stretching that now out for hours.

In the realms through which Kelly moved, possession and the beyond were concepts which did not nor could ever exist. When she did emerge, to eat, or pee, or sleep, the real world was the one which seemed unreal; terribly harsh by comparison to the hedonistic existence she had on the other side of the electronic divide.

This time when she exited the PTR she couldn't even recognize the signal her neural nanonics was receiving. Memories of such things were submerged deep in her brain, rising to conscious levels with the greatest of reluctance (and taking longer each time). It was a few moments before she even understood where she was, that this wasn't Hell but simply her apartment. The lights off, the window opaqued, the sheet on which she was lying disgustingly damp, and stinking of urine, the floor littered with disposable bowls.

Kelly wanted to plunge straight back into her electronic refuge. She was losing her grip on her old personality, and didn't give a fuck. The only thing she did monitor was her own decay; overriding fear saw to that.

I will *not* allow myself to die.

No matter how badly the black stimulant programs screwed up her neurones, she wouldn't permit herself to go completely over the edge, not physically. Before that would be zero-tau. The wonderful simplicity of eternal oblivion.

And until then, her brain would live a charmed life, providing pleasure and excitement, and not even knowing it was artificial. Life was to be enjoyed, was it not? Now she knew the truth about death, how did it matter how that enjoyment was achieved?

Her brain finally identified the signal from the apartment's net processor. Someone was at the door, requesting admission. Confusion replaced her dazed resentful stupor. Collins hadn't called on her to present a show for a week (or possibly longer); not since her interview with Tranquillity's bishop when she shouted at him, angry about how cruel his God was to inflict the beyond upon unsuspecting souls.

The signal repeated. Kelly sat up, and promptly vomited down the side of the bed. Nausea swirled inside her brain, shaking her thoughts and memories into a collage which was the exact opposite of the PTR: Lalonde in all its infernal glory. She coughed as her pale limbs trembled and the scar along her ribs flamed. There was a glass on the bedside table, half full of a clear liquid which she fervently hoped was water. Her shaking hand grabbed at it, spilling a quantity before she managed to jam it to her lips and swallow. At least she didn't throw it all back up.

Almost suffocating in misery she struggled off the bed and pulled a blanket around her shoulders. Her neural nanonics medical program cautioned her that her blood sugar level was badly depleted and she was on the verge of dehydration. She cancelled it. The admission request was repeated again.

"Piss off," she mumbled. Light seemed to be shining straight through her eye sockets to scorch her fragile brain. Sucking down air, she tried to work out why her neural nanonics had stopped running the PTR program. It shouldn't happen just because someone datavised her apartment's net processor. Perhaps the slender filaments meshed with her synaptic clefts were getting screwed by her disturbed body chemistry?

"Who is it?" she datavised as she tottered unsteadily through into the main living room.

“Lieria.”

Kelly didn't know any Lieria; at least not without running a memory cell check. She slumped down into one of her deep recliners, pulled the blanket over her legs, and datavised the door processor to unlock.

An adult Kiint was standing in the vestibule. Kelly blinked against the light which poured in around its snow-white body, gawped, then started laughing. She'd done it, she'd totally fucked her brain with the PTR.

Lieria lowered herself slightly and moved into the living room, taking care not to knock any of the furniture. She had to wriggle to fit the major section of her body through the door, but she managed it. An intensely curious group of residents peered in behind her.

The door slid shut. Kelly hadn't ordered it to do that. Her laughter had stopped, and her shakes were threatening to return. This was actually happening. She wanted to go back into the PTR real bad now.

Lieria took up nearly a fifth of the living room, both trac-tamorphic arms were withdrawn into large bulbs of flesh, her triangular head was swinging slightly from side to side as her huge eyes examined the room. No housechimp had been in for weeks to clean up; dust was accumulating; the door to the kitchen was open, showing worktops overflowing with empty food sachets; a loose pile of underwear decorated one corner; her desk was scattered with fleks and processor blocks. The Kiint returned her gaze to Kelly, who curled her limbs up tighter in the recliner.

“H-how did you get down here?” was all Kelly could ask.

“I took the service elevator,” Lieria datavised back. “It was very cramped.”

Kelly started. “I didn't know you could do that.”

“Use an elevator?”

“Datavise.”

“We have some command of technology.”

“Oh. Yes. It's just . . . skip it.” Her reporter's training began to assert itself. A private visit from a Kiint was unheard of. “Is this confidential?”

Lieria's breathing vents whistled heavily. "You decide, Kelly Tirrel. Do you wish your public to know what has become of you?"

Kelly stiffened her facial muscles, whether to combat tears or shame she wasn't sure. "No."

"I understand. Knowledge of the beyond can be disturbing."

"How did you beat it? Tell me, please. For pity's sake. I can't be trapped there. I couldn't stand it!"

"I am sorry. I cannot discuss this with you."

Kelly's cough had come back. She used the back of her hand to wipe her eyes dry. "What do you want, then?"

"I wish to purchase information. Your sensevises of Lalonde."

"My . . . why?"

"They are of interest to us."

"Sure. I'll sell them. The price is knowing how to avoid the beyond."

"Kelly Tirrel, you cannot buy that, the answer is inside you."

"Stop being so fucking obtuse!" she shouted, fury surmounting her consternation of the big xenoc.

"It is the profound wish of my race that one day you will understand. I had intended that by purchasing the data directly from you the money would bring or buy you some peace of mind. If I go directly to the Collins corporation, it will become lost in their accounts. You see, we do not mean you harm. It is not our way."

Kelly stared at the xenoc, depressed by her own incomprehension. Okay, girl, she thought, let's try and work this one out logically. She put her medical monitor program into primary mode, and used the results to bring appropriate suppressor and stimulant programs on-line to try to stabilize body and brain. There wasn't a great deal they could do, but at least she felt calmer and her breathing steadied. "Why do you want to buy them?"

"We have little data on humans who are possessed by re-

turned souls. We are interested. Your visit to Lalonde is an excellent firsthand account.”

Kelly felt the first stirrings of excitement; reporter’s instinct inciting her interest. “Bullshit. That’s not what I meant. If all you wanted was information on possessed humans, you could have recorded my reports directly from Collins as soon as they were released. God knows, they’ve been repeated often enough.”

“They are not complete. Collins has edited them to provide a series of highlights. We understand their commercial reasons for doing so, but this is of no use to us. I require access to the entire recording.”

“Right,” she said with apparent gravity, as if she was giving the proposition appropriately weighty thought. An analysis program had gone primary, refining possible questions in an attempt to narrow the focus. “I can give you full access to the times I came up against the possessed, and my observations of Shaun Wallace. That’s no problem at all.”

“We require a full record from the time you arrived in the Lalonde star system until you departed. All details are of interest to us.”

“All details? I mean, this is a human sensewise, I kept the flek recording the whole time. Standard company procedure. Unfortunately, that includes time when I was visiting the little girls’ room, if you catch on.”

“Human excretion functions do not embarrass us.”

“Shall I cut the time in *Lady Macbeth* for you?”

“Observations and crew impressions of the reality dysfunction from orbit are an integral part of the record.”

“So, how much were you thinking of offering me for this?”

“Please name your price, Kelly Tirrel.”

“One million fuseodollars.”

“That is expensive.”

“It’s a lot of hours you’re asking for. But the offer to edit it down still stands.”

“I will pay you the required amount for a complete recording only.”

Kelly pressed her teeth together in annoyance; it wasn't going to work, the Kiint was far too smart for verbal traps. Don't push, she told herself, get what you can and work out the why later on. "Fair enough. Agreed."

Lieria's tractamorphic flesh extended out into an arm, a Jovian Bank credit disk held between white pincers.

Kelly gave it an interested glance, and rose stiffly from the recliner. Her own credit disk was somewhere on her desk. She walked over to it, all three paces, then plonked herself down in the grey office chair a little too quickly.

"I would suggest you eat something and rest properly before you return to your sensenviron," Lieria datavised.

"Good idea. I was going to." She froze in the act of shoving the fleks and their empty storage cases around. How the hell had the Kiint known what she'd been running? *We have some command of technology.* She gripped the blanket harder with one hand as the other fished her disk from under a recorder block. "Found it," she said with forced lightness.

Lieria shunted the full amount across. The soft flesh of the pincers engulfed the Jovian Bank disk, then parted again to reveal a small dark blue processor block. It was like a conjuring trick which Kelly was in no state to unravel.

"Please insert your fleks in the block," Lieria datavised. "It will copy the recordings."

Kelly did as she was told.

"I thank you, Kelly Tirrel. You have contributed valuable information to our race's store of knowledge."

"Make the most of it," she said grumpily. "The way you're treating us we probably won't be around to contribute for much longer."

The living-room door slid open, scattering a startled crowd of StClément residents. Lieria backed out with surprising ease. When the door closed again Kelly was left by herself with the disconcerting impression that it could all very easily have been a dream. She picked up her credit disk, looking at it in wonder. One million fuseodollars.

It was the key to permanent zero-tau. Her lawyer had been negotiating with Collins to transfer her pension fund

into an Edenist trust account, just like Ashly Hanson. Except she wouldn't be coming out to take a look around every few centuries. Collins's accountants had been reluctant.

Another problem which had sent her into the sham escape of PTR. Now all she needed to do was get to an Edenist habitat. Only their culture had a chance of holding her safe through eternity.

Although . . . that stubborn old part of her mind was asking a thousand questions. What the hell did the Kiint really want?

"Think," she ordered herself fiercely. "Come on, damn it. Think!" Something happened on Lalonde. Something so important that a Kiint walks into my apartment and pays me a million fuseodollars for a record of it. Something we didn't think was important or interesting, because it wasn't released by Collins. So if it wasn't released, how the hell did the Kiint know about it?

Logically, someone must have told them—presumably today or very recently. Someone who has reviewed the whole recording themselves, or at least more of it than Collins released.

Kelly smiled happily, an unfamiliar expression of late. And someone who must have a lot of contact with the Kiint.

• • •

Review every single conversation which the Kiint were involved in over the last week, Ione said. Anything that anyone mentioned about Lalonde, anything at all, however trivial. And if you can't find it, start going through your earlier memories.

I am already reviewing the relevant scenes. There may be a problem with going back further than four days. My short-term memory capacity is only a hundred hours; after that the details are discarded so I may retain salient information. Without this procedure even my memory would be unable to cope with events inside me.

I know that! But it has to be recent for Lieria to go visiting in the middle of the night. I don't suppose the Kiint

said anything among themselves? Grandfather's non-intrusion agreement can hardly apply in this case.

I concur that it cannot be considered. However, I have never been able to intercept detailed affinity conversations between the adult Kiint. At best I can sometimes distinguish what I would define as a murmur.

Damn! If you can't remember, we'll have to haul all the Laymil project staff in and question them individually.

Not necessary. I have found it.

"Brilliant!" Show me.

The memory burst open around her. Bright light was shining down on the beach while glassy ripples lapped quietly against the shoreline. A huge sand castle stood directly in front of her. **Oh, bloody hell.**

• • •

Jay was woken by a hand shaking her shoulder with gentle insistence. "Mummy," she cried fearfully. Wherever she was, it was dark, and even darker shadows loomed over her.

"Sorry, poppet," Kelly stage-whispered. "It's not your mum, it's only me."

Horror fled from the little girl's face, and she hitched herself up in the bed, wrapping her arms around her legs. "Kelly?"

"Yep. And I am really sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you like that."

Jay sniffed the air, highly curious now. "What's that smell? And what time is it?"

"It's very late. Nurse Andrews is going to kill me if I stay for more than a couple of minutes. She only let me in because she knows you and I spent all that time together on *Lady Mac*."

"You haven't visited for ages."

"I know." Kelly was almost crushed by the surge of emotion the girl triggered, the accusation in her tone. "I haven't been terribly well lately. I didn't want you to see me the way I was."

"Are you all right now?"

"Sure. I'm on the way back."

“Good. You promised you’d show me around the studios you work in.”

“And I’ll keep it, too. Listen, Jay, I’ve got some really important questions. They’re about you and Haile.”

“What?” she asked suspiciously.

“I need to know if you told Haile anything about Lalonde, especially in the last couple of days. It’s vital, Jay, honest. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t.”

“I know.” She screwed up her lips, thinking hard. “There was some stuff about religion this morning. Haile doesn’t understand it very well, and I’m not very good at explaining it.”

“What about religion, exactly?”

“It was how many gods there are. I’d told her about the Tyrathca’s Sleeping God temple, you know, the one you showed me, and she wanted to know if that was the same thing as Jesus.”

“Of course,” Kelly hissed. “It wasn’t human possession, it was the Tyrathca section, we never released any of that.” She leaned over and kissed Jay. “Thank you, poppet. You’ve just performed a miracle.”

“Was that *all*?”

“Yeah. That was all.”

“Oh.”

“You snuggle down and get some sleep now. I’ll come visit tomorrow.” She helped pull Jay’s duvet back up and gave the girl another kiss. Jay sniffed inquisitively again, but didn’t comment.

“So?” Kelly asked softly as she walked away from the bed. “You’ve been watching, you know this must be serious. I want to talk to the Lord of Ruin.”

The pediatric ward’s net processor opened a channel to Kelly’s neural nanonics. “Ione Saldana will see you now,” Tranquillity datavised. “Please bring the relevant recordings.”

• • •

Despite being on what he considered excellent terms with the Lord of Ruin, Parker Higgins could still be chilled to the marrow when she gave him one of her expectant looks.

“But I don’t know anything about the Tyrathca, ma’am,”

he complained. Being dragged out of bed straight into a highly irregular crisis conference was playing havoc with his thought processes. Accessing the sensewise recording of Coastuc-RT and seeing the strange silvery structure which the builder-caste Tyrathca had constructed in the middle of the village didn't contribute much to his composure, either.

When he glanced at Kempster Getchell for support he saw the astronomer's eyes were closed as he accessed the recording a second time.

"You're the only xenoc specialists I've got, Parker."

"Laymil specialists."

"Don't quibble. I need advice, and I need it fast. How important is this?"

"Well . . . I don't think we knew the Tyrathca had a religion before this," he ventured.

"We didn't," Kelly said. "I ran a full search program through the Collins office encyclopedia. It's as good as any university library. There's no reference to this Sleeping God at all."

"And neither did the Kiint, so it would seem," Parker said. "They actually came and woke you to ask for the recording?"

"That's right."

Parker was somewhat put out by the reporter's dishevelled appearance. She sat wedged into one corner of the sofa in Ione's private study, a thick cardigan tugged around her shoulders as if it were midwinter. For the last five minutes she had been snatching up salmon sandwiches from a large plate balanced on the sofa's arm, pushing them forcefully into her mouth.

"Well I have to say, ma'am, that it's a relief to find out they don't know everything." A housechimp silently handed him a cup of coffee.

"But is it relevant?" Ione asked. "Were they just so surprised they didn't know about the Sleeping God myth that Lieria simply rushed over to Kelly to confirm it? Or does it have some bearing on our current situation?"

"It's not a myth," Kelly said around another sandwich.

“That’s exactly what I said to Waboto-YAU; and it nearly set the soldiers on me for that remark. The Tyrathca believe absolutely in their Sleeping God. Crazy race.”

Parker stirred his coffee mechanically. “I’ve never known the Kiint to be excited about anything. But then I’ve never known them to be in a rush either, which they obviously were tonight. I think we should examine this Sleeping God in context. You are aware, ma’am, that the Tyrathca do not have fiction? They simply do not lie, and they have a great deal of trouble understanding human falsehoods. The nearest they ever come to lying is withholding information.”

“You mean there really is a Sleeping God?” Kelly asked.

“There has to be a core of truth behind the story,” Parker said. “They are a highly formalized clan species. Individual families maintain professions and responsibilities for generations. Sireth-AFL’s family was obviously entrusted with the knowledge of the Sleeping God. At a guess, I’d say that Sireth-AFL is a descendant of the family which used to deal with electronics while they were on their arkship.”

“Then why not just store the memory electronically?” Kelly asked.

“It probably is stored, somewhere. But Coastuc-RT is a very primitive settlement, and the Tyrathca only ever use appropriate technology. There will be Tyrathca families in that village who know exactly how to build fusion generators and computers, but they don’t actually need them yet, therefore the information isn’t used. They employ water wheels and mental arithmetic instead.”

“Weird,” Kelly said.

“No,” Parker corrected. “Merely logical. The product of a mind that is intelligent without being particularly imaginative.”

“Yet they were praying,” Ione said. “They believe in a God. That requires a leap of imagination, or at least faith.”

“I don’t think so,” Kempster Getchell said. He grinned around, clearly enjoying himself. “We’re messing about with semantics here, and an electronic translator, which is never terribly helpful, it’s too literal. Consider when this

God appeared in their history. Human gods are derived from our pre-science era. There are no new religions, there haven't been for thousands of years. Modern society is far too sceptical to allow for prophets who have personal conversations with God. We have the answer for everything these days, and if it isn't recorded on a flek it's a lie.

"Yet here we have the Tyrathca, who not only don't lie, but encounter a God while they're in a starship. They have the same intellectual analytical tools as we do, and they still call it a God. And they *found* it. That's what excites me, that's what is so important to this story. It isn't indogenous to their planet, it isn't ancient. One of their arkships encountered something so fearfully powerful that a race with the technology to travel between the stars calls it a God."

"That would also mean it isn't exclusive to them," Parker said.

"Yes. Although, whatever it is, it was benign, or even helpful to the arkship in question. They wouldn't consider it to be *their* Sleeping God otherwise."

"Powerful enough to defend the Tyrathca from possessed humans," Ione said. "That's what they claimed."

"Yes indeed. A defence mounted from several hundred light-years distant, at least."

"What the fuck could do that?" Kelly asked.

"Kempster?" Ione prompted as the old astronomer stared away at the ceiling.

"I have absolutely no idea. Although 'sleeping' does imply an inert status, which can be reversed."

"By prayer?" Parker said sceptically.

"They thought it would be able to hear them," Kempster said. "Stronger than all living things was what that breeder said. Interesting. And that mirror-spire shape was supposed to be what it looked like. I'd like to say some kind of celestial event or object, that would fit in finding it in deep space. Unfortunately, there is no natural astronomical object which resembles that."

"Take a guess," Ione said icily.

"Powerful, and in space." The astronomer's face wrinkled

up with effort. "Humm. Trouble is, we have no idea of the scale. Some kind of small nebula around a binary neutron star; or a white hole emission jet—which might account for the shape. But none of those are exactly inert."

"Nor would they be much use against the possessed," Parker said.

"But its existence is enough to fluster the Kiint," Ione said. "And they can manufacture moons, plural."

"Do you think it could help us?" Kelly asked the astronomer.

"Good point," Kempster said. "A highly literal race thinks it can help them against the possessed. QED, it would be able to do the same thing for us. Although the actual encounter must have taken place thousands of years ago. Who knows how much the account had been distorted in that time, even by the Tyrathca? And if it was an event rather than an object, it would presumably be finished by now. After all, Confederation astronomers have catalogued our galaxy pretty thoroughly; and certainly anything odd within ten thousand light-years would be listed. Which is why I'm inclined to go for the inert object hypothesis. I must say, this is a delightful puzzle you've brought to us, young lady; I'd love to know what they did actually find."

Kelly made an impatiently dismissive gesture and leaned forward. "See?" she said to Ione. "This is critical, just like I said. I've provided you with enough to go on. Haven't I?"

"Yes," Ione said with considerable asperity.

"Do I get my flight authorization?"

"What is this? What flight?" Parker asked.

"Kelly wishes to visit Jupiter," Ione said. "To do that she needs my official authorization."

"Do I get it?" Kelly was almost shouting.

Ione's nose crinkled with distaste. "Yes. Now please be silent unless you have a cogent point to make."

Kelly flung herself back into the sofa, a fearsome grin on her face.

Parker studied her for a moment, not at all liking what he found, but forwent any comment. "The evidence we have so

far is depressingly small, but to my mind it does seem to indicate that the Sleeping God is something other than a natural object. Perhaps it is a functional Von Neumann machine, that would certainly have godlike abilities ascribed to it by any culture with inferior technology. Or, I regret to say, some kind of ancient weapon.”

“A manufactured artefact which can attack the possessed over interstellar space. Now that really is an unpleasant thought,” Kempster said. “Although the sleeping qualifier would admittedly be more pertinent in such a case.”

“As you say,” Ione said. “We don’t have nearly enough information to make anything other than wild guesses at this time. That must be rectified. Our real problem is that the Tyrathca have severed all contact with us. And I really don’t think we have any alternative but to ask them.”

“I would certainly advise we pursue that avenue, ma’am. The very possibility that the Sleeping God is real, and may even be able to defeat the possessed on some level, warrants further investigation. If we could . . .” His voice died away as Ione gripped the arms of her chair, blue eyes widening to express something Parker had never thought he would see there: horror.

• • •

Meredith Saldana drifted into the *Arikara*’s bridge; every one of the acceleration couches in the C&C section of the bridge was occupied as his staff officers dedicated themselves to scanning and securing space around Mirchusko.

He slid onto his own acceleration couch and accessed the tactical situation computer. The flagship was hanging a thousand kilometres off Tranquillity’s counter-rotating spaceport, with every sensor cluster and communications system extended. Some spacecraft moved around the habitat’s spaceport and outlying industrial stations, a couple of blackhawks were curving around the spindle to land on the outermost docking ledge, and three He₃ cryogenic tankers were rising over the gas giant’s natural rings en route for the habitat. Apart from that, the only ships flying were squadron members. The frigates were moving smoothly into their en-

globing positions, forming a protective eight thousand kilometre sphere around Tranquillity, complementing the habitat's own formidable SD platforms. His squadron's nine voidhawks were currently deployed right around the gas giant in an attempt to probe the rings for any observation system or hidden ship. An unlikely event, but Meredith was aware of just how much was riding on the Toi-Hoi ambush. When it came to this duty, he was a firm believer in the motto: I'm paranoid, but am I paranoid enough?

"Lieutenant Grese, our current situation, please?" he asked.

"One hundred per cent on-line, sir," the squadron intelligence officer reported. "All starship traffic is shut down. Those blackhawks you can see docking are the last of the flight deploying sensor satellites looking for an energy displacement signature from the Laymil home planet. All of them have obeyed the recall order. We're allowing personnel commuters and tugs to fly out to the industrial stations providing we're informed of their movements in advance. Tranquillity is supplying us with a direct feed from its SD sensor network, which is extremely comprehensive out to one million kilometres. Our only problem with that is that it doesn't appear to have any gravitonic distortion detectors."

Meredith frowned. "That's ridiculous, how does it detect emerging starships?"

"I'm not sure, sir. We did ask, but it just said we're receiving the full datavise from each sensor satellite. My only explanation is that the Lord of Ruin doesn't want us to know the habitat's full detection capability."

Which wasn't something Meredith believed. Somewhat to his surprise, he'd been quite impressed by his young cousin; especially as he'd gone in to meet her with a lot of firmly held preconceptions. He'd been forced to revise most of them under her unyielding dignity and astute political grasp. One thing he was sure of, if she was deliberately imposing limits on her cooperation she wouldn't be duplicitous about it.

"Can our own sensors compensate?" he asked.

“Yes, sir. At the moment, the voidhawks will provide us with an immediate warning of any emergence. But we’ve launched a full complement of gravitonic distortion detector satellites. They’ll provide coverage out to quarter of a million kilometres when they’re in position; that’s in about another twenty minutes, which will free the voidhawks for their next duty.”

“Good, in that case we won’t make an issue of this.”

“Sir.”

“Lieutenant Rhoecus, voidhawk status, please.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the Edenist replied. “There are definitely no ships inside any of Mirchusko’s rings. However, we cannot give any guarantees about smaller stealthed spy satellites. Two hundred and fifty ELINT satellites have been deployed so far, which gives us a high probability of detecting any transmission should there be a spy system observing the habitat. The *Myoho* and the *Oenone* are launching further ELINTs into orbit around each of Mirchusko’s moons in case there’s anything hiding on or under the surface.”

“Excellent. What about covering the rest of the system?”

“We’ve already worked out a swallow flight plan for each voidhawk which will allow them to conduct a preliminary survey in fifteen hours. It will be somewhat cursory, but if there is another ship within two AUs of Mirchusko they should find it. Clear space provides much fewer problems than a gas giant environment.”

“Several blackhawk captains offered to assist us, Admiral,” Commander Kroeber said. “I declined for now, but told them that Admiral Kolhammer may want them for the next stage.”

Meredith resisted a glance in the flagship captain’s direction. “I see. Have you ever served with Admiral Kolhammer, Mircea?”

“No, sir, I haven’t had that pleasure.”

“Well, for your information, I consider it unlikely he’d want the blackhawks along.”

“Yes, sir.”

Meredith raised his voice to address the bridge officers in

general. "Well done, ladies and gentlemen. You seem to have organized this securement most efficiently. My compliments. Commander, please take the *Arikara* out to our englobement coordinate, in your own time."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Acceleration returned to the bridge, building to a third of a gee. Meredith studied the tactical situation display, familiarising himself with the squadron's formation. He was quietly content with the way his ships and crews were performing, especially after the trauma of Lalonde. Unlike some navy officers, Meredith didn't regard the blackhawks as universally villainous, he liked to consider himself a more sophisticated realist than that. If they were going to be betrayed, it was likely to be by an outside agency such as a stealthed spy satellite. But even then, a starship would have to collect the information.

"Lieutenant Lowie, would it be possible to eliminate any spy system hiding in the rings by emp-ing them?"

"Sir, it would require complete saturation," the weapons officer said. "If the Organization has hidden a satellite out there its circuitry will be hardened. The fusion explosion would have to be inside twenty kilometres to guarantee elimination. We don't have that many bombs."

"I see. Just an idea. Rhoecus, I'd like to keep a couple of voidhawks in orbit around Mirchusko so they can monitor starships emerging outside our own sensor range. What effect will that have on the survey?"

"Approximate increase of six hours, Admiral."

"Damn, that's pushing our time envelope." He consulted the tactical situation display again, running analysis programs to calculate the most effective option.

A red dot flared into existence barely ten thousand kilometres away, surrounded by symbols: a wormhole terminus disgorging a ship. And it was nowhere near any of Tranquility's designated emergence zones. Another red dot appeared less than a second later. A third. A fourth. Three more.

"What the hell?"

"Not voidhawks, sir," Lieutenant Rhoecus said. "No

affinity broadcasts at all. They're not responding to Tranquillity or squadron voidhawks, either."

"Commander Kroeber, squadron to combat status. Rhoecus, recall the voidhawks. Can someone get me a visual identification?"

"Coming, sir," Lieutenant Grese datavised. "Two of the intruders are close to an SD sensor satellite."

More wormhole termini were opening. *Arikara's* thermo-dump panels and long-range sensor clusters sank back into their fuselage recesses. The warship's acceleration increased as it sped out to its englobement coordinate.

"Got it, Admiral. Oh, Lord, definitely hostile."

The image relayed into Meredith's neural nanonics showed him a charcoal-grey eagle with a wingspan of nearly two hundred metres; its eyes gleamed yellow above a long chrome-silver beak. His body tensed in reflex, pushing him deeper into the acceleration couch. That was one massively evil-looking creature.

"Hellhawk, sir. Must be from Valisk."

"Thank you, Grese. Confirm the other intruder identities, please."

The tactical situation display showed him twenty-seven bitek starships had now emerged from their wormholes. Another fifteen termini were opening. It was only seven seconds since the first had appeared.

"All of them are hellhawks, sir; eight bird types, four bogus starships, the rest conform to standard blackhawk profile."

"Admiral, the voidhawks have all swallowed back to Tranquillity," Rhoecus said. "Moving out to reinforce the englobement formation."

Meredith watched their purple vector lines slice across the tactical situation display, twisting around to reach the other squadron ships. No use, Meredith thought, no use at all. Fifty-eight hellhawks were ranged against them now, forming a loose ring around the habitat. Tactical analysis programs were giving him an extremely small probability of a successful defensive engagement, even with the squadron

backed up by Tranquillity's SD platforms. And that was reducing still further as more hellhawks continued to swallow in.

"Commander Kroeber, get those blackhawks Tranquillity was using as patrol ships out here as fast as possible."

"Aye, sir."

"Sir!" Grese shouted. "We're registering more gravitonic distortions. Adamist ships, this time. Multiple emergence patterns."

The tactical situation display showed Meredith two small constellations of red dots lighting up. The first was fifteen thousand kilometres ahead of Tranquillity, while the second trailed it by roughly the same amount. Dear God, and I thought Lalonde was bad. "Lieutenant Rhoecus."

"Yes, Admiral?"

"The *Ilex* and the *Myoho* are to disengage. They are ordered to fly to Avon immediately and warn Trafalgar what has happened here. Under no circumstances is Admiral Kolhammer to bring his task force to Mirchusko."

"But, sir . . ."

"That was an order, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

"Grese, can you identify the new intruders?"

"I think so, sir. I think it's the Organization fleet. Visual sensors show front-line warships; I've got frigates, some battle cruisers, several destroyers, and plenty of combat-capable commercial vehicles."

Large sections of the tactical situation display dissolved into yellow and purple hash as electronic warfare pods spun away from the hellhawks, coming on line as soon as they were clear of the energistic effect. The voidhawks continued to supply information on emerging starships. There were now seventy hellhawks ringing Tranquillity; with a hundred and thirty Adamist ships holding station on either side of it.

Arikara's bridge had fallen completely silent.

"Sir," Rhoecus said. "*Ilex* and *Myoho* have swallowed out."

Meredith nodded. "Good." There wasn't a hell of a lot

more he could say. "Commander Kroeber, please signal the enemy fleet. Ask them . . . Ask them what they want."

"Aye, sir."

The tactical situation computer datavised an alarm.

"Combat wasp launch!" Lowie shouted. "The hellhawks have fired."

At such close range, there was nothing the electronic warfare barrage could do to hide the burst of yellow solid rocket exhausts from Meredith's squadron. Each of the hellhawks had launched fifteen combat wasps. Spent solid rocket casings separated as the dazzling plumes of fusion fire sprang out, and they began to accelerate in towards the habitat at twenty-five gees. Over a thousand drones forming an immense noose of light which was swiftly contracting.

Tactical programs went primary in Meredith's neural nanonics. In theory, they had the capacity to fight off this assault, which would leave them with practically zero reserves. And he had to decide now.

It was a hopeless situation, one where instinct fought against duty. But Confederation citizens were being attacked; and to a Saldana duty was instinct.

"Full defensive salvo," Meredith ordered. "Fire."

Combat wasps leapt out of their launch tubes in every squadron ship. Tranquillity's SD platforms launched simultaneously. For a short while, space around the habitat's shell ceased to be an absolute vacuum. Hot streams of energized vapour from the exhausts of four thousand combats wasps sprayed in towards Tranquillity, creating a faint iridescent nebula beset with giddy squalls of turquoise and amber ions. Jagged petals of lightning flared out from the tip of every starscraper, ripping away into the chaotically unstable vortex.

Blackhawks were rising from Tranquillity's docking ledges, over fifty of them sliding out under heavy acceleration to join the fight. Meredith's tactical analysis program began revising the odds. Then he saw several swallow away. In his heart he didn't blame them.

"Message coming in, Admiral," the communications offi-

cer reported. “Someone called Luigi Balsmao, he claims he’s the Organization fleet’s commander. He says: Surrender and join us, or die and join us.”

“What a melodramatic asshole,” Meredith grunted. “Please advise the Lord of Ruin, it’s as much her decision as it is mine. After all, it’s her people who will suffer.”

“Oh, fuck! *Sir!* Another combat wasp launch. It’s the Adamist ships this time.”

Under Luigi’s command, all one hundred and eighty Organization starships fired a salvo of twenty-five combat wasps apiece. Their antimatter drives accelerated them in towards Tranquillity at forty gees.

30

The star wasn't important enough to have a name. The Confederation Navy's almanac office simply listed it as DRL0755-09-BG. It was an average K-type, with a gloomy emission in the lower end of the orange spectrum. The first scoutship to explore its planets, back in 2396, took less than a fortnight to complete a survey. There were only three unremarkable inner, solid planets for it to investigate, none of which were terracompatible. Of the two outer gas giants, the one furthest from the star had an equatorial diameter of forty-three thousand kilometres, its outer cloud layer a pale green with none of the usual blustery atmospheric conditions. As worthless as the solid planets. The innermost gas giant did raise the interest of the scoutship's crew for a short while. Its equatorial diameter was a hundred and fifty-three thousand kilometres, making it larger than Jupiter, and coloured by a multitude of ferocious storm bands. Eighteen moons orbited around it, two of which had high-pressure atmospheres of nitrogen and methane. The complex interaction of their gravity fields prohibited any major ring system from forming, but all of the larger moons shepherded substantial quantities of asteroidal rubble.

The scoutship crew thought that such abundant resources of easily accessible minerals and ores would make it an ideal location for Edenist habitats. Their line company even managed to sell the survey's preliminary results to Jupiter. But once again, DRL0755-09-BG's mediocrity acted against it. The gas giant was a good location for habitats, but not exceptional; without a terracompatible planet the Edenists weren't interested. DRL0755-09-BG was ignored

for the next two hundred and fifteen years, apart from intermittent visits from Confederation Navy patrol ships to check that it wasn't being used by an antimatter production station.

As the *Lady Mac*'s sensor clusters gave him a visual sweep of the penurious star system, Joshua wondered why the navy wasted its time.

He cancelled the image and looked around the bridge. Alkad Mzu was lying prone on one of the spare acceleration couches, her eyes tight shut as she absorbed the external panorama. Monica and Samuel were hovering in the background, as always. Joshua really didn't want them on the bridge, but the agencies weren't prepared to allow Mzu out of their sight now.

"Okay, Doc, now what?" he asked. He'd followed Mzu's directions so that *Lady Mac* emerged half a million kilometres above the inner gas giant's southern pole, near the undulating boundaries of the planet's enormous magnetosphere. It gave them an excellent viewpoint across the entire moon system.

Alkad stirred on her couch, not opening her eyes. "Please configure the ship's antenna to broadcast the strongest signal it can at the one-hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand-kilometre equatorial orbital band. I will give you the code to transmit when you're ready."

"That was the *Beezling*'s parking orbit?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Sarha, get the dish ready for that, please. I think you'd better allow for a twenty-thousand-kilometre error when you designate the beam. No telling what state they were in when they got here. If they don't respond, we'll have to widen the sweep pattern out to the furthest moon."

"Aye, Captain."

"How many people left on this old warship of yours, Doc?" Joshua asked.

Alkad broke away from the image feeding into her neural nanonics. She didn't want to. This was it, the star represented by that stupid little alphanumeric she had carried with her like a talisman for thirty years. Always expecting

him to be waiting here for her; there had been a million first lines rehearsed in those decades, a million loving looks. But now she'd arrived, seen that pale amber star with her own eyes, doubt was gripping her like frostbite. Every other aspect of their desperate plan had fallen to dust thanks to fate and human fallibility. Would this part of it really be any different? A sublight voyage of two and a half light-years. What had the young captain called it? Impossible. "Nine," she said faintly. "There should be nine of them. Is that a problem?"

"No. *Lady Mac* can take that many."

"Good."

"Have you thought what you're going to tell them?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Jesus, Doc; their home planet has been wiped out, you can't use the Alchemist for revenge, the dead are busy conquering the universe, and they are going to have to spend the rest of their lives locked up in Tranquillity. You've had thirty years to get used to the genocide, and a couple of weeks to square up to the possessed. To them it's still good old 2581, and they're on a navy combat mission. You think they're going to take all this calmly?"

"Oh, Mother Mary." Another problem, before she even knew if they'd survived.

"The dish is ready," Sarha said.

"Thanks," Joshua said. "Right, Doc, datavise the code into the flight computer. Then start thinking what you're going to say. And think good, because I'm not taking *Lady Mac* anywhere near a ship armed with antimatter that isn't extremely pleased to see me."

Mzu's code was beamed out by the *Lady Macbeth* in a slim fan of microwave radiation. Sarha monitored the operation as it tracked slowly around the designated orbital path. There was no immediate response—she hadn't been expecting one. She allowed the beam another two sweeps, then shifted the focus to cover a new circle just outside the first.

It took five hours to get a response. The tension and expectation which had so dominated the bridge for the first

thirty minutes had expired long ago. Ashly, Monica, and Voi were all in the galley preparing food sachets when a small artificial green star appeared in the display which the flight computer was feeding Sarha's neural nanonics. Analysis and discrimination programs came on-line, filtering out the gas giant's constant radio screech to concentrate on the signal. Two ancillary booms slid up out of *Lady Macbeth's* hull, unfolding wide broad-spectrum multi-element receiver meshes to complement the main communications dish.

"Somebody's there, all right," Sarha said. "Weak signal, but steady. Standard CAB transponder response code, but no ship registration number. They're in an elliptical orbit, ninety-one thousand kilometres by one hundred and seventy thousand four-degree inclination. Right now they're ninety-five thousand kilometres out from the upper atmosphere." A strangely muffled gulp made her abandon the flight computer's display to check the bridge.

Alkad Mzu was lying flat on her acceleration couch, with every muscle unnaturally stiff. Neural nanonics were busy censoring her body language with nerve overrides. But Sarha could see a film of liquid over her red-rimmed eyes which was growing progressively thicker. When she blinked, tiny droplets spun away across the compartment.

Joshua whistled. "Impressive, Doc. Your old crewmates have got balls, I'll say that for them."

"They're alive," Alkad cried. "Oh, Mother Mary, they're really alive."

"The *Beezling* made it here, Doc," Joshua said, deliberately curt. "Let's not jump to conclusions without facts. All we've got so far is a transponder beacon. What is supposed to happen next, does the captain come out of zero-tau?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Sarha, keep monitoring the *Beezling*. Beaulieu, Liol, let's get back to flight status, please. Dahybi, charge up the nodes, I want to be ready to jump clear if things turn out bad." He started plotting a vector which would take them over to the *Beezling*.

Lady Mac's triple fusion drive came on, quickly building

up to three gees. She followed a shallow arc above the gas giant, sinking towards the penumbra.

“Signal change,” Sarha announced. “Much stronger now, but it’s still an omnidirectional broadcast, they’re not focusing on us. Message coming in, AV only.”

“Okay, Doc,” Joshua said. “You’re on. Be convincing.”

They were still four hundred and fifty thousand kilometres away from the *Beezling*, which produced an awkward time delay. Pressed back into her couch, Alkad could only move her eyes to one side, glancing up at a holoscreen which angled out of the ceiling above her. A magenta haze slowly cleared to show her the *Beezling*’s bridge compartment. It looked as though some kind of salvage team had ransacked the place, consoles had been broken open to show electronic stacks with their circuit cards missing, wall panels had been removed exposing chunks of machinery which were half dismantled. To add to the disorder, every surface was dusted with grubby frost. Over the years, chunks of packaging, latch pins, small tools, items of clothing, and other shipboard debris had all stuck where they’d drifted to rest, giving the impression of inorganic chrysalides frozen in the act of metamorphosis. Awkward, angular shadows overlapped right around the compartment, completing the image of gothic anarchy. There was only one source of illumination, a slender emergency light tube carried by someone in an SII spacesuit.

“This is Captain Kyle Prager here. The flight computer reports we’ve picked up our activation trigger code. Alkad, I want this to be you. Are you receiving this? I’ve got very little left in the way of working sensors. Hell, I’ve got little in the way of anything that works anymore.”

“I’m receiving you, Kyle,” Alkad said. “And it is me, it’s Alkad. I came back for you. I promised I would.”

“Mother Mary, is that really you, Alkad? I’m getting a poor image here, you look . . . different.”

“I’m old, Kyle. Very very old now.”

“Only thirty years, unless relativity is weirder than we thought.”

"Kyle, please, is Peter there? Did he make it?"

"He's here, he's fine."

"Almighty Mary. You're sure?"

"Yes. I just checked his zero-tau pod. Six of us made it."

"Only six? What happened?"

"We lost Tane Ogilie a couple of years ago after he went outside to work on the drive tube. It had to be repaired before we could decelerate into this orbit; there was a lot of systems decay over twenty-eight years. Trouble is, the whole antimatter unit is badly radioactive now. Not even armour could save him from receiving a lethal dose."

"Oh, Mother Mary, I'm sorry. What about the other two?"

"Like I said, we've had a lot of systems decay. Zero-tau can keep you in perfect stasis, but its own components wear out. They went sometime during the voyage, we only found out when we came out to start the deceleration. Both of them suicided."

"I see," she said shakily.

"What happened, Alkad? You're not in any Garissan navy uniform I remember."

"The Omutans did it, Kyle. Just like we thought they would. The bastards went ahead and did it."

"How bad?"

"The worst. Six planet-busters."

Joshua cancelled his link to the communications circuit, turning to the more mundane details of the flight. Some things he just didn't want to hear: the reaction of a man being told his home planet has died.

Lady Mac's sensors were slowly gathering more information on the *Beezling*, allowing the flight computer to refine the warship's location beyond Sarha's initial rough estimate. The gas giant's violent magnetic and electromagnetic emissions were making it difficult. Even this far above the outer atmosphere space was a thick ionic soup, congested with severe energy currents which degraded sensor efficiency.

Joshua altered their flight vector several times as the new figures came in. *Lady Mac* was well over the nightside now, the swirl of particles around her forward fuselage glowing a

faint pink as they were buffeted through the planetary magnetosphere. It played havoc with the support circuitry.

Beaulieu and Liol would datavise flurries of instructions to contain the dropouts, returning the systems to operational status. Joshua monitored Liol's performance, unable to find fault. He'd make a good crewman. Maybe I could offer him Melvyn's slot, except his ego would never allow him to accept. There has to be a way we can settle this.

He turned his attention back to the communications link. After the shocks he'd received, Kyle Prager was reacting badly to Mzu's news of her deal with the agencies and Ione.

"You know I cannot hand it over to anybody else," Prager said. "You should never have brought them here, no matter what you agreed with them."

"What, and leave you to rot?" Alkad replied. "I couldn't do that. Not with Peter here."

"Why not? We planned for it. We would have destroyed the Alchemist and signalled the Confederation Navy for help. You know that. And as for this fable about the dead being alive . . ."

"Mother Mary. We can barely pick up your signal now, and I knew where to look. What sort of condition would you be in five years from now? Besides, there might not be any Confederation left in another five months, let alone five years."

"Better that than risk others learning how to build an Alchemist."

"Nobody is going to learn from me."

"Of course not, but there are so many temptations for governments now the knowledge of its existence has leaked."

"It leaked thirty years ago, and the technology is still safe. This rescue mission is designed to clear up the last loose end."

"Alkad, you're asking too much. I'm sorry my answer has to be no. If you try to rendezvous I will switch off the confinement chambers. We still have a quantity of antimatter left."

"No!" Alkad yelled. "Peter's on board."

"Then stay away."

"Captain Prager, this is Captain Calvert. I'd like to offer a simple solution."

"Please do," Prager answered.

"Shoot the Alchemist down into the gas giant. We'll pick you up after it's gone. Because I can assure you, I'm not going to come anywhere near the *Beezling* with that kind of threat hanging over me."

"I'd like to, Captain, but it will take some time to check over the Alchemist's carrier vehicle. Then the antimatter would have to be reloaded. And even if it still works, you might be able to intercept it."

"That's a very unhealthy case of paranoia you've got there, Captain."

"One that has kept me alive for thirty years."

"All right, try this. If we were possessed or simply wanted to acquire Alchemist technology we wouldn't even have come here. We already have the doc. You're military, you know there are a great many ways information can be extracted from unwilling donors. And we certainly wouldn't have thrown in a crazy story like the possessed to confuse the issue. But we're not possessed, or even hostile to you, so we told you the truth. So I'll tell you what. If you're still not convinced that we want to end the Alchemist threat, then go right ahead and kamikaze."

"No!" Alkad yelled.

"Quiet, Doc. First though, Captain, you put this Peter Adul character in a spacesuit, boot him out the airlock, and let us pick him up. He cannot be allowed to die, not if he knows how to build an Alchemist. The possessed would have him then. Guarding against that technology leakage is part of your duty, too, now. Once we have him, I'll blow you to shit myself if that's what it takes."

"You would, too, wouldn't you?" Prager asked.

"Jesus, yes. After what I've been through chasing the doc, it'll be a pleasure to finish this properly."

"It may be just the lousy reception I'm getting, but you look very young, Captain Calvert."

"Compared to most starship captains, I probably am. But I'm also the only option you have. You either die, or you come with me."

"Kyle," Alkad pleaded. "For Mary's sake!"

"Very well. Captain Calvert, you can rendezvous with the *Beezling* and take my crew off. After that the *Beezling* will be scuttled with the Alchemist on board."

Joshua heard someone on the bridge let out a heavy breath. "Thank you, Captain."

"Christ, what an ungrateful bastard," Liol complained. "Just make sure you invoice him a huge rescue bill, Josh."

"Well that finally settles that question," Ashly chuckled. "You're definitely a Calvert, Liol."

The *Beezling* was in a sorry state. That became increasingly apparent on *Lady Mac*'s final approach phase, when they were rising up behind it from a slightly lower orbit. Both ships were deep inside the penumbra now, although the gigantic orange and white crescent they were fleeing from still cast a glorious coronal glow across them. It was enough for *Lady Mac*'s visual sensors to provide a detailed image while they were still ten kilometres away.

Almost the entire lower quarter of the warship's fuselage plates were missing, with only a simple silver petal pattern left surrounding the drive tubes. The hexagonal stress structure was clearly visible, fencing in black and tarnished chrome segments of machinery. Some units were obviously foreign, jutting up through the centre of the hexagons where they'd been hurriedly inserted to complement or enhance original components. From the midsection forward, the fuselage was relatively intact. There was very little protective foam remaining, just a few dabs of blackened cinderlike flakes. Long silvery scars etched across the dark monobonded silicon told the story of multiple particle impacts. There were hundreds of small craters where the fuselage's molecular-binding generators had suffered localized overloads. Punctures whose vapour and shrapnel had been ab-

sorbed by whatever module or tank was directly underneath. None of the delicate sensor clusters had survived. Only two thermo-dump panels were extended, and they were badly battered; one had a large chunk missing, as if something had taken a bite out of it.

"I'm registering a strong magnetic emission," Beaulieu said as they closed the last kilometre. "But the ship's thermal and electrical activity is minimal. Apart from an auxiliary fusion generator and three confinement chambers the *Beezling* is basically inert."

"No thruster activity, either," said Liol. "They've picked up a tumble. One rotation every eight minutes nineteen seconds."

Joshua checked the radar return, computing a vector around the crippled old ship so he could reach its airlock. "I can dock and stabilize you," he datavisaged to Captain Prager.

"Not much point," Prager replied. "Our airlock chamber was breached by particle impact; and I doubt the latches will work anyway. If you just hold station we'll transfer across in suits."

"Acknowledged."

"Captain," Beaulieu said. "Two fusion drives. They're on an approach vector."

"Jesus!" He accessed the sensors. Half of the image was a ghostly apricot-coloured ocean illuminated by the planetary-sized aurora borealis storms which floated serenely above it. The nighttime sky which vaulted it was a perfect orrery dome of stars where the only movement came from tiny moons racing along their ordained pathways. Red icons were bracketing two of the brighter stars just outside the ecliptic. When Joshua keyed in the infrared they became brilliant. Purple vector lines sprouted out of them, projecting their trajectory in towards him.

"Approximately two hundred thousand kilometres away," Beaulieu said, her synthesized voice sounding completely uncaring. "I think I can confirm the drive signatures; it appears to be our old friends the *Urschel* and the *Raimo*. Both

plasma exhausts have very similar instabilities. If not them, then there are certainly possessed on board.”

“Who else?” Ashly grunted morosely.

Alkad looked around frantically, trying to make eye contact with the crew. They were all looking at Joshua as he lay on his couch, eyes closed, his flat brow producing neat parallel furrows as he frowned in concentration. “What are you waiting for?” she asked. “Take the survivors on board and run. Those ships are too far away to threaten us.”

Sarha waved her hand in annoyance. “They are now,” she said in a low voice. “They won’t be for long. And we’re too close to the gas giant to jump out. We need to be another hundred and thirty thousand kilometres away. In other words, up where they are. That means we can’t boost straight up; we’d fly straight into them.”

“So . . . what then?”

Sarha pointed a finger at Joshua. “He’ll tell us. If there’s a vector out of here, Joshua will find it.”

Alkad was surprised by the amount of respect in the normally volatile crew woman. But then all of the crew were regarding their captain with the kind of hushed expectancy that was usually the province of holy gurus. It made Alkad very uneasy.

Joshua’s eyes flipped open. “We have a problem,” he announced grimly. “Their altitude gives them too much tactical advantage. I can’t find us a vector.” A small regretful dip at the corner of his mouth. “There isn’t even a convenient Lagrange point this time. And I wouldn’t like to risk it anyway, not while we’re so close to a gas giant as big as this one.”

“Fly a slingshot,” Liol said. “Dive straight at the gas giant and go for a jump on the other side.”

“That’s over three hundred thousand kilometres away. *Lady Mac* can probably accelerate harder than the Organization ships, but they’ve got antimatter combat wasps, remember. Forty-five-gee acceleration; we’d never make it.”

“Christ.”

“Beaulieu, put a com beam on them,” Joshua said. “If

they respond, ask them what they want. I'm sure we know, but if nothing else I'd like confirmation."

"Yes, Captain."

"Doc, how do we go about firing the Alchemist at them?"

"You can't," she said simply.

"Jesus, Doc, this is no time for principles. Don't you understand? We have no other way out. None. That weapon is the only advantage we've got left. If we don't kill them, they'll get you, and Peter."

"This is not a question of principle, Captain. It's not physically possible to deploy the Alchemist against starships."

"Jesus." He couldn't believe it. But the doc looked frightened enough. Intuition convinced him she was telling the truth. The navigation program was still producing flight vectors. Dumb forced-calculation, trying out every conceivable probability to find one which would let them escape. The plots flickered in and out of existence at a subliminal speed, miniature purple lightning bolts crackling around the inside of his head. Throw in wild card manoeuvres, lunar slingshots, Lagrange points. Pray! It didn't make the slightest difference. The Organization frigates had thoroughly outmanoeuvred him. His one hope had been the Alchemist, a super-doomsday machine, a nuke to kill a couple of ants.

I have come so far I can actually see the ship it's stored in. I can't lose now, not with these stakes.

"Okay, Doc, I want to know exactly what your Alchemist does, and how it does it." He clicked his fingers at Monica and Samuel. "You two, I'll stay in Tranquillity if we survive this, but I have to know."

"God, Calvert, I'll stay there with you if that's what it takes," Monica told him. "Just get us out of this."

"Joshua," Sarha said. "You can't."

"Give me an alternative. It gets Liol's vote. He'll be captain then."

"I'm crew, Josh. This is your ship."

"Now he tells me. Datavise the file, Doc. Now, please." Information leapt into his mind as the files came over. Theory, application, construction, deployment, operational para-

meters. All neatly indexed with helpful cross-referencing. The blueprints of how to slay a star; in fact, build enough and you could slay an entire galaxy; or even just . . . Joshua flicked instantaneously back to the operational aspects. Pumped a few figures of his own into Mzu's coldly simple equations.

"Jesus, Doc, it wasn't a rumour. You really are dangerous, aren't you?"

"Can you do it?" Monica asked. She wanted to shout the question at him, jolt him out of that infuriating complacency.

Joshua winked at her. "Absolutely. Look, we came off badly down in that ironberg yard because that's not my territory. This is. In space, we win."

"Is he serious?" Monica appealed to the rest of the bridge.

"Oh, yes," Sarha said. "If anyone gets hostile with *Lady Mac*, they just crash straight into his ego."

• • •

High York posed a difficult problem of interpretation for Louise. The AV pillar in the *Jamrana's* lounge shone its image down her optic nerve throughout the entire approach phase. There was no colour, space was so black she couldn't even see the stars. The asteroid was different to Phobos's chiselled cylinder, a grizzled irregular lump which the ship's sensors seemed incapable of bringing into proper focus. Mechanical artefacts were shunting out of its puckered surface at all angles, though she wasn't quite sure if she had the scale right. If she had, then they were bigger than the largest ship ever to ply Norfolk's seas.

Fletcher was in the lounge with her. From the few comments he made he understood even less of the image than she did.

Genevieve, of course, was in her tiny cabin playing games on her processor block. She'd found a soul mate in one of Pieri's younger cousins; the pair of them had taken to locking themselves away for hours at a time to tackle battalions of Trafalgar Greenjackets or skate through puzzles of

five-dimensional topology. Louise wasn't entirely happy with her sister's new hobby, but on the other hand she was grateful she didn't have the duty of keeping her amused during the flight.

High York's disk-shaped spaceport traversed the AV image, eclipsing the asteroid itself. A high-pitched whine vibrated out of the lounge walls, and the *Jamrana* drifted forwards. And still there was no glimpse of Earth. Louise had really been looking forwards to that. Pieri would align a sensor on the planet for her if she asked, she was sure; but right now the whole Bushay family was involved in the docking procedure.

Louise asked her processor block for an update on their approach, and studied the display which appeared on its screen while it accessed the ship's flight computer. "Four minutes until we dock," she said. Assuming she was reading the tables of figures and coloured lines correctly.

She'd spent a large portion of the flight working through the block's tutorial programs until she could manage the unit's more basic display and operation modes. She didn't need to ask anyone's help to manage her medical nanonic packages, and she could monitor the baby's health continually. It gave her a good feeling. So much of Confederation life was centred around the casual use of electronics.

"Why so nervous, my lady?" Fletcher asked. "Our voyage ends. With Our Lord's mercy we have prevailed once more against the most inopportune circumstances. We have returned to the good Earth, the cradle of humanity. Though I fear that which has befallen me, I can do naught but rejoice at our homecoming."

"I'm not nervous," she protested unconvincingly.

"Come now, lady."

"All right. Look, it's not getting here; I'm really delighted we've made it. I suppose it's silly of me, but something about being on Earth is very reassuring. It's old and it's very strong, and if people are going to be safe anywhere, then it'll be here. That's the problem. Something Endron said about it keeps bothering me."

“You know that if I can assist you, I will.”

“No. It’s nothing you can help with. That’s the point. Endron told me we wouldn’t get through High York’s spaceport; that there would be inspections and examinations, awfully strict ones. It’ll be nothing like arriving at Phobos. And everything I’ve heard from Pieri just confirms that. I’m sorry, Fletcher, I don’t think we’re going to make it, I really don’t.”

“And yet we must,” he said softly. “That fiend Dexter cannot prevail. Should the necessity become apparent, I will surrender myself and warn Earth’s rulers.”

“Oh, no, Fletcher, you can’t do that. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

“Yet still you doubt me, Lady Louise. I see your heart crying in pain. That is a source of grief for me.”

“I don’t doubt you, Fletcher. It’s just that . . . If we can’t get through, then Quinn Dexter won’t manage it either. That would mean your whole journey is for nothing. I hate that.”

“Dexter is stronger than I, lady. I hold that bitter memory quite plainly. He is also more cunning and ruthless. If there is but a single chink in the armour of Earth’s valiant harbourmasters he will find it.”

“Heavens, I hope not. Quinn Dexter loose on Earth is too horrible to think about.”

“Aye, my lady.” His fingers clasped hers to emphasise his determination. Something he rarely did, shying away from physical contact with people. It was almost as if he feared contamination.

“That is why you must swear faithfully to me that should I stumble in my task you must pick up the torch and carry on. The world must be warned of Quinn Dexter’s devilish intent. And if possible you must also seek out this Banneth of whom he spoke with such animosity. Alert her to his presence, emphasise the danger she will face.”

“I’ll try, Fletcher, really I will. I promise.” Fletcher was prepared to sacrifice his new life and eternal sanity to save others. Her own goal of reaching Joshua seemed so petty

and selfish in comparison. "Be careful when we disembark," she urged.

"I place my trust in God, my lady. And if they catch me—"

"They won't!"

"Ah, now who has adopted a frail bravado? As I recall, 'twas you who warned me of what lies crouched beside the road ahead."

"I know."

"Forgive me, lady. I see that once again my tact is left wanting."

"Don't worry about me, Fletcher. I'm not the one they'll put into zero-tau."

"Aye, lady, I confess that prospect is one I shrink from. I know in my heart I will not last long in such black confinement."

"I'll get you out," she vowed. "If they put you in zero-tau I'll get it switched off, or something. There will be lawyers I can hire." She patted her ship-suit's breast pocket, feeling the outline of the Jovian Bank credit disk. "I have money."

"Let us hope it proves sufficient, my lady."

She gave him what she hoped was a bright smile, making out that everything was settled. So that's that.

The *Jamrana* trembled, shaking loose small flocks of jumble. Clangs rumbled down the central ladder shaft as the spaceport docking latches engaged.

"That's funny," Louise said. The display on the block's screen was undergoing a drastic change.

"Is something the matter, lady?"

"I don't think so. It's just odd, that's all. If I'm reading this right, the captain has given the spaceport total access to the flight computer. They're running some really comprehensive diagnostic programs, checking everything on board."

"Is that bad?"

"I'm not sure." Louise stiffened, glancing around self-consciously. She cleared her throat. "They're also accessing the internal cameras. Watching us."

"Ah."

"Come along, Fletcher. We must get ready to leave."

"Yes, ma'am, of course."

He had dropped right back into the estate servant role without a blink. Louise hoped the cameras wouldn't pick up her furtive smile as she pushed off from the deck.

Genevieve's cabin was full of four inch light cubes, each of them a different colour. Little creatures were imprisoned inside them, as if they were cages made of tinted glass. The projection froze as Louise activated the door, an orchestral rock track faded away.

"Gen! You're supposed to be packed. We're here, you know, we've arrived."

Her little sister peered at her through the transparent lattice, red-eyed and frazzled. "I've just disarmed eight of the counter-program's Trogois warriors, you know. I've never got that far before."

"Bully for you. Now get packed, you can play it again later. We're leaving."

Genevieve's face darkened in petulant rebellion. "It's not fair! We're always having to leave places the moment we arrive."

"Because we're travelling, silly. We'll get to Tranquillity in another couple of weeks, then you can put down roots and sprout leaves out of your ears for all I care."

"Why can't we just stay in the ship? The possessed can't get inside if we're flying about."

"Because we can't fly about forever."

"I don't see—"

"Gen, do as you're told. Turn this off and get packed. Now!"

"You're not Mother."

Louise glared at her. Genevieve's stubborn mask collapsed, and she started to sob.

"Oh, Gen." Louise skimmed across the narrow space and caught hold of the small girl. She ordered the processor block off, and the glowing bricks flickered into dewy sparkles before vanishing altogether.

"I want to go home," Genevieve blurted. "Home to Cricklade, not Tranquillity."

"I'm sorry," Louise cooed. "I haven't been paying you much attention on this flight, have I?"

"You've got things to worry about."

"When did you go to sleep last?"

"Last night."

"Humm." Louise put a finger under her sister's chin and lifted her face, studying the dark lines under her eyes.

"I can't sleep much in zero-g," Genevieve confessed. "I keep thinking I'm falling, and my throat all clogs up. It's awful."

"We'll book into a High York hotel, one that's on the biosphere's ground level. Both of us can have a real sleep in a proper bed then. How does that sound?"

"All right, I suppose."

"That's the way. Just imagine, if Mrs Charlsworth could see us now. Two unmarried landowner girls, travelling without chaperones, and about to visit Earth with all its decadent arcologies."

Genevieve attempted a grin. "She'd go loopy."

"Certainly would."

"Louise, how am I going to take this block back home? I really don't want to give it up now."

Louise turned the slim innocuous unit around in front of her. "We escaped the possessed, and we've flown halfway across the galaxy. You don't really think smuggling this back to Cricklade is going to be a problem for the likes of us, do you?"

"No." Genevieve perked up. "Everyone's going to be dead jealous when we get back. I can't wait to see Jane Walker's face when I tell her we've been to Earth. She's always going on about how exotic her family holidays on Melton island are."

Louise kissed her sister's forehead and gave her a warm hug. "Get packed. I'll see you up at the airlock in five minutes."

There was only one awkward moment left. All of the

Bushay family had gathered by the airlock at the top of the life-support section to say goodbye. Pieri was torn between desperation and having to contain himself in front of his parents and his cluster of extended siblings. He managed a platonick peck on Louise's cheek, pressing against her for longer than required. "Can I still show you around?" he mumbled.

"I hope so." She smiled back. "Let's see how long I'm there for, shall we?"

He nodded, blushing heavily.

Louise led the way along the airlock tube, her flight bag riding on her back like a haversack. A man was floating just beyond the hatch at the far end, dressed in a pale emerald tunic with white lettering on the top of the sleeve. He smiled politely.

"You must be the Kavanagh party?"

"Yes," Louise said.

"Excellent. I'm Brent Roi, High York customs. There are a few formalities we have to go through, I'm afraid. We haven't had any outsystem visitors since the quarantine started. That means my staff are all sitting around kicking their heels with nothing to do. A month ago you could have shot straight through here and we wouldn't even have noticed you." He grinned at Genevieve. "That's a huge bag you've got there. You're not smuggling anything in are you?"

"No!"

He winked at her. "Good show. This way please." He started off down the corridor, flipping at the grab hoops to propel himself along.

Louise followed with Genevieve at her heels. She heard a whirring sound behind. The hatch back to the *Jamrana* was closing.

No way back now, she thought. Not that there ever had been.

At least the customs man appeared friendly. Perhaps she had been fretting too much about this.

The compartment Brent Roi led her into was just like a broader section of the corridor, cylindrical, ten metres long

and eight wide. There were no fittings apart from five lines of grab hoops radiating out from the entrance.

Brent Roi bent his legs and kicked off hard as soon as he was through the hatch. When Louise went in he had already joined the others lining the walls. She looked around, her heart fluttering apprehensively. A dozen people were anchored to stikpads all around her, she couldn't see their faces, they all wore helmets with silver visors. Each of them was holding some sort of boxy gun. The stub muzzles were pointed at Fletcher the instant he popped out of the hatchway.

"Is this customs?" she asked in a failing voice.

Genevieve's small hand curled around her ankle. "Louise!" She clambered up her big sister's body like mobile ivy. The two girls clung to each other fearfully.

"The ladies are not possessed," Fletcher said calmly. "I ask you not to endanger them. I shall not resist."

"Too fucking right you won't, you son of a bitch," Brent Roi snarled.

• • •

Ashly fired the MSV's thrusters: too hard, too long. He cursed. The drift had been reversed, not halted. Pressure was wiring him close to overload. Mistakes like this could cost them a lot more than their lives. He datavised another set of directives into the craft's computer, and the thrusters fired again, a shorter, milder burst this time.

The MSV came to rest three metres above the launch tube's hatch. Like the rest of the *Beezling's* fuselage it was badly scarred and mauled. But intact.

"No particle penetration," he datavised. "It seems to be undamaged."

"Good, get it open," Joshua answered.

Ashly was already extending three of the MSV's waldo arms. He shoved a clamp hand straight into the mounting hole left by a broken sensor cluster and expanded the segments, securing the MSV in place. A fission blade came on, burning a lambent saffron at the tip of the second arm. Ashly

used it to slice into the fuselage at the rim of the hatch, then began to saw around.

Both the *Beezling* and the MSV trembled energetically. The computer datavised a series of clamp stress cautions, their grip on the mounting had shifted slightly. "Joshua, another one of those and you're going to shake me loose."

"Sorry. Won't happen again, we're docked now."

Ashly accessed the MSV's small sensor suite. The *Lady Mac* had attached herself to the rear of the *Beezling*, her aft hold-down latches engaging with the warship's corresponding locks. A slim silver piston slid out of her ring of umbilical couplings, weaving around slowly as it sought out a socket on the *Beezling* to mate with.

Spacesuited figures wearing manoeuvring packs were flitting towards the bright circle of light which was *Lady Macbeth's* open airlock. A third of the way around her fuselage one of her combat wasp launch tubes had opened. The front section of a combat wasp had risen up out of it, a dark tapering cylinder bristling with sensors and antennae. Beaulieu was working on it, her glossy body alive with reflected streaks of salmon-pink light that rippled fluidly with every movement. She had anchored her feet in the midsection grid which contained the drone's tanks and generators. One of the submunitions chamber covers had already been removed; now she was busy extracting the cluster of electronic warfare pods from inside.

The MSV's waldo arm finished cutting around the *Beezling's* hatch. Ashly grabbed it with the heavy-load arm and pulled it free. A strew of dust motes and composite shavings popped out, quickly dwindling away. The MSV's external lights swung around, and he was looking straight down into a smooth white cylinder which nested a sleek conical missile whose silver surface was polished brighter than any mirror.

"Is this the right one?" he asked, including his retinal image into the datavise.

"That is the Alchemist carrier, yes," Mzu replied.

“There’s no response from any processors in there. Temperature is a hundred and twenty absolute.”

“It won’t have affected the Alchemist.”

Ashly said nothing, hoping her self-confidence was as justified as Joshua’s. He extended one of the MSV’s manipulator waldos into the launch tube and fastened it around the apex of the carrier vehicle’s nose cone. Triangular keys found the locking pins, and turned them. He retracted the arm carefully, bringing the nose cone with it. The base was studded with junctions for the thermal shunt circuits, which were reluctant to separate; after thirty years the vacuum and the cold had melded them together. Ashly increased the tension on the waldo, and they tore free with a judder which the arm’s inertia absorber could barely cope with.

“That’s it?” Ashly datavisied when the nose cone was lifted clear.

“That’s it,” Mzu confirmed.

The Alchemist was a single globe one and a half metres in diameter, its seamless surface a neutral grey colour. It was held in place by five carbotanium spider-leg struts which encased it neatly, their inner surfaces lined with adjustable pads to maintain a perfect grip.

“You should be able to detach the entire restraint mechanism,” Mzu datavisied. “Sever the data and power cables if necessary; they’re not necessary anymore.”

“Okay.” He moved the manipulator waldo down the side of the Alchemist and used its small sensors to inspect the machinery he found below it. “This shouldn’t take long, the rivets are standard. I can cut them.”

“Fast, please, Ashly,” Joshua datavisied. “The Organization ships are only twenty-four minutes away.”

“Gotcha. I’ll have this with Beaulieu in three minutes.” He moved the first of the manipulator’s tools forwards. “Doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Why bother with a specialist carrier vehicle if it can be deployed in an ordinary combat wasp?”

“That carrier vehicle is designed to shoot the Alchemist

into a star. Admittedly that's a large target, but we can't take starships very close to one. The carrier has to be fully insulated from the star's heat and radiation, and it also has to be fast enough to avoid interception from combat wasps in the event we were detected. We built it to accelerate up to sixty-five gees."

Ashly would have liked to have called her bluff. But given their current situation, ignorance and blind faith made life altogether less stressful.

• • •

Monica didn't leave Alkad alone in the EVA preparation compartment, but she did permit her a discreet distance. Two other operatives were with her, ready to inspect the *Beezling's* crew to make sure they brought nothing threatening with them into the *Lady Macbeth*.

Alkad didn't really notice the agent's presence, every aspect of her life had been under continual observation for so long now that intrusion meant nothing. Not even for this most precious occasion.

She anchored herself to a stikpad in front of the airlock hatch, waiting with outwards patience. When she sorted through her feelings she found the rightful edgy anticipation, but perhaps not so much of it as there should have been. Thirty years. Can you really stay in love with someone for that long? Or did I just keep the ideal of love alive? One small illusion of humanity in a personality which deliberately and methodically set about excluding any other form of emotional weakness.

Well enough, there were memories of the good times. Memories of shared ideals. And of course memories of affection, adoration, and intimacy. But shouldn't real love require the continuing presence of the loved one in order to sustain itself and constantly renew? Has Peter really become nothing more than a concept suborned, just another excuse to retain my commitment?

The doubts tempted her to turn and flee from the moment. In any case, I'm over sixty and he's still thirty-five. A hand started up towards her face, wanting to fork her hair back or

tidy it. Silly. If she was so concerned about her appearance she should have done something about it long ago. Cosmetic packages, hormone gland implants, gene therapy. Except Peter would have hated her resorting to such untruthful indignities.

Alkad forced the delinquent hand down. The LEDs on the airlock's control processor changed from red to green, and the circular hatch swung back.

Peter Adul was first out, the others had allowed him that civility. His SII suit's silicon film had withdrawn from his head so she could see all the features she remembered so well. He stared back at her, a frightened smile on his lips. "White hair," he said gently. "I never imagined that. Lots of things, but never that."

"It's not so bad. I imagined much worse happening to you."

"But it didn't. And we're here. And you came to rescue us. After thirty years, you really came back here for us."

"Of course I did," she said, abruptly indignant.

Peter grinned wickedly. She laughed back, and launched herself into his arms.

• • •

Joshua was accessing the MSV's external sensors to monitor Ashly's and Beaulieu's efforts to integrate the Alchemist with their combat wasp. Ashly was using a waldo arm to edge the device down into the submunitions chamber which the cosmonik had cleared. The Alchemist would fit, but the restraint arms folded around it were causing problems. Beaulieu had already sliced a couple of chunks off the carb-otanium struts when they scraped against the chamber walls. This was one incredibly crude kludge-up from start to finish. But it didn't need excessive sophistication to work, just a secure mounting.

Superimposed across the sensor image were the *Lady Mac*'s systems schematics, enabling him to keep a slightly more than cursory eye on their performance. Liol and Sarha were prepping the ship for high acceleration, shutting down all redundant ancillary equipment, cycling fluids back out of

weight-vulnerable pipes and into their tanks, bringing the tokamaks up to full capacity so their power would be available for the molecular-binding force generators. Dahybi was running diagnostics through all the zero-tau facilities on board.

By rights the expectancy should have reduced his brain to a small knot of psychoses by now. Instead he had the oldest excuse of being too busy to worry. That and a wonderful burn of pure arrogance. It *can* work. After all, it was only marginally more crazy than the Lagrange point stunt.

Too bad I'll never be able to brag about this one in Harkey's Bar.

Which was actually more of a concern than the manoeuvre itself. I can't stay in Tranquillity for the rest of my life. I should never have mentioned it to the agents.

He saw Ashly extract the waldo from the combat wasp, leaving the Alchemist behind. Beaulieu reached forwards to hold a hose over the top of the submunitions chamber. A frayed jet of treacly topaz-coloured foam shot out of the nozzle, surging all around the Alchemist. It was a duopoxy sealant, used by the astronautics industry for quick, temporary repairs. The cosmonik moved the nozzle in smooth assured motions, making sure the foam completely encapsulated the Alchemist, cementing it into the combat wasp.

"Ashly, take the MSV around to the main airlock and transfer over in your suit," Joshua datavised.

"What about the MSV?"

"I'm dumping it here. It was never designed to withstand the kind of acceleration we'll be undergoing. That makes it a hazard, especially with all the reaction thruster volatiles it has in its tanks."

"You're the captain. But what about the spaceplane?"

"I know. You just get back in; we've only got sixteen minutes left before the Organization ships get here."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

"Liol."

"Yes, Captain?"

“Jettison the spaceplane, please. Beaulieu, how’s it going?”

“Fine, Captain. I’ve got it covered. The sealant is bonding, should be set in another fifty seconds.”

“Excellent work. Get back inside.” Joshua datavised the flight computer for a secure channel to the combat wasp. The drone came on-line, and he started its launch sequence program. Once its internal processors were operative he loaded in the flight vector he’d formatted. “Doc, it’s time to find out how good you are.”

“I understand, Captain.”

She accessed the processor governing the combat wasp’s chamber which the Alchemist was riding in and used it to datavise a long activation code at the device. It datavised an acknowledgement back to her. The display in Joshua’s mind opened out rapidly to accommodate the new iconic representation: parallel sheets of dark information stacked as high as Heaven. They came alive with interlocking grids of purple and yellow that shone like channelled starfire. Perspective switch, and the sheets were concentric spherical shells, coming alight from the core outwards. Information and energy arranging themselves in a precise, and very specific, pattern.

“It’s working,” Alkad datavised.

“Jesus Christ.” The neurovirtual jewel glimmered at the centre of his brain, complex beyond human comprehension. It was an outrageous irony that something so deliciously intricate and beautiful should be the harbinger of so much destruction. “Okay, Doc, set it for neutronium. I’m launching in twenty seconds—mark.”

• • •

Lady Mac’s spaceplane had risen up out of her hangar as thermo-dump panels and sensor cluster booms shrank back the other way. Ashly caught one last glimpse of it as he swept down into the airlock. The circular docking ring clamped around its nose cone had just disengaged, allowing it to drift free, then Beaulieu’s shiny brass silhouette oc-

cluded the airlock hatch behind him, and that was the end of it.

Pity, he thought, it was a lovely little machine.

As soon as the airlock's outer hatch closed the cylindrical chamber was fast-flooded with air. The flight computer's datavised display revealed their status. Joshua was already firing the thrusters to align them on their new flight vector. Combat wasp launch tubes were opening.

Ashly and Beaulieu dived out of the airlock, racing for the bridge. There was nobody in any of the decks they passed through. Several open cabin doors showed them active zero-tau pods.

The combat wasp carrying the Alchemist completed its fusion drive ignition sequence and launched. A quick cheer from the bridge echoed through *Lady Mac*'s empty compartments. Then ten more combat wasps were firing out of their tubes and chasing after the first. The whole salvo headed down towards the gas giant at twenty-five gees.

Ashly flew through the bridge's floor hatch just behind Beaulieu.

"Stations, please," Joshua said. He triggered *Lady Mac*'s three fusion tubes, giving Ashly barely enough time to roll onto his acceleration couch before gravity pushed down. Restraint webbing closed over him.

"Signal from the Organization ships," Sarha said. "They know who we are, they're asking for you by name, Joshua."

Joshua accessed the communications circuit. The image which his neural nanonics provided was shaky and stormed with static. It showed him a frigate's bridge, with figures lying flat on acceleration couches. One of them was dressed in a double-breasted suit of chocolate-brown worsted with slim silver-grey pinstripes, a wide-brimmed black fedora was resting on the console beside him. Joshua puzzled that one for a moment, the frigate was decelerating at seven gees. The fedora should have been squashed flat.

"Captain Calvert?"

"You got me."

"I'm Oscar Kearn, and Al put me in charge around here."

“Joshua,” Liol datavised. “The frigates are flipping over again. They’re starting to chase us.”

“Acknowledged.” He increased the *Lady Mac*’s acceleration, taking her up to seven gees.

Ashly groaned in chagrin before activating his acceleration couch’s zero-tau field. Black stasis closed around him, ending the punishing force. Alkad Mzu and Peter Adul joined him.

“Glad to meet you, Oscar,” Joshua had to datavise, his jaw was far too heavy to move.

“My people, they tell me you just fired something down at the big planet. I hope you ain’t been stupid, pal, I really do. Was it what I think it was?”

“Absolutely. No more Alchemist for anybody.”

“You dumb asshole. That’s a third of your options gone. Now you listen good, sonny boy, you switch off your ship’s engines and you hand over Mzu to me and there ain’t nobody gonna get hurt. That’s your second option.”

“No shit? Let me guess what the third is.”

“Don’t be a pumpkinhead, sonny. Remember, after we waste you and your rinky-dink ship, we’re only interested in giving the Mzu dame a new body. It’s the beyond for you, pal, for the rest of time. And take a tip from someone who’s been there, it ain’t worth it. Nothing is. So you just hand her over nice and smooth, and I don’t say nothing to the boss about you deep-sixing the Alchemist.”

“Mr Kearn, go screw yourself.”

“You call that Alchemist back, sonny. I know you got a radio control on the combat wasp. You call it back or I tell my crews to open fire.”

“If you blow up the *Lady Mac* you’ll definitely never get it, will you? Think about it, I’ll give you as much time as you need.” Joshua closed the communications link.

“How much more of this bloody acceleration?” Monica datavised.

“Seven gees?” Joshua replied. “None at all.” He increased the thrust up to a full ten gees.

Monica couldn’t even groan; her throat was sagging

under its own weight. It was ridiculous, her lungs couldn't inhale properly, her artificial tissue muscle implants were all in her limbs, not her chest. If she tried to hang on she'd end up asphyxiating. Keeping Mzu under observation was no longer an option. She would simply have to trust Calvert and the other crew members. "Good luck," she datavised. "See you on the other side."

The flight computer informed Joshua she'd activated her acceleration couch's zero-tau field. That left him with only three people who hadn't sought refuge in stasis: Beaulieu, Dahybi, and of course Liol.

"Status report, please," he datavised to them.

Lady Mac's systems and structure were both holding up well. But then Joshua knew she was capable of withstanding this acceleration, her real test was going to come later.

Seventy thousand kilometres behind her, the two Organization frigates were accelerating at eight gees, which was the limit of their afflicted drives. Their crews were hurriedly assembling situation outlines and summaries for Oscar Kearn, detailing how long it would be before the *Lady Macbeth* was outside the interception range of their combat wasps.

Ahead of all three ships, the salvo of eleven combat wasps were rushing towards the gas giant. There was no way any sensor could determine which was carrying the Alchemist, making any interdiction virtually impossible.

The status quo was held for over fifteen minutes before Oscar Kearn reluctantly admitted to himself that Calvert and Mzu weren't going to hand over the device, nor surrender themselves. He ordered the *Urschel* and the *Raimo* to launch their combat wasps at *Lady Macbeth*.

"No good," Joshua grunted savagely as *Lady Mac's* sensors showed him the sudden upsurge in the frigates' infrared emission signature. "You can't dysfunction this chunk of reality, pal."

The Alchemist was ninety seconds away from the gas giant's upper atmosphere. Its management programs began to orchestrate the complex energy patterns racing through its

nodes into the sequence Mzu had selected. Once it was primed, activation occurred within two picoseconds. Visually it could hardly be less spectacular; the Alchemist's surface turned infinitely black. The physics behind the change was somewhat more involved.

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"What I did," Alkad had datavised to Joshua when he asked her how it functioned, "was to work out how to combine a zero-tau field and the energy compression technique which a starship jump node utilizes. In this case, just as the energy density approaches infinite the effect is frozen. Instead of expelling the patterning node out of the universe, you get a massive and permanent space-time curvature forming around it."

"Space-time curvature?"

"Gravity."

• • •

Gravity at its strongest is capable of bending light itself, pulling at individual photons with the same tenacity as it once did Newton's apple. In nature, the only mass dense enough to produce this kind of gravity is formed at the heart of a stellar implosion. A singularity whose gravity permits nothing to escape: no matter, no energy.

At its highest setting the Alchemist would become such a cosmological entity; its surface concealed by an event horizon into which everything can fall and nothing return. Once inside the event horizon, electromagnetic energy and atoms alike would be drawn to the core's surface and compress to phenomenal densities. The effect is cumulative and exponential. The more mass which the black hole swallows, the heavier and stronger it becomes, increasing its surface area and allowing its consumption rate to rise accordingly.

If the Alchemist was fired into a star, every gram of matter would eventually plunge below the invincible barrier which gravity erected. That was Alkad Mzu's humane solution. Omuta's sun would not flare and rupture, would never endanger life on the planet with waves of heat and radiation. Instead the sun would shrink and collapse into a small black

sphere, with every erg of its fusing nuclei lost to the universe for ever. Omuta would be left circling a non-radiative husk, its warmth slowly leaking away into the now permanent night. Ultimately, the air itself would become cold enough to condense and fall as snow.

But there was the second setting, the aggressive one. Paradoxically, it actually produced a weaker gravity field.

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The Alchemist turned black as zero-tau claimed it. However, the gravity it generated wasn't strong enough to produce a singularity with an event horizon. However, it was easily capable of overcoming the internal forces which designate an atom's structure. The combat wasp immediately flashed into plasma and enfolded it. All electrons and protons within the envelope were crushed together, producing a massive pulse of gamma radiation. The emission faded rapidly, leaving the Alchemist cloaked in a uniform angstrom-deep ocean of superfluid neutrons.

When it struck the outer fringes of the atmosphere a searing white light flooded out to soak hundreds of square kilometres of the upper cloud bands. Seconds later the deeper cloud layers were fluorescing rosy pink while internal shadows surged through torn cyclones like mountain-sized fish. Then the light vanished altogether.

The Alchemist had reached the semisolid layers of the gas giant's interior, and was punching through with almost no resistance. Matter under tremendous pressure was crushed against the device, which absorbed it greedily. Every impacting atom was squeezed directly into a cluster of neutrons that plated themselves around the core. The Alchemist was swiftly buried under a mantle of pure neutronium, which boasted a density that exceeded that of atomic nuclei.

As the particles were compressed by the device's extraordinary gravity field, they liberated colossal quantities of energy, a reaction far more potent than mere fusion. The surrounding semisolid material was heated to temperatures which destroyed every atomic bond. A vast cavity of nuclear instability inflated around the Alchemist as it soared ever

deeper into the gas giant. Ordinary convection currents were wholly inadequate to syphon off the heat at the same rate it was being produced, so the energy abscess simply had to keep on expanding. Something had to give.

Lady Mac's sensors detected the first upwelling while the ship was still seven minutes from perigee. A smooth-domed tumour of cloud, three thousand kilometres in diameter, glowing like gaseous magma as it swelled up through the storm bands. Unlike the ordinary great spots infesting gas giants it didn't spiral, its sole purpose was to elevate planetary masses of tortuously heated hydrogen up from the interior. Hurricanes and cyclones which had blasted their way through the upper atmosphere for centuries were thrust aside to allow the thermal monster its bid for freedom. Its apex distended over a thousand kilometres above the tropopause, casting a pernicious copper light over a third of the night-side.

Right at the centre, the glow had become unbearably bright. A spire of solid white light punctured the top of the cloud dome, streaking out into space.

"Holy Christ," Liol datavised. "Was that it? Did it just detonate?"

"Nothing like," Joshua replied. "This is only the start. Things are going to get a little nasty from now on."

Lady Mac was already far ahead of the fountaining plasma stream, racing around the gas giant's curvature for the dawn terminator. Even so, thermal circuits issued a grade three alarm as the plasma's radiance washed over the hull. Emergency cryogenic exchangers vented hundreds of litres of inflamed fluid to shunt the heat out. Processors were failing at a worrying rate in the immense emp backlash of the wavering plasma stream; even the military-grade electronics were suffering. On top of that, electric currents started to eddy through the fuselage stress structure as the planetary flux lines trembled.

Dahybi had withdrawn into zero-tau, leaving Joshua and Liol to datavise instructions into the flight computer, bringing backups on-line, isolating leakages, stabilizing power

surges. They worked perfectly together, keeping the flight systems on-line; each intuitively knowing what was required to support the other.

“Something very odd is happening to the planetary magnetosphere,” Beaulieu reported. “Sensors are registering extraordinary oscillations within the flux lines.”

“Irrelevant,” Joshua replied. “Concentrate on keeping our primary systems stable. Four minutes more, that’s all, we’ll be on the other side of the planet then.”

On board the *Urschel*, Ikela watched the lightstorm eruption on one of the bridge screens. “Holy Mary, it works,” he whispered. “It actually bloody works.” A perverse sense of pride mingled with fatalistic dismay. *If only* . . . But then, fruitless wishes were ever the province of the damned.

He ignored Oscar Kearn’s semi-hysterical (and totally impossible) orders to turn the ship around and get them the hell away from this badass planet. Twentieth-century man simply didn’t understand orbital mechanics. They had been accelerating along their present course for twenty-two minutes now, their trajectory effectively committed them to a slingshot flyby. Their best hope was to stay on track, and pray they got past perigee before another upwell exploded out of the atmosphere. That was what the *Lady Macbeth* was attempting. Good tactic, Ikela acknowledged grudgingly.

Somehow, he didn’t think the *Urschel* would make it. He didn’t know exactly how the Alchemist worked, but he doubted one eruption was the end of it.

With a sense of inevitability that curiously neutralized any regret or gloom, he settled back passively in his acceleration couch and watched the screens. The original spout of plasma was dying away, the cloud dome flattening out to dissipate into a thousand new hypervelocity storms. But underneath the frothing upper atmosphere a fresh stain of light was spreading, and it was an order of magnitude larger than the first.

He smiled contentedly at his god’s-eye view of what promised to be a truly dazzling Armageddon.

The Alchemist was slowing, it had passed through the

semisolid layers into the true core of the planet. Now the density of surrounding matter was intense enough to affect its flight. That meant matter was being pressed against it in ever-greater quantities, and with it the rate of neutronium conversion was accelerating fast. The energy abscess which it generated stretched out back along its course through the planet's interior like a comet's tail. Sections of it were breaking apart; ten-thousand-kilometre lengths pinching into elongated bubbles which rose up through the disrupted tiers of the planet's internal structure. Each one greater than the last.

The second upwelling rampaged out of the upper atmosphere; its tremendous scale making it appear absurdly ponderous. Vast fonts of ions cascaded from its edges as the centre broke open, twisting into scarlet arches which fell gracefully back towards the boiling cloudscape. A coronal fireball spat out of the central funnel, bigger than a moon, its surface slippery with webs of magnetic energy which condensed the plasma into deeper purple curlicues. Ghost gases flowered around it, translucent gold petal wings unfurling to beat with the harmonic of the planetary flux lines.

Lost somewhere among the rising glory of light were two tiny sparkles produced by antimatter detonating inside both Organization frigates.

Lady Mac swept triumphantly across the terminator and into daylight, surfing at a hundred and fifty kilometres per second over the hurricane rivers of phosphorescence which flowed through the troposphere. An arrogant saffron dawn waxed behind her, far outshining the natural one ahead.

"Time to leave," Joshua datavised. "You ready?"

"All yours, Josh."

Joshua datavised his order into the flight computer. Zero-tau claimed the last three acceleration couches on the bridge. *Lady Mac's* antimatter drive ignited.

The starship accelerated away from the gas giant at forty-two gees.

• • •

Finally, the Alchemist had come to rest at the centre of the gas giant. Here was a universe of pressure unglimped ex-

cept through speculative mathematical models. The heart of the gas giant was only slightly less dense than the neutronium itself. Yet the difference was there, permitting the inflow of matter to continue. The conversion reaction burned unabated. Pure alchemy.

Energy blazed outwards from the Alchemist, unable to escape. The abscess was spherical now, nature's preferred geometry. A sphere at the heart of a sphere; dangerously tormented matter confined by the perfectly symmetrical pressure exerted by the mass of seventy-five thousand kilometres of hydrogen piled on top of it. This time there was no escape valve up through the weak, nonsymmetrical, semisolid layers. This time, all it could do was grow.

• • •

For six hundred seconds *Lady Macbeth* accelerated away from the mortally wounded gas giant. Behind her, the Alchemist's trail of fragmented energy abscesses pumped up out of the darkside clouds, transient volcanoes of feculent gas rising higher than worlds. The planet began to develop its own billowing photosphere; a dark burgundy orb enclosed by a glowing azure halo. Its ebony moons sailed on indomitably through their new sea of lightning.

The starship's multiple drive tubes cut out. Joshua's zero-tau switched off, depositing him abruptly into free fall. Sensor images and flight data flashed straight into his brain. The planet's death convulsions were as fascinating as they were deadly. It didn't matter, they were over a hundred and eighty thousand kilometres from the disintegrating storm bands. Far enough to jump.

Deep beneath the benighted clouds, the central energy abscess had swollen to an intolerable size. The pressure it was exerting against the confining mass of the planet had almost reached equilibrium. Titanic fissures began to tear open.

An event horizon engulfed *Lady Macbeth's* fuselage.

With a timing that was the ultimate tribute to the precision of Mzu's decades-old equations, the gas giant went nova.

• • •

The singularity surged into existence five hundred and eighty thousand kilometres above Mirchusko's pale jade blizzards of ammonia-sulphur cirrus. Its event horizon blinked off to reveal the *Lady Macbeth's* dull silicon fuselage. Omnidirectional antennae were already broadcasting her CAB identification code. Given the reception they got on returning from Lalonde, Joshua wasn't going to take any chances this time.

Sensor clusters telescoped outwards, passive elements scanning around, radars pulsing. The flight computer datavised a class three proximity alert.

"Charge the nodes," Joshua ordered automatically. His mistake, he never expected to jump into trouble here. Now that might cost them badly.

The bridge lights dimmed fractionally as Dahybi initiated an emergency power up sequence. "Eight seconds," he said.

The external sensor image flashed up in Joshua's mind. At first he thought they were being targeted by electronic warfare pods. Space was flecked with small white motes. But the electronic sensors were the only ones not being taxed, the whole electromagnetic environment was eerily silent. The flight computer reported its radar track-while-scan function was approaching capacity overload as it designated multiple targets. Each of the white motes was being tagged by purple icons to indicate position and trajectory. Three were flashing red, approaching fast.

It wasn't interference. *Lady Mac* had emerged just outside a massive particle storm unlike anything Joshua had ever seen before. The motes weren't ice, nor rock.

"Jesus, what is this stuff?" He datavised a set of instructions into the flight computer. The standard sensor booms began to retreat, replaced by the smaller, tougher combat sensors. Discrimination and analysis programs went primary.

The debris was mostly metallic, melted and fused scraps no bigger than snowflakes. They were all radioactive.

"There's been one brute of a fight here," Sarha said. "This is all combat wasp wreckage. And there's a lot of it. I think

the swarm is about forty thousand kilometres in diameter. It's dissipating, clearing from the centre."

"No response to our identification signal," Beaulieu said. "Tranquillity's beacons are off air, I cannot locate a single artificial electromagnetic transmission. There isn't even a ship's beacon active."

The centre of the debris storm had a coordinate Joshua didn't even have to run a memory check on. Tranquillity's orbital vector. *Lady Mac*'s sensor suite revealed it to be a large empty zone. "It's gone," he said numbly. "They blew it up. Oh, Jesus, no. Ione. My kid. My kid was in there!"

"No, Joshua," Sarha said firmly. "It hasn't been destroyed. There isn't nearly enough mass in the swarm to account for that."

"Then where is it? Where the hell did it go?"

"I don't know. There's no trace of it, none at all."

PETER F. HAMILTON

**THE
NAKED GOD**

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 A Time Warner Company

ISBN 0-7595-6035-8

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2000 by Warner Books. A mass market edition was published in two volumes in 2000 by Warner Books.

First eBook edition: November 2000

Visit our Web site at www.iPublish.com.

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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

SHIPS

LADY MACBETH

Joshua Calvert	Captain
Liol Calvert	Fusion specialist
Ashly Hanson	Pilot
Sarha Mitcham	Systems specialist
Dahybi Yadev	Node specialist
Beaulieu	Cosmonik
Peter Adul	Mission specialist
Alkad Mzu	Mission specialist
Oski Katsura	Mission specialist
Samuel	Edenist Intelligence agent

OENONE

Syrinx	Captain
Ruben	Fusion systems
Oxley	Pilot
Cacus	Life support
Edwin	Toroid systems
Serina	Toroid systems
Tyla	Cargo officer
Kempster Getchell	Mission specialist
Renato Vella	Mission specialist
Parker Higgens	Mission specialist
Monica Foulkes	ESA agent

VILLENEUVE'S REVENGE

André Duchamp	Captain
Kingsley Pryor	Capone's agent

MINDORI

Rocio CondraHellhawk possessor
Jed HintonDeadnight disciple
BethDeadnight disciple
Gerald SkibbowRefugee
Gari HintonJed's sister
NavarJed's half sister

ARIKARA

Meredith SaldanaRear Admiral, squadron commander
GreseLieutenant, squadron intelligence officer
RhoecusLieutenant, voidhawk liaison
KroeberCommander

HABITATS

TRANQUILLITY

Ione SaldanaLord of Ruin
Dominique Vasilkovsky Socialite
Father Horst Elwes Priest, refugee

VALISK

DariatGhost
ToltonStreet poet
ErentzRubra's descendant
Dr PatanPhysicist

ASTEROIDS

TRAFALGAR

Samual Aleksandrovich ...First Admiral Confederation Navy
LalwaniAdmiral, CNIS chief
Motela KolhammerAdmiral, 1st fleet commander
Dr Pierce GilmoreCNIS research division director
Jacqueline CouteurPossessor

Murphy HewlettConfederation marine lieutenant
Amr al-Sahhaf.....Captain, staff officer

MONTEREY

Jezzibella.....Mood Fantasy artist
Al Capone.....Possessor
Kiera Salter.....Possessor of Marie Skibbow
Leroy Octavius.....Jezzibella's manager
LibbyJezzibella's dermal technologist
Avram Harwood IIIMayor of San Angeles
Emmet MorddenOrganization lieutenant
Silvano RichmannOrganization lieutenant
Mickey Pileggi.....Organization lieutenant
Patricia Mangano.....Organization lieutenant
Webster Pryor.....Hostage
Luigi Balsamo.....ex-Commander, Organization fleet
Cameron LeungHellhawk Zahan
Bernhard Allsop.....Possessor
Hudson Proctor.....Possessor, Kiera's deputy
Soi YinHellhawk
Etechells.....Hellhawk Stryla

PLANETS

NORFOLK

Luca Comar.....Grant Kavanagh's possessor
SusannahMarjorie Kavanagh's possessor
CarmithaRomany
Bruce SpantonMarauder
JohanMr Butterworth's possessor
Marcella RyeColsterworth council officer
VéroniqueOlive Fenchurch's possessor

OMBEY

Ralph Hiltch.....General, Liberation army

Cathal Fitzgerald.....Ralph's deputy
 Dean Foal.....ESA G66 division
 Will Danza.....ESA G66 division
 Kirsten Saldana.....Princess of Ombey
 Diana Tiernan.....Police technology division chief
 Admiral Farquar.....Royal Navy, Ombey Commander
 Hugh Rosler.....DataAxis reporter
 Tim Beard.....Rover reporter
 Sinon.....Liberation army serjeant
 Choma.....Liberation army serjeant
 Elana Duncan.....Liberation army mercenary
 Janne Palmer.....Royal Marine
 Annette Ekelund.....Possessor
 Soi Hon.....Possessor, ex-guerrilla
 Delvan.....Possessor
 Milne.....Possessor
 Moyo.....Possessor
 Stephanie Ash.....Possessor
 Cochrane.....Possessor
 Rana.....Possessor
 Tina Sudol.....Possessor
 McPhee.....Possessor
 Franklin.....Possessor

KULU

Alastair II.....The King
 Simon, Duke of Salion.....Chairman security commission
 Lord Kelman Mountjoy.....Foreign office minister
 Lady Phillipa Oshin.....Prime minister

KIINT HOMEWORLD

Richard Keaton.....Observer
 Tracy Dean.....Observer
 Jay Hilton.....Refugee, Haile's friend

HaileJuvenile Kiint
Nang.....Haile’s parent
Lieria.....Haile’s parent

EARTH

Louise KavanaghRefugee
Genevieve KavanaghRefugee
Fletcher ChristianPossessor
Quinn DexterMessiah of the Light Bringer
Banneth.....High Magus, Edmonton sect
Andy Behoo.....Sellrat
Ivanov Robson.....Private detective
Brent Roi.....Detective, Halo Police
CourtneyEdmonton sect acolyte
Billy-Joe.....Edmonton sect acolyte

OTHERS

CONFEDERATION

Olton HaakerAssembly President
Jeeta Anwar.....Chief presidential aide
Mae OrtliebPresidential science aide
Cayeaux.....Edenist ambassador
Sir Maurice Hall.....Kulu Kingdom ambassador

EDENISTS

Wing-Tsit ChongEdenism’s Founder
AtheneSyrinx’s mother

MOSDVA

Quantook-LOUDistributor of resources

TYRATHCA

Baulona-PWMBreeder, electronics regulator

**THE
NAKED GOD**

1

Jay Hilton was sound asleep when every electrophorescent strip in the paediatric ward sprang up to full intensity. The simple dream of her mother broke apart like a stained-glass statue shattered by a powerful gust of sharp white light; colourful splinters tumbling off into the glare.

Jay blinked heavily against the rush of light, raising her head in confusion. The familiar scenery of the ward hardened around her. She felt so tired. It certainly wasn't morning yet. A huge yawn forced her mouth open. All around her the other children were waking up in bleary-eyed mystification. Holomorph stickers began reacting to the light, translucent cartoon images rising up to perform their mischievous antics. Animatic dolls cooed sympathetically as children clutched at them for reassurance. Then the doors at the far end of the ward slid open, and the nurses came hurrying in.

One look at the brittle smiles on their faces was all Jay needed. Something was badly wrong. Her heart shivered. Surely not the possessed? Not here?

The nurses began ushering children out of their beds, and along the central aisle towards the doors. Complaints and questions were firmly ignored.

“It’s a fire drill,” the senior staff nurse called out. “Come along, quickly, now. I want you out of here and into the lifts. Pronto. Pronto.” He clapped his hands loudly.

Jay shoved the thin duvet back, and scuttled down off the bed. Her long cotton nightie was tangled round her knees, which took a moment to straighten. She was about to join the others charging along the aisle when she caught the flickers of motion and light outside the window. Every morning since she’d arrived, Jay had sat in front of that window, gazing solemnly out at Mirchusko and its giddy green cloudscape. She’d never seen speckles of light swarming out there before.

Danger.

The silent mental word was spoken so quickly Jay almost didn’t catch it. Though the feel of Haile was unmistakable. She looked round, expecting to see the Kiint ambling down the aisle towards her. But there was only the rank of flustered nurses propelling children along.

Knowing full well she wasn’t doing what she was supposed to, Jay padded over to the big window, and pressed her nose against it. A slim band of tiny blue-white stars had looped itself round Tranquillity. They were all moving, contracting around the habitat. She could see now that they weren’t really stars, they were lengthening. Flames. Brilliant, tiny flames. Hundreds of them.

My friend. My friend. Lifeloss anguish.

Now that was definitely Haile, and intimating plenty of distress. Jay took a step back from the window, seeing misty grey swirls where her face and hands had pressed against it. “What’s the matter?” she asked the empty air.

A cascade of new flames burst into existence outside the habitat. Expanding knots blossoming seemingly at random across space. Jay gasped at the sight. There were thousands of them, interlacing and expanding. It was so pretty.

Friend. Friend.

Evacuation procedure initiated.

Jay frowned. The second mental voice came as a faint echo. She thought it was one of the adult Kiint, possibly Lieria. Jay had only encountered Haile's parents a few times. They were awfully intimidating, though they'd been nice enough to her.

Designation. Two.

No. The adult responded forcefully. **Forbidden.**

Designation.

You may not, child. Sorrow felt for all human suffering. But obedience required.

No. Friend. My friend. Designation. Two. Confirmed.

Jay had never felt Haile so determined before. It was kind of scary. "Please?" she asked nervously. "What's happening?"

A torrent of light burst through the window. It was as if a sun had risen over Mirchusko's horizon. All of space was alive with brilliant efflorescences.

The adult Kiint said: **Evacuation enacted.**

Designated.

Jay felt a wash of guilty triumph rushing out from her friend. She wanted to reach out and comfort Haile, who she knew from the adult's reaction was in Big Trouble over something. Instead, she concentrated on forming a beaming smile at the heart of her own mind, hoping Haile would pick it up. Then the air around her was crawling as if she was caught in a breeze.

"Jay!" one of the nurses called. "Come along sweetie, you . . ."

The light around Jay was fading fast, along with the sounds of the ward. She could just hear the nurse's gasp of astonishment. The breeze abruptly turned into a small gale, whipping her nightie around and making her bristly hair stand on end. Some kind of grey fog was forming around

her, a perfectly spherical bubble of the stuff, with her at the centre. Except she couldn't feel any dampness in the air. It darkened rapidly, reducing the ward to weak spectral outlines. Then the boundary expanded at a speed so frightening that Jay screamed. The boundary vanished, and with it any sign of the ward. She was alone in space devoid of stars. And falling.

Jay put her hands to her head and screamed again, as hard as she possibly could. It didn't put a stop to any of the horror. She paused to suck down a huge breath. That was when the boundary reappeared out on the edge of nowhere. Hurtling towards her so fast from every direction that she knew the impact would squash her flat. She jammed her eyes shut. "MUMMY!"

Something like a stiff feather tickled the soles of her feet, and she was abruptly standing on solid ground. Jay windmilled her arms for balance, pitching forward. She landed hard on some kind of cool floor, her eyes still tight shut. The air she gulped down was warmer than it had been in the ward, and a lot more humid. Funny smell. Rosy light was playing over her eyelids.

Still crouched on all fours, Jay risked a quick peep as she gathered herself to scream again. The sight which greeted her was so incredible that the breath stalled in her throat. "Oh gosh," was all she eventually managed to squeak.

Joshua initiated the ZTT jump with little enthusiasm. His downcast mood was one which he shared with all the *Lady Mac*'s crew and passengers—at least, those who weren't in zero-tau. To have achieved so much, only to have their final triumph snatched away.

Except . . . Once the initial shock of discovering that *Tranquillity* had vanished from its orbit had subsided, he wasn't frightened. Not for Ione, or his child. *Tranquillity*

hadn't been destroyed, there was at least that comfort. Which logically meant the habitat had been possessed and snatched out of the universe.

He didn't believe it.

But his intuition was hardly infallible. Perhaps he simply didn't want to believe it. Tranquillity was home. The emotional investment he had in the habitat and its precious contents was enormous. Tell anyone that everything they ever treasured has been erased, and the reaction is always the same. Whatever. His vacillation made him as miserable as the rest of the ship, just for a different reason.

"Jump confirmed," he said. "Samuel, you're on."

Lady Mac had jumped into one of Trafalgar's designated emergence zones, a hundred thousand kilometres above Avon. Her transponder was already blaring out her flight authority codes. Somehow Joshua didn't think that would quite be enough. Not when you barged in unexpected on the Confederation's primary military base in the middle of a crisis like this one.

"I've got distortion fields focusing on us," Dahybi said drolly. "Five of them, I think."

The flight computer alerted Joshua that targeting radars were locking on to the hull. When he accessed the sensors rising out of their recesses, he found three voidhawks and two frigates on interception courses. Trafalgar's strategic defence command was directing a barrage of questions at him. He glanced over at the Edenist as he started to datavise a response. Samuel was lying prone on his acceleration couch, eyes closed as he conversed with other Edenists in the asteroid.

Sarha grinned round phlegmatically. "How many medals do you think they'll give us apiece?"

"Uh oh," Liol grunted. "However many it is, we might be getting them posthumously. I think one of the frigates has

just realised our antimatter drive is ever so slightly highly radioactive.”

“Great,” she grumbled.

Monica Foulkes didn't like the sound of that; as far as the Confederation Navy was aware, it was only Organization ships who were using antimatter. She hadn't wanted to take Mzu back to Tranquillity, and she certainly hadn't wanted to wind up at Trafalgar. But in the discussion which followed their discovery of Tranquillity's disappearance, she didn't exactly have the casting vote. The original agreement between herself and Samuel had just about disintegrated when they rendezvoused with the *Beezling*.

Then Calvert had insisted on the First Admiral being the final arbitrator of what was to be done with Mzu, Adul, and himself. Samuel had agreed. And she couldn't produce any rational argument against it. Silently, she acknowledged that maybe the only true defence against more Alchemists being built was a unified embargo covenant between the major powers. After all, such an agreement almost worked for antimatter.

Not that such angst counted for much right now. Like ninety per cent of her mission to date, the critical deciding factor was outside her control. All she could do was stick close to Mzu, and make sure the prime requirement of technology transfer wasn't violated. Though by allowing it to be deployed against the Organization, she'd probably screwed that up too. Her debrief was shaping up to be a bitch.

Monica frowned over at Samuel, who was still silent, his brow creased up in concentration. She added a little prayer of her own to all the unheard babble of communication whirling around *Lady Mac* for the Navy to exercise some enlightenment and tolerance.

Trafalgar's strategic defence command told Joshua to

hold his altitude, but refused to grant any approach vector until his status was established. The Navy's emergence zone patrol ships approached to within a cautious hundred kilometres, and took up a three-dimensional diamond observation formation. Targeting radars remained locked on.

Admiral Lalwani herself talked to Samuel, unable to restrain her incredulity as he explained what had happened. Given that the *Lady Macbeth* contained not only Mzu and others who understood the Alchemist's principals, but a quantity of antimatter as well, the final decision on allowing the ship to dock belonged to the First Admiral himself. It took twenty minutes to arrive, but Joshua eventually received a flight vector from strategic defence command. They were allocated a docking bay in the asteroid's northern spaceport.

"And Joshua," Samuel said earnestly. "Don't deviate from it. Please."

Joshua winked, knowing it was being seen by the hundreds of Edenists who were borrowing the agent's eyes to monitor *Lady Mac*'s bridge. "What, Lagrange Calvert, fly off line?"

The flight to Trafalgar took eighty minutes. The number of antimatter technology specialists waiting for them in the docking bay was almost as great as the number of marines. On top of that were a large complement of uniformed CNIS officers.

They weren't stormed, exactly. No personal weapons were actually taken out of their holsters. Though once the airlock tube was sealed and pressurized, *Lady Mac*'s crew had little to do except hand over the powerdown codes to a Navy maintenance team. Zero-tau pods were opened, and the various bewildered occupants Joshua had accumulated during his pursuit of the Alchemist were ushered off the ship. After a *very* thorough body scan, the polite, steel-

faced CNIS officers escorted everyone to a secure barracks deep inside the asteroid. Joshua wound up in a suite that would have done a four-star hotel credit. Ashly and Liol were sharing it with him.

“Well now,” Liol said as the door closed behind them. “Guilty of carrying antimatter, flung in prison by secret police who’ve never heard of civil rights, and after we’re dead, Al Capone is going to invite us to have a quiet word.” He opened the cherrywood cocktail bar and smiled at the impressive selection of bottles inside. “It can’t get any worse.”

“You forgot Tranquillity being vanquished,” Ashly chided. Liol waved a bottle in apology.

Joshua slumped down into a soft black leather chair in the middle of the lounge. “It might not get worse for you. Just remember, I know what the Alchemist does, and how. They can’t afford to let me go.”

“You might know what it does,” Ashly said. “But with respect, Captain, I don’t think you would be much help to anyone seeking the technical details necessary to construct another.”

“One hint is all it takes,” Joshua muttered. “One careless comment that’ll point researchers in the right direction.”

“Stop worrying, Josh. The Confederation passed that point a long time ago. Besides, the Navy owes us big-time, and the Edenists, and the Kulu Kingdom. We pulled their arses out of the fire. You’ll fly *Lady Mac* again.”

“Know what I’d do if I was the First Admiral? Put me into a zero-tau pod for the rest of time.”

“I won’t let them do that to my little brother.”

Joshua put his hands behind his head, and smiled up at Liol. “The second thing I’d do, would be to put you in the pod next to mine.”

Planets sparkled in the twilight sky. Jay could see at least fifteen of them strung out along a curving line. The nearest one appeared a bit smaller than Earth's moon. She thought that was just because it was a long way off. In every other respect it was similar to any of the Confederation's terra-compatible planets, with deep blue oceans and emerald continents, the whole globe wrapped in thick tatters of white cloud. The only difference was the lights; cities larger than some of Earth's old nations gleamed with magisterial splendour. Entire weather patterns of cloud smeared across the nightside diffused the urban radiance, soaking the oceans in a perpetual pearl gloaming.

Jay sat back on her heels, staring up delightedly at the magical sky. A high wall ringed the area she was in. She guessed that the line of planets extended beyond those she could see, but the wall blocked her view of the horizon. A star with a necklace of inhabited planets! Thousands would be needed to make up such a circle. None of Jay's didactic memories about solar systems mentioned one with so many planets, not even if you counted gas-giant moons.

Friend Jay. Safe. Gleefulness at survival.

Jay blinked, and lowered her gaze. Haile was trying to run towards her. As always when the baby Kiint got over-excited her legs lost most of their coordination. She came very close to tripping with every other step. The sight of her lolloping about chaotically made Jay smile. It faded as she began to take in the scene behind her friend.

She was in some kind of circular arena two hundred metres across, with an ebony marble-like floor. The wall surrounding it was thirty metres high, sealed with a transparent dome. There were horizontal gashes at regular intervals along the vertical surface, windows into brightly lit rooms that seemed to be furnished with large cubes of primary colours. Adult Kiint were moving round inside, although an

awful lot of them had stopped what they were doing to look directly at her.

Haile thundered up; half-formed tractamorphic tentacles waving round excitedly. Jay grabbed on to a couple of them, feeling them palpitate wildly inside her fingers.

“Haile! Was that you who did this?”

Two adult Kiint were walking across the arena floor towards her. Jay recognized them as Nang and Lieria. Beyond them, a black star erupted out of thin air. In less than a heartbeat it had expanded to a sphere fifteen metres in diameter, its lower quarter merging with the floor. The surface immediately dissolved to reveal another adult Kiint. Jay stared at the process in fascination. A ZTT jump, but without a starship. She focused hard on her primer-level didactic memory of the Kiint.

I did, Haile confessed. Her tractamorphic flesh writhed in agitation, so Jay just squeezed tighter, offering reassurance. Only us were designated to evacuate the all around at lifeloss moment. I included you in designation, against parental proscription. Much shame. Puzzlement. Haile turned her head to face her parents. **Query lifeloss act approval? Many nice friends in the all around.**

We do not approve.

Jay flicked a nervous gaze at the two adults, and pressed herself closer against Haile. Nang formshifted his tractamorphic appendage into a flat tentacle, which he laid across his daughter’s back. The juvenile Kiint visibly calmed at the gesture of affection. Jay thought there was a mental exchange of some kind involved, too, sensing a hint of compassion and serenity.

Why did we not help? Haile asked.

We must never interfere in the primary events of other species during their evolution towards Omega comprehension. You must learn and obey this law

above all else. However, it does not prevent us from grieving at their tragedy.

Jay felt the last bit was included for her benefit. “Don’t be angry with Haile,” she said solemnly. “I would have done the same for her. And I didn’t want to die.”

Lieria reached out a tentacle tip, and touched Jay’s shoulder. **I thank you for the friendship you have shown Haile. In our hearts we are glad you are with us, for you will be completely safe here. I am sorry we could not do more for your friends. But our law cannot be broken.**

A sudden sensation of bleak horror threatened to engulf Jay. “Did Tranquillity really get blown up?” she wailed.

We do not know. It was under a concerted attack when we left. However, lone Saldana may have surrendered. There is a high possibility the habitat and its population survived.

“We left,” Jay whispered wondrously to herself. There were eight adult Kiint standing on the arena floor now, all the researchers from Tranquillity’s Laymil project. “Where are we?” She glanced up at the dusky sky again, and that awesome constellation.

This is our home star system. You are the first true human to visit.

“But . . .” Flashes of didactic memory tumbled through her brain. She looked up at those enticing, bright planets again. “This isn’t Jobis.”

Nang and Lieria looked at each other in what was almost an awkward pause.

No, Jobis is just one of our science mission outposts. It is not in this galaxy.

Jay burst into tears.

Right from the start of the possession crisis the Jovian Consensus had acknowledged that it was a prime target. Its

colossal industrial facilities were inevitably destined to produce a torrent of munitions, bolstering the reserve stocks of Adamist navies which thanks to budgetary considerations were not all they should be. The response of the Yosemite Consensus to the Capone Organization had already shown what Edenism was capable of achieving along those lines, and that was with a mere thirty habitats. Jupiter had the resources of four thousand two hundred and fifty at its disposal.

Requests for materiel support started almost as soon as Trafalgar issued its first warning about the nature of the threat which the Confederation was facing. Ambassadors requested and pleaded and called in every favour they thought Edenism owed them to secure a place in production schedules. Payment for the weapons involved loan agreements and fuseodollar transfers on a scale which could have purchased entire stage-four star systems.

On top of that, it was Edenism which was providing the critical support for the Mortonridge Liberation in the form of serjeant constructs to act as foot soldiers. It was the one utterly pivotal psychological campaign waged against the possessed, proving to the Confederation at large that they could be beaten.

Fortunately, the practical aspects of assaulting one or more habitats were extremely difficult. Jupiter already had a superb Strategic Defence network; and among the possessed only the Organization had a fleet which could hope to mount any sort of large-scale offensive, and the distance between Earth and New California almost certainly precluded that. However, the possibility of a lone ship carrying antimatter on a fanatical suicide flight was a strong one. And then there was the remote possibility that Capone would acquire the Alchemist and use it against them. Although Consensus didn't know how the doomsday device

worked, a ship certainly had to jump in to deploy it, which in theory gave the Edenists an interception window to destroy the device before it was deployed.

Preparations to solidify their defences had begun immediately. Fully one third of the armaments coming out of the industrial stations were incorporated into a massively expanded SD architecture. The 550,000-km orbital band containing the habitats was the most heavily protected, with the number of SD platforms doubled, and seeded with seven hundred thousand combat wasps to act as mines. A further million combat wasps were arranged in concentric shells around the massive planet out to the orbit of Callisto. Flotillas of multi-spectrum sensor satellites were dispersed among them, searching for any anomaly, however small, which pricked the potent energy storms churning through space around the gas-giant.

Over fifteen thousand heavily armed patrol voidhawks complemented the static defences; circling the volatile cloudscape in elliptical, high-inclination orbits, ready to interdict any remotely suspicious incoming molecule. The fact that so many voidhawks had been taken off civil cargo flights was actually causing a tiny rise in the price of He₃, the first for over two hundred and sixty years.

Consensus considered the economic repercussions to be a worthwhile trade for the security such invulnerable defences provided. No ship, robot, or inert kinetic projectile could get within three million kilometres of Jupiter unless specifically permitted to do so.

Even a lone maniac would acknowledge an attempted attack would be the ultimate in futility.

The gravity fluctuation which appeared five hundred and sixty thousand kilometres above Jupiter's equator was detected instantaneously. It registered as an inordinately pow-

erful twist of space-time in the distortion fields of the closest three hundred voidhawks. The intensity was so great that the gravitonic detectors in local SD sensor array had to be hurriedly recalibrated in order to acquire an accurate fix. Visually it appeared as a ruby star, the gravity field lensing Jupiter's light in every direction. Surrounding dust motes and solar wind particles were sucked in, a cascade of picometeorites fizzing brilliant yellow.

Consensus went to condition-one alert status. The sheer strength of the space warp ruled out any conventional starship emergence. And the location was provocatively close to the habitats, a hundred thousand kilometres from the nearest designated emergence zone. Affinity commands from Consensus were loaded into the combat wasps drifting inertly among the habitats. Three thousand fusion drives flared briefly, aligning the lethal drones on their new target. The patrol voidhawks formed a sub-Consensus of their own, designating approach vectors and swallow manoeuvres to englobe the invader.

The warp area expanded out to several hundred metres, alarming individual Edenists, though Consensus itself absorbed the fact calmly. It was already far larger than any conceivable voidhawk or blackhawk wormhole terminus. Then it began to flatten out into a perfectly circular two-dimensional fissure in space-time, and the real expansion sequence began. Within five seconds it was over eleven kilometres in diameter. Consensus quickly and concisely reformed its response pattern. Approaching voidhawks performed frantic fifteen-gee parabolas, curving clear then swallowing away. An extra eight thousand combat wasps burst into life, hurtling in towards the Herculean alien menace.

After another three seconds the fissure reached twenty kilometres in diameter, and stabilized. One side collapsed

inwards, exposing the wormhole's throat. Three small specks zoomed out of the centre. *Oenone* and the other two voidhawks screamed their identity into the general affinity band, and implored: **HOLD YOUR FIRE!**

For the first time in its five hundred and twenty-one year history, the Jovian Consensus experienced the emotion of shock. Even then, its response wasn't entirely blunted. Specialist perceptual thought routines confirmed the three voidhawks remained unpossessed. A five-second lockdown was loaded into the combat wasps.

What is happening? Consensus demanded.

Syrinx simply couldn't resist it. **We have a visitor**, she replied gleefully. Her entire crew was laughing cheerfully around her on the bridge.

The counter-rotating spaceport was the first part to emerge from the gigantic wormhole terminus. A silver-white disk four and a half kilometres in diameter, docking bay lights glittering like small towns huddled at the base of metal valleys, red and green strobes winking bright around the rim. Its slender spindle slid up after it, appearing to pull the dark rust-red polyp endcap along.

That was when the other starships began to rampage out of the terminus; voidhawks, blackhawks, and Confederation Navy vessels streaking off in all directions. Jupiter's SD sensors and patrol voidhawk distortion fields tracked them urgently. Consensus fired guidance updates at the incoming combat wasps, determinedly vectoring them away from the unruly incursion.

The habitat's main cylinder started to coast up out of the terminus, a prodigious seventeen kilometres in diameter. After the first thirty-two kilometres were clear, its central band of starscrapers emerged, hundreds of thousands of windows agleam with the radiance of lazy afternoon sunlight. Their bases just cleared the rim of the wormhole.

There were no more starships to come after that, only the rest of the cylinder. When the emergence was complete, the wormhole irised shut and space returned to its natural state. The flotilla of patrol voidhawks thronging round detected a capacious distortion field folding back into the broad collar of polyp around the base of the habitat's southern endcap that formed the bed of its circumfluous sea.

Consensus directed a phenomenally restrained burst of curiosity at the newcomer.

Greetings, chorused Tranquillity and Ione Saldana. There was a distinct timbre of smugness in the hail.

Dariat did the one thing which he had never expected to do again. He opened his eyes and looked around. His own eyes in his own body; fat unpleasant thing that it was, clad in his usual grubby toga.

The sight which greeted him was familiar: one of Valisk's innumerable shallow valleys out among the pink grass plains. If he wasn't completely mistaken, it was the same patch of ground Anastasia's tribe had occupied the day she died.

"This is the final afterlife?" he asked aloud.

It couldn't be. There was an elusive memory, the same befuddlement as a dream leaves upon waking. Of a sundering, of being torn out of . . .

He had fused with Rubra, the two of them becoming one, vanquishing the foe by shunting Valisk to a realm, or dimension, or state, that the two of them grasped was intrinsically adverse to the possessing souls. Perhaps they had even created the new location by simply willing it to be. And then time went awry.

He gave his surroundings a more considered examination. It was Valisk, all right. The circumfluous sea was about four kilometres away, its clusters of atolls easily rec-

ognizable. When he turned the other way, he could see a fat black scar running down two-thirds of the northern endcap.

The light tube was dimmer than it should be, even accounting for the loss of some plasma. It proffered a kind of twilight, but grey rather than the magnificent golden sunset Dariat had experienced every day of his life. The grass plain echoed that malaised atmosphere, it was uneasily torpid. Its resident insects had curled up into dormancy; birds and rodents slunk back reticently to their nests, even the flowers had shrugged off their natural gloss.

Dariat bent down to pick an enervated poppy. And his chubby hand passed clean through the stem. He stared at it in astonishment, for the first time seeing that he was faintly translucent.

Shock finally liberated comprehension. A location hostile to possessors, one which would exorcise them from their enslaved hosts, denying them their energistic power. That was the destination he and Rubra had committed the habitat to.

“Oh, Thoale, you utter bastard. I’m a ghost.”

For nearly ten hours the lift capsule had skimmed down the tower linking Supra-Brazil asteroid with the Govcentral state after which it was named, a smooth, silent ride. The only clue to how fast the lift capsules travelled (three thousand kilometres per hour) would come when they passed each other. But as they clung to rails on the exterior of the tower, and the only windows gave a direct view outward, such events remained out of sight to their passengers. Deliberately so; watching another capsule hurtling towards you at a combined speed of six thousand kilometres per hour was considered an absolute psychological no-go zone by the tower operators.

Just before it entered the upper fringes of the atmosphere,

the lift capsule decelerated to subsonic velocity. It reached the stratosphere as dawn broke over South America. On Earth that was no longer an invigorating sight; all the passengers saw was an unbroken murky-grey cloud layer which covered most of the continent and a third of the South Atlantic. Only when the lift capsule was ten kilometres above the frothing upper layer could Quinn see the army of individual streamers from which the gigantic cyclone was composed, flowing around each other at perilous velocities. The seething mass was as compressed as any gas-giant storm band, but infinitely drabber.

They descended into the slashing tendrils of cirrus, and the windows immediately reverberated from the barrage of fist-sized raindrops. There was nothing else to see after that, just formless smears of grey. A minute before they reached the ground station, the windows went black as the lift capsule entered the sheath which guarded the bottom of the tower from the worst violence of the planet's rabid weather.

Digits on the Royale Class lounge's touchdown counter reached zero, an event marked by only the slightest tremble as latch clamps closed round the base of the lift capsule. The magnetic rail disengaged, and a transporter rolled it clear of the tower, leaving the reception berth clear for the next capsule. Airlock hatches popped open, revealing long extendable corridors leading into the arrivals complex where treble the usual numbers of customs, immigration, and security officers waited to scan the passengers. Quinn sighed in mild resignation. He'd quite enjoyed the trip down, mellowing out with all the facilities the Royale Class lounge could provide. A welcome period of contemplation, assisted by the Norfolk Tears he'd been drinking.

He had arrived at Earth with one goal: conquest. Now at least he had some notions how to go about subduing the

planet for his Lord. The kind of exponential brute force approach the possessed had used up to now just wasn't an option on Earth. The arcologies were too isolated for that. It was curious, but the more Quinn thought about it, the more he realized that Earth was a representation of the Confederation in miniature. Its vast population centres kept separate by an amok nature almost as lethal as the interstellar void. Seeds of his revolution would have to be planted very carefully indeed. If Govcentral security ever suspected an outbreak of possession, the arcology in question would be quarantined. And Quinn knew that even with his energetic powers there would be nothing he could do to escape once the vac-trains had been shut down.

Most of the other passengers had disembarked, and the chief stewardess was glancing in Quinn's direction. He rose up from his deep leather seat, stretching the tiredness from his limbs. There was absolutely no way he'd ever get past the immigration desk, let alone security.

He walked towards the airlock hatch, and summoned the energetic power, mentally moulding it into the now familiar pattern. It crawled over his body, needle spears of static penetrating every cell. A swift groan was the only indication he showed of the grotesquery he experienced passing through the gateway into the ghost realm. His heart stopped, his breathing ceased, and the world about him lost its glimmer of substance. The solidity of walls and floors was still present, but ephemeral. Irrelevant if he really pressed.

The chief stewardess watched the last passenger step into the airlock, and turned back to the bar. Secured below the counter were several bottles of the complimentary Norfolk Tears and other expensive spirits and liqueurs which her team had opened. They were careful never to leave much, at

most a third, before opening a new bottle. But a third of these drinks was an expensive commodity.

She began inventorying all these bottles as empty in her stock control block. The team would split them later, filling their personal flasks, and take them home. As long as they didn't get too greedy the company supervisor would let it pass. Her block's datavise turned to nonsense. She gave it an annoyed glare, and automatically rapped it against the bar. That was when the lights started to flicker. Puzzled now, she frowned up at the ceiling. Electrical systems were failing all over the lounge. The AV pillar projection behind the bar had crashed into rainbow squiggles, the airlock hatch activators were whining loudly, though the hatch itself wasn't moving.

"What—?" she grumbled. Power loss was just about impossible in the lift capsules. Every component had multiple redundancy backups. She was about to call the lift capsule's operations officer when the lights steadied, and her stock control block came back on line. "Bloody typical," she grunted. It still bothered her badly. If things could go wrong on the ground, they could certainly go wrong half way up the tower.

She gave the waiting bottles a forlorn glance, knowing she was giving them up if she logged an official power-down incident report. The company inspectorate authority would swarm all over the lift capsule. She carefully erased the inventory file she'd started, and datavised the lounge processor for a channel to the operations officer.

The call never got placed. Instead she received a priority datavise from the arrivals complex security office ordering her to remain exactly where she was. Outside, an alarm siren started its high-pitched urgent wailing. The sound made her jump, in eleven years of riding the tower she'd only ever heard it during practice drills.

The siren's clamour sounded muffled to Quinn. He'd watched the airlock lights quiver, and sensed the delicate electronic patterns of nearby processors storm wildly as he pushed himself through the gateway. There was nothing he could do about it. It took all of his concentration to marshal his energistic power into the correct pattern. Now it seemed that pattern had an above-average giveaway effect on nearby electronics—though nothing had happened when he'd slipped out of the ghost realm into the Royale Class lounge at the start of the descent. Of course, he wasn't exerting himself then, quite the opposite, he'd actually been reining in the power.

Ah well, something to remember.

Thick security doors were rumbling across the end of the corridor, trapping stragglers among the passengers. Quinn walked past them, and reached the door. It put up a token resistance as he pushed himself through, as if it were nothing more than a vertical sheet of water.

The arrivals complex on the other side was made up from a series of grandiose multi-level reception halls, stitched together by wave stairs and open-shaft lifts. It could cope with seventy passenger lift capsules disembarking at once; a capacity which had been operating at barely twenty-five per cent since the start of the crisis. As Quinn made his way out from the sealed admission chamber at the end of the corridor, his first impression was that the air-conditioning grilles were pumping out adrenaline gas.

Down below on the main concourse, a huge flock of people was running for cover. They didn't know where they were going, the exits were all closed, but they knew where they didn't want to be, and that was anywhere near a lift capsule that was crammed full of possessed. They were damn sure there was no other reason for a security alert of such magnitude.

Up on Quinn's level, badly hyped security guards in bulky kinetic armour were racing for the admission chamber. Officers were screaming orders. All the passengers from the lift capsule were being rounded up at gunpoint and being made to assume the position. Anyone who protested was given a sharp jab with a shock rod. Three stunned bodies were already sprawled on the floor, twitching helplessly. It encouraged healthy cooperation among the remainder.

Quinn went over to the rank of guards who were forming a semicircle around the door to the admission chamber. Eighteen of the stubby rifles were lined up on it. He walked round one guard to get a closer look at the weapon. The guard shivered slightly, as if a chilly breeze was finding its way through the joint overlaps of her armour. Her weapon was some kind of machine pistol. Quinn knew enough about munitions to recognise it as employing chemical bullets. There were several grenades hanging from her belt.

Even though God's Brother had granted him a much greater energetic strength than the average possessed, he would be very hard pressed to defend himself against all eighteen of them firing at him. Earth was obviously taking the threat of possession very seriously indeed.

A new group of people had arrived to move methodically among the whimpering passengers. They weren't in uniforms, just ordinary blue business suits, but the security officers deferred to them. Quinn could sense their thoughts, very calm and focused in comparison to everyone else. Intelligence operatives, most likely.

Quinn decided not to wait and find out. He retreated from the semicircle of guards as an officer was ordering them to open the admission chamber door. The wave stair down to the main concourse had been switched off; so he climbed the frozen steps of silicon two at a time.

People huddled round the barricaded exits felt his pas-

sage as a swift ripple of cool air, gone almost as it started. On the plaza outside, more squads of security guards were setting up; two groups were busy mounting heavy-calibre Bradfield rifles on tripods. Quinn shook his head in a kind of bemused admiration, then carefully walked round them. The long row of lifts down to the vac-train station was still working, though there were few people left on the arrivals complex storey to use them. He hopped in to one with a group of frightened-looking business executives just back from a trip to Cavius city on the moon.

The lift took them a kilometre and a half straight down, opening into a circular chamber three hundred metres across. The station's floor was divided up by concentric rows of turnstiles, channelling passengers into the cluster of wave stairs occupying the centre. Information columns of jet-black glass formed a picket line around the outside, knots of fluorescent icons twirling around them like electronic fish. Lines of holographic symbols slithered through the air overhead, weaving sinuously around each other as they guided passengers to the wave stair which led down to their platform.

Quinn sauntered idly round the outside of the information columns for a while, watching the contortions of the holograms overhead. The bustling crowd (all averting their eyes from each other), the confined walls and ceiling, wheezing air conditioners pouring out gritty air, small mechanoids being kicked as they attempted to clean up rubbish—he welcomed them all back into his life. Even though he was going to destroy this world and despoil its people, for a brief interlude it remained the old home. His satisfaction came to a cold halt; the name EDMONTON, in vibrant red letters, trickled over his head, riding along a curving convey of translucent blue arrowheads towards one of the wave stairs. The vac-train was departing in eleven minutes.

It was so tempting. Banneth, at last. To see that face stricken with fear, then suffering—for a long *long* time, the suffering—before the final ignominy of empty-headed imbecility. There were so many stages of torment to inflict on Banneth, so much he wanted to do to her now he had the power; intricate, malicious applications of pain, psychological as well as physical. But the needs of God's Brother came first, even before the near-sexual urgings of his own serpent beast. Quinn turned away from the glowing invitation in disgust, and went to find a vac-train which would take him direct to New York.

People were starting to congregate around the windows of the bars and fast-food outlets which made up the perimeter wall of the station. Kids stared with intrigued expressions at the images coming at them from newschannel AV projectors, while adults achieved the blank-faced otherwhereness which showed they were receiving sensevises. As he passed a pasta stall, Quinn caught a brief glimpse of the image inside a holoscreen above the sweating cook. Jupiter's cloudscape formed an effervescent ginger backdrop to a habitat; dozens of spaceships were swirling round it in what could almost be read as a state of high excitement.

It wasn't relevant to him, so he walked on.

Ione had gone straight to De Beauvoir palace after Tranquillity emerged above Jupiter, coordinating the habitat's maintenance crews and making a public sensewise to reassure people and tell them what to do. The formal reception room was a more appropriate setting for such a broadcast than her private apartment. Now with the immediate crisis over, she was snuggled back in the big chair behind her desk and using Tranquillity's sensitive cells to observe the last of the voidhawks assigned to implement the aid re-

sponse settle on its docking ledge pedestal. A procession of vehicles trundled over the polyp towards it, cargo flatbed lorries and heavy-lift trucks eager to unload the large fusion generator clamped awkwardly in the voidhawk's cargo cradles.

The generator had come from one of the industrial stations of the nearest Edenist habitat, Lycoris; hurriedly ferried over by Consensus as soon as Tranquillity's status was established. There were currently fifteen technical crews working on similar generators around the docking ledge, powering them up and wiring them in to the habitat's power grid.

When she sank her mentality deeper into the neural strata and the autonomic monitor routines which operated there, Ione could feel the electricity flowing back into the star-scrapers through the organic conductors, their mechanical systems gradually coming back on line. The habitat's girdling city had been in emergency powerdown mode since the swallow manoeuvre, along with other non-essential functions. Grandfather Michael's precautions hadn't been perfect after all. She grinned to herself; pretty damn good, though. And even without the Jovian Consensus on hand to help with all its resources, they had the smaller fusion generators in the non-rotating spaceport.

We would have been okay.

Of course we would, Tranquillity said. It managed a mildly chastising tone, surprised at her doubt.

Obviously, nobody had fully thought through the implications of the swallow manoeuvre for Tranquillity. When it entered the wormhole, the hundreds of induction cables radiating out from the endcap rims had been sliced off, eliminating nearly all of the habitat's natural energy generation capability. It would take their extrusion glands several months to grow new ones out to full length.

By which time they might have to move again.

Let's not worry about that right now, Tranquillity said. **We're in the safest orbit in the Confederation; even I was surprised by the amount of fire-power Consensus has amassed here to protect itself. Be content.**

I wasn't complaining.

Nor are our inhabitants.

Ione felt her attention being focused inside the shell.

It was party time in Tranquillity. The whole population had come up out of the starscrapers to wait in the parkland around the lobbies until the electricity was restored. Elderly plutocrats sat on the grass next to students, waitresses shared the queue to the toilets with corporate presidents, Laymil project researchers mingled with society vacuum-heads. Everybody had grabbed a bottle on the way out of their apartment, and the galaxy's biggest mass picnic had erupted spontaneously. Dawn was now five hours late, but the moonlight silver light-tube only enhanced the ambience. People drank, and ran stim programs, and laughed with their neighbour as they told and retold their personal tale of combat-wasp-swarms-I-have-seen-hurtling-towards-me. They thanked God but principally Ione Saldana for rescuing them, and declared their undying love for her, that goddamn beautiful, brilliant, canny, gorgeous girl in whose habitat they were blessed to live. And, hey, Capone; how does it feel, loser? Your almighty Confederation-challenging fleet screwed by a single non-military habitat; everything you could throw at us, and we beat you. Still happy you came back to the wonders of this century?

The residents from the two starscrapers closest to De Beauvoir palace walked over the vales and round the spinnies to pay their respects and voice their gratitude. A huge crowd was singing and chanting outside the gates, calling, pleading for their heroine to appear.

Ione slid the focus over them, smiling when she saw Dominique and Clement in the throng, as well as a wildly drunk Kempster Getchell. There were others she knew, too, directors and managers of multistellar companies and finance institutions, all swept along with the tide of emotion. Red-faced, exhilarated, and calling her name with hoarse throats. She let the focus float back to Clement.

Invite him in, Tranquillity urged warmly.

Maybe.

Survival of dangerous events is a sexual trigger for humans. You should indulge your instincts. He will make you happy, and you deserve that more than anything.

Romantically put.

Romance has nothing to do with this. Enjoy the release he will bring.

What about you? You performed the swallow manoeuvre.

When you are happy, I am happy.

She laughed out loud. "Oh what the hell, why not."

That is good. But I think you will have to make a public appearance first. This crowd is good-natured, but quite determined to thank you.

Yes. She sobered. **But there is one last official duty.**

Indeed. Tranquillity's tone matched her disposition.

Ione felt the mental conversation widen to incorporate the Jovian Consensus. Armira, the Kiint ambassador to Jupiter, was formally invited to converse with them.

Our swallow manoeuvre has produced an unexpected event, Ione said. **We are hopeful that you can clarify it for us.**

Armira injected a sensation of stately amusement into the affinity band. **I would suggest, Ione Saldana and Tran-**

quillity, that your entire swallow manoeuvre was an unexpected event.

It certainly surprised the Kiint we were host to, she said. They all left, very suddenly.

I see. Armira's thoughts hardened, denying them any hint of his emotional content.

Tranquillity replayed the memory it had from the time of the attack, showing all the Kiint vanishing inside event horizons.

What you have seen demonstrated is an old ability, Armira responded dispassionately. **We developed the emergency exodus facility during the era when we were engaged in interstellar travel. It is merely a sophisticated application of your distortion field systems. My colleagues helping with your Laymil research project would have used it instinctively when they believed they were threatened.**

We're sure they would, Consensus said. **And who can blame them? That's not the point. The fact that you have this ability is most enlightening to us. We have always regarded as somewhat fanciful your claim that your race's interest in star travel is now over. Although the fact that you had no starships added undeniable weight to the argument. Now we have seen your personal teleport ability, the original claim is exposed as a complete fallacy.**

We do not have the same level of interest in traveling to different worlds that you do, Armira said.

Of course not. Our starships are principally concerned with commercial and colonization flights, and an unfortunate amount of military activity. Your technological level would preclude anything as simple as commercial activity. We also believe that you are peaceful, although you must have considerable

knowledge of advanced weapons. That leaves colonization and exploration.

A correct analysis.

Are you still conducting these activities?

To some degree.

Why did you not tell us this, why have you hidden your true abilities behind a claim of mysticism and disinterest?

You know the answer to that, Armira said. Humans discovered the Jiciro race three hundred years ago; yet you have still not initiated contact and revealed yourselves to them. Their technology and culture is at a very primitive level, and you know what will happen if they are exposed to the Confederation. All that they have will be supplanted by what they will interpret as futuristic items of convenience, they will cease to develop anything for themselves. Who knows what achievements would be lost to the universe?

That argument does not pertain here, Consensus said. The Jiciro do not know what the stars are, nor that solid matter is composed of atoms. We do. We acknowledge that our technology is inferior to yours. But equally you know that one day we will achieve your current level. You are denying us knowledge we already know exists, and you have done so twice, in this field and in your understanding of the beyond. This is not an act of fellowship; we have opened ourselves to you in honesty and friendship, we have not hidden our flaws from you; yet you have clearly not reciprocated. Our conclusion is that you are simply studying us. We would now like to know why. As sentient entities we have that right.

Study is a pejorative term. We learn of you, as you do us. Admittedly that process is imbalanced, but given our respective natures, that is inevitable. As to

bestowing our technology; that would be interference of the grandest order. If you want something, achieve it for yourselves.

Same argument you gave us concerning the beyond, Ione remarked testily.

Of course, Armira said. Tell me, Ione Saldana, what would your reaction have been if a xenoc race announced that you had an immortal soul, and proved it, and then went on to demonstrate that the beyond awaited, though as Laton said, only for some? Would you have greeted such a revelation with thanks?

No, I don't suppose I would.

We know that our introduction to the concept of the beyond was accidental, Consensus said. Something happened on Lalonde which allowed the souls to come back and possess the living. Something extraneous. This calamity has been inflicted upon us. Surely such circumstances permit you to intervene?

There was a long pause. We will not intervene in this case, Armira said. For two reasons. Whatever happened on Lalonde happened because you went there. There is more to travelling between stars and exploring the universe than the physical act.

You are saying we must accept responsibility for our actions.

Yes, inevitably.

Very well, with reservations we accept that judgement. Though, please appreciate, we do not like it. What is the second reason?

Understand, there is a faction among my people who have argued that we should intervene in your favour. The possibility was rejected because what we have learned of you so far indicates that your race will come through this time successfully. Edenists espe-

cially have the social maturity to face that which follows.

I'm not an Edenist, Ione said. What about me, and all the other Adamists, the majority of our race? Are you going to stand back as we perish and fall into the beyond? Does the survival of an elite few, the sophisticates and the intellectuals, justify discarding the rest? Humans have never practised eugenics, we regard it as an abomination, and rightly so. If that's the price of racial improvement, we're not willing to pay it.

If I am any judge, you too will triumph, Ione Saldana. Nice to know. But what about all the others?

Fate will determine what happens. I can say no more other than to restate our official response: the answer lies within yourselves.

That is not much of a comfort, Consensus remarked.

I understand your frustration. My one piece of advice is that you should not share what you have learned about my race with the Adamists. Believing we have a solution, and that piety alone will extract it from us, would weaken their incentive to find that answer.

We will consider your suggestion, Consensus said. But Edenism will not voluntarily face the rest of eternity without our cousins. Ultimately, we are one race, however diverse.

I acknowledge your integrity.

I have a final question, Ione said. Where is Jay Hilton? She was taken from Tranquillity at the same time as your researchers. Why?

Armira's thoughts softened, shading as close to embarrassment as Ione had ever known a Kiint to come. That was an error, the ambassador said. And I apologise unreservedly for it. However, you should know the error was made in good faith. A young Kiint included Jay

Hilton in the emergency exodus against parental guidance. She was simply trying to save her friend.

Haile! Ione laughed delightedly. **You wicked girl.**

I believe she has been severely reprimanded for the incident.

I hope not, Ione said indignantly. **She's only a baby. Quite.**

Well, you can bring Jay back now; Tranquillity isn't as vulnerable as you thought.

I apologise again, but Jay Hilton cannot be returned to you at this time.

Why not?

In effect, she has seen too much. I assure you that she is perfectly safe, and we will of course return her to you immediately once your current situation is resolved.

The walls of the prison cell were made from some kind of dull-grey composite, not quite cool enough to be metal, but just as hard. Louise had touched them once before sinking down onto the single cot and hugging her legs, knees tucked up under her chin. The gravity was about half that of Norfolk, better than Phobos, at least; though the air was cooler than it had been on the *Jamrana*. She spent some time wondering about Endron, the old systems specialist from the *Far Realm*, thinking he might have betrayed them and alerted High York's authorities, then decided it really didn't matter. Her one worry now was that she'd been separated from Gen; her sister would be very frightened by what was happening.

And I got her into this mess. Mother will kill me.

Except Mother was in no position to do anything. Louise hugged herself tighter, fighting the way her lips kept trembling.

The door slid open, and two female police officers

stepped in. Louise assumed they were police, they wore pale blue uniforms with Govcentral's bronze emblem on their shoulders, depicting a world where continents shaped as hands gripped together.

"Okay, Kavanagh," said the one with sergeant stripes. "Let's go."

Louise straightened her legs, looking cautiously from one to the other. "Where?"

"Interview."

"I'd just shove you out the bloody airlock, it's up to me," said the other. "Trying to sneak one of those bastards in here. Bitch."

"Leave it," the sergeant ordered.

"I wasn't . . ." Louise started. She pursed her lips helplessly. It was so complicated, and heaven only knew how many laws she'd broken on the way to High York.

They marched her down a short corridor and into another room. It made her think of hospitals. White walls, everything clean, a table in the middle that was more like a laboratory bench, cheap waiting room chairs, various processor blocks in a tall rack in one corner, more lying on the table. Brent Roi was sitting behind the table; he'd taken off the customs uniform he'd worn to greet the *Jamrana*, now he was in the same blue suit as the officers escorting her. He waved her into the chair facing him.

Louise sat, hunching her shoulders exactly the way she was always scolding Gen for doing. She waited for a minute with downcast eyes, then glanced up. Brent Roi was giving her a level stare.

"You're not a possessed," he said. "The tests prove that."

Louise pulled nervously at the black one-piece overall she'd been given, the memory of those tests vivid in her mind. Seven armed guards had been pointing their machine guns at her as the technicians ordered her to strip. They'd

put her inside sensor loops, pressed hand-held scanners against her, taken samples. It was a million times worse than any medical examination. Afterwards, the only thing she'd been allowed to keep was the medical nanonic package round her wrist.

"That's good," she said in a tiny voice.

"So how did he blackmail you?"

"Who?"

"The possessed guy calling himself Fletcher Christian."

"Um. He didn't blackmail me, he was looking after us."

"So you rolled over and let him fuck you in return for protection against the other possessed?"

"No."

Brent Roi shrugged. "He preferred your little sister?"

"No! Fletcher is a decent man. You shouldn't say such things."

"Then what the hell are you doing here, Louise? Why did you try and infiltrate a possessed into the O'Neill Halo?"

"I wasn't. It's not like that. We came here to warn you."

"Warn who?"

"Earth. Govcentral. There's somebody coming here. Somebody terrible."

"Yeah?" Brent Roi raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Who's that then?"

"He's called Quinn Dexter. I've met him, he's worse than any normal possessed. Much worse."

"In what way?"

"More powerful. And he's full of hate. Fletcher says there's something wrong about him, he's different somehow."

"Ah, the expert on possession. Well, if anyone is going to know, it'll be him."

Louise frowned, unsure why the official was being so difficult. "We came here to warn you," she insisted. "Dex-

ter said he was coming to Earth. He wants revenge on someone called Banneth. You have to guard all the spaceports, and make sure he doesn't get down to the surface. It would be a disaster. He'll start the possession down there."

"And why do you care?"

"I told you. I've met him. I know what he's like."

"Worse than ordinary possessed; yet you seemed to have survived. How did you manage that, Louise?"

"We were helped."

"By Fletcher?"

"No . . . I don't know who it was."

"All right, so you escaped this fate worse than death, and you came here to warn us."

"Yes."

"How did you get off Norfolk, Louise?"

"I bought tickets on a starship."

"I see. And you took Fletcher Christian with you. Were you worried there were possessed among the starship crew?"

"No. That was one place I was sure there wouldn't be any possessed."

"So although you knew there were no possessed on board, you still took Christian with you as protection. Was that your idea, or his?"

"I . . . It . . . He was with us. He'd been with us since we left home."

"Where is home, Louise?"

"Cricklade manor. But Dexter came and possessed everyone. That's when we fled to Norwich."

"Ah yes, Norfolk's capital. So you brought Christian with you to Norwich. Then when that started to fall to the possessed, you thought you'd better get offplanet, right?"

"Yes."

“Did you know Christian was a possessed when you bought the tickets?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And when you bought them, did you also know Dexter wanted to come to Earth?”

“No, that was after.”

“So was it dear old samaritan Fletcher Christian who suggested coming here to warn us?”

“Yes.”

“And you agreed to help him?”

“Yes.”

“So where were you going to go originally, before Fletcher Christian made you change your mind and come here?”

“Tranquillity.”

Brent Roi nodded in apparent fascination. “That’s a rather strange place for a young lady from Norfolk’s landowner class to go. What made you choose that habitat?”

“My fiancé lives there. If anyone can protect us, he can.”

“And who is your fiancé, Louise?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Joshua Calvert.”

“Joshua Cal . . . You mean *Lagrange* Calvert?”

“No, Joshua.”

“The captain of the *Lady Macbeth*?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“Let’s say, the name rings a bell.” He sat back and folded his arms, regarding Louise with a strangely mystified expression.

“Can I see Genevieve now?” she asked timidly. No one had actually said she was under arrest yet. She felt a lot more confident now the policeman had actually listened to her story.

“In a little while, possibly. We just have to review the information you’ve provided us with.”

“You do believe me about Quinn Dexter, don’t you? You must make sure he doesn’t get down to Earth.”

“Oh, I assure you, we will do everything we can to make sure he doesn’t get through our security procedures.”

“Thank you.” She glanced awkwardly at the two female officers standing on either side of her chair. “What’s going to happen to Fletcher?”

“I don’t know, Louise, that’s not my department. But I imagine they’ll attempt to flush him out of the body he’s stolen.”

“Oh.” She stared at the floor.

“Do you think they’re wrong to try that, Louise?”

“No. I suppose not.” The words were troubling to speak; the truth, but not what was right. None of what had happened was right.

“Good.” Brent Roi signalled her escort. “We’ll talk again in a little while.” When the door closed behind her, he couldn’t help a grimace of pure disbelief.

“What do you think?” his supervisor datavised.

“I have never heard someone sprout quite so much bullshit in a single interview before,” Brent Roi replied. “Either she’s a retard, or we’re up against a new type of possessed infiltration.”

“She’s not a retard.”

“Then what the hell is she? Nobody is that dumb, it’s not possible.”

“I don’t believe she’s dumb, either. Our problem is, we’re so used to dealing with horrendous complexities of subterfuge, we never recognise the simple truth when we see it.”

“Oh come on, you don’t actually believe that story?”

“She is, as you said, from the Norfolk landowner class; that doesn’t exactly prepare her for the role of galactic master criminal. And she is travelling with her sister.”

“That’s just cover.”

“Brent, you are depressingly cynical.”

“Yes, sir.” He held on to his exasperation, it never made the slightest impression on his supervisor. The anonymous entity who had guided the last twenty years of his life lacked many ordinary human responses. There were times when Brent Roi wondered if he was actually dealing with a xenoc. Not that there was much he could do about that now; whatever branch of whatever agency the supervisor belonged to, it was undoubtedly a considerable power within Govcentral. His own smooth, accelerated promotion through the Halo police force was proof of that.

“There are factors of Miss Kavanagh’s story which my colleagues and I find uniquely interesting.”

“Which factors?” Brent asked.

“You know better than that.”

“All right. What do you want me to do with her?”

“Endron has confirmed the Phobos events to the Martian police, however we must establish exactly what happened to Kavanagh on Norfolk. Initiate a direct memory retrieval procedure.”

Over the last five hundred years, the whole concept of Downtown had acquired a new-ish and distinctly literal meaning in New York; naturally enough, so did Uptown. One thing, though, would never change; the arcology still jealously guarded its right to boast the tallest individual building on the planet. While the odd couple of decades per century might see the title stolen away by upstart rivals in Europe or Asia, the trophy always came home eventually.

The arcology now sprawled across more than four thousand square kilometres, housing (officially) three hundred million people. With New Manhattan at the epicentre, fifteen crystalline domes, twenty kilometres in diameter, were

clumped together in a semicircle along the eastern seaboard, sheltering entire districts of ordinary skyscrapers (defined as buildings under one kilometre high) from the pummelling heat and winds. Where the domes intersected, gigantic conical megatowers soared up into the contused sky. More than anything, these colossi conformed to the old concept of “arcology” as a single city-in-a-building. They had apartments, shopping malls, factories, offices, design bureaus, stadiums, universities, parks, police stations, council chambers, hospitals, restaurants, bars, and spaces for every other human activity of the Twenty-seventh Century. Thousands of their inhabitants were born, lived, and died inside them without ever once leaving.

At five and a half kilometres tall, the Reagan was the current global champion, its kilometre-wide base resting on the bedrock where the town of Ridgewood had stood in the times before the armada storms. An apartment on any of its upper fifty floors cost fifteen million fuseodollars apiece, and the last one was sold twelve years before they were built. Their occupants, the new breed of Uptowners, enjoyed a view as spectacular as it was possible to have on Earth. Although impenetrably dense cloud swathed the arcology for a minimum of two days out of every seven; when it was clear the hot air was very clear indeed. Far below them, under the transparent hexagonal sheets which comprised the roof of the domes, the tide of life ebbed and flowed for their amusement. By day, an exotic hustle as kaleidoscope rivers of vehicles flowed along the elevated 3D web of roads and rails; by night, a shimmering tapestry of neon pixels.

Surrounding the Reagan, streets and skyscrapers fanned out in a radial of deep carbon-concrete canyons, like buttress roots climbing up to support the main tower. The lower levels of these canyons were badly cluttered, where

the skyscraper bases were twice as broad as their peaks, and the elevated roads formed a complex intersecting grid for the first hundred and fifty metres above the ground. High expressways throwing off curving slip roads at each junction down to the local traffic lanes; broad freight-only flyovers shaking from the eighty-tonne autotrucks grumbling along them twenty-four hours a day, winding like snakes into tunnels which led to sub-basement loading yards; metro transit carriages gliding along a mesh of rails so labyrinthine that only an AI could run the network. Rents were cheap near the ground, where there was little light but plenty of noise, and the heavy air gusting between dirty vertical walls had been breathed a hundred times before. Entropy in the arcology meant a downward drift. Everything that was worn-out, obsolete, demode, economically redundant—down it came to settle on the ground, where it could descend no further. People as well as objects.

Limpet-like structures proliferated among the crisscross of road support girders bridging the gap between the skyscrapers, shanty igloos woven from salvaged plastic and carbotanium composite, multiplying over the decades until they clotted into their own light-killing roof. Under them, leeches to the streets themselves, were the market stalls and fast-food counters; a souk economy of fifth-hand cast-offs and date-expired sachets shuffled from family to family in an eternal round robin. Crime here was petty and incestuous, gangs ruled their turf, pushers ruled the gangs. Police made token patrols in the day, and went off-shift as the unseen sun sank below the rim of the domes above.

This was Downtown. It was everywhere, but always beneath the feet of ordinary citizens, invisible. Quinn adored it. The people who dwelt here were almost in the ghost realm already; nothing they did ever affected the real world.

He walked up out of the subway onto a gloomy street

jammed with canopied stalls and wheel-less vans, all with their skirt of goods guarded by vigilant owners. Graffiti struggled with patches of pale mould for space on the skyscraper walls. There were few windows, and those were merely armoured slits revealing little of the mangy shops and bars inside. Metallic thunder from the roads above was as permanent as the air which carried it.

Several looks were quickly thrown Quinn's way before eyes were averted for fear of association. He smiled to himself as he strode confidently among the stalls. As if his attitude wasn't enough to mark him out as an interloper, he had clothed himself in his jet-black priest robe again.

It was the simplest way. He wanted to find the sect, but he'd never been to New York before. Everybody in Downtown knew about the sect, this was their prime recruiting ground. There would be a coven close by, there always was. He just needed someone who knew the location.

Sure enough, he hadn't got seventy metres from the subway when they saw him. A pair of waster kids busy laughing as they pissed on the woman they'd just beaten unconscious. Her two-year-old kid lay on the sidewalk bawling as blood and urine pooled round its feet. The victim's bag had been ripped apart, scattering its pitiful contents on the ground around her. They put Quinn in mind of Jackson Gael; late-adolescence, with pumped bodies, their muscle shape defined by some exercise but mostly tailored-hormones. One of them wore a T-shirt with the slogan: CHEMICAL WARFARE MACHINE. The other was more body-proud, favouring a naked torso.

He was the one who saw Quinn first, grunted in amazement, and nudged his partner. They sealed their flies and sauntered over.

Quinn slowly pushed his hood down. Hyper-sensitive to trouble, the street was de-populating rapidly. Pedestrians,

already nervous from the mugging, slipped away behind the forest of support pillars. Market stall shutters were slammed down.

The two waster kids stopped in front of Quinn, who grinned in welcome. "I haven't had sex for ages," Quinn said. He looked straight at the one wearing the T-shirt. "So I think I'll fuck you first tonight."

The waster kid snarled, and threw a punch with all the strength his inflated muscles could manage. Quinn remained perfectly still. The fist struck his jaw, just to the left of his chin. There was a crunch which could easily be heard above the traffic's clamour. The waster kid bellowed, first in shock, then in agony. His whole body shook as he slowly pulled his hand back. Every knuckle was broken, as if he had punched solid stone. He cradled it with frightened tenderness, whimpering.

"I'd like to say take me to your leader," Quinn said, as if he hadn't even noticed the punch. "But organising yourselves takes brains. So I guess I'm out of luck."

The second waster kid had paled, shaking his head and taking a couple of steps backward.

"Don't run," Quinn said, his voice sharp.

The waster kid paused for a second, then turned and bolted. His jeans burst into flames. He screamed, stumbling to a halt, and flailing wildly at the burning fabric. His hands ignited. The shock silenced him for a second as he held them up disbelievingly in front of his face. Then he screamed again, and kept on screaming, staggering about drunkenly. He crashed into one of the flimsy stalls which crumpled, folding about him. The fire was burning deeper into his flesh now, spreading along his arms, and up onto his torso. His screaming became weaker as he bucked about in the smouldering wreckage.

The T-shirted kid raced over to him. But all he could do

was look down in a horror of indecision as the flames grew hotter.

“For Christ’s sake,” he wailed at Quinn. “Stop it. Stop it!”

Quinn laughed. “Your first lesson is that God’s Brother cannot be stopped.”

The body was motionless and silent now, a black glistening husk at the centre of the flames. Quinn put a hand on the shoulder of the sobbing waster kid at his side. “It hurts you, doesn’t it? Watching this?”

“Hurts! Hurts? You bastard.” Even with a face screwed up from pain and rage, he didn’t dare try to twist free from Quinn’s hand.

“I have a question,” Quinn said. “And I’ve chosen you to answer it for me.” His hand moved down, caressing the waster kid’s chest before it reached his crotch. He tightened his fingers round the kid’s balls, aroused by the fear he was inflicting.

“Yes, God, yes. Anything,” the kid snivelled. His eyes were closed, denying what he could of this nightmare.

“Where is the nearest coven of the Light Bringer sect?”

Even with the pain and dread scrambling his thoughts, the waster kid managed to stammer: “This dome, district seventeen, eighty-thirty street. They got a centre somewhere along there.”

“Good. You see, you’ve learnt obedience, already. That’s very smart of you. I’m almost impressed. Now there’s only one lesson left.”

The waster kid quailed. “What?”

“To love me.”

The coven’s headquarters had chewed its way, maggot-fashion, into the corner of the Hauck skyscraper on eighty-thirty street. What had once been a simple lattice of cube

rooms, arranged by mathematics rather than art, was now a jumbled warren of darkened chambers. Acolytes had knocked holes in some walls, nailed up barricades in the corridors, pulled down ceilings, sealed off stairwells; drones shaping their nest to the design of the magus. From the outside it looked the same, a row of typically shabby Downtown shops along the street, selling goods cheaper than anywhere else—they could afford to, everything was stolen by the acolytes. But above the shops, the slim windows were blacked out, and according to the building management processors, the rooms unoccupied, and therefore not liable to pay rent.

Inside, the coven members buzzed about industriously twenty-four hours a day. Looked at from a strictly corporate viewpoint, which was how magus Garth always regarded his coven, it was quite a prosperous operation. Ordinary acolytes, the real sewer-bottom shit of the human race, were sent out boosting from the upper levels; bringing back a constant supply of consumer goodies that were either used by the sect or sold off in the coven-front shops and affiliated street market stalls. Sergeant acolytes were deployed primarily as enforcers to keep the others in line, but also to run a more sophisticated distribution net among the dome's lower-middle classes; competing (violently) with ordinary pushers out in the bars and clubs. Senior acolytes, the ones who actually had a working brain cell, were given didactic memory courses and employed running the pirate factory equipment, bootlegging MF albums, black sensewise programs, and AV activant software; as well as synthesizing an impressive pharmacopoeia of drugs, hormones, and proscribed viral vectors.

In addition to these varied retail enterprises, the coven still engaged in the more traditional activities of crime syndicates. Although sensewise technology had essentially

eliminated a lot of prostitution outside of Downtown, that still left protection rackets, extortion, clean water theft, blackmail, kidnapping, data theft, game-rigging, civic-service fraud, power theft, embezzlement, and vehicle theft, among others.

The coven performed all of them with gusto, if not finesse. Magus Garth was satisfied with their work. They hadn't missed their monthly target in over three years, making the required financial offering to New York's high magus over in dome two. His only worry was that the High Magus could realize how lucrative the coven was, and demand a higher offering. Increased payments would cut into Garth's personal profits, the eight per cent he'd been skimming every month for the last five years.

There were times when Garth wondered why nobody had noticed. But then, looking at sergeant acolyte Wener, maybe he shouldn't be all that surprised. Wener was in his thirties, a big man, but rounded rather than wedge-shaped like most of the acolytes. He had a thick beard, dark hair sprouting from his face in almost simian proportions. His head was in keeping with the rest of his body, though Garth suspected the bone thickness would be a lot greater than average. An overhanging forehead and jutting chin gave him a permanently sullen, resentful expression—appropriately enough. You couldn't geneer that quality, it was a demonstration that the incest taboo was finally starting to lose force among Downtown residents. Fifteen years in the sect, and Wener was as far up the hierarchy as he'd ever get.

"They got Tod, and Jay-Dee," Wener said. He smiled at the memory. "Tod went down swinging. Hit a couple of cops before they shot him with a fucking nervejam. They started kicking him then. I got out."

"How come they spotted you?" Garth asked. He'd sent Wener and five others out to steam a mall. Simple enough,

two of you bang into a civilian, cut a bag strap, slice trouser pocket fabric. Any protest: you get crushed by a circle of aggressive faces and tough young bodies looking for an excuse to hurt you as bad as they can.

Wener shifted some flesh around on top of his shoulders, his way of shrugging. “Dunno. Cops maybe saw what was going down.”

“Ah, fuck it.” Garth knew. They’d hit a streak and stayed too long, allowed the mall patrols to realize what was happening. “Did Tod and Jay-Dee have anything on them?”

“Credit disks.”

“Shit.” That was it. The cops would send them straight down to the Justice Hall, walk them past a judge whose assistant’s assistant would access the case file and slap them with an Involuntary Transportation sentence. Two more loyal followers lost to some asshole colony. Though Garth had heard that the quarantine was even affecting colony starship flights. Ivet holding pens at every orbital tower station were getting heavily overcrowded, the news companies were hot with rumours of riots.

Wener was shoving his hands in his pockets, pulling out credit disks and other civilian crap: fleks, jewellery, palm-sized blocks . . . “I got this. The steam wasn’t a total zero.” He spilt the haul on Garth’s desk, and gave the magus a hopeful look.

“Okay, Wener. But you’ve got to be more careful in the future. Fuck it, God’s Brother doesn’t like failure.”

“Yes, magus.”

“All right, get the hell out of my sight before I give you to Hot Spot for a night.”

Wener lumbered out of the sanctum, and closed the door. Garth datavised the room’s management processor to turn up the lights. Candles and shadowy gloom were the sect’s habitual trappings. When acolytes were summoned before

him, the study conformed to that: a sombre cave lit by a few spluttering red candles in iron candelabrams, its walls invisible.

Powerful beams shone down out of the ceiling, revealing a richly furnished den; drinks cabinet filled with a good selection of bottles, an extensive AV and sensewise flek library, new-marque Kulu Corporation desktop processor (genuine—not a bootleg), some of the weirder art stuff that was impossible to fence. A homage to his own greed, and devoutness. If you see something you want: take it.

“Kerry!” he yelled.

She came in from his private apartment, butt naked. He hadn’t allowed her to wear clothes since the day her brother brought her in. Best-looking girl the coven had acquired in ages. A few tweaks with cosmetic adaptation packages, pandering to his personal tastes, and she was visual perfection.

“Get my fifth invocation robes,” he told her. “Hurry up. I’ve got the initiation in ten minutes.”

She bobbed her head apprehensively, and retreated back into the apartment. Garth started picking up the junk Wener had left, reading the flek labels, datavising the blocks for a menu. A gentle gust of cool air wafted across his face. The candles flickered. It broke his concentration for a moment. Air conditioner screwed up again.

There was nothing of any interest among Wener’s haul, no blackmail levers; some of the fleks were company files, but a quick check found no commercially sensitive items. He was indifferent about that. Data was the other offering the coven made to the High Magus, and that on a weekly basis. A gift that never brought any return, other than the invisible umbrella of political protection the sect extended to its senior members. So Garth played along, considering it his insurance premium. The reports were more than a sim-

ple summary of what was happening inside the coven; the High Magus insisted on knowing what action was going down on the street, every street.

Years of being out on the street at the hard edge had taught Garth the value of good intelligence, but this was like a fetish with the High Magus.

Kerry returned with his robes. The fifth invocation set were appropriately flamboyant, black and purple, embroidered with scarlet pentagrams and nonsense runes. But they were a symbol of authority, and the sect was very strict about internal discipline. Kerry helped him into them, then hung a gold chain with an inverted cross round his neck. When he looked into a mirror he was satisfied with what he saw. The body might be sagging slightly these days, but he used weapon implants rather than straight physical violence to assert himself now; while the shaven skull and eyes recessed by cosmetic adaptation packages gave him a suitably ominous appearance.

The temple was at the centre of the headquarters, a cavity three stories high. Straight rows of severed steel reinforcement struts poking out of the walls showed where the floors and ceilings used to be. A broad pentagon containing an inverted cross was painted across the rear wall. It was illuminated from below by a triple row of skull candles, great gobs of wax in upturned craniums. Stars, demons, and runes formed a constellation around it, although they were fading under layers of soot. The altar was a long carbon-concrete slab, ripped from the sidewalk outside, and mounted on jagged pillars of carbotanium. Impressively solid, if nothing else. There was a black brazier on top of it, lithe blue flames slithering out of the trash bricks it was filled with, sending up a plume of sweet-stinking smoke. A pair of tall serpent-shaped candle sticks flanked it. Ten iron

hoops, sunk into the carbon concrete, trailed lengths of chain which ended in manacles.

Just over half of the coven's acolytes were waiting obediently when Garth arrived. Standing in rows, wearing their grey robes, with coloured belts denoting seniority. Garth would have preferred more. But they were stretched pretty thin right now. A turf dispute with a gang operating out of ninety-ten street had resulted in several clashes. The gang lord was doubtless thinking it would all be settled with a boundary agreement. Garth was going to cure him of that illusion. God's Brother did not negotiate. Acolytes had the gang under observation, building up a picture of their entire operation. It wasn't something the gang understood or could ever emulate, they didn't have the discipline or the drive. Their only motivation was to claw in enough money to pay for their own stim fixes.

That was what made the sect different; serving God's Brother so rewarding.

In another week Garth would unlock the weapons stash and launch a raid. The High Magus had already arranged for him to take delivery of sequestration nanonics; that would be the fate of the gang's leadership, turned into biological mechanoids. Any attractive youths would be used as bluesense meat after the acolytes had enjoyed their victory orgy. And, inevitably, there would be a sacrifice.

The acolytes bowed to Garth, who went to stand in front of the altar. Five initiates were shackled to it. Three boys and two girls, lured in by the promises and the treachery of friends. One of the boys stood defiantly straight, determined to show he could take whatever the initiation threw at him so he could claim his place, the other two were just surly and subdued. Garth had ordered one of the girls to be tranked after he'd spoken to her earlier. She'd virtually been abducted by an acolyte angry at losing her to an out-

side rival, and was likely to go into a mental melt-down if she wasn't eased in to her new life; she had strong ambitions to better herself and rise out of Downtown.

Garth held up his arms, and made the sign of the inverted cross. "With flesh we bond in the night," he intoned.

The acolytes started a low, mournful chanting, swaying softly in unison.

"Pain we love," Garth told them. "Pain frees the serpent beast. Pain shows us what we are. Your servants, Lord."

He was almost in a trance state as he spoke the words, he'd said them so many times before. So many initiations. The coven had a high turnover, arrests, stim burnouts, fights. But never drop outs.

Indoctrination and discipline helped, but his main weapon of control was belief. Belief in your own vileness, and knowing there was no shame in it. Wanting things to get worse, to destroy and hurt and ruin. The easy way forward . . . once you give in to your true self, your serpent beast. All that started right here, with the ceremony.

It was a deliberate release of sex and violence, an empowerment of the most base instincts, permitting little resistance. So easy to join, so natural to immerse yourself in the frenzy around you. Indulge the need to belong, to be the same as your brethren family. An act which gave the existing acolytes that fraternity.

As to the initiates, they passed through the eye of the needle. Fear kept them in place at first, fear of knowing how exquisitely ugly the sect really was, how they would be dealt with if they disobeyed or attempted to leave. Then the cycle would turn, and there would be another initiation. Only this time it would be them showing their devotion to God's Brother, revelling in the unchaining of their serpent beast. Doing as they had been done by, and enraptured by the accomplishment.

Whoever had designed the ritual, Garth thought, had really understood basic conditioning psychology. Such elemental barbarism was the only possible way to exert any kind of control over a Downtown savage. And there was no other sort of resident here.

“In darkness we see You, Lord,” Garth recited. “In darkness we live. In darkness we wait for the true Night that You will bring us. Into that Night we will follow You.” He lowered his arms.

“We will follow You,” the acolytes echoed. Their rustling voices had become hot with expectation.

“When You light the true path of salvation at the end of the world, we will follow You.”

“We will follow You.”

“When Your legions fall upon the angels of the false lord, we will follow You.”

“We will follow You.”

“When the time . . .”

“That time is now,” a single clear voice announced.

The acolytes grunted in surprise, while Garth spluttered to a halt, more astonished than outraged at the interruption. They all knew how important he considered the sect’s ceremonies, how intolerant of sacrilege. Only true believers can inspire belief in others.

“Who said that?” he demanded.

A figure walked forward from the back of the temple, clad in a midnight-black robe. The opening at the front of the hood seemed to absorb all light, there was no hint of the head it contained. “I am your new messiah, and I have come among you to bring our Lord’s Night to this planet.”

Garth tried to use his retinal implants to see into the hood, but they couldn’t detect any light in there, even infrared was useless. Then his neural nanonics reported innumerable program crashes. He yelled: “Shit!” and thrust his

left hand out at the robed figure, index finger extended. The fire command to his microdart launcher never arrived.

“Join with me,” Quinn ordered. “Or I will find more worthy owners for your bodies.”

One of the acolytes launched herself at Quinn, booted foot swinging for his kneecap. Two others were right behind her, fists drawn back.

Quinn raised an arm, his sleeve falling to reveal an albino hand with grizzled claw fingers. Three thin streamers of white fire lashed out from the talons, searingly bright in the gloomy, smoke-heavy air. They struck his attackers, who were flung backwards as if they’d been hit by a shotgun blast.

Garth grabbed one of the serpent candlesticks, and swung it wildly, aiming to smash it down on Quinn’s head. Not even a possessed would be able to survive a mashed brain, the invading soul would be forced out. Air thickened around the candlestick, slowing its momentum until it halted ten centimetres above the apex of Quinn’s hood. The serpent’s head, which held the candle, hissed and closed its mouth, biting the rod of wax in half.

“Swamp him!” Garth shouted. “He can’t defeat all of us. Sacrifice yourself, for God’s Brother.”

A few of the acolytes edged closer to Quinn, but most stayed where they were. The candlestick began to glow along its entire length. Pain stabbed into Garth’s hands. He could hear his skin sizzling. Squirts of greasy smoke puffed out. But he couldn’t let go; his fingers wouldn’t move. He saw them blister and blacken; bubbling juices ran down his wrists.

“Kill him,” he cried. “Kill. Kill.” His burning hands made him scream out in agony.

Quinn leant towards him. “Why?” he asked. “This is the

time of God's Brother. He sent me here to lead you. Obey me."

Garth fell to his knees, arms shaking, charred hands still clenched round the gleaming candlestick. "You're a possessed."

"I was a possessed. I returned. My belief in Him freed me."

"You'll possess all of us," the magus hissed.

"Some of you. But that is what the sect prays for. An army of the damned; loyal followers of our darkest Lord." He turned to the acolytes and held up his hands. For the first time his face was visible within, pale and deadly intent. "The waiting is over. I have come, and I bring you victory for eternity. No more pathetic squabbling over black stimulants, no more wasting your life mugging geriatric farts. His true work waits to be done. I know how to bring Night to this planet. Kneel before me, become true warriors of darkness, and together we will rain stone upon this land until it bleeds and dies."

Garth screamed again. All that was left now of his fingers were black bones soldered to the candlestick. "Kill him, shitbrains!" he roared. "Smash the fucker into bedrock, curse you." But through eyes blurred with tears he could see the acolytes slowly sinking to the floor in front of Quinn. It was like a wave effect, spreading across the temple. Wener was the closest to Quinn, his simple face alive with admiration and excitement. "I'm with you," the lumbering acolyte yelled. "Let me kill people for you. I want to kill everyone, kill the whole world. I hate them. I hate them real bad."

Garth groaned in mortification. They believed him! Believed the shit was a real messenger from God's Brother.

Quinn closed his eyes and smiled in joy as he gloried in their adulation. Finally, he was back among his own. "We

will show the Light Bringer we are the worthy ones," he promised them. "I will guide you over an ocean of blood to His Empire. And from there we will hear the false lord weeping at the end of the universe."

The acolytes cheered and laughed rapturously. This was what they craved; no more of the magus's tactical restraint, at last they could unleash violence and horror without end, begin the war against the light, their promised destiny.

Quinn turned and glanced down at magus Garth. "You: fuckbrain. Grovel, lick the shit off my feet, and I'll allow you to join the crusade as a whore for the soldiers."

The candlestick clattered to the ground, with the roast remains of Garth's hands still attached. He bared his teeth at the deranged possessor standing over him. "I serve my Lord alone. You can go to hell."

"Been there," Quinn said urbanely. "Done that. Come back." His hand descended on Garth's head as if in anointment. "But you will be of use to me. Your body, anyway." His needle-sharp talons pierced the skin.

The magus discovered that the pain of losing his hands was merely the overture to a very long and quite excruciating symphony.

2

It was designated Bureau Seven, which somewhat inevitably for a government organization was acronymed down to B7. To anyone with Govcentral alpha-rated clearance, it was listed as one of the hundreds of bland committees which made up the management hierarchy of the Govcentral Internal Security Directorate. Officially its function was Policy Integration and Resource Allocation, a vital coordination role. The more senior GISD Bureaus produced their requirements for information and actions, and it was B7's job to make sure none of the new objectives clashed with current operations before they designated local arcology offices with carrying out the project and assigned funds. If there was any anomaly to be found with B7, it was that such an important and sensitive responsibility did not have a political appointee assigned to run it. Certainly the chiefs of Bureaus 1 through 6 changed with every new administration, reflecting fresh political priorities; and several hundred minor posts among the lower Bureaus were also up for grabs as a loyalty reward to the new President's retinue. Again, no junior positions were available in B7.

So B7 carried on as it always had, isolated and insular. In

fact, just how insular would have come as a great shock to any outsider who investigated the nature of its members—that is, a shock in the brief period left to them before being quietly terminated.

Although the antithesis of democracy themselves, they did take the job of guarding the republic of Earth extremely seriously. Possession was the one threat which actually had the potential not just to overthrow but actually eliminate Govcentral, a prospect which hadn't arisen for nearly four hundred and fifty years, since the population pressures of the Great Dispersal.

Possession, therefore, was the reason why a full meeting of all sixteen members had been convened for the first time in twelve years. Their sensenviron conference had a standard format, a white infinity-walled room with an oval table in the centre seating their generated representations. There was no seniority among them, each had his or her separate area of responsibility, the majority of which were designated purely on geographical terms, although there were supervisors for GISD's divisions dealing in military intelligence.

An omnidirectional projection hung over the table, showing a warehouse on Norfolk which was burning with unnatural ferocity. Several museum-piece fire engines were racing towards it, along with men in khaki uniforms.

"It would appear the Kavanagh girl is telling the truth," said the Central American supervisor.

"I never doubted it," Western Europe replied.

"She's certainly not possessed," said Military Intelligence. "Not now, anyway. But she'd still have those memories if she had been."

"If she'd been possessed, she would have admitted it," Western Europe said indolently. "You're building in complications for us."

“Do you want a full personality debrief to confirm her authenticity?” Southern Africa asked.

“I don’t think we should,” Western Europe said. He absorbed the mildly polite expressions of surprise the representations around the table were directing at him.

“Care to share with us?” Southern Pacific asked archly.

Western Europe looked at the Military Intelligence supervisor. “I believe we have crossover from the *Mount’s Delta*?”

Military Intelligence gave a perfunctory nod. “Yes. We confirmed that the starship was carrying two people when it docked at Supra-Brazil. One of them slaughtered the other in an extravagantly gory fashion right after docking was completed, the body was literally exploded. All that we can tell you about the victim is that he was male. We still don’t know who he was, there’s certainly no correlating DNA profile stored in our memory cores. I’ve requested that all governments we’re in contact with run a search through their records, but I don’t hold out much hope.”

“Why not?” Southern Pacific asked.

“The *Mount’s Delta* came from Nyvan; he was probably one of their citizens. None of their nations remain intact.”

“Not relevant, anyway,” said Western Europe.

“Agreed,” Military Intelligence said. “Once we’d stripped down the *Mount’s Delta*, we ran extremely thorough forensic tests on the life support capsule and its environmental systems. Analysis on the faecal residue left in the waste cycle mechanism identified the other occupant’s DNA for us. And this is where the story gets interesting, because we have a very positive match on his DNA.” Military Intelligence datavised the sensewise’s controlling processor, and the image above the table changed. Now it showed an image taken from Louise Kavanagh’s brain a few minutes before the warehouse was fired; a young man with a pale,

stern face, dressed in a jet-black robe. The viewing angle was such that he looked down on the members of B7 with a derisory sneer. "Quinn Dexter. He was an Ivet shipped to Lalonde last year, sentenced for resisting arrest, the police thought he was running an illegal package into Edmonton. He was as it happens. Sequestration nanonics."

"Oh Christ," Central America muttered.

"The Kavanagh girl confirms he was on Norfolk, and both she and Fletcher Christian strongly suspect he was the one who took over the frigate *Tantu*. Following that, the *Tantu* made one unsuccessful attempt to penetrate Earth defences, and immediately withdrew, damaging itself in the process."

Western Europe datavised the sensenviron management processor, and the image above the table changed again. "Dexter got to Nyvan. One of the surviving asteroids confirmed that the *Tantu* docked at Jesup asteroid. That's when their real troubles started. Ships from Jesup planted the nukes in the abandoned asteroids." He pointed at the image of Nyvan which had replaced Dexter. It was a world like nothing previously seen in the galaxy, as if a ball of lava had congealed in space, a crinkled black surface crust riddled with contorted fissures of radiant red light. The two atmospheric aspects were in constant conflict, supernatural and supernature boiling against each other with harrowing aggression.

"Dexter was there on Lalonde at incident one, according to Laton and our Edenist friends," Western Europe said remorselessly. "He was on Norfolk, which we now recognize as the major distribution source of infection. He was at Nyvan which has elevated the crisis to a completely new stage; as far as we can tell one which has proved as hostile to the possessed as it is to the ordinary population. And now

we are certain he arrived here at Supra-Brazil.” He looked directly at the South America supervisor.

“There was an alert at the Brazil tower station fifteen hours after the *Mount’s Delta* arrived,” South America said tonelessly. “Just after its descent, one of the lift capsules suffered exactly the kind of electronic glitches known to be inflicted by the possessed. We had the entire arrivals complex sealed and surrounded within ninety seconds. Nothing. No sign of any possessed.”

“But you think he’s here?” East Europe pressed.

South America smiled without humour. “We know he is. After the alert, we hauled in everyone who came down on the lift capsule, passengers and crew. This is what we got from several neural nanonics memory cells.” Nyvan faded away to show a slightly fuzzy two-dimensional picture, indicating a low-grade recording. The figure in the Royale Class lounge wearing a blue-silk suit, and slumped comfortably in a deep chair was undoubtedly Dexter.

“Merciful Allah,” North Pacific exclaimed. “We’ll have to shut down the vac-trains. It’s our one advantage. I don’t care how good he is at eluding our sensors, the little shit can’t walk a thousand kilometres along a vacuum tunnel. Isolate the bastard, and hit him with an SD platform strike.”

“I believe even we would have trouble shutting down the vac-trains,” South Pacific said significantly. “Not without questions being asked.”

“I don’t mean we should issue the order,” North Pacific snapped. “Feed the information up to B3, and make the President’s office authorize it.”

“If the public find out there’s a possessed on Earth, there will be absolute pandemonium,” North Africa said. “Even we would have trouble retaining control over the arcologies.”

“Better than being possessed,” North America said. “Be-

cause that's what he'll do to the arcology populations if we don't stop him. Even we would be in danger."

"I think his objective is more complex than that," Western Europe said. "We know what he did to Nyvan, I think we can assume he wants to do the same thing here."

"Not a chance," Military Intelligence said. "Even if he could sneak around up in the Halo, which I doubt, he'd never acquire enough nukes to split an asteroid open. You can't remove one of those beauts from storage without anyone knowing."

"Maybe, but there's something else. Kavanagh and Fletcher Christian both say that Dexter is here to hunt down Banneth and have his revenge on her. I checked Dexter's file; he used to be a sect member in Edmonton. Banneth was his magus."

"So what?" asked North Pacific. "You know what those crazy brute sect members do to each other when the lights go off. I'm not surprised he wants to beat the crap out of Banneth."

"You're missing the point," Western Europe said patiently. "Why would the soul possessing Quinn Dexter's body care about Dexter's old magus?" He looked questioningly round the table. "We're dealing with something new, here, something different. An ordinary person who has somehow gained the same powers of the possessed, if not superior ones. His goals are not going to be the same as theirs, this craving they have to flee the universe."

North America caught it first. "Shit. He used to be a sect member."

"And presumably remains so," Western Europe agreed. "He was still performing their ceremony on Lalonde; that was incident one, after all. Dexter is a true believer in the Light Bringer teachings."

"You think he's come back to find his God?"

“It’s not a god he worships, it’s the devil. But no, he’s not here to find him. My people ran a psychological profile simulation; what they got indicates he’s come back to prepare the way for his Lord, the Light Bringer, who glories in war and chaos. He’ll try to unleash as much mayhem and destruction on both us and the possessed as it’s possible to do. Nyvan was just the warm up. The real game is going to be played out down here.”

“Well that settles it then,” North Pacific said. “We have to close the vac-trains. It’ll mean losing an entire arcology to him; but we can save the rest.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” Western Europe said. “Dexter is a problem; a novel one, granted. He’s different, and more powerful than all the others B7 has faced over the centuries. But that’s what we are here for, ultimately, to solve problems which would defeat conventional government action. We simply have to locate a weakness and use it.”

“An invisible megalomaniac as powerful as a minor god has a weakness?” North Pacific said. “Allah preserve us, I should like to hear what it is.”

“The Kavanagh girl has escaped him twice. Both times it was due to the intervention of an unknown possessed. We have an ally.”

“On Norfolk! Which has bloody vanished.”

“Nevertheless, Dexter does not command total support from the possessed. He is not invincible. And we have what should be a decisive advantage over him.”

“Which is?”

“We know about him. He knows nothing about us. That can be exploited to trap him.”

“Ah yes,” the Halo supervisor said contentedly. “Now I understand the reluctance for a personality debrief on the Kavanagh girl.”

“Well I don’t,” South America declared querulously.

“Personality debrief requires a much more invasive procedure,” Western Europe said. “At the moment Kavanagh is not aware of what has happened to her. That means we can use her ignorance to get very close to Dexter.”

“Close to . . .” South Pacific trailed off. “My God, you want to use her as a lightning conductor.”

“Exactly. At the moment we have one chance for proximity, and that’s Banneth. Unfortunately there is only a limited degree of preparation we can make with her. The possessed, and therefore presumably Dexter, can sense the emotional content of the minds around them. We have to proceed with extreme caution if he is to be lured into a termination option. If he learns someone is hunting him, we could lose several arcologies, if not more. Moving the Kavanagh girl back into the game doubles our chances of engineering an encounter with him.”

“That’s goddamn risky,” North America said.

“No, I like it,” Halo said. “It has subtlety; that’s more us than closing down the vac-trains and using SD fire to incinerate entire arcology domes.”

“Oh heaven preserve we should let our standard of style drop when the whole fucking world is about to go down the can,” South Pacific grouched.

“Does anyone have a substantial objection?” Western Europe enquired.

“Your operation,” North Pacific said hotly. “Your responsibility.”

“Responsibility?” Australia chided lightly.

There were several smiles around the table as North Pacific glowered.

“Naturally I accept the consequences,” Western Europe purred volubly.

“You’re always such an arrogant little shit when you’re this age, aren’t you?” North Pacific said.

Western Europe just laughed.

The three Confederation Navy marines were polite, insistent, and resolutely uncommunicative. They escorted Joshua the entire length of Trafalgar. Which, he thought, was a hopeful sign; he was being taken away from the CNIS section. A day and a half of interviews with sour-faced CNIS investigators, cooperating like a good citizen. None of his questions answered in return. Certainly no access to a lawyer—one of the investigators had given him a filthy look when he half-jokingly asked for legal aid. Net processors wouldn’t respond to his datavises. He didn’t know where the rest of his crew was. Didn’t know what was happening to *Lady Mac*. And could make a pretty good guess what kind of report Monica and Samuel were concocting.

From the tube carriage station a lift took them up to a floor which was plainly officer country. A wide corridor, good carpet, discreet lighting, holograms of famous Naval events (few he recognized), intent men and women looping from office to office, none of them under the rank of senior lieutenant. Joshua was led into a reception room with two captains sitting at desks. One of them stood, and saluted the marines. “We’ll take him from here.”

“What is this?” Joshua asked. It definitely wasn’t a firing squad on the other side of the ornate double doors in front of him, and hopefully not a courtroom either.

“The First Admiral will see you now,” the captain said.

“Er,” Joshua said lamely. “Okay, then.”

The large circular office had a window overlooking the asteroid’s biosphere. It was night outside, the solartubes reduced to a misty oyster glimmer revealing little of the land-

scape. Big holoscreens on the walls were flashing up external sensor images of Avon and the asteroid's spaceports. Joshua looked for *Lady Mac* among the docking bays, but couldn't find her.

The captain beside him saluted. "Captain Calvert, sir."

Joshua locked eyes with the man sitting behind the big teak desk in front of him, receiving a mildly intrigued gaze from Samuel Aleksandrovich.

"So," the First Admiral said. "Lagrange Calvert. You fly some very tight manoeuvres, Captain."

Joshua narrowed his eyes, unsure just how much irony was being applied here. "I just do what comes naturally."

"Indeed you do. I accessed that section of your file, also." The First Admiral smiled at some internal joke, and waved a hand. "Please sit down, Captain."

A blue-steel chair swelled up out of the floor in front of the desk. Alkad Mzu was sitting in the one next to it, body held rigid, staring ahead. On the other side of her, Monica and Samuel had relaxed back into their own chairs. The First Admiral introduced the demure Edenist woman beside them as Admiral Lalwani, the CNIS chief. Joshua responded with a very nervous twitch of greeting.

"I think I had better start by saying the Confederation Navy would like to thank you for your part in the Nyvan affair, and solving the Alchemist problem for us," the First Admiral said. "I do not like to dwell on the consequences had the Capone Organization acquired it."

"I'm not under arrest?"

"No."

Joshua let out a hefty breath of relief. "Jesus!" He grinned at Monica, who responded with a laconic smile.

"Er, so can I go now?" he asked without much hope.

"Not quite," Lalwani said. "You're one of the few people who knows how the Alchemist works," she told him.

Joshua did his best not to glance at Mzu. "A very brief description."

"Of the principles," Mzu said.

"And I believe you told Samuel and agent Foulkes that you would submit to internal exile in Tranquillity so no one else could obtain the information," Lalwani said.

"Did I? No."

Monica pantomimed deep thought. "Your exact words were: I'll stay in Tranquillity if we survive this, but I have to know."

"And you said you'd stay there with me," Joshua snapped back. He scowled at her. "Ever heard of Hiroshima?"

"The first time an atomic bomb was used on Earth," Lalwani said.

"Yeah. At the time the only real secret about an atom bomb was the fact that it was possible to build one that worked. Once it got used, that secret was out."

"The relevance being?"

"Anyone who visits the location where we deployed Alchemist and sees the result, is going to be able to figure out those precious principles of yours. After that, it's just a question of engineering. Besides, the possessed won't build another. They're not geared around that kind of action."

"Capone's Organization might be able to," Monica said. "They certainly thought they could, remember? They wanted Mzu at any price, incarnate or just her soul. And who's going to know where the Alchemist was used unless you and your crew tell them?"

"Jesus, what do you people want from me?"

"Very little," said the First Admiral. "I think we've established to everyone's satisfaction that you're trustworthy." He grinned at Joshua's sour expression. "Despite what that may do to your reputation. So I'm just going to ask you

to agree to a few ground rules. You do not discuss the Alchemist with anyone. And I mean anyone.”

“Easy enough.”

“For the duration of our current crisis you do not put yourself in a position where you will encounter the possessed.”

“I’ve already encountered them twice, I don’t intend to do it again.”

“That effectively means you will not fly anywhere outside the Sol system. Once you get home, you stay there.”

“Right.” Joshua frowned. “You want me to go to Sol?”

“Yes. You will take Dr Mzu and the *Beezling* survivors there. As you pointed out with your Hiroshima analogy, we cannot push the information genie back into the lamp, but we can certainly initiate damage limitation. The relevant governments have agreed that Dr Mzu can be returned to a neutral nation, where she will not communicate any details of the Alchemist to anyone. The doctor has consented to that.”

“They’ll get it eventually,” Joshua said softly. “No matter what agreements they sign, governments will try to build Alchemists.”

“No doubt,” Samual Aleksandrovich said. “But such problems are for the future. And that is going to be a very different place to today, is it not, Captain?”

“If we solve today, then, yeah. It’ll be different. Even today is different than yesterday.”

“So. Lagrange Calvert has become a philosopher?”

“Haven’t we all, knowing what we do now?”

The First Admiral nodded reluctantly. “Perhaps it’s not such a bad thing. Somebody has to find a solution. The more there are of us searching, the quicker it will be revealed.”

“That’s a lot of faith you have there, Admiral.”

“Of course. If I didn’t have faith in the human race, I would have no right to sit in this chair.”

Joshua gave him a strong look. The First Admiral wasn’t quite what he’d envisaged, the gung-ho military archetype. That made him more confident for the future. Slightly. “Okay, so where do you want me to take the doc in the Sol system, exactly?”

Samual Aleksandrovich smiled broadly. “Ah yes, this is one piece of news I shall enjoy imparting.”

Friend Jay, please cry not.

Haile’s voice was no stronger than the memory of a dream. Jay had closed up her mind as tight as her eyelids. She just lay on the floor, all curled up, sobbing at . . . everything. Ever since that terrible day on Lalonde when the Ivets went mad, she and Mummy had been torn further and further apart. First the cramped house on the savannah. Then Tranquillity, where she’d heard rumours of the possessed taking Lalonde out of the universe—even though the paediatric ward staff had been careful about allowing the refugee kids access to any news. Now this, flying like an angel to another galaxy. Where she’d never get back from. And she’d never see Mummy ever again. Everyone she knew was either dead, or about to be possessed. She wailed louder, so much it hurt her throat.

The back of her head was full of warm whispers, pushing to be let in.

Jay, please restrain yourself.

She is developing cyclic trauma psychosis.

We should impose a thalamic regulator routine.

Humans respond better to chemical suppressers.

Certainty?

Ambiguous context.

Referral to Corpus.

Tractamorphic flesh was slithering round her, rubbing gently. She shook at the touch of it.

Then there was a sharp regular clicking sound, *tac tac tac*, like heels on the cool hard floor. Human heels.

“What in seven heavens’ name do you lot think you’re doing?” a woman’s voice asked sharply. “Give the poor dear some air, for goodness sake. Come on, get back. Right back. Move out the way.” There followed the distinctive sound of a human hand being slapped against a Kiint hide.

Jay stopped crying.

“Move! You too, you little terror.”

That causes painfulness, Haile protested.

“Then learn to move quicker.”

Jay smeared some of the tears from her eyes, and peered up just in time to see someone’s finger and thumb pinching the crater ridge of skin around Haile’s ear, hauling her aside. The baby Kiint’s legs were getting all twisted round as she skittled hurriedly out of the way.

The owner of the hand smiled down at Jay. “Well well, sweetie, haven’t you just caused a stir? And whatever are all these tears for? I suppose you had a bit of shock when they jumped you here. Don’t blame you. That stupid leaping through the darkness stunt used to give me the chronic heebie-jeebies every time. I’ll take a Model-T over that any day. Now there was a really gracious method of transport. Would you like a hanky, wipe your face a bit?”

“Uh,” Jay said. She’d never seen a woman quite so old before; her brown Mediterranean skin was deeply wrinkled, and her back curved slightly, giving her shoulders a permanent hunch. The dress she wore had come straight out from a history text, lemon-yellow cotton printed with tiny white flowers, complemented by a wide belt and lace collar and cuffs. Thin snow-white hair had been permed into a neat beret; and a double loop of large pearls round her neck chit-

tered softly with every movement. It was as if she'd turned age into a statement of pride. But her green eyes were vividly alert.

A frilly lace handkerchief was pulled from her sleeve, and proffered to Jay.

"Thank you," Jay gulped. She took the hanky, and blew into it heavily. The huge adult Kiint had all backed off, standing several paces behind the small woman, keeping close together in a mutual support group. Haile was pressed against Lieria, who had formshifted a tractamorphic arm to stroke her daughter soothingly.

"So now, sweetie, why don't you start by telling me your name."

"Jay Hilton."

"Jay." The woman's jowls bobbed, as if she was sucking on a particularly hard mint. "That's nice. Well, Jay, I'm Tracy Dean."

"Hello. Um, you are real, aren't you?"

Tracy laughed. "Oh yes, sweetie, I'm genuine flesh and blood, all right. And before you ask why I'm here, this is my home now. But we'll save the explanations until tomorrow. Because they're very long and complicated, and you're tired and upset. You need to get some sleep now."

"I don't want to sleep," Jay stammered. "Everybody in Tranquillity's dead, and I'm here. And I want Mummy. And she's gone."

"Oh, Jay, no, sweetie." Tracy knelt beside the little girl, and hugged her tight. Jay was sniffing again, ready to burst into tears. "Nobody's dead. Tranquillity swallowed away clean before any of the combat wasps reached it. These silly oafs got it all wrong and panicked. Aren't they stupid?"

"Tranquillity's alive?"

"Yes."

"And Ione, and Father Horst, and everybody?"

“Yes, all safe and sound. Tranquillity is orbiting Jupiter right this minute. That surprised everybody, let me tell you.”

“But . . . how did it do that?”

“We’re not quite sure yet, but it must have an awful lot of energy patterning cells tucked away somewhere inside it.” She gave Jay a sly grin, and winked. “Tricky people, those Saldanas. And very clever with it, thankfully.”

Jay managed an experimental smile.

“That’s better. Now, let’s see about finding you that bed for the night.” Tracy rose to her feet, holding Jay’s hand.

Jay used her free hand to wipe the handkerchief across her face as she scrambled to her feet. “Oh right.” Actually, she thought that talk of explanations sounded quite fascinating now. There was so much about this place she wanted to know. It would be worth staying awake for.

You now have betterness, query? Haile asked anxiously.

Jay nodded enthusiastically at her friend. “Much better.”

That is good.

I will assume complete Jay Hilton guardian responsibility now.

Jay cocked her head to give Tracy Dean a sideways look. How could she use the Kiint mental voice?

Confirm, Nang said. The words Jay could hear in her head speeded up then, becoming a half-imagined birdsong, but suffused with feeling.

We will venture wide together, Haile said. **See new things. There is muchness here to see.**

“Tomorrow, maybe,” Tracy said. “We have to get Jay settled in here first.”

Jay shrugged at her friend.

“Now then, Jay, we’re going to jump out of here. It’ll be

the same as before, but this time you know it's happening, and I'll be with you the whole time. All right?"

"Couldn't we just walk, or use a groundcar, or something?"

Tracy smiled sympathetically. "Not really, sweetie." She pointed up at the planets arching over the dark sky. "My home is on one of those."

"Oh. But I will be seeing Haile while I'm here, won't I?" Jay raised her hand and waved at her friend. Haile formshifted the tip on one of her tractamorphic arms into a human hand, and wriggled the fingers.

We will build the castles of sand again.

"Close your eyes," Tracy said. "It's easier that way." Her arm went round Jay's shoulder. "Are you ready?"

This time it wasn't so bad. There was that quick breeze ruffling her nightie again, and despite having her eyes shut her stomach was telling her very urgently that she was falling again. A squeak crept out of her lips in spite of her best efforts.

"It's all right sweetie, we're here now. You can open your eyes again."

The breeze had vanished, its departure signalling a whole symphony of fresh sound. Hot sunlight tingled her skin; when she breathed in she could taste salt.

Jay opened her eyes. There was a beach in front of her, one which made the little cove on Tranquillity seem quite pallid by comparison. The powder-fine sand was snow-white, stretching out on either side of her for as far as she could see. Wonderfully clear turquoise water lapped against it, languid waves rolling in from a reef several hundred metres out. A beautiful three-masted yacht of some golden wood was anchored half-way between the shore and the reef, undeniably human in design.

Jay grinned at it, then shielded her eyes with a hand and

looked round. She was standing on a circle of the same ebony material as before, but this time there was no encircling wall or watching Kiint. The only artefact was a bright orange cylinder, as tall as she was, standing next to the edge. Scatterings of sand were drifting onto the circle.

Behind her, a thick barricade of trees and bushes lined the rear of the beach. Long creeper tendrils had slithered out of them over the hard-packed sand, knitting together in a tough lacework that sprouted blue and pink palm-sized flowers. The only noise was the waves and some kind of honking in the distance, almost like a flock of geese. When she searched the cloudless sky, she could see several birds flapping and gliding about in the distance. The arch of planets was a line of silver disks twinkling away into the horizon.

“Where are we now?” Jay asked.

“Home.” Tracy’s face managed to produce even more wrinkles as she sniffed distastefully. “Not that anywhere is really home after spending two thousand years swanning loyally round Earth and the Confederation planets.”

Jay stared at her in astonishment. “You’re two thousand years old?”

“That’s right, sweetie. Why, don’t I look it?”

Jay blushed. “Well . . .”

Tracy laughed, and took hold of her hand. “Come along, let’s find you that bed. I’ll think I’ll put you in my guest quarters. That’ll be simplest. Never thought I’d ever get to use them.”

They walked off the ebony circle. Up ahead of them, Jay could see some figures lazing on the beach, while others were swimming in the sea. Their strokes were slow and controlled. She realized they were all as old as Tracy. Now Jay was paying attention, she could make out several chalets lurking in the vegetation behind the beach. They

were strung out on either side of a white stone building with a red tile roof and a sizeable, well-manicured garden; it looked like some terribly exclusive clubhouse. Still more old people were sitting at iron tables on the lawns, reading, playing what looked like a board game, or just staring out to sea. Mauve-coloured globes, the size of a head, were floating through the air, moving sleekly from table to table. If they found an empty glass or plate they would absorb it straight through their surface. In many cases they would extrude a replacement; the new glasses were full, and the plates piled with sandwiches or biscuit-type snacks.

Jay walked along obediently at Tracy's side, her head swivelling about as she took in the amazing new sights. As they approached the big building, people looked their way and smiled encouragingly, nodding, waving.

"Why are they doing that?" Jay asked. All the excitement and fright had worn off now she knew she was safe, leaving her very tired.

Tracy chuckled. "Having you here is the biggest event that's happened to this place for a long time. Probably ever."

Tracy led her towards one of the chalets; a simple wooden structure with a veranda running along the front, on which stood big clay pots full of colourful plants. Jay could only think of the pretty little houses of the Juliffe villages on the day she and her mother had started sailing upriver to Aberdale. She sighed at the recollection. The universe had become very strange since then.

Tracy patted her gently. "Almost there, sweetie." They started up the steps to the veranda.

"Hi there," a man's voice called brightly.

Tracy groaned impatiently. "Richard, leave her alone. The poor little dear's dead on her feet."

A young man in scarlet shorts and a white T-shirt was

jogging barefoot across the sands towards them. He was tall with an athletic figure, his long blond hair tied back into a ponytail by a flamboyant leather lace. He pouted at the rebuke, then winked playfully at Jay. "Oh, come on, Trace; just paying my respects to a fellow escapee. Hello, Jay, my name's Richard Keaton." He gave a bow, and stuck his hand out.

Jay smiled uncertainly at him, and put out her own hand. He shook it formally. His whole attitude put her in mind of Joshua Calvert, which was comforting. "Did you jump out of Tranquillity as well?" she asked.

"Heavens, no, nothing like that. I was on Nyvan when someone tried to drop a dirty great lump of metal on me. Thought it best I slipped away when no one was looking."

"Oh."

"I know everything is real weird for you right now, so I just wanted you to have this." He produced a doll resembling some kind of animal, a flattish humanoid figure made from badly worn out brown-gold velvet; its mouth and nose were just lines of black stitching, and its eyes were amber glass. One semicircular ear had been torn off, allowing tufts of yellowing stuffing to peek out of the gash.

Jay gave the battered old thing a suspicious look, it wasn't anything like the animatic dolls back in Tranquillity's paediatric ward. In fact, it looked even more primitive than any toy on Lalonde. Which was pretty hard to believe. "Thank you," she said awkwardly as he proffered it. "What is it?"

"This is Prince Dell, my old Teddy Bear. Which dates me. But friends like this were all the rage on Earth when I was young. He's the ancestor of all those animatic dolls you kids have these days. If you hold him close at night he keeps troubles away from your dreams. But you have to keep cuddling him tight for him to be able to do that prop-

erly. Something to do with earth magic and contact; funny stuff like that. He used to sleep with me until I was a lot older than you. I thought he might be able to help you tonight.”

He sounded so serious and hopeful that Jay took the bear from him and examined it closely. Prince Dell really was very tatty, but she could just picture him in the embrace of a sleeping boy with blond hair. The boy was smiling blissfully.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll hold on to him tonight. Thank you very much.” It seemed a bit silly, but it was kind of him to be so considerate.

Richard Keaton smiled gladly. “That’s good. The Prince hasn’t had much to do for a long time. He’ll be happy to have a new friend. Make sure you treat him nicely, he’s a bit delicate now, poor thing.”

“I will,” Jay promised. “Are you really old, as well?”

“Older than most people you’ve ever met, but nothing like as antique as good old Trace, here.”

“Huh,” Tracy sniffed critically. “If you’re quite finished.”

Richard rolled his eyes for Jay’s benefit. “Sweet dreams, Jay. I’ll see you tomorrow, we’ve got lots to talk about.”

“Richard,” Tracy asked reluctantly. “Did Calvert do it?”

A huge smile flashed over his face. “Oh yeah. He did it. The Alchemist is neutralized. Just as well, it was a brute of a weapon.”

“Typical. If they’d just devote ten per cent of their military budget and all that ingenuity into developing their social conditions.”

“Preaching to the converted!”

“Are you talking about Joshua?” Jay asked. “What’s he done?”

“Something very good,” Richard said.

“Amazingly,” Tracy muttered dryly.

“But . . .”

“Tomorrow, sweetie,” Tracy said firmly. “Along with everything else. I promise. Right now, you’re going to bed. Enough delaying tactics.”

Richard waved, and walked away. Jay held Prince Dell against her tummy as Tracy’s hand pressed into her back, propelling her up the steps and into the chalet. She glanced down at the ancient bear again. His dull glass eyes stared right back at her, it was an incredibly melancholic expression.

The first hellhawk came flashing out of its wormhole terminus twelve thousand kilometres from Monterey asteroid. New California’s gravitonic detector warning satellites immediately datavisied an alert to the naval tactical operations centre. The high pitched audio alarm startled Emmet Morden, who was the duty officer in the large chamber. At the time he was sitting with his feet up on the commander’s console, reading through a four-hundred-sheet hard copy guide of a Quantumsoft accountancy program in preparation for his next upgrade to the Treasury computers. With most of the Organization fleet away at Tranquillity, and the planet reasonably stable right now, it was a quiet duty, just right to catch up on his technical work.

Emmet’s feet hit the floor as the AI responsible for threat analysis squirted a mass of symbols and vectors up on one of the huge wall-mounted holoscreens. In front of him, the equally surprised SD network operators scrambled to interpret what was happening. There weren’t many of them among the eight rows of consoles in the centre, nothing like the full complement which the Organization had needed at the height of the Edenist harassment campaign. Right now, spaceflight traffic was at a minimum, and the contingent of

Valisk hellhawks on planetary defence duty had done a superb job of clearing Edenist stealth mines and spy globes from space around the planet.

“What is it?” Emmet asked automatically; by which time another three wormholes had opened. The precariously-stacked pile of hard copy avalanched off his console as he determinedly cleared his keyboard ready to respond.

The AI had acquired X-ray laser lock on for the first four targets, and was requesting fire authority. Another ten wormholes were opening. Jull von Holger, who acted as the go-between for the Valisk hellhawks and the operations centre, leapt to his feet, shouting: “Don’t shoot!” He waved his arms frantically. “They’re ours! They’re our hellhawks.”

Emmet hesitated, his fingers hovering over the keys. According to his console displays, over eighty wormholes had now opened to disgorge bitek starships. “What the fuck do they think they’re doing busting in on us like that? Why aren’t they with the fleet?” Suspicion flowered among his thoughts; and he didn’t care that von Holger could sense it. Hellhawks were dangerously powerful craft, and with the fleet away they could make real trouble. He’d never really trusted Kiera Salter.

Jull von Holger’s face went through a wild panoply of emotion-derived contortions as he conducted fast affinity conversations with the unexpected arrivals. “They’re not from the fleet. They’ve come here directly from Valisk.” He halted for a moment, shocked. “It’s gone. Valisk has gone. We lost to that little prat Dariat.”

“Holy shit,” Hudson Proctor gasped.

Kiera stuck her head round the bathroom door as the beautician tried to wrap her sopping wet hair in a huge fluffy purple towel. The Quayle suite in the Monterey

Hilton was a temple to opulence and personal luxury. As Rubra had denied everyone access to the Valisk starscrapers, along with their apartment bathrooms, Kiera had simply groomed herself with energistic power alone. She had forgotten what it was to sprawl in a Jacuzzi with a selector that could blend in any of a dozen exotic salts. And as for having her hair styled properly rather than forcing it into shape . . .

“What?” she snapped in annoyance; though the beacon-bright dismay in her associate’s mind tempered any real fury at being interrupted.

“The hellhawks are here,” he said. “All of them. They’ve come from Valisk. It’s . . .” He flinched in trepidation. Delivering bad news to Kiera was always a desperately negative career move. Just because she had the kind of teenage-sweetheart looks which could (and had) suckered in non-possessed kids from right across the Confederation didn’t mean her behaviour matched. Quite the opposite—she took a perverse enjoyment from that, too. “Bonney chased after Dariat, apparently. There was a big fight in one of the starscrapers. Plenty of our people got flung back into the beyond. Then she forced him to ally with Rubra, or something.”

“What happened?”

“They, er—Valisk’s gone. The two of them took the habitat out of the universe.”

Kiera stared at him, little wisps of steam starting to lick out of her hair. She’d always bitterly regretted that Marie Skibbow didn’t have some kind of affinity faculty; its absence had always put her at a slight disadvantage in Valisk. But she’d coped, the entire worldlet and its formidable starships had belonged to her. She’d been a power to contend with. Even Capone had sought out her help. Now—

Kiera gave the non-possessed beautician girl a blank-eyed glance. "Get lost."

"Ma'am." The girl curtsied, and almost sprinted for the suite's double doors on the other side of the lounge.

Kiera allowed herself a muted scream of fury when the doors closed. "That fucking Dariat! I knew it! I fucking knew he was a disaster waiting to happen."

"We're still in charge of the hellhawks," Hudson Proctor said. "That gives us a big chunk of Capone's action; and the Organization is in charge of a couple of star systems, with more on the way. It's not such a loss. If we'd been inside the habitat it would be one hell of a lot worse."

"If I'd been inside, it would never have happened," she snapped back. Her hair was abruptly dry, and her robe blurred, running like hot wax until it became a sharp mauve business suit. "Control," she murmured almost to herself. "That's the key here."

Hudson Proctor could sense her focusing on him, both her eyes and her mind.

"Are you with me?" she asked. "Or are you going to ask good old Al if you can sign on as one of his lieutenants?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because if I can't keep control of the hellhawks, I'm nothing to the Organization." She smiled thinly. "You and I would have to start right back at the beginning again. With the hellhawks obeying us, we'll still be players."

He glanced out of the big window, searching space for a sight of the bitek starships. "We've got no hold on them any more," he said dejectedly. "Without the affinity-capable bodies stored in Valisk, there's no way they'll do as they're ordered. And there aren't any more of Rubra's family left for us to replace them with. We've lost."

Kiera shook her head impatiently. Considering she'd co-opted the ex-general to her council for his ability to think

tactically, he was doing a remarkably poor job of it. But then, maybe a politician's instinct was naturally quicker at finding an opponent's weakness. "There's one thing left which they can't do for themselves."

"And that is?"

"Eat. The only sources of their nutrient fluid which they'll be able to use are on Organization-held asteroids. Without food, even bitek organisms will wither and die. And we know our energistic power can't magic up genuine food."

"Then Capone will control them."

"No." Kiera could sense his anxiety at the prospect of losing his status, and knew she could rely on him. She closed her eyes, focusing on assignments for the small number of her people she'd brought with her to Monterey. "Which is the most reliable hellhawk we've got on planetary defence?"

"Reliable?"

"Loyal, idiot. To me."

"That'll probably be Etchells in the *Stryla*. He's a regular little Nazi, always complaining hellhawks never see enough battle action. Doesn't get on too well with the others, either."

"Perfect. Call him back to Monterey's docking ledges and go on board. I want you to visit every Organization asteroid in this system with a nutrient fluid production system. And blow it to shit."

Hudson gave her an astounded look, trepidation replacing the earlier anxiety. "The asteroids?"

"No, shithead! Just the production systems. You don't even have to dock, just use an X-ray laser. That'll leave Monterey as their only supply point." She smiled happily. "The Organization has enough to do right now without the burden of maintaining all that complicated machinery. I

think I'll go down there right now with our experts, and relieve them."

It wasn't dawn which arose over the wolds, inasmuch as there was no sun to slide above the horizon any more, but none the less the darkened sky grew radiant in homage to Norfolk's lost diurnal rhythm. Luca Comar felt it developing because he was a part of making it happen. By coming to this place he had freed himself from the clamour of the souls lost within the beyond, their tormented screams and angry pleas. In exchange he had gained an awareness of community.

Born at the tail end of the Twenty-first Century he'd grown up in the Amsterdam arcology. It was a time when people still clung to the hope that the planet could be healed, their superb technology employed to turn the clock back to the nevertime of halcyon pastoral days. In his youth, Luca dreamed of the land returned to immense parkland vistas with proud white and gold cities straddling the horizon. A child brought up by some of the last hippies on Earth, his formative years were spent loving the knowledge that togetherness was all. Then he turned eighteen, and for the first time in his existence reality had bitten, and bitten hard; he had to get a job, and an apartment, and pay taxes. Not nice. He resented it until the day his body died.

So now he had stolen a new body, and with the strange powers that theft had bestowed, he'd joined with the others of this planet to create their own Gaia. Unity of life was a pervasive, shroud-like presence wrapping itself around the planet, replacing the regimented order of the universe as their provider. Because the new inhabitants of Norfolk wished there to be a dawn, there was one. And as they equally desired night, so the light was banished. He contributed a little of himself to this Gaia, some of his wishes,

some of his strength, a constant avowal of thanks to this new phase of his existence.

Luca sat on the edge of the huge bed in the master bedroom to watch the light strengthen outside Cricklade; a silver warmth shining down from the sky, its uniformity leaving few shadows. With it came the sense of anticipation, a new day to be treasured because of the opportunity it might bring.

A dull dawn, bland and boring, just as the days have become. We used to have two suns, and revelled in the contrast of colours they brought, the battle of shadows. They had energy and majesty, they inspired. But this, this . . .

The woman on the bed beside Luca stretched and rolled over, resting her chin in her hand and smiling up at him. "Morning," she purred.

He grinned back. Lucy was good company, sharing a lot of his enthusiasms, as well as a wicked sense of humour. A tall woman, great figure, thick chestnut hair worn long, barely into her mid-twenties. He never asked how much of her appearance was hers, and how much belonged to her host. The age of your host had swiftly become taboo. He liked to think himself modern enough so that bedding a ninety-year-old wouldn't bother him, age and looks being different concepts here. He still didn't ask, though. The solid image was good enough.

An image so close to Marjorie it verges on the idolatrous. Did this Lucy see that in my heart?

Luca yawned widely. "I'd better get going. We have to inspect the mill this morning, and I need to know how much seed corn we've actually got left in the silos over in the estate's western farms. I don't believe what the residents are telling me. It doesn't correspond with what Grant knows."

Lucy pulled a dour face. "One week in heaven, and the four horsemen are already giving us the eye."

“Alas, this is not heaven, I’m afraid.”

“And don’t I know it. Fancy having to work for a living when you’re dead. God, the indignity.”

“The wages of sin, lady. We did have one hell of a party to start with, after all.”

She flopped back down on the bed, tongue poised tautly on her upper lip. “Sure did. You know I was quite repressed back when I was alive first time around. Sexually, that is.”

“Hallelujah, it’s a miracle cure.”

She gave a husky chuckle, then sobered. “I’m supposed to be helping out in the kitchen today. Cooking the workers lunch, then taking it out to the fields for them. Bugger, it’s like some kind of Amish festival. And how come we’re reverting to gender stereotypes?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s us girls that are doing all the cooking.”

“Not all of you.”

“The majority. You should work out a better rota for us.”

“Why me?”

“You seem to be taking charge around here. Quite the little baron.”

“Okay, I designate you to draw up a proper equitable rota.” He stuck his tongue out at her. “You should be good at secretarial work.”

The pillow hit him on the side of his head, nearly knocking him off the bed. He caught the next one, and put it out of her reach. “I didn’t do it deliberately,” he said seriously. “People tell me what they can do, and I shove them at the first matching job. We need to get a list of occupations and skills sorted out.”

She moaned. “Bureaucracy in heaven, that’s worse than sexism.”

“Just think yourself lucky we haven’t got round to introducing taxes yet.” He started searching round for his

trousers. Luckily, the Manor had entire wardrobes of Grant Kavanagh's high-quality clothes. They weren't quite Luca's style, but at least they fitted perfectly. And the outdoor gear was hard-wearing, too. It saved him from having to dream up new stuff. That was harder here, in this realm. Imagined items took a long time to form, but when they did, they had more substance, and persevered longer. Concentrate hard enough and long enough on changing something, and the change would become permanent, requiring no more attention.

But that was inert objects: clothes, stone, wood, even chunks of machinery (not electronics), they could all be fashioned by the mind. Which was fortunate; Norfolk's low-technology infrastructure could be repaired with relative ease. Physical appearance, too, could be governed by a wish, flesh gradually morphing into a new form—invariably firmer and younger. The majority of possessed were intent on reverting to their original features. As seen through a rose-tinted mirror, Luca suspected. Having quite so many beautiful people emerge in one place together was statistically implausible.

Not that vanity was their real problem. The one intractable difficulty of this new life was food. Energistic power simply could not conjure any into existence; no matter how creative or insistent you were. Oh, you could cover a plate with a mountain of caviar; but cancel the illusion and the glistening black mass would relapse into a pile of leaves, or whatever raw material you were trying to bend to your will.

Irony or mockery, Luca couldn't quite decide what their deliverance had led them to. But whichever it was, eternity tilling the fields was better than eternity in the beyond. He finished dressing, and gave Lucy an expectant, slightly chiding look.

“All right,” she grumbled. “I’m getting up. I’ll pull my communal weight.”

He kissed her. “Catch you later.”

Lucy waited until the door shut behind him, then pulled the sheets back over her head.

Most of the manor’s residents were already awake and bustling about. Luca said a dozen good-mornings as he made his way downstairs. As he walked along the grand corridors, the state of the building gradually registered. Windows left ajar, allowing the nightly sprinkling of rain to stain the carpets and furniture; open doors showed him glimpses of rooms with clothes strewn everywhere, remnants of meals on plates, grey mould growing out of mugs, sheets unwashed since the start of Norfolk’s possession. It wasn’t apathy, exactly, more like teenage carelessness—the belief that mum will always be around to clean up after you.

Bloody squalor junkies. Wouldn’t have happened in my day, by damn.

There were over thirty people having their breakfast in Cricklade’s dining hall, which now served as the community’s canteen. The big chamber was three stories high, with a wooden ceiling supported by skilfully carved rafters. Cascade chandeliers hung on strong chains; their light globes were inoperative, but they bounced plenty of the sky’s ambient light around the hall, illuminating the elaborate Earthwoodland frescos painted between every window. A thick blue and cream coloured Chinese carpet silenced Luca’s boots as he walked over to the counter and helped himself to scrambled egg from an iron baking dish.

The plate he used was chipped, the silver cutlery was tarnished, and the polish on the huge central table was scuffed and scratched. He nodded to his companions as he sat, holding back any criticism. Focus on priorities, he told him-

self. Things were up and running at a basic level, that's what counts. The food was plain but adequate; not rationed exactly, but carefully controlled. They were all reverting to a more civilized state of behaviour.

For a while after Quinn left, Cricklade's new residents had joyfully discarded the sect's loathsome teachings which the monster had imposed, and dived into a continual orgy of sex and overconsumption. It was a reaction to the beyond; deliberately immersing themselves in complete sensory-glut. Nothing mattered except feeling, and taste, and smell. Luca had eaten and drunk his way through the manor's extensive cuisine supplies, shagged countless girls with supermodel looks, flung himself into ludicrously dangerous games, persecuted and hounded the non-possessed. Then, with painful slowness, the morning after had finally dawned, bringing the burden of responsibility and even a degree of decency.

It was the day when the bathroom shower nozzle squirted raw sewage over him that Luca started to gather up like-minded people and set about restoring the estate to working order. Pure hedonistic anarchy, it turned out, was not a sustainable environment.

Luca saw Susannah emerge from the door leading to the kitchen. His every movement suddenly became very cautious. She was carrying a fresh bowl of steaming tomatoes, which she plonked down on the self-service counter.

As he had applied himself to getting the farming side of the estate functional again, so she had taken on the manor itself. She was making a good job of providing meals and keeping the place rolling along (even though it wasn't maintained as it had been in the old days). Appropriately enough, for Susannah was possessing Marjorie Kavanagh's body. Naturally, there had been little room for physical improvement; she'd discarded about a decade, and shortened

her extravagant landowner hair considerably, but the essential figure and features remained the same.

She picked up an empty bowl and walked back to the kitchen. Their eyes met, and she gave him a slightly confused smile before she disappeared back through the door.

Luca swallowed the mush of egg in his mouth before he choked on it. There had been so much he wanted to cram into that moment. So much to say. And their troubled thoughts had resonated together. She knew what he knew, and he knew . . .

Ridiculous!

Hardly. She belongs with us.

Ridiculous because Susannah had found someone: Austin. They were happy together. And I have Lucy. For convenience. For sex. Not for love.

Luca forked up the last of his eggs, and washed them down with some tea. Impatience boiled through him. I need to be out there, get those damn slackers cracking.

He found Johan sitting at the other end of the table, with the single slice of toast and glass of orange which was his whole meal. "You ready yet?" he asked curtly.

Johan's rounded face registered an ancient expression of suffering, creasing up into lines so ingrained they must have been there since birth. There was a glint of sweat on his brow. "Yes, sir; I'm fit for another day."

Luca could have mouthed the ritual reply in tandem. Johan was possessing Mr Butterworth. The physical transformation from a lumbering, chubby sixty-year-old to virile twenty-something youth was almost complete, though some of the old estate manager's original characteristics seemed to defy modification.

"Come on then, let's be going."

He strode out of the hall, directing sharp glances at several of the men around the table as he went. Johan was al-

ready rising to his feet to scurry after Luca. Those who had received the visual warning crammed food in their mouths and stood hurriedly, anxious not to be left behind.

Luca had a dozen of them follow him into the stables, where they started to saddle up their horses. The estate's rugged farm ranger vehicles were still functional, but nobody was using them right now. The electricity grid had been damaged during the wild times, and only a couple of possessed in Stoke County owned up to having the knowledge to repair it. Progress was slow; the small amount of power coming from the geothermal cables was reserved for tractors.

It took Luca a couple of minutes to saddle up his horse; buckles and straps fastened into place without needing to think—Grant's knowledge. Then he led the piebald mare out into the courtyard, past the burnt out ruins of the other stable block. Most of the horses Louise had set free during the fire had come back; they still had over half of the manor's superb herd left.

He had to ride slower than he liked, allowing the others to keep up. But the freedom of the wolds made up for it. All as it should be. Almost.

Individual farms huddled in the lee of the shallow valleys, stolid stone houses seeking protection against Norfolk's arctic winters; they were scattered about the estate almost at random. Their fields had all been ploughed now, and the tractors were out drilling the second crop. Luca had gone round the storage warehouses himself, selecting the stock of barley, wheat, maize, oats, a dozen varieties of beans, vegetables. Some fields had already started to sprout, dusting the rich dark soil with a gossamer haze of luxuriant emerald. It was going to be a good yield, the nightly rain they conjured up would ensure that.

He was thankful that most of the disruption to the estate

had been superficial. It just needed a firm guiding hand to get everything back on track.

As they approached Colsterworth, the farms were closer together, fields forming a continual quilt. Luca led his team round the outskirts. The streets were busy, clotted by the town's residents as they strove for activity and normality. Nearly all of them recognized Luca as he rode past. His influence wasn't quite so great here, though it was his objectives which had been adopted. The town had elected itself a council of sorts, who acknowledged Luca had the right goals in restarting the county's basic infrastructure. A majority of the townsfolk went along with the council, repairing the water pump house and the sewage treatment plant, clearing the burnt carriages and carts from the streets, even attempting to repair the telephone system. But the council's real power came from food distribution, over which it had a monopoly, loyalists mounting a round the clock guard on the warehouses.

Luca spurred his horse over the canal bridge, a wood and iron arch in the Victorian tradition. The structure was another of the council's repair projects, lengths of genuine fresh timber had been dovetailed into the original seasoned planking; energetic power had been utilised to reform the iron girders that had been smashed and twisted (somehow they couldn't quite match the blue paint colour, so the new sections were clearly visible).

The Moulin de Hurley was on the other bank, a big mill house which supplied nearly a quarter of Kesteven island with flour. It had dark-red brick walls cut by tall iron-rimmed windows; one end was built over a small stream, which churned excitedly out of a brick arch before emptying into the canal at the end of the wharf. A series of tree-lined reservoir ponds were staggered up the gentle curve of the valley which rose away behind the building.

There was a team appointed by the council to help him waiting by the Moulin's gates. Their leader, Marcella Rye, was standing right underneath the metal archway supporting an ornate letter K. Which gave Luca a warm sensation of contentment. After all, he owned the mill. No! The Kavanaghs. The Kavanaghs owned it. Used to own it.

Luca greeted Marcella enthusiastically, hoping the flush of bonhomie would prevent her from sensing his agitation at the lapse. "I think it'll be relatively easy to get this up and running again," he said expansively. "The water powers the large grinder mechanism, and there's a geothermal cable to run the smaller machines. It should still be producing electricity."

"Glad to hear it. The storage sheds were ransacked, of course," she pointed at a cluster of large outbuildings. Their big wooden doors had been wrenched open; splintered and scorched, they now hung at a precarious angle. "But once the food was gone, nobody bothered with the place."

"Fine, as long as there's no . . ." Luca broke off, sensing the whirl of alarm in Johan's thoughts. He turned just in time to see the man stumble, his legs giving way to pitch him onto his knees. "What's—?"

Johan's youthful outline was wavering as he pressed his fists against his forehead; his whole face was contorted in an agony of concentration.

Luca knelt beside him. "Shit, what is it?"

"Nothing," Johan hissed. "Nothing. I'm okay, just dizzy that's all." Sweat was glistening all over his face and hands. "Heat from the ride got to me. I'll be fine." He clambered to his feet, wheezing heavily.

Luca gave him a confused glance, not understanding at all. How could anyone be ill in a realm in which a single thought had the power of creation? Johan must be severely hung over; a body wasn't flawlessly obedient to the mind's

wishes here. They still had to eat, after all. But his deputy didn't normally go in for heroic benders.

Marcella was frowning at them, uncertain. Johan gave a forced *I'm fine* nod. "We'd best go in," he said.

Nobody had been in the mill since the day Quinn Dexter had arrived in town. It was cool inside; the power was off, and the tall smoked-glass windows filtered the daylight down to a listless pearl. Luca led the party along the dispenser line. Large, boxy stainless steel machines stood silent above curving conveyer belts.

"Initial grinding is done at the far end," he lectured. "Then these machines blend and refine the flour, and bag it. We used to produce twelve different types in here: plain, self-raising, granary, savoury, strong white—you name it. Sent them all over the island."

"Very homely," Marcella drawled.

Luca let it ride. "I can release new stocks of grain from the estate warehouses. But—" He went over to one of the hulking machines, and tugged a five pound bag from the feed mechanism below the hopper nozzle; it was made of thick paper, with the Moulin's red and green water wheel logo printed on the front. "Our first problem is going to be finding a new stock of these to package the flour in. They used to come from a company in Boston."

"So? Just think them up."

Luca wondered how she'd wound up with this assignment. Refused to sleep with the council leader? "Even if we only produce white flour for the bakeries, and package it in sacks, you're looking at a couple of hundred a day," he explained patiently. "Then you need flour for pastry and cakes, which people will want to bake at home. That's several thousand bags a day. They'd all have to be thought up individually."

"All right, so what do you suggest?"

“Actually, we were hoping you might like to come up with a solution. After all, we’re supplying the expertise to get the mill going again, and providing you with grain.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No thanks needed. This isn’t a Communist society, we’re not giving it away. You’ll have to pay for it.”

“It’s as much ours as it is yours.” Her voice had risen until it was almost an indignant squeal.

“Possession is nine-tenths of the law.” He grinned mirthlessly. “Ask your host.” His mind detected his people were sharing his amusement; even Johan’s thoughts were lighter. The townies were highly uncomfortable with the facts being presented.

Marcella regarded him with blatant mistrust. “How do you propose we pay?”

“Some kind of ledger, I suppose. Work owed to us. After all, we’re the ones growing the food for you.”

“And we’re running the mill for you, and transporting the stuff all over the county.”

“Good. That’s a start then isn’t it? I’m sure there’ll be other useful industries in Colsterworth, too. Our tractors and field machinery will need spares. Now all we need is a decent exchange rate.”

“I’m going to have to go back to the council with this.”

“Naturally.” Luca had reached the wall separating the dispenser line from the chamber housing the main grinder. There were several large electrical distribution boxes forming their own mosaic over the bricks. Each one had an amber light glowing brightly on the front. He started pressing the trip buttons in a confident sequence. The broad tube lights overhead flickered as they came alight, sending down a blue-white radiance almost brighter than the sky outside. Luca smiled in satisfaction at his mental prowess. The cir-

cuitry for governing this old island was mapped out in his mind now, percolating up from his host.

His modest feeling of contentment faded, absorbed by a new body of emotion slipping over his perceptual horizon. Around him, the others were reacting in the same fashion. All of them turned instinctively to face the same outer wall, as if trying to stare through the bricks. A group of people were approaching Colsterworth. Dark thoughts sliding through Norfolk's atmosphere of the mind like threatening storm clouds.

"I think we'd better go take a look," Luca said. There were no dissenters.

They used the railway to get about over the island, adapting one of the utilitarian commuter trains which had trundled between the island's towns. A steam-powered ironclad fortress now clanked and hissed its way along the rails, hauling a couple of Orient Express carriages behind it. Several sets of what looked like twin recoilless ack-ack guns had been mounted at both ends of the train, while the barrel of a big tank cannon pointed along the top of the boiler, emerging from the combination turret/driver's cabin.

Just outside Colsterworth, where the rail went over the canal before it got to the station, Luca and Marcella stood side by side on the embankment at the head of their combined teams. More people were emerging from the town, bolstering their numbers. Antibodies responding to an incurious virus, Luca thought. And they were right to do so. People here were made to wear their hearts on their sleeves, visible to everyone else. It saved a lot of bullshitting around. Plain for all to see, those coming down the track were set on just one thing.

The train let out a long annoyed whistle, sending a fountain of steam rocketing up into the sky. Metallic screeches

and janglings came pouring out of the engine when its riders realized how committed the townie blockaders were. Its pistons pounded away, reversing the wheel spin.

Luca and Marcella stood their ground as it howled forwards. A thought-smile flashed between them, and they stared down at the tracks, concentrating. The rails just in front of their feet creaked once, then split cleanly. Bolts holding them to the timber sleepers shot into the air, and the rails started to curl up, rolling into huge spirals. Flame spewed out of the train's wheels. The riders had to exert a lot of energetic strength to halt its momentum. It stopped a couple of yards short of the coils. Billows of angry steam jetted out of valves all along the underside, water splattered down onto the tracks. A thick iron door banged open on the side of the driver's cabin. Bruce Spanton jumped down.

He was dressed in anti-hero black leathers, impenetrable sunglasses pressed tight against his face. Heavy boots crunched on the gravel chippings of the embankment as he stalked towards the huddled townsfolk. A holster with a gold-plated Uzi slapped his leg with every step.

"Hello," Luca muttered, "Somebody watched way too many bad cable movies when they were younger."

Marcella subdued a grin as the ersatz Bad Guy halted in front of them.

"You," Bruce Spanton growled. "You're in my way, friend. You must feel lucky to try a move like that."

"What do you boys want here?" Luca asked wearily. The bad vibes emanating from Spanton and the others in the train weren't entirely forged. Not everyone on Norfolk had calmed down after returning from the beyond.

"Me and the guys, just passing through," Spanton said challengingly. "No law against that, here, is there?"

"No law, but plenty of wishes," Luca said. "This county

doesn't want you. I'm sure you'll respect that majority opinion."

"Tough shit. You got us. What you gonna do, call the cops?"

A big silver Western sheriff's badge mushroomed on the front of Marcella's tunic. "I am the police in Colsterworth."

"Listen," Bruce Spanton said. "We're just here to check out the town. Have us a bit of fun. Stock up on some food, grab some Norfolk Tears. Then tomorrow we'll be gone. We don't want no trouble; it's not as if we want to stay here. Crappy dump like this, not our scene. Know what I mean?"

"And how are you going to pay for your food?" Marcella asked. Luca did his best not to turn and frown at her.

"Pay for it?" Spanton yelled in astonishment. "What the fuck are you scoring, sister? We don't pay for anything any more. That got left behind along with all the rest of the lawyers and shit we had to put up with back there."

"It doesn't work like that," Luca said. "It's our food. Not yours."

"It's not yours, shithead. It belongs to everyone."

"We've got it. You don't. It's ours. That simple enough for you?"

"Fuck you. We've got to eat. We've got a right to eat."

"I remember you now," Luca said. "You were one of Dexter's people. Real devout arse licker. Do you miss him?"

Bruce Spanton stabbed a finger at Luca. "I'm going to remember you, shithead. And you're going to wish I fucking hadn't."

"Learn the rules when you go abroad," Luca said forcefully. "And then live by them. Now either you climb back on your pathetic little cartoon mean machine and leave. Or, you stay and find yourself a useful job, and earn a living

like everybody else. Because we're not in the business of supporting worthless parasite scum like you."

"Get a jo . . ." disbelief and rage made Bruce Spanton splutter to a halt. "What the hell is this?"

"For you, exactly that: Hell. Now get out of our county before we run you out." Luca heard several cheers from behind him.

The sound made Bruce Spanton look up. He glanced round the crowd, sensing their mood, the belligerence and resentment focusing on him. "You fuckers are crazy. You know that? Crazy! We've just escaped from all this shit. And you're trying to bring it back."

"All we're doing is building ourselves a life as best we can," Luca said. "Join in, or fuck off."

"Oh we'll be back," Bruce Spanton said, tight lipped. "You'll see. And people will join us, not you. Know why? Because it's easier." He stomped off back to the train.

Marcella grinned at his back. "We won. We showed the bastards, eh? Not such a bad combination, you and me. We won't be seeing them again."

"This is a small island on a small planet," Luca said, more troubled than he wanted to be by Spanton's parting shot.

3

Sinon's serjeant body had been divested of its last medical package just five hours before the *Catalpa* flew out of its wormhole terminus above Ombey. The voidhawk's crew toroid was overcrowded, carrying thirty-five of the hulking serjeants and their five-strong biomedical supervisory team in addition to the usual crew. Heavy dull-rust coloured bodies stood almost shoulder to shoulder as they performed lumbering callisthenics all around the central corridor, discovering for themselves the parameters of their new physiques.

There was no fatigue in the fashion of a genuinely human body, the tiredness and tingling aches. Instead blood sugar depletion and muscle tissue stress registered as mental warning tones within the neural array housing the controlling personality. Sinon thought they must be similar to a neural nanonic display, but grey and characterless rather than the full-spectrum iconographic programs which Adamists enjoyed. Interpreting them was simple enough, thankfully.

He was actually quite satisfied with the body he now possessed (even though it was unable to smile at that par-

ticular irony for him). The deep scars of the serjeant's assembly surgery were almost healed. What minimal restriction they imposed on his movements would be gone within a few more days. Even his sensorium was up to the standard of an Edenist body. Michael Saldana certainly hadn't skimped on the design of the bitek construct's genetic sequence.

Acclimatisation to his new circumstances had twinned a growing confidence throughout the flight. A psychological boost similar to a patient recovering from his injuries as more and more of the medical packages became redundant. In this case shared with all the other serjeant personalities who were going through identical emotional uplifts, the general affinity band merging their emerging gratification into synergistic optimism.

Despite a total lack of hormonal glands, Sinon was hot for the Mortonridge Liberation campaign to begin. He asked the *Catalpa* to share the view provided by its sensor blisters as the wormhole terminus closed behind them. The external image surged into his mind; featuring Ombey as a silver and blue crescent a hundred and twenty thousand kilometres ahead. Several settled asteroids swung along high orbits, grubby brown specks muffled by a fluctuating swirl of silver stardust as their industrial stations deflected spears of raw sunlight. Larger, more regular motes of light swarmed around *Catalpa*, its cousins emerging from their termini and accelerating in towards the planet.

This particular squadron was comprised of just over three hundred of the bitek starships. It wasn't even the first to arrive at the Kingdom principality today. The Royal Navy's strategic defence centre on Guyana had combined its flight management operations and sensors with civil traffic control to guide the torrent of arriving starships into parking orbits.

The voidhawks headed down towards the planet, merging into a long line as they spiralled into alignment over the equator. They shared the five hundred kilometre orbit with their cousins and Adamist starships from every star system officially allied to the Kingdom. Military and civil transports unloaded their cargo pods into fleets of flyers and spaceplanes; Confederation Navy assault cruisers had brought an entire battalion of marines, and even the voidhawks were eager to see the huge Kulu Royal Navy Aquilae-class starships.

After reaching low orbit, the *Catalpa* had to wait a further eight hours before its spaceplane received clearance to ferry the first batch of serjeants down to Fort Forward. Sinon was on it as the night-shadowed ocean fled past underneath the glowing fuselage. Their little craft had aerobraked down to mach five when Xingu's western coastline rose over the horizon ahead. The red cloud was just visible to the sensors, a slice of curving red light, as if the fissure between land and sky had been rendered in gleaming neon. Then their altitude dropped, and it sank away.

They must know we're here, Choma said. **With ten thousand spaceship flights hyperbooming across the ocean every day, they'll hear us arriving if nothing else.** In the Twenty-fifth Century, Choma had been an astroengineering export manager based at Jupiter. Although he'd readily admitted to the other serjeant personalities that his personal knowledge-base of obsolete deep space star-tracker sensors was not very relevant to the Liberation, his main interest was strategy games, combined with the odd bit of role-playing. For himself and his fellow quirky enthusiasts, the kind of simulation arenas available to Edenists through perceptual reality environments were anathema. They wanted authentic mud, forests, rock faces, redoubts, heavy backpacks, heat, costumes, horse riding,

marches, aching joints, flagons of ale, making love in the long grass, and songs around the campsite. To the amusement of the other inhabitants, they would take over vast tracts of habitat parkland for their contests; it was quite a faddish activity at the time. All of which made Choma the closest thing Sinon's squad had to an experienced soldier.

A lot of the old strategy game players had come out of the multiplicity to animate serjeant bodies. Slightly surprisingly, very few ex-intelligence agency operatives had joined them, the people whose genuine field operations experience would really have been valuable.

Very likely, Sinon agreed. Dariat demonstrated his perceptive ability to the Kohistan Consensus; no doubt the combined faculty of the Mortonridge possessed will provide them with some foreknowledge.

That and the ring of starships overhead. The convoys aren't exactly unobtrusive.

But they are obscured by the red cloud.

Don't count on it.

Does that worry you? Sinon asked.

Not really. Surprise was never going to be our strategic high-ground. Best we could hope for is the scale of the Liberation being a nasty shock to Ekelund and her troops.

I wish I had experience of the combat situations we will be facing rather than theoretical memories.

I expect that experience is going to be one thing you'll be collecting plenty of, in a very short timespan.

The *Catalpa*'s spaceplane landed at Fort Forward's new spaceport, racing along one of the three prefabricated runways laid out in parallel. Another was touching down forty-five seconds behind it; that managed to spark a Judeo of concern in Sinon's mind. Even with an AI in charge of slotting the traffic together, margins were being stretched. Ion

field flyers were landing and launching vertically from pads on the other side of the spaceport's control tower at a much faster rate than the runways could handle spaceplanes.

For the moment, the spaceport's principal concern was to offload cargo and send it on to Fort Forward. The hangars were frantically busy, heavy-lift mechanoids and humans combining to keep the flow of pods going; any delay here would have a knock on effect right back up to orbit. Nearly all of the Liberation's ground vehicles were assigned to carry cargo. Passenger vehicles were still up in orbit.

Sinon and the others were given a static charge test by Royal Marines as they got to the bottom of the spaceplane's stairs. That it was perfunctory was understandable, but Sinon was satisfied to see they did test everybody. As soon as they were cleared the spaceplane taxied away, joining a queue of similar craft waiting to take off. Another one rolled into place, extending its airstair. The Marine squad moved forward again.

An Edenist liaison officer they never even saw told them that they were going to have to get to Fort Forward on foot. They were part of a long line of serjeants and marines marching along a road of freshly unrolled micro-mesh composite next to the new six-lane motorway. After they got underway, Sinon realized that it wasn't only Confederation Marines who made up the human contingent of the Liberation's ground forces. He walked over to a boosted mercenary taller than himself. The mercenary's brown skin had exactly the same texture as leather, long buttress ropes of muscle were clumped round the neck, supporting a nearly-globular skull armoured with silicolithium like an all-over helmet. In place of a nose and mouth, there was an oval cage grill at the front, and the saucer eyes were set very wide apart, giving little overlap, normal apart from the blue-green irises, which appeared to be multifaceted.

When Sinon asked, she said her name was Elana Duncan. "Excuse me for inquiring," he said. "But what exactly are you doing here?"

"I'm a volunteer," Elana Duncan replied with an overtly feminine voice. "We're part of the occupation force. You guys take the ground from those bastards, we'll hold on to it for you. That's the plan. Listen up, I know you Edenists don't approve of my kind. But there aren't enough marines to secure the whole of Mortonridge, so you've got to use us. That, and I had some friends on Lalonde."

"I don't disapprove. If anything I'm rather glad there's someone here who has actually been under fire before. I wish I had."

"Yeah? Now, see, that's what I don't get. You're cannon fodder, and you know you're cannon fodder. But it doesn't bother you. Me, I know I'm taking a gamble, that's a life-choice I made a long time ago."

"It doesn't bother me, because I'm not human, just a very sophisticated bitek automaton. I don't have a brain, just a collection of processors."

"But you got a personality, dontcha?"

"This is only an edited copy of me."

"Ha. You must be very confident about that. A life is a life, after all." She broke off, and tipped her head back, neck muscles flexing like heavy deltoids. "Now there's a sight which makes all this worthwhile. You can't beat those old warships for blunt spectacle."

A CK500-090 Thunderbird spaceplane was coming in to land. The giant delta-wing craft was at least twice the size of any of the civil cargo spaceplanes using the runways. Air thundered turbulently in its wake as it slipped round to line up on its approach path, large sections of the trailing edges bending with slow agility to alter the wing camber. Then a bewildering number of hatches were sliding open all across

its fuselage belly; twelve sets of undercarriage bogies dropped down. The Thunderbird hit the runway with a roar louder than a sonic boom. Chemical rockets in the nose fired to slow it, dirty ablation smoke was pouring out of all ninety-six brake drums.

“God damn,” Elana Duncan murmured. “I never thought I’d ever see an operation like this, never mind be a part of it. A real live land army on the move. I’m centuries after my time, you know, I belong back in the Nineteen and Twentieth Centuries, marching on Moscow with Napoleon, or struggling across Spain. I was born for war, Sinon.”

“That’s stupid. You know you have a soul now. You shouldn’t be risking it like this. You have invented a crusade for yourself to follow rather than achieve anything as an individual. That is wrong.”

“It’s my soul, and in a way I’m no different to Edenists.”

Sinon felt a rush of real surprise. “How so?”

“I’m perfectly adjusted to what I am. The fact that my goals are different to those of your society doesn’t matter. You know what I think? Edenists don’t get caught in the beyond because you’re cool enough under pressure to figure your way out. Well, me too, pal. Laton said there was a way out. I believe him. The Kiint found it. Just knowing that it’s possible is my ticket to exit. I’ll be happy searching because I know it’s not pointless, I won’t suffer like those dumbasses that wound up trapped. They’re losers, they gave up. Not me. That’s why I’m signed up on this mad Liberation idea, it’s just part of getting ready for the big battle. Good training, is all.”

She gave his shoulder an avuncular pat with a hand whose fingers had been replaced by three big claws, and marched off.

That’s an excess of fatalism, Choma remarked. What a strange psychology.

She is content, Sinon answered. I wish her well in that.

A large quantity of love had been invested in constructing the farmhouse. Even the Kulu aristocracy with their expensive showy buildings employed modern materials in their fabric. And Mortonridge was a designated rapid growth area, with government subsidies to help develop the farms. A resolutely middle-class province. Their buildings were substantial, but cheap: assembled from combinations of carbon concrete, uniform-strength pulpwood planks, bricks made from grains of clay cemented by geneered bacteria, spongesteel structural girders, bonded silicon glass. For all their standardisation, such basic components afforded a wealth of diversity to architects.

But this was unmistakable and original. Beautifully crude. A house of stone, quarried with an industrial fission blade from a local outcrop; large cubes making the walls thick enough to repel the equatorial heat and keep the rooms cool without air conditioning. The floor and roof beams were harandrid timbers, sturdy lengths dovetailed and pegged together as only a master carpenter could manage. Inside, they'd been left uncovered, the gaps between filled with reed and plaster, then whitewashed. It was as historic as any of the illusions favoured by the possessed, not that anyone could mistake something so solid for an ephemeral aspiration.

There was a barn attached at the end, also stone, forming one side of the farmyard. Its big wooden doors were swinging open in the breeze the day the Karmic Crusader pulled up outside. Stephanie Ash had been tired and fed up by the time they pulled off the main road and drove along the unmarked dirt track. Investigating it had been Moyo's idea.

"The road must lead somewhere," he insisted. "This land

was settled recently. Nothing's had time to fall into disuse yet."

She hadn't bothered to argue with him. They'd driven a long way down the M6 after handing the children over, a journey which meant having to pass back through Annette Ekelund's army. This time they'd been pointedly ignored by the troops billeted in Chainbridge. After that they'd zig-zagged from coast to coast looking for a refuge, somewhere self-sufficient where they could rest up and wait for the grand events beyond Mortonridge to play themselves out. But the towns in the northern section of the peninsula were still occupied, though there was a steady drift out to farms. They were unwelcome there; the possessed were learning to guard their food stocks. Every unoccupied farm they'd visited had been ransacked for food and livestock. It was a monotonous trend, and finding a functional power supply to recharge the Karmic Crusader was becoming more difficult.

After the joy and accomplishment of evacuating the children, the comedown to excluded refugee status was hard. Stephanie hadn't exactly lost faith, but the narrow road was no different to any of the dozens they'd driven down the last few days. Hope rebutted unfailingly each time.

The road took the bus through a small forest of aboriginal trees, then dipped into a shallow, lightly-wooded valley which meandered extravagantly. A stream bubbled along the lush grassy floor, its speed revealing they were actually travelling up at quite an angle. After four kilometres, the valley ended by opening out into a nearly circular basin. It was so regular, Stephanie suspected it was an ancient impact crater. A lacework of silver brooks threaded their way down the sides, feeding a lake at the centre, which was the origin of the valley's stream. The farmhouse stood above the shore, separated from the rippling water by a neatly

trimmed lawn. Behind it, someone had converted the north-facing walls of the basin into stepped terraces, making a perfect sun-trap. The levels were cultivated with dozens of terrestrial fruit and vegetable plants; from citrus tree groves to lettuce, avocados to rhubarb. Almost all the aboriginal vegetation had been removed; even the south side looked as if it was covered in terrestrial grass. Goats and sheep were wandering around grazing peacefully.

They all piled out of the Karmic Crusader, smiling like entranced children.

“There’s nobody here,” Rana said. “Can you sense it? This whole place is empty.”

“Oh goodness,” Tina exclaimed nervously. She took the last step off the bus’s stairs, her scarlet stilettos sinking awkwardly into the road’s loose-packed gravel surface. “Do you really think so? This is simply paradise. It’s just what we all deserve after everything we’ve done for others. I couldn’t bear us being thrown out by someone else claiming they were here first. It would be excruciating.”

“There are no vehicles left,” McPhee grunted. “The owners probably received the Kingdom’s warning and cleared out before Ekelund’s people arrived in these parts.”

“Lucky for them,” Rana said.

“More so for us,” Moyo said. “It’s absolutely bloody perfect.”

“I think the irrigation system is screwed,” McPhee said. He was shielding his eyes with a hand as he squinted up at the terraces. “There, see? There must be channels to divert the brooks so that each level receives a decent supply. But it’s spilling over like a waterfall. The plants will drown.”

“No they won’t,” Franklin Quigly said. “It’s not broken. The power’s off, and there’s no one here to manage it. That’s all. We could get it fixed inside of a day. That’s if we’re staying.”

They all turned to look at Stephanie. She was amused rather than gratified by the compliment. "Oh I think so." She smiled at her ragged little band. "We're not going to find anywhere better."

They spent the rest of the day wandering round the farmhouse and the terraces. The basin was an intensive-cultivation market garden; there were no cereal crops on any of the terraces. There were signs of a hurried departure all through the building, drawers pulled out, clothes spilled on the shiny floorboards, a tap left running, two old suitcases abandoned half-packed in one of the bedrooms. But there was a lot of basic foodstuffs left in the pantry, flour, jams, jellied fruit, eggs, whole cheeses; a big freezer was filled with fish and joints of meat. Whoever the farm belonged to, they didn't believe in modern sachets and readymade meals.

Tina took one look inside the kitchen with its simple array of shining copper pots and pans, and sniffed with emphatic disapproval. "You can take the worship of all things rustic too far, you know."

"It's appropriate to what we are now," Stephanie told her. "The consumer convenience society cannot exist in our universe."

"Well just don't expect me to give up silk stockings, darling."

Moyo, Rana, and McPhee scrambled up to the top of the basin to a small building they assumed was a pumphouse for the irrigation system. Stephanie and the rest started clearing out the farmhouse. By the third day, they'd got the terrace irrigation equipment working again. Not perfectly, their presence still glitched some of the management processors; but there was a manual back-up control panel in the pumphouse. Even the clouds' gloomy claret illumination had grudgingly brightened as they established them-

selves and began exerting their influence. It wasn't the pure sunlight which shone upon towns and larger groups of possessed, but the plants gleefully absorbed the increased rain of photons, and perked up accordingly.

A week later Stephanie had every right to be content as she walked out into the relatively cool air of early morning. The right, but not the reality. She opened the iron-framed French doors which led out to the lawn, and stepped bare-foot onto the dewy grass.

As usual the red clouds tossed through the sky above, their massive braids strumming the air until it groaned in protest. This time, though, a subtler resonance was carried by the rancorous vapour. It couldn't be heard, it merely preyed on the mind like a troublesome dream.

She walked down to the shore of the lake, her head turning slowly from side to side as she scanned the sky, questioning for some kind of hint. Anything. The nettling sensation had been building for many days now. Whatever the origin, it was too far away for her senses to distinguish, skulking below the horizon like a malevolent moon.

"So you like feel the cosmic blues sounding out, too?" Cochrane said ruefully.

Stephanie jumped, she hadn't noticed him approach. The bells on the ancient hippy's velvet flares were silent as he trod lightly over the grass. An exceptionally large reefer hung from the corner of his mouth. It smelt different than usual, not nearly as sweet.

He caught her puzzlement, and his beard parted to show a smug grin. Fingers with many rings plucked the brown tube from his mouth, and held it vertically. "Guess what I found growing on some forgotten terrace? This Mr Taxpaying Johnny Appleseed we've taken over from here wasn't quite as straight as his fellow Rotarians believed. Know what this is? Only like genuine nicotiana. And as illegal as

hell around these parts. Man but it feels good, first real drag I've had in centuries."

Stephanie smiled indulgently as he stuck it back in his mouth. Indulgent was all you could be with Cochrane. Moyo was coming out of the farmhouse, his mind darkened with concern.

"You know it's here, too, don't you?" she asked sadly. "This must be what Ekelund meant when she told me the Saldana Princess was preparing."

"And Lieutenant Anver," Moyo muttered.

"The earth can feel war's coming, that blood's going to be spilt. How very . . . biblical; bad vibes in the aether. I'd so hoped Ekelund was wrong, that she was just trying to justify maintaining her army by claiming phantom enemies were waiting on the other side of the hill."

"No way," Cochrane said. "The bad dude cavalry's like mounting up. They'll charge us soon, guns blazing."

"Why us?" Stephanie asked. "Why this planet? We said we wouldn't threaten them. We promised, and we kept it."

Moyo put his arm round her. "Being here is a threat to them."

"But it's so stupid. I just want to be left alone, I want time to come to terms with what's happened. That's all. We've got this beautiful farm, and we're making it work without hurting anybody. It's good here. We can support ourselves, and have enough time left over to think. That doesn't make us a threat or a danger to the Confederation. If we were allowed to carry on we might be able to make some progress towards an answer for this mess."

"I wish we could be left alone," Moyo told her sadly. "I wish they'd listen to us. But they won't. I know what it'll be like out there now. Common sense and reason won't matter. Forcing us out of Mortonridge is a political goal. Once the Saldanas and other Confederation leaders have declared it,

they won't be able to pull back. We're in the path of a proverbial irresistible force."

"Perhaps if I went back up to the firebreak and spoke to them. They know me. They might listen."

Alarm at what she was saying made Moyo tighten his grip around her. "No. I don't want you doing anything crazy like that. Besides, they wouldn't listen. Not them. They'd smile politely for a while, then shove you into zero-tau. I couldn't stand that, I've only just found you."

She rested her head against him, quietly thankful for his devotion. He'd been there for her since the very first day. More than a lover, a constant source of strength.

"You can't go," Cochrane said. "Not you. These cats would like fall apart without you to guide them. We need you here, man. You're our den mother."

"But we won't last long if we stay here, and the Princess sends her army to find us."

"A little more time is better than the big zippo. And who knows what our karma's got mapped out for us before the jackboots kick our door down."

"You're not normally the optimist," Stephanie teased.

"Face it babe, I'm not normally alive. That kinda warps your outlook, dig? You gotta have faith these days, man. Some cool happening will come along to like blow our minds away."

"Groovy," Moyo deadpanned.

"All right, you win," Stephanie assured them. "No noble sacrifices on my part. I'll stay here."

"Maybe they'll never come," Moyo said. "Maybe Ekelund will defeat them."

"Not a chance," Stephanie said. "She's good, and she's mean, which is everything it takes. But she's not that good. Just stop and feel the weight of them building up out there.

Ekelund will cause them a whole load of grief when the invasion starts, but she won't stop them."

"What will you do then, when they reach the farm? Will you fight?"

"I don't think so. I might lash out, that's human nature. But fight? No. What about you? You said you would, once."

"That was back when I thought it might do some good. I suppose I've grown up since then."

"But it's still not fair," she complained bitterly. "I adore this taste of life. I think going back to the beyond will be worse now. Next time, we'll know that it doesn't have to be permanent, even though it probably will be. It would have been far better if we'd been spared knowing. Why is the universe persecuting us like this?"

"It's karma, man," Cochrane said. "Bad karma."

"I thought karma was paying for your actions. I never hurt anyone badly enough for this."

"Original sin," Moyo said. "Nasty concept."

"You're wrong," she said. "Both of you. If I know anything now, it's that our religions are lies. Horrid, dirty lies. I don't believe in God, or destiny, not any more. There has to be a natural explanation for all this, a cosmological reason." She sank into Moyo's embrace, too tired even for anger. "But I'm not smart enough to work it out. I don't think any of us are. We're just going to have to wait until someone clever finds it for us. Damn, I hate that. Why can't I be good at the big things?"

Moyo kissed her brow. "There are forty kids on the other side of the firebreak who are mighty glad you achieved what you did. I wouldn't call that a small thing."

Cochrane blew a smoke ring in the direction of the oppressive presence beyond the firebreak. "Anyhow, nobody's served us an eviction order on these bodies yet. The evil Kingdom's warlords have got to like catch us first. I'm

going to make chasing after me tragically expensive to the taxpayers. That always pisses them off bigtime.”

We really should be doing this in a perceptual reality, Sinon moaned. I mean: actual physical training. It's barbaric. I'm amazed Ralph Hiltch hasn't assigned us a crusty old drill sergeant to knock us into shape. We've got the right scenario.

That morning, the sergeants had been driven out to a training ground ten kilometres east of Fort Forward, a rugged stretch of land with clumps of trees and mock-up buildings. It was one of twenty-five new training zones, their basic facilities thrown up as quickly as Fort Forward itself. Royal Marine engineers were busy constructing another ten.

Choma half-ignored Sinon's diatribe, concentrating on the bungalow in front of them. The rest of the squad were spread out round the dilapidated building in a semicircle, learning to cling to whatever cover was available. Stupid really, he thought, considering the possessed can sense us from hundreds of metres. But it added to the feeling of authenticity. The point which Sinon was missing.

Suddenly, one of the small bushes fifty metres away shimmered silver, and metamorphosed into a green-skinned hominoid with bug-eyes. Balls of white light shot away from his pointing hand. The two sergeants swivelled smoothly, lining their machine guns up on the apparition.

Ours, they told the rest of the squad. Sinon squeezed the trigger down with his right index finger, while his left hand twisted the gun's side grip, selecting the fire rate. The small chemical projectile cases reverberated loudly as they fired, smothering all other sounds. Ripples of static shivered over the end of the barrel as the pellets hammered into their target.

The static gun was the weapon which the Kingdom had developed to arm the serjeants for the Liberation. A simple enough derivative of an ordinary machine gun, the principal modification was to the bullet. Inert kinetic tips had been replaced by spherical pellets which carried a static charge. Their shape reduced their velocity from ordinary bullets (and their accuracy), though they could still inflict a lethal amount of damage on a human target, while their electrical discharge played havoc with the energistic ability of a possessed. Every pellet carried the same level of charge, but the variable rate of fire would allow the serjeants to cope with the different strengths of the individual possessed they encountered; and as the gun's mechanism was mechanical, the possessed couldn't glitch it—in theory.

It took three seconds of concentrated fire on the green monster before it stopped flinging white light back at Sinon and Choma. The image collapsed into an ordinary human male, who pitched forward. A holographic projector lens glinted in the bush behind it.

You were too slow to respond to the target's strength, their supervisor told them, in a genuine combat situation his white fire would have disabled the pair of you. And, Sinon . . .

Yes?

Work on improving your aim, that entire first burst you fired was wide.

Acknowledged, Sinon informed the supervisor curtly. He adopted singular engagement mode to talk to Choma. Wide shooting, indeed! I was simply bringing the gun round onto the target. Approaching fire can be a large psychological inhibitor.

Certainly can, Choma replied with strict neutrality. He was scanning the land ahead, alert for new dangers. It

would be just like the training ground controllers to hit them immediately again.

I think I am beginning to comprehend the gun's parameters, Sinon declared. My thought routines are assimilating its handling characteristics at an autonomic level.

Choma risked a mildly exasperated glance at his squad mate. **That's the whole point of this training. We can hardly accept a tutorial thought routine from a habitat, now can we? The Consensus didn't even know about static guns when we left Saturn. Besides, I always said the best lessons are the ones you learn the hard way.**

You and your atavistic Olympiad philosophy. No wonder it fell out of fashion by the time I was born.

But you're getting the hang of it, aren't you?

I suppose so.

Good. Now come on, we'd better advance to the building or we'll wind up on latrine duty.

At least the serjeant's lips and throat allowed Sinon to sigh plaintively. **Very well.**

Princess Kirsten had switched her retinal implants to full resolution so that she could watch the squads advancing over various sections of the training ground. There was a old saying running loose in her mind, as if one file was continually leaking from a memory cell: I don't know about the enemy, but by God they frighten me. This was the first time she'd ever encountered the big bitek constructs outside of a sensewise. Their size and mien combined to make them both impressive and imposing; she was now rather glad Ralph Hiltch had the courage to suggest using them. At the time she'd been only too happy deferring the final choice to Allie. The family does so lack the bravery to make really important decisions, thank God he still has the guts. It was

the same even when we were kids, we all waited for his pronouncement.

Several hundred of the dark figures were currently crawling, slithering, and in some cases running through the undergrowth, bushes, and long grass while colourful holographic images popped into existence to waylay them. The sound of gunfire rattled through the air; it was a noise she was becoming very familiar with.

“They’re making good progress,” Ralph Hiltch said. He was standing beside the Princess on the roof of the training ground’s management centre, which gave them an uninterrupted view over the rumpled section of land which the Liberation army had annexed. Their respective entourages were arranged behind them, officers and cabinet ministers forming an edgy phalanx. “It only takes two sessions on average to train up a serjeant. The support troops need a little longer. Don’t get me wrong, those marines are excellent troops; I don’t just mean the Kingdom’s, our allies have sent their best, and the mercs are formidable at the best of times. It’s just that they’re all way too reliant on their neural nanonic programs for fire control and tactics, so we really discourage their usage. If a possessed does break through the front line, that’s the first piece of equipment that’s going to glitch.”

“How many serjeants are ready?” Kirsten asked.

“About two hundred and eighty thousand. We’re training them up at the rate of thirty thousand a day. And there’s another five training grounds opening each day. I’d like the rate increased, but even with the Confederation Navy brigades, I’ve only got a limited number of engineering corps; I have to balance their assignments. Completing the accommodation sections of Fort Forward is my priority.”

“It would appear as though you have everything under control.”

“Simple enough, we just tell the AI what we want, and it designates for us. This is the first time in history a land army commander doesn’t have to worry unduly about logistics.”

“Providing a possessed doesn’t get near the AI.”

“Unlikely, ma’am; believe me, unlikely. And even that’s in our contingency file.”

“Good, I’d hate us to become overconfident. So when do you think you’ll be able to begin the Liberation?”

“Ideally, I’d like to wait another three weeks.” He acknowledged the Princess’s raised eyebrow with a grudging smile. They’d spent the best part of two hours that morning under the gaze of rover reporters, inspecting the tremendous flow of materiel and personnel surging through Fort Forward’s spaceport. To most people it looked as if they already had the military resources to invade a couple of planets. “Our greatest stretch is going to be the opening assault. We have to ring the entire peninsula, and it’s got to be one very solid noose, we can’t risk anything less. That’ll have to be achieved with inexperienced troops and untested equipment. The more time spent preparing, the greater chance we have for success.”

“I’m aware of that, Ralph. But you were talking about balance a moment ago.” She glanced back at Leonard Deville, who responded with a reluctant twitch. “Expectations are running rather high, and not just here on Ombey. We’ve demanded and received a colossal amount of support from our political allies and the Confederation Navy. I don’t need to remind you what the King said.”

“No ma’am.” His last meeting with Alastair II, the time when he’d received his commission needed no file. The King had been adamant about the factors at play, the cost of external support, and the public weight of anticipation and belief.

Success. That was what everyone wanted, and expected him to deliver, on many fronts. And I have to give them that. This was all my idea. And my fault.

Unlike the Princess, Ralph didn't have the luxury of glancing round his people for signs of support. He could well imagine Janne Palmer's opinion—she'd be right too.

"We can begin preliminary deployment in another three days," he said. "That way we'll be able to start the actual Liberation in eight days' time."

"All right, Ralph. You have another eight days' grace. No more."

"Yes ma'am. Thank you."

"Have you actually managed to test one of the static guns on a possessed yet?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am, no."

"Isn't that taking a bit of a chance? Surely you need to know their effectiveness, if any?"

"They'll either work, or not; and we don't want to give Ekelund's people any advance warning just in case they can devise a counter. We'll know if they're any use within seconds of our first encounter. If they don't, then the ground troops will revert to ordinary light arms. I just hope to God they don't have to, we'll inflict a hell of a lot of damage on the bodies we're trying to recover. But the theory's perfect, and the machinery's all so beautifully simple as well. Cathal and Dean dreamed up the concept. It should have been obvious from the start. I should have come up with it."

"I think you've worked enough miracles, Ralph. All the family wants from you now is a mundane little victory."

He nodded his thanks, and stared out over the training ground again. It was changeover time, hundreds of grubby-red serjeants were on the move, along with a good number of ordinary troops. Though ordinary was a relative term when referring to the boosted mercenaries.

“One question,” Leonard DeVille said; he sounded apologetic, if not terribly sincere about it. “I know this isn’t quite what you want to hear right now, Ralph. But you have allocated room for the rover reporters to observe the action during the assault, haven’t you? The AI does know that’s a requirement?”

Ralph grinned. This time he gave Palmer a direct look before locking eyes with the Home Office Minister. The Princess was diplomatically focused on the returning sergeants.

“Oh yes. We’re putting them right in the front line for you. You’ll get senseises every bit as hot as the one Kelly Tirrel produced on Lalonde. This is going to be one very public war.”

Chainbridge was different now. When Annette Ekelund had first arrived here, she’d transformed it into a simple headquarters and garrison town. Close enough to the firebreak to deploy her irregulars if the Kingdom sent any of its threatened “punishment” squads over to snatch possessed. Far enough away so that it was outside the range of any inquisitive sensors—incidentally making it reasonably safe from SD fire. So she’d gathered her followers to her, and allowed them their illusion of freedom. A genuine rabble army, with a licence to carouse and cavort for ninety per cent of the time, with just a few of her orders to follow the morning after. Something to do, something vaguely exciting and heroic-seeming, gave them a sense of identity and purpose. For that, they stayed together.

It made them into a unit for her, however unwieldy and unreliable. That was when Chainbridge resembled a provincial town under occupation by foreign troops with unlimited expense accounts. Not a bad analogy. There were parties and dances every evening, and other people began to

hang around, if for no other reason than the army made damn sure they had full access to Mortonridge's dwindling food supplies. It was a happy town kept in good order, Annette even established the hub of Mortonridge's downgraded communication net in the old town hall, which was commandeered as her command post. The net allowed her to retain a certain degree of control over the peninsula, keeping her in touch with the councils she'd left in charge of the towns her forces had taken over. There wasn't much she could do to enforce her rule, short of complete overkill and send in a brigade of her troops, but in the main she'd created a small society which worked. That was before any of the inhabitants really believed that the Kingdom would break its word and invade with the express intention of ripping body from usurping soul.

Now Chainbridge's parties had ended. The few inhabited buildings had lost their ornate appearance in favour of a bleakly oppressive, fortress-like solidity. Non-combatants, the good-timers and hangers on, had left, drifting away into the countryside. The town was preparing for war.

From her office window in the town hall, she could look down on the large cobbled square below. The fountains were off, their basins dry and duned by clumps of litter. Vehicles were parked in neat ranks under the rows of leghorn trees that circled the outer edge of the square. They were mostly manual-drive cars and four-wheel drive farm rovers, as per her instructions. None of them wore any kind of illusory image. Engineers were working on several of them, readying them for the coming ordeal.

Annette came back to the long table where her ten senior officers were sitting. Delvan and Milne had taken the chairs on either side of hers; the two people she relied on the most. Delvan claimed to have been an officer in the First World War; while Milne had been an engineer's mate during

Earth's steamship era, which made him a wizard with all things mechanical, though he freely admitted to knowing very little about electronics. Beyond them, sat Soi Hon, who was a veteran of early-Twenty-first Century bush wars, an ecological agitator, he called himself. Annette gathered his battles hadn't been fought along national lines, but rather corporate ones. Whatever he wanted to describe himself as, his tactical know-how in the situation they faced was invaluable. The rest of them were just divisional commanders, gaining the loyalty of their troops through personality or reputation. Just how much loyalty, was a moot point.

"What are today's figures?" Annette asked.

"Nearly forty deserted last night," Delvan said. "Little shits. In my day they would have been shot for that kind of cowardice."

"Fortunately, we're not in your day," Soi Hon said. "When I fought the desecrators who stole my land I had legions of the people who did what they had to because our cause was just. We needed no military police and prisons to enforce the orders of our commanders then, nor do we here. If in their hearts people do not want to fight, then forcing them will not make them good soldiers."

"God is on the side of the big battalions," Delvan sneered. "Owning your claptrap nobility doesn't guarantee victory."

"We are not going to win." Soi Hon smiled peacefully. "You do understand that, don't you?"

"We'll have a damn good try, and to hell with your defeatist talk. I'm surprised you didn't leave with the rest of them."

"I think that'll do," Annette said. "Delvan, you know Soi Hon is right, you've felt what the Kingdom is gathering to fling against us. The King would never commit his forces

against us unless he was convinced of the outcome. And he has the backing of the Edenists, who even more than he, won't engage in a foolhardy venture. This is a showpiece war; they intend to demonstrate to the Confederation's general public that we are beatable. They cannot afford to lose, no matter what it costs them."

"So what the hell do you want us to do, then?" Delvan asked.

"Make that cost exorbitant," Soi Hon said. "Such people always assign a value to everything in monetary terms. We might not be able to defeat them on Mortonridge, but we can certainly prevent any further Liberation campaigns after this one."

"Their troops will have reporters with them," Annette said. "They'll want to showcase their triumphs. This war will be fought on two fronts, the physical one here, and the emotional one broadcast by the media across the Confederation. That is the important one, the one we have to win. Those reporters must be shown the terrifying price of opposing us. I believe Milne has been making some preparations."

"Not doing so bad on that front, lass," Milne said. He sucked on a big clay pipe for emphasis, every inch the solid reliable NCO. "I've been training up a few lads, teaching them tricks of trade, like. We can't use electrical circuits, of course, not our type. So we've gone back to basics. I've come up with a nice little mix of chemicals for an explosive; we're shoving it into booby traps as fast as we can make 'em."

"What kind of booby traps?" Delvan asked.

"Anti-personnel mines, ground vehicle snares, primed buildings, spiked pits; that kind of thing. Soi's been showing us what he used to rig up when he was fighting. Right tricky stuff, it is, too. All with mechanical triggers, so their

sensors won't pick them up, even if they can get them working under the red cloud. I'd say we're due to give Hiltch's boys a load of grief once they cross the firebreak. We've also rigged bridges to blow, as well as the major junction flyovers along the M6. That ought to slow the bug-gers down."

"All very good," Delvan said. "But with respect, I don't think a few scraps of rubble will make much difference to their transport. I remember the tanks we used to have, great big brutes, they were. But by heaven they could crunch across almost every surface; and the engineers have had seven centuries to improve on that."

"Ruining the road junctions might not make a huge impact, but it will certainly have some effect," Soi Hon said impassively. "We know how large this Liberation army is, even in these times that makes it unwieldy. They will use the M6, if not for front line troops, then certainly for their supplies and auxiliaries. If we delay them even by an hour a day, we add to the cost. Slowing them down will also give us time to respond and retaliate. It is a good tactic."

"Okay, I'm not arguing with you. But these booby traps and blown bridges are a passive response. Come on man, what've you got that'll allow us to attack them?"

"My lads have found quite a few light engineering factories and the like in Chainbridge," Milne said. "The machine tools still work if you switch 'em to manual. Right now, I've got 'em churning out parts for a high velocity hunting rifle. I don't know what the hell that sparky machine gun is that the souls have seen Hiltch's boys practising with. But I reckon my rifle's got an easy twice the range of 'em."

"They'll be wearing armour," Delvan warned.

"Aye, I know that. But Soi's told me about kinetic enhanced impact bullets. Our armourers are doing their best to produce them, you'll have a decent stock in another few

days. We'll be able to inflict a lot of damage with them, you see if we don't."

"Thanks, Milne," Annette said. "You've done a great job, considering what you've had to work with, and what we're facing."

Milne cocked his pipe at her. "We'll put up a good account of ourselves, lass, no worries."

"I'm sure." She gazed round at the rest of her commanders. There was a good range of emotions distributed among them, from clear nerves to stupid over-confidence. "Now we know roughly what our own capabilities are, we need to start working out how we're going to deploy. Delvan, you're probably the best strategist we have . . ."

"Butt-headed traditionalist," Soi Hon muttered sotto voce.

Annette raised a warning eyebrow and the old guerrilla made a conciliatory shrug. "What is Hiltch likely to do?" she asked.

"Two things," Delvan said, ignoring Soi. "Firstly, their initial assault is going to be a lulu. He'll throw everything he's got at us, on as many fronts as he can afford to open. We'll be facing massive troop incursions, this wretched space warship bombardment, aircraft carpet bombing, artillery. The aim is to demoralise us right from the start, make it quite clear from the scale of the Liberation that we'll lose, drumming it home in a fashion we can't possibly ignore. I'd recommend that we actually pull back a little way from the borders of the peninsula; don't give him an easy target. Leave it to Milne's booby traps to snarl up his timetable, and stall any immediate visible success he wants to lay on for the reporters."

"Okay, I can cope with that. What's his second likely objective?"

"His target missions. If he's got any sense, he'll go for

our population centres first. Our power declines with our numbers, which will make his mopping up operation a damn sight easier.”

“Population centres,” Annette exclaimed in annoyance. “What population centres? People are deserting the towns in droves. The councils are reporting we’re now down to less than half the numbers we had in urban areas when we took over Mortonridge. They’re like our deserters, heading for the hills. Right now we’re spread over this land thinner than a pigeon’s fart.”

“It’s not the hills they’re after,” Soi said, his soft tone a rebuke. “It’s the farms. Which was only to be expected. You are well aware of the food situation across the peninsula. Had your efforts been directed at developing our civil infrastructure instead of our military base, it would be a different story.”

“Is that a criticism?”

His gentle laugh was infuriating, mockingly superior. “A plea for industrialisation, from me? Please! I regard the land and the people as integral. Nature provides us with our true state. It is our towns and cities with their machines and hunger, which have birthed the corruption that has contaminated human society for millennia. The defence of people who chose to live with the land is paramount.”

“Okay, thanks for the party manifesto. But it doesn’t alter what I said. We haven’t got that many population centres to lure Hiltch’s forces into ambush.”

“We will have. I suspect Delvan is correct when he says Hiltch will want to open with a grand gesture. That should work in our favour. As always when a land is invaded, its people pull together. They’ll see that as individuals they can offer no resistance to the Liberation forces, and they’ll flee their isolation in search of group sanctuary. We will gather

ourselves together as a people again. Then the battle will be joined in full.”

Annette’s growing smile was a physical demonstration of the satisfaction spreading through her thoughts. “Remember Stephanie Ash, what I told her about having to decide whose side she was on? That self-righteous cow just stood there smiling politely the whole time, knowing her world view was the real thing and that I’d come round to her way of thinking in the end. Looks like I’ll have the last laugh after all—even if it is only a short one. Damn, I’m going to enjoy that almost as much as I am bollixing up my dear old friend Ralph’s campaign.”

“You really think we’ll be able to start recruiting into the regiments again?” Delvan asked Soi Hon.

“Can you think of nothing but your own position and power? It is not the regiments which will inflict the worst casualties, but the united people. Group ten of us together, and the destructive potential of our energistic power is an order of magnitude greater than any artillery the Liberation forces can bring to bear.”

“Which is less than one per cent of the lowest powered maser on a Strategic Defence platform, and that’s before we get into the heavy duty systems like their X-ray lasers,” Annette said, tired of their bickering. “It’s not our numbers which matter, but our ability to communicate and organise. That’s what we have to safeguard until the last of us is shoved into zero-tau.”

“I agree,” Delvan said. “The whole war is going to be an extremely fluid situation from the start. Lightning strikes, hit the bastards and run, are what we should be planning for.”

“Exactly, that’s where I expect you two to combine for me. Your overall strategy, Delvan, combined with Soi’s tac-

tics. It's a lethal alliance, the equivalent of the Kingdom and the Edenists."

"An inspired comparison," Soi chuckled.

"My pleasure. All right, let's start looking at the map, and see who we're going to send where."

It was Emmet Mordden, again, who was on duty in the operations centre when the Organization fleet started to emerge above New California. The hellhawks were first, their wormholes opening more or less in the official emergence zone, a hundred thousand kilometres above Monterey. That gave them some warning that the Adamist craft were en route. Emmet quickly called in five more operatives to monitor their rag-tag arrival. They certainly aimed for the emergence zone, but with possessed officers on board aiming and hitting were increasingly separate concepts. Event horizons started to inflate across a vast section of space around the planet; the only thing regular about them was the timing. One every twenty seconds.

The big flight trajectory holoscreens ringing the centre had to change perspective several times, clicking down through their magnification to encompass space right out to Requa, New California's fourth moonlet. Black icons started to erupt across the screen as if it was being struck by dirty rain.

The AI began to absorb the swarm of information datavised in from the SD sensor platforms, and started plotting the starships' erratic trajectories. Multiple vector lines sprang up on every console display. The operators studied them urgently, opening communication circuits to verify the ships were still under Organization control. Emmet got so carried along by the pandemonium of the first few minutes it took a while before he began to realize something was badly wrong with the whole episode. Firstly, they were

too early, Admiral Kolhammer's task force couldn't possibly have arrived at Tranquillity yet. Secondly, there were too many ships. Even if the ambush had been a massive success, some ships would have been lost. Of all Capone's lieutenants, he had the most pragmatic view of just how effective the fleet ships were.

Those two ugly facts were just beginning to register, when he sensed the dismay bubbling up among Jull von Holger's thoughts, as the hellhawk liaison man communicated with his colleagues.

"What the hell is it?" Emmet demanded. "Why are they back here? Did they lose, chicken out, or what?"

Jull von Holger shook his head in bewilderment, most reluctant to be the messenger of bad news. "No. No, they didn't lose. Their target . . . Tranquillity jumped away."

Emmet frowned at him.

"Look, just call Luigi, okay. I don't understand it myself."

Emmet gave him a long dissatisfied look, then turned to his own console. He ordered it to find the *Salvatore's* transponder, and open a channel to the flagship. "What's going on?" he asked when a fuzzy picture of Luigi Balsamo appeared in the corner of his display.

"She tricked us," Luigi shouted angrily. "That Saldana bitch ran away. Christ knows how she managed it, but the whole thing vanished down a wormhole. Nobody told us a habitat could do that. You never warned us, did you? You're supposed to be the Organization's technical whiz kid. Why the fuck didn't you say something?"

"About what? What do you mean it went down a wormhole? What went down a wormhole?"

"Why don't you *listen*, shitbrain? The habitat! The habitat vanished in front of us!"

Emmet stared at the image, refusing to believe what he'd heard. "I'm calling Al," he said eventually.

It was the first time Luigi had ever been intimidated by the big double doors of the Nixon suite. There were a couple of soldiers on duty outside, wearing their standard fawn-brown double-breasted suits, big square-jawed guys with a dark rasp of stubble, glossy Thompson machine guns held prominently. He could sense several people milling about inside, their familiar thoughts dull and unhappy as they waited for him. He thought of all the punishments and reprimands he'd attended in his own capacity as one of the Organization's elite lieutenants. The omens weren't good.

One of the soldiers opened the doors, a superior in-the-know grin on his face. He didn't say anything, just made a mocking gesture of welcome. Luigi resisted the urge to smash his face to pulp, and walked in.

"What the fuck happened?" Al bellowed.

Luigi glanced round at the semicircle of erstwhile friends as the doors closed behind him. Patricia was there, as was Silvano, Jezzibella, Emmet, Mickey, and that little bitch Kiera. All of them going with the tide that was sweeping him away to drown.

"We were given some very bad information." He looked pointedly at Patricia. "Perez sold us a dummy. And you bought it."

"He didn't," she snapped. "He possessed one of the First Admiral's top aids in Trafalgar. Kolhammer was heading straight for Tranquillity."

"And we would have got him, too. If somebody had just warned me. I mean, Jesus H Christ, an entire goddamn habitat flitting off. Do you have any idea how big that thing was?"

“Who cares?” Al said. “The habitat wasn’t your main target. You were there to blow up Kolhammer’s ships.”

“The only way we could do that was if we’d captured the habitat first,” Luigi said angrily. “Don’t try blaming all this on me. I did everything you asked.”

“Who the fuck else am I going to blame?” Al asked. “You were there, it was your responsibility.”

“Nobody has ever heard of a habitat that can do that before,” Luigi ground out. “Nobody.” He shoved an accusatory finger at Jezzibella. “Right?”

For whatever reason, Jezzibella had assumed her impish adolescent girl persona, red ribbons tying her hair into ponytails, a white blouse and grey pleated skirt not really covering her body. She pouted, a gesture which was almost obscenely provocative. It was an act which various judges had been asked to ban when she performed it live on tour. “Right. But I’m hardly an expert on energy patterning systems, now am I?”

“Christ almighty. Emmet?” It was almost a plea.

“It is unprecedented,” Emmet said with some sympathy.

“And you.” Luigi glared at Kiera. “You lived in a habitat. You knew all about how they work, why didn’t you tell us?” The attack didn’t quite kick up the response he expected. A flash of icy anger twisted Kiera’s thoughts, while Al simply sneered scornfully.

“Valisk was not capable of performing a swallow manoeuvre,” she said. “As far as we know, only Tranquillity has that ability. Certainly none of the Edenist habitats can. I don’t know about the other three independent habitats.”

“Didn’t stop Valisk from vanishing, though, did it,” Al muttered snidely.

Silvano gave an over-loud laugh, while Jezzibella smiled demurely at Kiera’s discomfort. Luigi looked from one to the other in puzzlement. “Okay, so are we agreed? It was a

shitty situation, sure. But there was nothing I could do about it. That Saldana girl took everyone by surprise.”

“You were the fleet’s commander,” Al said. “I gave you that job because I thought you were smart, man, that you had some flare and imagination. A guy with a few qualities, know what I mean? If all I want is some putz who expects a slap on the back every time he does what he’s told I would have given the job to Bernhard Alsop. I expected more from you, Luigi, a lot more.”

“Like what? I mean, come on here, tell me, Al, just what the hell would you have done?”

“Stopped it from flying out. Don’t you get it, Luigi? You were my man on the ground. I was goddamn depending on you to bring the Organization through this okay. Instead, I’m left with shit all over my face. Once you saw what was happening you should have zeroed the place.”

“Christ, why won’t any of you *listen*? I was fucking trying to zero it, Al. That’s what spooked Saldana; that’s what made her scoot the hell out of there. I’d got nearly five thousand of those war rockets chasing after her faster than a coyote with a hornet up its ass, and she got clean away. There was *nothing* we could do. We were damn lucky to cut free ourselves. The explosions from all those war rockets did some damage, too, we were . . .”

“Wooha there,” Al held up a hand. “What explosions? You just said the combat wasps never touched Tranquillity.”

“Yeah, but most of them detonated when they hit the wormhole entrance. I don’t understand none too well; the technical boys, they say it’s like a solid barrier, but it’s made out of nothing. Beats me. Anyway, the first ones started to go off, and . . . hell, you know how powerful antimatter is, they set off the others. The whole lot went off like a string of goddamn firecrackers.”

“All of them? Five thousand antimatter-powered combat wasps?”

“That’s right. Like I said, we were lucky to get out alive.”

“Sure you were.” Al’s voice had dropped to a dangerous monotone. “You’re alive, and I’m out one planet which we postponed invading, I’m down a Confederation Navy task force you were supposed to ambush, and I’ve also got to replace five thousand combat wasps fuelled up by the goddamn rarest substance in the whole fucking universe. Jeez, I’m real glad you’re back. Seeing you here smiling away in once piece makes me feel absolutely fucking peachy. You piece of *shit*! Do you have any idea how badly you’ve screwed up?”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“Oh absolutely. You’re right. No way are you to blame for this. And you know what? I bet I know who it was. Yeah. Yeah, now I think about it, I know. It was me. That’s right, me. I’m to blame. I’m the asshole here. I made the biggest fucking mistake of my life when I put you in charge.”

“Yeah? Well I didn’t hear you whining none when I came back from Arnstat. Remember that day? I delivered a whole fucking planet on a fucking plate for you, Al. You gave me the keys for the city back then. Parties, girls, you even made Avvy track down a genuine copy of the Clark Gable *Gone with the Wind* for me. Nothing. Nothing was too much trouble. I was loyal to you, then, and I’m loyal to you now. I don’t deserve any of this. All you lost was a few lousy rockets and some fancy fuel. I put my life on the line for you, Al. And we all know how goddamn precious that is now, don’t we? Well, do *you* know what? I don’t deserve to be treated like this. It ain’t right.”

Al scowled, looking round the other lieutenants. They all kept their faces blank, of course, but their minds were boil-

ing. Annoyance and doubt were the predominant emotions. He guessed his own mind would show the same. He was fucking furious with Luigi, it was the first defeat the Organization had been dealt, the news boys would crow about it clear over the Confederation. His image would take a terrible battering, and as Jez always said: image was everything in the modern world. The aura of the Organization's invincibility would be hit badly. Yet at the same time, Luigi was right, he had done his best, right from the start when they'd all walked into City Hall in the ballsiest escapade this side of the Trojan horse.

"By rights, I ought to fucking fry you, Luigi," Al said darkly. "We've been set back weeks thanks to what happened at Tranquillity. I've got to find another planet to invade, I've got to wait until we've built up a decent new stock of antimatter, the reporters will hang me out to dry, everyone's confidence is busted. But I'm not going to. And the only reason I'm not going to is because you came back here like a man. You ain't afraid to admit you made a mistake."

There was a new flash of anger in Luigi's mind at that. Al waited, mildly intrigued, but it was never voiced. He materialised a Havana, and took a comfortable drag before saying: "So I'll make you an offer. You can stay with the Organization, but I'm going to bust you right back down to the bottom of the ladder again. You're a private zero class, Luigi. I know the other guys'll go hard on you for a while, but you stay loyal, you keep your nose clean, and you can work your way back up again. I can't be no fairer than that."

Luigi gawped at Al, struggling with disbelief at what he'd just heard while a strangled choke growled up from his throat. His mind was telegraphing the notion of outright re-

bellion. Al fixed him with *the look*, all humour eradicated. “You won’t like the alternative.”

“All right, Al,” Luigi said slowly. “I can live with that. But I’m telling you, I’ll be back in charge of the fleet inside of six months.”

Al guffawed, and clapped Luigi’s arm. “That’s my boy. I knew I made the right decision with you.” Luigi managed a brief smile, and turned to walk out of the room. Al slumped his shoulders when the doors shut. “Guess that’s one guy we’ve lost for good.”

Jezzibella rubbed his arm in sympathy. “You did the right thing, baby. It was honourable. He did fuck up something chronic.”

“I wouldn’t have been so generous,” Kiera said. “You shouldn’t show so much kindness. People will see it as a weakness.”

“You’re dealing with people, not mechanoids,” Jezzibella said blankly. “You have to make allowances for the odd mistake. If you shoot every waiter who spills a cup of coffee over your skirt, you wind up with a self service bar.”

Kiera smiled condescendingly at her. “What you’ll actually wind up with is a group of highly efficient waiters who can do the job effectively.”

“You mean, like the way your team handled things on Valisk?”

“All teams need an effective leader.”

Al was tempted to let them go for it—nothing like a good catfight. But one bust-up among his senior lieutenants was enough for today. So instead, he said: “Speaking of which, Kiera, are the hellhawks going to keep flying for me?”

“Of course they will, Al. I’ve been busy setting up my new flight coordination office in one of the docking ledge departure lounges. Close to the action, as it were. They’ll do what I tell them to.”

“Uh huh.” He didn’t like the implications of that sweetly spoken assurance any more than the unpleasant note of victory rippling through her mind. And judging by the sudden suspicion colouring Jez’s thoughts, neither did she.

It was one of those absurd left right, left right sideways shuffles that seemingly automatically occurs when two people try to get out of each other’s way simultaneously which finally blew Beth’s temper. She’d come out of the washroom at one end of the *Mindori*’s life support module to find Jed standing outside waiting to use it. He immediately dropped his head so he didn’t have to look at her and danced to one side. A move she instinctively matched. They dodged about for a couple of seconds.

The next thing Jed knew was a hand grasping his collar, and hauling him into the washroom. Bright mock sunbeams poured through the smoked-glass portholes, producing large white ovals on the polished wood floor. Archaic brass plumbing gleamed and sparkled all around the small compartment. Jed’s knee banged painfully on the rim of the enamel bath as Beth smoothly slewed his weight round like some kind of ice skater act. The door slammed shut, the lock *snicked* and he was shoved flat against the wall. “Listen ball-brain,” she snarled, “I was not shagging him. Okay?”

He risked a sneer, praying she wasn’t still carrying the nervejam stick. “Yeah? So what were you doing in bed with him?”

“Sleeping.” She saw the new expression of derision forming on his face, and twisted his sweatshirt fabric just a fraction tighter. “Sleeping,” she repeated forcefully. “Jeeze, mate, the guy’s brain is totally zonked. It took a time to get him quietened down, that’s all. I dozed off. Big deal. If you

hadn't stormed out so bloody fast you would have seen I still had all my clobber on."

"That's it?"

"What the hell do you expect? The pair of us were working our way through a kama sutra recording? Is that what you think of me? That I'm going to leap into bed with the first geriatric I meet?"

Jed knew his answer to that question was going to be critical, and possibly close to fatal if he got it wrong. "No," he insisted, willing himself to believe it totally. Voice only would never be good enough. He often suspected Beth had some kind of advanced telepathic ability. "I don't think that of you at all. Um . . . you've got more class than that. I always said so."

"Hummm." Her grip on his sweatshirt loosened slightly. "You mean you were always miffed I didn't let you shag me."

"That's not it!" he protested.

"Really?"

Jed thought that jibe was best ignored in its entirety. "What do you make of this delay?" he asked.

"Bit odd. I don't understand why we didn't dock with Valisk before we went on another rendezvous. I mean, we were already there in the Srinagar system, least that's what I thought."

"Yeah. I didn't see Valisk, though, just some gas giant. Then the ship swallowed away again. I thought I was going to die. We were *there*."

"Choi-Ho and Maxim said this new rendezvous was major-league important when I asked them. They clammed up pretty smart when I asked them where it was, though. You think that's important?"

"Course it's important. Question is, why?"

“We might have to dodge some navy patrols to make the new rendezvous. That’ll be risky.”

“So why not tell us?”

“There’s a lot of kids on board. Could be they don’t want to worry them.”

“Makes sense.”

“But you don’t reckon?”

“Dunno. It’s funny, you know. We busted our balls to get a flight. Everything we had got left behind, our families, friends, everything. But I didn’t have any doubts. Now we’re as good as there . . . I don’t know, it’s just such a big thing. Maybe I’m a bit scared. What about you?”

Beth gave him a careful look, unsure just how much she should reveal. He really had invested a lot in the ideal of Valisk and all it promised. “Jed, I know Gerald’s a bit flaky, but he told me something.”

“A *bit* flaky.”

“Jed! He said Kiera is actually called Marie, that she’s his daughter. He reckons that Valisk is no different to any other place the possessed have taken over.”

“Crap,” he said angrily. “That’s total crap. Look, Beth. We know Kiera is a possessor, she’s never hidden that. But she’s only borrowing that girl’s body. She said things like that won’t matter after Valisk leaves the universe. She can take on her own form again.”

“Yes, but, Jed . . . His daughter.”

“Just a weird coincidence, that’s all. Mind, it explains why the old fart is so crazy.”

She nodded reluctantly. “Maybe. But then again it wouldn’t do any harm to start thinking the unthinkable, would it?”

He took hold of both her arms, just above the elbows. “We’ll be all right,” he said intently. “You’ve accessed

Kiera's recording enough times. You know she's telling us the truth. This is like wedding night nerves."

She gave his hands a curious glance; normally she would have instantly shaken free from such a grip. But this flight was not an ordinary time. "Yeah. Thanks, mate." She gave him a timid smile.

Jed returned an equally uncertain flutter. He started to slowly lean forward, bringing his face down towards hers. Her lips parted slightly. He closed his eyes. Then a finger was resting on his chin.

"Not here," Beth said. "Not in a dunny."

Beth actually let him hold her hand as they walked along the life support module's central corridor. Somehow it didn't seem to matter so much now. Back on Koblat it would have meant everyone knowing: Beth and Jed, Jed and Beth. The boys would have smiled and whooped and given Jed the thumbs up. "Well done mate. Scored with an ice maiden, nice one. So what does she look like with her kit off? Are they big tits? Is she any good at it? Has she gone down on you yet?" While the girls would have clustered round her and asked if he'd said he loved her. Does he devote enough time to you? Are you going to apply for an apartment together?

It was a horrendous cycle spinning around her, a compendium of everything she hated about Koblat. The loss of any purpose to life. Surrendering to the company and signing on as another of its cheaply produced multi-function biological tools. She knew several girls on her corridor level who were grandmothers at twenty-eight.

Their weakness had given her the strength to strive for at least the hope of something more, to resist almost intolerable peer pressure. Star of her education stream, exceptionally receptive to each didactic memory she received.

Applying for every college scholarship and exchange programme she could locate in the asteroid's memory cores. Enduring the jeers and whispers. But it had been hard hard hard. Then along came Kiera, who offered a way out from all that awful pressure. A life that was different and kind. And Beth had believed, because Kiera was the same sort of age, and empowered, and taking control of her own destiny. And because . . . it was easy. For the first time ever.

They stopped outside the cabin she'd been sharing with Gerald, and Jed kissed her before she could turn the handle. Not a very good kiss, he almost missed her lips, and definitely no tongue like there was in all the low-rated blue sensewise recordings she'd accessed. His anxious expression almost made her laugh, as if he was expecting her to deck him one. Which, she admitted, she probably would have done three weeks ago if he'd come on fresh with her. She got the door open, and they stumbled inside, not bothering with the lights. Jed kissed her again. A better attempt, this time. When he finished, she asked: "Will you think of her?"

"Who?" he asked in confusion.

"You know, her, Kiera. Will you think of her when you're doing it with me?"

"No!" Although there was enough of a quaver in his voice to reveal the truth. To her, if no one else. She knew him well enough, growing up together for ten years. It was almost too close.

He had become—not obsessed, that wasn't strong enough—captivated by Kiera and that exquisite beguiling beauty of hers. In dismay Beth knew it wouldn't be her face he saw when he closed his eyes in ecstasy, not her body he would feel below his fingers. For some reason, despite the humiliation, she didn't really care. After all, she had her own reasons for this. She twined a forearm behind his head, and pulled him down to kiss her again. The lights came on.

Beth gasped in surprise, and twisted to look at the bunk, expecting to see Gerald there. It was empty, the blankets rumpled.

There was a melodic chime from the dresser, and the small mirror above it shimmered with colour. A man's face appeared on it; he was middle aged, with a Mediterranean complexion and a long chin which pulled his lips downwards, making him appear permanently unhappy.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But I think you'll find what I have to say quite important."

Jed had stiffened the second he appeared, quickly pulling his hands away from Beth. She tried not to show how annoyed she was by that; she'd just made *the* decision—what did he have to be guilty about?

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Rocio Condra; I am the soul possessing this hellhawk."

"Oh brother," she murmured. Jed managed to blush even deeper.

"I was listening to your conversation in the washroom. I believe we can help each other."

Beth smiled weakly. "If you're powerful enough to do that, how can we possibly help you? You can do anything."

"My energistic power gives me a great deal of influence over the local environment, I agree. But there are some things which remain beyond me. Listening to you, for example, I had to use a bitek processor; there's one in every section of the *Mindori's* life support module."

"If you've heard everything we've talked about, then you know about Gerald and Marie," Beth said.

"Indeed. That is why I chose you to make my offer to. You already know everything is not what it seems."

Jed peered at Rocio's image. "What offer?"

"The end requirements haven't yet been finalized. However, if all goes well, I expect I shall require you to perform

some physical tasks for me. Nothing too difficult. Just venture into a few places I obviously cannot reach.”

“Such as?”

“That is not yet apparent. We will have to advance this partnership one step at a time. As a gesture of goodwill, I am prepared to impart some information to you. If, based on what you hear, you then wish to continue with this relationship, we can move forward together.”

Beth gave Jed a puzzled glance, not surprised to find he was equally mystified. “Go on,” she said. “We’ll listen.”

“I am about to swallow into the New California system. We will probably dock at Monterey asteroid, the headquarters of the Capone Organization.”

“No way!” Jed cried.

“There never was a new rendezvous, was there?” Beth asked, somehow unsurprised by the revelation.

“No,” Rocio said. “We did not dock at Valisk because it is no longer in this universe. There was a battle for control between different factions of possessed inside. The victors subsequently removed it.”

Jed took a couple of paces backwards, and sank down onto the bunk. His face was fragile with dismay. “Gone?”

“I’m afraid so. And I am genuinely sorry. I know how much hope you had for your future there. Unfortunately, that hope was extremely misplaced.”

“How?” Beth asked through clenched teeth.

“There never was any Deadnight, not really. Kiera Salter simply wanted fresh bodies to possess so that she could expand the habitat’s population base. Had you disembarked there, you would have been tortured until you surrendered yourselves to possession.”

“Oh Jeeze,” Beth whispered. “And Monterey? What’s going to happen to us at Monterey?”

“Much the same, I expect. The Organization does retain

professional non-possessed who have specialist fields of expertise. Are you highly qualified in any subject?"

"Us?" Beth barked in consternation. "You've gotta be bloody joking, mate. The only thing we know how to do proper is mess up. Every bloody time." She was afraid she was going to start crying.

"I see," Rocio said. "Well, in return for your help, I am prepared to hide you on board when we dock at Monterey."

"What sort of help?" Jed asked.

Beth wheeled round to glare at him. "Does it bloody matter! *Yes* we'll help. As much as you want."

Rocio's image gave a dry smile. "As I said, my requirements will not be fully established until I have analysed the local situation. It may be that I don't require you to do anything. For the moment, I shall simply hold you in reserve."

"Why?" Beth asked. "You're part of them. You're a possessor. What do you want us for?"

"Because I am not part of them. We are not all the same. I was being coerced into helping Kiera. Now I must find out what has happened to the other hellhawks, and decide what to do next. In order to do that, I must keep every conceivable option open. Having allies who are in no position to betray me will provide an excellent advantage."

"All right," Beth said. "What do we have to do?"

"I will swallow into the New California system in another thirty minutes. Even if Kiera and the other hellhawks have left there, the passengers will have to be disembarked. For now, the pair of you must be hidden. I believe I have a place which will put you outside the perception range of Choi-Ho and Maxim Payne."

"What perception range?" Jed asked.

"All possessed are able to sense the thoughts of other people. The range varies between individuals, of course."

"You mean they know what I'm thinking?" he hooted.

“No. But they are aware of your presence, and with that your emotions. However, such perception through solid matter is difficult; I believe the fluid in some of my tanks will shield you. We just have to get you at the centre of a suitably large cluster.”

“There had better be room for five of us in this nest of yours,” Beth said sprightly.

“I only require two people.”

“Tough, mate. You get yourself a bargain package with us. Gerald and the girls come too.”

“I don’t need them.”

She gave his image a cold smile. “Must have been dead a long time, huh? To forget what it’s like to have other people, friends, responsibilities. What? You think we’d leave them behind for Capone. A couple of kids? Come on!”

“The Organization is unlikely to possess the girls. They pride themselves in being altruistic and charitable.”

“Good for them. But it doesn’t make any difference. You get all five of us, or none at all.”

“That’s right,” Jed said, coming up to stand beside her. “Gari’s my sister. I’m not leaving her with Capone.”

Rocio sighed heavily. “Very well. But only those three. If you have a flock of second cousins on board, they will have to take their chances with the Organization.”

“No second cousins. What do you want us to do?”

It took a lot of nerve to saunter idly into the *Mindori*’s main lounge with a bland expression on his face, knowing what he did. Jed felt he carried it off rather well; his visits to the Blue Fountain in search of sympathetic starship crews had provided a good rehearsal for brazening out awkward moments. There was a big press of Deadnight kids in the lounge, more than usual as the extended flight finally ap-

proached its end. All of them gazing eagerly out of the big forward-looking window at the silver-on-black starfield.

Jed let his eyes flick round quickly, confirming Choi-Ho and Maxim Payne weren't anywhere about. Rocio had assured him they were both in their cabin, but he didn't entirely trust everything the hellhawk's soul said.

In this instance, Rocio hadn't lied. The two possessed were nowhere to be seen. Jed walked confidently across the lounge to one of the fitted cupboards on the far side. Its narrow slatted doors were made from rosewood, with small brass handles moulded to resemble rose buds. As he put his hand round the cool metal, it turned to black plastic below his fingers. A narrow display panel appeared briefly to one side, framing a block of grey alphanumeric which flickered too fast to be read. He waited until he heard a discreet *click* then pulled gently. The door opened a fraction, and he moved closer, covering his actions.

Rocio had told him the bitek processor blocks were on the third shelf from the top. The thin gap allowed him to confirm the slim rectangular units were waiting there. It was obviously some kind of general equipment storage cupboard; he could see tool kits, and test blocks, and sensor modules, as well as several devices he couldn't fathom at all. A rack on the fourth shelf contained five compact laser pistols.

He froze.

It was probably Rocio's final assessment of his suitability. If he could turn his back on the weapons he would be resolute enough to be of use to the hellhawk. If he knew anything about this nebulous deal, whatever help Rocio wanted, it would not be small, not when the exchange price was his own life. But a weapon would offer some security, however feeble. And Beth had her nervejam stick.

Knowing his heated thoughts would be betraying his

guilt to Rocio in a way no clandestine visual observation ever could, Jed reached calmly for a pistol, then slid his hand smoothly up to one of the processor blocks. He tucked both of them neatly into his inside jacket pocket, and shut the cupboard door again. The electronic lock vanished instantly beneath a slick ripple of wood grain which lapped over it.

Walking back out of the lounge was the worst part. Some little part of Jed's brain was yelling at him to warn them. All of a sudden, he hated them. Sweetly trusting kids, their eyes happy and shining as they gawped out at the enchanting vista of interstellar space. All that hope suffusing unseen, yet cloying, into the air as they waited for the window to reveal their own special nirvana waiting for them at the end of the next wormhole.

Fools! Blind, stupid, and ridiculously ingenuous. The hatred clarified then. He was looking at multiple reflections of himself.

Beth got Gerald to come along with her, which he did unquestioningly. Jed brought Gari and Navar, who were intensely curious, twittering together as they walked down the length of the corridor. Their curiosity turned to hard-edged scepticism as Jed knocked softly on the washroom door.

"You told us this was important," Navar said accusingly.

"It is," he assured her. Something in his tone stalled the scornful sniff she was preparing as a retort.

Beth unlocked the washroom door and slid it open. Jed checked the corridor to make sure no one was watching. With only fifteen minutes to go until the swallow manoeuvre, all the other Deadnights were crowding round the observation ports in the forward cabins. The two girls gave Gerald a confused look as they all crowded into the con-

fined space of the cabin. In turn, Gerald barely noticed them. Jed took the bitek processor block from his pocket. One surface shimmered with a moiré holographic pattern, then cleared to show Rocio's face.

"Well done, Jed," he said. "Bluffing it out is often the best option."

"Yeah, all right, now what?"

"Who's that?" Navar asked.

"We'll explain later," Beth said. "Right now, we've got to get into position ready for when the ship docks." She said it to the girls, although she was actually studying Gerald intently. He was in one of his passive moods, unperturbed by what was happening. She just prayed he stayed that way while they were hidden away.

"Aren't we getting off at Valisk?" Gari asked her big brother in a forlorn voice.

"No, doll, sorry. We're not even docking with Valisk."

"Why not?"

"Guess we got lied to." The bitter sorrow in his voice silenced her.

"You will need to clear the floor," Rocio instructed.

Beth and the two girls climbed into the bath, while Gerald sat on the toilet lid. Jed pressed himself back against the door. The floorboards faded away; rich honey colour bleaching to a sanitary grey-green, resilient texture becoming the uncompromising hardness of silicolithium composite. Some residual evidence of the wood illusion remained, little ridges where the planks had lain, dark flecks in the surface a pallid mimicry of the grain pattern. In the centre of the floor was an inspection hatch, with recessed metal locking clips at each corner.

"Turn the clips ninety degrees clockwise, then pull them up," Rocio said.

Jed knelt down and did as he was told. When the clips

were free, the hatch rose ten centimetres with a swift hiss of air. He swung it aside. There was a narrow metal crawl way below it, bordered by foam-insulated pipes and bundled cables. Beth activated the lightstick she'd brought along, and held it over the hatch. There was a horizontal T-junction a couple of metres down.

"You will go first, Beth," Rocio said, "and light the way. I will supply directions. Jed, you must close the hatch behind you."

Reluctantly, with the girls pouting and scowling, they all climbed down into the crawl way. Jed tugged the hatch back into place after him, nearly catching his fingers as it guillotined shut. When it was in place, the washroom floor silently and fastidiously sealed over with elegant floorboards again.

4

Dariat wandered along the valley, not really paying much attention to anything. Only the memories pulled at him, bittersweet recollections guiding him towards the sacred places he hadn't dared visit in the flesh for thirty years, not even when he'd roamed through Valisk to avoid Bonney and Kiera.

The wide pool, apparently carved into the grey-brown polyp-rock by the stream's enthusiastic flow, nature at its most pleasing. Where tufts of soft pink grass lined the edges, strains of violet and amber moss sprawled over the scattering of boulders, and long fronds of water reeds swayed lazily in the current.

The flat expanse of land between the slope of the valley and an ox-bow loop in the stream. An animal track wound through it, curving round invisible obstacles as it led down to a shallow beach where the herds could drink. Apart from that it was untouched, the pink grass which currently dominated the plains was thick and lush here, its tiny mushroom-shaped spoor fringes poised on the verge of ripeness. Nobody had camped here for years, despite its

eminent suitability. None of the Starbridge tribes had ever returned. Not after . . .

Here. He walked to one side of the empty tract, the taller stalks of grass swishing straight through his translucent legs. Yes, this was the place. Anastasia's tepee had been pitched here. A sturdy, colourful contraption. Strong enough to take her weight when she tied the rope round her neck. Was the pink grass slightly thinner here? A rough circle where the pyre had been. Her tribe sending her and her few belongings on their way to the Realms (every possession except one, the Thoale stones, which he had kept safe these thirty years). Her body dispersed in fire and smoke, freeing the soul from any final ties with the physical universe.

How had they *known*? Those simple, backward people. Yet their lives contained such astonishing truth. They more than anyone would be prepared for the beyond. Anastasia wouldn't have suffered in the same way as the lost souls he'd encountered during his own fleeting time there. Not her.

Dariat sat on the grass, his toga crumpling around chubby limbs, though never really chafing. If any of her essence had indeed lingered here, it was long gone now. So now what? He looked up at the light tube, which had become even dimmer than before. The air was cooler, too, nothing like Valisk's usual balmy medium. He was rather surprised that phenomenon registered. How could a ghost sense temperature? But then most aspects of his present state were a mystery.

Dariat?

He shook his head. Hearing things. Just to be certain, he looked around. Nobody, alive or spectral, was in sight. An interesting point though. Would I be able to see another ghost?

Dariat. You are there. We feel you. Answer us.

The voice was like affinity, but much softer. A whisper into the back of his mind. Oh great, a ghost being haunted by another ghost. Thank you again, Thoale. That could only ever happen to me.

Who is this? he asked.

We are Valisk now. Part of us is you.

What is this? What are you?

We are the habitat personality, the combination of yourself and Rubra.

That's crazy. You cannot be me.

But we are. Your memories and personality fused to Rubra's within the neural strata. Remember? The change to us, to the neural strata's thought routines, was corporeal and permanent. We remain intact. You, however, were a possessing soul, you were torn out by the habitat's shift to this realm.

A realm hostile to the possessed, he said rancorously.
Exactly.

Don't I know it. I'm a ghost. That's what the shift did to me. A bloody ghost.

How intriguing. We cannot see you.

I'm in the valley.

Ah.

Dariat could feel the understanding within the personality. It knew which valley he meant. A true affinity.

Can we have access to your sensorium, please. It will allow us to analyse the situation properly.

He couldn't think of a reasonable objection, even though the idea sat uncomfortably. After thirty years of self-imposed mental isolation, sharing came hard. Even with an entity that claimed to be derived from himself.

Very well, he griped. He allowed the affinity link to

widen, showing the personality the world through his eyes—or at least what he imagined to be his eyes.

As requested, he looked at his own body for the personality, walked about, demonstrated how he had no material presence.

Yet you persist in interpreting yourself as having human form, the personality said. How strange.

Force of habit, I guess.

More likely to be subconscious reassurance. The pattern is your basic foundation, the origin of quintessential identity. Retention of that is probably critical to your continuation as a valid entity. In other words, you're very set in your ways. But then we know that already, don't we.

I don't believe I'm that self-destructive. So if you wouldn't mind cancelling the insults for a few decades.

As you wish. After all, we do know how to cut the deepest.

Dariat could almost laugh at the impression of *déjà vu* which the exchange conjured up. He and Rubra had spent days of this same verbal fencing while he was possessing Horgan's body. **Was there a reason you wanted to talk to me? Or did you just want to say hello?**

This realm is not hostile to souls alone. It is also affecting our viability right down to the atomic level. Large sections of the neural strata have ceased to function, nor are such areas static, they flow through the strata at random, requiring persistent monitoring. Such failures threaten even our homogenised presence. We have to run constant storage replication routines to ensure our core identity is not erased.

That's tough, but unless the failure occurs everywhere simultaneously, you'll be safe.

As may be. But the overall efficiency of our cells is

much reduced. The sensitive cell clusters cannot perceive as clearly as before; organ capability is degrading to alarming levels. Muscle membrane response is sluggish. Electrical generation is almost zero. All principal mechanical and electrical systems have shut down. The communication net and most processors are malfunctioning. If this situation continues, we will not be able to retain a working biosphere for more than ten days, a fortnight at most.

I hate to sound negative at a time like this, but what do you expect me to do about it?

The remaining population must be organized to assist us. There are holding procedures which can be enacted to prevent further deterioration.

Physical ones. You'll have to ask the living, not me.

We are attempting to. However, those who have been de-possessed are currently in an extremely disorientated state. Even those we have affinity contact with are unresponsive. As well as undergoing severe psychological trauma, their physiological condition has deteriorated.

So?

There are nearly three hundred of our relatives still in zero-tau. Your idea, remember? Kiera was holding them ready as an incentive for the hellhawk possessors. If they were to be taken out, we would have a functional work force ready to help, one that has a good proportion of qualified technicians among it.

Good idea . . . Wait, how come their zero-tau pods are working when everything else has failed?

The zero-tau systems are self-contained and made from military-grade components, they are also located in the deep caverns. We assumed that combination affords them some protection from whatever is affecting us.

If all you've got to do is flick one switch, why not just use a servitor?

Their physiological situation is even worse than the humans. All the animals in the habitat seem to be suffering from a strong form of sleeping sickness. Our affinity instructions cannot rouse them.

Does that include all the xenoc species?

Yes. Their biochemistry is essentially similar to terrestrial creatures. If our cells are affected, so are theirs.

Okay. Any idea what the problem is? Something like the energistic glitch which the possessed gave out?

Unlikely. It is probably a fundamental property of this realm. We are speculating that the quantum values of this continuum are substantially different from our universe. After all, we did select it to have a detrimental effect on the energy pattern which is a possessing soul. Consequently, we must assume that mass-energy properties here have been altered, that is bound to affect atomic characteristics. But until we can run a full analysis on our quantum state, we cannot offer further speculation.

Ever considered that the devil simply doesn't allow electricity in this particular part of hell?

Your thought is our thought. We prefer to concentrate on the rational. That allows us to construct a hypothesis which will ultimately allow us to salvage this shitty situation.

Yeah, I can live with that. So what is it that you want me to do?

See if you can talk to someone called Tolton. He will switch off the zero-tau pods for us.

Why? Who is he?

A street poet, so he claims. He was one of the in-

habitants we managed to keep out of Bonney's clutches.

Does he have affinity?

No. But legend has it that humans can see ghosts.

Shit, you're grasping at straws.

You have an alternative?

Ghosts can get tired. This unwelcome discovery made itself quite clear as Dariat trudged over the grassland towards the ring of starscraper lobbies in the middle of the habitat. But then if you have imaginary muscles, they are put under quite a strain carrying your imaginary body across long distances, especially when that body had Dariat's bulk.

This is bloody unfair, he declared to the personality. When souls come back from the beyond, they all see themselves as physically perfect twenty-five-year-olds.

That's simple vanity.

I wish I was vain.

Valisk's parkland was also becoming less attractive. Now he had hiked out of the valley, the vivid pink grass which cloaked the southern half of the cylinder was grading down to a musky-grey, an effect he equated to a city smog wrapping itself round the landscape. It couldn't be blamed entirely on the diminished illumination; the slim core of plasma in the axial light tube was still a valiant neon blue. Instead it seemed to be part of the overall lack of vitality which was such an obvious feature of this realm. The xenoc plant appeared to be past its peak, as if its spore fringes had already ripened and now it was heading back into dormancy.

None of the insects which usually chirped and fluttered among the plains had roused themselves. A few times, he came across field mice and their xenoc analogues, who were sleeping fitfully. They'd just curled up where they

were, not making any attempt to return to their nests or warrens.

Ordinary chemical reactions must still be working, he suggested. If they weren't, then everything would be dead.

Yes. Although from what we're seeing and experiencing, they must also be inhibited to some degree.

Dariat trudged on. The spiral-springs of grass made the going hard, causing resistance as his legs passed through them. It was though he was walking along a stream bed where the water was coming half-way up his shins. As his complaints became crabbier, the personality guided him towards one of the narrow animal tracks.

After half an hour of easier walking, and pondering his circumstances, he said: **You told me that your electrical generation was almost zero.**

Yes.

But not absolute?

No.

So the habitat must be in some kind of magnetic field if the induction cables are producing a current.

Logically, yes.

But?

Some induction cables are producing a current, the majority are not. And those that are, do so sporadically. Bugged if we can work out what's going on, boy. Besides, we can't locate any magnetic field outside. There's nothing we can see that could be producing one.

What is out there?

Very little.

Dariat felt the personality gathering the erratic images from clusters of sensitive cells speckling the external polyp shell, and formatting them into a coherent visualisation for

him. The amount of concentration it took for the personality to fulfil what used to be a profoundly simple task surprised and worried him.

There were no planets. No moons. No stars. No galaxies. Only a murky void.

The eeriest impression he received from the expanded affinity bond was the way Valisk appeared to be in flight. Certainly he was aware of movement of some kind, though it was purely subliminal, impossible to define. The huge cylinder appeared to be gliding through a nebula. Not one recognizable from their universe. This was composed from extraordinarily subtle layers of ebony mist, shifting so slowly they were immensely difficult to distinguish. Had he been seeing it with his own eyes, he would have put it down to overstressed retinas. But there were discernible strands of the smoky substance out there; sparser than atmospheric cloud, denser than whorls of interstellar gas.

Abruptly, a fracture of hoary light shimmered far behind the hub of Valisk's southern endcap, a luminous serpent slithering around the insubstantial billows. Rough tatters of gritty vapour detonated into emerald and turquoise phosphorescence as it twirled past them. The phenomenon was gone inside a second.

Was that lightning? Dariat asked in astonishment.

We have no idea. However, we can't detect any static charge building on our shell. So it probably wasn't electrically based.

Have you seen it before?

That was the third time.

Bloody hell. How far away was it?

That is impossible to determine. We are trying to correlate parallax data from the external sensitive cells. Unfortunately, lack of distinct identifiable reference points within the cloud formations is hampering our endeavour.

You're beginning to sound like an Edenist. Take a guess.

We believe we can see about two hundred kilometres altogether.

Shit. That's all?

Yes.

Anything could be out there, behind that stuff.

You're beginning to catch on, boy.

Can you tell if we're moving? I got the impression we were. But it could just be the way that cloud stuff is shifting round out there.

We have the same notion, but that's all it ever can be. Without a valid reference point, it is impossible to tell. Certainly we're not under acceleration, which would eliminate the possibility we're falling through a gravity field . . . if this realm has gravity, of course.

Okay, how about searching round with a radar? Have you tried that? There are plenty of arrays in the counter-rotating spaceport.

The spaceport has radar, it also has several Adamist starships, and over a hundred remote maintenance drones which could be adapted into sensor probes. None of which are functioning right now, boy. We really do need to bring our relatives out of zero-tau.

Yeah yeah. I'm getting there as quick as I can. You know what, I don't think fusing with my thought routines has made that big an impression on you, has it?

According to the personality, Tolton was in the parkland outside the Gonchraov starscraper lobby. Dariat didn't get there on the first attempt. He encountered the other ghosts before he arrived.

The pink grassland gradually gave way to terrestrial grass and trees a couple of kilometres from the starscraper lobbies. It was a lush manicured jungle which boiled round

the habitat's midsection, with gravel tracks winding round the thicker clumps of trees and vines. Big stone slabs formed primitive bridges over the rambling brooks, their support boulders grasped by thick coils of flowering creepers. Petals were drooping sadly as Dariat walked over them. As he drew closer to the lobby, he started to encounter the first of the servitor animal corpses, most of them torn by burnt scars, the impact of white fire. Then he noticed the decaying remains of several of their human victims lying in the undergrowth.

Dariat found the sight inordinately depressing. A nasty reminder of the relentless struggle which Rubra and Kiera had fought for dominance of the habitat. "And who won?" he asked morbidly.

He cleared another of the Neolithic bridges. The trees were thinning out now, becoming more ornate and taller as jungle gave way to parkland. There were flashes of movement in front of him coupled with murmurs of conversation, which made him suddenly self-conscious. Was he going to have to jump up and down waving his arms and shouting to get the living to notice him?

Just as he was psyching himself up for the dismaying inevitable, the little group caught sight of him. There were three men and two women. Their clothes should have clued him in. The eldest man was wearing a very long, foppish coat of yellow velvet with ruffled lace down the front; one of the women had forced her large fleshy frame into a black leather dominatrix uniform, complete with whip; her mousy middle-aged companion was in a baggy woollen overcoat, so deliberately dowdy it was a human stealth covering; of the remaining two men, one was barely out of his teens, a black youth with panther muscles shown off by a slim red waistcoat; while the other was in his thirties, cov-

ered by a baggy mechanics overall. They made a highly improbable combination, even for Valisk's residents.

Dariat stopped in surprise and with some gratification, raising a hand in moderate greeting. "Hello there. Glad you can see me. My name's Dariat."

They stared at him, already unhappy expressions displaced by belligerent suspicion.

"You the one Bonney had everyone chasing?" the black guy asked.

Dariat grinned modestly. "That's me."

"Motherfucker. You did this to us!" he screamed. "I had a body. I had my life back. You fucked that. You fucked me. You ruined everything. Everything! You brought us here, you and that shit living in the walls."

Comprehension dawned for Dariat. He could see the faint outlines of branches through the man. "You're a ghost," he exclaimed.

"All of us are," the dominatrix said. "Thanks to you."

"Oh shit," he whispered in consternation.

There are other ghosts? the personality asked. The affinity band was awash with interest.

What does it bloody look like!

The dominatrix took a step towards him; her whip flicked out, cracking loudly. She grinned viciously. "I haven't had a chance to use this properly for a long time, dearie. That's a shame, because I know how to use it real bad."

"Gonna get you plenty of chance to catch up now," the black guy purred to her.

Dariat stood his ground shakily. "You can't blame me for this. I'm one of you."

"Yeah," said the mechanic. "And this time you can't get away." He drew a heavy spanner from his leg pocket.

They must all be here, the personality said. **All the possessing souls.**

Just great.

“Can we hurt him?” the mousy woman asked.

“Let’s find out,” the dominatrix replied.

“Wait!” Dariat implored. “We need to work together to get the habitat out of this place. Don’t you understand? It’s collapsing around us, everything’s breaking down. We’ll be trapped here.”

The black guy bared his teeth wide. “We needed you to work with us to beat the habitat back in the real universe.”

Dariat flinched. He turned and ran. They gave chase immediately. That they’d catch him was never in doubt. He was appallingly overweight, and he’d just finished a nine kilometre hike. The whip slashed against the back of his left calf. He wailed, not just from the sharp sting, but from the fact it could sting.

They whooped and cheered behind him, delighted by the knowledge they could inflict injury, pain. Dariat staggered over the end of the bridge, and took a few unsteady steps towards the thicker part of jungle. The whip struck him again, flaying his shoulder and cheek, accompanied by the dominatrix’s gleeful laugh. Then the lean black guy caught up with him, and jumped high, kicking him in the small of the back.

Dariat went flying, landing flat on his stomach, arms and legs spread wide. Not a single blade of grass even bent as he struck the ground; his bloated body seemed to be lying on a median height of stalks, while longer stems poked straight through him.

The beating began. Feet kicked savagely into his flanks, his legs, neck. The whip whistled down again and again, landing on his spine each time. Then the mechanic stood on his shoulders, and brought the spanner down on his skull. The battering became rhythmic, horrifyingly relentless. Dariat cried out at every terrifying impact. There was pain,

in abundance there was pain, but no blood, nor damage, nor bruising or broken bones. The blaze of hurt had its origin in a concussion of hatred and fury. Each blow reinforcing, emphasising how much they wanted him ruined.

His cries grew fainter, though they were just as insistent, and tainted with increasing anguish. The spanner, and the whip, and the boots, and the fists began to sink into him, puncturing his intangible boundary. He was sinking deeper into the grass, the hammering propelling his belly into the soil. Coldness swept into him, a wave racing on ahead of the solid surface with which he was merging. His shape was lacking definition now, its outline becoming less substantial. Even his thoughts began to lose their intensity.

Nothing could stop them. Nothing he said. Nothing he begged. Nothing he could pay. None of his prayers. Nothing. He had to endure it all. Not knowing what the outcome would be; terrifyingly, not knowing what it could be.

They let him be, eventually. After how much time not one of them knew. As much as it took to satisfy their hunger for vengeance. To dull the enjoyment of sadism. To experiment with the novel methods of brutality available to ghosts. There wasn't much of his presence left when they finished. A gauzy patch of pearl luminescence loitering amid the grass, the back of his toga barely bobbing above the surface of the soil. Limbs and head were buried.

Laughing, they walked away.

Amid the coldness, darkness, and apathy, a few strands of thought clung together. A weak filigree of suffering and woe. Everything he was. Very little, really.

Tolton had a brief knowledge of scenes like this. Second-hand knowledge, old and stale, memories of tales told to him by the denizens of the lowest floors of the starscrapers. Tales of covert combat operations, of squads that had been

hit by superior firepower, waiting to be evacuated out of the front line. Their bloody, battered casualties wound up in places like this, a field hospital triage. It was the latest development in the saga of the habitat population's misfortunes. Lately, studying the parkland had become a form of instant archaeology. Evolving stages of residence were laid out in concentric circles, plain to see.

In the beginning was the starscraper lobby, a pleasing rotunda of stone and glass, blending into the superbly maintained parkland. Then with the arrival of possession, the lobby had been smashed up during one of the innumerable firefights between Kiera's followers and Rubra, and a shanty town had sprung up in a ring around it. Tiny Tudor cottages had stood next to Arabian tents, which were pitched alongside shiny Winnebagoes; the richness of imagination on display was splendid. That was before Valisk departed the universe.

After that, the illusion of solidity had melted away like pillars of salt in the rain, exposing rickety shacks assembled from scraps of plastic and metal. They leant together precariously, one stacked against another to provide a highly dubious stability. The narrow strips of grass between were reduced to slippery runnels of mud, often used as open sewers.

So now the survivors of Valisk's latest change in fortune had moved again, repelled from the hovels of their erstwhile possessors, they were simply sprawling uncaringly across the surrounding grass. They lacked the energy and willpower to do anything else. Some lay on their backs, some had curled up, some were sitting against trees, some stumbled about aimlessly. That wasn't so bad, Tolton thought, after what they'd been through a period of stupefaction was understandable. It was the sound which was getting to him. Wails of distress and muffled sobbing min-

gling together to poison the air with harrowing dismay. Five thousand people having a bad dream in unison.

And just like a bad dream, you couldn't wake them from it. To begin with, when he'd emerged from his hiding place, he'd moved from one to another. Offering words of sympathy, a comforting arm around the shoulder. He'd persisted valiantly for a couple of hours like that, before finally acknowledging how quite pathetically pointless it all was. Somehow, they would have to get over the psychological trauma by themselves.

It wasn't going to be easy, not with the ghosts as an ever-present reminder of their ordeal. The ex-possessors were still slinking furtively through the outlying trees of the nearby jungle. For whatever reason, once they'd been expelled from their host bodies, they wouldn't leave. Immediately after Valisk's strange transformation they had clung longingly to their victims, following them with perverted devotion as they crawled about shaking and vomiting in reaction to their release. Then as people had gradually started to recover their wits and take notice, the anger had surfaced. It was that massive deluge of communal hatred which had forced the ghosts to retreat, rather than the shouts of abuse and threats of vengeance.

They'd fled into the refuge of the jungle around the parkland, almost bewildered by the response they'd spawned. But they hadn't gone far. Tolton could see them thronging out there amid the funereal trees, their eerie pale radiance casting diaphanous shadows which twisted fluidly amid the branches and trunks.

But the ghosts never went any further than the trees. It was as if the greater depths of the darkling habitat frightened them, too. That was the aspect of this whole affair which worried Tolton the most.

His own wanderings were almost as aimless as anyone in

the throes of recovery. Like them, he didn't relish the idea of venturing through the shanty town, he also considered it prudent not to fraternise with the ghosts. Though somewhere at the back of his mind was some ancient piece of folklore about ghosts never actually killing anybody. Whichever pre-history warlock came up with that prophecy had obviously never encountered these particular ghosts.

So he kept moving, avoiding eye-contact, searching for . . . well, he'd know what when he saw it. Ironically, the thing he missed most was Rubra, and the wealth of knowledge which came with that contact. But the processor block he'd used to stay in touch with the habitat personality had crashed as soon as the change happened. Since then he'd tried using several other blocks. None of them worked, at most he got a trickle of static. He didn't have enough (any, actually) technical knowledge to understand why.

Nor did he understand the change which the habitat had undergone, only the result, the mass exorcism. He assumed it had been imposed by some friendly ally. Except Valisk didn't have any allies. And Rubra had never dropped any hint that this might happen, not in all the weeks he'd kept Tolton hidden from the possessed. There was nothing for it but to keep moving for the delusion of purpose it bestowed, and wait for developments. Whatever they might be.

"Please." The woman's voice was little more than a whisper, but it was focused enough to make Tolton hesitate and try to see who was speaking.

"Please, I need some help. Please." The speaker was in her late middle-age, huddled up against a tree. He walked over to her, avoiding a couple of people who were stretched out, almost comatose, on the grass.

Details were difficult in this leaden twilight. She was wrapped in a large tartan blanket, clutching it to her chest like a shawl. Long unkempt hair partially obscured her

face, glossy titian roots contrasted sharply with the dirty faded chestnut of the tresses. The features glimpsed through the tangle were delicate, a pert button nose and long cheekbones, implausibly artistic eyebrows. Her skin seemed very tight, almost stretched, as if to emphasise the curves.

“What’s wrong?” Tolton asked gently, cursing himself for the stupidity of the question. As he knelt beside her, the light tube’s meagre nimbus glimmered on the tears dribbling down her cheeks.

“I hurt,” she said. “Now she’s gone, I hurt so badly.”

“It’ll go. I promise, time will wash it away.”

“She slept with hundreds of men,” the woman cried wretchedly. “Hundreds. Women, too. I felt the heat in her, she loved it, all of it. That slut, that utter slut. She made my body do things with those animals. Awful, vile things. Things no decent person would ever do.”

He tried to take one of her hands, but she snatched it away, turning from him. “It wasn’t you,” he said. “You didn’t do any of those things.”

“How can you say that? It was done to me. I felt it all, every minute of it. This is my body. Mine! My flesh and blood. She took that from me. She soiled me, ruined me. I’m so corrupt I’m not even human any more.”

“I’m sorry, really I am. But you have to learn not to think like that. If you do, you’re letting her win. You’ve got to put that behind you. It’s over, and you’ve won. She’s been exorcised, she’s nothing but a neurotic wisp of light. That’s all she’ll ever be now. I’d call that a victory, wouldn’t you?”

“But I hurt,” she persisted. Her voice dropped to a confessional tone. “How can I forget when I hurt?”

“Look, there are treatments, memory suppressers, all sorts of cures. Just as soon as we get the power turned back on, you can . . .”

“Not my mind! Not just that.” She had begun to plead. “It’s my body, my body which hurts.”

Tolton started to get a very bad feeling about where the conversation was heading. The woman was shaking persistently, and he was sure some of the moisture glistening on her face had to be perspiration. He flicked an edgy glance back at her unnatural roots. “Where, exactly, does it hurt?”

“My face,” she mumbled. “My face aches. It’s not me anymore. I couldn’t see me when she looked in a mirror.”

“They all did that, all imagined themselves to look ridiculously young and pretty. It’s an illusion, that’s all.”

“No. It became real. I’m not me, not now. She even took my identity away from me. And . . .” Her voice started trembling. “My shape. She stole my body, and still that wasn’t enough. Look, look what she’s done to me.”

Moving so slowly that Tolton wanted to do it for her, she drew the folds of the blanket apart. For the first time, he actually wished there was less light. To begin with it looked as though someone had badly bungled a cosmetic package adaptation. Her breasts were grossly misshapen. Then he realized that was caused by large bulbs of flesh clinging to the upper surface like skin-coloured leeches. Each one almost doubled the size of the breast, the weight pulling them down heavily. The natural tissue was almost squashed from view.

The worst part of it was, they obviously weren’t grafts or implants; whatever the tissue was, it had swollen out of the natural mammary gland. Below them, her abdomen was held anorexically flat by a broad oval slab of unyielding skin. It was as though she’d developed a thick callous across the whole area, fake musculature marked out by faint translucent lines.

“See?” the woman asked, staring down at her exposed chest in abject misery. “Bigger breasts and a flat belly. She

really wanted bigger breasts. That was her wish. They'd be more useful to her, more fun, more spectacular. And she could make wishes come true."

"God preserve us," Tolton murmured in horror. He didn't know much about human illnesses, but there were some scraps of relevant information flashing up out of his childhood's basic medical didactic memories. Cancer tumours. Almost a lost disease. Geneering had made human bodies massively resistant to the ancient bane. And for the few isolated instances when it did occur, medical nanonics could penetrate and eradicate the sick cells within hours.

"I used to be a nurse," the woman said, as she ashamedly covered herself with the blanket again. "They're runaways. My breasts are the largest growths, but I must have the same kind of malignant eruptions at every change she instituted."

"What can I do?" he asked hoarsely.

"I need medical nanonic packages. Do you know how to program them?"

"No. I don't even have neural nanonics. I'm a poet, that's all."

"Then, please, find me some. My neural nanonics aren't working either, but a processor block might do instead."

"I . . . Yes, of course." It would mean a trip into the lifeless, lightless starscraper to find some, but his discomfort at that prospect was nothing compared to her suffering. Somehow, he managed to keep a neutral expression on his face as he stood up, even though he was pretty certain a medical nanonic package wouldn't work in this weird environment. But it might, it just might. And if that slender chance existed, then he would bring one for her, no matter what.

He cast round the dismal sight of people strewn about, holding themselves and moaning. The really terrifying doubt engulfed him then. Suppose the anguish wasn't all

psychological? Every possessed he'd seen had changed their appearance to some degree. Suppose every change had borne a malignancy, even a small one.

"Oh fucking hell, Rubra. Where are you? We need help."

As always, there was no warning when the cell door opened. Louise wasn't even sure when it had swung back. She was curled up on the bunk, dozing, only semi-aware of her surroundings. Quite how long she'd been in this state, she didn't know. Somehow, her time sense had got all fouled up. She remembered the interview with Brent Roi, his sarcasm and unconcealed contempt. Then she'd come back here. Then . . . She'd come back here hours ago. Well, a long time had passed . . . She thought.

I must have fallen asleep.

Which was hard to believe; the colossal worry of the situation had kept her mind feverishly active.

The usual two female police officers appeared in the doorway. Louise blinked up at their wavering outlines, and tried to right herself. Bright lights flashed painfully behind her eyes; she had to clamp her mouth shut against the sudden burst of nausea.

What is wrong with me?

"Woo there, steady on." One of the police officers was sitting on the bed beside her, holding her up.

Louise shook uncontrollably, cold sweat beading on her skin. Her reaction calmed slightly, though it was still terribly hard to concentrate.

"One minute," the woman said. "Let me reprogram your medical package. Try to take some deeper breaths, okay?"

That was simple enough. She gulped down some air, her chest juddering. Another couple of breaths. Her rogue body seemed to be calming. "Wha . . . What?" she panted.

“Anxiety attack,” said the policewoman. “We see a lot of them in here. That and worse things.”

Louise nodded urgently, an attempt to convince herself that’s all it was. No big deal. Nothing badly amiss. The baby’s fine—the medical package would insure that. Just stay calm.

“Okay. I’m okay now. Thank you.” She proffered a small smile at the police officer, only to be greeted with blank-faced indifference.

“Let’s go, then,” said the officer standing by the door.

Louise girded herself, and slowly stood on slightly unsteady legs. “Where are we going?”

“Parole Office.” She sounded disgusted.

“Where’s Genevieve? Where’s my sister?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. Come on.”

Louise was almost shoved out into the corridor. She was improving by the minute, although the headache lingered longer than anything else. A small patch of skin at the back of her skull tingled, as if she’d been stung. Her fingers stroked it absently. Anxiety attack? She hadn’t known there was such a thing before. But given everything she currently had to think about, such a malaise was more than likely.

They got into a lift which had to be heading down. The gravity field had risen to almost normal when they got out. This part of the asteroid was different to the cells and interview rooms she’d been kept in until now. Definitely government offices, the standardized furniture and eternally polite personnel with their never-smiling faces were evidence of that. She took a little cheer from the fact these corridors and glimpsed rooms weren’t as crushingly bleak as the upper level. Her status had changed for the better. Slightly.

The police officers showed her into a room with a narrow window looking out over High York’s biosphere cavern.

Not much to see, it was dawn, or dusk, Louise didn't know which. The grassland and trees soaking up the gold-orange light were a brighter, more welcoming green than the cavern in Phobos. Two curving settees had been set up facing each other in the middle of the floor, bracketing an oval table. Genevieve slouched on one of them, hands stuffed into the pockets of her shipsuit, feet swinging just off the floor, looking out of the window. Her expression was a mongrel cross between sullen resentment and utter boredom.

"Gen." Louise's voice nearly cracked.

Genevieve raced across the room and thudded into her. They hugged each other tightly. "They wouldn't tell me where you were!" Genevieve protested loudly. "They wouldn't let me see you. They wouldn't say what was happening."

Louise stroked her sister's hair. "I'm here now."

"It's been forever. Days!"

"No, no. It just seems like that."

"Days," Genevieve insisted.

Louise managed a slightly uncertain smile; wanting for herself the reassurance she was attempting to project. "Have they been questioning you?"

"Yes," Genevieve mumbled morosely. "They kept on and on about what happened in Norwich. I told them a hundred times."

"Me too."

"Everybody must be really stupid on Earth. They don't understand anything unless you've explained it five times."

Louise wanted to laugh at the childish derision in Gen's voice, pitched just perfectly to infuriate any adult.

"And they took my games block away. That's stealing, that is."

"I haven't seen any of my stuff either."

“The food’s horrid. I suppose they’re too thick to cook it properly. And I haven’t had any clean clothes.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

Brent Roi hurried into the room, and dismissed the two waiting police officers with a casual wave. “Okay, ladies, take a seat.”

Louise flashed him a resentful look.

“Please?” he entreated without noticeable sincerity.

Holding hands, the sisters sat on the settee opposite him. “Are we under arrest?” Louise asked.

“No.”

“Then you believe what I told you?”

“To my amazement, I find sections of your story contain the odd nugget of truth.”

Louise frowned. This attitude was completely different to the one he’d shown her during the interview. Not that he was repenting, more like he’d been proved right instead of her.

“So you’ll watch out for Quinn Dexter?”

“Most assuredly.”

Genevieve shuddered. “I hate him.”

“That’s all that truly matters,” Louise said. “He must never be allowed to get down to Earth. If you believe me, then I’ve won.”

Brent Roi shifted uncomfortably. “Okay, we’ve been trying to decide what to do with the pair of you. Which I can tell you is not an easy thing, given what you were attempting. You thought you were doing the right thing, bringing Christian here. But believe me, from the legal side of things, you are about as wrong as it’s possible to be. The Halo police commissioner has spent two days being advised by some of our best legal experts on what the hell to do with you, which hasn’t improved his temper any. Ordinarily we’d just walk you past a warm judge and fly you off

to a penal colony. There'd be no problem obtaining a guilty verdict." He gazed at Genevieve. "Not even your age would get you off."

Genevieve pushed her shoulders up against her neck, and glowered at him.

"However, there are mitigating circumstances, and these are strange times. Lucky for you, that gives the Halo police force a large amount of discretion right now."

"So?" Louise asked calmly. For whatever reason she wasn't afraid; if they were due to face a trial none of this would be happening.

"So. Pretty obviously: we don't want you up here after what you've done; plus you don't have the basic technical knowledge necessary to live in an asteroid settlement, which makes you a liability. Unfortunately, there's an interstellar quarantine in force right now, which means we can't send you off to Tranquillity where your fiancé can take care of you. That just leaves us with one option: Earth. You have money, you can afford to stay there for the duration of the crisis."

Louise glanced at Genevieve, who squashed her lips together with a dismissive lack of interest.

"I'm not going to object," Louise said.

"I couldn't care less if you did," Brent Roi told her. "You have no say in this at all. As well as deporting you, I am officially issuing you with a police caution. You have engaged in an illegal act with the potential of endangering High York, and this will be entered into Govcentral's criminal data memory store with a suspended action designation. Should you at any time in the future be found committing another criminal act of any nature within Govcentral's domain this case will be reactivated and used in your prosecution. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Louise whispered.

"You cause us one more problem, and they'll throw you out of the arcology and lock the door behind you."

"What about Fletcher?" Genevieve asked.

"What about him?" Brent Roi said.

"Is he coming down to Earth with us?"

"No, Gen," Louise said. "He's not." She tried to keep the sorrow from her voice. Fletcher had helped her and Gen through so much, she still couldn't think of him as a possessor, one of the enemy. The last image she had was of him being led out of the big airlock chamber where they'd been detained. A smile of forlorn encouragement on his face, directed at her. Even in defeat, he didn't lose his nobility.

"Your big sister's right," Brent Roi told Genevieve. "Stop thinking about Fletcher."

"Have you killed him?"

"Tough to do. He's already dead."

"Have you?"

"At the moment he's being very cooperative. He's telling us about the beyond, and helping the physics team understand the nature of his energetic power. Once we've learned all we can, then he'll be put into zero-tau. End of story."

"Can we see him before we go?" Louise asked.

"No."

The two female police officers escorted Louise and Genevieve directly up to the counter-rotating spaceport. They were given a standard class berth on the *Scher*, an inter-orbit passenger ship. The interstellar quarantine hadn't yet bitten into the prodigious Earth, Halo, Moon economic triad; outsystem exports made up barely fifteen per cent of their trade. Civil flights between the three were running close to their usual levels.

They arrived at the departure lounge twelve minutes be-

fore the ship was scheduled to leave. The police returned their luggage and passports, with Earth immigration clearance loaded in; they also got their processor blocks back. Finally, they handed Louise her Jovian Bank credit disk.

Louise had her suspicions that the whole procedure was deliberately being rushed to keep them off-balance and complacent. Not that she knew how to kick up a fuss. But there was probably some part of their treatment which a good lawyer could find fault with. She didn't really care. *Scher's* life support capsule had the same lengthy cylindrical layout as the *Jamrana*, except that every deck was full of chairs. A sour stewardess showed them brusquely to their seats, strapped them in, and left to chase other passengers.

"I wanted to change," Genevieve complained. She was pulling dubiously at her shipsuit. "I haven't washed for ages. It's all clammy."

"We'll be able to change when we get to the tower station, I expect."

"Which tower station? Where are we going?"

"I don't know." Louise glanced at the stewardess, who was chiding an elderly woman's attempts to fasten her seat straps. "I think we'll just have to wait and find out."

"Then what? What do we do when we get there?"

"I'm not sure. Let me think for a minute, all right?"

Louise squirmed her shoulders, letting her muscles relax. Freefall always made her body tense up as it tried to assume more natural gravity-evolved postures. Thankfully, the cabin chairs were almost flat, preventing her from getting stomach twinges.

What to do next hadn't bothered her much while she'd been in custody. Convincing Brent Roi about Dexter was her only concern. Now that had been accomplished, or seemed to be. She still couldn't quite believe he had taken

her warnings particularly seriously; they'd been released far too quickly for that. Dismissed, almost.

The authorities had Fletcher in custody, and he was cooperating with them about possession. That was their true prize, she thought. They were confident their security procedures would spot Dexter. She wasn't. Not at all. And she'd made one solemn promise to Fletcher, which covered exactly this situation.

If I can't help him physically, at least I can honour my promise. If our positions were reversed, he would. Banneth, I said I'd find and warn Banneth. Yes. And I will. The sudden resolution did a lot to warm her again.

Then she was aware of a strangely rhythmic buzzing sound, and blinked her eyes open. Genevieve had activated her processor block; its AV projector lens was shining a conical fan of light directly on her face. Frayed serpents of pastel colour stroked her cheeks and nose, glistening on a mouth parted in an enraptured smile. Her fingers skated with fast dextrous motions over the block's surface, sketching eccentric ideograms.

I'm really going to have to do something about this obsession, Louise thought, it can't be healthy.

The stewardess was shouting at a man cradling a crying child. Tackling Gen was probably best delayed until they reached Earth.

It wasn't rugged determination, or even victorious self-confidence which brought him back. Instead, came the slow, dreadful comprehension that this awful limbo wouldn't end if he did nothing.

Dariat's thoughts hung amid vast clusters of soil molecules, membranous twists of nebula dust webbing the space between stars, insipid, enervated. Completely unable to evaporate, to fade away into blissful non-existence. Instead,

they hummed with chilly misery as they conducted pain-soaked memories round and around on a never ending circuit, humiliation and fear undimmed by time and repetition.

Worse than the beyond. At least in the beyond, there were other souls, memories you could raid to bring an echo of sensation. Here there was only yourself; a soul buried alive. Nothing to comfort you but your own life. Screaming from the pain of the blows which battered him down might have stopped, but the internal scream of self-loathing could never cease. Not incarcerated here. He didn't want to go back, not to the dimly sensed light and air above, the vicious brutality of the ghosts waiting there. Every time he emerged, they would pummel him down again. That was what all of them wanted. He would go through the same suffering again and again. Yet he couldn't stay here, either.

Dariat moved. He thought of himself, visualised pushing his bulky body up through the soil, as if he was doing some kind of appalling fitness-fad exercise. It wasn't anything like that easy. Imagination couldn't power him as before. Something had happened to him, weakening him. The vitality he owned, even as a ghost, had been leeches out by the matter with which he was entwined.

Fantasy muscles trembled as he strained. Finally, along his back, sensation was returning in a paltry trickle. A warmth, but not on his skin. Inside, just below the surface.

It inspired greed, a hunger for more. Nothing else mattered, the warmth was revitalising, a font of life. It lent to his strength, and he began to rise faster through the soil, sucking in more warmth as he went. Soon, his face cleared the ground, and he was moving at an almost normal speed. Extricating himself from the soil meant discovering just how cold he was. Dariat stood up, teeth chattering, arms crossed over his chest, hugging tight as his hands tried to

rub some heat into icy flesh. Only his feet were warm, though that was a relative term.

The grass around his sandals was a sickly yellow-brown, dead and drooping. Each blade was covered in a delicate sprinkle of hoarfrost. They made up a roughly oval patch about two metres long. Body-shaped, in fact. He stared at it, completely bewildered.

Damn, I'm cold!

Dariat? That you, boy?

Yes, it's me. One question—he didn't really want to ask, but had to know. **How long was I . . . out for?**

It's been seventeen hours.

Seventeen years was a figure he could have believed in quite easily. **Is that all?**

Yes. What happened?

They beat me into the ground. Literally. It was . . . Bad. Real bad.

Then why didn't you come out earlier?

You won't understand.

Did you kill the grass?

I don't know. I suppose so.

How? We thought you didn't interact with solid matter.

Don't ask me. There was a kind of warmth as I came out. Or maybe it was just hatred which killed the grass, concentrated hatred. That's what they were giving off; Thoale be damned, but they hated me. I'm cold now. He scanned round, searching through the tree trunks for any sign of the other ghosts. After a moment, he walked away from the patch of dead grass, spooked by the place. The opposite of consecrated ground.

Movement felt good, it was making his legs warm up. When he glanced down, he saw a line of frosted footsteps in the grass trailing back to the burial patch. But he was defi-

nately getting warmer. He started walking again, a meagre lick of heat seeping up from his legs to his torso. It would take a long time to dispel the chill, but he was sure it would happen eventually.

The starscraper is the other way, the personality said.

I know. That's why I'm going back to the valley. I'll be safe there.

For a while.

I'm not risking another encounter.

You have to. Look, forewarned is forearmed. Just take it carefully. If you see any ghosts waiting ahead of you, go around them.

I'm not doing it.

You have to. Our internal status is still decaying. We must have those descendants out of zero-tau. What good will a dead habitat do you? You know they're the only chance of salvation any of us have. You know that. You just showed us how bad entombment here is; that could become permanent if we don't get clear.

Shit! He stopped, standing with his fists clenched. Tendrils of frost slithered out from under his soles to wilt the grass.

It's common sense, Dariat. You won't be giving in to Rubra just by agreeing.

That's not—

Ha. Remember what we are.

All right! Bastards. Where's Tolton?

Tolton had found the lightstick in an emergency equipment locker in the starscraper's lobby. It gave out a lustreless purple-tinged glow, and that emerged at a pitiful percentage of its designated output wattage. But after forty minutes, his eyes had acclimatised well. Navigating down through the interior of the starscraper posed few physical problems.

Resolution, however, was a different matter. In his other hand he carried a fire axe from the same locker as the lightstick, it hardly inspired confidence.

Beyond the bubble of radiance which enveloped him, it was very dark indeed. And silent with it. No light shone in through any of the windows; there wasn't even a dripping tap to break the monotony of his timorous footsteps. Three times since he'd been down here, the electrophorescent cells had burst into life. Some arcane random surge of power sending shoals of photons skidding along the vestibules and stairwells. The first time it happened, he'd been petrified. The zips of light appeared from nowhere, racing towards him at high speed. By the time he yelled out and started to cower down, they were already gone, behind him and vanishing round some corner. He didn't react much better the next two times, either.

He told himself that he should be relieved that some aspect of Rubra and the habitat was still functioning, however erratically. It wasn't much reassurance; that the stars had vanished from view had been a profound shock. He'd already decided he wasn't going to share that knowledge with the other residents for a while. What he couldn't understand was, where were they? His panicky mind was constantly filling the blank space outside the windows with dreadful imaginings. It wasn't much of a leap to have whatever skulked outside getting in to glide among the opaque shadows of the empty starscraper. Grouping together and conspiring, flowing after him.

The muscle membrane door at the bottom of the stairwell was partially expanded, its edges trembling slightly. He cautiously stuck the lightstick through the gap, and peered round at the fifth floor vestibule. The high ceilings and broad curving archways that were the *mise-en-scène* of Valisk's starscrapers had always seemed fairly illustrious

before; bitek's inalienable majesty. That was back when they were bathed in light and warmth twenty-four hours a day. Now they clustered threateningly round the small area of illumination he projected, swaying with every slight motion of the lightstick.

Tolton waited for a moment, nerving himself to step out. This floor was mainly taken up by commercial offices. Most of the mechanical doorways had frozen shut. He walked along, reading the plaques on each one. The eighth belonged to an osteopath specialising in sports injuries. There ought to be some kind of medical nanonics inside. The emergency lock panel was on the top of the frame. He broke it open with the blunt end of the axe, exposing the handle inside. Now the power was off, or at least disabled, the electronic bolts had disengaged. A couple of turns on the handle released the lock entirely, and he prised the door open.

Typical waiting room: not quite expensive chairs, soft drinks dispenser, reproduction artwork, and lush potted plants. The large circular window looked out at nothing, a black mirror. Tolton saw his own reflection staring back, with a fat man in a grubby robe standing behind him. He yelped in shock, and dropped the lightstick. Flat planes of light and shadow lurched around him. He turned, raising the axe up ready to swipe down on his adversary. Almost overbalancing from the wild motion.

The fat man was waving his arms frantically, shouting. Tolton could hear nothing more than a gentle murmur of air. He gripped the axe tightly as it wobbled about over his head, ready for the slightest sign of antagonism. None came. In fact, there probably couldn't ever be any. Tolton could just see the door through the fat man. A ghost. That didn't make him any happier.

The ghost had put his hands on his hips, face screwed up

in some exasperation. He was saying something slowly and loudly, an adult talking to an idiot child. Again, there was that bantam ruffling of air. Tolton frowned; it corresponded to the movements of the fat ghost's jaw.

In the end, communication became a derivative of lip reading. There was never quite enough sound (if that's what it truly was) to form whole words, rather the faint syllables clued him in.

"Your axe is the wrong way round."

"Uh." Tolton glanced up. The blade was pointing backwards. He shifted it round, then sheepishly lowered it. "Who are you?"

"My name's Dariat."

"You're wasting your time following me, you can't possess me."

"I don't want to. I'm here to give you a message."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. The habitat personality wants you to switch off some zero-tau pods."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"We're in affinity contact."

"But you're a . . ."

"Ghost. Yes, I had noticed. Although I think a revenant is a term more applicable in my case."

"A what?"

"The personality never warned me you were this stupid."

"I am not . . ." Tolton's outrage spluttered to a halt. He started to laugh.

Dariat gave the alleged street poet a mildly annoyed glare. "Now what?"

"I've had some weird shit dumped on me in my time, but I think arguing with a ghost over my IQ has got to be the greatest."

Dariat felt his lips move up in a grin. "Got a point there."

“Thank you, my man.”

“So, are you going to help?”

“Of course. Will turning off the pods be of any use?”

“Yeah. That mad bitch Kiera was holding a whole load of my illustrious relatives in stasis. They should be able to get things up and running again.”

“Then we can get out of . . .” Tolton took another look at the window. “Where are we, exactly?”

“I’m not sure you can call this a place, more like a different state of being. It exists to be hostile to the possessed. Unfortunately, there are a few unexpected side effects.”

“You sound as though you’re talking from a position of knowledge; which I frankly find hard to believe.”

“I played a part in bringing us here,” Dariat admitted. “I’m not completely sure of the details, though.”

“I see. Well, we’d better get started, then.” He picked up the lightstick. “Ah, wait. I promised a woman I’d try and find some medical nanonic packages for her. She really does need them.”

“There’s some in the osteopath’s storage cabinet, through there.” Dariat pointed.

“You really are in touch with Rubra, aren’t you.”

“He’s changed a bit, but, yes.”

“Then I’m curious. Why did the two of you choose me for this task?”

“His decision. But most of the other corporeal residents got whacked out when they were de-possessed. You saw them up in the park. They’re no good for anything right now. You’re the best we’ve got left.”

“Oh, bloody hell.”

When they emerged up into the decrepit lobby, Tolton sat down and tried to get a processor block to work. He’d never had a didactic memory imprint covering their opera-

tions and program parameters. Never needed one; all he used them for was recording and playing AV fleks, and communications, plus a few simple commands for medical nanonics (mainly concerned with morning-after blood detoxification).

Dariat started to advise on how to alter the operating program format, essentially dumbing down the unit. Even he had to consult with the personality about which sub-routines to delete. Between the three of them, it took twenty minutes to get the little unit on line with a reliable performance level.

Another fifteen minutes of running diagnostics (far slower than usual), and they knew what medical nanonics could achieve in such an antagonistic environment. It wasn't good news; the filaments which wove into and manipulated human flesh were sophisticated molecular strings, with correspondingly high-order management routines. They could bond the lips of wounds together, and infuse doses of stored biochemicals. But fighting a tumour by eliminating individual cancer cells was no longer possible.

We can't waste any more time on this, the personality protested.

Tolton was hunched up over the block. Dariat waved a hand under his face—the only way to catch his attention. Out here in the park the poet found it even harder to hear him; though Dariat suspected his “voice” was actually some kind of weak telepathy.

“It'll have to do,” Dariat said.

Tolton frowned down once again at the horribly confusing mass of icons eddying across the block's screen. “Will they be able to cure her?”

“No. The tumours can't be reversed, but the packages should be able to contain them until we get back to the real universe.”

"All right. I suppose that'll do."

Dariat managed to feel mildly guilty at the sadness in Tolton's voice. The way the street poet could become so anxious and devoted to a stranger he'd only spent five minutes with was touching.

They walked through the moat of decaying shacks and into the surrounding ring of human misery. The loathing directed at Dariat by those that saw him was profound enough to sting. He, a creature now purely of thought, was buffeted by the emanation of raw emotion; his own substance refined against him. It wasn't as strong as the blows inflicted by his fellow ghosts, but the cumulative effect was disturbingly debilitating. When he'd sneaked into the lobby he hadn't attracted such attention, a few glances of sullen resentment at most. But then, he realized, he was still suffering from the effects of the entombment, he'd been weaker, less substantial.

Now, the jeering and catcalls which chased him were building to a crescendo as more and more people realized what the commotion was about and joined in. He started staggering about, groaning at the pain.

"What is it?" Tolton asked.

Dariat shook his head. There was real fear building in him now. If he stumbled and fell here, victim to this wave of hatred, he might never be able to surface from the soil again. At every attempt he would be pressed back by the throng of people above him, dancing on his living grave.

"Going," he grunted. "Got to go." He pressed his hands over his ears (fat lot of good that it did) and tottered as fast as he could out towards the shadowy trees beyond. "I'll wait for you. Come when you've finished."

Tolton watched in dismay as the ghost scurried away; becoming all too aware of the animosity which was now fo-

cusing on him. Head down, he hurried away in the direction he thought he'd left the woman.

She was still there, propped up against the tree. Dull eyes looked up at him, suffused with dread, hope denied. It was the only part of her which betrayed any emotion. Her stretched-tight face seemed incapable of displaying the slightest expression. "What was the noise about?" she mumbled.

"I think there was a ghost around here."

"Did they kill it?"

"I don't know. I don't think you can kill ghosts."

"Holy water. Use holy water." Tolton knelt down, and gently eased her clutching hands from the blanket. This time when it parted he was determined not to grimace. It was hard. He placed the nanonic medical packages on her breasts and belly the way Dariat had said, and used the block to activate the pre-loaded programs. The packages stirred slightly as they started to knit with her skin.

She let out a soft sigh, embodying both relief and happiness.

"It'll be all right," he told her. "They'll stop the cancer now."

Her eyes had closed. "I don't believe you. But it's nice of you to say it."

"I mean it."

"Holy water; that'll burn the bastards."

"I'll remember."

Tolton found Dariat skulking among the fringes of the trees. The ghost couldn't keep still, nervously searching round for signs of anyone approaching.

"Don't fret, man. The others don't care about you so long as you stay away from them."

“I intend to,” Dariat grumbled. “Come on, we’ve got a way to go.”

He started walking.

Tolton shrugged, and started after him.

“How was the woman?” Dariat asked.

“Perky. She wanted to sprinkle you with holy water.”

“Silly cow,” he snorted with derisive amusement. “That’s for vampires.”

Kiera had decreed that the zero-tau pods should be put in the deep chambers around the base of the northern endcap. The polyp in that section was a honeycomb of caverns and tunnels; the chambers used almost exclusively by the astronautics industry to support the docking ledge infrastructure. Stores, workshops, and fabrication plants all dedicated to supplying Magellanic Itg’s blackhawk fleet. It was a logical place to use. The equipment was already close to hand. There wasn’t as much danger from Rubra’s insurgency in the big, unsophisticated caverns as there was in the starscrapers. And if they wanted them set up anywhere else, they’d be facing a troublesome relocation job.

As soon as Dariat told him where the zero-tau pods were, Tolton tried to use one of the rentcop jeeps abandoned around the starscraper lobby. It crawled along barely at walking pace. Stopped. Started. Crawled some more. Stopped.

They walked the whole way to the base of the northern endcap. Several times during the day Tolton caught Dariat studying the path behind them, and asked what he was trying to see.

“Footprints,” the fat ghost replied.

Tolton decided that after what he’d been through, Dariat was entitled to a reasonable degree of neurotic paranoia. The lightstick grew steadily brighter as they ventured into

the cavern levels. Indicator lights began winking on some chunks of machinery. After a while, when they were deep inside the habitat shell, the electrophorescent strips were glowing; not as bright as before, but they remained steady.

Tolton switched the lightstick off. "You know, I even feel better down here."

Dariat didn't answer. He was aware of the difference himself. An atmosphere reminiscent of those heady days thirty years ago, endless bright summer days when being alive was such a blessing. The personality was right, the otherworldliness of this continuum hadn't fully penetrated down here. Things worked as they were supposed to.

We might manage to salvage something from this yet.

They found the zero-tau pods in a lengthy cavern. At some time, there had been machinery or shelving pinned to the wall; small metal brackets still protruded from the dark-amber polyp. Deep scratches told of their recent, hurried removal. Now the cavern was empty except for the row of interstellar-black sarcophagi running the length of the floor. Each of them had been taken from a blackhawk, the crudely severed fittings were proof of that. Thick cables had been grafted on to the interface panels, wiring them into clumps of spherical high-density power cells.

"Where do I start?" Tolton asked.

The processor block he was carrying bleeped before Dariat could begin the usual prolonged process of exaggerated enunciation. "It doesn't matter. Pick one."

"Hey," Tolton grinned. "You're back."

"Rumours of my demise have been greatly exaggerated."

Oh, please, Dariat said.

What's the matter with you? We're back on track. Rejoice.

Dariat was abruptly party to a resurgence of optimism, the sense of a hibernating animal approaching winter's end.

Holding his scepticism in check, he watched Tolton go over to the closest zero-tau pod. The personality issued a couple of simple instructions, and Tolton pecked at a keyboard.

Erentz completed her cower as the scene above her switched. One instant a Chinese warlord with a cruel smile, promising that the next thing she would know was the torture leading up to possession, the next a moderately overweight, wide-eyed man with a good ten days' worth of grubby stubble was peering anxiously down at her. The light was dimmer, too. The wail which she'd started before the pod was activated, continued, rising in pitch.

It's all right. Calm yourself.

Erentz paused, gathering her breath. **Rubra?** The mental voice which had chivvied her along since before she could remember felt different slightly.

Almost. But don't worry. The possessed have gone. You're safe.

There was a background emotion which sparked a small doubt. But the obvious apprehension and concern of the man staring down at her was a strange, fast-acting tonic. He definitely wasn't possessed.

"Hello," Tolton said, desperate for some kind of response from the startled young woman.

She nodded slowly, and raised herself gingerly into a sitting position. It didn't help that the first thing she saw was Dariat hanging back by the cavern entrance. She emitted a frightened gasp.

I'm on your side, Dariat told her, earning a twitchy laugh in response.

What is happening here? she demanded.

The personality began to fill her in. Acceptance of her new situation came amid a rush of relief. Erentz, like all the others released from zero-tau, relied on Rubra to provide a substantial part of their confidence. That he was the one

who'd beaten the possessed was a heady boost for them. Fifteen minutes saw the last of the zero-tau pods deactivated. Dariat and Tolton were sidelined to slightly peeved observers as the brigade of Rubra's descendants quickly and efficiently set about releasing their cousins. After that, when they'd come down off the hype, the habitat personality began marshalling them into groups and giving them assignments.

First priority was given to igniting the various fusion generators dotted about the spaceport. They made two attempts to initiate fusion, both of which failed. Microfusion generators, they soon found, worked well in the deep caverns; so they began the arduous process of manoeuvring starship auxiliary tokamaks through the spaceport and down the endcap. When the first one came on-line operating at thirty-eight per cent efficiency, they knew they really did stand a chance.

Schedules were drawn up to install another dozen in the caverns, feeding their energy into the habitat's organic conductors. After two days' unstinting effort, the light-tube began to blaze with early-morning intensity. Noonday brightness was beyond them, but the resumption of near-normal light provided a huge psychological kick for every resident (curiously, that also included the ostracised ghosts). In tandem, the habitat's huge organs began to function again, ingesting and revitalising the myriad fluids and gases utilised within the polyp.

Confidence guaranteed, the personality and its team set about investigating their continuum. Equipment was ransacked from physics labs and Magellanic Itg research centres, and taken down to the caverns where it was powered up. Crude space probes were prepared from the MSVs, sprouting simple sensor arrays. Outside that hot hive core of activity, the rest of the residents slowly began to gather

themselves together mentally and physically. Although that promised to be possibly the longest journey of all.

But after a week, Valisk had regained a considerable amount of its most desired commodity: hope.

There was a broad grin smeared across Joshua's face during the entire approach manoeuvre; sometimes it came from admiration, sometimes plain affection. He knew he must look utterly dopy. Simply didn't care. *Lady Mac's* external sensor array was feeding his neural nanonics a panoramic view of Jupiter's snarled pink and white cloudscape. Tranquillity formed a sharp midnight-black silhouette sailing across the storms.

The massive habitat looked completely undamaged; although its counter-rotating spaceport was darker than usual. The docking bays, normally the focus of frantic time-pressure maintenance efforts, were shut down and lightless, leaving the curving ebony hulls of Adamist starships half-hidden in their eclipsed metal craters. Only the navigation and warning strobes were still flashing indomitably around the edges of the big silver-white disc.

"It's really here," Ashly said in a stunned voice from across the bridge. "That's, that's . . ."

"Outrageous?" Beaulieu suggested.

"Damn right it is," Dhabi said. "Nothing that big can be a starship. Nothing."

Sarha laughed quietly. "Face it, people; we're living in interesting times."

Joshua was glad that the Mzu, her compatriots, and the agency operatives were all down in capsule D's lounge. After everything they'd been through, for the crew to show such bewilderment now was almost an admission of weakness, as if they couldn't cope with the rigours of starflight after all.

Jovian flight management authority datavisised their final approach vector, and Joshua reduced the fusion drives to a third of a gee as they crossed the invisible boundary where Tranquillity's traffic control centre took over guidance responsibility. Their escort of five voidhawks matched the manoeuvre with consummate elegance; unwilling to show anything other than perfection to Lagrange Calvert, a tribute to the modest debt Edenism owed him for Aethra.

If only they knew, Samuel said. They'd be flying parabolas of joy.

The Jovian sub-Consensus which dealt with classified security matters acknowledged the sentiment with an ironic frisson. **Given our culture's fundamental nature, the restriction of knowledge is always a curious paradox to us, it said. However, in the case of the Alchemist, it is fully justified. Every Edenist does not need to know specific details, hence the requirement for my existence. And your job.**

Ah yes, my job.

You are tired of it.

Very. As soon as the *Lady Macbeth* had emerged above Jupiter, Samuel had been conversing with the security sub-Consensus. It was the reason there had been relatively little fuss made about their arrival. First Admiral Aleksandrovich's decision had quickly been accepted by Consensus and Tranquillity.

After that, Samuel had immersed his mentality with Consensus, allowing his worries and tension to dissipate among his fellows. Sympathy for Edenists was so much more than a simple expression of compassion; with affinity he could feel it reaching into his mind, warmth and light dispelling the accumulation of icy shadows that were fear's legacy. No longer alone. Floating in a buoyant sea of welcome understanding. His thoughts began to flow in more regular

patterns, and with that state achieved his body quietened. A sense of wellbeing claimed him; sharing himself with Consensus, entwined with the billions living contentedly above Jupiter, sporting with the voidhawks, he became whole again.

Yet this is the time we need you most, sub-Consensus replied. **You have proved how valuable you are. Your skills are essential to this crisis.**

I know. And if I'm needed for another assignment, I'll go. But I think after this, it's time I found a new career. Fifty-eight years of one thing is enough, even for a low-stress job.

We understand. There is no immediate field assignment awaiting you. We would like you to resume the observation of Dr Mzu for the time being.

I think that's a formality now.

Yes. But it will help to have you there in person. You have proved your worth to Monica Foulkes, she trusts you, and it is her report that will influence the Duke more than anything, and through him, the King. In this affair we must reassure the Kingdom we are playing fair.

Of course. Our alliance is a remarkable achievement, even in these circumstances.

Quite.

I'll stay with Mzu.

Thank you.

Samuel used his affinity to stay in communication with the voidhawk escort, so he could borrow the image of Jupiter from their sensor blisters. It was a much more satisfying view than the AV projection of *Lady Macbeth's* sensor array. He watched their approach to Tranquillity, awed by the giant habitat, and not a little disconcerted by its star-jumping capability. It was so strange seeing it here, a famil-

iar place, in a familiar location; but the two didn't belong together. He smiled at his own discomfort.

"You look happy," Monica said gruffly.

They had taken acceleration couches slightly apart from Mzu and the *Beezling* survivors; the two groups still not quite trusting each other. During the flight they'd been formal and polite, nothing more.

Samuel waved at the lounge's AV pillar with its moiré sparkle, which was also showing the approach. "I rather like the idea of thwarting Capone in such a fashion. A habitat that can perform a swallow manoeuvre! Who'd have thought it? Well, a Saldana did, obviously. I doubt many others would."

"I didn't mean that," Monica said. "You were happy the moment we arrived here, and you've been getting happier ever since. I've been watching you."

"Coming home is always comforting."

"It's more than that, it's like you've mellowed out."

"I have. Communion with my people and Consensus always does that. It's a valuable psychological relief. I don't relish being apart from it for so long."

"Oh God, here we go again, more propaganda."

Samuel laughed. They might not have affinity, but he knew her well enough by now that it almost didn't make any difference. A pleasant revelation when dealing with an Adamist, let alone an ESA operative. "I'm not trying to convert you, I'm just saying it's good for me. As you noticed."

Monica grunted. "You ask me, it's a weakness. You're dependent, and that can't be good in our profession. People should be capable of acting by themselves without any hang ups. If I get wound up, I just run a stim program."

"Ah yes, the natural human method of dealing with stress."

“No worse than yours. Faster and cleaner, too.”

“There are many ways of being human.”

Monica stole a glance over at Mzu and Adul, still resentful at what they’d all been through. “Inhuman, as well.”

“I think she’s realized her folly. That’s good. It’s a sign of maturity to learn from one’s mistakes, especially after living with them for so long. She may yet make a positive contribution to our society.”

“Maybe. But as far as I’m concerned, she’ll need watching till the day she dies. And even then I’d be none too sure, she’s that tricky. I still think the First Admiral was wrong, we should have zero-taued the lot of them.”

“Well rest easy; I’ve already told Consensus I’ll continue watching over her. I’m too old and jaded for another active assignment. Once this crisis is concluded I’ll move on to something else. I always rather fancied wine growing; fine wine, of course. The kind of vintage that would satisfy the real oenophile. After all, I’ve tasted enough rubbish while I’ve travelled round the Confederation. Some of our habitats have superb vineyards, you know.”

Monica gave him a single surprised look, then snorted in amusement. “Exactly who are you trying to fool?”

It certainly wasn’t a hero’s welcome. Only Collins bothered to report that the *Lady Macbeth* had docked, and they did it in a tone which suggested Joshua was slinking back home.

Five serjeants greeted Mzu and the *Beezling* survivors, escorting them to their new quarters. They weren’t under arrest, Tranquillity explained, speaking through the constructs; but it laid down the guidelines for their residence quite austerely. A few friends were waiting for the crew in the bay’s reception compartment. Dahybi and Beaulieu vanished off with them, heading for a bar. Sarha and Ashly took a commuter lift together. Two deputy managers from

the Pringle Hotel greeted Shea and Kole, ushering them away to their rooms.

That left Joshua with Liol to take care of. He wasn't entirely sure what to do about that. They were still orbiting round each other, though it was a closer orbit now. A hotel was out, too cold, Liol was family after all. He just wished they'd managed to sort out the problem of *Lady Mac* and Liol's gung-ho claim. Though his brother had definitely become more conciliatory as the flight progressed. A good sign. It looked as though Liol would have to share his apartment. Well, at least he'd understand bachelor mess.

But as soon as Joshua air-swam out from their airlock tube, Ione was in front of him, toes pressed with ballerina grace on the compartment's stikpad. Doubts about Liol vanished. She was wearing a simple maroon polka-dot summer dress, ruffed gold-blond hair floating daintily. It made her seem girlish and elegant all at once. The sight of her like that summoned up memories warmer than any neural nanonics catalogued recollections could ever be.

She grinned knavishly, and held out both hands. Joshua caught hold and let her gently secure him. They kissed, a tingle lost somewhere between just good friends and old lovers. "Well done," she whispered.

"Thanks, I . . ." He frowned when he saw who was waiting behind her. Dominique: dressed in a tight sleeveless black leather T-shirt that was tucked into white sports shorts. All curves and blatant athleticism. As overt as Ione was demure.

"Joshua, darling!" Dominique squealed happily. "My God, you look so divine in a shipsuit. So well packaged. What can those naughty designers have been thinking of?"

"Er, hello, Dominique."

"Hello?" She pouted with tragic disappointment. "Come here, gorgeous."

Arms that were disproportionately strong wrapped round him. Wide lips descended happily, a tongue wriggling into his mouth. Hair and pheromones tickled his nose, making him want to sneeze.

He was too embarrassed to resist. Then she stiffened suddenly. “Oh *wow*, there’s two of you.”

The embrace was broken. Dominique stared hungrily behind him, long fronds of blond hair writhing about.

“Um, this is my brother,” Joshua mumbled.

Liol gave her a languid grin, and bowed. It was a good manoeuvre considering he wasn’t anchored to a stikpad. “Liol Calvert, Josh’s bigger brother.”

“Bigger.” Dominique’s eyes reflected slivers of light like coquettish diamonds.

In some way he couldn’t quite work out, Joshua was no longer between the two of them.

“Welcome to Tranquillity,” Dominique purred.

Liol took a hand gently and kissed her knuckles. “Nice to be here. It looks spectacular so far.”

A small groan of dismay rumbled up from Joshua’s throat.

“There’s plenty more to see, and it gets a whole lot better.” Dominique’s voice became so husky it was almost bass. “If you want to risk it, that is.”

“I’m just a simple boy from a provincial asteroid; of course I’m looking forward to the delights of the big bad habitat.”

“Oh, we have several bad things you’ll never find in your asteroid.”

“I can believe it.”

She crooked a finger in front of his nose. “This way.”

The two of them levitated out of the hatch together.

“Humm.” Ione smiled with sly contentment. “Eight seconds total; that’s pretty fast even for Dominique.”

Joshua looked back from the hatch to her amused blue eyes. He realized they were alone. "Oh, very neat," he remarked admiringly.

"Let's just say, I had a premonition they might hit it off."

"She'll eat him alive. You know that, don't you?"

"You never complained."

"How did you know about him?"

"While you were on your approach flight I was busy assimilating memories from the serjeants. The two that are left, anyway. You had a hell of a time."

"Yeah."

"You'll do all right, you and Liol. Just a bit too similar for comfort at the start, that's all."

"Could be." He squirmed uncomfortably.

She rested a hand on each shoulder, smiling softly. "But not identical."

There was nothing much said while they rode the commuter lift down the spaceport spindle. Just looks and smiles. Shared knowledge of what was to come when they got back to her apartment. Coming from shared relief that they'd both survived, and maybe wanting a return to times past for the reassurance that would bring. It wouldn't be the same, but it would still be familiar. It wasn't until they got into a tube carriage that they kissed properly. Joshua reached up to stroke her cheek.

"Your hand," she exclaimed. A whole rush of noxious memories were bubbling forth: the corridor in Ayacucho, Joshua on all fours in the slush, his hand blackened and charred, the two girls clinging together, whimpering, and the furious arab snarling then horrified as the serjeant opened fire. The roar of bullets and stink of hot blood. Not a senseise she'd accessed, remote and vaguely unreal; she'd been a genuine witness to the actual event and always would be.

Joshua took his hand away from her face as she gave it a concerned look. A medical nanonic package had formed a thin glove to cover his fingers and palm. "I'm okay. The navy medics matched and grafted some muscle tissue; they've had a lot of practice with this kind of injury. It'll be okay in another week."

"Good." She kissed the tip of his nose.

"You're worried about a couple of fingers; I was scared shitless about Tranquillity. Jesus, Ione, you've no idea what it was like finding you gone. I thought you'd been possessed just like Valisk."

Her broad freckled face crinkled with mild bafflement. "Humm, interesting. I get surprised by other people being surprised. All right, it could have been possession. But you of all people should have worked it out. I as good as told you."

"When?"

"The very first night we met. I said that grandfather Michael believed that we would eventually encounter whatever the Laymil had come up against. Of course, back then everyone thought it was an external threat, which was a reasonable enough assumption. Unfortunately, that also meant that Tranquillity was likely to be the first to confront it. Either we'd find it among the Ruin Ring, or it would return to Mirchusko, the last place it had visited. Grandfather knew we probably wouldn't be able to beat it with conventional weapons, he hoped we'd discover what it was so we could develop some kind of defence in time. But just in case . . ."

"He wanted to be able to run," Joshua concluded.

"Yes. So he ordered a modification to the habitat's genome."

"And nobody realized? Jesus."

"Why should they? There's a ring of energy patterning cells around the shell, at the end of the circumfluous sea. If

you look at the habitat from the outside, the ridge containing the water is actually a kilometre wider than the sea itself. But who's going to measure?"

"Hidden in plain view."

"Quite. Michael didn't see any reason to advertise the fact. Our royal cousins know . . . I assume, anyway. The files are stored in the Apollo Palace archives. It gives us the ability to jump away from trouble, a long way away. I chose Jupiter this time, because we considered Jupiter safe. But ultimately Tranquillity could jump across the galaxy in thousand light-year swallows, and the possessed would never be able to follow us. And if the crisis gets that bad, I'll do it."

"Now I get it. That's how you knew the *Udat's* wormhole vector."

"Yes."

When the tube carriage arrived at Ione's apartment Joshua was feeling comfort as much as excitement. Neither of them took the lead, asking or pressing the other, they simply went to the bedroom because it was what the moment had ordained. They both slipped out of their clothes, admiring each other. Almost dreamily, Joshua tasted her breasts again, regretting how long it had been. Both of them showed off the old skills, knowing precisely what to do to each other's flesh to invigorate and arouse.

Only once, when she knelt in front of him, did Ione speak. "Don't use your nanonics," she whispered. Her tongue licked along his cock, teeth closing delicately on one ball. "Not this time. This should be natural."

He agreed, complying, making the encounter raw, and relishing every second of their performance. It was new. The big jelly-mattress bed was the same, so were the positions they accomplished. This time, though, they had honesty, openly celebrating the physical power they exerted

over each other. It was as emotionally satisfying as it was sensually rewarding.

Afterwards they spent the night sleeping in each other's arms, snuggled up like childhood siblings. The loitering contentment made breakfast a civilized meal. They wrapped themselves in huge house robes to sit at a big old oak table in a room mocked up to resemble a conservatory. Palms, ferns, and delectos grew out of moss-coated clay pots, their multiplying stems interlaced with broad iron trellises to produce verdant walls. The illusion was almost perfect but for the small neon-bright fish swimming past on the other side of the glass.

House chimps served them scrambled parizzat eggs, with English tea and thick-cut toast. While they ate, they accessed various news broadcasts from Earth and the O'Neill Halo, following the Confederation's response to Capone, the build up of forces for the Mortonridge Liberation, rumours of the possessed spreading among the asteroids, appearing in star systems previously thought clean.

"Quarantine busters," Ione said sharply at the item on Koblat being taken out of the universe. "The idiots in those asteroids are still letting them dock. At this rate the Assembly will have to shut down interplanetary flights as well."

Joshua looked away from the AV projection. "It won't make any difference."

"It will! They have to be isolated."

He sighed, regretful at how easily the mood had gone. Forgetting everything for a day had been so comfortable. "You don't understand. It's like saying you'll be safe if Tranquillity jumps across the galaxy where the possessed can't find you. Don't you see, they'll always find you. They are what you become. You, me, everyone."

"Not everyone, Joshua. Laton mentioned some kind of journey through the afterworld, he didn't believe he'd be

trapped in the beyond. The Kiint have as good as admitted we don't all wind up there."

"Good, build on that. Find out why."

"How?" She gave him a measured look. "This isn't like you."

"I think it is. I think it took that possessed to make me realize."

"You mean that Arab in Ayacucho?"

"Yeah. No kidding, Ione, I was staring death and what comes after right in the face. Bound to make you stop and wonder. You can't solve everything with direct action. That's what makes this Mortonridge Liberation so ridiculous."

"Don't I know it. That whole miserable campaign is nothing more than a propaganda exercise."

"Yeah. Though I expect the people they do de-possess will be grateful enough."

"Joshua! You can't have it both ways."

He grinned at her over the rim of a huge tea cup. "We're going to have to, though, aren't we? There has to be some solution to satisfy both sides."

"Right," she said cautiously.

5

In any given month, there would be between two and seven armada storms rampaging across Earth's surface, a relentless assault they'd persevered with for over five hundred years. Like so many things, their name had become everyday currency. Few knew or cared about its origin.

It had begun with chaos theory: the soundbite assertion that one butterfly flapping its wings in a South American rain forest would start a hurricane in Hong Kong. Then in the Twenty-first Century came cheap fusion, and mass industrialisation; entire continents elevated themselves to Western-style levels of consumerism within two decades. Billions of people found themselves with the credit to buy a multitude of household appliances, cars, exotic holidays; they moved into new, better, bigger homes, adopting lifestyles which amplified their energy consumption by orders of magnitude. Hungry to service their purchasing power, companies built cities of new factories. Consumer and producer alike pumped out vast quantities of waste heat, agitating the atmosphere beyond the worst-case scenarios of most computer models.

It was after the then largest storm in history raged across

the Eastern Pacific in early 2071 that a tabloid newscable presenter said it must have taken a whole armada of butterflies flapping their wings to start such a brute. The name stuck.

The storm which had swept up from mid-Atlantic to swamp New York was ferocious even by the standards of the Twenty-seventh Century. Its progress had been under observation for hours by the arcology's anxious weather defence engineers. When it did arrive, their response systems were already on line. It looked as though a ragged smear of night was sliding across the sky. The clouds were so thick and dense no light could boil throughout to illuminate their underbelly—until the lightning began. Then the rotund tufts could sometimes be distinguished, streaked with leaden grey strata as they undulated overhead at menacing speed. The energy levels contained within would prove fatal for any unprotected building. Consequently, the ability to deflect or withstand the storms was the prime requirement of any design brought before the New York civil engineering review board for a building permit. It was the one criterion which could never be corroded by backhanders or political pressure.

The tip of every megatower was crowned with high-wattage lasers, whose beams were powerful enough to puncture the heart of the heavy clouds. They etched out straight channels of ionized air, cajoling the lightning to discharge directly into the superconductor grids masking the tower structure. Every tower blazed like a conical solar flare above the dome residents, spitting out residual globules of violet plasma.

Amid them fell the rain. Fist-sized drops hurled out by a furious wind to hammer against the domes. Molecular binding force generators were switched on to reinforce the

transparent hexagons against a kinetic fusillade which had the force to abrade raw steel.

The noise from this barrage of elements drummed through the dome to shake the gridwork of carbotanium struts supporting the metro transit rails. Most above-ground traffic had shut down. Right across the arcology, emergency crews were on full standby. Even the shield of lasers and superconductors were no guarantee against power spikes in such conditions. In such times, sensible people went home or to bars, and waited until sharp slivers of pewter light started to carve up the clouds, signalling the end of the deluge. A time when fear was heightened. When more primitive thoughts were brought to the fore.

A good time. Useful.

Quinn looked up at the old building which was home to the High Magus of New York.

Under cover of the storm, sect members were piling out of the vans behind him. Only ten possessed so far: a manageable number for what he had in mind. The rest, the acolytes and initiates, followed obediently, in awe of the apostles of evil who now commanded them.

Faith, Quinn mused, was a strange power. They had committed their lives to the sect, never questioning its gospels. Yet in all of that time, they had the reassurance of routine, the notion that God's Brother would never actually manifest himself. The bedrock of every religion, that your God is a promise, never to be encountered in this life, this universe.

Now the souls were returning, owning the power to commit dark miracles. The acolytes had fallen into stupefaction rather than terror, the last doubt vanquished. Condemned as the vilest outcasts, they now knew they'd been right all along. That they were going to win. Whatever they were ordered to do, they complied unquestioningly.

Quinn motioned the first team forward. Led by Wener, the three eager acolytes scampered down a set of steps at the base of the wall, and clustered round the disused basement door at the bottom. A codebuster block was applied, then a programmable silicon probe was worked expertly into the crack between the door and the frame. The silicon flexed its way under the ageing manual bolts, then began to reformat its shape, pushing them back. Within thirty seconds, the way in was open. No alarms, and no give away use of energistic power.

Quinn stepped through.

The difference between the headquarters and the dingy centre on Eighty-Thirty street surprised even Quinn. At first he even thought he might have the wrong place, but Dobbie, who now possessed magus Garth's body, reassured him this was indeed where they should be. The corridors and chambers were an inverse mirror of the Vatican's splendour. Rich fittings and extravagant artwork, but sybaritic rather than warmly exquisite, celebrating depravity and pain.

"Fuck, look at this place," Wener muttered as they marched down one of the corridors. Sculptures took bestiality as their theme, featuring both mythical and xenoc creatures, while paintings showed the saintly and revered from history being violated and sacrificed on the altars of the Light Bringer.

"You should take a good look," Quinn said. "It's yours. Those hours ripping off citizens and pushing illegals on the street, that paid for all this. You live in shit, so the High Magus can live like a Christian bishop. Nice, isn't it."

Wener and the other acolytes glowered round at the perverse grandeur, envious and angry. They split up, as arranged. One of the possessed leading each group of acolytes, securing the exits and strategic areas, the weapons cache. Quinn went straight for the High Magus. Three

times, he encountered acolytes and priests scurrying along the corridors. They were all given the same simple choice: Follow me, or be possessed.

They took one look at the black robe, listening to the voice whispering out of the seemingly empty hood, and capitulated. One of them even gave a mad little laugh of relief, a strong sense of vindication flooding his mind.

The High Magus was taking a bath when Quinn strode into his quarters. It could have been the penthouse of some multistellar corporation president, certainly there was little evidence of idolatrous worship amongst the opulence. Much to Wener's disappointment he didn't even have naked servant girls to wash him. Slimline domestic mechanoids stood quietly among the white and blue furnishings. His one concession to turpitude appeared to be the goblet he was drinking a seventeen-year-old red wine out of, its vulvic influences impossible to ignore. Islands of lime-green bubbles drifted round his round frame, giving off a scent of sweet pine.

He was already frowning as Quinn glided over the gold-flecked marble to the sunken bath, presumably forewarned by the failure of his neural nanonics. His eyes widened at the invasion, then narrowed as the eccentric delegation stared down at him.

"You're a possessed," he said directly to Quinn.

There was no panic in the mind of the High Magus, which surprised Quinn, if anything the old man appeared curious. "No, I am the Messiah of our Lord."

"Really?"

The mocking irony of the tone caused the hem of Quinn's robe to stir. "You will obey me, or I will have your fat shit body possessed by someone more worthy."

"More compliant, you mean."

"Don't fuck with me."

“I have no intention of fucking with you or anyone else.”

Quinn was puzzled by this whole exchange. The original calmness he could sense in the High Magus was slowly replaced by weariness. The High Magus took another sip of the wine.

“I’m here to bring Night to the Earth as Our Lord bids,” Quinn said.

“He *bids* nothing of the sort, you pathetic little prick.”

Quinn’s ashen face materialized to thrust out of his hood.

The High Magus laughed out loud at the shock and anger he saw there, and committed suicide. Without any noise or hysterics, his body froze, then slowly slithered down the side of the bath. It rolled to one side, and floated inertly on the surface, white bloated rims of fat bobbing among the green bubbles. The wine goblet sank, a red stain marking where it had vanished.

“What are you doing?” Quinn shouted at the departing soul. He sensed a final sneer as the retreating wisps of energy evaporated amid dimensional folds. His claw hands shot out of the voluminous sleeves, as if to pull the essence of the High Magus back to face judgement. “Shit!” he gasped. The magus must have been demented. Nobody. Nobody went into the beyond, not now they knew for sure what awaited them there.

“Asshole,” Wener grunted. Along with the other acolytes, he was perturbed by the death. Trying not to show it.

Quinn knelt down at the side of the bath, searching the corpse with eyes and eldritch senses for the mechanism of its demise. There were the usual weapons implants, he could perceive those all right, hard splinters among the softer grain of organic matter, even the neural nanonics were discernible. But Quinn’s energistic power had nullified them. What then? What instrument could effect an in-

stantaneous and painless suicide? And more curiously, why was the High Magus equipped with it?

He straightened slowly, retracting his head and arms back within his cloak's veil of night. "It doesn't matter," he told his agitated followers. "God's Brother knows how to deal with traitors, the beyond is not a refuge for those who fail Him."

A dozen heads nodded in eager acceptance before him. "Now go and bring them to me," he said.

The acolytes scattered to do his bidding. They rounded up everyone in the headquarters, and herded them into the temple. It was a vaulting chamber nestled at the core of the Leicester, a baroque fabrication of gilded pillars and crude cut stone blocks. Six giant pentagons were etched on the curving ceiling, emitting a dull crimson glow. The grumble of the storm was just audible, a bass reverberation sneaking through the Leicester to give the floor a faint vibration.

Quinn stood beside the altar as the captives were ushered up to him one at a time. Every time, he repeated the simple choice of futures: follow me, or be possessed. Merely claiming you would submit was no use. Quinn interrogated their innermost beliefs and fears before passing his final decree. He wasn't surprised by how many failed. Inevitably, this far up the sect hierarchy, they had grown soft. Still evil, still exploiting the soldiers below them, but not for the right reasons. Maintaining their own status and comforts had evolved into their dominant urge, not a willingness to further the cause of the Light Bringer. Traitors.

He made them suffer for their crime. Over thirty were chained to the altar and vanquished. By now he had become proficient in opening a fissure back into the beyond; but more importantly he'd learned how to impose his own presence around the opening, valiantly guarding the gateway from the unworthy. Even in their utter desperation for es-

cape, many souls turned aside from such a custodian. Those who did emerge conformed to Quinn's ideal. Nearly all of them had been sect members while they were alive.

He gathered them together after the ceremony, explaining what God's Brother had decided for them. "We need more than one arcology to bring Night to this world," he told them. "So I'm leaving you this one for yourselves. Don't piss this opportunity away. I want you to take it over, but carefully, not like the way the possessed do on other planets, even Capone. Those dickheads just rush up and head butt every town they come across. And each time, the cops swoop down and pick them off. This time it's gonna be different. You've got the acolytes worshipping the ground you shit on. Use them. Moving around is what lets those fucking AIs sniff you out. You mess with processors and power cables just by being near them. So don't go near them. Stay in the sect centres and get the acolytes to bring people to you."

"Which people?" Dobbie asked. "I understand how we don't gotta move about. But, shit, Quinn, there's over three hundred million people in New York. The acolytes can't bring them all to us."

"They can bring the ones that count, the police captains and technical guys, the ones gonna cause you grief. Or at least knock them out, stop them from reporting that you've arrived in town. That's all I want from you right now. Get yourselves established. There's a sect centre in every dome, take them over and hole up there for a while. Live like a fucking king, I'm not saying don't enjoy yourself. But I want you ready, I want you to build up a coven of possessed in each dome. Loyal ones, you all know how fucking important discipline is. We're going strategic. Learn where the major fusion generators are, hunt down the fresh water stations, and the sewage plants, see which intersections the

transport system depends on, track down critical nodes in the communication net. The acolytes will know all this crap, or they can find out. Then when I give the word, you smash each of those sites into lava. You paralyse the whole fucking arcology with terrorism, bring it to its knees. That way the cops won't be able to organize any resistance when we emerge to claim glory for Him. You come out into the open and start possessing others, and you turn them loose. Nobody can run, there's nowhere to go, no outside. Possessed always win on asteroids, this is no different, just bigger, is all."

"The new possessed, they won't worship God's Brother," someone said. "We can choose a few who will to start with, but if we turn them loose, there's no way millions of them is going to do like we say."

"Of course not," Quinn said. "Not at first, anyway. They have to be forced into this, like I did to Nyvan. Haven't you worked it out yet? What's going to happen to an arcology with three hundred million possessed living in it?"

"Nothing," Dobbie said in puzzlement. "It won't work."

"Right," Quinn purred. "Nothing's going to work. I'm going to visit as many arcologies as I can, and I'm going to seed all of them with possessed. And they're all going to collapse, because energistic power breaks the machinery. The domes won't be able to hold off the weather any more, there isn't going to be any food, or water. Nothing. Not even forty billion possessed wishing at once are going to be able to change that. They'll shift Earth into another realm, but it still won't make any difference. Just being somewhere else isn't going to put food on the table, won't restart the machines. That's when *it* will happen. The revelation that they have nowhere else to turn. Our Lord will have won their minds." He lifted his hands, and allowed a pallid smile to show from his hood. "Forty billion possessors, and

the forty billion they possess. Eighty billion souls screaming into the Night for help. Don't you see? It's a cry so strong, so full of anguish and fear, that it will bring Him. Finally, He will emerge from the Night, bringing light to those who have come to love Him." Quinn laughed at the astonishment on their faces, and dark delight in their minds.

"How long?" Dobbie asked avidly. "How long we gotta wait?"

"A month, maybe. It'll take me a while to visit all the arcologies. But I'll penetrate them all in the end. Wait for my word." The silhouette of his robe began to fade. Outlines of the furniture behind him started to show through. Then he was gone. A cold breeze drifted across the chamber, perturbing the shallow gasps of consternation that echoed from the dismayed disciples.

The *Mindori* approached Monterey at a steady half gee acceleration. Two hundred kilometres ahead, the asteroid's features were resolving, crumpled dust-grey rock speared by metallic spires and panels. It was surrounded by a swarm of pearl-white specks that flashed and glinted in the tenacious sunlight. The Organization fleet: over six hundred Adamist warships floating in attendance while small service craft flitted among them. Each one a unique knot in Rocio Condra's distortion field.

Gliding among them were the more subtle interference patterns of other distortion fields. Valisk's hellhawks were here. Rocio called out in welcome. Those who bothered to acknowledge his arrival were subdued. The emotional content simmering within most of his fellows was one of grudging acceptance. Rocio accepted it reluctantly. It was what he'd been expecting.

Glad to see you found your way back to us, Hudson Proctor said. **What have you got?**

The affinity link provided Rocio an opening to the man's eyes. He was in one of the docking ledge lounges, overlooking the pedestals where several hellhawks were perched. The room had been altered into an executive-style office. Kiera Salter was sitting at a broad desk, her head coming up to give him a hard, enquiring stare.

Deadnight kids, Rocio said. **I haven't told them Valisk has gone.**

Good, good.

"The Organization hasn't got any real use for that kind of waster trash," Kiera said as Hudson repeated his silent conversation. "Dock here and disembark them. They'll be dealt with appropriately."

And what about us? Rocio asked mildly. **What do the hellhawks do now?**

"I'll have you assigned to fleet support duties," Kiera said impassively. "Capone is preparing another invasion. The hellhawks are becoming essential to ensure viability."

I don't wish to fly combat duties any more, thank you. This starship is proving an excellent host for my soul, I have no intention of endangering it, especially now that you have no reserve body for me to inherit.

Kiera's answering smile portrayed regret. It wasn't an emotion Hudson relayed via affinity, keeping the exchange scrupulously neutral.

"I'm afraid we're effectively on a war footing," Kiera said. "Which means, that wasn't a request."

Are you trying to order me?

"I'm offering you one simple choice. You do as I tell you, or you fuck off back to the Edenists right now. You know why that is? Because we're the only two who can feed you. I am now in full command of the only possessed-owned nutrient supply in this star system. Me, not Capone and the Organization, me. If you want to prevent that excellent host

of yours from expiring from malnutrition, you do exactly what I ask, and in return you'll be permitted to dock and ingest as much of that goo as you can hold. No one else can provide you with that, non-possessed asteroids will blow you away with their SD platforms before you get within a hundred kilometres. Only the Edenists can supply you. And they've got their price, too, as I'm sure they've told you. If you cooperate with them, it'll be to help understand the nature of the interface with the beyond. They'll find out how to banish us. You and I will both be zapped back into that infernal oblivion. So decide, Rocio; where your loyalty lies, who you're going to fly for. I'm not asking for you and me to be friends, I want to know if you'll obey, that's all. And you will tell me now."

Rocio opened his affinity to converse with the other hellhawks. **Is this what she holds over us?**

Yes, they answered. **There is no third alternative that we can see.**

This is monstrous. I'm happy with this form. I don't want to risk it in Capone's egotistical conquests.

Then protect it, you pitiful bastard, Etchells said. **Stop whining and fight for what you believe in. Some of you are so pathetic, you don't deserve what you've got.**

Rocio remembered Etchells, always eager to intercept the voidhawks observing Valisk. When Capone had first approached Kiera for help, he'd been excited and anxious to become involved in the conflict.

Piss off, you fascist bigot.

A coward, and a way with words, Etchells retorted. **No wonder you're so insecure.**

Rocio closed his affinity with the offensive hellhawk. **I'll dock at Monterey and offload the passengers**, he told

Hudson and Kiera. **What kind of fleet support are you proposing?**

Kiera's smile lacked grace. "While the fleet is here, all hellhawks are on a rota to interdict the spy globes and stealthed bombs. The voidhawks have just about given up that nonsense, but they're still probing our defences, so we have to remain vigilant. Apart from that, there's also some communication duties, VIP flights and collecting cargo from asteroids. Nothing too demanding."

And when Capone finds a new planet to invade?

"You fly escort for the fleet, and then you help them eliminate the target world's Strategic Defence network."

Very well. I will be docking in another eight minutes, please have a pedestal ready to receive me. Rocio abandoned Hudson Proctor's mind, and analysed what had been said. The situation was almost what he'd been expecting. Controlling the supply of nutrient fluid was the only practical way of binding the hellhawks to the Organization. What he hadn't predicted was Kiera still being in charge. She'd obviously come to the same conclusion about coercion.

A few queries to a couple of friendlier hellhawks, and he found that Etchells had visited most of the asteroid settlements in the New California system, blasting their nutrient production machinery. Kiera had ordered the flight, and Hudson had been on board to make sure everything ran smoothly. Kiera and the Organization were still separate. She was using her control over the hellhawks to maintain her status as a power player. Scheming little bitch. And it would be the hellhawks who paid for that status.

Rocio's ersatz beak parted slightly. Even though he couldn't manage a modestly contented smile any more, the intent was there. Forced obedience always generated discontent. Allies wouldn't be hard to find. He abandoned his

favoured bird-image just as he slipped round Monterey's counter-rotating spaceport. The *Mindori* settled its hull on one of the docking ledge pedestals, and gratefully received the hose nozzles probing its underbelly. Muscle membranes contracted round the seal rings, and the thick nutrient fluid pulsed its way up into the nearly-depleted reserve bladders. The whole process served to emphasise just how vulnerable the giant bitek starship was. After such a long flight, Rocio was enduring a strong subconscious pressure to ingest again, and he had absolutely no control over the substance pumped along the pipes. Kiera could be giving him anything, from water to an elaborate poison. It tasted fine, to his limited internal sense and filter glands, but he could never be quite sure. His plight was intolerable. So what? he asked himself, bitterly. Blackmail always was.

The rebellion began at once. Rocio ordered his bitek processor array to open a channel into the asteroid's communication network. Access to any defence-critical system was denied; the Organization had protected its electronic architecture as thoroughly as the New California defence force it had usurped. However, that left a lot of civil memory cores and sensors to access. He began to analyse what information he was permitted, and hooked in to various cameras to look round.

A large bus trundled over the rock ledge, its flaccid elephant-trunk airlock tube snuggling up to the *Mindori*'s life support section. Inside the hellhawk, the Deadnight kids raced through their cabins, snatching up their bags. A long, agitated queue formed outside the main airlock hatch. Choi-Ho and Maxim Payne stood at the end, smiling placidly.

When the hatch swung open amid a hiss of white vapour, the kids let out a collective gasp of delight. Kiera herself was waiting for them. Gorgeous body clad in a small scar-

let dress, hair tumbling over her honey-coloured shoulders. And that mesmerising smile every bit as bright in real life as it was in the recording. They filed past her in a numb daze, eyes wide with awe as she said hello to each and every one of them. All she got was a few mumbled words in return.

“That was easy enough,” she said to Choi-Ho and Maxim at the end. “We had a couple of flights end in riots when they realized they weren’t at Valisk. For no-hopers, they can be vicious little shits. There was a lot of damage, and it’s hard getting replacement components for these life support modules.”

“So what do we do now?” Maxim asked.

“I always need good officers. Or you can join the Organization if you like. Capone is keen to recruit soldiers to enforce his rule down on the planet. You’ll be on the cutting edge of his empire,” she said sweetly.

“I’m good at what I do now,” Choi-Ho said levelly. Maxim quickly agreed.

Kiera observed their minds. There was a tang of resentment, of course, there always was. But they’d capitulated. “All right, you’re in. Now let’s get these loser brats into the asteroid. They won’t be suspicious if we stay with them.”

She was right. Her presence alone was enough to fool the besotted Deadnights, none of them ever questioning why the bus windows were blanked out. It wasn’t until they walked through the next set of airlocks that suspicions started to bubble up. They were all from asteroid settlements, and the equipment here was very similar to what they thought they’d left behind. Habitats were supposed to be different, devoid of this many mechanical contrivances. With the elder ones slightly puzzled now, they trooped into the main arrivals hall. The Organization gangsters were waiting. It only took two acts of violence against the

bravest rebels to quell any further resistance. They were quickly segregated and classified according to the charts Leroy and Emmet had provided.

Amid a welter of tearful and frightened crying, individuals were hauled off into the corridors. As the Organization was still very male dominated, the older boys were all taken down to Patricia Mangano and imminent possession by new soldiers. With them went the less attractive girls. Prettier girls were dispatched to the brothel where they would service the Organization's soldiers and non-possessed followers. The children (and definition was difficult, puberty plus a couple of years appeared to be the deciding factor) were flown down to the planet, where Leroy paraded them in front of the rover reporters, claiming their salvation from Deadnight as more humanitarian charity on AI's behalf. The distorted image of a weeping seventeen-year-old girl being shoved along by a machine-gun toting gangster in a brown pinstripe suit vanished from the processor block's screen in a hail of static.

"I can't find any further working cameras in that section," Rocio announced. "Would you like me to return to the arrivals hall?"

Jed had to work hard against his tightening throat muscles. "No. That's enough." When the hellhawk possessor had shown them the first pictures snatched from cameras, Jed had wanted to scramble out of their cramped refuge. Kiera was actually on board! A mere thirty metres away from him. He'd suddenly wondered what the hell he was doing, crouched painfully between cold, condensation-smearred tanks with loops of grimy cable wiping his forehead. The sight of her brought back all the old rapture. And she was smiling. Kiera would make the angels envious of her beauty and compassion.

Then he heard bonkers Gerald reciting: "Monster, mon-

ster, monster, monster,” like it was some kind of freaky spell.

Beth was rubbing the old fart’s arm, all full of sympathy, saying, “It’s okay, you’ll get her back, you will.”

Jed wanted to shout out how barmy the pair of them were. But by then the last of the Deadnights were in the bus, and Kiera’s smile was gone. In its place was a hideously alien expression of contempt verging on cruelty. The words which came from her lips were cold and harsh. Rocio had been telling the truth.

Despite the evidence, that lost part of Jed’s heart had wanted to believe in his divine saviour and her promises of a better world. Now he knew that was gone. Worse than that, it had never existed. Even Digger had been right. Bloody Digger, for Christ’s sake! He was just a dumb stupid waster kid trying to score the ultimate escape trip from Koblat. If Beth and the girls hadn’t been in there with him, he knew he would have burst into tears. For Jed, not even the scenes in the arrivals hall were as horrific as that final moment when Kiera’s smile vanished.

By the time Rocio Condra’s face reappeared on the block, the girls were sniffing quietly, arms around each other. Beth made no attempt to hide the tears meandering down her cheeks. Gerald had shrunk back into his usual uncommunicative self.

“I’m sorry,” Rocio said. “But I did suspect that something like this was going to happen. If it’s of any comfort, I am in a similar position.”

“Similar?” Beth grunted. “Comfort? I knew some of those girls, damn you. How can you compare what they’re going to go through with what you’ve got to do? That’s not patronising, that’s sickening.”

“They are being forced to prostitute themselves with men in order to survive. I have to risk my life and that of my host

in hostile combat conditions if I wish to continue my existence in this universe. Yes, I have to say there is similarity, whether you see it or not.”

Beth glared at the processor block through her misery. She'd never felt so low before, not even when those men had grabbed her that time when she met Gerald.

“So now what?” Jed asked dolefully.

“I'm not certain,” Rocio answered. “Obviously, we must find a new source of nutrient fluid for myself and those hellhawks that share my beliefs. I shall have to gather a lot more information before that option opens itself.”

“Do we have to stay in here the whole time?”

“No, of course not. There is no one inside the life support section, you may come out now.”

It took a hot, aggravating five minutes to wriggle free from the confines of the cramped under-floor service ducts. Jed was the first to extricate himself from the hatch in the washroom floor. He quickly helped the others free. They wandered out into the central corridor, glancing about anxiously, not quite believing Rocio when he said they were alone.

They stood in the big forward lounge, looking out of the long window at the docking ledge. The row of pedestals stretched away, gradually curving above them, silver mushrooms sprouting from the grizzled rock, each one bathed in a pool of yellow light. But for three other docked hellhawks suckling their nutrient fluid from the hoses, it could have been a post-industrial wasteland. Some technicians were working on the cargo cradles of one craft, but apart from that, nothing moved.

“So we just wait,” Beth said, flopping down into a settee.

Jed pressed his nose to the transparency, trying to see the rock wall at the back of the ledge. “Guess so.”

“I'm hungry,” Gari complained.

“Then go eat,” Jed said. “I’m not going to stop you.”
“Come with us.”

He turned from the window, seeing his sister’s apprehensive expression, and smiled reassuringly. “Sure, kid, no problem.”

The galley was one compartment Rocio hadn’t tried to modify with his energistic imagination, leaving the contemporary metal and composite surfaces undisturbed. However, they’d plainly been pillaged by some passing barbarian army. A cascade of empty sachets were littering the floor, stuck in place by treacle-like liquids. Storage cabinet doors swung open, revealing empty spaces. The timer on an induction oven bleeped away relentlessly.

A ten minute search turned up five cans of drinking chocolate, a sachet of unhydrated oatmeal cakes, and a serve-3 pizza with extra anchovies.

Jed surveyed the cache with dismay. “Oh Jeeze, there’s nothing left to eat.” He knew what that meant, one of them would have to sneak into the asteroid to find some supplies. Zero guesses who’d get picked for that doozy.

Jay woke up in a wonderfully soft bed, wrapped inside a smooth cocoon of clean cotton sheets smelling faintly of lavender. It was that warm drowsy state which always followed a really long, deep sleep. She squirmed round a little, enjoying the contentment of being utterly at peace. Some small object had managed to wedge itself under her shoulder, harder than the luxurious pillow. Her hand closed round it, pulling it out. Coarse fur tickled her fingers. Frowning, squinting she held up the . . . doll. Tatty old thing. She smiled cosily, and put Prince Dell down beside her. Snuggling into the mattress.

Her eyes flipped wide open. A fog of hoary light was curving round a pair of plain navy-blue curtains. It illumi-

nated a neat wooden room, with its sloping ceiling supported by a scaffold of naked A-frame beams. The tight-fitting wall boards had all been painted a silky green, bedecked with picture frames that were mainly landscape watercolours, though there were several sepia photos of people in history-text clothes. A glazed pedestal washbasin with brass taps stood in the corner, a towel hanging beside it. There was a wicker chair at the foot of the bed, with a pair of fat cushions crammed into it. The sound of waves rolling gently onto a beach could just be heard in the background.

Jay flung back the sheet and slithered down off the bed. Her feet touched a warm carpet, and she padded over to the window. She lifted a corner of the curtain, then pulled it wide open. The beach was outside; a fringe of grass blending into white sands, followed by gorgeous turquoise water stretching out to a mild horizon haze. A clear azure sky rose from the other side of the haze, cut in half by that incredible curving line of brilliant silver-white planets. She laughed in amazed delight. It was real, really real.

The bedroom's door opened into the chalet's hallway. Jay ran along it, out onto the veranda. The hem of her nightie flapped around bare feet, Prince Dell was clutched in one hand. Outside, the heat and salty humidity gusted over her along with the intense sunlight. She flew down the steps and onto the grass, dancing round and whooping. The sand was hot enough to make her jump up and down before retreating back onto the grass. She gave the glittering water an exasperated look. How lovely it would have been to dive right in. Haile was going to adore this place.

“Good morning to you, young Jay Hilton.”

Jay jumped, and turned round. One of the purple globes she remembered from last night was floating half a metre above her head. Her nose wrinkled up in bemusement. It

seemed to be the victim of a talented graffiti artist who'd inflicted two black and white cartoon eyes rimmed with black-line eyebrows; more black lines defined a pug nose, while the mouth was a single curve sealed by smile commas. "What are you?" she asked.

"Well, wadda ya'know, my name's Mickey. I'm a universal provider. But I'm a special one, coz I'm all yours." The mouth jerked up and down in time with its voice.

"Oh yeah?" Jay asked suspiciously. That silly face was far too happy for her liking. "What does a universal provider do, then?"

"Why, I provide, of course."

"You're a machine."

"Guess so," it said with goofy pleasure.

"I see. So what do you provide?"

"Whatever you want. Any material object, including food."

"Don't be stupid. You're tiny, what if I wanted a . . . a vac-train carriage."

"Why would you want one of those?"

Jay sneered at it smugly. "I just want one. I'm proving a point."

The face lines squiggled their way into an expression of dozy obedience. "Oh. Okey-dokey, then. It's going to take about quarter of an hour to put it together."

"Sure," Jay sneered.

"Hey! That's got lots of complicated parts inside, you know."

"Right."

"If you'd asked for something simple, I could provide straight away."

"All right. I want the Diana statue from the Paris arcology. That's just a lump of carved rock."

"Easy peasy."

“Uh—” Jay managed to grunt.

Mickey zipped out over the beach, too fast for her to follow. She swivelled, just in time to see it inflating equally fast. At ten metres in diameter, its ridiculous face was suddenly not so pleasant and harmless as it loomed above her. A pair of shoes began to ooze through the bottom. They were as long as Jay was tall. Mickey started to rise up, exposing legs, waist, torso . . .

The full fifteen metre height of the granite statue gazed out serenely across the Kiint ocean. Pigeon droppings scarred its shoulders. Above Diana’s head, Mickey shrank back to its usual size and floated back down to Jay. Its mouth line shifted up into feline gratification.

“What have you done?” Jay yelled.

“Provided the statue. Wossamatter, wrong one?”

“No! Yes!” She glanced frantically along the beach. There were figures moving round outside the other chalets and big white clubhouse, but fortunately none of them seemed to have noticed. Yet. “Get rid of it!”

“Oh. Charming.” Mickey inflated out again. Its hurt pout ominous on such a scale. The statue was swallowed whole. The only memorial: a pair of giant footprints in the sand.

“You’re mad,” Jay accused as it shrank once again. “Utterly mad. They should switch you off.”

“For what?” it wailed.

“For doing that.”

“Just doing what I’m told,” it grumbled. “I suppose you want to cancel the vac-train as well, now?”

“Yes!”

“You should make up your mind. No wonder they won’t hand over my kind of technology to the Confederation. Think of all the statues you’d leave lying round the place.”

“How do you do it,” she asked sharply. “How do you

work? I bet you've never even been to Earth, how do you know what Diana's statue looked like?"

Mickey's voice dropped back down to normal. "The Kiint have this whopping great central library, see. There's no end of stuff stored in there, including your art encyclopaedias. All I've gotta do is find the template memory."

"And you make it inside you?"

"Small things, no problem. I'm your man, just shout. The bigger stuff, that's gotta be put together in a place like a high-speed factory. Then when it's done and polished they just ship it in through me. Simplisimo."

"All right. Next question, who decided to give you that silly voice?"

"Whaddya mean, silly? It's magnifico."

"Well, you don't talk like an adult, do you?"

"Ha, hark who's talking. I'll have you know, I'm an appropriate companion personality for a girl your age, young missy. We spent all night ransacking that library to see what I should be like. You got any idea what it's like watching eight million hours of Disney AVs?"

"Thank you for being so considerate, I'm sure."

"What I'm here for. We're partners, you and me." Mickey's smile perked up again.

Jay folded her arms and fixed it with a stare. "Okay, *partner*; I want you to provide me with a starship."

"Is this another of those point thingies?"

"Could be. I don't care what type of starship it is; but I want it to be one I can pilot by myself, and it has to have the range to get me back to the Confederation galaxy."

Mickey's eyes blinked slowly, as if lethargic shutters were coming down. "Sorry, Jay," it said quietly. "No can do. I would if I could, honest, but the boss says no."

"Not much of a companion, are you."

“How about a chocolate and almond ice cream instead? Big yummie time!”

“Instead of a starship. I don’t think so.”

“Aww, go on. You know you want to.”

“Not before breakfast, thank you.” She turned her back on it.

“Okay. I know, how about a megalithic strawberry milkshake, with oodles and oodles of . . .”

“Shut up. And you’re not called Mickey, either. So don’t pretend you are.” Jay smiled at the silence; imagining it must be contorting its sketched face into hurt dismay. Her name was being called from the chalet.

Tracy Dean stood on the veranda, waving hopefully. She was dressed in a pale lemon dress with a lace collar, its design obsolete but still stylish. Jay walked back, aware that the provider machine was following. “The face wasn’t a good idea, was it?” Tracy said with dry amusement after Jay climbed the steps to the veranda. “Didn’t think so. Not for someone who’s seen all you have. But it was worth a try.” She sighed. “Program discontinued. There, it’s just an ordinary provider, now. And it won’t talk stupid anymore, either.”

Jay glanced up at the purple sphere, which was now completely featureless. “I don’t mean to be awkward.”

“I know, sweetie. Now come and sit down. I’ve got some breakfast for you.”

A white linen tablecloth had been spread over a small table beside the weather-worn railings. It had Spanish pottery bowls with cereal and fruit, one jug of milk, and another of orange juice. There was also a teapot with a battered old strainer.

“Twinings Ceylon tea,” Tracy said happily as they sat down. “Best you can have for breakfast in my opinion. I became completely addicted to it in the late Nineteenth Cen-

tury, so I brought some back with me once. Now the providers can synthesise the leaves for me. I'd like to be all snobbish and say that I can tell it's not the same, but I can't. We'll let it brew for a while, shall we?"

"Yes," Jay said earnestly. "If you like." There was something deliciously fascinating about this old woman who had Father Horst's compassion and Powel Manani's determination.

"Have you never brewed tea in a pot before, young Jay?"

"No. Mummy always bought it in sachets."

"Oh dear me. There are some things which the march of progress doesn't improve, you know."

Jay poured some milk over the cereal bowl, deciding not to ask about the strange-shaped flakes. One thing at a time. "Do the Kiint live on all these planets?"

"Ah, yes. I did promise I'd explain things today, didn't I, sweetie?"

"Yes!"

"Such impatience. Where to start, though?" Tracy sprinkled some sugar onto her grapefruit, and sank a silver spoon into the soft fruit. "Yes, the Kiint live on all these planets. They built them, you know. Not all at once, but they have been civilized for a very long time. One planet couldn't possibly accommodate them all any more, just like there are too many humans to live on Earth nowadays. So they learned how to extract matter from their sun and condense it. Quite an achievement, actually, even with their technology. The arc is one of the wonders of this galaxy. Not just physically, culturally, too. All the species who've achieved FTL starflight visit here eventually. Some that haven't, too. It's the greatest information exchange centre we know of. And the Kiint know of a few, believe me."

"The provider said there was a big library here."

"It was being modest. You see, when you've got the tech-

nology to take care of your every physical requirement, there's not much else you can do but develop your knowledge base. So that's what they do. And it's a big universe to get to know. It keeps them occupied, and fulfils life's basic requirement."

"What's that?"

"To live is to experience, and experience is living. I had a lovely little chuckle when the first Kiint ambassador from Jobis told the Confederation they had no interest in starflight. Travel broadens the mind, and heavens do they travel. They have this quite magical society, you see, they spend their whole time developing their intellects. The best way I can put it for you, is that wisdom is their equivalent of money, that's what they pursue and hoard. I'm generalising, of course. A population as large as theirs is bound to have dissidents. Nothing like our Edenist Serpents, of course; their disagreements are mostly philosophical. But there are a few Kiint who turn their backs on their own kind. There's even a couple of planets in the arc they can go to where they're free of the central society.

"Whatever faction they come from, they're all very noble by our standards. And I'll admit it leaves them superbly prepared to face transcendence when their bodies die. But to be honest, that kind of existence is rather boring for humans. I don't think we'll ever go quite so far down that road. Different mental wiring, thankfully. We're too impatient and quarrelsome. Bless us."

"So you are really human then?"

"Oh yes, sweetie. I'm human. All of us living here are."

"But why are you here?"

"We work for the Kiint, helping them to record human history. All of us take little unobtrusive jobs where we can get a good view of events. In the old days it was as servants of lords and kings, or joining up with nomads. Then when

the industrial age started up we moved into the media companies. We weren't front line investigative reporters, we were the office mundanes; but it meant we had access to an avalanche of information most of which never made it into the official history books. It was perfect for us; and we still mostly work in the information industries today. I'll show you how to use the AV projector later if you want, every broadcast humans make goes into the arc's library. That always tickled me, if those desperate marketing departments only knew just how wide an audience they really have."

"Are the Kiint really that interested in us?"

"Us, the Tyrathca, the Laymil, xenocs you've never heard of. They're fascinated by sentience, you see. They've witnessed so many self-aware races dwindle away to nothing, or self-destruct. That kind of loss is tragic for the races which succeed and prosper. Everybody's different, you see, sweetie. Life alone is precious, but conscious thought is the greatest gift the universe offers. So they try and study any entities they find; that way if they don't survive their knowledge won't be entirely lost to the rest of us."

"How did you end up working for them?"

"The Kiint found Earth when they were exploring that galaxy about two and a half thousand years ago. They took DNA specimens from a few people. We were cloned from that base, with a few alterations."

"Like what?" Jay asked eagerly. This was a wonderful story, so many secrets.

"We don't age so quickly, obviously; and we've got a version of affinity; little things like that."

"Gosh. And you've been on Earth since you were born?"

"Since I grew up, yes. We had to be educated the Kiint way first. Their prime rule in dealing with other species, especially primitive ones, is zero intervention. They were worried that we might become too sympathetic and go na-

tive. If we did that, we'd introduce ideas that were wrong for that era; I mean, think what would have happened if the Spanish Armada was equipped with anti-ship missiles. That's why they made us sterile, too; it should help us remain impartial."

"That's horrid!"

Tracy smiled blankly at the horizon. "There are compensations. Oh sweetie, if you'd seen a fraction of what I have. The Imperial Chinese dynasties at their height. Easter Islanders carving their statues. Knights of armour battling for their tiny kingdoms. The Inca cities rising out of jungles. I was a servant girl at Runnymede when King John signed the Magna Carta. Then lived as a grandee noblewoman while Europe was invigorated by the Renaissance. I waved from the harbour when Columbus set sail across the Atlantic; and spat as Nazi tanks rolled into Europe. Then thirty years later I stood on Cocoa Beach and cried when *Apollo 11* took off for the moon, I was so proud of what we'd achieved. And there I was in the spaceplane which brought Richard Saldana down to Kulu. You have no idea how blessed my life has been. I know everything, everything, humans are capable of. We are a good species. Not the best, not by Kiint standards, but so much better than most. And wonderfully unique." She sniffed loudly, and dabbed a handkerchief on her eyes.

"Don't cry," Jay said quietly. "Please."

"I'm sorry. Just having you here, knowing what you could accomplish if you have the chance, makes this hurt so much harder. It's so bloody *unfair*."

"What do you mean?" Jay asked. Seeing the old woman so upset was making her nervous. "Aren't the Kiint going to let me go home?"

"It's not that." Tracy smiled bravely, and patted Jay's hand. "It's what kind of home that'll be left for you. This

shouldn't have happened, you see. Discovering energetic states and what they mean normally comes a lot later in a society's development. It's a huge adjustment for anybody to make. Human-type psychologies need a lot of preparation for that kind of truth, a generation at least. And that's when they're more sociologically advanced than the Confederation. This breakthrough was a complete accident. I'm terrified the human race won't get through this, not intact. We all are, all the Kiint observers want to help, to point the researchers in the right direction if nothing else. Our original conditioning isn't strong enough to restrict those sort of feelings."

"Why don't you?"

"Even if they allowed us, I'd be no use. I've been part of all our history, Jay. I've seen us evolve from dirty savages into a civilization that has spread among the stars. More than anybody I know what we could grow into if we just had the chance. And I have the experience to intervene without anyone ever knowing they'd been guided. But at the most crucial time of our social evolution, when that experience is utterly *vital*, I've got to stay here."

"Why?" Jay pleaded.

Tracy's frail shoulders trembled from repressed emotion. "Oh sweetie, haven't you worked out what this dreadful place is yet? It's a bloody retirement home."

The view arrived suddenly. For over twenty minutes Louise had been sitting in one of the lounge's big chairs, its webbing holding her in the deep hollow of cushioning. Her belly muscles were beginning to strain as they were obliged to hold her in a curving posture. Then she felt a slight trembling in the decking as the lift capsule was shunted onto the tower rail. A tone sounded. Thirty seconds later they flashed out of the Skyhigh Kijabe asteroid. There was a

quick impression of soured-white metal mountains, but they quickly shrank from sight overhead. Gentle gravity relieved her muscles, and the webbing slackened.

Earth shone with a mild opalescent light below her. It was midday in Africa, at the base of the tower, and the clouds were charging in from the oceans on either side. There seemed to be a lot more of them than there had been on Norfolk, although the *Far Realm* had been orbiting at a much lower altitude. That might account for it. Louise couldn't be bothered to find the correct meteorology files in her processor block, and run a comparison program. The sight was there to enjoy not analyse. She could actually see the giant white spirals spinning slowly as they battered against each other. It must be a pretty impressive speed for the movement to be visible from such a height.

Genevieve switched her webbing off, and glided over to the lounge window, pressing herself against it. "It's beautiful," she said. Her face was flushed as she smiled back at Louise. "I thought Earth was all rotten."

Louise glanced about, slightly worried by what the other passengers would think of the little girl's remark. With the quarantine, most of them must be from Earth or the Halo. But nobody was even looking at her. In fact, it seemed as though they were deliberately not looking. She went over to stand beside Gen. "I guess that's as wrong as everything else in the school books."

The Halo was visible against the stars, a huge slender thread of stippled light curving behind the planet, like the most tenuous of a gas-giant's rings. For five hundred and sixty-five years, companies and finance consortiums had been knocking asteroids into Earth orbit. The process was standardized now; first the large-scale mining of mineral resources, hollowing out the habitation caverns, then the gradual build up of industrial manufacturing stations as the

initial resources were depleted and the population switched to a more sophisticated economy. There were nearly fifteen thousand inhabited asteroids already drifting along in their common cislunar orbit, and new rocks were arriving at the rate of thirty-five a year. Tens of thousands of inter-orbit craft swooped between the spinning rocks, fusion exhausts tangling together in a single scintillating nimbus. Every asteroid formed a tiny bulge in the loop, wrapped behind a delicate haze of industrial stations.

Louise gazed at the ephemeral testament to astroengineering commerce. More fragile than the bridge of heaven in Norfolk's midsummer sky, but at the same time, more imposing. The vista inspired a great deal of confidence. Earth was strong, much stronger than she'd realized; it sprang from a wealth which she knew she would never truly comprehend.

If we're safe anywhere, we're safe here. She put her arm round Genevieve. For once, contented.

Below the majesty of the Halo, Earth was almost quiescent by comparison. Only the coastlines of North and South America hinted at the equal amount of human activity and industry on the ancient planet. They remained in darkness, awaiting the dawn terminator sliding over the Atlantic; but the night didn't prevent her from seeing where people were. Arcologies blazed across the land like volcanoes of sunlight.

"Are they the cities?" Genevieve asked excitedly.

"I think so, yes."

"Gosh! Why is the water that colour?"

Louise switched her attention away from the massive patches of illumination. The ocean was a peculiar shade of grey green, not at all like the balmy turquoise of Norfolk's seas when they were under Duke's stringent white glare.

"I'm not sure. It doesn't look very clean, does it? I suppose that must be the pollution we hear about."

A small contrite cough just behind them made both girls start. It was the first time anyone apart from the stewards had even acknowledged they existed. When they turned round they found themselves facing a small man in a dark purple business suit. He'd already got some thin wrinkles on his cheeks, though he didn't seem particularly old. Louise was surprised by his height, she was actually an inch taller than him, and he had a very broad forehead, as if his hair wouldn't grow properly along the top of it.

"I know this is rude," he said quietly. "But I believe you're from outsystem?"

Louise wondered what had given them away. She'd bought the pair of them new clothes in Skyhigh Kijabe, one-piece garments like shipsuits but more elaborate, with pronounced pockets and cuffs. Other women were wearing the fashion; so she'd hoped they would blend in.

"Yes," Louise said. "From Norfolk, actually."

"Ah. I'm afraid I've never tasted Norfolk Tears. Too expensive, even with my salary. I was most sorry to hear about its loss."

"Thank you." Louise kept her face blank, the way she'd learned to do whenever Daddy started shouting.

The man introduced himself as Aubry Earle. "So this is your first visit to Earth?" he asked.

"Yes," Genevieve said. "We want to go to Tranquillity, but we can't find a flight."

"I see. Then this is all new to you?"

"Some of it," Louise said. She wasn't quite sure what Aubry wanted. He didn't seem the type to befriend a pair of young girls. Not from altruism, anyway.

"Then allow me to explain what you are seeing. The oceans aren't polluted, at least not seriously; there was an

extensive effort to clean them up at the end of the Twenty-first Century. Their present colouring comes from algae blooms. It's a geneered variety that floats on the top. I think it looks awful, myself."

"But it's everywhere," Genevieve said.

"Alas, yes. That's our carbon sink these days. Earth's lungs, if you like. It performs the job once done by forests and grasslands. The surface vegetation is not what it used to be, so Govcentral introduced the algae to prevent us from suffocating ourselves. Actually, it's a far more successful example of terraforming than Mars. Though I would never be so undiplomatic as to say that to a Lunar citizen. We now have less carbon dioxide in our atmosphere than at any time in the last eight hundred years. You'll be breathing remarkably clean air when you arrive."

"So why do you all live in the arcologies?" Louise asked.

"Heat," Aubry said sadly. "Do you know how much heat a modern industrial civilization of over forty billion people generates?" He gestured down at the globe. "That much. Enough to melt the polar ice and quicken the clouds. We've taken all the preventative measures we can, of course. That was the original spur to build the orbital towers, to prevent spaceplanes aerobraking and shedding even more heat into the air. But however economic we are, we can't dissipate it at a rate that'll turn the clock back. The old ocean currents have shut down, there's no ozone layer at all. And that kind of ecological retro-engineering is beyond even our ability. We're stuck with the current environment, unfortunately."

"Is it very bad?" Genevieve asked. What he'd described sounded worse than the beyond, though she thought the man didn't sound terribly upset by the cataclysm.

He smiled fondly at the planet. "Best damn world in the Confederation. Though I expect everyone says that about their homeworld. Am I right?"

"I like Norfolk," Louise said.

"Of course you do. But if I might make an observation, this is going to be noisier than anything you've experienced before."

"I know that."

"Good. Take care down there. People aren't likely to help you. That's our culture, you see."

Louise gave him a sideways look. "Do you mean they don't like foreigners?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. It's not racism. Not overtly, anyway. On Earth everybody is a foreigner to their neighbour. It's because we're all squashed up so tight. Privacy is a cherished commodity. In public places, people don't chat to strangers, they avoid eye contact. It's because that's the way they want to be treated. I'm really breaking taboos by talking to you. I doubt any of the other passengers will. But I've been outsystem myself, I know how strange it all is for you."

"Nobody's going to talk to us?" Genevieve asked apprehensively.

"Not as readily as I."

"That's fine with me," Louise said. She couldn't quite bring herself to trust Aubry Earle. At the back of her mind was the worry that he would volunteer to become their guide. It had been bad enough in Norwich when she'd depended on Aunt Celina; Roberto was family. Earle was a stranger, one prepared to drop Earth's customs in public when it suited him. She gave him a detached smile, and led an unprotesting Gen away from the window. The lift capsule had ten decks, and her standard-class ticket allowed her into four of them. They managed to avoid Earle for the rest of the flight. Though she realized he was telling the truth about privacy. Nobody else talked to them.

The isolation might have been safer, but it made the ten

hour trip incredibly boring. They spent a long time watching the view through the window as Earth grew larger, and talking idly. Louise even managed to sleep for the last three hours, curling up in one of the big chairs.

She woke to Gen shaking her shoulder. "They just announced we're about to reach the atmosphere," her sister said.

Louise combed some strands of hair from her face, and sat up. Other passengers who'd been dozing were now stirring themselves. She took the hair clip off as she reorganized her mane, then fastened it up again. First priority when they were down must be to get it washed. The last time she'd managed properly was back on Phobos. Maybe it was time for a cut, a short style that was more manageable. Though the usual arguments still applied: she'd invested so much time keeping it in condition, cutting it was almost a confession of defeat. Of course, back at Cricklade she'd had the time to groom herself every day, and had a maid to help.

Whatever did I do all day back then?

"Louise?" Genevieve asked cautiously.

She raised an eyebrow at the girl's tone. "What?"

"Promise you won't get mad if I ask?"

"I won't get mad."

"It's just that you haven't said yet."

"Said what?"

"Where we're going after we touch down."

"Oh." Louise was completely stumped. She hadn't even thought about their destination. Getting away from High York and Brent Roi had been her absolute priority. What she needed to do was find somewhere to stay so she could think about what to do next. And without consulting her block there was really only one city name from her ethnic

history classes which she was certain would still exist. "London," she told Genevieve. "We're going to London."

The African orbital tower had been the first to be built, a technological achievement declared the equal of the FTL drive by the Govcentral committees and politicians who'd authorized it. Typical self-aggrandising hyperbole, but acknowledged to be a reasonable comparison none the less. As Aubry Earle had said, it was intended to replace spaceplanes and the enormously detrimental effect they were having on Earth's distressed atmosphere. By 2180 when the tower was finally commissioned (eight years late), the Great Dispersal was in full swing, and the volume of spaceplane traffic had become so injurious to the atmosphere that meteorologists were worrying about elevating the armada storms to an even greater level of ferocity.

The question became academic. Once the tower was on line, its cargo capacity exceeded thirty per cent of the world's spaceplane fleet. Upgrades were being planned before the first lift capsule ran all the way up to Skyhigh Kijabe. Four hundred and thirty years later, the original slender tower of monocarbon fibre was now nothing more than a support element threading up the centre of the African Tower. A thick grey pillar dwindling off up to infinity, immune to the most punishing winds the armada storms could fling at it. The outer surface was lined with forty-seven magnetic rails, the structure's maximum. It was now cheaper to build new towers than expand it any further.

The lower five kilometres were the fattest section, providing an outer sheath of tunnels to protect the lift capsules from the winds, enabling the tower to remain operational in all but the absolutely worst weather conditions. Exactly where the tower ended and the Mount Kenya station started was no longer certain. With a daily cargo throughput poten-

tial of two hundred thousand tonnes, and up to seventy-five thousand passengers, the capsule handling infrastructure had moulded itself tumescently around the base, a mountain in its own right. Eighty vac-train tunnels intersected in the bedrock underneath it, making it the most important transport nucleus on the continent.

To keep the passengers flowing smoothly, there were eighteen separate arrival Halls. All of them followed the same basic layout, a long marble-floored concourse with the exit doors from customs and immigration rooms on one side, and lifts on the other, leading to the subterranean vac-train platforms. Even if an arriving passenger knew exactly which lift cluster they wanted, they first had to negotiate a formidable barricade of retail stalls selling everything from socks to luxury apartments. Keeping track of one individual (or a pair) amid the perpetual scrum occupying the floor wasn't easy, not even with modern equipment.

B7 left nothing to chance. A hundred and twenty GSDI field operatives had been pulled off their current assignments to provide saturation coverage. Fifty were allocated to Hall Nine, where the Kavanagh sisters were due to disembark, their movements coordinated by an AI that was hooked into every security sensor in the building. Another fifty were already on their way to London within minutes of Louise saying that was her intended goal. Twenty had been held in reserve in case of cockups, misdirection, or good old fashioned acts of God.

The arrangements had caused more arguments among B7; all of the supervisors remained extremely proprietorial when it came to their respective territories. Southern Africa, in whose domain the Mount Kenya station fell, disputed Western Europe's claim that he should take personal command of the surveillance. Western Europe counterclaimed that as the tower station was just a brief stopover for the sis-

ters, and the whole operation was his anyway, he should have the necessary authority. The other B7 supervisors knew Southern Africa, renowned for the tedious minutiae of procedure worship, was just going through the motions.

Western Europe was given his way over the tower station, as well as gaining concessions to steer the operation through whichever territory the Kavanaghs roamed in their search for Banneth.

Southern Africa acceded to the decision, and withdrew testily from the sensenviron conference. Smiling quietly at his inevitable victory, Western Europe datavised the AI for a full linkage. With the station layout unfolding in his mind, he began to designate positions to the agents. Tied in with that was the lift capsule's arrival time, and the departure times of each scheduled vac-train. The AI computed every possible travel permutation, plotting the routes which the sisters would have to walk across the concourse. It even took into account the types of stalls which might catch their eye. Satisfied the agents were placed to cover every contingency, Western Europe stoked the logs on his fire, and settled back into a leather armchair with a brandy to wait.

It was probably the ultimate tribute to the fieldcraft of the GSDI agents that after all fifty of them took up position in Hall Nine, Simon Bradshaw didn't notice them, not even with his hyper instinct for the way of things on the concourse. Simon was twenty-three years old, though he could easily pass for fifteen. Selected hormone courses kept him short and skinny, with soft ebony skin. His large eyes were moist brown, which people mistook for mournful. Their endearing appeal had salvaged him from trouble countless times in the twelve years he'd been strutting the concourses of the Mount Kenya station. Local floor patrol cops had his profile loaded in their neural nanonics, along with hundreds of other regular sneak opportunists. Simon used cosmetic

packages every fortnight or so, altering his peripheral features, though his size remained constant. It was the act you had to vary to prevent the cops from putting a comparison program into primary mode. Some days dress smart and act little boy lost, dress casual and act street tough, dress neutral act neutral, pay a cousin to lend you their five-year-old daughter and come over as a protective big brother. But never ever dress poor. Poor people had no business in the station, even the stall vendors had neat franchise uniforms below their shiny franchise smiles.

Today Simon was actually in a franchise uniform himself: the scarlet and sapphire tunic of Cuppamaica, the coffee café. Being unobtrusive by being mundane. Nobody was suspicious of station workers. He saw the two girls as soon as they emerged through the customs and immigration archway. It was like they had a hologram advert flashing over their heads saying: EASY. He couldn't ever remember seeing such obvious offworlders before. Both of them gawping round at the cavernous Hall, delighted and amazed by the place. The little one giggled, pointing up at the transit informatives, baubles of light charging about overhead like insane dragonflies, shepherding passengers towards the right channels.

Simon was off immediately, coming away from the noodle stall he'd been slouching against as if powered by a nuclear pulse. Moving at a fast walk, the luggage cab buzzing incessantly at his heels as its small motors strained to keep up. He was desperately trying not to run, the urgency was so hot. His principal worry now was if the others of his profession saw them. It would be like a feeding frenzy.

Louise couldn't bring her legs to move. Her fellow passengers had swept her and Genevieve out of customs, carrying her along for a few yards before her surroundings exerted a grip on her nerves. The arrivals Hall was awe-

some, a stadium of coloured crystal and marble, saturated with noise and light. There must surely have been more people thronging across its floor than lived in the whole of Kesteven island. Like her, they all had luggage cabs chasing after them, adding to the bedlam. The squat oblong box had been supplied by the line company operating the lift capsule. Her bags had been dumped inside by the retrieval clerk, who'd promptly handed her a circular card. The cab, he promised, would follow her everywhere as long as she kept the card with her. It was also the key to open it again when they got down to their vac-train platform. "After that you're on your own," he said. "Don't try and take it on the carriage. That's MKS property, that is."

Louise swore she wouldn't. "How do we get to London?" Gen asked in a daunted tone. Louise glanced up at the mad swarms of photons above them. They were balls of tightly packed writing, or numbers. Logically, it must be travel information of some kind. She just didn't know how to read it.

"Ticket office," she gulped. "They'll tell us. We'll have to buy a ticket for London anyway."

Genevieve turned a complete circle, trying to scan the Hall through the melee of bodies and luggage cabs. "Where's the ticket office?"

Louise pulled the processor block out of her shoulder purse. "I'll find it," she said with determination. It was just a question of accessing a local net processor and loading a search program. An operation she'd practised a hundred times with the tutorial. Watching the graphics assemble themselves in the display as she conjured up a welcome feeling of satisfaction.

I've got a problem and I'm solving it. By myself, and for myself. I'm not dependent.

She grinned happily at Gen as the search program inter-

rogated the station information processors. “We’re actually on Earth.” She said it as though she’d only just realized. Which, in a strange way, she had.

“Yes,” Genevieve grinned back. Then she scowled as a scrawny youth in a red and blue uniform barged into her. “Hey!”

He mumbled a grudging apology, side-stepped round the luggage cab and walked away.

The block beeped to announce it had located the vac-train ticket dispensers for Hall Nine. There were seventy-eight of them. Without showing any ire, Louise started to redefine the search parameters.

Easy, easy, *easy*. Simon wanted to yell it out. That jostle with the little kid was the modern equivalent of the shell game. Visually confusing as their respective luggage cabs crossed paths, and allowing his grabber to intercept their tag card code at the same time. He fought the impulse to turn round and check the new luggage cab at his feet. Those girls were in for a hell of a shock when they got to their platform and found only a pile of beefbap wrappers inside it.

Simon headed for the stalls at a brisk pace. There was a staff lift at the middle. Route down to a quieter level, where he could examine his prize. He was ten metres from the front line of stalls when he was aware of two people closing on him. It wasn’t an accidental path, either, they were coming at him with all the purpose of combat wasps. Running wasn’t going to do any good, he knew that. He pressed the release button on the grabber hidden in his palm. The girls’ luggage cab swerved away, no longer following him. Now, if he could just dump the grabber in a waste bin. No proof.

Shit. How could his luck turn like this?

One of the cops (or whoever) went after the luggage cab. Simon hunted round for a bin. Anywhere there was a fast

food bar. He ducked round the first stall, making one last check on his pursuers. That was why he never saw the third (or fourth and fifth, for that matter) GISD agent until the woman bumped right into him. He did feel, briefly, a small sting on his chest. Exactly the same place she was now taking her hand away from. His guts suddenly turned very cold, then that sensation faded to nothing.

Simon looked down at his chest in puzzlement just as his legs faltered, dropping him to his knees. He'd heard of weapons like this, so slim they never left a mark as they punctured your skin; but inside it was like an EE grenade going off. The world was going quiet and dim around him. High above, the woman watched him with a faint sneer of satisfaction on her lips.

"For a couple of bags?" Simon coughed incredulously. But she'd already turned, walking away with a calm he could almost respect. A real pro. Then he was somehow aware of himself finishing the fall to the floor. Blood rushed out of his gaping mouth. After that, the darkness rushed up to drown him. Darkness, but not total night. The world was only the slightest of distances away. And he wasn't alone in observing it from outside. The lost souls converged upon him to devour the font of keen anguish that was his mind.

"That way," Louise said brightly. The block's little screen was showing a floor layout, which she thought she'd aligned right.

With Genevieve skipping along at her side she negotiated the obstacle course of stalls. They slowed down to window shop the things on display, not really understanding half of them. She also thought there must be a subtle trick to negotiating the crowd which was eluding her. Twice on the way to the dispenser, people banged into her. It wasn't as though she didn't look where she was going.

The block had told her there was neither a ticket office, nor an information desk. A result which made her acknowledge she was still thinking along Norfolk lines. All the information she needed was in the station electronics, it just needed the right questions to extract it.

A vac-train journey to London cost twenty-five fuseodollars (fifteen for Gen); a train left every twelve minutes from platform thirty-two; lifts G to J served that level. Once she knew that, even the transit informatives whirling past overhead began to make a kind of sense.

Western Europe accessed an agent's sensewise to watch the sisters puzzle out the ticket dispenser. Enhanced retinas zoomed in on Genevieve, who had started clapping excitedly when a ticket dropped out of the slot.

"Don't they have ticket dispensers on Norfolk, for heaven's sake?" the Halo supervisor asked querulously. He had maintained executive control over the observation team during the Kavanaghs' trip from High York down to the Mount Kenya station, anxious that nothing should mar the hand over. Now, curiosity had impelled him to tarry. Having initiated a few unorthodox missions in his time, he was nevertheless impressed with Western Europe's chutzpa in dealing with Dexter.

Western Europe smiled at the sensewise overlay of Halo, who appeared to be leaning against the marble fireplace, sipping a brandy. "I doubt it. Some cheery-faced old man in a glass booth would be more their style. Haven't you accessed any recent sensewises of Norfolk? Actually, just any sensewises of the place would do. It hasn't changed much since the founding."

"Damn backward planet. It's like the medieval section of a themepark. Those English-ethnic morons abused the whole Great Dispersal ethos with that folly."

"Not really. The ruling Landowner class introduced a sta-

bility we're still striving for, and without one per cent of the bloodshed we employ to keep a lid on things down here. In a way, I envy all those pastoral planets."

"But not enough to emigrate."

"That's a very cheap shot. Quite beneath you. We're as much products of our environment as the Kavanaghs are of theirs. And at least they're free to leave."

"Leave yes. Survive in the real world, no." He indicated the observation operation's status display. It wasn't a pleasing tally. Five people had been eliminated by the guardian blanket of GISD agents—pickpockets, sneak thieves, a scam jockey—as the sisters made their way across the concourse. Extermination was the quick, no arguments, solution. It was also going to cause an uproar with the local police when the bodies were discovered. "At this rate, you're going to wind up slaughtering more people than Dexter has to protect them."

"I always thought station security should be sharper," Western Europe said casually. "What kind of advert is it for Govcentral when visitors get ripped off within ten minutes of their arrival on the good old homeworld?"

"Most don't."

"Those girls aren't *most*. Don't worry, they'll be safer when they reach London and book into a hotel."

Halo studied Western Europe's handsome young face, amused by the mild expression of preoccupation to be found there. "You fancy Louise."

"Don't be absurd."

"I know your taste in women as well as you know my preferences. She's exactly your type."

Western Europe swirled the brandy round his three-hundred-year-old snifter, not looking up at the smug overlay image. "I admit there's something really rather appealing about Louise. Naiveté, one supposes. It does always attract,

especially when coupled with youthful physical beauty. Earth girls are so . . . in your face. She has breeding, manners, and dignity. Also something the natives here lack.”

“That’s not naiveté, it’s pure ignorance.”

“Don’t be so uncharitable. You’d be equally adrift on Norfolk. I doubt you could ride to the hunt in pursuit of the cunning hax.”

“Why would anybody, let alone me, want to go to Norfolk?”

Western Europe tilted the snifter back and swallowed the last of the brandy. “Exactly the answer one expects from someone as jaded and decadent as you. I worry that one day this whole planet will think like us. Why do we bother protecting them?”

“We don’t,” Halo chuckled. “Your memory transfer must have glitched. We protect ourselves. Earth merely is our citadel.”

6

It was as if space had succumbed to a bleak midwinter. Monterey was moving into conjunction with New California, sinking deeper through the penumbra towards the eclipse. Looking through the Nixon suite's big windows, Al could see the shadows above him expanding into black pools of nothingness. The asteroid's crumpled rock surface was slowly melting from view. Only the small lights decorating the thermal exchange panels and communication rigs gave him any indication that it hadn't been removed from the universe entirely. Equally, the Organization fleet gathered outside was now invisible save for navigation strobes and the occasional spectral gust of blue ions fired from a thruster.

Beneath his feet, New California slid across the brilliant starscape, a gold-green corona crowning an empty circle. From this altitude, there were no city lights, no delicate web of lustrous freeways gripping the continents. Nothing, in fact, to show that the Organization existed at all.

Jezzibella's arms crept round his chest, while her chin came to rest on his shoulder. A mild forest-morning per-

fume seeped into the air. “No sign of red clouds,” she said encouragingly.

He lifted one hand to his lips, and kissed the knuckles. “No. I guess that means I’m still numero uno about here.”

“Of course you are.”

“You wouldn’t fucking think so the beefs everyone’s got. Not just what they say, either. What they think counts for a whole lot.”

“They’ll be all right once the fleet’s in action again.”

“Sure,” he snorted. “And when’s that gonna be, huh? Fucking Luigi, I shoulda popped him properly, screwing up like that. It’s gonna take another twenty—thirty days to build up our antimatter stocks to anything like a load we can risk another invasion with. So Emmet says. That means six weeks minimum I know. Goddamn! I’m losing it, Jez. I’m fucking losing it.”

Her grip tightened. “Don’t be silly. You were bound to have setbacks.”

“I can’t afford one. Not now. Morale’s going to shit out there. You’ve heard what Leroy said. Possessed crew are going down to the surface for funtime and ain’t coming back. They think I’m gonna lose control of the planet and they’ll be better off down there when it happens.”

“So get Silvano to tighten up.”

“Maybe. You can only be so tough, you know?”

“You sure you can’t bring the next invasion forward?”

“No.”

“Then we need something else to keep the soldiers and lieutenants occupied and committed.”

He turned to face her. She was wearing one of those whore’s dresses again, just tiny little strips of pale yellow fabric up the front (he had ties wider than that), and a teensy skirt. So much skin tantalisingly revealed; it made him want to tug it off. As if he’d never seen her in the buff be-

fore. But then she was always alluring in some new fashion, a mirror hall chameleon.

A sensational piece of ass, no doubt about it. But the way she kept on coming up with ideas for him (just like her never-ending mystique) had become vaguely unnerving of late. It was like he'd become dependent, or something.

"Like what?" he asked flatly.

Jezzibella pouted. "I don't know. Something which doesn't need the whole fleet, but'll still be effective. Not a propaganda exercise like Kursk; we need to hurt the Confederation."

"Kingsley Pryor's gonna do that."

"He might. Although that's a very long shot, remember?"

"Okay, okay." Al wished up one of his prime Havanas, and took a drag. Even they seemed to have lost some of their bite recently. "So how do we use some itsy piece of the fleet to piss the Feds?"

"Dunno. Guess you'd better go call Emmet in; see what he can come up with. That's strictly his field." She gave him a slow wink and sauntered off to the bedroom.

"Where the hell are you going?" he demanded.

A hand waved dismissively. "This dress is for your eyes only, baby. I know how hot you get when other people see what I've got to offer. And you need to have a clear head when you're talking to Emmet."

He sighed as the tall doors closed behind her. Right again.

When Emmet Mordden arrived fifteen minutes later, Al had returned to the window. There was very little light in the big lounge, just some red jewels glimmering high up on the white and gold walls. With Monterey now fully into the umbra, the window was little more than a slate grey rectangle, with Al's ebony silhouette in the middle. His youthful

face was illuminated by a diminutive orange glimmer coming from the Havana.

Emmet tried not to show too much annoyance at the cigar smoke clogging the room. The Hilton's conditioners never managed to eliminate the cloying smell, and using energetic power to ward it off was too much like overkill. It might just offend Al, too.

Al raised a hand in acknowledgement, but didn't turn away from the window with its empty view. "Can't see anything out there today," he said quietly. "No planet, no sun."

"They're still there, Al."

"Yeah yeah. And now is when you tell me I got responsibilities to them."

"I'm not going to tell you that, Al. You know the way it is."

"Know what, and don't tell Jez this, I'd trade in the whole shebang for a trip home to Chicago. I used to have a house in Prairie Avenue. You know? Like, for my family. It was a nice street in a decent neighbourhood, full of regular guys, trees, good lighting. There was never any trouble there. That's where I want to be, Emmet, I wanna be able to walk down Prairie Avenue and open my own front door again. That's all. I just wanna go home."

"Earth ain't like it used to be, Al. And it hasn't changed for the best. Take it from me, you wouldn't recognize it now."

"I don't want it now, Emmet. I want to go *home*. Capeesh?"

"Sure, Al."

"That sound crazy to you?"

"I had a girl before. It was a good thing back then, you know."

"Right. See, I had this idea. I remember there was this Limy guy, Wells, I think his name was. I never read any of

his books, mind. But he wrote about things that are happening today in this crazy world, about Mars men invading and a time machine. Boy, if he's come back, I bet he's having a ball right now. So . . . I just wondered; he was thinking stuff like that, a time machine, back in the Twentieth Century, and the Confederation eggheads, they can build these starships today. Did they ever try to make a time machine?"

"No, Al. Zero-tau can carry ordinary people into the future, but there's no way back. The big theory guys, they say it can't be done. Not in practice. Sorry."

Al nodded contemplatively. "That's okay, Emmet. Thought I'd ask."

"Was that all, Al?"

"Shit no." Al smiled reluctantly, and turned from the window. "How's it going out there?"

"We're holding our own, especially down on the planet. Haven't had to use an SD strike for three days now. Some of the lieutenants have even caught a couple of AWOL starship crew. They're getting shipped back up here tonight. Patricia's going to deal with. She's talking about setting an example."

"Good. Maybe now those bastards will learn there ain't no get-out clause when you sign up with me."

"The voidhawks have stopped dumping their stealth bombs and spyglobes on the fleet. Kiera's hellhawks have done a good job clearing them out."

"Huh." Al opened the liquor cabinet, and poured himself a shot of bourbon. The stuff was imported from a planet called Nashville. He couldn't believe they'd called a whole goddamn planet after that hick dirt-town. Their booze had a kick, though.

"You remember she moved her people into the rooms along the docking ledge?" Emmet said. "I know why she did it, now. They've knocked out all the machinery which

makes the nutrient fluid for the hellhawks. And not just here in Monterey, all over the system, too. The *Stryla* visited all the asteroids we run, and layered their nutrient machinery. Her people are guarding the only one left working. If the hellhawks don't do as they're told, they don't get fed. They don't eat, they die. It's that simple."

"Neat," Al said. "Let me guess, if we try to muscle in on the last machine, it gets zapped."

"Looks like it. They've let slip that it's booby trapped. I'd hate to risk it."

"As long as the hellhawks do what I want, she can stay. Barricading herself in like that is dumb. It makes her even more dependent on me for status. She has to support me, she's not important to anyone else."

"I've put a couple of people on surveying what's left of the machinery she smashed up. We might be able to put a working unit back together eventually, but it'll take time."

"Time is something which is giving me a fucking headache, Emmet. And I ain't talking about Wells's machine here. I need to get the fleet back into action, soonest."

"But, Al—" he stopped as Al held up a hand.

"I know. We can't launch no invasion right now. Not enough antimatter. There's gotta be something else they can do. I'm being honest with you here, Emmet, the boys are so antsy, they'll mutiny if we keep them kicking their heels in port much longer."

"I suppose you could launch some fast strike raids. Let people know we've still got some punch."

"Strike on what? Just blowing things up for the sake of it, ain't my style. We have to give the fleet a purpose."

"There's the Mortonridge Liberation. The Confederation's been beaming propaganda about that to every city on New California, telling us how we're bound to lose eventu-

ally. If we hit some of their supply convoys we'd be helping the possessed on Ombey."

"Yeah," Al said. The notion didn't really appeal, too few visible returns. "What I'm looking for is something that'll cause a shitload of trouble for the Confederation each time. Knocking out a couple of ships ain't going to do that."

"Well . . . This is just an idea, Al. I don't know if it's the kind of thing you're looking for. It depends on how many planets you want to rule over."

"The Organization has to keep up its momentum to exist. Ruling planets is only a part of that. So talk to me, Emmet."

Kiera could see eight hellhawks out on the ledge below her. They were all sitting on their pedestals, ingesting nutrient fluid. A rotor had been drawn up so the whole flock could feed on the ten metallic mushrooms which remained functional. Studying the huge creatures, so powerful yet utterly dependent, Kiera couldn't avoid the religious analogy. They were like a devout congregation coming to receive mass from their priestess. Each of them abased themselves before her, and if the correct obeisance was performed, they received her blessing in return, and were allowed to live.

The *Kerachel* swept in above the ledge, appearing so swiftly out of the umbra it might have just swallowed in. A pointed lozenge-shape, a hundred metres long, it hardly hesitated as it found its designated pedestal and sank down. Knowing that even though it couldn't see her expression, it could sense her thoughts, she smiled arrogantly down upon it. "Any problems?" she asked casually.

"Monterey's command centre monitored its patrol flight," Hudson Proctor replied. "No deviations. Eight suspect objects destroyed."

"Well done," she murmured. A hand waved languid permission to start.

Hudson Proctor picked up a handset, and began speaking into it. Two hundred metres below the departure lounge, her loyal little team opened a valve, and the precious fluid surged along a pipe out to the pedestal. A feeling of contentment strummed the air like background music as *Kerachel* began sucking in its food. Kiera could feel the hellhawk's mood, it mellowed her own.

There were eighty-seven hellhawks based at Monterey now. A formidable flotilla by anyone's standards. Securing them for herself had absorbed all her efforts over the last few days. Now it was time to start thinking ahead again. Her position here was actually a lot stronger than it had been at Valisk. If the habitat was a fiefdom, then New California was a kingdom in comparison. One which Capone appeared singularly inept at maintaining. The main reason she'd established herself so easily in the docking ledges was the apathy spreading through Monterey. Nobody thought to question her.

That simply wouldn't do. In building his Organization, Capone had grasped an instinctive truth. People, possessed or otherwise, needed structure and order in their lives. It was one of the reasons they fell into line so easily, familiarity was a welcome comrade. Give them the kind of nirvana which existed (though she had strong suspicions about that) in the realm where planets shifted to, and the population would sink into a wretched, lotus-eating state. The Siamese twin of unending indulgent leisure. If she was honest to herself, she was terrified of the immortality she'd been given. Life would change beyond comprehension, and that was going to be very hard indeed. For an adaptation of that magnitude, she would no longer be herself.

And that, I will not permit.

She enjoyed what she was and what she'd got, the drives and needs. Like this, at least she remained recognizably

human. That identity was worth preserving. Worth fighting for.

Capone wouldn't do it. He was weak, controlled by that ingenious trollop Jezzibella, by a non-possessed.

In the Organization, a method of enforcing control over an entire planetary population had been perfected. If she was in charge, it could be used to implement her policies. The possessed would learn to live with their phobia of open skies. In return they would have the normal human existence they craved. There would be no dangerous metamorphosis into an alien state of being. She would remain whole. Herself.

A twitch of motion broke her contemplation. Someone was walking along the docking ledge, someone in a bulky orange and white spacesuit with a globular helmet. Compared to modern SSI suits, the thing was ridiculously old-fashioned. The only reason for wearing one was if you didn't have neural nanonics.

"Are there any engineering crews on the ledge?" Kiera asked. She couldn't see any hellhawks receiving maintenance right now.

"A couple," Hudson Proctor answered. "The *Foica* is being loaded with combat wasps, and *Varrad*'s main fusion generator needs work on its heat dump panels."

"Oh. Where . . ."

"Kiera." Hudson held up the handset in trepidation. "Capone's calling all his senior lieutenants. It's an invite to some kind of glam party this evening."

"Really?" She gave the spacesuited figure one last glance. "And I haven't a thing to wear. But if our Great and Glorious Leader has summoned me, I'd better not disappoint him."

Back on Koblat, they called these spacesuits ballcrushers. Jed had worn one before for an emergency evacuation drill, and now he was remembering why. Putting it on was easy enough; when they got it out of the locker it was a flaccid sack three times too large for his frame. He'd wriggled into it, standing with arms outstretched and legs apart so the baggy fabric could hang unobstructed off each limb. Then Beth had activated the wristpad control, and the fabric contracted like an all-over tourniquet. Now every part of his body was being squeezed tight. It was the same principle as an SII suit, preventing any loose bubbles of air becoming trapped between his skin and the suit. If a suit contained any sort of gas, it would inflate like a rigid balloon as soon as he stepped out into a vacuum.

This way, he could move about almost unrestricted. Providing he ignored the sharp pincer sensation besetting his crotch at every motion. Not an entirely easy thing to disregard.

But apart from that, the suit was functioning smoothly. He wished his heart would do the same. According to the hazy purple icons projected onto the inside of his helmet, the suit's integral thermal shunt strips were conducting away a lot of heat. Nerves and an adrenaline high were making the blood pound away in his arteries. His tension wasn't helped by the rank of huge hellhawks he was walking along. He knew they could sense his thoughts and all the guilt cluttering up his skull, which made the torment even worse. A bad case of feedback. Bubbles of plastic and dark metal clung to the underbellies of the bitek starships like mechanical excrescences. Weapons and sensors. He was sure every one of them was tracking him.

"Jed, you're getting worse," Rocio told him.

"How can you tell?"

"Why are you whispering? You are using a legitimate

spacesuit radio frequency. If the Organization is monitoring this, which I doubt, they still have to decrypt the signal, which I also doubt their ability to do. As far as they are concerned you are just one of Kiera's people, while she will think you belong to the Organization. That's the beauty of this in-fighting, nobody knows what anyone else is doing around here."

"Sorry," Jed said contritely into the helmet mike.

"I'm monitoring your body functions, and your heartrate is still climbing."

That brought a shudder which rippled up from Jed's legs to make his chest quiver. "Oh Jeeze. I'll come back."

"No no, you're doing fine. Only another three hundred metres to the airlock."

"But the hellhawks are going to know!"

"Only if you don't take precautions. I think it's time we used a little chemical help here."

"I didn't bring any. We weren't supposed to need that in Valisk."

"I don't mean your underclass narcotics. The suit medical module will provide what you need."

Jed hadn't even known the suit had any medical modules. Following Rocio's instructions, he tapped out a series of orders on the wristpad. The air in the helmet changed slightly, becoming cooler, and smelling of mint. For such a small suffusion, its effect was swift. The cold massaged its way in through Jed's muscles, bringing a nearly-orgasmic sigh from his throat. It was a hit stronger than anything he'd ever scored in Koblat. His mind was being methodically purged of fright by this balmy tide of wellbeing. He held up his arms, expecting to see all his anxiety streaming out of his fingertips like liquid light.

"Not bad," he declared.

"How much did you infuse?" Rocio asked.

The hellhawk's voice came across as brittle and irritating. "What you said," Jed retorted in a fashion which demonstrated quite plainly who was occupying the lead role. A couple of the physiology icons were flashing a rather pleasing pink in front of him. Like pretty little flower buds opening, he thought.

"All right, Jed, let's keep going, shall we?"

"Sure thing, mate."

He started walking forwards again. Even the twinge in his groin was less of an issue now. That medical suffusion was good shit. The hellhawks had stopped radiating their intimidation. With his mind chilling he started to see them in a different context; grounded on their pedestals, sucking desperately at their drink. Not so much different to himself and the girls. He acquired a more confident stride as he passed the last two.

Rocio's voice started issuing directions again, guiding him in towards the airlock. Tall spires of machinery ran up the rock cliff at the back of the ledge, sprouting pipes in a crazed dendritic formation. Several small fountains of thin vapour were jetting out horizontally from junctions and micrometeorite punctures; their presence a testament to Monterey's floundering maintenance programme. Windows were set into the drab, sheered rock; long panoramic rectangles fronting departure lounges and engineering management offices. All but two were dark, reflecting weak outlines of the floodlit hellhawks. The remaining pair revealed nothing but vague shadows moving behind their frosted anti-glare shielding.

Maintenance vehicles, cargo trucks, and crew buses had been left scattered along the base of the cliff. Jed made his way through the maze they formed, thankful of the cover. The airlocks waited for him beyond, unlit tunnels leading into the asteroid. Conduits that would take him directly to

the nest of the most feared possessed in the Confederation. His trepidation rose again as he approached them. He stopped on the threshold of a personnel airlock, and used the wristpad again.

“Careful how much of that trauma suppresser you inhale,” Rocio said lightly. “It’s strong stuff, they designed it to keep you functional after an accident.”

“No worries,” Jed said earnestly. “I can handle it.”

“Very well. There’s no one in the area immediately behind the airlock. Time to go in.”

“Jed?” Beth’s voice sounded loud and high in his helmet. “Jed, can you hear me?”

“Sure, doll.”

“Okay. We’re watching the screens, too. Rocio is relaying images from the cameras inside, so we’ll look out for you, mate. And he’s right about the medical module, go easy on it, huh? I want to share some of that suffusion with you when you get back.”

Even in his tranquil state, Jed interpreted that right. He went into the airlock feeling majestic.

He took his helmet off, and took a breath of neutral air. It helped to clear his head a bit, not so much euphoria, but none of the fright, either. Good enough. Rocio gave him a whole string of directions to follow, and he started off cautiously down the corridor.

The store room for crew supplies wasn’t far from the airlock, naturally enough. Rocio had been keeping a careful watch on things, seeing what happened when other hellhawks came to dock. Several of his bitek comrades still had crew on board. The combat wasps they carried required activation codes, and following standard security procedures, Kiera and Capone had split the codes between loyalists. No one person could fire them. It was a significant point that she hadn’t asked Rocio to carry any.

Jed found the door Rocio nominated, and pulled back the clamps. Cold air breezed out, turning his breath to foggy streamers. Inside, the room was split into aisles by long free-standing shelves. Despite the Organization's claim that normalizing food production on New California was a priority, there weren't many packs left. Processing food for the space industry was a specialist business; ideally, everything had to be crumbs-free, taste-strengthened, and packaged in minimum volume. Leroy Octavius had decided that restarting the kitchen facilities of the relevant companies wasn't cost effective. Consequently, fleet crews had been making do with old stocks and standard pre-packed meals.

"What's there?" Beth asked impatiently. There were no cameras actually in the store room, Rocio had to go on what he'd seen being taken in and out.

Jed walked down the aisles, brushing the frost dust off various labels. "Plenty," he muttered. Providing you liked yoghurt, mint potato cakes, cheese and tomato flans (dehydrated in sachets that looked like fat biscuits), blackcurrant and apple mousse concentrate; complemented with hot-frozen cubes of broccoli, spinach, carrot, and sprouts.

"Oh bugger."

"What's the matter?" Rocio asked.

"Nothing. The boxes are heavy, that's all. We're going to have a real party when I get this lot back to the ship."

"Are there any chocolate oranges?" Gari piped up.

"I'll have a look, sweetheart," Jed lied. He went back out into the corridor to fetch a trolley which had been abandoned just along from the store room. It ought to fit through the airlock, which meant he could use that to transport everything back to the *Mindori*. Then they'd all have to be carried up the stairs to the life support module's airlock. It was going to be a long hard day.

“Somebody coming,” Rocio announced after Jed had got a dozen boxes out of the store room and onto the trolley.

Jed stopped dead, hugging a box of compressed rye chips. “Who?” he hissed.

“Not sure. Camera image isn’t too good. Small guy.”

“Where is he?” Jed dropped the box, wincing at the sound.

“A hundred metres away. But heading your way.”

“Oh Jeeze. Is he possessed?”

“Unknown.”

Jed shot across the storage room and closed the door. Nothing he could do about the damning trolley outside, though. His heart began yammering as he flattened himself against the wall beside the door—as if that made a difference.

“Still coming,” Rocio announced calmly. “Seventy metres now.”

Jed’s hand crept down to the utility pocket on his hip. Fingers flicked the seal catch, and he dug inside. His hand closed around the cold, reassuring grip of the laser pistol.

“Thirty metres. He’s coming to the junction with your corridor.”

Don’t look at the bloody trolley, Jed prayed. Christ, please don’t.

He drew the laser pistol out, and studied the simple controls for a second. Switched modes to constant beam, full power. Repeater was no good, a possessed would be able to screw with the electrics inside while he was shooting. He was only going to have one chance.

“He’s in the corridor. I think he’s seen the trolley. Stopping just outside.”

Jed closed his eyes, shaking badly. A possessed would be able to sense his thoughts. They would all be hauled off to

face Capone. He would be tortured and Beth would get sent to the brothel.

I should have left the door open, that way I could have sprung out and surprised them.

“Hello?” a voice called. It was very high pitched, almost a girl.

“Is that them?” he whispered to his suit mike.

“Yes. He’s examined the trolley. Now by the door.”

The locking clamp moved, slowly hinging back. Jed stared at it in dread, desperate for one last hit from the suit’s medical module.

If the laser doesn’t work, I’ll kill myself, he decided. Better that . . .

“Hello?” the high voice sounded timid. “Is someone there?”

The door started to open.

“Hello?”

Jed shouted in fury, and jumped from the wall. Holding the laser pistol in a double handed grip, he spun round and fired out into the corridor. Webster Pryor was saved by two things: his own diminutive height, and Jed’s quite abysmal aim.

The red strand of laserlight was quite brilliant compared to the corridor lighting. It left Jed squinting against the glare, trying to see what he was shooting at. Blue-white flames and black smoke were squirting out of the corridor wall opposite, tracing a meandering line in the composite. Then the smoke stopped, and a spray of molten metal rained down. He was slicing through a conditioning duct.

He did—just—see a small man dive to the floor at his feet as the laser slashed round in search of a target. There was a yell of panic, and someone was screaming: “Don’t shoot me don’t shoot me!” in a high pitched voice.

Jed yelled himself. Confused all to hell what was hap-

pening. Tentatively, he took his finger off the laser's trigger. Metal creaked alarmingly as the duct sagged around the dripping gap in its side. He looked down at the figure in the white jacket and black trousers grovelling on the floor. "What in Christ's name is going on? Who are you?"

A terrified face was looking up at him. It wasn't a bloke, just a kid. "Please don't kill me," Webster pleaded. "Please. I don't want to be one of them. They're horrible."

"What's happening?" Rocio asked.

"Not sure," Jed mumbled. He took a look down the corridor. All clear.

"Was that a laser?"

"Yeah." He aimed it down at Webster. "Are you possessed?"

"No. Are you?"

"Course bloody not."

"Well I didn't know," Webster wailed.

"How did you get a weapon?" Rocio asked.

"Shut up! Jeeze, give me a break. I just got one, okay?"

Webster was frowning through his tears. "What?"

"Nothing." Jed hesitated, then put the laser pistol back in his utility pocket. The kid looked harmless; though the waiter's jacket with its brass buttons which he wore, along with his oil-slicked hair, was a little odd. But he was more scared than anything else. "Who are you?"

The story came out in broken sentences, punctuated by sobs. How Webster and his mother had been caught up in Capone's take-over. How they'd been held in one of the asteroid's halls with hundreds of other women and children. How some Organization woman came searching them out from the rest. How he'd been separated from his mother and put to work serving drinks and food for the gangster bosses and a peculiar, very pretty, lady. How he kept hear-

ing Capone and the lady mention his father's name, and then glance in his direction.

"What are you doing down here?" Jed asked.

"They sent me for some food," Webster said. "The cook told me to find out if there were any swans left in storage."

"This is the spacecraft section," Jed said. "Didn't you know?"

Webster sniffled loudly. "Yes. But if I look everywhere, I could stay away from them for a while."

"Right." He straightened, and found one of the small camera lenses. "What do we do?" he asked, flustered by the boy's tale.

"Get rid of him," Rocio said curtly.

"What do you mean?"

"He's a complication. You've got the laser pistol, haven't you?"

Webster was looking up at him passively, eyes red-rimmed from the tears. All mournful and beat; the way not so long ago Jed had looked at Digger when the pain was at its worst.

"I can't do that!" Jed exclaimed.

"What do you need, a note from your mother? Listen to me, Jed, the second he steps within range of a possessed, they'll know something's happened to him. Then they'll come looking for you. They'll get you, and Beth, and the girls."

"No way. I can't. I just can't. Not even if I wanted to."

"So what are you going to do instead?"

"I don't know! Beth? Beth, have you been switched on to all this?"

"Yes, Jed," she replied. "You're not to touch that boy. We've got plenty of food, now, so bring him back with you. He can come with us."

“Really?” Rocio enquired disdainfully. “And where’s his spacesuit? How’s he supposed to get out to me?”

Jed looked at Webster, thoroughly disconcerted. This whole situation was just getting worse and worse. “For Christ’s sake, just get me out of this.”

“Stop being an arsehole,” Beth snapped. “It’s bloody obvious, you’ll have to steal one of the vehicles. There’s plenty of them about. I can see some of them docked to the airlocks close to where you went in. Take one and drive it over to us.”

Jed wanted to curl up into a ball and take a decent hit. A vehicle! In full view of this whole nest of possessed.

“Please Jed, come back,” Gari entreated. “I don’t like it here without you.”

“All right, doll,” he said, too bushed to kick up an argument. “On my way.” He rounded on Webster. “And you’d better not be any trouble.”

“You’re going to take me away?” the boy asked in wonder.

“Sort of, yeah.”

Jed didn’t bother about collecting any more food from the shelves. He just started pushing the trolley, making sure Webster was in sight the whole time.

Rocio reviewed the camera images and schematic data available to him, and quickly devised a route to one of the docking ledge vehicles. It meant the two of them taking a lift up to the lounge level, which he didn’t like. But pre-viewing enabled him to hurry them past the sections where crews were still working without incident.

The vehicle he’d chosen for them was a small taxi with a five-seater cab. Large enough to take the trolley, and simple enough for Jed to drive. He was back at the *Mindori* three minutes after disengaging from the airlock. It actually took him longer than that to match the taxi’s docking tube with

the starship's life support module hatch. Once the tube was locked and pressurized, Beth, Gari, and Navar came rushing in to greet the returning hero. Beth put her hands on either side of his face and gave him a long kiss. "I'm proud of you," she said.

That wasn't something she'd ever told him before, and she didn't hand out platitudes, either. Of course, today had been full of not merely the unusual, but the positively weird. However, the words left him warm and uncertain. The moment was only slightly spoiled when the two younger girls started reading labels and found out what he'd brought back.

It had taken the Monterey Hilton's head chef over three hours to prepare the meal. A dozen or so senior lieutenants and their partners had been invited to an evening with Al and Jezzibella. Pasta with a sauce that was at least as good as they used to make on Earth (supervised by Al), swan stuffed with fish, fresh vegetables boosted up from the planet that afternoon, desserts heavy on chocolate and calories, matured cheeses, the finest wines New California could produce, the fanciest liqueurs. As well as the food, there was a five-piece band, and some showgirls for later. Guests would also receive items of twenty-four carat jewellery (genuine, not energistic baubles), personally selected by Al himself. The evening was intended to be memorable. Nobody left Al Capone's party without a smile on their face. His reputation as a wild and exuberant host had to be preserved, after all.

What Al didn't know was that Leroy had to be taken off Organization administration duties in order to make the arrangements. He'd spent over an hour calling senior Organization personnel to facilitate the ingredients and people necessary to make the party work. That bothered the obese

manager. The picture he and Emmet were getting from various lieutenants and city bosses down on the surface was a smooth one, things falling neatly into place, people doing as they were told. But not so long ago, when the fleet left for Arnstat, Leroy had put together a grand ball in under a week. A time when the planet and high-orbit asteroids had fought for the privilege of supplying Al with the best of anything they had. This party was a fraction of that scale and a multiple of the effort.

However, despite the grudging donations, the Nixon suite's dining room was an impressive and dramatic example of lavishness when Leroy finally arrived, immaculate tuxedo straining around his huge frame. One of the more lissom girls from the brothel was on his arm; the pair of them a gross example of human glandular divergence. Heads turned to look at him when they arrived together. Silent calculations were quickly performed when a smiling Al greeted them, and handed the girl a diamond necklace which even her cleavage couldn't devour. No snide remarks were ventured, though the mind-tones said it all.

Monterey was out of the umbra again, heading into the light. Outside the broad window, New California's green and blue crescent gleamed warmly. It was a sumptuous atmosphere for the pre-dinner drinks, and the atmosphere was suitably relaxed. Waiters circulated with gold and silver trays of canapés, making sure no glass was ever in danger of heading towards half empty. Conversation flowed, and Al circulated with grace, showing no favouritism.

His mood didn't even falter when Kiera showed up an easy fifteen minutes after everyone else. She wore a provocatively simple sleeveless summer dress of some thin mauve fabric, cut to emphasise her figure. On a girl of her body's age it would have been charmingly guileless, on her it was a declaration of all-out fashion war against the other

females in the room. Only Jezzibella in the ever-classic little black cocktail number looked snazzier. And by the bright cherub's smile she used to welcome Kiera, she knew it.

"Al, darling," Kiera's smile was wide and sweltering as she kissed Al's cheek. "Great party, thanks for the invite."

For a second, Al worried her teeth might be going for his jugular. Her thoughts bristled with an icy superiority. "Wouldn't be the same without you," he told her. Jeeze, and to think he'd once considered her a possible lay. His wang would get so cold inside her, it'd snap clean off.

The notion made him shiver. He beckoned to one of the waiters. The guy must have been in his nineties, one of those dignified old coots that were perfect as butlers. Young Webster should have been doing this job, Al thought, it would have made for a cuter image. But he hadn't seen the boy all evening. The old man wobbled forwards obediently, carrying a tray of black velvet with a shimmering sapphire cobweb necklace resting on it.

"For me?" Kiera simpered. "Oh, how lovely."

Al took the necklace off the tray and slowly fastened it round her neck, ignoring her lecherous smirk at his proximity.

"It's so nice to see you here," Jezzibella said, clinging to Al's arm. "We weren't sure if you could spare the time."

"I've always got time for Al."

"That's nice to hear. Keeping the hellhawks in line must take up a big part of your day."

"I don't have any trouble coping. They know I'm in charge of them."

"Yeah, you got some interesting moves, there," Al said. "Emmet was full of praise for what you did. Said it was smart. Coming from him, that's quite a compliment. I'll

have to remember them in case I'm ever in a similar situation."

Kiera removed a champagne saucer from one of the waiters, her gaze searched the room like a targeting laser until she found Emmet. "You won't be in a similar situation, Al. I'm covering that flank for you. Very thoroughly."

Jezzibella morphed into her hero-worshipping early-teens persona. "Covering for Al?" her high girlish voice piped.

"Yes. Who else?"

"Come on, Jez," Al grinned in mock-rebuke. "There ain't no one else in the market for hellhawks, you know that."

"I do." Jezzibella looked up adoringly at him, and sighed.

"And without me, there's no reason for New California to keep supporting them," Al said.

Kiera's attention moved back from Emmet. "Believe me, I'm very aware of everyone's position. And their worth."

"That's nice," Jezzibella said blandly.

"Enjoy your drink, babe," Al said, and patted Kiera's arm. "I got a small announcement to make before we sit down to eat." He marched over to Emmet, and signalled the head waiter to bang a gong. The room fell silent, people picking up on the focused excitement in Al's mind. "This ain't the usual kind of speech to make at table. I ain't got no stag jokes, for a start."

Faithful smiles switched on all around. Al took another sip of champagne—damn, but he wanted a shot of decent bourbon. "All right, I ain't gonna bullshit around with you. We got problems with the fleet, on account of it ain't got nowhere to go. You know how it is, we gotta keep momentum going or the boys'll go sour on us. That right, Silvano?"

The brooding lieutenant nodded scrupulously. "Some of

the guys are getting close to the boil, sure, Al. Nothing we can't keep a lid on."

"I don't wanna keep no fucking lid on nothing. We gotta give the bastards something to do while we build up stocks of antimatter. We can't take over no planet again, not for a while. So we're gonna hit the Confederation from another angle. That's what I got for you, something new. This way we cause them one fuck of a lot of damage, and don't get hurt ourselves. And we got Emmet here to thank for that." He put his arm round the Organization's reluctant technology expert, and gave him a friendly hug. "We're gonna launch some raids on other planets, and break through their space fort defences. Once we've done that, we can sling a whole load of our guys down to the surface. Tell them, Emmet."

"I've done some preliminary designs for one-man atmospheric entry pods," Emmet said in a tense voice. "They're based on standard escape boats, but they can descend in under fifteen minutes. That's high gees for whoever's inside, but with our energistic strength it shouldn't be a problem. And they're simple enough, that we shouldn't screw up the guidance electronics. All the fleet has to do is create a window in the SD coverage long enough for them to get down. Once they're on the ground, the good old exponential curve comes into play."

"Without the fleet firepower to back them up, they'll lose," Dwight said bluntly. "The local cops will wipe them out."

"It depends on how together the planet is, and how many soldiers we can shove down there," Al said, untroubled. "Emmet's right about how fast we can expand. That's gonna cause the governments a shitload of grief."

"But, Al, the Organization can't expand as fast as ordinary possessed. We've got to have time to let Harwood and

his guys vet the souls that're coming back. Christ, we've had enough trouble with loyalty on New California, let alone Arnstat. If we don't have committed lieutenants, the Organization'll fall apart."

"Who gives a shit?" Al laughed round at the startled expressions. "Come on, you guys! Just how many goddamn planets do you think we can run? Even the King of Kulu's only got half a dozen. If I gave all you dopeheads one apiece to be emperor of, that still leaves hundreds of free ones left out there to screw with us. We gotta start levelling the odds, here. I say shoot possessed down to the surface and let the fuckers run loose. We can use all our hotheads from here, all the crap artists who wanna take New California out of the universe, send them, get rid of the assholes permanently. That way we're solving two problems at once. Fewer traitors here, and planets dropping out of the Confederation. You retards grabbed what that'll mean yet? It means less hassle for us. Every planet we hit is gonna scream to the navy for the same kinda help Mortonridge is getting. That'll cost them plenty to provide. Money they can't spend dicking with us." He looked round the room, knowing he'd won them over. Again. His face reddened with the heat of victory, three tiny white lines proud on his cheek. That reluctant admiration he'd kindled in them proving he was the man with the plan, and the balls to see it through.

Al raised his glass high in triumph. And it was like a room full of krauts doing their knee-jerk fascist salute as the others held their own glasses up, fast. Jezzibella winked impishly at him from behind the back row, while Kiera's face was drawn as she considered the implications.

"A toast. Goodbye to that goddamn pain in the ass Confederation."

The *Mindori's* distortion field expanded outwards in a specific pattern of swirls, generating ripples in the fabric of space-time. They pushed against the hull, lifting it from the pedestal in a simple, smooth motion. Inside the large forward lounge, none of the six passengers noticed even a quiver in the apparent gravity field. They'd just finished their meal of mashed turkey granules, which was the only meat product Beth could hammer into a burger shape. Jed was ignoring the sullen stares that were getting flashed his way. Turkey wasn't so bad after it had been grilled.

Gerald Skibbow looked up at the lounge's big screen as the edge of the docking ledge slipped towards them. "Where are we going?" he asked.

Webster twitched in surprise, it was the first time he'd heard Gerald speak. The others stared at him, slightly nervous of what would follow. Even now, after all this time, he was still nutty Gerald to them. Rocio had privately confided to Jed and Beth he couldn't make any sense of Gerald's thoughts at all.

A small picture of Rocio's face appeared in one corner of the screen. "I've been given a patrol flight vector," he said. "It's not a very demanding one, we'll never be more than three million kilometres from New California. I suspect it's a trial to see if I do as I'm told. I have just filled my reserve bladders with nutrient fluid, if I was going to leave, now would be an obvious time."

"Are you going to?" Beth asked.

"No. The only place to go is the Edenist habitats and the Confederation. The price for their sanctuary would be co-operating with their physicists. And that would ultimately lead to the defeat of the possessed. I told you before, I need to find other options."

"I don't want to leave Monterey," Gerald said. The screen was now showing the asteroid's counter-rotating

spaceport receding at a considerable speed. "Please go back and let me disembark."

"Can't do that, Gerald, mate," Beth said. "Them possessed, they'd spot you inside Monterey in a flash. Give the whole game away. We'd all wind up like Marie, that way, and they'd punish Rocio, too."

"I will assist you with Kiera in whatever way I can," Rocio said. "But first, I must establish myself as one of her servile flock."

Beth reached over and gripped Gerald's arm. "We can wait that long, eh?"

Gerald considered her words; although he was sure his thoughts were taking longer to form these days. There was a time when he could give an instant reply to any topic or question. That Gerald existed only in his mind now, a memory that was hard to find and difficult to see. "All right," he said. It was a tough concession to make. To have been so close to *her*. Just a few hundred metres. And now having to leave, to abandon her. It would probably be days until they could return. Days darling Marie would have to spend enduring the torment of that terrible woman's control. The notions of what she would get up to with her captive flesh were horrible. Marie was a lovely little girl, so pretty. Always had lots of boyfriends, which he'd tried not to get upset and protective over. Back on Lalonde, sex seemed the only thing the possessed were interested in. And like every father since the dawn of civilization, Marie's sexuality was the one thing Gerald never dared dwell upon.

It would be that, he admitted in his dark heart. Night after night, Kiera would allow some man to run his hands over her. Would laugh and groan at the abuse. Would demand hot physical violations. Bodies writhing together in the darkness. Beautiful, strong bodies. Gerald whimpered softly.

"You okay?" Beth asked. Beside her, Jed was frowning.

“Fine,” Gerald whispered. His hands were rubbing his perspiring forehead, trying to massage the pain inside. “I just want to help her. And if I could just get to her, I know I could. Loren said so, you see.”

“We’ll be back there in no time, okay, no worries.”

He nodded lamely, returning to pick at the food they’d given him. He had to get to Marie soon. He was sorry about everyone else’s predicament, but what Marie was suffering was unspeakable. Next time they landed at Monterey, he decided, it would be different. No details, but definitely different.

Rocio was aware of Gerald’s ardent, fractured anxiety sinking back under calmer emotions. That man’s mind was a complete enigma. Not that Rocio actually wanted to be privy to such tortured thoughts. Shame that he couldn’t convince Beth and Jed to stay on board by themselves. This entourage of people were making his position more complicated. Ideally, he’d like to winnow the numbers down again.

Now that he was clear of the asteroid, he began to accelerate. Modifying the distortion field to generate ever-more powerful ripples in space-time. He surfed them at seven gees, a secondary manipulation alleviating the force around the life support section. As the sense of freedom rose in tandem with his speed, he allowed his dreamform to blossom. Dark wings slowly spread wide, sweeping eagerly, sending motes of interplanetary dust swirling in his wake. He shook his neck, blinking huge red eyes, flexing his talons. In this state, he was perfectly at one with himself and life. It reaffirmed the conviction that Kiera’s hold over himself and his comrades must be broken.

He began talking to the other hellhawks, probing for emotional nuances. Building a pattern of those who thought as he did. Of the seventy currently in the New California

system, he thought there were possibly nineteen he could count on for open support, another ten would probably side with him if things looked favourable. Several were playing it very coy, while eight or nine, led by Etchells and Cameron Leung, revelled in the prospect of following the Organization fleet into glory. Good enough odds.

Eight hours into his patrol, Hudson Proctor delivered new instructions. **There's an interplanetary ship decelerating towards New California, Kiera's lieutenant said. Coming straight in along the south pole, one and a half million kilometres out. We think it's come from the Almaden asteroid. Can you sense it?**

Rocio expanded his distortion field, probing where Proctor indicated. The ship slithered into his perception as a tight kink of mass, alive with energy.

Got it, he acknowledged.

Intercept them, and order them to return.

Are they hostile?

I doubt it. Probably just another bunch of idiots who think they can live where they want instead of where the Organization tells them.

Understood. And if they don't want to return?

Blow them to shit. Any questions?

No.

Rocio changed the distortion field again, concentrating it on a small area just ahead of his beak. Power surged through his patterning cells, and the stress he was applying leapt towards infinite. A wormhole interstice opened, and he shot through, emerging from the terminus less than two seconds later. It folded neatly behind his tailfeathers, returning local space-time to its usual consonance.

The interplanetary ship was three kilometres away, a long silk-grey splinter of metal and composite. Standard configuration of barrel-shaped life support module sepa-

rated from the drive section by a lattice tower. It was decelerating at two thirds of a gee, blue-white fusion flame spearing cleanly from its exhaust. Rocio was also aware of another wormhole terminus opening five thousand kilometres away. A hellhawk slid out, deflating its distortion field immediately, and drifting inert. He resisted the temptation to hail it. Shadowing him in such a fashion to monitor his conduct was very unsubtle.

A radar pulse triggered the ship's transponder: according to the code it was called the *Lucky Logorn*. Rocio matched velocities with it, and opened a short-range channel. "This is the Organization ship *Mindori*," he told them. "You're approaching New California's Strategic Defence network without clearance. Please identify yourself."

"This is Deebank, I guess I'm the captain around here. We haven't been advertising our presence in case we attracted those goddamn voidhawks. Sorry about that, didn't mean to give you a scare. We'd like clearance to rendezvous with a low orbit station."

"Clearance refused. Return to your asteroid."

"Now just a goddamn minute, we're loyal members of the Organization here. What gives you the right to order us about?"

Rocio activated a maser cannon on his lower hull, and targeted one of the thermo-dump panels plumbed into *Lucky Logorn*'s equipment bay. "One. I'm not ordering you, I'm relaying an instruction from the Organization. Two." He fired.

The blast of coherent maser radiation thumped a half-metre hole into the middle of the thermo-dump panel. Fluorescent orange shards spun away, their glimmer slowly fading to black.

"Fuck you," Deebank shouted. "You bastards can't keep us out here forever."

“Realign your drive. Now. My second shot will be through your fusion tube. You’ll be left drifting out here. The only thing you’ll have to occupy yourselves with is a sweepstake. Is your food going to run out first? Or will it be the air? Then again, a voidhawk might pick you up, and you get used as research lab beasts by the Confederation.”

“You piece of shit.”

“I’m waiting.” Rocio slid closer, picking up the resentment and anger boiling through the eight people in the life support section. There was bitter resignation in there, too.

Sure enough, the fusion drive plume twitched round, sending *Lucky Logorn* on a shallow arc which would ultimately see it heading back to Almaden. Cancelling so much delta-V was a long, energy expensive business. It would take them hours.

“We’re going to remember you,” Deebank promised. “Time will come when you need to join us. Don’t expect it to be easy.”

“Join you where?” Rocio asked, genuinely curious.

“On a planet, dick-for-brains.”

“Is that what this was all about? Your fear of space?”

“What the hell did you think we were doing? Invading?”

“I wasn’t told.”

“Okay. So now you understand, will you let us through?”

“I can’t.”

“Bastard.”

Rocio played for the sympathy angle, marshalling his thoughts into contrite concern. “I mean it. There’s another hellhawk shadowing me, making sure I do what I’m told. They’re not certain about my commitment to the cause, you see.”

“Hear that splashing sound? That’s my heart bleeding.”

“Why doesn’t the Organization want you on New California?”

“Because they need the products Almaden makes in its industrial stations. The asteroid has plenty of astroengineering companies who specialise in weapons systems. And we’re the poor saps who have to terrorise non-possessed technicians into keeping them running. You got any idea what that’s like? It’s a crock of shit. I was a soldier when I was alive, I used to fight the kind of fascists who enslaved people like this. I’m telling you, it ain’t right. It ain’t what I was brought up to do. None of this is.”

“Then why stay in the Organization?”

“If you ain’t for Capone, you’re against him. That’s the way it works. He’s been real smart the way he’s set things up. Those lieutenants of his will do anything to keep their position. They put the screws on us, and we have to put the screws on the non-possessed. If there’s any trouble, if we start to object, or get uppity, they just call on the fleet for back up. Don’t they? You’re the enforcers, you make it all hang together for him.”

“We have our own enforcer, she’s called Kiera.”

“The Deadnight babe? No shit? I wouldn’t mind submitting my poor body to some enforcement by her.” Laughter rumbled across the gap between the ships.

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d ever met her.”

“Tough bitch, huh?”

“The worst.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that.”

“You and I are in the same situation.”

“Yeah? So listen, maybe we can come to some kind of arrangement? I mean, if we have to go back to Almaden, the lieutenants are going to make us eat shit for pulling this stunt. Why don’t you take us back to New California, let us off at a low orbit station, or if you’ve got a spaceplane we could use that. If we get down there to the surface, we stay. Believe me. There’d be no comeback.”

“Fine for you.”

“We’ll get you a body. A human one, the very best there is. There’s millions of non-possessed left on the planet; we’ll get one ready for possession and hold it for you. This way you get down there without any of the risk we’ll be going through. Listen, you can sense I’m telling the truth. Right?”

“Yes. But it doesn’t interest me.”

“What? Why not? Come on! It’s the greatest deal in town.”

“Not for me. You people really hate this empty universe, don’t you?”

“Oh, like you don’t? You were in the beyond. You can hear the beyond. It’s always there, just one step away on the other side from night. We have to get away from that.”

“I don’t.”

“Crap.”

“But I don’t. Really. Certainly I can still hear the lost souls, but it’s not as if they can touch me. All they are is a reminder of that nothingness. They’re not a threat themselves. Fear is the only thing that drives you to escape. I’ve got over that. *Mindori* belongs here in the emptiness, this is its perfect milieu. Having this construct as my host has taught me not to be afraid. Perhaps it should be you who try and find blackhawk and voidhawk bodies? Can you imagine that? It would solve everyone’s problem, without all this conflict and violence. If after you die, you were to be given a voidhawk body to possess. Enough could be grown for the lost souls, I’m sure of it, given time and commitment. Then ultimately, space would become filled with billions of us, the entire human race transformed into dark angels flitting between the stars.”

“Hey, pal, know what? Possessing that monster didn’t cure you, it made you take a swan dive over the edge.”

“Perhaps. But which of us is content?”

“You got Kiera to worry about. Remember? How come you don’t flap off into the sunset?”

“As you say, Kiera is a problem.”

“Right, so don’t come over all superior.”

“I wasn’t. Your offer to deal interests me. It may be possible to come to some arrangement. I have a notion, but it’ll take some time to check the requirements. Once you’re back on Almaden, I’ll look you up.”

Coming down to the gym in the Hilton’s basement always stirred Kiera’s darker animal feelings. She rather enjoyed her new role of laid back vamp, letting her eye wander over the young men being put through their paces by a gruff Malone. Their apprehension was pleasurable as they saw her watching, the nudges and worried glances. It wasn’t that she’d never had affairs back on New Munich, she’d taken several lovers during her marriage, both before and after her husband’s fall from grace. But they’d all been insipid, cautious encounters. Most of the thrill had come from the concept of having an affair, of cheating and not getting caught. The sex had never been anything special.

Now though, she was free to explore her sexuality to the full, with no one to disapprove or condemn. Part of her allure came from being a woman in power, she was a challenge to any male; the rest came from Marie Skibbow’s gorgeous body. It was the second factor which brought her down here to the non-possessed. Possessed lovers, like poor old Stanyon, were so artificial. Men inevitably gave themselves big penises, could stay erect all night, had Greek-god bodies. Strutting clichés, that spoke volumes about their weaknesses and insecurities.

She much preferred the youngsters from the gym for the reality they provided. Unable to hide behind any mental or

physical illusion, sex with them was raw and primitive. Dominating them in bed, without a single inhibition, was utterly delicious. And Marie herself had a surprising amount of knowledge which Kiera could extract and experiment with. Despised memories and skill gained during a long river journey spent capitulating to an old man called Len Buchanan. Enduring the nightly humiliation for one reason alone, the freedom which waited at the end of the river. The girl had a single minded determination which Kiera quite admired. It came close to her own. Even now, captive and tragic, inside her mental prison, Marie clung to the notion of deliverance.

But how? Kiera wondered lightly.

Somehow. One day.

Not with me in command of you.

Nothing lasts forever. As *you* know.

Kiera dismissed the impudent girl from her thoughts with a derisory mental sneer. Her gaze found a rather delicious nineteen-year-old hammering his fists into a long leather punch bag. The desperate aggression and sweating muscles were highly arousing. He knew she was standing behind him, but refused to turn. Hoping if he avoided eye contact she would pass by. She crooked a finger at Malone, who came over reluctantly.

“What’s his name?” she asked huskily.

“Jamie.” The squat trainer’s thoughts were full of contempt.

“Are you frightened of me, Jamie?”

He stopped punching, steadying the bag. Gentle grey eyes stared at her levelly. “You, no. What you can do, yeah.”

She applauded languidly. “Very good. Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you.” She glanced down at Malone. “I’ll bring him back to you in the morning.”

Malone took his cap off, and spat on the floor. "Whatever you say, Kiera."

She walked right up to Jamie, enjoying his discomfort at her proximity. "Oh dear, I'm not that bad am I?" she murmured.

He was a head taller than her. When he looked down, his eyes were drawn the rich tanned skin revealed by her mauve summer dress. Embarrassment warred with other, more subtle emotions. Kiera grinned in victory. At least something was going right tonight. Capone and his damn sedition plans! She took his big hand in hers, and began to lead him out of the gym like a giant puppy. Before she reached the double doors, they swung open. Luigi barged through, carrying a pile of towels. He caught sight of Kiera, and glared angrily. Commander of the fleet, now running trivial demeaning errands for the nonentity Malone. The resentment twisting him up was almost strong enough to manifest itself as pernicious violence; he was sure she was here simply to witness his humiliation first hand. The boss's new favourite gloating over her ex-rival's downfall.

"Luigi," Kiera said brightly. "Fancy seeing you here. How wonderful."

"Piss off, bitch." He elbowed past her, scowling.

"After the towels, will you be going down on your knees to tie up their shoes?"

Luigi twisted in mid step, and marched back to her. He thrust his head forward so their noses were touching. "You're a whore. A very cheap whore. With only one thing to sell. When the Organization has used up your hellhawks, you'll be nothing. Best thing is, you know it's coming. Your bullshit ice empress routine doesn't fool anyone. This whole damn asteroid is laughing at you."

"Of course it's coming," she said serenely. "But they wouldn't be used up if the fleet was commanded properly."

Confusion marred his face and his thoughts. "What?"

That uncertainty was enough for Kiera. She patted Jamie's heavily muscled forearm. "Why don't you take those heavy towels from Luigi, darling. It looks like I won't be needing you tonight, after all."

Jamie peered over the pile of towels unexpectedly dumped in his arms, watching the doors close behind Kiera and Luigi. "I don't get it," he complained. Part of him had actually been quite looking forward to the sex, despite what the others kept saying about the Deadnight witch.

Malone patted the big lad's shoulder in a paternal fashion. "Don't worry about it, my boy. You're well off out of that kind of scene."

Given Dr Pierce Gilmore's senior position within the CNIS's scientific staff, weapons analysis division, it was inevitable that a large part of his nature tended towards the bureaucratic. Precise and methodical in his work, he believed strongly in following sanctioned procedures to the letter during his investigations. Such adherence to protocol was something of a joke among his department's junior staff, who accused him of inflexibility and lack of imagination. He endured their behind-his-back humour stoically, while politely and consistently refusing to take short cuts and play up to wild hunches. To his credit, it was exactly the kind of leadership the weapons division needed. Eternal patience is a prime requisite in the dismantling of unknown weapons that have been designed illegally (mostly under government patronage) and tend to incorporate elements that actively discourage close examination. In the seven years he'd held his post, the division's safety record was exemplary.

Also to his credit, he didn't indulge in the usual internal empire building so beloved of government employees, es-

pecially those who, like him, were essentially unaccountable. As a result, his office was a modest one, roughly equivalent to the entitlement of a middle manager in some multistellar company. There were few personal items, some ornaments and desktop solid images; a shelf of Stanhopea orchids flourishing under a slim solaris tube. The furniture was formal, a comfortable reproduction of the flared dark-wood Midwest-ethnic style he'd grown up with. Broad holographic windows of Cheyenne's heroically rugged countryside did little to disguise the room's actual location, buried deep inside Trafalgar. In its favour, the electronic suite Gilmore had installed was a top-of-the range Edenist processor array verging on AI status. Such a system helped facilitate the twice weekly multi-disciplinary councils he chaired to investigate the capabilities of the possessed.

This was the second time the team heads had met since Jacqueline Couteur had made her bid for freedom in maximum security court three, and the aftermath was still affecting everyone's mood. Professor Nowak, the quantum physicist, was first to arrive, helping himself to some of the coffee from the percolator jug which Gilmore kept going full time. Dr Hemmatu, the energy specialist, and Yusuf, the electronics chief, came in together talking in low tones. They gave Gilmore a perfunctory nod and sat down at the conference desk. Mattox was next, the neurology doctor keeping to himself as usual, choosing a chair one along the desk from Yusuf. Euru completed the group, sitting directly opposite Gilmore. In contrast to the rest of them, the dark-skinned Edenist appeared almost indecently happy.

Gilmore had known his deputy long enough to see it wasn't just the usual contentment which all Edenists shared. "You have something?" he enquired.

"A voidhawk has just arrived from the Sinagra system. It was carrying an interesting recording."

Hemmatu perked up. "From Valisk?" The independent habitat had supplied a large amount of very useful data on the behaviour of the possessed before it vanished.

"Yes, just before Rubra and Dariat took it away," Euru said, smiling broadly. He instructed his bitek processor block to datavise the file to them.

The sensewise they received was a strange one, lacking the resolution normally associated with full nerve channel input. Conversions from Edenist habitat memories to a standard Adamist electronic format were notoriously quirky, but this was something else again. Nesting within its environment of pastel colours, tenuous scents, and mild tactorials, Gilmore tried bravely to avoid using the connotation: spectral. He failed dismally.

The memory was of Dariat, while he bobbed about on the surface of some icy water inside a dark polyp-walled tube. The cold was severe enough to penetrate even his energistic protection, judging by the way it was numbing his appropriated limbs, and making him shiver. A plump black woman clung to him, shaking violently inside her strange waistcoat of cushions.

Did you gain any impression of size? the Kohistan Consensus asked Dariat.

Not really, a universe is a universe. How big is this one?

Consensus received his quick recollection of the beyond. His soul had become a feeble flicker of identity adrift in a nowhere at one remove from reality. Nowhere full of similar souls; all of them with the same craving, the sensations available on the other side.

The memory of someone else's memory: if the sensenvi-ron of the Valisk starscraper waste tube was tenuous, this was as insubstantial as a nearly-forgotten dream. The beyond, as far as Dariat was concerned, lacked any physical

sensation, all that betrayed its presence was a transparent tapestry of emotions. Anguish and yearning flooded through the realm Souls clustered round, desperately suckling at his memories for the illusion of physical sensation they contained.

Confusion and fear reigned in Dariat's mind. He wanted to flee. He wanted to plunge into the glorious star of sensation burning so bright as Kiera and Stanyon forced open a path into Horgan's body. The beyond withered behind him as he surged along the tear through the barrier between planes of existence.

And how do you control the energistic power? Consensus asked.

Dariat gave them a visualization (perfectly clear this time) of desire overlaying actuality. More handsome features, thicker hair, brighter clothes. Like a hologram projection, but backed up by energy oozing out of the beyond to shore it up, providing solidity. Also, the destructive power, a mental thunderbolt, aimed and thrown amid boiling passion. The rush of energy from the beyond increasing a thousandfold, sizzling through the possessed body like an electric charge.

What about senses? This ESP faculty you have? The world around him altered, shifting to slippery shadows.

There were several more questions and observations on the nature of Dariat's state, which the rebel possessor did his best to answer. In total, the recording amounted to over fifteen minutes.

"Wealth indeed," Gilmore said when it ended. "This kind of clarification is just what we need to pursue a solution. It seemed to me as though Dariat actually had some freedom of movement in the beyond. To my mind, that implies physical dimensions."

"A strange sort of space," Nowak said. "From the way

the souls were pressed close enough to overlap, there appeared to be very little of it. I won't call it a place, but it's definitely a unified area. It was almost a closed continuum, yet we know it exists in parallel to our own universe, so it must have infinite depth. That's damn close to being paradoxical." He shrugged, disturbed by his own reasoning.

"That perception ability Dariat demonstrated interests me," Euru commented. "The effect is remarkably similar to a voidhawk's mass perception sense."

Gilmore looked across his desk to the tall Edenist, inviting him to continue.

"I'd say the possessed must be interpreting local energy resonances. Whatever type of energy they operate within, we know it pervades our universe, even if we can't distinguish it ourselves yet."

"If you're right," Nowak said, "that's a further indication that our universe is conjunctive with this beyond realm, that there is no single interface point."

"There has to be an identifiable connection," Euru said. "Dariat was clearly aware of the lost souls while he occupied Horgan's body. He could hear them—for want of a better phrase. They were pleading with the possessors the whole time, asking to be given bodies. Somewhere there is a connection, a conduit leading back there."

Gilmore glanced round the desk to see if anyone else wanted to pick up on the point. They were all silent, concentrating on the implications Euru and Nowak raised. "I've been considering that we might need to approach this from a different angle," he said. "After all, we've had a singular lack of success in trying to analyse the quantum signature of the effect, perhaps we should concentrate less on the exact nature of the beast, and more on what it does and implies."

“In order to deal with it, we have to identify it,” Yusuf said.

“I’m not advocating a brute force and ignorance approach,” Gilmore replied. “But consider; when this crisis started, we believed we were dealing with an outbreak of some energy virus. I maintain that is essentially what we have here. Our souls are self-contained patterns capable of existence and travel outside the matrix of our bodies. Hem-matu, how would you say they are formed?”

The energy expert stroked his cheek with long fingers, pondering the question. “Yes, I think I see what you’re driving at. The beyond energy is apparently present in all matter, including cells, although the quantity involved must necessarily be extremely tenuous. Therefore as intelligence arises during life, it imprints itself into this energy somehow.”

“Exactly,” Gilmore said. “The thought patterns which arise in our neurone structure retain their cohesion once the brain dies. That is our soul. There’s nothing spiritual or religious about it, the entire concept is an entirely natural phenomenon, given the nature of the universe.”

“I’m not sure about denying religion,” Nowak said. “Being inescapably plugged into the universe at such a fundamental level seems somewhat spiritually impressive to me. Being at one with the cosmos, literally, makes us all part of God’s creation. Surely?”

Gilmore couldn’t quite work out if he was joking. A lot of physicists took to religion as they struggled with the unknowable boundaries of cosmology, almost as many as embraced atheism. “If we could just put that aside for the moment, please?”

Nowak grinned, waving a hand generously.

“What I’m getting at is that something is responsible for retaining a soul’s cohesion. Something glues those thoughts

and memories together. When Syrinx interviewed Malva, she was told: *'Life begets souls.'* That it is *'the pattern which sentience and self awareness exerts on the energy within the biological body.'*

"So souls accrue from the reaction of thoughts upon this energy," Nowak said. "I'm not disputing the hypothesis. But how can that help us?"

"Because it's only us: humans. Animals don't have souls. Dariat and Laton never mentioned encountering them."

"They never mentioned encountering alien souls either," Mattox said. "But according to the Kiint, they're there."

"It's a big universe," Nowak said.

"No," Gilmore countered. "That can't apply. Only some souls are trapped in the section we know about, the area near the boundary. Laton as good as confirmed that. After death, it's possible to embark on the great journey. Again, his words."

Euru shook his head sadly. "I wish I could believe him."

"In this I agree with him, not that it has much bearing on my principal contention."

"Which is?" Mattox asked.

"I believe I know the glue which holds souls together. It has to be sentience. Consider, an animal like a dog or cat has its individuality as a biological entity, but no soul. Why not? It has a neural structure, it has memories, it has thought processes operating inside that neural structure. Yet when it dies, all that loses coherence. Without a focus, a strong sense of identity, the pattern dissolves. There is no order."

"The formless void," Nowak muttered in amusement.

Gilmore disregarded the jibe. "We know a soul is a coherent entity, and both Couteur and Dariat have confirmed there is a timeflow within the beyond. They suffer entropy just as we do. I am convinced that makes them vulnerable."

“How?” Mattox asked sharply.

“We can introduce change. Energy, the actual substance of souls, cannot be destroyed, but it can certainly be dissipated or broken up, returned to a primordial state.”

“Ah yes.” Hemmatu smiled in admiration. “Now I follow your logic. Indeed, we have to reintroduce some chaos into their lives.”

Euru gave Gilmore a shocked stare. “Kill them?”

“Acquire the ability to kill them,” Gilmore responded smoothly. “If they have the ability to leave the part or state of the beyond where they are now, they must clearly be forced to do so. The prospect of death, real *final* death, would provide them with the spur to leave us alone.”

“How?” Euru asked. “What would be the method?”

“A virus of the mind,” Gilmore said. “A universal anti-memory that would spread through thought processes, fracturing them as it went. The beauty of it is, the possessed are constantly merging their thoughts with one another to fulfil their quest for sensation. En masse, they are a mental superconductor.”

“You might just be on to something here,” Hemmatu said. “Are there such things as anti-memory?”

“There are several weapons designed to disable a target’s mental processes,” Mattox said. “Most of them are chemical or biological agents. However, I do know of some that are based upon didactic imprint memories. But so far my colleagues have only produced variants that induce extreme psychotic disorders such as paranoia or schizophrenia.”

“That’s all we need,” Nowak grunted. “Extra demented lost souls. They’re quite barmy enough as it is.”

Gilmore gave him a disapproving glance. “Would an anti-memory be possible, theoretically?” he asked Mattox.

“I can’t think of any immediate show-stoppers.”

“Surely it would just self-destruct?” Yusuf said. “If it

eradicates the mechanism of its own conductivity, how can it sustain itself?"

"We'd need something that rides just ahead of its own destruction wave," Mattox said. "Again, it's not a theoretical impossibility."

"Nobody said the concept wouldn't need considerable development work," Gilmore said.

"And trials," Euru said. His handsome face was showing a considerable amount of unease. "Don't forget that phase. We would need a sentient being to experiment on. Probably several."

"We have Couteur," Gilmore muttered. He acknowledged the Edenist's silent censure. "Sorry: natural thought. She caused us more than her fair share of trouble in court three."

"I'm sure there will be bitek neural systems adequate for the purpose," Mattox said hurriedly. "We don't have to use humans at this stage."

"Very well," Gilmore said. "Unless anyone has any objections, I'd like to prioritize this project. The First Admiral has been placing considerable pressure on us for an overall solution for some time. It'll be a relief to report we might be able to finally go on the offensive against the possessed."

Edenist habitats gossiped among themselves. The discovery first surprised, then amused Ione and Tranquillity. But then their multiplicity personalities were made up from millions of people, who like all the elderly were keen to see how their young relatives were doing and spread the word among friends. The personalities were also integral to Edenist culture, so naturally they took an avid interest in human affairs for the reaction it would ultimately have upon themselves. The minutiae of political, social, and economic behaviour from the Confederation at large was ab-

sorbed, debated, and meditated upon. Knowledge was the right of all Edenists. It was just the method of passing on the more miscellaneous chunks which was delightfully quirky. Manifold sub-groups would form within every personality, with interests as varied as classical literature to xenobiology; early industrial age steam trains to Oort cloud formations. There was nothing formal, nothing ordained about such clusterings of cognate mentalities. It was, simply, the way it was. An informal anarchy.

Observing this, Tranquillity began to consider itself the equivalent of some ageing uncle overseeing a brood of unruly young cousins. Its own decorum generated a mild feeling of alienation from its contemporaries (which Ione also found amusing). Only when the full Jovian Consensus, with all its solemn nobility, arose from the gabbling minds, was there a notion of kinship.

By the time Tranquillity did arrive at Jupiter, there were literally millions of sub-groups convening within the habitat personalities to consider every possible aspect of the possession problem (essentially, Gilmore's committee to the Nth degree). Eager to participate in the search for a solution, Tranquillity contributed its memories and conclusions of the crisis to date; information which was eagerly disseminated and deliberated over. Among the groupings who surveyed all matters religious, the most interesting development was the Kiint's curiosity in the Tyrathca's Sleeping God. The question of what the Sleeping God might actually be was passed to the cosmology groupings. They didn't have much of an idea, so they queried the xenopsychology field. In turn, they wondered if the enigma would be better served by the xenocultural historians . . .

At which point, two very distinct (and in their different ways, very important) mentalities among the collective personalities became aware of the Sleeping God problem. The

sub-Consensus for security and Wing-Tsit Chong together decided the matter was best dealt with by themselves and a few of their own specialists. In collaboration with Ione, of course.

Joshua had a bad feeling about Ione calling him to a conference without being told the reason. There were resonances of being asked to go after Mzu coming into play. It got worse when she told him it was to be convened in De Bouvoir Palace. That meant it was going to be formal, official.

When he arrived at the small tube station which served visitors to the Palace, Mzu was climbing the steps ahead of him. He wanted to turn round and go back to supervising *Lady Mac's* refit. But at least this was as bad as it could possibly get. They made laboured small talk as they walked along the dark-yellow stone path to the classical building. Mzu didn't know why she'd been invited, either.

A horde of servitor chimps were scurrying about on either side of the path, along with specialist agronomy servitors. All of them were busy repairing the once immaculate parkland. Grass had been trampled into mud by thousands of dancing feet, topiary bushes were knocked into odd shapes, with bottles sticking out of unusual crevices. But it was the tomis shrubs which had taken the worst battering; with their blue and gold trumpet-shaped flowers torn from broken branches to form a brown, slippery mat across the path. The servitors were optimistically trying to repair them with adroit pruning and staking; though the smaller ones were simply being replaced. Vandalism on such a scale was unheard of in Tranquillity. Though Joshua did have to smile at the pile of clothes which the chimps had gathered up. It was mostly underwear.

A pair of serjeants were on guard duty outside the basil-

ica's archway entrance. "The Lord of Ruin is expecting you," one intoned. It led them along the nave to the audience chamber.

Ione sat in her accustomed place behind the crescent table in the centre. Long, flat streamers of light from the towering windows intersected around her, giving her an almost saintly portrayal. Joshua was hard pressed not to comment on the theatre of the moment when she smiled a welcome, but he played the game and bowed solemnly. Mzu was given a more punctilious nod of recognition. There were six high-backed chairs set up along the convex side of the table, four of them already occupied. Joshua knew Parker Higgens; Samuel was there as well; but he had to run a search through his neural nanonics to name the Laymil project's chief astronomer, Kempster Getchell. The fourth turned to face him . . .

"You!"

"Hello, Joshua," Syrinx said. The possibility of a smile teased her lips.

"Oh," Ione murmured in a suspiciously sweet tone. "Do you two know each other?"

Joshua gave Ione a punitive look, then went over to Syrinx and gave her a light kiss on the cheek. "I heard what happened on Pernik. I'm glad you came through it all right."

She touched the medical nanonic on his hand. "I'm not the only one who's come through, apparently."

Joshua returned the smile, and sat next to her.

"There's a file I want you and Dr Mzu to review before we start," Ione told him.

The miserable scene of Coastuc-RT swamped Joshua's mind; with Waboto-YAU arguing through its translator, and the two menacing soldier-caste Tyrathca standing close to Reza Malin. He'd avoided accessing most of Kelly's

recordings when Collins released them. Lalonde was one planet he didn't want to return to by any method. The close presence of the mercenary leader was a shortcut to emotions he'd rather leave dormant.

When the recording ended, he looked up to see one of the long glass windows behind Ione had darkened. Instead of emitting strong golden light, it now contained the image of an ancient Oriental man sitting in an antique wheelchair.

"Wing-Tsit Chong will speak for the Jovian Consensus today," Ione announced.

"Right," Joshua said. He loaded that name into a search program, ready to run it through his memory files.

Syrinx leant across. "The founder of Edenism," she said softly. "Quite a major historical figure, in fact."

"Name the inventor of the ZTT drive," Joshua retorted.

"Julian Wan normally gets the credit. Although technically he was only the head of the New Kong asteroid's stardrive research team; a bureaucrat, basically."

Joshua frowned in pique.

"Possibly the present would provide us with a more suitable topic for discussion," Wing-Tsit Chong chided gently.

"The Sleeping God throws up a number of questions," Ione said. "Very relevant questions, given the Tyrathca's psychology. They believed it would be able to help them against possessed humans. And they don't lie."

"So far this entity or object has made no appreciable impact upon our situation," Wing-Tsit Chong said. "Implying three options. It is a myth, and the Tyrathca were either fooled or mistaken by their encounter with it. It is not capable of assisting them. Or it does exist, it is capable, and it has simply restrained itself, so far."

"That third implication is the most interesting," Kempster said. "It's an assumption that the Sleeping God is sen-

tient, or at least self-aware; which rules out a celestial event.”

“I always concurred with the artefact possibility myself,” Parker Higgins said. “The arkship Tyrathca would surely recognize a celestial event for what it was. And celestial events don’t keep watch. Waboto-YAU was quite insistent about that. The Sleeping God dreams of the universe, it knows everything.”

“I concur,” Wing-Tsit Chong said. “This entity has been assigned extraordinary perceptive powers by the Tyrathca. Although we can assume the memories of Sireth-AFL’s family would become open to degradation down the centuries, the major elements must retain their integrity. Something very unusual is out there.”

“Have you asked the Kiint direct what it is, and what their interest is?” Joshua asked.

“Yes. They claim a total lack of knowledge on the subject. Ambassador Armira simply repeats Lieria’s claim that they are interested in the full record of Kelly Tirrel’s sojourn on Lalonde so they might understand the nature of human possession.”

“They might be telling the truth.”

“No,” Parker Higgins said forcefully. “Not them. They’ve been lying to us since first contact. This is more than coincidence. The Kiint are desperately interested. And I’d love to beat them to it.”

“A race that can teleport?” Joshua said light heartedly. The old director’s vehemence was out of character here.

“Even if the Kiint aren’t interested,” Ione said swiftly, “we certainly are. The Tyrathca believe it to be real and able to assist them. That alone justifies sending a mission to it.”

“Wait—” Joshua said. He couldn’t believe he’d been so slow. “You want me to go after it, don’t you?”

"That's why you're here," Ione answered calmly. "I believe you said you wanted to make a contribution?"

"Yes, I did." There was a residue of reluctance in the acknowledgement. Some of the old bravado. I want to originate the solution. Claim all the glory. Shades of the good old days.

He grinned at Ione, wondering if she'd guessed what he was thinking. More than likely. But if there was a chance this xenoc God might have an answer, he wanted in. He owed a lot of people the effort. His dead crew. His unborn child. Louise and the rest of Norfolk. Even himself, now he refused to avoid thinking of death and the mysteries that inaugurated. Facing up to fate in such a fashion might be frightening, but it made living a hell of a lot easier. And, to be honest with himself, so did the prospect of flying again.

"And so, I believe, did Syrinx," Ione said. The voidhawk captain nodded admission.

"The Kiint stonewalled you, huh?" Joshua asked.

"Malva was very polite about it, but essentially, yes."

Joshua settled back, gazing up at the domed ceiling. "Let me see. If a Tyrathca arkship encountered this God, then it has to be a long way off, a very long way. Not too much problem for a voidhawk, but . . . ah, now I get it. The anti-matter." *Lady Mac's* inclusion was obvious now. Her delta-V reserve was currently five or six times greater than most Adamist warships, making her an obvious candidate to surmount the problem of galactic orbital mechanics. For starships, there's a lot more than just distance to the gulf between stars. Ultimately, it is velocity which governs their design and finances.

Earth's sun orbits the galactic centre roughly once every two hundred and thirty million years, giving it an approximate velocity of two hundred and twenty kilometres per second relative to the core. Other stars, of course, have dif-

ferent orbital velocities, depending on their distance from the core, so their velocities relative to each other are also different. Voidhawks can cope with the variance by tailoring their wormhole terminus to match a local star's vector. It's a manoeuvre which uses up an inconvenient amount of energy from the patterning cells; however, because they obtain their energy for free it doesn't affect their commercial performance except in terms of recharging time. But for Adamist starship captains, that variance isn't merely inconvenient, it's a positive bane. The ZTT jump might provide a short cut across the interstellar gulf, but it cannot magically change inertia. A starship emerging from a jump has precisely the same vector it had when it started. In order to rendezvous with the planet or asteroid at its destination, its delta-V has to be altered to match. It's a tedious process which uses up plenty of fuel; in other words, it costs money. And the further the stars are away from each other, the greater the velocity difference. For most Adamist starships, a flight right across the longest axis of Confederation space, a distance approaching nine hundred light-years, would use up over ninety per cent of their reaction drive fuel. Several marques would be incapable of the feat anyway. The limit is imposed because they all used fusion drives.

Antimatter, of course, provided a vastly superior delta-V. And the antimatter *Lady Mac* had taken on board from the *Beezling* was still in her confinement chambers. The First Admiral had given Samuel instructions for the secure military facilities at Jupiter to dispose of it. One of the five specialist ships qualified to handle the substance was still en route to Tranquillity.

"There is a high possibility that a long flight will be required to bring this task to a fruitful conclusion," Wing-Tsit Chong said. "I congratulate you on your clarity of thought, young Joshua."

Syrinx and Ione swapped a glance. "You're going to let him use antimatter?" Mzu asked in surprise.

"A voidhawk and Adamist starship are a good pairing for this kind of assignment," Syrinx said. "Both of us have strengths and weaknesses which complement the other. Providing the Adamist ship can manage to keep up with a voidhawk, of course."

"Outperform, or outsmart?" Joshua asked civilly.

"All right," Mzu said. "So why am I here?"

"We believed you might be able to help us analyse the nature of the Sleeping God," Kempster Getchell said. "Especially if it turns out to be a high-technology weapon rather than a natural phenomenon, which is my field."

Alkad glanced round at their faces, depressed when she knew she should have been flattered. "I had one idea," she said. "Once. Thirty years ago."

"One original insight," Wing-Tsit Chong said. "Which is one more than most people have had, or ever will have. You have a mind which is capable of it. An ability which can innovate on such a level is an asset we cannot overlook."

"What about Foulkes?" Alkad asked Samuel.

"If you agree to participate, I'll speak with her. The non-contact prohibition placed upon you does not apply in this situation. You will be permitted to fly on this mission. However, I will accompany you along with Monica."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be. And please don't interpret our continued presence as approval for what you did. It so happens, that there are sections of this mission which require the kind of ability which Monica and I specialise in."

"How very enigmatic. Very well, if you think I'm the right person for the job, I'd be honoured to take part."

"Good," Ione said.

"But I'll need Peter with me."

“This isn’t a honeymoon cruise,” Samuel told her, reproachfully.

“We worked as a team putting the Alchemist together. It’s a synergistic relationship.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Ione said. “But for argument’s sake, I’ll permit you to ask him if he wants to accompany you.”

“So where were you thinking of sending us?” Joshua asked.

“Regretfully, you will have to go directly to the source,” Wing-Tsit Chong said. “Which is one of the reasons this mission is being assembled under the auspices of the Jovian security sub-Consensus. A thorough search of xenology records both at Jupiter and Earth have revealed absolutely no reference to the Sleeping God. The Tyrathca have never mentioned it to us before.”

“The source? Oh Jesus, you mean Hesper-LN, the Tyrathca home planet?”

“Initially, yes. Waboto-YAU told us that it was another arkship which encountered the Sleeping God, not Tanjuntic-RI. Therefore, that arkship must have lasered the information to all the other Tyrathca arkships in the exodus fleet. We must hope that a recording of that message is still aboard Tanjuntic-RI. If you can find it, you may be able to establish the approximate location of the encounter.”

“That could be a long way off,” Joshua said. His neural nanonics started to access almanac and Tyrathca history files from memory cells, running them through a navigation program. The result rising into his mind in the form of gold and scarlet icons was both fascinating and alarming. “Hesper-LN isn’t their genuine home planet, remember. It’s just the last colony world Tanjuntic-RI founded. Look, the original Tyrathca star, Mastrit-PJ, the one they escaped from is on the other side of the Orion Nebula. That puts it

at least 1,600 light-years away. Now if we get real unlucky, and the arkship which found the Sleeping God was going in the opposite direction to Tanjuntic-RI, you're talking twice as far."

"We are aware of that," Wing-Tsit Chong said.

Joshua sighed with indubitable regret. To take *Lady Mac* on such a voyage would have been awesome. "I'm sorry, there isn't that much antimatter left. I can't take the old girl that far."

"We are aware of your starship's performance capabilities," Wing-Tsit Chong said. "However there is a supply of antimatter which you will be able to use."

"You keep some here at Jupiter?" Joshua asked in what he figured was a casual voice.

"No," Syrinx said. "A CNIS agent called Erick Thakara located a production station which may be supplying Capone."

"Thakara—" Joshua's search program located the appropriate file; he locked eyes with Ione. "Really? That's . . . helpful."

"With the 1st fleet somewhat overstretched, the First Admiral's staff have asked for Jupiter's voidhawks to tackle it," Samuel said.

"Which they are preparing to do," Wing-Tsit Chong said. "However, before the station is finally annihilated, you will be able to take on board as much antimatter as the *Lady Macbeth's* confinement systems can handle."

"Three thousand light-years," Joshua murmured. "Jesus."

"Meredith Saldana's task force has a large contingent of Confederation Navy marines assigned to it," Ione said. "They'll secure the station for you once the personnel surrender to the voidhawk squadron."

“What if the station operatives just suicide?” Joshua said. “They usually do when the Navy confronts them.”

“And take as many of us with them as they can,” Syrix whispered.

“They will be offered a penal planet sentence instead of the usual death penalty,” Samuel said. “We can only hope that proves attractive enough to them.”

“All right, but even if we load *Lady Mac* with enough antimatter, the Tyrathca have ended communications with the Confederation,” Joshua said. “Do you really think they’ll allow us to search through Tanjuntic-RI’s electronic systems?”

“Probably not,” Samuel said. “But as we don’t intend to ask their permission, it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

7

You didn't have to be attuned to the land like a possessed to know it was about to happen. Most of Ombey's population was aware the time had come.

Day after day the news companies had been broadcasting senseises from rover reporters covering the build up of Liberation forces. Everybody knew somebody who was connected to somebody who was involved in some way; from hauling equipment out to Fort Forward to serving drinks to Edenists in spaceport bars. Speculation on the current affairs programmes was deliberately vague about specific dates and precise numbers, even the communication net gossips were showing restraint in naming the day. Hearsay aside, the evidence was pretty solid.

The type of cargoes raining down on the planet had changed. Combat gear was slowly being replaced by heavy-duty civil engineering equipment, ready to repair the expected damage to Mortonridge and provide additional support infrastructure for the occupying forces. The personnel arriving at Fort Forward were also subject to a shift in professions. Just under a million serjeants had been sent from Jupiter, along with nearly a quarter of a million

marines and mercenaries from across the Confederation. The Liberation army was essentially complete. So now it was the medical teams being ferried down from orbit, civilian volunteers complementing entire mobile military hospitals. Estimated casualty figures (both military and civilian) were strictly classified. But everyone knew the twelve thousand medical staff were going to suffer a heavy workload. Eighty voidhawks had already been assigned evacuation duties, spreading the wounded around facilities in the Kingdom and its allies.

Throughout the seventh day following Princess Kirsten's visit, Ralph Hiltch and his command staff studied the figures and displays provided by the AI. The neuroiconic image which accumulated in his mind kept expanding as more information was correlated. By late afternoon, his conscious perception point seemed to be hanging below a supergalaxy of multicoloured stars, which threatened to make him giddy as he tried to examine it in all directions at once. Despite its coherence, what he really wanted was more training time, more transport, more supplies, and definitely more intelligence assessments of the terrain ahead. But essentially, his army was as ready as it would ever be. He gave the order for final stage deployment to begin.

Over half of the sergeants and their back-up brigades had already left Fort Forward. The previous two days had been spent mustering at their preliminary positions offshore. Nearly a hundred islands around Mortonridge's coast had been taken over as temporary depots; from reefs which barely showed above the waves to resort atolls dotted with luxury hotels. Where there were no convenient scraps of land, huge cargo ships had been hurriedly converted into floating docks, and anchored thirty kilometres from the shore.

For the first stage of the coastal assault, the army was

scheduled to use boats. They were actually going to storm ashore, wading through the waves and up onto the sand, almost in homage to a great many of the incarnations from the past they were facing. Ralph wasn't prepared to risk flying even the simplest of aircraft into the energistic environment over Mortonridge, not until after they'd dealt with the red cloud at least.

The remainder of the Liberation ground forces emptied out of Fort Forward in massive convoys, spreading out along the firebreak in thousands of multi-terrain vehicles. There was no attempt at secrecy, no hugging the cover behind ridges and hills. The squads drove through the encroaching twilight and into the night; the nimbus of their massed headlight beams creeping like an anaemic dawn along the horizon paralleling the firebreak.

Across Xingu, a civil curfew order was enacted once again, with the police put on full alert. Although they were fairly sure no possessed were left outside Mortonridge, the continent's authorities were taking Annette Ekelund's threat of sabotage very seriously. When dawn arrived, no civilian would be allowed out onto the streets. People grumbled and groaned, and datavised protests to local news shows, remembering what a nuisance the curfew had been last time. It was almost a bravado show of defiance. In the main, they just settled back and accessed the show.

High above the planet, the Strategic Defence centre on Guyana began coordinating the Royal Navy's part of the assault. Thrusters flared on low orbit weapons platforms, refining their new orbits. A flotilla of three hundred void-hawks also began to accelerate, synchronizing their distortion fields to rise away from the planet in a long curve.

The psychic pressure mounting against Mortonridge shifted from faint intimation to blatantly unmistakable.

To casual observation, Chainbridge was still a busy town. When Annette Ekelund reached a slight ridge a couple of kilometres from the outskirts, she stopped the sturdy country rover she was driving and looked back over her shoulder. Hundreds of lighted windows shone out across the lame farmland, burning steady against the flickering crimson waves scattered down from the lumbering cloud roof. The buildings were warm, too, warm enough to fool any perfunctory sensor scans into believing they were occupied. But no one was left there, her command group was the last to leave.

“It’ll keep the blighters tied up for a while,” Delvan assured her. He was sitting in the passenger seat beside her, clad in his old khaki uniform, a discreet row of scarlet and gold ribbons on his chest.

In the back seat, Soi Hon veiled a sneer. He, too, had reverted to type: dark jungle fatigues and a felt bush-ranger hat. “For at least a quarter of an hour.”

“Would you like to return to the beyond fifteen minutes early?” Delvan enquired lightly.

“Any time we delay them is good time,” Annette told the pair of them. She took the brake off, and accelerated down the secondary road. They were heading for Cold Overton, a small village eighty kilometres away. Their field command centre; picked virtually at random by Soi Hon, central but not strategically so, adequate road links, surrounded by thick forest. It was as good as any, not that they’d be staying long. Fluid tactics was the key to this campaign.

Soi Hon clapped Delvan on the shoulder. “And this is our time, eh? You and I both. Onward to death and glory.”

“There is no glory here.” Delvan spoke so quietly, the others could only just hear him against the bass grumble of thunder.

“Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts?”

"I heard my men wailing at night," the old soldier replied emotionlessly. "The ones left out in No Man's Land, left behind to drown in puddles of their own blood; the ones that weren't vomiting their lungs up from that devilish gas. Screaming for us to help them, more frightened at being alone than they were of being shot."

"You Christians, you always take life so personally. We're here by accident, not design. Nothing is ordained, you are only what you make of yourself. You can never go back, the past doesn't change. Stop thinking about it. The only part of history which matters is the future."

"It broke my heart, not being able to help them. Good, decent men; boys a lot of them. I swore I'd never get involved in such madness again. They called it total war. But it wasn't, it was total bloody murder. Insanity had become a disease, and we all caught it. Twice in my lifetime my nation sent its youth out to die for a just cause, to protect ourselves and our way of life." He smiled frigidly at the eco warrior. "And now here I am once again. Seven bloody centuries later. Seven hundred years, and nothing has changed. Not one damn thing. I'm fighting to preserve myself and my new life. A righteous war with me on the side of the angels, even though they've become fallen angels. And I can already hear the screams, God help me."

"All I hear is our victory song," Soi Hon said. "The voice of the land is louder and stronger than any human cry. This is our place, we are at one with it. We belong here. We have a right to exist in this universe."

Delvan closed his eyes and tipped his head back. "Lord forgive me I am such a fool. Here we all are, embarking on a crusade to storm the very gates of Heaven Itself in our desperation. What a monumental folly. I shall smite at the dark angels massed against us, crying for death, for only in

death will we ever find peace. Yet You have already revealed that death is not our destiny, nor ever can be.”

“Wake up, old man. We’re not fighting God, we’re fighting an unjust universe.”

For the first time since his return from the beyond, Delvan smiled. “You think there’s a difference?”

The island was enchanting, its botany and geology combining into the kind of synergistic idyll which was the grail of Edenist habitat designers. Inland, there were craggy rocks hosting long white waterfalls, and thick lush forests choked with sweet-scented flowers. The shore comprised cove after cove, their pale gold sands gleaming under the azure sky; except for one, where the offshore reef crumbled under the foaming breakers to give the sands an exquisite fairy dust coating of pink coral. It appealed to humans on a primal level, urging them to slow down and spend time just soaking in nature. As a reward for their worship, time itself would expand and become almost meaningless.

Even in his current existence, Sinon wished he was staying longer than their eighteen-hour stopover. Five thousand serjeants had descended on this tiny jewel of land glinting in the ocean, along with their equipment and support personnel. Marines were camped ten to a room in the resort hotels; gardens and tennis courts had been requisitioned as landing pads; and the coves were harbours for a hundred of the regiment’s landing boats. All day, the boats had taken their turn to nuzzle the shore, extending their forward ramps so that jeeps and light trucks could drive on board. Now, in the evening, the serjeants were finally embarking.

Syrinx would like this place, Sinon told Choma. I must tell her about it. He was two thirds of the way along a line of serjeants who were wading out to their landing boat. There wasn’t enough room on this particular beach to

berth more than three boats at a time, so the other eleven were anchored a hundred metres offshore. A column of sergeants snaked out to each one, making slow time through the water. The big constructs were laden with backpacks, carrying their weapons above their heads to stop them getting wet. Groups of Royal Marines milled about on the bluff, watching the process. If all went well, they'd be doing the same thing next morning.

Now there's good healthy optimism, Choma replied.

What do you mean?

I've been working out our probable casualty rate. Would you like to know how many of our squad are likely to survive the entire campaign?

Not particularly. I have no intention of becoming a statistic.

Where have I heard that before? In any case, it's two. Two out of ten.

Thank you very much. Sinon reached the landing boat. It was an ugly, rugged affair, one design serving the entire Liberation armada. A carbosilicon hull mass produced over on Esparta, with power cells and an engine that could have come from any of a dozen industrialized star systems allied to the Kingdom. Hard-pressed navy engineers had plugged the standard components together, completing several hundred each day. The three on the beach were still being worked on by technicians.

Honesty is supposed to be our culture's strength, Choma said, mildly irked by the negative reaction.

We're a long way from Eden now. Sinon slung his rifle high on his shoulder, and started climbing the ladder up the side of the boat. When he reached the top of the gunnel he looked back to shore. The sun was sinking into the sea, leaving a rosy haze line above the darkening water. Parody-

ing that, on the opposite horizon, the glow of the red cloud was visible, a narrow fracture separating water and air.

Last chance, Sinon told himself. The other serjeants were all climbing down into the boat, their mind-tones subdued but still resolute. Rationally, he was buying the Confederation time to find a genuine answer. And Consensus itself had approved this course of action. He swung his legs over the rail, and put a hand down to help Choma. **Come on, let's go storm the Dark Lord's citadel.**

The Royal Marine ion field flyer was a lone spark of gold shimmering high in the night sky, brighter than any star. It flew across the top of the Mortonridge peninsula, keeping parallel to the firebreak, twenty-five kilometres to the north, and holding a steady fifteen kilometre altitude.

Ralph Hiltch sat in the flyer's cabin as Cathal Fitzgerald piloted them above the northern end of the mountain range which formed the peninsula's spine. Eight hours of neural nanonics enforced sleep had left him feeling fresh, but emotionally dead. His mind had woken immune to the human consequences of the Liberation. Whether it was numb from the torrent of information which had been bullying his brain for weeks, or guilty at the enormity of what he'd organized, he wasn't sure.

It meant that now he was hooked into the flyer's sensor suite, he could view the last stages of the deployment with god-like dispassion. Which was probably for the best, he thought. Accepting personal responsibility for every casualty would drive anyone insane within the first two minutes. Even so, he'd wanted this one last overview. To convince himself it was genuine if nothing else. The last insecurity, that all the data and images he'd handled had been transformed to physical reality.

There could be doubt. The army spread out below him,

his army, was flowing over the black land in streamers of fluid light, bending and curling round hills and valleys. Individual vehicles expressed as twinkles of light, barely different to icons blipping their way across a map. Except here there was no colour, just the white headlight beams contrasting the funeral ground.

It was after midnight, and two-thirds of the ground deployment was complete. Both flanks were established, now there was only the centre to set up, the most difficult aspect. His main spearhead was going to drive right along the M6, allowing the huge supply and back-up convoys an easy ride. Using the motorway was a disturbingly obvious strategy, but essential if they were to complete in a minimum timescale.

Ekelund would have sabotaged the road, but bridges could be repaired, blockades shunted aside, and gorges filled. The combat engineering corps were ready for that. At least the possessed didn't have air power. Though occasionally he had images of propeller biplanes roaring overhead and strafing the jeeps. Victory rolls with the pilot's white silk scarf flapping jauntily in the slipstream. Stupid.

Ralph switched the suite's focus to the red cloud. Its edges were still arched down to the ground, sealing the peninsula away from the rest of the planet. Dusky random wave shadows rolled across the pulpy surface. He thought they might be more restless than usual, though that could well be his imagination. Thankfully, there was no sign of that peculiar oval formation which he'd seen once before. The one he absolutely refused to call an eye. All he really wanted was one glimpse through; to reassure himself the peninsula was still there, if nothing else. They'd had no data of any kind from inside since the day Ekelund had brought the cloud down. No links with the net could be es-

ablished; no non-possessed had managed to sneak out. A final sweep with the flyer's sensors revealed nothing new.

"Take us back," he told Cathal.

The flyer performed a fast turn, curving round to line up on Fort Forward. Ahead of it, the giant Thunderbirds continued to swoop down out of the western sky, delta heat-shields glowing a dull vermilion against the starfield backdrop. That aspect of the build up, at least, remained unchanged. Cathal landed them inside the secure command complex, along the southern side of the new city. Ralph trotted down the airstair, ignoring the armed Marine escort which fell in around him. The trappings of his position had ceased to register as special some time ago, just another aspect of this extraordinary event.

Brigadier Palmer (the first person Ralph had promoted) was waiting outside the door to the Ops Room. "Well?" she asked, as they walked in.

"I didn't see anyone waving a white flag."

"We'd know if they wanted to." Like a lot of people involved with the Liberation, especially those who'd been on Mortonridge since the start, she considered herself to have a connection with the possessed hidden behind the red cloud, an awareness of attitude. Ralph wasn't convinced, although he acknowledged the possessed exerted some kind of psychic presence.

The Ops Room was a long rectangular chamber with glass walls separating it from innumerable specialist planning offices. Completing electronic systems integration and connecting their architecture with Ombey's military communication circuits was another triumph for the overworked Royal Marine engineering corps, though its rushed nature was evident in the bundled cables hanging between consoles and open ceiling panels, air conditioning which was too chilly, and raw carbon-concrete corner pillars. Its

floor-space was taken up by cheap corporate-style desks holding consoles, AV projectors, and communication gear. Right now, it was full to capacity; over fifty officers from the Royal Navy were collaborating with an equal number of Edenists; the next largest contingent was the Confederation Navy with twenty; while the remainder were drawn from various participating allies.

They were going to be the coordinators of the Liberation, the human analysis and liaison between the ground forces and the controlling AI back in Pasto. A failsafe against the maxim: No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Every one of them stood up as Ralph Hiltch entered. That, he did notice. Together they had spent the past few weeks planning this together, arguing, pleading, contributing ideas, working miracles. They'd learned to cooperate and coordinate their fields of expertise, putting aside old quarrels so they melded into a unified, dedicated team. He was proud of them and what they'd accomplished.

Their show of respect rekindled several of his suppressed emotions. "I'll keep this short," he told the hushed chamber. "We can't pretend this is going to solve the problem possession poses to the Confederation, but it's a damn sight more important than a propaganda war, which is what some reporters have been calling it. We're fighting to free two million people, and we're battling to bring hope into the lives of an awful lot more. To me, that's more than worthwhile, it's essential. So let's make our contribution a good one."

Amid scattered applause, he made his way to his office at the far end. His desk gave him a view down the whole length of the Ops Room, providing he craned his neck over the stack of processor block peripherals connected to his main desktop console. While he was datavising the array for strategic updates, his executive command group joined

him. As well as Janne Palmer who was the Chief of the occupying forces, there was Acacia, the Edenist liaison, an elderly woman who had served as ambassador to Ombey for five years. He'd also drafted in Diana Tiernan to act as the army's technical advisor, helping to filter the scientific reports on the possessed which were flooding in from across the Confederation. Cathal completed the gathering, still holding his post as Ralph's assistant, but now with the rank of lieutenant commander.

When the glass door slid shut, isolating them from the noise from outside, Ralph requested a security level one sensenviron conference. Princess Kirsten and Admiral Farquar joined them around the white bubble room's table. "The deployment's going remarkably well," Ralph said. "All our principal front line divisions will be in place at zero-hour."

"My occupation troops are effectively ready," Janne said. "There are a few minor hitches, mostly logistical. But given the amount of materiel involved, and the different groupings we're attempting to coordinate, I'm happy. We're well within estimated parameters. The AI should have the bugs knocked out by morning."

"The serjeants are also ready," Acacia reported. "Again, there are some hitches, mainly with transport equipment, but we are committed."

"Admiral Farquar?" Kirsten asked.

"All space based assets are functional. Platform orbits are synchronized, and the voidhawks are reaching apogee. It looks good."

"Very well," Kirsten said. "God help me for this, but they've left us with no alternative. General Hiltch, you now have full command authority for Ombey's military forces. Engage the enemy, Ralph, evict them from my planet."

Standard military doctrine was, somewhat inevitably, fairly unimaginative. Every kind of tactic and counter-tactic had been attempted, practised, and refined by generals, warlords, and emperors down the centuries until there was little room for mistake. So even though Mortonridge was unique from a philosophical standpoint, it could be defined in military terms as a large scale hostage/siege scenario. Given that assessment, the method of resolving it was clear cut.

Ralph wanted to isolate the possessed in small groups. They were vulnerable like that, capable of being overwhelmed. To achieve it, their communications should be broken, denying them the ability to regroup and mount any kind of counter-attack. Harassment should be constant, wearing them down. And, if possible, he wanted them deprived of the cover provided by their red cloud. In summary: divide and conquer. An ancient principle, but now aided by the kind of firepower which only modern technology could provide.

Ombey had four and a half thousand low orbit Strategic Defence platforms. Their orbital vectors were orchestrated to provide a constant barrier above the surface, similar to the way electrons pirouetted around their nucleus. For the Liberation, all that had changed. Navy starships had taken over the low orbit protection duty, leaving the platforms free for an altogether different task. Their elaborate inclinations had been shifted, ion thrusters firing for hours at a time to clump them into flocks of twenty-five. Now they formed a single chain around the planet, with an inclination tilted at just a couple of degrees to the equator. One flock would pass over Mortonridge every thirty seconds.

Sensor satellites had been manoeuvred into the gaps between the platforms, ready to provide the Liberation Forces

with an unparalleled coverage of the peninsula once the red cloud had been broken apart. Admiral Farquar used them to watch the dawn terminator sliding over the ocean towards the lowering band of red cloud. Tactical overlays showed him the positions of the landing boats heading in for the beaches. Far overhead, the flotilla of voidhawks had passed apogee, and were now hurtling downwards, accelerating at eight gees.

In one hour, dawn would reach Mortonridge's eastern seaboard. The Admiral datavisied his command authority code to Guyana's SD control centre. "Fire," he ordered.

Though they never knew it, the Liberation forces very nearly won in the first ninety seconds. The initial flock of SD platforms sent seventy-five electron beams slamming down through the upper atmosphere to strike the red cloud. They were aimed along the north/south axis of the peninsula, and defocused, so that at the point of impact they were over fifty metres across. The intention wasn't to pierce the red cloud, just to pump it full of electrical energy, the possessed's one known Achilles Heel. Each beam began scanning from side to side, in gigantic ten second sweeps that took them from coast to coast.

Then the second flock of platforms slid up over the horizon and into range. Another seventy-five beams speared down. There was a ten second overlap before the first flock was out of range.

Annette Ekelund let out a single shriek of agony, and dropped helplessly to her knees. The pain was incredible. A shaft of blue-star sunlight flung down from a height greater than heaven lanced clean through her skull. It didn't just burn her stolen brain, it set fire to her very thoughts. That part of her spirit which communed so gladly with the others

on Mortonridge was the treacherous conductor. The part which created the shield of cloud and gave them all a subliminal sense of community. Her belief in whatever humanity has survived the incarceration of the beyond. And now it was killing her.

She abandoned it in its entirety. Her scream twisting from pain to wretchedness. All around her, the other souls were shrinking away from each other, withdrawing into self. The last sob burbled out from her lips, and she flopped limply onto her back. Her body was freezing, shaking in shock. Delvan and Soi Hon were scrabbling in the dirt somewhere nearby, she could hear their whimpers. She couldn't see either of them, the world had gone completely black.

Every possessed across the Confederation was instantly aware of the strike. Pain and shock reverberated through the beyond. Wherever they were, whatever they were doing, they felt it.

Al Capone was underneath Jezzibella when it happened, adopting a complicated position so that her breasts were pushed into his face while he could still bend his knees for the leverage to give her a damn good shafting. Her laugh was halfway between a giggle and a moan when the mental impact knocked him with the force of a wild hockey puck. He convulsed, shouting in pained panic.

Jezzibella cried out as his frantic motion twisted her arm, nearly dislocating her shoulder. "Al! Fuck. That fucking hurts, you fucking dickhead. I told you I don't do that sado shit, fuck you."

Al grunted in confused dismay, shaking his head to clear the weird dizziness foaming inside. He was so disoriented, he fell off the side of the bed.

For the first time, Jezzibella actually caught a glimpse of

Brad Lovegrove's natural features beneath the illusion. Not too different to Al, they could almost be brothers. Her anger faded at the sight of him grimacing, limbs twitching in disarray. "Al?"

"Fuck," he gasped. "What the fuck was that?"

"Al, you okay, baby? What happened?"

"God damn! I don't know." He looked round the bedroom, expecting to see some kind of bomb damage, G-men storming through the door. . . . "I ain't got a clue."

For Jacqueline Couteur the invisible shockwave almost proved fatal. Strapped onto the examination table in the demon trap she couldn't move when her muscles spasmed. Her vital signs monitor alerted the staff to some kind of seizure, at which point her conscious defence against the electric current they were shunting through her body began to crumble. Fortunately, one of the more alert team members shut the power off before she was genuinely electrocuted. It took her five or six minutes to recover her normal antagonism, and prowess.

On patrol a million kilometres above New California, Rocio Condra lost control of the distortion field, letting it flare and contract wildly. The big hellhawk tumbled crazily, its bird-form imploding in a cloud of dark scintillations. Gravity inside the life-support cabin vanished along with the quaint steamship interior. Jed, Beth, Gerald and the three kids suddenly found themselves in freefall. Then gravity returned in a rush, far too strong, and in the wrong direction, making one of the bulkhead walls the floor. The surface swatted them hard, then the gravity failed again to send them flying across the cabin in a tangle of limbs and screams. Stars gyrated savagely beyond the viewport. Another wash of gravity sucked them down onto the ceiling.

In Quinn Dexter's case, it was his first setback on Earth. He had just arrived at Grand Central Station to take a vac-

train to Paris. Not the original station building on Manhattan, the island itself was actually abandoned and flooded, but New Yorkers were sentimental about such things. This was the third such edifice to carry the name. Buried nearly a kilometre below the centre of dome five, it formed the hub of the arcology's intercontinental train network.

Once more he had secluded himself within the ghost realm to avoid any risk of detection. That was when he began to notice just how many ghosts haunted the station and other subterranean sections of the vast arcology. Hundreds of them drifted mournfully amid the unseeing streams of commuters. They were drab despondent figures, staring round at the faces that rushed past. There was so much longing and desperation in their expressions, as if every one of them was searching for some long lost child. They were aware of Quinn, gazing at him in bewilderment as he strode through the main concourse on his way to the platforms. In turn, he ignored them, worthless creatures incapable of either aiding or hindering his crusade. They really were as good as dead.

He was twenty metres short of the wave elevator for platform fifty-two when the flashback from the Liberation reached him. The impact wasn't actually too great, he'd withstood far worse at Banneth's hands, it was the suddenness of it all which shocked him. Without warning he was yelling as streaks of pain flared out from the centre of his brain to infect his body. Edmund Rigby's captive thoughts writhed in agony, transfixed by the blast of torment.

Quinn panicked, frightened by the unknown. Until this moment he believed he was virtually omnipotent. Now some witchery was attacking him in a method he couldn't fathom. Souls in the beyond were screaming in terror. The ghosts around him began wailing, clasping their hands to-

gether in prayer. His control over the energistic power faltered as his thoughts dissolved into chaos.

Bud Johnson never saw where the guy came from. One second he was hurrying to the wave elevator, on his way to catch a San Antonio connection—the next, some man in a weird black robe was kneeling on all fours on the polished marble floor at his feet. That was almost impossible, everyone who grew up on Earth and lived in the arcologies had an instinctive awareness of crowds, the illogical tides and currents of bodies which flowed through them. He always knew where people were in relation to himself, alert to any possible collision. Nobody could just *appear*.

Bud's momentum kept his torso going forwards, while his legs were completely blocked. He went flying, pivoting over the man's back to crash onto the cool marble. His wrist made a nasty snapping sound, firing hot pain up his arm. And his neural nanonics did nothing. Nothing! There were no axon blocks, no medical display. Bud let out a howl of pain, blinking back tears as he looked up.

Those tears might have accounted for two or three of the curious faces peering down at him. Pale and distressed, wearing extremely odd hats. When he blinked the salty fluid clear, they'd gone. He clutched at his injured wrist. "Sheesh, dear God, that hurts." A murmur of surprise rattled over his head, a strong contrast to the screams breaking out across the rest of the station. No one seemed particularly concerned about him.

"Hey, my neural nanonics have failed. Someone call me a medic. I think my wrist's broken."

The man he'd fallen over was now rising to his feet. Bud was acutely conscious of the silence that had closed around him, of people backing away. When he looked up, any thoughts of shouting curses on the clumsy oaf vanished instantly. There was a face inside the large hood, barely visi-

ble. Bud was suddenly very thankful for the robe's shadows. The expression of fury and malice projected by the features he could see was quite bad enough. "Sorry," he whispered.

Fingers closed around his heart. He could actually feel them, individual joints hinging inwards, fingernails digging into his atriums. The hand twisted savagely. Bud choked silently, his arms flapping wildly. He was just aware of people closing in on him again. This time, they registered concern. Too late, he tried to tell them, far too late. The aloof devil turned casually and faded from his sight. Then so did the rest of the world.

Quinn observed Bud's soul snake away from his corpse, vanishing into the beyond, adding his screams to the beseeching myriad. There was a big commotion all around, people shoving and jostling to get a good view of whatever was going down. Only a couple of them had gasped as he returned himself to the ghost realm, fading out right in front of them. At least he'd retained enough composure not to use the white fire. Not that it mattered now. He'd been seen, and not just by people with glitched neural nanonics; the station's security sensors would have captured the event.

Govcentral knew he was here.

Tucked down in the central hold of the landing boat, Sinon couldn't physically see the rest of the squadron closing on the shore. Affinity made it unnecessary; all the Edenist minds on and orbiting Ombey were linked together, providing him with more information than General Hiltch had available. He was aware of his personal position, as well as that of his comrades, even the Liberation's overall situation was available to him. The voidhawk flotilla revealed the red cloud beneath them. Huge lightning bolts were writhing across the upper surface as the SD platforms continued

their electron barrage. At the centre, along the spine of hills, the glow was fading, allowing pools of darkness to ripple outward.

Along with all the other serjeants, Sinon craned forwards for a look. The barrier of red cloud had grown steadily through the night as the boats headed in for the beach. From ten kilometres offshore, it stretched right across the water, solid and resolute like the wall at the end of the world.

Small flickers of lightning arose to dance along the bottom, slashing down into the waves. Steam plumes screwed upwards from the discharges. Then the lightning streamers were coming together into massive dazzling rivers, rising up, following the steep curve of the cloud to arch inland. The red glow faded, taking less than five seconds to die completely. Its disappearance startled Sinon and the other serjeants. The victory was too sudden. This was not the epic struggle they'd been preparing for. The crawling webs of lightning more than made up for the absence; blazing bright right across the horizon.

You know, that is actually a very big cloud, Sinon said. The brilliant flashes were near-continuous now, keeping the dark mass illuminated prominently.

You noticed that, Choma retorted.

Yes. Which could be a problem. It was rather nicely contained while the possessed were using it as a shield. As such, we tended to disregard its physical properties; it was, after all, primarily a psychological barrier.

Psychological or not, we can't cruise straight through with all that electrical activity.

Choma wasn't the only one to reach that conclusion. They could already feel the boat slowing as the captain reduced power to the engines. A precaution repeated simultaneously by the entire armada.

“Recommendations?” Ralph asked.

“Shut down the SD assault,” Acacia said. “The landing boats are already slowing. They can’t penetrate that kind of lightning storm.”

“Diana?”

“I think so. If the red light is an indication of the possessed’s control, then we’ve already routed them.”

“That’s a very big if,” Admiral Farquar protested.

“We don’t have a lot of choice,” the elderly technology advisor said. “The landing boats clearly can’t get through, nor can the ground vehicles, for that matter. We have to let the energy discharge itself naturally. If the red light returns when they’re inside, we can resume the electron beam attack until the cloud itself starts to break up.”

“Do it,” Ralph ordered. “Acacia, get the serjeants as close as they can to the cloud, then as soon as the lightning’s finished, I want them through.”

“Yes, General.”

“Diana, how long is it going to take to dissipate that electricity?”

“A good question. We’re not sure how deep or dense that cloud is.”

“Answer me.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. There are too many variables.”

“Oh great. Acacia, is the lightning going to affect the harpoons?”

“No. The cloud’s too low for that, and they’re going too fast. Even if one took a direct hit from a lightning bolt, the trajectory won’t be altered by more than a couple of metres at best.”

The voidhawk flotilla was only one and a half thousand kilometres from the surface of Ombey. Mortonridge filled

their sensor blister coverage, changing from a red smear to a seething mass of blue-white streamers, more alive than ever before. There was just time for one last query.

We're still go, Acacia assured them.

All three hundred voidhawks reached the apex of their trajectory. Their bone-crushing eight-gee acceleration ended briefly. Each one flung a swarm of five thousand kinetic harpoons from its weapons cradles. Then power surged through their patterning cells again, reversing the previous direction of the distortion field. The punishing intensity was unchanged, still eight gees, pushing them desperately away from the planet with its dangerous gravity field.

Far below, the delicate filigree of shimmering lightning vanished beneath an incandescent corona as the upper atmosphere ignited. The plasma wake left by one and a half million kinetic harpoons had merged together into a single photonic shockwave. It hit the top of the cloud, puncturing the churning grey vapour with such speed there was little reaction. At first. Acacia was quite right, the cloud for all its bulk and animosity could not deflect the harpoons from their programmed targets.

No human could draw up that list, it was the AI in Pasto that ultimately designated their impact points. They descended in clumps of three, giving a ninety-seven per cent probability of a successful hit. Mortonridge's communication net was the main target.

Urban legend dictated that modern communication nets were annihilation proof. With hundreds of thousands of independent switching nodes spread over an entire planet, and millions of cables linking them, backed up by satellite relays, their anarchistic-homogeneous nature made them immune to any kind of cataclysm. No matter how many nodes were taken out, there was always an alternative route

for the data. You'd have to physically wipe out a planet before its data exchange was stalled.

But Mortonridge was finite, its net isolated from the redundancy offered by the rest of the planet. The location of every node was known to within half a metre. Unfortunately, ninety per cent of them were proscribed, because they were inside a built up urban area. If kinetic harpoons started dropping amid the buildings, resulting casualties would be horrendous. That left the cables out in the open countryside. A lot of them followed roads, nestled in utility conduits along the side of the carbon concrete, but many more took off across the land, laid by mechanoids tunnelling through forests and under rivers, with nothing on the surface to indicate their existence.

Long-inactive files of their routes had been accessed and analysed by the AI. Strike coordinates were designated, with the proscription that there should be no habitable structure within three quarters of a kilometre. Given the possessed's considerable ability to defend themselves on a physical level, it was considered a reasonable safe distance.

Stephanie Ash lay quivering on the floor even after her mind had recoiled from the communion with other souls. The loss hurt her more than any pain from the electron beam attack against the cloud. That simple act of union had given her hope. As long as people went on supporting each other, she knew, despite everything else, they remained human to some small degree. Now even that fragile aspiration had been wrenched from them.

"Stephanie?" Moyo called. His hand was shaking her shoulder gently. "Stephanie, are you all right?"

The fear and concern in his voice triggered her own guilt. "God, no." She opened her eyes. The bedroom was lit solely by a small bluish flame coming from his thumb. Out-

side the window, blackness swarmed the whole world. "What did they do?" She could no longer sense the psychic weight pressing against her from the other side of the fire-break. Only the valley was apparent.

"I don't know. But it's not good." He helped her to her feet.

"Are the others all right?" She could sense their minds, spread out through the farmhouse, embers of worry and pain.

"Same as us, I guess." A bright flash from outside silenced him. They both went to the window and peered out. Huge shafts of lightning skidded along the underbelly of the cloud.

Stephanie shivered uncomfortably. What had successfully shielded them from the open sky was now an intimidating large mass far too close overhead.

"We're not in charge of it anymore," Moyo said. "We let go."

"What's going to happen to it?"

"It'll rain, I guess." He shot her an anxious look. "And that's a lot of cloud up there. We just kept adding to it, like a baby's security blanket."

"Maybe we should get the animals in."

"Maybe we should get the hell out of here. The Princess's army will be coming."

She smiled sadly. "There's nowhere to go. You know that."

The frequency of the lightning had increased dramatically by the time they rounded up Cochrane, Rana, and Franklin to help chase after the chickens and lambs that normally ambled round inside the farmyard. The first few big drops of water began to patter down.

Moyo stuck his hand out, palm up. As if confirmation was really needed. "Told you," he said smugly.

Stephanie turned her cardigan into a slicker, even though she didn't hold out much hope of staying dry. The drops were larger than any she'd ever known. All the chickens were running through the open gate, the lambs had already vanished into the atrocious night. She was just about to suggest they didn't bother trying to catch them when daylight returned to Mortonridge.

Cochrane gaped up at the sky. The clouds had turned into translucent veils of grey silk, allowing the light to pour through. "Wow! Who switched the sun back on, man?" The bottom of the clouds detonated into incandescent splinters, searing down through the air. Vivid star-tips pulling down a hurricane cone of violet mist after them. Stephanie had to shield her eyes, they were so bright.

"It's the end of the world, kids," Cochrane cried gleefully.

All one and a half million harpoons struck the ground within a five second period. A clump of them were targeted on a cable four kilometres from the farm valley, their terrible velocity translated into a single devastating blast of heat. The radiant orange flash silhouetted the valley rim, lasting just long enough to reveal the debris plume boiling upwards.

"Ho shit," Cochrane grunted. "That Mr Hiltch *really* doesn't like us."

"What were they?" Stephanie asked. It seemed incredible that they were still in their bodies. Surely that kind of violence would wipe them out?

"Some kind of orbital bombardment," Moyo said. "It must have been aimed at Ekelund's troops." He didn't sound too convinced.

"Aimed? It was everywhere."

"Then why didn't it hit us?" Rana asked. Moyo just shrugged. That was when the roar of the impact reached

them, a drawn out rumble loud enough to swallow any words.

Stephanie covered her ears, and looked up again. The cloud was in torment, its rumpled underbelly foaming violently. Ghostly billows of luminescent purple air left behind by the harpoons snaked around the tightly packed whorls; the two of them flowing against each other, yet never merging, like liquids with different densities. She frowned, blinking upwards as the light dimmed. A thick slate-grey haze was emerging, oozing out of the cloud to swallow both the lightning and the tattered sheets of ion vapour. It was expanding fast, darkening.

“Inside,” she said in a small voice as the last echoes of the explosion reverberated across the valley. They all turned to look at her. The big drops of rain had returned. A breeze arose to stroke their clothes. “Get inside. It’s going to rain.”

They glanced up at the descending haze, awed and fearful as understanding reached them.

“Nothing!” Annette screamed furiously at the processor block. The primitive schematic displayed on its screen proved it was functioning, yet nobody was answering her calls. “We’re cut off.”

Soi Hon studied the display on his block. “All the lines are down, from what I can see,” he said.

“Don’t be absurd, you can’t knock out an entire net,” Annette protested. Doubt stung. “It’s not possible.”

“I imagine that was the idea behind the bombardment,” Soi Hon replied, unperturbed. “It was rather spectacular, after all. They wouldn’t expend that much effort for no reason. And we didn’t have the whole net functioning in the first place, only the critical links.”

“Damn it, how the hell am I going to organize our resistance now?”

“Everyone has their original orders, and they have no choice but to fight. All this means is that you are no longer in charge of the possessed.”

Even his complacency soured at the look she gave him.

“Oh really?” she asked dangerously.

The light began to fade outside. Annette strode across to the big front window. She’d taken over a folksy restaurant called the Black Bull in the middle of Cold Overton, giving her a commanding position at the end of the broad main street. Fifty vehicles were parked on the stone slabs of the market square outside, waiting for the troops who’d taken refuge in the nearby shops and cafés. Milne and a few of his engineers were walking about, inspecting the equipment. There didn’t seem to be any damage, though several of the harpoons had fallen just outside the village.

“Soi,” she said. “Take a couple of squads and check the roads. I want to know how quickly we can get out of here.”

“As you wish.” He nodded briskly, and made for the door.

“There’s a big group of us in Ketton,” she said, almost to herself. “That’s only ten kilometres west of here. We’ll link up with them. Should be able to convince some civilians to join up, too. After that we can move on to the next group.”

“We could use runners to carry messages,” Delvan suggested. “That’s what we did back in my time. Communications were always pretty damn poor close to the front.”

There was very little light left now. Annette saw Milne and the others running. There was no fear in their minds, just urgency. Raindrops splattered against the window. Within seconds the whole of Main Street was awash. Gutters started to fill up, with small whirlpools forming over the drains.

"I've never seen anything like that before," Soi Hon exclaimed, raising his voice against the noise. He was standing in the open doorway, a waterproof poncho forming round his shoulders. The drumming sound of the huge drops was easily as loud as the red cloud's thunder had been. "And we saw some storms round the Pacific in my day, believe me."

A rivulet of dirty water began to seep in around his feet, trickling round the tables. Annette couldn't see anything outside now, the rain was battering heavily against the glass, producing the kind of spume that normally topped ocean waves. Behind that, there was only blackness.

Delvan moved up beside him to get a better look. "Nobody's going anywhere in this."

"Yes," Annette agreed shakily. "You'd better wait."

"How long, though?" Delvan muttered. "We didn't think about this when we drew the cloud over us."

"Don't worry," Soi Hon said. "Nobody's going to do any fighting for a while. It's just as bad for them. And at least we're inside."

The landing boat surged forwards as soon as the dazzling corona from the kinetic harpoons lit up the sky. Sinon used the voidhawks' vantage point to observe the giant splash of plasma sink into the dark mantle of cloud.

It's expanding, Acacia announced. **Confirm that, we're tracking it.**

Vast cyclonic spirals of cloud were stirring across the upper surface. Washed by Ombey's pale moonlight, the movement appeared almost majestic. Primeval forces had awoken. Along the edges of the cloud, gargantuan tornadoes began to spin away, careering off over the sea.

The whole damn thing's breaking up, Choma said.

Sinon shared a shiver of consternation with the other ser-

jeants; not just in his boat. All of them were facing the same onslaught. He stared out over the prow, watching mountains of water on the move. A wind had risen from nowhere to blow straight at him.

We can't turn back, Choma said. **It'll catch us on the open water. Best head for shore.**

Sinon's hand patted his lifebelt, seeking reassurance. The massif of cloud seemed to be hurtling towards them, a light-absorbing void distending across the ocean.

Keep going, was the decision concurred by the rest of the Edenists and General Hiltch's command group. Every boat in the Liberation armada rammed its engines to full, and met the stormfront head on.

It wasn't rain they faced, not in the ordinary sense. The deluge crashing down over them was like standing under a waterfall. As the clouds rampaged overhead, so the waves rose, as if seeking to bridge the gap. The landing boats were thrown around pitilessly. Sometimes Sinon had to hold himself against a deck that was lifting over thirty degrees to the vertical. The jeeps secured along the centre of the hold strained against their restraint cables as their weight was flung about in directions the designers had never anticipated. Bilge pumps were wailing plaintively, to little effect. Sinon clung to a guard rail as the cold water mounted steadily against his legs, sloshing between the hull walls. He was worried he'd get tossed overboard. He was worried his newly assembled body would split along surgical lines as he strained muscles and tendons to hold on. He worried that a jeep would break free and crush him. He worried they wouldn't reach the beach before the rain and waves filled the hold and sunk them.

Not even sharing the anxiety in the Edenist fashion did much to alleviate it. There was way too much distress bubbling through the aether as the armada battled for shore.

The Edenists in secondary support roles, safe away from the megastorm, along with the voidhawks and their crews overhead, did their best to offer what reassurance and comfort they could to their beleaguered kinsmen. But they all felt the death toll rising, compounding the alarm. Landing boats collapsed, pitched over, individual serjeants lost their grip to drown amid the monster waves. Voidhawks laboured tirelessly to absorb the fresh memories of the dying serjeant personalities.

A nausea suppression program went primary as an aghast Ralph watched the nightmare unfurling. Neatly tabulated icons blinked up inside his mind, indicating the woeful progress the boats were making. Some were even being driven backwards as the gales howled out from the land. He did what he could. For all it was worth. Ordering the ground forces along the firebreak to stay put and dig in. Putting the medical teams on immediate standby. Designating search patrols for the aircraft, ready for the time when it became feasible to fly.

Diana Tiernan and the AI couldn't give him any estimate when that would be. There was no way of knowing the true weight of water powering the storm. Radar scans from the SD sensor satellites to discover the depth and density were badly distorted by the tremendous electrical discharges still churning madly over Mortonridge. All they could do was wait.

"We couldn't have known," Janne Palmer said. "Dealing with the possessed is one giant unknown."

"We should have guessed," Ralph answered bitterly. "At least considered it."

"Best information we had was that the cloud was a couple of hundred metres thick," Diana said. "That's all it was on Lalonde and every other planet they took over. But this

blasted thing, it must be kilometres deep. They must have sucked every gram of water from the air. There may even be some kind of osmotic process involved, siphoning it up out of the sea.”

“Damn those bastards,” Ralph spat.

“They are afraid,” Acacia said calmly. “They built the thickest, highest wall they could to keep us out. It’s human nature.”

Ralph couldn’t bring himself to answer the Edenist. It was Acacia’s people who were taking the brunt of the calamity. And it was his plan, his orders, which had put them there. Anything he said would be pathetically inadequate.

Outside, the rain had reached Fort Forward, and was doing its best to wash the city’s programmable silicon structures into the nearby river. Fast rivulets were gouging the soil away from their base anchors. Ops Room staff glanced round nervously as banshee winds pummelled away at the walls. Fifty minutes after the kinetic harpoon barrage, the landing boats started to reach the beaches.

“They’re coming through,” Acacia said. The first strands of confidence were starting to emerge within the combined Edenist psyche as serjeants exported the feeling of sand crunching underfoot. Proof that success was possible, the sense of relief which accompanied it. “It’s going to be okay, we’re going to make it.”

“Right,” Ralph croaked. One icon gleamed darkly at the centre of his woeful thoughts: 3129. The number of dead so far. And we’re the only ones shooting.

An immense wave smacked the landing craft down on the beach with an almighty crunch. The blow sent Sinon skidding back along the hold on his arse, limbs flailing. Water slowed his momentum quickly. He came to rest in a jumble

of other serjeants, all struggling to disentangle themselves. The three at the bottom were completely immersed. Affinity was supremely useful in coordinating their movements, like unpicking a three dimensional puzzle.

They'd just got free when the next wave clobbered the side of the landing boat. It lacked the brutality of the previous one, simply shoving the hull further up the beach, and twisting them at an angle.

Dry land! Choma cried triumphantly.

Well . . . land, anyway, Sinon acknowledged dutifully as he sloshed forwards back up the hold. The rain here was even worse than out at sea. Visibility was down to maybe fifteen metres, and that was with the boat's powerful lights shining down.

Sometimes, I think you have completely the wrong attitude for this.

Sinon sent a smile image at his friend. He carried on searching through the water for pieces of his kit lost during the last portion of the voyage.

The squad began to assess their position. Five had been injured seriously enough to disqualify them from the campaign altogether. Several more had suffered minor cracking in their exoskeletons, which the medical nanonics could cope with. (Surprisingly, the medical nanonics were working reasonably well.) The beach they'd wound up on was three kilometres south of their designated landing point, Billesdon. The truck at the back of the hold was so badly flooded it'd require a complete maintenance overhaul. The landing boat was wedged into the shingle, and would need towing off at high tide before it could return to the resort island for the marines.

On the plus side, the forward ramp worked, allowing the three functional jeeps out. Most of their armament was intact. All the other landing boats containing their regiment

had made it ashore, though they were spread out along the coast. After a brief discussion with their Ops Room liaison, they agreed to make their way to Billesdon and regroup there. According to their original plan, the back-up forces and supplies would use the town's harbour as their disembarkation point. But it still had to be secured.

By the time the boat's forward ramp came down it was technically dawn. Hunched down in the almost non-existent shelter provided by the starboard hull, Sinon couldn't notice any difference. The only way he knew the jeeps were lumbering out was by using his affinity to see out through the driver's eyes.

Looks like we're on, Choma said.

They rose to their feet, and checked their kit one last time. Sinon's squad took up position by the second jeep. Intense headlight beams pierced ten metres through the deluge before the grey water defeated them. It was slow going. Their feet sank deep into the saturated shingle. Twice they had to push the jeep when its wide tyres dug themselves into axle-high ruts.

The squad was totally dependent on their guidance blocks. Satellite images taken before the possession provided them with a high-resolution picture of the cove, and the single narrow track leading away from it into the forest at the rear. Inertial guidance designated their position to within ten centimetres. Supposedly. There was no way of checking. Satellite sensors still couldn't penetrate the cloud to give them a verified location reference. They just had to hope the bitek processors hadn't been glitched since they loaded them back on the island.

Shingle gave way to tacky mud. Laggard waves of the yellow slough were creeping down the beach from the land behind. Clumps of grass and small bushes were being trawled along with it.

Great, Sinon said as he waded in. **At this rate, it's going to take a week to get there.** He was aware of other squads encountering similar difficulties all along the coast.

We need to get to higher ground, Choma said. His affinity indicated a point on the guidance block image. **That should give us better terrain to traverse.**

The squad concurred, and changed direction slightly.

Any news on when this rain's going to end? Sinon queried their liaison.

No.

Not even Cochrane could be bothered to maintain the Karmic Crusader's outlandish appearance. The rain was eroding their spirits at the same rate it ate into the valley's soil. Three hours so far, without ever slackening.

Flares of lightning revealed what it was doing to their beautiful circular valley. Water cascaded over the lip, turning the orderly terraces into long curving waterfalls. At each stage it grew muckier and more glutinous as it carried the rich cultivated black soil with it. Avalanches of crops and sturdy young fruit trees were plunging down the ever-steepening slopes to sink without trace into the expanding lake. The lawn at the rear of the farmhouse was slowly submerged, bringing the water up to the ornate iron-framed patio doors.

By that time they were already loading the Karmic Crusader with their cases. Wind had ripped countless slates from the roof, letting the rain in to soak through the ceiling plaster.

"Just bear in mind, there's only one road out of this valley," McPhee said when the first rivulet came churning down the stairs into the living room. "And that runs above the river. If we're going to get out of here, it's got to be soon."

Nobody had argued. They splashed their way upstairs to pack while he and Cochrane brought the bus out of the barn. Moyo was driving, keeping their speed to little more than walking pace. The dirt track along the side of the winding valley was crumbling at an alarming rate as sheets of filthy water poured down out of the trees above them, foaming round trunks and raking out the tangled undergrowth. His mind concentrated on giving the bus broader tyres in an attempt to gain some kind of traction on the quagmire surface. It was difficult; he had to get Franklin and McPhee to collaborate with him, meshing their thoughts together.

A tree crashed onto the track twenty metres ahead of them, uprooted by the relentless water. Moyo stamped down on the brakes, but the bus just kept slithering forwards. Not even the full focus of his energetic ability could affect the motion. An untimely reminder about his acute lack of omnipotence. He just managed to shout: "Hold on to something," before the bus's front collision buffer hit the trunk. The windscreen turned white, bulging inwards to absorb as much of the impact as it could before finally disintegrating into a hail of tiny plastic spheres. A fat bulb of twigs and spiky topaz leaves burst through the rent. Moyo tried to duck, but the seat straps held him fast. Instinct took over, and a stupendous ball of white fire engulfed the twigs. He screeched as his eyebrows smouldered and his hair shrivelled into black frazzled ash. The skin on his face went dead.

Steam belched along the interior as the Karmic Crusader juddered to a halt. Stephanie loosened her grip on the seat back in front of her, leaving deep indentations in the composite. The floor was tilted at quite an incline. What with the rain drumming on the roof, and the water from the slope pouring round them she could only just distinguish the

stressed creaking coming from the bodywork. There was no way of telling what was causing it. Even her eldritch sense was cluttered with confusing shadowforms, the rain was equivalent to strong static interference.

Then water came gurgling eagerly along the aisle, pushing a fringe of filthy scum ahead of it. It glided over her shoes. She made an effort to banish the cloying steam, trying to make out the gloomy interior.

“My eyes!” It was just a whisper, but poignant enough to carry the length of the aisle. Everyone swung round towards the front of the bus.

“Oh god, my eyes. My eyes. Help me! My eyes!”

Stephanie had to hang on to the overhead racks, swinging one hand in front of the other, to make her way forwards. Moyo was still sitting in the driver’s seat, his body rigid. The incinerated remains of the tree’s branch cluster loomed centimetres from his face like some fabulously delicate charcoal sculpture. His hands were held close to his cheeks, trembling from the fear of what he’d find if he actually touched himself.

“It’s all right,” she said automatically. Her mind played traitor, fright and revulsion at what she saw surging to the surface of her thoughts. His skin had roasted away, taking most of his nose and all of his eyelids with it. Blood was dribbling out of the fissures between scabs of crisped corium layers. Both eyes had broiled, turning septic yellow as creamy fluids percolated out in a mockery of tears.

“I can’t see,” he cried. “Why can’t I see?”

She reached out and grasped both his hands. “Shush. Please, darling. It’ll be all right. You just got scorched by the flame, that’s all.”

“I can’t see!”

“Of course you can. You’ve got your sixth sense until your eyes recover. You know I’m here, don’t you?”

“Yes. *Don't go.*”

She put her arms round him. “I won't.” He began shaking violently. Cold sweat was prickling his undamaged skin.

“He's in shock,” Tina said. The others were gathering round, as much as the cramped aisle would permit. Their thoughts tempered by the sight of Moyo's injuries.

“He's all right,” Stephanie insisted in a brittle tone.

“It's very common with major burn cases.”

Stephanie glared at her.

“Yo, man, give him a drag on this,” Cochrane said. He held out a fat reefer, sickly sweet smoke seeping from its glowing tip.

“Not now!” Stephanie hissed.

“Actually, yes, darling,” Tina said. “For once the ape man's right. It's a mild sedative, which is just what he needs right now.” Stephanie frowned suspiciously at the unaccustomed authority in Tina's voice. “I used to be a nurse,” the statuesque woman continued, gathering in her black diamante shawl with a contemptuous dignity. “Actually.”

Stephanie took the reefer, and eased it gently into Moyo's lips. He coughed weakly as he inhaled.

The bus groaned loudly. Its rear end shifted a couple of metres, sending them all grabbing for support. McPhee ducked his head to peer through the broken windscreen. “We're not going anywhere in this,” he said. “We'd better get out before we get washed away.”

“We can't move him,” Stephanie protested. “Not for a while.”

“The river's nearly up level with this track, and we've got at least another kilometre and a half to go before we're out of the valley.”

“Level? It can't be. We were twenty metres above the valley floor.”

The Karmic Crusader's headlights were out, so she sent a slender blade of white fire arching over the track. It was as if the land had turned to water. She couldn't actually see any ground, slopes and hollows were all submerged under several centimetres of flowing yellow-brown water. Just below the flattish section which marked the track, a cavalcade of flotsam was sweeping along the valley. Mangled branches, smashed trunks, and snarled up mats of vegetation were all cluttered together; their smooth progress was ominous, nothing stood in their way. As she watched, another of the trees from the slope above slid down past the bus, staying vertical the whole time until it reached the river.

She didn't like to think how many more trees were poised just above them. "You're right," she said. "Let's get out of here."

Cochrane retrieved his reefer. "Feel better?" Moyo simply twitched. "Hey, no need for the downer. Just like grow them back, man. It's easy."

Moyo's answering laugh was hysterical. "Imagine I can see? Oh yes, oh yes. It's easy, it's so fucking easy." He started to sob, tapping his fingertips delicately over his ruined face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You stopped the bus," Stephanie said. "You saved all of us. There's nothing to be sorry for."

"Not *you!*" he screamed. "Him! I'm saying sorry to him. It's his body, not mine. Look what I've done to it. Not you. Oh god. Why did all this happen? Why couldn't we all just die?"

"Get me the first-aid kit," Tina told Rana. "Now!"

Stephanie had her arm round Moyo's shoulder again, wishing there was some aspect of energistic power that could manifest raw comfort. McPhee and Franklin tried opening the door. But it was jammed solid, beyond even

their enhanced physical strength's ability to shift. They looked at each other, gripped hands, and closed their eyes. A big circular section of the front bodywork spun off into the bedlam outside. Rain spat down the aisle like a damp shotgun blast. Rana struggled forwards with the first-aid kit case, fiddling with the clips.

"This is no use," Tina wailed. She plucked out a nanonic package, face wrinkled in dismay. The thick green strip dangled from her hand like so much wobbly rubber.

"Come on! There must be something in it you can use," Stephanie said.

Tina rummaged through. The case contained several strips of nanonic package, diagnostic blocks—all useless. Even the phials of biochemicals and drugs used infuser patches, the dosage regulated by a diagnostic block. There was no non-technological method of getting the medication into his bloodstream. She shook her head weakly. "Nothing."

"Damn it—"

The bus groaned, shifting again. "No more time," McPhee said. "This is it. Out. Now."

Cochrane clambered out of the hole, splashing down on the track next to the fallen tree. Keeping his footing was obviously difficult. The water came halfway up his shin. Rana followed him down. Stephanie gripped the seat straps holding Moyo in, and forced them to rot in her palms. She and Franklin hauled him up, and guided him through the hole. Tina followed them through, letting out martyred squeals as she struggled to find footholds.

"Lose those bloody heels, ye moron," McPhee yelled at her.

She glared back at him petulantly, but her scarlet stilettos faded into ordinary pumps with flat soles. "Peasant. A girl has to look her best at all times, you know."

“This is real you stupid cow, not a fucking disaster movie set. You’re no’ being filmed.”

She ignored him, and turned to help Stephanie with Moyo. “Let’s try and bandage his face, at the very least,” she said. “I’ll need some cloth.”

Stephanie tore a strip off the bottom of her saturated cardigan. When she passed it over to Tina it had become a dry, clean strip of white linen.

“I suppose that’ll be all right,” Tina said dubiously. She started to wrap it round Moyo’s eyes, making sure the stub remains of his nose were also covered. “Do try and think of your face as being normal, darling. It’ll all grow back, then, you’ll see.”

Stephanie said nothing, she didn’t doubt Moyo could repair the burns to his cheeks and forehead, but actually growing eyeballs back . . .

Franklin landed with a heavy splash, the last out of the bus. Nobody fancied trying to salvage their luggage. The boot was at the rear, and not even energistic power would help much clambering over the tree. Blasting the trunk to shreds would only send the bus spinning over the edge.

They spent a couple of minutes sorting themselves out. First priority was fending off the rain; their collective imagination produced a transparent hemisphere, like a giant glass umbrella floating in the air above them. Once that was established, they set about drying off their clothes. There wasn’t anything they could do about the water coursing across the track, so they gave themselves sturdy knee-high wellingtons.

Thus protected, they set off down the track, taking turns to guide and support a shivering Moyo. A bright globe of ball lightning bobbed through the air ahead and slightly to the side of them, hissing as raindrops lashed against it, but lighting the way and hopefully giving them some warning

of any more falling trees. Apart from that, their only worry was making it out of the valley before the river rose up over the track. The driving rain and roaring wind meant they never knew when another tree slithered down the slope into the dark and battered Karmic Crusader, sending it plunging into the engorged river.

Billesdon was a cheery little town, tucked into the lee of a large granite headland on Mortonridge's eastern coast. Sheltered from the worst of the breakers to come rolling in off the ocean, it was a natural harbour. District planners took advantage of that, quarrying the abundant rock to build a long curving quay opposite the headland, enclosing a wide deepwater basin with a modest beach at the back. The majority of boats which used it were trawlers and sandrakers, their operators earning a good living from Ombey's plentiful fish and crustacean species. Even the local seaweed was exported to restaurants across the peninsula.

It also proved a haven for pleasure boats, with several sport fishing and yachting clubs setting up shop. With so many boats to service, the marine engineering companies and supply industries were quick to seize upon the commercial opportunities available and open premises in the town. Houses, apartment blocks, shops, hotels, entertainment halls, and industrial estates were thrown up all the way back along the shallow valley behind the headland. Villas and groves began to blossom along the slopes above, next to golf courses and holiday complexes.

Billesdon became the sort of town, beautiful and economically successful, that was presented as the Kingdom's ideal, every citizen's entitlement. Sinon's squad reached the outskirts around midday. A trivial glimmer of light was pen-

etrating the clouds, giving the world a lacklustre opacity. Visibility had risen to a few hundred yards.

Sinon wished it hadn't bothered. They were poised just outside the town, not far above the sea. Cover was ostensibly provided by a spinney of fallen Fellots. None of the sturdy aboriginal trees remained standing; their dense fan-shaped branches had cushioned the way the trunks fell, leaving them at crazy angles. Rain kept their upper sections clean from the cloying mud, giving the cerise bark a glossy sheen. Choma was pressed up against a fat trunk at the edge of the spinney, waving a sensor block slowly ahead of him. The whole squad hooked in to the block's bitek processor, examining the buildings ahead through a variety of wavelengths.

Not even the money lavished on Billesdon's infrastructure had saved it from the rain. The terraces and groves above had dissolved, sending waves of mud slithering down into the prim streets, clogging the drains within minutes. Water raced along the roads and pavements, submerging tarmac and grass alike before it poured over the quayside wall. There were no boats left in the harbour; every single craft had been used to evacuate the population before Ekelund's invasion reached the coast. In theory, that left the basin clear for the Liberation's landing boats to bring the occupation troops and support materiel ashore.

Seems deserted, Choma said.

Nothing moving, Sinon agreed, **but infrared's useless in all this rain. There could be thousands of them tucked up nice and dry waiting for us.**

Look on the bright side, the water should foul up that white fire of theirs.

Maybe, but that still leaves them with a whole load of options to use against us.

That's good, keep thinking like that. Paranoia keeps you on your toes.

Thank you.

So what do you want to do now?

Simple. We're going to have to go in and check it out one house at a time.

Okay, that's what I signed up for.

They discussed it with the other squads encircling the town. Search areas were designated, tactics coordinated, blockades established on the main roads. Guyana was alerted that they were going in, and readied the low orbit SD platforms to provide groundstrike support if called for.

The outskirts ahead of Sinon were modest houses overlooking the harbour, home to the fishing families. They had large gardens, which had been completely washed away. Long tongues of mud-slimed debris were stretched down the slope, with small streams running down their centres where the water had gouged a channel into the sandy soil. Cover between the spinney and the first house was non-existent, so the squad moved forwards with long gaps between each member. If the white fire did burst down on them, it would never be able to reach more than one at a time. Hopefully.

Sinon was third in the line. He held his machine gun ready, crouched low to provide the smallest possible target. Ever since they came ashore, he'd been thankful that his serjeant body had an exoskeleton; the rain didn't bother him as much as it would if he had ordinary skin. Body armour had been considered and rejected, it had never been any good against the white fire before. The one concession they all made were shoes, a kind of sandal with deep-tread soles to give them traction.

Even so, it was hard to keep his feet from slipping as he hurried forward through the mud. The first house was ten metres ahead of him: a white box with long silvered windows and a large first floor balcony at the rear. Water poured out of the sagging guttering, diluting the slow-

moving sludge that percolated round the base of the walls. He kept sweeping the machine gun nozzle across the facing wall, alert for any sign of motion from inside. Out in the open, wind was driving the rain straight at him. Even his body was aware of how cold it was; not that it was affecting his performance, not yet. Sensor blocks dangled from his belt, unused and redundant as he urged himself on. His training was his one and only defence now.

Choma had already reached the house ahead of him, ducking down to crawl under the windows. Sinon reached the back wall, and started to follow his friend along the side of the house. It was important to keep moving, not clump together. Palm fronds and limp knots of grass wrapped themselves round his ankles, slowing him. When he reached the largest window, he took one of the sensor blocks from his belt, and gingerly pressed it to the pane. The block relayed a slightly misty image of the room inside. A lounge, cosy, with worn furniture and framed family holograms on the wall. Water was spraying out of the ceiling's central light fitting; the floor was invisible under a layer of mud which had pushed in from the hallway. An infrared scan showed no hot-spots.

Clean downstairs, he said. And my ELINT block is clear. Looks like nobody's home.

We need to be sure, Choma replied. Check out the upper floor. I'll back you.

Sinon stood up, shouldering the machine gun. He took out a fission blade and sliced through the window frame, cutting out the lock. Raindrops sizzled on the glowing blade. The next two serjeants in his squad had already reached the house when he slipped inside. He pushed out a heavy breath from his lungs, the nearest he could get to a sigh. Actually out of the rain. Its impact was diminished to

a dull drum roll on the roof. Choma splashed down into the thin mire beside him.

Hell, that's better.

Affinity made Sinon aware of the rest of the squad; two of them were in the neighbouring houses, while the rest had started to spread out along the street. **My ELINT's still clear,** he said.

Choma looked up at the ceiling, pointing his machine gun at it cautiously. **Yes. I'm pretty sure there's nobody up there, but we've still got to check.**

Sinon made his way out into the hall, machine gun held ready. **How can you be sure? You don't know what's up there.**

Instinct.

Crazy. He put his foot on the first step, sandal sole making a squelching sound against the sodden carpet. **We've barely got imagination operating inside these neural arrays, let alone an intuitive function.**

Then I suggest you work one up fast, you're going to need it.

Sinon turned so he could cover the landing as he ascended. Nothing moved except for the unending water, glistening as it ran down walls, curdling across carpets and tile floors, dripping from furniture. He reached the main bedroom, its door ajar. His foot kicked it hard, dinting the wood. The door slammed back amid a shower of droplets. Choma was right: it was empty. In every room, the signs of panicked departure. Drawers ransacked, clothes scattered about.

Nobody here, Sinon reported to the squad when they cleared the front bedroom. Other house searches across the town were also proving negative as the squads moved in.

Ghost town, Choma said, chortling.

I think you could find a better phrase. He looked

down through the window, seeing squad members scuttling along the road outside. They were going against the flow of mud, their legs churning up deep eddies. Things were trundling along the street, carried along by the relentless current. Bulges in the smooth mud; there was no way of telling if they were stones or crumpled twigs. All of them moved at the same speed.

He held up a sensor block, panning it round in search of anomalous hot-spots. The image was overlapping his actual field of view, which meant he was looking straight at the house on the other side of the street when it exploded.

A serjeant had cut through the lock on a side door and crept cautiously inside, machine gun held ready. The ground floor must have been clear, because a second serjeant followed him in. Thirty seconds later four explosions detonated simultaneously. They were carefully placed, one at each corner of the house. Long flakes of concrete and lumps of stone shot out of the billowing flame. The whole house trembled: then, its crucial support destroyed, it collapsed vertically. Windows all along the street blew out under the impact of the blast wave. Sinon just managed to twist away in time, allowing his backpack to take the brunt of the flying shards.

The affinity bond boiled with hard, frantic thoughts. Both serjeants in the house were hammered by the explosions, their bodies wrecked. But the tough exoskeleton withstood the searing pressure for a few moments, long enough for the controlling personalities to instinctively begin the transfer. One of the orbiting voidhawks accepted their thoughts; then the house descended on their already weakened skulls.

“Shit!” Sinon yelled. He was curled up on the bedroom floor, aware of something being wrong with his left forearm. When he brought it up to his face, the exoskeleton was cracked in a small star pattern. Blood was seeping out of the

centre. Rain lashed in through the empty window, washing the crimson stain away.

Are you all right? Choma asked.

Yes . . . Yes, I think so. What happened? He stood up, peering down circumspectly onto the street. The mud and rain had swallowed almost all the immediate signs of the explosion. There was no smoke, no dust cloud. Just a pancake of rubble where the house had stood moments before. The tide of mud was already frothing round it, bubbling eagerly into cracks.

Choma pointed his machine gun along the street, radiating satisfaction that the squad had merged with the scenery. He knew where they were, but they weren't easily visible. **Where are they? Did anyone see where the white fire came from?**

He was answered with a chorus of: No's.

I don't think it was white fire, Sinon said. He ordered his block to replay the memory. The gouts of flame spearing out of each corner were orange, and they came from inside the house.

Sabotage? Choma said.

Could be. They were perfectly placed for demolition.

They were on their way down the stairs when the second house exploded. It was on the far side of town, being examined by one of the other squads. One serjeant was killed, another two were injured beyond any field medic's ability to patch up; they needed immediate evacuation. The rest of Sinon's squad stood back as he clambered up over the mound of stone and girders which had been the house. When he was clear of the mud he ran a sensor pad over the exposed rubble close to one of the corners. The rain was washing the mess clean, but the chemical analysis still had enough residual molecules to work with.

Not good, he announced. **This wasn't white fire. There's a definite trace of trinitrotoluene here.**

Sod it! Choma exclaimed. **The bastards have booby trapped the whole town.**

Parts of it. I doubt they've got the resources to rig every building.

But you can bet they've done the critical ones, as well as picking on houses at random, he said grudgingly. **It's what I would've done.**

If you're right, we're going to have to treat each building as potentially hazardous. And we don't even know what the trigger is.

I doubt it'll be electronic. Our sensors would spot active processors, and the possessed wouldn't be able to set them up in the first place. We'll have to get some of the marine engineers in here to find out what kind of mechanism they're employing.

Sinon's response was lost amid a burst of anguish within the communal affinity band. Both of them instinctively turned to the west. The death of another two serjeants was all too clear. A warehouse in a town called Holywell had just exploded.

It's not just here, Choma said. **Ekelund's people have been busy.**

Confirmation that most major towns around the periphery of Mortonridge were booby trapped came in to the Ops Room throughout the afternoon. Ralph sat in his office assessing the reports in a state of weary disbelief. Progress schematics were being revised on a fifteen minute basis by the AI. Their original timetable was constantly rearranged, targets being pushed further and further back.

"Truly amazing," he told Princess Kirsten during the

evening's briefing. "We're fifteen hours in, and already twenty behind schedule."

"Conditions are pretty foul under there," Admiral Farquar said. "I don't see Ekelund's people having a better time of it."

"How would we know? Fifteen hours, and we haven't had a single encounter with a live possessed. Christ, I mean I know no battle plan survives contact with the enemy, but no one ever said anything about it disintegrating before we even catch sight of them."

"General Hiltch," the Princess said sharply. "I'd like you to give me some positive factors, please. Have all the possessed simply vanished into this other realm they long for?"

"We don't think so, no, ma'am. Pulling back from the coast and the firebreak is a logical move. They obviously worked it out in advance, hence the booby traps."

"There's circumstantial evidence that they're still in the centre of Mortonridge," Diana said. "Our satellite sensor scans are at their worst there. Radar and UV laser is beginning to break through the fringes, but when we try to probe the centre we get the same kind of hazing effect the possessed have always generated. QED, they're still there."

"That's something, I suppose."

"I also think the worst of the rain should be over by mid-day tomorrow. Results from the sensors we can rely on show us the cloud is thinning out. A lot of it is simply blowing out to sea now they're no longer containing it. And of course, it's falling, bigtime."

"It certainly is," Acacia said. She shuddered at the on-the-ground impressions affinity had delivered to her. "You're going to have real problems with Mortonridge's vegetation when this is all over. I doubt there's a tree standing on the whole peninsula. I didn't know rain like that could exist."

“It can’t, normally,” Diana said. “This whole meteorology situation is highly artificial. The dispersal will influence the planet’s weather patterns for the rest of the year. However, it certainly isn’t sustainable; as I said, the heaviest falls will be over by midday tomorrow. After that, the serjeants will be able to make decent progress.”

“Over open country, possibly,” Ralph said. “But we’re going to have to vector in these booby traps.”

“Do we know what they are, yet?” the Princess asked.

“The majority so far are good old fashioned TNT,” Ralph told her. “Easily produced from the kind of chemicals available in most of our urban zones. We managed to get some marine engineers in to the afflicted towns to examine what they could. There’s no standard trigger mechanism, naturally enough. The possessed are using everything from trip wires to wired up door knobs. There’s just no quick way to deal with them. The whole point of the front line serjeants is to clear every metre of ground as they advance. Knowing you’re in danger just by walking in to a building is going to be very stressful for the entire army, I’m afraid. Doing the job properly is going to slow us down considerably.”

“So will the mud,” Janne said. “We know where the roads are, but no one’s actually seen a solid surface yet.”

“Progress down the M6 is slow,” Cathal confirmed. “The major bridges are out. We expected that, of course. But the mechanoids are having a lot of trouble erecting the replacements the convoys are carrying, they’re just not designed to operate in this kind of environment.”

“That situation should ease off tomorrow as well,” Diana said.

“The rain, yes; but the mud will still be there.”

“We’re going to have to learn to live with that, I’m afraid. It’s here for the duration.”

Did you know, the original ethnic Eskimos on Earth had several dozen words for snow, Sinon said.

Really? Choma answered from the other side of the winding ravine they were following.

Apparently so.

Excuse me for having my neural array assembled in too much of a hurry, but I don't quite see the relevance to our current situation.

I just thought, it might be appropriate if we had an equal number of names for mud.

Oh right. Yes. Let's see, we could have real crappy mud, bloody awful mud, pain in the ass mud, squeezes inside your exoskeleton and squelches a lot mud, and then there's always the ultimate: drowning in mud.

You have a much higher emotional context than the rest of us, don't you? Your jest about neural array assembly might be an unintentional truism.

You are what you bring to yourself.

Quite. Sinon stepped over yet another fallen branch. It was mid afternoon of the Liberation's second day. All the sergeants had received the revised schedule from the Fort Forward Ops Room, they were expected to move across the land at about half the speed originally intended. Very optimistic, Sinon thought.

It had taken until four o'clock in the morning to secure Billesdon. Now they knew they were dealing with TNT, the sensor blocks had been programmed to sniff it out. Given TNT's relatively unstable nature, there were usually enough molecules left floating round inside the building to provide a positive detection. The damp didn't help, but by and large, the blocks protected them.

Sinon himself had found two houses that were rigged. They'd learned to tie the blocks to the end of long poles, and push them through windows and doors already forced

open by the mud. Each time, he'd designated the buildings, and they were left for the marine engineers to send mechanoids in at some later time. They'd still lost another eight serjeants before the town was cleared.

The landing boats had returned as a feeble dawn broke; carrying their supplies, more jeeps, and the first of the marines troops. The wind had calmed, although the rain was still as intense. And the big harbour basin was now clotting up with mud, hampering their manoeuvring as they docked. But by mid morning, the quayside was thick with activity. A degree of confidence returned to the serjeants. They were getting back on track. With the marines holding Billesdon, the whole battalion began to deploy back out along the coast ready for the push inland.

True to Diana Tiernan's prediction, the rain did start to slacken by midday. Or at least, they convinced themselves it had; the light perforating the clouds was noticeably brighter. It did nothing to alleviate the misery of the mud. There had never been a landscape like it on any terracompatible Confederation world. Rover reporters stood on the edge of town, starkly silent as their enhanced retinas faithfully delivered the devastation back to the millions of citizens accessing the Liberation. Only the contours of the land remained stable, the mud had claimed everything else. There were no fields, or meadows, or scrubland, just a slick piss-brown coating, undulating and gurgling as it crept inexorably along. Mortonridge had become a single quagmire, extending from the sea to the horizon. Sensors in orbit showed the stain around the coast was already ten kilometres wide, and still spreading incursive fingers hungrily into the calm turquoise ocean.

Along with the rest of his squad, Sinon trudged through the forest, scrambling over the fallen trunks and their even more troublesome roots. Nothing had been left standing up-

right, although the tide of mud lacked the force to carry the trees with it. Superficially, the area resembled a bayou, although here the fractured wood was razor sharp, lacking the worn rottenness of plants growing in genuine swampland. Real bayous didn't have so many dead animals, either.

Like the vegetation, Mortonridge's indigenous creatures had taken a dreadful punishment. Birds and ground animals had drowned in their millions. Their corpses too, were part of the loose detritus carried along by the mud as it slid downwards into the ocean. Except in the forest, where the branches and root webs acted like nets. They were clustered round each tree, anonymous lumps, distending as they started to decompose. Heavy bubbles swelled across them like clumps of inflatable fungus as body gases forced a way out.

His battalion had been arranged in a line eighty kilometres wide, centred around Billesdon and its flanks merging with other battalions. This was the time when the army was stretched to its absolute maximum, completely encircling the entire peninsula. The AI had spaced the serjeants fifty metres apart right along the coast, planning on them yomping forwards together in a giant contracting sweep manoeuvre. If a possessed did try to hide out in the countryside they would never be more than twenty-five metres away from one of the serjeants. A combination of eyesight, infrared, SD satellite observation, and ELINT blocks ought to be able to locate them. Jeeps, trucks and reserve squads trailed behind the front line in columns one kilometre apart, ready to reinforce any section of the line that came under heavy attack. Mustered behind them were the prisoner-handling details.

When the gigantic formation was complete, the serjeants paused, reaffirming their commitment to the Liberation, celebrating the unity and accomplishment. Mortonridge

was sealed off ahead of them, and now they were physically in place after all that had befallen, success appeared tangible. Doubt was banished.

“Go,” Ralph ordered.

The pattern started to waver as soon as the serjeants left the coast behind. Mountain roads and tracks had vanished altogether. Valley floors were now deep rivers of mud. No vehicles could plough through the broken remains of the forests. The AI began to guide them round obstacles, always keeping the reserves within optimum distance of the front line. Slowing some sections of the advance, directing extra serjeants to expand the line over steep terrain.

They had their first encounter with a possessed seventy-six minutes after they started. Sinon watched through another set of eyes as the serjeant up near the firebreak fired its machine gun at a heat corona coming from behind an up-turned car. Sparkling bullets ripped straight through the composite bodywork. Tendrils of enraged white fire curved over the top in retaliation. Another serjeant opened fire. The entire line halted, waiting to see what would happen.

For a moment there was no effect. Then the white fire faded, turning translucent before the rain smothered it, drops steaming as they fell through. A man staggered out from behind the wrecked car, hands waving madly as the bullets thudded into him. Ripples of purple light blazed out from every impact, swathing his body in a wondrous pyrotechnic display. The serjeant upped the fire rate.

“Stop it!” the man screamed. He crashed to his knees, hands batting feebly to ward off the machine gun. “Stop it for fuck’s sake. I surrender, goddamn it.”

The serjeant eased off the trigger, and walked forwards. “Lie down flat, put your hands behind your head. Do not attempt to move or apply your energistic power.”

“Fuck you,” the man snarled through clenched teeth. His body was shaking badly.

“Down. Now!”

“All right, all right.” He lowered himself into the mud. “Mind if I don’t go any further? Even we can’t breathe mud.”

The serjeant took its holding stick from its belt, a dull silver cylinder half a metre long. It telescoped out to two metres, and a pincer clamp at one end opened wide.

“What the hell . . . ?” the man grunted as the serjeant closed the clamp round his neck.

“This restraint has a dead-man function. If I let go, or I’m made to let go, it will fire ten thousand volts into you. If you resist or refuse to obey any instruction, I will shove a current into you and keep turning it up until your energetic ability is neutralised. Do you understand?”

“You’re gonna die one day, you’re going to join us.”

The serjeant switched on a two hundred volt current.

“Jesus wept,” the man squealed.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes. Yes, fuck. Turn it off. Off!”

“Very well. You will now leave this body.”

“Or what, asshole? If you zap me too hard we both die. Me and my host.”

“If you do not leave of your own volition, you will be placed in zero-tau.”

“Fuck. I can’t go back there.” He started sobbing. “Don’t you understand? I can’t. Not there. *Please*. Please, if you’ve got an ounce of humanity in you, don’t do this. I’m begging you.”

“I’m sorry. That is not an option. Leave now.”

“I can’t.”

The serjeant pulled on the holding stick, forcing the possessed to his feet. “This way.”

“What now?”

“Zero-tau.”

The cheering in the Ops Room was deafening. Ralph actually grinned out at them from his office, the image of the captured possessed being led away lingering in his mind. It might work, he thought. It just might. He remembered walking out of Exnall, the girl crying limply in his arms, Ekelund’s mocking laughter in the air.

“Enjoy your victory with the girl,” she’d sneered. His only personal success in that entire frightful night.

“Two down,” Ralph whispered. “Two million to go.”

The fish were dying. Stephanie thought that the oddest thing. This rain should be their chance to take over the whole world. Instead the ever-thickening mud was clogging up their gills, preventing them from breathing. They lay on the surface, being pushed along by the leisurely waves of water, their bodies flapping madly.

“We should like hollow out some logs, man, use them as canoes. That’s what our ancestors used to do, and those cats were like really in tune with nature,” Cochrane suggested when they cleared the end of the valley.

They’d only just made it, the sluggish river was leaking over the top of the track. At times it seemed as if the whole surface of the valley was on the move. They stood above the gurgling edge of the flow, and watched the gargantuan outpouring spread out to surge on across the lowlands.

“Fat lot of use that would be,” Franklin muttered grimly. “Everything’s heading down to the coast, and that’s where *they* are. Besides,” he gestured round extravagantly at the denuded valley. “What trees?”

“You are such a downer. I want some wheels, man. I have like totally had it with tramping through this shit.”

“I thought cars were spawned by the capitalist Establish-

ment to promote our greed and distance us from nature,” Rana said sweetly. “I’m sure I heard somebody say that recently.”

Cochrane kicked at the fish flopping about round his feet. “Get off my back, prickly sister. Okay? I’m thinking of Moyo. He can’t handle this.”

“Just . . . quiet,” Stephanie said. Even she was waspish, fed up with the pettiness they were all displaying. The ordeal of the bus and then the track had stretched everyone’s nerves. “How are you?” she asked Moyo.

His face had returned to normal, the illusion swallowing his bandage and shielding his scabbed tissue from sight. Even his eyeballs appeared to dart about naturally. But he’d taken a lot of cajoling and encouragement to walk along the track. His thoughts had contracted, gathering round a centre of sullen self-pity. “I’ll be okay,” he mumbled. “Just get me out of this rain. I hate it.”

“Amen to that,” Cochrane chirped.

Stephanie looked round the shabby landscape. Visibility was still pretty ropy on the other side of their protective umbrella, though it was definitely lighter now. It was hard to believe this eternal featureless mire was the same vigorous green countryside they’d travelled across in the Karmic Crusader. “Well we can’t go that way,” she gestured at the cataract of muddy water rumbling away into the distance. “So I guess we’ll have to stick to this side. Anyone remember roughly where the road is?”

“Along there, I think,” McPhee said. Neither voice or mind-tone suggested much confidence in the claim. “There’s definitely a flat ledge. See? The carbon-concrete must have held up.”

“Till the foundation gets washed out from under it,” Franklin said.

Stephanie couldn't honestly see any difference in the mud where he was pointing. "All right, we'll go for it."

"How far?" Tina demanded querulously. "And how long will it take to get there?"

"Depends where you're heading, babe," Cochrane said.

"Well I don't know, do I? I wouldn't ask if I did."

"Any kind of building will do," Stephanie said. "We can reinforce it against the weather ourselves. I just want us out of this. We can think what to do next when we're rested up. Come on." Stephanie gripped Moyo's hand and began to walk in the direction the road was supposed to be. Fish tails slapped pitifully at her wellingtons.

"Oh man, it don't make no difference what we decide. We know what's like gonna happen."

"Then stay here and let it," Rana told the miserable hippie. She started off after Stephanie.

"I didn't say I was in a rush." The edge of the invisible shield moved towards Cochrane, and he scrambled after them.

"There was a village called Ketton on this road," McPhee said. "I remember going through it before we turned off up to the farm."

"How far?" Tina asked, her voice rising in hope.

Cochrane smiled happily. "Miles and miles, it'll probably take us like about ten—twenty days."

A ferocious jet of white fire squirted into the wall two metres above Sinon's head. He flattened himself into the mud below as paint ignited and carbon-concrete blistered.

Coming from the shops, seventy metres right. It was hard to see with all the smoke mingling with the rain, but his retinas had a long purple after image scorched across them.

Got it, Kerrial answered.

The white fire expanded into a thin circular sheet, rivulets trickled down, their tips wriggling purposefully towards Sinon. "Shit." If he stayed the fire would get him, if he moved he'd lose the cover which the wall provided. And there must be several of them in the shops; two other sergeants were under attack as well.

Eayres was a nothing village in the guidance block's memory. A cluster of houses clumped round a road junction, its population mostly employed by the local marble quarry. Who would expect the possessed to make a stand here? Expect the unexpected, Choma had chanted happily when the white fireballs burst open amid the squad.

Sinon saw Kerrial swing himself into position, bringing his machine gun to bear on the shops in the middle of the village. Bullet craters slammed across the brickwork in front of him. Then his body was being flung back, nerve channels shutting down. Blackness. Kerrial's memories arose from his neural array to be absorbed by an orbiting voidhawk.

They've got guns! Sinon broadcast.

Yes, Choma said. **I saw.**

Where did they get them from?

This is the countryside, hunting is a sport here. Besides, did you think we had a monopoly?

The white fire rivulets had reached the ground. Steam roared up as they floated sinuously along the top of the mud towards Sinon. He scrambled to his feet, and jumped forward. The white fire behind him vanished. Another, brighter, spear lanced out of a shop's fractured window. He hit the mud, rolling desperately as he brought his grenade launcher to bear.

You'll kill them, Choma warned. Sinon's right leg went dead as the white fire engulfed it. He slamfired the launcher, hand pumping the mechanism with cyborg intent.

Grenades thudded into the upper floor of the shop, detonating instantly. The ceiling split open, hurling down a torrent of rubble as the roof caved in. Three radiant lines of machine gun fire poured through the ground floor windows and into the tumult inside. The white fire evaporated into tiny violet wisps, splattering off Sinon's leg. He scrambled up, and pushed himself hard for the buildings dead ahead, dragging his useless leg along. Crashing through the first door to land in a deserted bar.

Clever, Choma said. I think that's got them cold.

The white fire had gone out everywhere. Serjeants converged on the little row of prim shops, walking forwards steadily, firing their machine guns continually. The squad had responded to the possessed like antibodies reacting to an incurative virus. Flowing in towards the village from both sides, the reserve squad racing forward. A miniature version of the noose contracting around Mortonridge. They had it encircled within minutes. Then began their advance.

Seventeen of them walked through the smoke that whirled along Main Street, impervious to the flames roaring out of the buildings all around. Their gunfire was concentrated on the shops, aiming their vivid bullets through any gap they could find. Weird lights flickered inside, as if someone had activated a nightclub hologram rig. Steam fountained out through windows and cracks in the wall.

"All right. Enough. *Enough*, God damn it. We're through."

The ring of serjeants held their places ten metres from the central shop, feet apart, juddering in time to the roaring guns.

"ENOUGH. We surrender." The machine guns fell silent.

Lumps of stone stirred on the mound of rubble which had been the shop's upper floor, spinning down to splash into the ubiquitous mire. Limbs began to emerge amid a welter

of coughing. Six possessed squirmed free, holding up their hands and blinking uncomfortably. More serjeants moved forwards to clamp their necks with holding sticks.

Elana Duncan reached Eayres two hours later. The fires were out by then, extinguished by the rain. She whistled appreciatively as she climbed out of the truck, a sound violent enough to make the marines wince. "Must have been a hell of a fight," she said in envy. The trucks had halted in the village's main street. Over half of the buildings around her had been flattened into small hillocks of debris; of those that remained, few were left with roofs. Naked, heat-twisted girders skewered up into the gloomy sky. Black soot stains smeared over entire walls were already dissolving under the rain to reveal deep bullet pocks.

Marines began jumping down from the other trucks in the convoy. It was a familiar routine by now. Urban zones, whatever the size, were occupied by a garrison. They served as emergency reserves and staging post; also a transitory field hospital a lot of the time. The possessed weren't giving up without a fight. The marine lieutenant in charge started shouting orders, and the troops fanned out to secure the perimeter. Elana and the other mercs began unloading their truck with the help of five mud-caked mechanoids.

First off was a programmable multipurpose silicon hall. An oval twenty-five metres long, with open archways along the sides. It was a standard Kulu Royal Marine corps issue, designed for tropical climates, with an overhang in anticipation of heavy showers, and allowing a constant breeze to filter through. Ordinarily ideal for a place like Mortonridge. Now, they were having to direct the mechanoids to bulldoze up a base from soil and stone which they then sealed over with fast-set polymer. It was the only way to keep the hall's floor above mud level.

Once that was up, they started moving the zero-tau pods in. A double file of serjeants marched down the main street, escorting three possessed. Elana splashed out to greet them. She enjoyed this part of her duty.

One of the possessed had given up, a man in his late sixties. She'd seen that before. Filthy, torn clothes. Not bothering to heal his wounds. Even the rain was allowed to soak him. The other two were more typical. Dignity intact. Clothes immaculate, not a scratch on them. The rain bounced off as if they had a frictionless coating. Elana gave one of them a long look. A woman in a prim antique blue suit, white blouse with a lace collar, and pearl necklace. Her hair was a solid bottle blonde coiffure that could have been carved from rock for all the wind affected it. She gave Elana a single distasteful glance, defiantly arrogant.

Elana nodded affably at the serjeant guarding her, whose leg was wrapped in a medical package tube. "Humm, she's the third one of these today. And I thought that woman was unique."

"Excuse me?" the serjeant asked.

"They enjoy historical figures. I've been accessing my encyclopaedia's history files ever since this campaign started, trying to place them. Hitlers are quite popular, so's Napoleon and Richard Saldana, then there's Cleopatra. Somebody called Ellen Ripley is a big favourite with the women, too; but none of my search programs have managed to track her down yet."

The blue-suited woman looked dead ahead, and smiled a secret smile.

"Okay," Elana said. "Bring them in."

The mercenaries were hooking the zero-tau pods up to their power cells, datavising diagnostics through the management processors. Elana's ELINT block gave a warning bleep. She rounded on the three prisoners, pulling a high-

voltage shockrod from her belt. Her voice boomed out from her facial grille, echoing round the hall.

“Cut that out, shitbrains. You lost, and this is the end of the line. Too late to argue about it now. The serjeants might be too honourable and decent to fry your bodies, but I’m not. And this is my part of the operation. Got that?” The ELINT block quietened. “Good. Then we’ll get along just fine in your final minutes in this universe. Any last minute cigarettes, you can indulge yourselves. Otherwise just keep quiet.”

“I see you have found an occupation which obviously suits you.”

“Huh?” She glanced down at serjeant with the injured leg.

“We met at Fort Forward, just after arriving. I am Sinon.”

Her three claws snapped together with a loud *click*. “Oh yes, the cannon fodder guy. Sorry, you all look alike to me.”

“We are identical.”

“Glad to see you survived. Though God knows how you managed it. Trying to storm ashore through that weather was the dumbest military decision since the Trojans took a shine to that horse.”

“I think you’re being unduly cynical.”

“Don’t give me that crap. You must have a decent dose of it too, if you’ve survived this long. Remember the oldest military rule, my friend.”

“Never volunteer for anything?”

“Generals always fuck up bad.”

The first zero-tau pod opened. Elana pointed her shockrod at the blue-suited woman. “Okay, Prime Minister, you first.” Sinon kept the holding stick round her neck as she backed in. Metal manacles closed round her limbs, and Elana switched on a mild current. The woman glared out,

her face drawn back with the effort of fighting the electricity.

“Just in case,” Elana told Sinon. “We had a few try to break free once they finally realize their number’s up. You can take the holding stick off now.” The clamp sprang open, and Sinon stood clear. “You going to leave all nice and voluntarily?” Elana asked. The front of the zero-tau pod was already swinging shut. The woman spat weakly. “Didn’t think so. Not you.”

The zero-tau pod turned midnight black. Elana heard a hiss of breath from one of the waiting possessed, but didn’t say anything.

“How long do you leave them in there?” Sinon asked.

“Cook them for about fifteen minutes. Then we open up to see if they’re done. If not, it’s just back in for progressively longer periods. I’ve had one hold out for about ten hours before, but that was the limit.”

“That sounds suspiciously like enjoyment to me.”

Elana waved the next possessed into his pod. “Nothing suspicious about it. General Hiltch, God fuck him, says I’m not allowed in the front line. So this is the second best duty as far as I’m concerned. I don’t take marine discipline too good. Sitting with a bunch of those pansy-asses in a place like this counting raindrops would have me thrown off-planet inside of a day. So as I’m technologically competent, me and my friends requested this placement. It works out fine. Army’s short of skilled techs who can also handle the noise if the possessed start to panic: we fit the bill. And this way I get to see the bastards booted out of their bodies. I *know* it’s happening.”

The second possessed was put in a zero-tau pod. He didn’t resist. Then the third zero-tau pod was activated. Elana aimed the shock rod at the last possessed, the apathetic one. “Hey, cheer up. This is your lucky day, looks like the re-

serves got called out. You're on, kid." He gave her a broken look and grimaced. His features melted, shrinking back to reveal a wizened face with anaemically pale skin.

"Catch him," Elana yelled. The man's legs buckled. He pitched forward into her arms. "Thought that one might quit," she said in satisfaction.

Choma removed the holding stick's clamp from around his neck. Elana eased him down onto the floor, calling for blankets and some pillows. "Damn it, we haven't had time to unpack the medical gear yet," she said. "And we're going to need it. Those bastards."

"What's the matter?" Sinon asked.

Elana's claw sliced through the man's raggedy shirt, exposing his chest. There were strange ridges swelling out of his skin, mimicking the lines of muscle a healthy twenty-year-old mesomorph might have. When she prodded one with the tip of a claw, it sagged like a sack of jelly.

"They always go for perfection," she explained to Sinon and Choma. "Assholes. I don't know what that energistic power is, but it screws up their flesh real bad under the illusion. Sometimes you get fat deposits building up, that's pretty harmless; but nine times out of ten, it's tumours."

"All of them?" Sinon asked.

"Yep. Never satisfied with what they've got. I'm sure it's a metaphor for something, but I'm bugged if I can figure out what. We're having to ship everyone who gets de-possessed back to Xingu and into one of the major hospitals. They're overflowing already, and they don't have enough nanonic packages to go around. Another week of this, and the entire Ombey system is going to go into medical meltdown. And that's not taking you guys into account; you're not exactly emerging unscathed from the Liberation."

"Can we help?"

"Not a thing you can do, sorry. Now if you could clear

out . . . I've got to try and organize some sort of transport for this batch. Hell, I wish we had hovercraft, they're the only things that can travel properly over this swamp. That dickhead Hiltch won't allow any planes in under the cloud yet."

Sinon and Choma left her and another couple of mercenaries running medical scanners over the unconscious man.

All of them? Sinon repeated gloomily. The prospect kindled a sensation of alarm, in itself a worrying development. He hadn't configured himself to be waylaid by impulsive emotions. **Do you know what that means?**

Trouble, Choma declared. **Real bad trouble.**

8

The vac-trains were an excellent solution to Earth's transport problem in the age of the arcologies. There were no aircraft any more. The armada storms had finished off air travel in the same way they made people abandon their cars. One of the late Twenty-first Century's most enduring newscable images was of a farmer's pick-up truck rammed through the nineteenth-floor window of the Sears Tower in the wake of a storm. As the planet's population flowed into cities and began strengthening them against the weather, so they turned to trains as the only practical method of transport between urban conglomerations. Heavy and stolid, tornadoes couldn't fling them about so easily. Of course, they still took a battering from the wind if they were caught out in the open. So the next logical stage was to protect the tracks in the same way the domes were going up to shield the city centres. The first real example was the channel tunnel, which was extended to cover the whole journey between London and Paris. Once that proved viable, the global rail network was rapidly expanded. As with any macro-infrastructure project awash with government money, the technology advanced swiftly.

By the time Louise and Genevieve arrived on Earth, the vac-trains were a highly mature system, travelling at considerable speed between stations. Common wisdom had the tunnels drilled kilometres deep in the safety of the bedrock. Not so; a lot of the time they didn't even qualify as tunnels. Giant tubes were laid over the abandoned land, and buried just below the surface. It was much easier to maintain the vacuum inside that kind of factory-manufactured subway than in a rock tunnel. Tectonics played havoc with rigid lava walls that had been melted by a flame of fusion plasma; experience showed they fractured easily, and on a couple of occasions actually sheered. So tunnels were only used to thread the tubes through mountains and plunge deep under arcologies. Even trans-oceanic routes were laid in trenches and anchored in place.

With no air to create friction, the trains were free to accelerate hard; on the longer trans-Pacific runs they touched Mach fifteen. Powered by linear motors, they were quick, smooth, silent, and efficient. The trip from Mount Kenya station to London's Kings Cross took Louise and Genevieve forty-five minutes, with one stop at Gibraltar. Airlocks at both ends of their carriage matched up with platform hatches, and popped open.

"All passengers for London please disembark," the sparkling AV pillars on the carriage ceiling announced. "This train will depart for Oslo in four minutes."

The girls collected their big shoulder bags and hurried out onto the platform. They emerged into a long rectangular chamber, its ornately sculpted walls harking back to long-distant imperial grandeur. The line of twenty hatches connecting to the train appeared to be made of black wrought iron, Victorian-era space technology. On the opposite side, three large archways led to broad wave escalators that spiralled upwards with impressive curves.

Genevieve stayed close behind her big sister as she negotiated their way across the platform. At least this time they managed to avoid barging in to people. Excitement was powering a smile that would not fade.

An Earth arcology. London! Where we all came from originally. Home—sort of. How utterly utterly stupendous. It was the complete opposite of the nightmare that had been Norfolk by the time they left. This world had massive defences, and its people could do whatever they wanted with lots of fabulous machines to help them. She held Louise's hand tightly as they stepped onto the wave elevator. "Where next?"

"Don't know," Louise said. For some reason she was completely calm. "Let's see what's up there, shall we?"

The wave escalator brought them onto the floor of a huge hemispherical cavern. It was like the arrivals hall of Mount Kenya station, only larger. The base of the wall was pierced by tunnel entrances radiating out to lift shafts and platforms for the local train network, while the floor was broken by concentric rows of wave elevators to the vac-trains. Bright informational spheres formed tightly packed streamers five metres above the heads of the thronging passengers, weaving around each other with serpentine grace. Right in the centre was a single flared spire of rock that rose up to eventually merge into the roof's apex.

"It's just another station," Genevieve said in mild disappointment. "We're still underground."

"Looks like it." Louise squinted up. Black flecks were zipping through the strata of informationals, as if they were suffering from static. She smiled, pointing. "Birds, look."

Genevieve twirled round, following their erratic flight. There were all sorts, from pert brown sparrows to emerald and turquoise parrots.

"We'd better find a hotel, I suppose," Louise said. She

pulled her shoulder bag round to take the processor block out.

Genevieve tugged at her arm. "Oh please, Louise. Can't we go up to the surface first? I just want to look. I'll be good, I promise. Please?"

Louise tucked the shoulder bag back. "I wouldn't mind a peek myself." She studied the informationals, catching sight of one that seemed promising. "Come on." She caught Gen's hand. "This way."

They took a lift up to the surface. It brought them out in a mock-Hellenic temple at the middle of a wide plaza full of statues and fenced in by huge oaks. A small commemorative plaque on a worn pillar marked the passing of the station's old surface structures and iron rail tracks. Louise walked out from the shade of the temple, wandering aimlessly for a few yards until she simply stopped. It was as if the arcology was appearing in segments before her. Slowly. As soon as her mind acknowledged one part, another would flip up behind that, demanding recognition.

Though she didn't know it, Kings Cross was the geographical heart of the tremendous Westminster Dome, which at thirty kilometres in diameter enclosed most of the original city, from Ealing in the west to Woolwich in the east. Ever since the first small protective domes went up over London (a meagre four km wide to start with—the best Twenty-first Century materials technology could manage), preservation orders had been slapped on every building of historical or architectural significance, which the conservationists basically defined as anything not built from concrete. By the time the Westminster Dome was constructed over that initial cluster of ageing weather shields, the outlying districts had undergone significant changes, but any Londoner from the mid Nineteenth Century onwards would have been able to find their way around the

central portion without too much trouble. It was essentially one of the largest lived-in museums on the planet.

The nine smaller domes circling round outside the Westminster, however, were a different matter. London didn't have the megatowers of New York, but the arcology still housed a quarter of a billion people beneath its geodesic crystal roofs. The outer domes were purpose built, four hundred square kilometres apiece of thoroughly modern arcology, with only tiny little zones of original buildings left as curios amid the gleaming condos, skyscrapers, and malls.

Louise wasn't aware of them at all. She could see on the other side of the oaks that the plaza was encircled by a wide road jammed with sleek vehicles, all driving so close together you couldn't walk between them. The vehicles merged in and out of the giant roundabout from wide streets that radiated away between the beautiful ancient grey-stone buildings surrounding the plaza. When she raised her gaze above the blue-slate roofs and their elaborate chimney stacks, she could see even grander and taller buildings behind them. Then beyond those . . . It was as though she was standing at the bottom of a mighty crater whose walls were made entirely from buildings. Around the plaza they were elegant and unique, with each one somehow merging cleanly into its neighbours to form compact refined streets; but they grew from that to plainer, larger skyscrapers, spaced further apart. The towers' artistry came from the overall shape rather than detailed embellishments, moulded to suggest Gothic, Roman, Art Deco, and Alpine Bavarian influences among others.

And gathering all those disparate architectural siblings within its sheltering embrace was the external wall. A single redoubtable cliff of windows, a mosaic of panes so dense it blended into a seamless band of glass, blazing gold

under the noonday sun. Out of that, rose the dome itself, an artificial sky of crystal.

Louise sat down heavily on the plaza's stone slabs, and let out a whoosh of breath. Gen sat beside her, arms folded protectively round her shoulder bag. London's pedestrians flowed round them, eyes consummately averted.

"It's very big, isn't it?" Gen said quietly.

"Certainly is." All those buildings, so many people. Despite feeling light headed, a weight of worry was threatening to sink her again. How in heaven's name am I going to find a single person amid this multitude? Especially when they probably don't want to be found.

"Fletcher would really love this."

Louise looked at her sister. "Yes. I think he would."

"Do you suppose he'd recognize any of it?"

"There may be bits left over from his time. Some of these buildings look quite old. We'll have to look it up in the local library memory." She broke off and smiled. That's it, everything you ever need to know is in the processor memories. Banneth will be listed somewhere, I just have to program in the right search. "Come on. Hotel first. Then we'll get something to eat. How does that sound?"

"Jolly nice. What hotel are we going to?"

"Give me a moment." She took her processor block out, and started querying the arcology's general information centre. Category visitors, subsection residential. Central, and civilized. They'd wind up paying more for a classy hotel, but at least they'd be safe. Louise knew there were parts of Earth's arcologies that were terribly crime-ridden. And besides, "Kavanaghs never stay anywhere that doesn't have a four-star rating," Daddy had said once.

Information slid down the screen. They didn't seem to have star ratings here, so she just went by price. Central

London hotels, apparently, cost as much to run as starships. At least the beds will be a lot more comfortable.

“The Ritz,” she said finally.

That just left getting there. With Genevieve getting progressively more impatient, as evidenced by overloud sighs and shuffling feet, Louise requested surface transport options from Kings Cross to the Ritz. After ten minutes struggling with horribly complicated maps and London Metro timetables that kept flashing up she realized she wasn’t quite as adept at operating the block as she thought she was. However, the screen did tell her there were taxis available.

“We’ll take a cab.”

Under Gen’s ungenerously sceptical look, she picked her shoulder bag up, and started off towards the oaks at the rim of the plaza. Flocks of parakeets and budgerigars pecking at the stone slabs stampeded out of her way. Most of the subway entrances had the name of the streets they led to, but a few had the London Transport symbol on top: blue circle cut by a red line, with a crown in the middle. Louise went down one to find herself in a short passage that opened out into a narrow parking bay. Five identical silver-blue taxi cars were waiting silently, streamlined bubbles with very fat tyres.

“Now what?” Genevieve said.

Louise consulted the block. She walked up to the first taxi, and keyed the Commence Journey icon on the block’s screen. The door hissed out five centimetres, then slid back along the body. “We get in,” she told her sister smugly.

“Oh very clever. What happens if you don’t have a block to do that for you?”

“I don’t know.” She couldn’t see a handle anywhere. “I suppose everyone on this world is taught how to use things like this. Most of them have neural nanonics, after all.”

There wasn't much room inside, enough for four seats with deep curving backs. Louise shoved her bag in the storage bin underneath, and studied the screen again. The block was interfacing with the taxi's control processor, which made life a lot simpler for her. The whole activation procedure was presented to her as a simple, easy-to-understand-menu. She fed in their destination, and the door slid shut. The taxi told the block what their fee was (as much as the vac-train fare from Mount Kenya), and explained how to use the seat straps.

"Ready?" she asked Gen, when they'd fastened themselves in.

"Yes." The little girl couldn't hide her enthusiasm.

Louise held her Jovian Bank disk up to the small panel on the taxi's central column, and transferred the money over. They started to roll forward. The taxi took them up a steep ramp, accelerating fast enough to press the sisters back into their seat cushioning. The reason was simple enough, they emerged right in the middle of the traffic racing round the Kings Cross plaza, slotting in without the slightest fuss.

Genevieve laughed excitedly as they zipped across several lanes, then slowed slightly to turn off down one of the broad streets. "Golly, this is better than the aeroambulance." The little girl grinned.

Louise rolled her eyes. Though once she accepted the fact that the control processor did know how to drive, she began to breathe normally again. The buildings rushing past were old and sombre, which gave them a dignity all of their own. On the other side of the pavement barrier, pedestrians jostled their way along in a permanent scrum.

"I never knew there were so many people," Gen said. "London must have more than live on the whole of Norfolk."

“Probably,” Louise agreed.

The taxi took them a third of the way round the expressway, then turned off, heading back down to ground level. There were parks on both sides of the road when they started their descent, then buildings rose up to their left, and they were back on one of the ancient streets again. The pavements here didn't seem so crowded. They slowed drastically, pulling over to the right alongside a large cube of white-grey stone with tall windows lined by iron railings and a steep state roof. An open arcade ran along the front, supported by wide arches. The taxi stopped level with a gate in the roadside barrier, which a doorman opened smartly. He was dressed in a dark blue coat and top hat, a double row of brass buttons gleamed down his chest. At last, Louise felt at home. This was something she could deal with.

If the doorman was surprised at who climbed out of the taxi he never showed it. “Are you staying here, miss?” he asked.

“I hope so, yes.”

He nodded politely, and ushered them under the arcade towards the main entrance.

Genevieve eyed the front of the stolid building sceptically. “It looks dreadfully gloomy.”

The lobby inside was white and gold, with chandeliers resembling frost-encrusted branches that had dazzling stars at the tip of each twig. Arches along the long central aisle opened into big rooms that were full of prim white tables where people were sitting having tea. Waiters in long black tailcoats bustled about, carrying trays with silver teapots and very tempting cakes.

Louise marched confidently over to the gleaming oak reception desk. “A twin room, please.”

The young woman standing behind smiled professionally. "Yes, madam. How long for?"

"Um. A week to start with."

"Of course. I'll need your ident flek, please, to register. And there is a deposit."

"Oh, we haven't got an ident flek."

"We're from Norfolk," Gen said eagerly.

The receptionist's composure flickered. "Really?" She cleared her throat. "If you're from offworld, your passports will be satisfactory."

Louise handed the passports over, thinking briefly of Endron again, and wondering how much trouble the Martian was in right now. The receptionist scanned the passports in a block and took the deposit from Louise. A bellboy came forward and relieved the sisters of their bags before showing them into a lift.

Their room was on the fourth floor, with a large window overlooking the park. The decor was so reminiscent of the kind Norfolk landowners worshiped it gave Louise a sense of *déjà vu*; regal-purple wallpaper and furniture so old the wood was virtually black beneath the polish. Her feet sank into a carpet well over an inch thick.

"Where are we?" Gen asked the bellboy. She was pressed up against the window, staring out. "I mean, what's that park called?"

"That's Green Park, miss."

"So are we near anywhere famous?"

"Buckingham Palace is on the other side of the park."

"Gosh."

He showed Louise the room's processor block, which was built in to the dresser. "Any information you need on the city for your stay should be in here; it has a comprehensive tourist section," he said. She tipped him a couple of

fusedollars when he left. He'd been holding his own credit disk, casually visible through fingers splayed wide.

Genevieve waited until the door shut. "What's Buckingham Palace?"

The AI was alert to the glitch within a hundredth of a second. Two ticket dispenser processors and an informational projector. It brought additional analysis programs on line, and ran an immediate verification sweep of every electronic circuit in Grand Central Station.

Half a second. The response to a general acknowledgement datavise from five sets of neural nanonics was incorrect. All of them were within a seven metre zone, which also incorporated the failing ticket dispensers.

Two seconds. Security sensors in Grand Central's concourse focused on the suspect area. The AI datavised to B7's North American supervisor the fact it had located a possessed-type glitch in New York. He had just framed his query in reply when the sensors observed Bud Johnson go cartwheeling over someone in a black robe crouched on the floor.

Three and a half seconds. There was a visual discontinuity. None of the sensor short-term memory buffers had registered the black clad figure before. It was as if he'd just materialized out of nowhere. If he had neural nanonics, then they were not responding to the ident request datavise.

Four seconds. The North American supervisor took direct control of the situation in conjunction with the AI. A datavised warning went out to the rest of the supervisors.

Six seconds. The full B7 complement of supervisors was on line, observing. The AI's visual characteristics program locked on to the shadowed face inside the black robe's hood. Quinn Dexter rose to his feet.

South Pacific: "Nuke him. Now!"

Western Europe: "Don't be absurd."

Halo: "SD platforms armed; do you want groundstrike?"

North America: "No. It's completely impractical. Grand Central Station's concourse is a hundred and fifty metres below ground, and that's spread out below three skyscrapers. There isn't an X-ray laser built that could reach it."

South Pacific: "Then use a real nuke. A combat wasp can be down there in two minutes."

Asian Pacific: "I second that."

Western Europe: "No! Damn it. Will you morons control yourselves."

North America: "Thank you. I'm not going to blast Dome One into oblivion. There are twenty million people living in there. Even Laton didn't kill that many."

North Europe: "You can't let him go. We have to exterminate him."

Western Europe: "How?"

North Europe: "South Pacific's right. Nuke the shit. I'm sorry about the other inhabitants, but it's the only way we can resolve the situation."

Western Europe: "Observe, please."

Eleven seconds. Bud Johnson's face had turned purple. He scabbled feebly at his chest, then pitched over onto the floor. People clustered round him. Quinn Dexter became translucent and quickly faded from view. The AI reported all the processors had come back on line.

Military Intelligence: "Oh shit."

Western Europe: "Will a nuke kill him now do you think? Wherever he is."

South Pacific: "One way to find out."

Western Europe: "I cannot permit that. We exist primarily to protect Earth. Even with our prerogatives, you cannot exterminate twenty million people in the *hope* that you kill one terrorist."

Halo: "The boy's right, I'm afraid. I'm standing down the SD platforms."

South Pacific: "Terrorist demon, more like."

Western Europe: "I'm not arguing definitions. All this does is confirm I was right the first time. We have got to be extremely careful how we deal with Dexter."

North Pacific: "Well at least shut down New York's vac-trains."

Central America: "Yes. Isolate him in New York. You can creep up on him there."

Western Europe: "I'm going to have to say no again."

North Pacific: "In Allah's name, why? We know where he is, that gives us a tremendous advantage."

Western Europe: "It's psychology. He knows we know he's here. He's not stupid, he'll realize we'll find out about him appearing in Grand Central station. The question is, how long does it take us to find out? If we stop the vac-trains now, it shows him we are right up to speed and deeply worried by him, and also that we'll go all out to stop him. That's not good, that puts him on guard."

Central America: "So, he's on guard? If he's trapped in one place, it won't do him any good. He'll still be on death row. He knows it's coming, and there's nothing he can do about it."

Western Europe: "First thing he'll do is mobilise New York to defend himself. And we'll be back to one option of having to nuke the place. Don't you see? Our arcologies are even more vulnerable than asteroid settlements. They are utterly dependent on technology, not just to protect us from the weather, but to feed us and condition our air. If you confine three hundred million possessed inside one, every single chunk of machinery will break down. The domes will shatter in the first storm that comes along, and the population will either starve or turn cannibal."

Central America: "I'm prepared to sacrifice one arcology to save the rest. If that's what it takes."

Western Europe: "But we don't have to sacrifice one. Certainly not yet. You're being abysmally premature. Right now, Dexter will be skipping round arcologies, establishing small groups of possessed who'll keep their heads down until he gives the word. While he's doing that, we've got a chance. There will only be small groups in each arcology, which *we* really ought to be able to find. If other worlds can track them, so can we. Dexter is our problem, not the ordinary possessed."

Asian Pacific: "Put it to the vote."

Western Europe: "How wonderfully democratic. Very well."

Six supervisors voted for closing down New York's vac-trains right away. Ten voted to keep them open.

Western Europe: "Thank you so much for your confidence."

Southern Africa: "You have the ball for now. But if you haven't dealt with Dexter in another ten days, I shall be voting to isolate him wherever he is. And then we'll see if he can hide from a nuke as well as he can from a sensor."

The conference dissolved. Western Europe asked North America, Military Intelligence, and Halo to remain on line. Natural allies in the eternal warzone of B7's internal politics, they obliged. His sensewise overlay program positioning and dressing them around his drawing room as though they were weekend guests just come in from a stroll round the grounds.

"It'll go against you eventually," Halo warned. "They're happy for you to take responsibility for the chase as long as Dexter hasn't caused any noticeable damage. But the minute he gets noisy, they'll revert."

“That little crap artist, South Pacific,” North America complained. “Telling me to nuke New York! Who the hell does she think she is?”

“She always favours the blunt approach,” Western Europe said. “We all know that. That’s why I like her so much, makes one feel constantly superior.”

“Inferior or not, she’ll carry the day eventually,” Military Intelligence said.

Western Europe walked over to the tall glass-panelled door, and let his two Labradors in. “I know. That’s why I found today encouraging.”

“Encouraging?” North America asked, astonished. “Are you kidding? I’ve got that Dexter bastard running round loose in New York.”

“Yes, exactly. Something went wrong for him. He was on his knees when he appeared, and he vanished within seconds. *He* was glitched. Another factor in our favour.”

“Maybe,” Halo said. He sounded very dubious.

“All right,” North America said. “So what now?”

“You need to do two things. In forty minutes, I want you to close down all New York’s vac-trains.”

“Forty minutes? He’ll be long gone.”

“Yes. As I said, he knows we know he’s here. We have to play along with that, but make him think we’re lumbering along five steps behind him. So close the vac-trains. He won’t be in New York, so it doesn’t matter.”

“You hope.”

“I know. Once he’d been exposed there he had no option but to leave. New York is closed to him now, out of the equation. To do whatever he wants to do, he has to maintain his mobility. He probably took the shortest ride out there is, figuring the police would close down the vac-trains pretty fast; but that’s beside the point.”

“Okay. How long do you want them shut down for?”

“That’s the second thing. We have to work on the assumption he was leaving. Therefore, he’s more than likely left a group of possessed behind him. You have to find them, and eliminate them. Keep the arcology sealed up until you do. In fact, keeping the individual domes isolated might be a good idea if you can manage it.”

“You really think that’s what he’s doing?”

“Yes. He wants to inflict maximum devastation on this planet. He’ll seed as many arcologies as possible with his followers. And when he gives the word, they’ll hit the streets, and we’ll be faced with the exponential curve again.”

“The AI is monitoring the arcology’s electronics anyway.”

“Yes. I’m sure that’s effective on Kulu and other modern worlds; but you and I know it can never access everything, not here, not in the old areas. There’s over five hundred years’ worth of electronic junk plugged together out there; we’re dealing with millions of old systems, quirky one-offs, and non-standard patch ups. The AI is a good sentry, but don’t make the mistake of becoming dependent. The best source we’ll have is probably the sects.”

“The sects?”

“Certainly. The one set of idiots who’ll support the possessed without having to be forced. Dexter knows that, they’re the ones he’ll go to.”

“All right, I’ll get on to it.”

“So what are you going to be doing?” Halo asked Western Europe.

“Same as before. Engineer an encounter. We have to get our people close to him while he’s visible, and therefore vulnerable.”

“Vulnerable to what?”

“If he’s out in the open, an SD strike. Or if our contact is

through an agent, we can try for electrocution or a memory scramble.”

“Memory scramble?”

“Yes,” said Military Intelligence. “The CNIS believes they can kill souls by firing some kind of mentallic virus at the possessed. It’s the opposite of a didactic imprint. They’re researching it now.”

Western Europe started making a fuss of one of the dogs, scratching its belly as it rolled around on the carpet. “Do try and stay up to date,” he chided Halo.

“It won’t be available before the end of the week,” Military Intelligence warned.

“I know. I doubt I’ll manage to arrange an interception by then anyway.”

“How’s that angle coming along?” Halo asked.

“The Banneth connection is just about covered. I’m not sure about the Kavanagh girls; they’re a long shot, and a pretty random one at that. But I’m working on it.”

Louise spent an hour using the room’s desktop processor block and got nowhere. The directory provided her with enough entries under Banneth (173,364—once she’d removed the deceased), but no matter how she tried to cross reference that with Quinn Dexter the result was always negative. She racked her brains to remember everything Dexter had said back in the hangar at Bennett Field. Banneth was female, she remembered that for certain. And Dexter said she’d hurt him. That was about it, really.

Somewhere, somehow, those facts should link up. She was sure they did. But finding the connection was beyond her woeful programming ability. The idea that had begun back when they got in the taxi was becoming more and more attractive. If she dared.

Why not? she thought. There’s nothing dangerous about

neural nanonics, not physically, the rest of the Confederation uses them. Joshua has a set. It's only Norfolk which doesn't allow them. She raised her arm, and looked at the discreet medical nanonic package bracelet. Also banned on Norfolk, yet it was helping her pregnancy. That settled it. She grinned, emboldened by her decision. I have to take responsibility for myself now. If I need neural nanonics to help me on Earth, then I will get myself a set.

They hadn't left the room since arriving at the hotel. Lunch had been a snack delivered by room service. Genevieve had flopped on her bed in weary disgust at the inactivity, and activated her own block. She was smothered by a laser-haze of grid lines and feisty fantasy beasts which leapt about enthusiastically at every excitable shouted command.

"Gen?"

The projection shrank. Genevieve blinked up at her, trying to focus. Louise was sure that being immersed in the projection so much was bad for her little sister's eyesight.

"What?"

"We're going out. I can't get the hang of the desktop block, so I'm going to buy some neural nanonics instead." There, she'd said it out loud. There'd be no backing down now.

Genevieve stared at her in astonishment. "Oh Louise, don't tease so. We're not allowed."

"We *weren't* allowed. We're on Earth, now, remember. You can do anything you want here as long as you've got money."

Genevieve cocked her head to one side. Then the most charming smile graced her face. It didn't fool Louise for a second. "Please, Louise. Can I have one, too? You know I'll never be allowed once we get home."

"I'm sorry. You're not old enough."

"I am!"

"Gen, you're not. And you know you're not."

She stamped her foot, little fists clenched in outrage. "That's not fair! It's not. It's not. You always pick on me coz I'm the youngest. You're a bully."

"I'm not picking on you. You just can't have one, your brain is still growing. They can't connect it. I checked. It's not legal, and it'll do a lot of damage to your brain cells. I only just scrape in if you measure my age in Earth years."

"I hate being small."

Louise put her arms round the girl, reflecting on how much she'd done so since leaving home. They never used to hug much before. "You'll be bigger one day," she whispered into her sister's fluffed up hair. "And things are going to be different when we get home."

"You think so?"

"Oh yes."

The receptionist seemed rather amused at being asked, in a lofty sort of way. But she was helpful enough, telling Louise that Oxford Street and New Bond Street were probably their best bet for clothes, while Tottenham Court Road was where they would find any conceivable kind of electronics. The sisters were also assured these areas were safe for girls to walk through by themselves. "And the hotel runs a courtesy collection service for any items that you purchase." She handed over an authorization disk, keyed to Louise's bioelectric pattern.

Louise loaded a comprehensive street map into her block, taken from the hotel's memory; and combined it with the guidance program. "Ready?" she asked Gen. "Let's go spend the family fortune."

Aubry Earle had spoken the truth on the lift capsule when he told them arcology dwellers would always respect

their privacy. Out on the street, Louise couldn't quite work out how people always slid to one side at the last second. She was constantly scanning bodies all round to try and find a way through the gaps, while locals moved as smoothly as the automated traffic without ever once glancing in her direction. Some of the pedestrians quite literally glided past. People their own age wearing calf-high boots with soles that seemed to flow over the pavement slabs without any resistance. Genevieve watched their effortless progress with admiration and longing. "I want some boots like that," she said.

A subwalk got them under Piccadilly and into New Bond Street. It turned out to be a dainty little pedestrian lane, lined with enchanting boutiques whose marble frontage was embossed with brass lettering saying when they'd been established. None of them were under three centuries old, while some claimed to be over seven. The labels on show meant nothing to either of them, but judging by the prices they must have been admiring the most exclusive designer garments on the planet.

"It's gorgeous," Louise sighed longingly at a shimmering scarlet and turquoise evening gown, sort of like an all-over mermaid's tail—except it wasn't all-over, nowhere near. It was the kind of thing she would love to wear at a summer ball on Norfolk. The planet had never seen its like before.

"Then buy it."

"No. We've got to be sensible. Just everyday clothes that we need to get about in the arcology. Remember, one day I'll have to explain the entire bill to Daddy."

The evening gown was just the start of New Bond Street's provocative temptations. They trailed past window displays she could have bought en masse.

"We'll have to have supper in the hotel dining room,"

Genevieve suggested artfully. "I bet they won't let us in unless we dress up."

It was an insidious suggestion. "Okay. One dress. That's all."

They dashed across the threshold of the boutique in front of them. Privacy didn't apply inside the shop; three assistants swooped eagerly. Louise explained what they wanted, and then spent the next forty-five minutes ricocheting in and out of a changing room. She and Gen would look at each other, comment, and go back for the next trial.

She learned a lot in the process. The assistants were very complimentary about the sisters' hair. Except . . . on Earth, it was fashionable to have actives woven among the strands. Their one-piece suits with big pockets, were current, but not that *à la mode*. Yes, Oxford Street stores were perfect for buying streetfashion clothes, and we recommend these. Louise could have sworn she heard the block's memory creaking under the load of names they entered. She used her Jovian Bank credit disk with only a momentary twinge of guilt.

Out on the street again, they laughed at each other. Gen had wound up with a scarlet dress and deep-purple jacket. While Louise had bought herself a full length gown of deepest blue, that was made from a material crossed between velvet and suede. There was also a short ginger-coloured waistcoat to go with it, which complemented its square cut neck.

"It's true," Louise said happily. "Retail therapy actually works."

They didn't get directly to Oxford Street. There was a stop at a salon at the top of New Bond Street first. The beauticians made an incredible fuss over them, delighted with so much raw material to work on. The owner himself

came over to direct the operation (once their credit rating had been verified).

After two hours, several cups of tea, and enthralling the staff with an edited version of their travels, Louise had the wrap taken off. She stared in the mirror, not believing she'd spent her life tolerating unmanaged hair. Norfolk's simplistic regime of washing, conditioners, and sturdy brushing was barbaric ineptitude. Under the salon's professional auspices her hair had become lustrous, individual strands conducting a little starlight shimmer of light along their length. And it flowed. Every day of her life she'd held that thick mane in place with clips and ribbons, sometimes getting the maid to braid fanciful bands. Flexitives made all that irrelevant. Of its own accord, her hair fell back over her shoulders, always keeping itself tidy and together in one large tress. It also rippled subtly, as if she was engulfed in her own permanent private breeze.

"You look beautiful, Louise," Genevieve said, suddenly shy.

"Thank you." Gen's hair had been straightened, darkened, and glossed, its hem curling inwards slightly. Again, it held its shape no matter what.

Stalls were lined up against the road barriers, filled with brassy, cheaper items than those in the shops. Genevieve saw one with pairs of the magical boots hanging from the awning. Slipstream boots, the cheerful owner told her as he found some her size. Popular with the under fifteens because you didn't need neural nanonics to switch the directed frictionless soles on or off.

Louise bought them on the condition Gen waited until they got back to the hotel before she tried them out. She also got a duster bracelet. When Gen clamped the trinket round her wrist and waved it round, it sprayed out a fine powder which emitted a fiery sparkle as it fell to earth.

Holding her arm up and pirouetting, a spiral of twinkling starlight spun around her.

Quinn sat on one of the benches along the banks of the Seine, opening his mind to the demented screeching reverberating through the beyond. It had taken him two and a half hours to reach the Paris arcology since being struck by that inexplicable wave of emotional torment that had swept through the beyond.

The first thing—obviously!—was to get the fuck out of New York. It wouldn't take the cops long to review the memories of sensors covering the concourse and identify him. He'd gone straight down to a platform and taken a vac-train to Washington. A short ride, not quite fifteen minutes. He'd kept within the ghost realm for the whole trip, apprehensive that the vac-train would be halted and returned to New York. But it arrived at Washington on time, and he switched to the first inter-continental ride available: Paris.

Even then, he'd remained invisible as it streaked along the bottom of the North Atlantic. Still anxious that another of those waves would surge up and expose him. If it had done during the journey under the ocean, he knew he'd be finished. He couldn't believe God's Brother would allow that to happen. But the first time was causing all sorts of doubts.

It wasn't until he was out of the Paris terminus and walking through one of the old city's parks that he had allowed himself to fully emerge. He clothed himself in an ordinary shirt and trousers, hating the way his white skin tingled in the bright sun shining through the colossal crystal dome. But it meant he was safe, there were no processors in the middle of the park to glitch at his appearance, nobody near enough to see that he'd appeared from nowhere rather than

walked round the ancient tree. He stood there for a minute, scanning the nearby minds for any sign of alarm. Only then did he relax and make his way down to the river.

Parisians strolled along behind him as they had for centuries—lovers, artists, business executives, bureaucrats; none of them paying attention to the solitary downcast youth. Nor did any of them avail themselves to the space left on his bench. Some subliminal warning steered them along past, frowning slightly at the unaccountable chill.

Slowly, Quinn started to gather the strands together, faint images and hoarse wailing voices filling in the story. He saw clouds which surprised even him, an arcology-born. Rain cascaded down on huddled bodies, so thick it was almost solid. Terrifying blasts of lightning ripping through the darkness. The encircling forces, radiating their stern nonhuman determination, closing in.

Mortonridge was not a place where a possessed should be caught outside today; and two million of them had been. Something had struck at them, tearing away their protective covering of cloud. Some technological devilry. The signal for the Liberation to commence. A one-off; a unique act in response to a unique situation. Not some miracle wrought by the Light Bringer's great rival.

Quinn lifted his head, and smiled a contemptuous smile. Such a shock was extremely unlikely to occur again. There was no unknown threat. He was perfectly safe. Night could still dawn.

He stood up, and turned slowly, examining his surroundings properly for the first time. The celebrated Napoleonic heart of the city was encompassed by a range of splendid white, silver, and gold towers. Their burnished surfaces hurt his eyes, as their grandeur hurt his sensibility. But somewhere among all this cleanliness and vitality, the waster kids would be grubbing through dank refuse, hurting

each other and unwary civilians for no reason they understood. Finding them would be as easy here as it had been in New York. Just walk in the direction everyone else was coming from. His heartland, where his words would bring its denizens purpose.

He completed his turn. Right ahead of him the Eiffel Tower stood guard at the end of a broad immaculate park, with sightseers wandering round its base. Even in Edmonton, Quinn had heard of this structure. A proud symbol of Gallic forbearance through all the centuries of Govcentral's pallid uniformity. Its very endurance reflecting the strengths and determination of the people who regarded it as their own. Precious to the world. And now, so terribly fragile with age.

Quinn started to chuckle greedily.

Andy Behoo fell in love. It was instantaneous. *She* walked in through the door of Jude's Eworld, kicking off a cascade of datavised alarms, and he was utterly smitten.

Terminal babe. Taller than him by a good ten centimetres, with the most gorgeous cloak of hair. A face with soft features so delicate as to be way beyond anything cosmetic adapter packages could achieve—a natural beauty. She wore a white sleeveless T-shirt that showed off a hot figure without revealing anything, and a scarlet skirt that didn't reach her knees. But it was the way she carried herself that clinched it for him. Perfectly composed, yet she still looked round the shop with child-like curiosity.

The rest of the staff were all giving her clandestine glances as the doorway scanners datavised their findings. Then the smaller girl entered behind her, and the scanners gave out an almost duplicate alert. How weird. They couldn't possibly be a cop grab operation, too obvious. Besides, the

manager was pretty regular when it came to slipping the shop's bung to the district station.

Andy told the customer he was dealing with, "Look it over, and have a think about it, you won't find a better deal in London," then left them to scoot over to the girl before any of his so-called colleagues could reach her. If the floor manager had seen, he'd probably lose his job. *Abandoning a customer before the sale is sealed—capital crime.*

"Hi, I'm Andy. I'm your sellrat. Anything you want, it's my job to push the more expensive model on you." He grinned broadly.

"You're my what?" Louise asked. Her expression was half puzzlement, half smile.

Her accent did strange things along Andy's spine, making him shiver. The ultimate in class, and foreign-exotic, too. He scanned his enhanced retinas across her face, desperate to capture her image. Even if she walked out of his life now, she would never be entirely lost. Andy had certain male-orientated software packages that could superimpose her into sensenviron recordings. He felt shabby even as he recorded her.

"Sellrat. That's what the public calls Customer Interactivity Officers round these parts."

"Oh," the smaller girl sighed dismissively. "He's just a shopboy, Louise."

Andy's neural nanonics had to reinforce his smile. Why do they always come in pairs? And why always one obnoxious one? He clicked his fingers and pointed both index fingers at the smaller girl. "That's me. Try not to be too disappointed, I really am here to help."

"I'd like to buy some neural nanonics," Louise said. "Is it very difficult?"

The request startled Andy. Her clothes alone must have cost more than twice his weekly pay, why didn't she have a

set already? Beautiful and enigmatic. He smiled up at her. “Not at all. What were you looking for?”

She sucked her lower lip. “I’m really not very sure. The best I can afford, I suppose.”

“We don’t have them on Norfolk,” Genevieve said. “That’s where we’re from.”

Louise tried not to frown. “Gen, we don’t have to give our history to everyone we meet.”

Rich foreigners. Andy’s conscience struggled against temptation. Conscience won out, backed up by infatuation. I can’t sell her a pirate set. Not her. “Okay, your lucky day. We’ve got some top-of-the-range sets in stock. I can fix a reasonable deal for them, too, so there’s no need to get sweaty about the money. This way.”

He led them over to his section of the counter, managing to get her name on the way. His neural nanonics faithfully recorded the way she walked, her body movements, even her speech pattern. Like most nineteen-year-olds who’d grown up in London’s manky Islington district with its history of low-income employment, Andy Behoo fancied himself as a prospective net don. It combined the goal of fringe-legal work (also his heritage), with very little actual effort. He’d taken didactic memory courses on electronics, nanonics, and software every month since he’d passed his fourteenth birthday. His two-room flat was stocked to the ceiling with ancient processor blocks and every redundant peripheral he’d managed to scrounge or steal. Everyone in his tenement knew Andy was the guy to visit when you had a technical problem.

As to why such an embryonic datasmart prince of darkness was working as a sellrat in Jude’s Eworld, he had to get the money to finance his revolutionary schemes from somewhere—or maybe even go to college. And the shop always employed technerd teenagers as their outfront sales-

force, they were the only ones who kept up to date on upgrades and new marques that would work on minimum-wage weeks.

The wall behind the counter was made up entirely from boxes of consumer electronics. All of them had colourful logos and names. Louise read a few of the contents labels, not understanding a word. Genevieve was already bored; looking round at other parts of the slightly shabby shop—one of seemingly hundreds of near-identical outlets along Tottenham Court Road. The inside was a maze formed by counters and walls of boxes, with old company posters and holomorph stickers stuck up on every available surface. Holographic screens flashed out enticing pictures of products in action. The section opposite Andy Behoo had a big GAMES sign above it. And Louise had promised.

Andy began pulling boxes down and lining them up on the counter. They were rectangular, the size of his hand, wrapped in translucent foil, with the manufacturer's guarantee seal on the front. "Okay," Andy said with familiar confidence. "What we have here, the Presson050, is a basic neural nanonics set. Everything you need to survive daily arcology life: datavises, mid-rez neuroiconic display, enhanced memory retrieval, axon block. It's preformatted to NAS2600 standard, which means it can handle just about every software package on the market. There's a company-supplied didactic operations imprint that comes with it, but we do sell alternative operations courses."

"That sounds very . . . comprehensive," Louise said. "How much?"

"How are you paying?"

"Fuseodollars." She showed him her Jovian Bank disk.

"Okay. Good move. I can give you a favourable rate on that. So, we're looking at about three and a half thousand, for which we'll throw in five free Quantumsoft supplement

packages from their BCD30 range. Your choice of functions. I can arrange finance for you if you want, better percentage than any Sol-system bank.”

“I see.”

“Then we’ve got—” His hand moved on to the next box.

“Andy. What’s the top of the range, please?”

“Okay, good question.” He disappeared behind the counter for a moment, returning with a fresh box and a suitably awed tone. “Kulu Corporation ANI5000. The King himself uses this model. We’ve only got three left because of the starflight quarantine. These are most wanted items all over town right now. But I can still give you level retail.”

“And that’s better than the first one?”

“Yes indeedie. Runs NAS2600, of course, with parallel upgrade potential for when the 2615 comes out.”

“Um. What’s this NAS number you keep saying?”

“Neural Augmentation Software. It’s the operating system for the whole filament network, and the number is the version. 2600 was introduced turn of the century, and boy was it a bugfeist when it came out. But it’s a smooth proved system now. And the supplement packages are just about unlimited, every software house in the Confederation publishes compatible products. If you’re going serious professional you can add physiological monitors, encyclopaedia galactica, employment waldoing, SII suit control, weapons integration, linguistic translation, news informant, starship astrogration, net search—the full monty. Then there’s games applications as well, I can’t even list them you have so many.” He patted the box with reverence. “No fooling, Louise, this set gives you the full interface range: nerve overrides to control your body, sense amplification, sight-equivalent neuroiconic generation, complete reality sensen-viron, implant command, total indexed memory recall.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Got to warn you: not cheap. Seventeen thousand fuseodollars.” He held up his hands in placation. “Sorry.”

Daddy will kill me, Louise thought, but it has to be done. I promised Fletcher, and that horrid Brent Roi never really believed me. “All right.”

Andy smiled in admiration. “Talk about power choosing. That’s impressive, Louise. But, hey, I can lighten the burden. For a 5000 set, we’ll throw in twenty-five software supplements, and give you twenty per cent discount on the next twenty-five you buy from us.”

“That sounds like a jolly good deal,” she said inanely, swept along by his enthusiasm. “How long does it take to get a set?”

“For one this complex, ninety minutes. I can give you the operating didactic at the same time.”

“What’s one of those?”

Andy’s breezy ebullience faltered in the face of such an astonishing question. He started to access his encyclopaedia’s file on Norfolk, and put a news search in primary mode for good measure. “You don’t have them on your planet?”

“No. Our constitution is pastoral, we don’t have much technology. Or weapons.” Defending Norfolk, yet again.

“No weapons; hey, good policy. Didactic imprints are sort of like the instruction manual, but it gets written directly inside your brain, and you never forget it.”

“Well if I’m going to spend this much money, I certainly need to know how to work it, don’t I?”

Andy laughed heartily, then stopped quickly when he caught sight of Genevieve’s expression. How come nobody ever produced a suavity program he could load? Talking to and impressing girls would be so much easier. The floor supervisor was datavisising questions about his oddball cus-

tomer and the door sensor alert, which he answered briefly. Then the Norfolk information started to emerge.

"We have a preparation room," Andy gestured to the back of the shop.

"Louise, I want to look round," Genevieve said winningly. "There might be something for me."

"All right. But if you see something just ask, don't touch anything. That's all right, isn't it?" she asked Andy.

"Sure thing." Andy winked at Genevieve and gave her a thumbs up. Her sneer could have withered an oak tree.

Louise followed Andy into the small preparation room, a cube-space whose walls were fashioned from dark panelling, with various electronic units poking out. It was furnished with just a glass cubicle, like a shower but without any visible nozzle; and a low padded bench similar to a doctor's examination table.

The attention Andy showed her was somewhat amusing. She thought possibly it wasn't entirely due to her high-spending customer status. Most of the young gentlemen (and others—slightly older) on Norfolk had shown a similar, if less blatant, interest over the last couple of years. Now, of course, she was wearing what amounted to little more than an exhibitionist's costume. Though by Earth's standards it was tame. But the top and skirt had made her look so damn good in the department store's mirror. She could hold her own against London girls in this. For the first time in her life she was *sassy*. And free to enjoy it. And loving it.

The glass door slid shut with a definitive *click* behind her. She shot Andy a suspicious glance.

"Bugger," Western Europe muttered as his linkages with Louise were cut. He switched to Genevieve, which was about as useless; the little girl was investigating a Gothic

fantasy, standing in a castle courtyard as a column of priestess warriors rode off to battle on their unicorns.

Western Europe had wanted Louise to discover the bugs at some stage. He just hadn't planned on it being quite so early in the operation. But then, buying neural nanonics wasn't what he expected of a girl from Norfolk, either. She was quite a remarkable little thing, really.

Andy Behoo scratched at his arm awkwardly. "You do know you've been stung, don't you?" he asked.

"Stung?" Louise took a guess. "You're not talking about insects, are you?"

"No. The door sensors spotted it as soon as you and your sister came in. There are nanonic bugs in your skin; like miniature radios I guess you'd call them. They transmit all sorts of information about where you are, and what's going on around you. There are four on you, Genevieve has three. That we can detect, anyway."

She drew in a shocked breath. How stupid! Of course Brent Roi wouldn't let her walk round freely. Not someone who'd tried to sneak a possessed down to Earth. He was bound to want to see what she did next. "Oh sweet Jesus."

"I reckon Govcentral must be nervous about foreigners right now, especially as you come from Norfolk," Andy said. "What with the possessed, and all. Don't worry, this room is screened, they can't hear us now."

His sellrat swagger had diminished as he tried to reassure her. In fact, he'd become almost sheepish, which made him actually quite pleasant, she thought. "Thank you for telling me, Andy. Do you scan all your customers?"

"Oh yes. Mainly for dodgy implants. There's quite a few gangs try to siphon our software fleks. Then we do sell bugs ourselves, see, so sometimes we get cops coming in and trying to find who those customers are. Jude's Eworld has a

strong neutrality policy, which we enforce. We have to, or we'd never sell anything."

"Can you get them off me?"

"All part of our customer service. I can give you a more detailed scan, too, see if there are any others."

She followed his instructions, standing in the cubicle, which gave her a comprehensive bodyscan down to a sub-cellular level. So now someone else knows I'm pregnant, she acknowledged in resignation. No wonder Earth's population value their privacy so, they don't get very much of it. The bodyscan located another two bugs. Andy applied a small rectangular patch similar to a medical package (same technology, he said) to her arms and leg; then she pulled up her T-shirt up so he could press it against her back.

"Is there any way of knowing if the police sting me again?" she asked.

"An electronic warfare block should tell you. We had a shipment of front-line equipment in from Valisk a couple of months back. I think there's still some left. Good stuff."

"I think you'd better put one of those removal patches on the list as well." Louise called Genevieve into the room, and explained what'd happened. Thankfully her sister was more curious than outraged. She peered at her skin after Andy took the nanonic package away, fascinated by the removal process. "It doesn't look any different," she complained.

"They're too small to see," Andy said. "Which makes them too small to feel. They shouldn't call it getting stung, really. More like being feathered."

When Genevieve scooted back into the shop to continue her appraisal of consumer goodies, Andy handed over the box of Kulu Corporation neural nanonics to Louise. "You need to check the seal," he said. "Make sure it hasn't been broken, and see that the wrapping hasn't been tampered

with as well. You can tell that by the colour. If someone tries to cut or tear it, the stress turns it red.”

She turned it over obediently. “Why do I have to do this?”

“Neural nanonics connect directly into your brain, Louise. If someone changes the filaments or subverts the NAS codes they could get into your memories or manipulate your body like a puppet. This guarantees the set hasn’t been tampered with since it left the factory; and you have the Kulu Corporation’s assurance that their design wouldn’t sequestrate you.”

Louise gave the box a closer examination. The foil seemed intact and clear.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” he said quickly. “It’s a standard speech; we implant fifty of these a day. I mean, think what would happen to the shop or the manufacturer if anything like that did ever happen. We’d be lynched. It’s in our interest to make sure everything’s kosher for you. Another reason we have sensors at the door.”

“Okay, I suppose.” She handed the box back. Andy broke the seal in front of her, and took out a small black capsule a couple of centimetres long. He slotted that into the back of a specialist medical implant package. The only other item in the box was a flek.

“This is the operating didactic, which is standard, but it also contains the first time access code specific to this set,” he told her. “Basically, it allows you to activate the neural nanonics. After that, you change the code by just thinking of a new one. So even if someone got hold of your flek afterwards it wouldn’t do them any good. Don’t worry, it’s all explained in the didactic.”

She lay face down on the cushioned bench, with a pair of collar wings holding her neck steady. Andy pushed her hair to one side, ready to apply the medical package to the nape

of her neck. There was already a tiny nearly-healed scar on her skin. He knew exactly what it was, he'd seen it a thousand times before, every time the implant package was taken off.

"Is everything all right?" Louise asked.

"Yes. No problem. It just takes a minute to line this up right." He datavised the bodyscan cubicle's processor. Its memory file of her scan confirmed there was absolutely no foreign matter in her brain.

Andy took the coward's way out and said nothing. Mainly because he didn't want to alarm her. But something here was desperately wrong. Either she was lying to him, which he couldn't believe. Or . . . he couldn't quite decide what the other options were. He was trespassing deep in Govcentral territory. All that did was enhance her mystery up to the level of pure enchantment. A babe in distress right out of the sensewise dramas. In his shop!

"Here we go," he said lightly, and put the package over her existing scar. Now there would never be any proof.

Louise tensed slightly. "It's gone numb."

"That's okay. It's supposed to."

All the medical package did was open a passage through to the base of the skull, and ease the capsule containing the densely pleated neural nanonics into place. Then the filaments began to unwind from each other and porrect forward, their probing tips slowly winding their way round cells as they sought out synapses. There were millions of them, active molecular strings obeying their AI formatted protocol; instructions determined by their own structure of spiralling atoms. They formed a wondrously intricate filigree around the medulla oblongata, branching to connect with the nerve strands inside while the main filaments seeped further into the brain to complete their interface.

With the implant package in place, Andy fetched the di-

dactic imprinter. Louise thought it looked like a pair of bur-nished stainless steel ski glasses. He put the flek in a small slot at the side, and placed it carefully on her face. “This works in pulses,” he said. “You’ll get a warning flash of green, then you’ll see a violet light for about fifteen seconds. Try not to blink. It should happen eight times.”

“That’s it?” The edges of the imprinter had stuck to her skin, leaving her in total blackness.

“Yep, not so bad, is it?”

“And this is the way everyone on Earth learns things?”

“Yes. The information is encoded within the light, and your optic nerve passes it straight into your brain. Simple explanation, but that’s the principle.”

Louise saw a flicker of green, and held her breath. The violet light came on, an otherwise uniform sheen broken by that unique monotone sparkle which a laser leaves on the retina. She managed not to blink until it went off. “Your children don’t go to school?” she asked.

“No. Kids go to day clubs, keeps them busy and you make friends there. That’s all.”

She was silent for some time, considering the implications. The hours—years!—of my life I have sat in classrooms listening to teachers and reading books. And all the time, this way of learning, of discovery, existed. One of the demonic technologies that will ruin our way of life. Banned without question. That’s nothing to do with keeping Norfolk pastoral, that’s denying people opportunity, stunting their lives. It’s worse than cousin Gideon’s arm. She clenched her teeth together, suddenly very, very angry.

“Hey, are you all right?” Andy asked timidly.

The violet light came on again. “Yes,” she snapped primly. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Andy didn’t say anything else until the didactic imprinter finished. Too scared he’d say the wrong thing again and

annoy her further. He hadn't got a clue why her mood had swung so fast. When the imprinter did come off, it revealed a very pensive expression.

"Could you do me a favour?" Louise said. A knowing smile licked along her lips. "Keep an eye on Genevieve for me. I promised I'd buy her something from here, so if you could steer her to some kind of gadget that's relatively harmless I'd be grateful."

"Sure, my pleasure. Consider her guarded from any possible digital grief." Andy had to use a nerve override impulse to prevent her from seeing how crushing that request was. He'd been counting on using the time it took to implant the neural nanonics to talk to her. Yet again, Andy blows out, he raged silently. Just once, I'd like to score with a major babe. Once!

The games section wasn't nearly as exciting as Genevieve had expected. Jude's Eworld was actively promoting a thousand games through its display screen catalogues, with direct access to ten times that many over encrypted links to publishers; covering the whole genre from interactive roles to strategy general's command. But as she flipped through them she could see they were all variants of each other. Everybody promised newer, hotter graphics, unrivalled worldbuilding, tac-stim activants, ingenious puzzles, more terrifying adversaries, slicker music. Always greater than before, never different. She sampled four or five, standing inside a projection cone beamed out from a high-wattage AV lens on the ceiling. Bore-ing. In truth, she'd begun to tire of them back on the *Jamrana*; like spending a whole day eating chocolate cake, really.

There didn't seem to be much else in Jude's Eworld that was interesting. Their main market was neural nanonics and associated software, or else no-fun processor blocks with strange peripherals.

“Hi. How’s it going, there? Are you hyping cool yet?”

Genevieve turned to see the gruesomely oiky little shop-boy Andy smiling ingratiatingly at her. One of his front teeth was crooked. She’d never seen that on someone his age before. “I’m having a lovely time, thank you so much for caring.” It was the tone that would earn her a sharp slap from her mother or Mrs Charlsworth.

“Uh huh.” Andy grunted, fully flustered. “Er, I thought perhaps I could show you what we’ve got to offer for kids your . . . I mean, the kind of blocks and software you might enjoy.”

“Oh whoopee do.”

His arms re-arranged themselves chaotically, indicating the section of the shop he wanted her to move towards. “Please?” he asked desperately.

With an overlong sigh and slouched shoulders, Genevieve shuffled along despondently. Why does Louise always attract the wrong type? she wondered. Which sparked an idea. “She’s got a fiancé, you know.”

“Huh?”

A modest smile at his horror. “Louise. She’s engaged to be married. They announced the banns at our estate’s chapel.”

“Married?” Andy yelped. He flinched, looking round the shop to see if any of his colleagues were paying attention.

This was fun. “Yes. To a starship captain. That’s why we’re on Earth, we’re waiting for him to arrive.”

“When’s he due, do you know?”

“A couple of weeks, I think. He’s very rich, he owns his starship.” She glanced round in suspicion, then leaned in towards the boy. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but I think the only reason Daddy gave his permission was because of the money. Our estate is very big, and it takes a lot to keep it running.”

“She’s marrying for money?”

“Has to be. I mean he’s so *old*. Louise said he’s thirty years older than she is. I think she was fibbing so it didn’t sound so bad. If you ask me, it’s more like forty-five.”

“Oh my God. That’s disgusting.”

“It looks so awful when he kisses her, I mean he’s virtually bald, and hideously fat. She says she hates him to touch her, but what can she do about it? He’s her future husband.”

Andy stared down at her, his face stricken. “Why does your father allow this?”

“All marriages are arranged on Norfolk, it’s just our way. If it makes you feel any better, I think he really likes Louise.” She’d have to stop now. Crying shame, but it was getting really difficult to keep a straight face. “He keeps on saying he wants to have a big family with her. He says he expects her to bear him at least seven children.” Jackpot! Andy had started trembling with indignation—or worse.

Her day made, Genevieve gently took his hand in hers, and smiled up trustfully. “Can we see the hyper cool electronics now, please?”

Understanding arrived within Louise’s mind like a solstice sunrise. Quietly irresistible, bringing with it a fresh perspective on the world. A new season of life begun.

She knew precisely how to utilise the augmented mentality opening up within her brain as the filaments connected with her neurones, controlling the expanded potential with an instinct that could have been a genetic heritage it was so deep seated. Audio discrimination, analysing the murmur of sounds resonating through the door from the shop. Visual memory indexing, saving and storing what she saw. Pattern analysis. A test datavise, requesting an update from the medical package on her wrist. And the neuroiconic display, sight without eyes, moulding raw data into colour. It left her

giddy and sweating from excitement. The sense of achievement was extraordinary.

I'm equal to everybody else now. Or I will be when I've learned how to use all the applications properly.

She datavised the implant package on her neck for a status check. A procedural menu sprang up inside her skull, and she ran a comparison. It confirmed the implantation process was complete. She instructed the package to disengage, withdrawing the empty capsule from which the filaments had sprouted, and knitting the cells together behind it.

"Steady on," Andy said. "That's supposed to be my job."

Louise grinned at him as she climbed off the bench, and stretched extravagantly, flexing the stiffness out of limbs held still for too long. "Oh, come on," she teased. "All your clients must do that. It's the first taste of freedom we get. Having neural nanonics must be like being allowed to vote, you've become a full member of society. Aren't they wonderful gadgets?"

"Um. Yeah." He got her to lean forwards, and peeled the implant package from her neck. "You can actually become a full citizen, you know." The strangely hopeful tone earned him an inquisitive look.

"What do you mean?"

"You could apply for residential citizenship. If you wanted. I checked the Govcentral legal memory core. It's no problem; you just need a Govcentral citizen to sponsor you, and a hundred fuseodollars fee. You can datavise them for an application. I've got the address."

"That's um . . . very kind, Andy. But I don't really plan on staying here for long." She smiled, trying to let him down gently. "I have a fiancé, you see. He's going to come and take me away."

"But Norfolk laws wouldn't apply to you," Andy blurted

desperately. "Not here. Not if you're an Earth citizen. You'd be safe."

"I'm sure I am anyway. Thank you." She smiled again, slightly more firm this time; and slipped past him out into the shop.

"Louise! I want this," Genevieve shrieked. The little girl was standing in the middle of the shop, arms held rigid at her side as she turned round and round. There was a small block clipped onto her belt with DEMONSTRATOR printed in blue on its top. Louise hadn't seen her smile like that in a long time.

"What have you got, Gen?"

"I gave her a pair of realview lenses to try," Andy said quietly. "Like contact lenses, but they receive a datavise from the block which overlays a fantasyscape on what you're seeing." He datavised a code to her. "That'll let you view direct from the block."

Louise datavised the code, marvelling at how smoothly she did it, and closed her eyes. The world started to spin around her. A very strange world. It had the same dimensions as the inside of Jude's Eworld, but this was a cave of onyx, where every surface corresponded to walls and counters, fat stalagmites had replaced the flek sale bins. People had become hulking black and chrome cyborgs, whose limbs were clusters of yellow pistons.

"Isn't it fabulous?" Gen whooped. "It changes whatever you look at."

"Yes, Gen, it's good." She saw the mouth on one of the cyborgs clank apart to speak her own words, and smiled. The cyborg's mouth froze open. Louise cancelled her reception from the realview block.

"You can get about fifty different imagery programs for it," Andy said. "This one's *Metalpunk Wasteland*. Quite

popular. There's an audioplug peripheral to change the voices."

"Please, Louise! This one."

"All right, all right."

Andy datavised an off code to the demonstrator block. Genevieve pouted as the cave melted back into the shop. Andy started piling boxes and small flek cases up on the counter. "What supplements do you want?" he asked.

Louise consulted the market menu already included in the NAS2600. "News hound, global address directory search, people tracker . . . um, the pregnancy supplement for my physiological monitor, universal message script. I think that's it."

"You're entitled to another twenty."

"I know. Do I have to collect them all today? I'm not really sure what else I'll need."

"Take as much time as you need to choose, and drop in whenever you want. But I'd recommend netA, that'll give you your own address, you've got to pay an annual fee to the link company, but nobody will be able to contact you without one. Oh, and streetnav, too, if you're going to stay in London—shows you the short cuts and how to use public transport."

"Okay, fine, put them on." More flek cases began to appear on the counter. "And that electronic warfare block we talked about."

"Sure thing."

When he slapped it down, it didn't look much different to her ordinary processor block, same anonymous oblong of dark grey plastic.

"Who buys bugs and things like that from you?" she asked.

"Could be anyone. Girl wanting to find out if her boyfriend's cheating on her. Manager who needs to know

which of his staff are ripping him off. Voyeur perverts. Mostly, though, it's private detectives. Regular spooks convention at times, this place."

Louise didn't approve of that notion that just anybody could come along and spy on their friends and enemies. There ought to be some restrictions on who could buy such items. But then regulation was one thing Earth didn't seem to have much of.

Andy handed over the shop's accounts block with an apologetic smile. Louise tried not to shiver as she transferred the money over from her Jovian Bank disk. She gave the realview block and a packet of disposable lenses to Genevieve, who promptly tore the wrapping off with a gleeful, "Yesss."

"I'll see you when you come back for the rest of your software?" Andy asked. "And if you change your mind about . . . the other thing, I'll be happy to sponsor your application. I'm entitled to do that. I'm an adult citizen."

"Right," she said gingerly. There was something very odd about the way he'd latched onto the idea. She was debating whether to quiz him further when she caught the glint of devilment in Gen's eye. The little girl spun round quickly. "You've been very kind, Andy," Louise said. "Please don't worry about me." She leant over the counter and gave him a light kiss. "Thanks."

Genevieve was already making for the door, giggling wildly. Louise snatched up the carrier bag full of fleks, and chased after her.

Louise lay back on her bed as the brilliant sun finally sank away below Green Park. Genevieve was sleeping on the bed next to her, exhausted by the very long day.

Terrible child, Louise thought fondly. I must make sure she gets a set of neural nanonics when she turns sixteen.

She closed her own eyes and put the news hound program into primary mode. The room's net processor acknowledged her datavise, and she began asking for general items on the possessed. That was when she had her crash course on using news hound's filter program accessories and designating more refined search parameters. It took an hour, but she was eventually able to slot the myriad events reported by Earth's news agencies into an overall picture. The arrival of the *Mount's Delta* was a weird one. The way its crewman had been shredded hinted strongly at Quinn Dexter to her mind.

New York's abrupt isolation was the principal current topic for the agencies, in fact it was just about their only topic. Govcentral's North American Commissioner appeared before the reporters to assure everyone that it was just a precaution, and they were investigating a "possessed-type" incident in Dome One as a matter of procedure. No schedule was given for opening the vac-trains. Police squads, reinforced with riot-control mechanoids, were out in force on the streets as the arcology residents became highly restless.

Then there was the event which caused Louise to jerk upright on the bed, opening her eyes wide in surprise and delight. Tranquillity's arrival at Jupiter. Joshua was *here!* In this star system.

She sank back onto the pillows, shaking with excitement. The universal message script was hurriedly brought into primary mode. She composed a file for him which she really hoped didn't sound too desperate and pathetic, and datavised it triumphantly into the communication net. Her neural nanonics told her that Jupiter was five hundred and fifty million miles away, so the signal would take about forty minutes to reach it. She might have a reply within two hours!

Western Europe, who was monitoring her net connection, instructed the AI to block the message. The last thing he needed right now was some dunderhead boyfriend charging to the rescue, especially one as famous as Lagrange Calvert.

9

The party was a good one, though the guy with only one arm was kind of weird. Liol knew he was staring, and loaded a mild protocol reminder into his neural nanonics. It was just that he'd never seen anything like that before. Didn't seem to affect the guy's balance out on the dance floor, and the girl he was with obviously didn't mind. Or perhaps she enjoyed the novelty value. Knowing the girls in this habitat, that was a strong option. Come to that, maybe the missing arm was an obscure fashion statement. Not impossible.

Liol headed for the buffet table, picking his way through the crowd. Just about everyone smiled and said hello as they jostled together. He replied to most of them, their names familiar now without having to access a memory file. Plutocrat princes and princesses, with media celebrities jumbled in for variety. They tended to work hard during the day, expanding corporate empires, starting new dynasties, never taking their wealth for granted especially in these times. Tranquillity's change of location was causing them unique problems in sustaining their traditional markets, but there were fabulous benefits to be had from being

placed in the Confederation's wealthiest star system. They'd set about exploiting that as ruthlessly and gleefully as only they could. But nights were given over to a single giant funtime: parties, restaurants, shows, clubs; Tranquility boasted the best of them all in profusion.

He wasn't even sure who his host was. The apartment was as expensively anonymous as all the others he'd been in over the last few days, a hospitality showcase. Everything selected by designers to demonstrate their talent and taste—bitched over by other designers. Just another party. No doubt he and Dominique would grace two or three more before the night was out. The social set he'd belonged to in Ayacucho had never been shy of a good time, and were wealthy enough to indulge themselves. But compared to this mob, they were jejune provincials.

They were fascinated that he was Joshua's brother. Smiled indulgently when he told them he had his own business back in Ayacucho. But he could reveal little about *Lady Mac's* last flight. So conversation tended to dry up fast after that. He really didn't know much about Confederation politics, or the money shifts in multistellar markets, or hot entertainment items (Jezzibella was Capone's girl—oh, come *on!*); and he certainly didn't relish discussing the possessed, and how the crisis was developing.

He took a plate along the long table of canapés, deliberately picking the more bizarre-looking items. Jupiter was rising across the window behind the table, so he munched and stared, as overwhelmed by the spectacle as any hick farmboy. Not quite the reaction of a sophisticated starship crewman-about-the-galaxy. The aspiration he'd cherished for himself since first hearing *Lady Mac* was supposedly his rightful inheritance. Now he'd flown in *Lady Mac*, actually getting to pilot her. He'd seen new star systems, even fought in an orbital war and (ironically implausible) saved

the Confederation—or at least alleviated some of the Navy’s burden. After the pinnacle, there was always the journey back down again. He would never, ever be as good a pilot as Joshua. The manoeuvres his brother had flown during the *Beezling* encounter had made that quite obvious. And the Confederation wasn’t such a fun place to roam through any more. Neither was life, now the beyond waited.

A reflection in the window made him turn. Joshua and Ione were mingling among the guests. Talking with ease, laughing. A good-looking couple, Josh in a formal black jacket, her in a flowing green evening dress. He was about to go over when Joshua led Ione out onto the dance floor.

“Yoo hoo.” Dominique waved from across the room. People struggled to get out of the way as she cut a line straight for him. Liol was granted the knowledge of what it must be like for a planet to face an invading fleet. Her hand grasped his arm, and she rubbed her nose against his. “I missed you,” she murmured with silky reproach.

“I was hungry.”

“Me too.” The resentment snapped off, replaced with bountiful mischief. She plucked one of the canapés from his plate and popped it straight into her mouth. “Eeek. Sungwort seaweed, and they coated it in coriander.”

“It was interesting,” he apologised meekly. She was as adorable as she was terrifying. By far the most beautiful girl in the room, Dominique favoured a more natural look than her contemporaries, a gypsy girl among the glossy mannequins. Her black evening gown was full-length, but that somehow didn’t stop it from displaying a huge quantity of strategic flesh. Her broad lips curved up into a delighted smile. She dabbed her finger on his nose. “I just love your innocence.” A quality of which he had very little left. Sex with Dominique was narcotic, ruining you with pleasure.

She held his gaze for a moment, face enraptured by de-

votion. He wanted to turn and flee. "Someone I'd like you to meet," she said neutrally, as if divining his response. A finger beckoned. There was a slim girl standing behind her, completely blocked by Dominique's broad, healthy physique. She had a prim Oriental face with hair several shades fairer than Dominique. "This is Neomone."

"Hi," Neomone darted forward and kissed him. Then swayed back, blushing, looking very pleased with herself.

"Hi." He didn't quite know what to make of her. She was in her late teens, wearing a slinky silk dress that revealed an almost androgynous figure, all ribcage and stringy muscle. Thrilled and nervous at the same time, she kept giving Dominique worshipful glances.

"Neomone is training to be a ballerina," Dominique purred.

"I've never been to a ballet," Liol admitted. "We've had troupes visit Ayacucho, but I didn't think it would be quite me. Sorry."

Neomone giggled. "Ballet is for everyone."

"You should dance with him," Dominique told her. "Let him see there's nothing to be scared of from cultural élitism." She cocked an eye at Liol. "Neomone's quite a fan of yours, you know."

He grinned, slightly awkward. "Oh. Why's that?"

"You flew in the *Lady Mac*," the girl said breathlessly. "Everyone knows Joshua was on a secret mission."

"If you know, then it can't be that secret, can it?"

"Told you he was a modest hero," Dominique said. "In public, anyway."

Liol managed to keep smiling valiantly. Maybe he had bragged a little. That was the nature of the starflight business. "You know how it is," he shrugged.

Neomone's giggles were unstoppable. "Not yet," she said. "But I'm going to find out tonight."

The beach glowed a pale silver under the light-tube's lunar radiance. Joshua took his shoes off to walk along it, holding Ione's hand. The sand was warm and soft, flowing over his toes like grainy liquid. Tiny fluorescent fish darted about just under the sea's surface, as if a shower of pink and azure sparks were tumbling horizontally through the water. Somebody had made a row of small melted-looking mounds just above the shoreline, meandering away into the distance.

Ione signed contentedly, and leaned into him. "I know it's silly, but I keep coming back. She loved playing on this beach. I suppose I'm expecting to find her here."

"Jay?"

"Yes." She paused. "And Haile. I hope she's all right."

"The Kiint say she is. They wouldn't lie about that. Many things, but not the welfare of a child."

"She must be so lonely." Ione sat down with her back to one of the small dunes. She slid her silk scarf from her neck. "I don't see why they won't let us bring her back from Jobis. Starships are still going there."

"Bloody mystics," Joshua sat beside her. "Probably not in their horoscopes."

"You're starting to sound like dear old Parker Higgins."

Joshua laughed. "I can't believe that old duffer is coming with us. And Getchell as well."

"They're the best I've got."

"Thanks for asking me to go. I need to be flying. I'm no good to anybody just sitting around."

"Joshua." She reached over to trace the stark line of his jaw bone. "I'm pregnant again. You're the father."

His mouth flopped open. She smiled, and kissed him gently. "Sorry. Bad timing. Again. I'm very good at that."

“No,” he said with weak defiance. “No, that’s, er, not bad timing at all.”

“I thought you should know before you left.” Even in the twilight she could see the shock and wonder in his eyes. There was something absolutely gorgeous about him when he looked so vulnerable. It means he cares, I suppose. She touched his face again.

“Um. When?” he asked.

“Before you went to Norfolk. Remember?”

He grinned, almost shy. “We’ll never know the exact time then. There’s an awful lot to choose from.”

“If I had a choice, I think I’d make it the one in Adul Nopal’s apartment.”

“Oh Jesus, yes. The middle of his dinner party.” He flopped down onto the sand, and grinned up. “Yeah! That would be fitting.”

“And Joshua. It was very deliberate. I’m not in this state by accident.”

“Right. Thanks for consulting me. I mean, I thought we’d already established the next Lord of Ruin with Marcus.”

“Just say no.”

He put his hand round her head, and pulled her down, kissing her. “I think we’ve already confirmed I can’t.”

“You’re not angry with me?”

“No. Worried, maybe. More about the future than anything. But then the kid won’t have it any different to the rest of the human race when he dies. We can’t fear for that, or we’d be utterly paralysed. The Kiint found a solution, the Laymil, too—for all it’s inapplicable. We damn well can.”

“Thank you, Joshua.”

“I’d like to know why, though. I mean, we already have the next Lord of Ruin established.”

She closed her eyes, shutting out his gentle curiosity.

“Because you’re perfect,” she whispered. “For me. Great body, good genes.”

“Little Miss Romantic.”

“And a wonderful lover.”

“Yeah, I know that bit. I carry the burden well, though.”

She laughed spryly, then she was crying helplessly.

“Hey. No.” He cradled her, hugging lightly. “Don’t do that.”

“Sorry.” She wiped a hand across her eyes. “Joshua. Please. I don’t love you. I can’t love you.”

He flinched, but didn’t recoil. “I see.”

“Oh God damn it. Now I’ve gone and hurt you. And I didn’t want that. I never wanted that.”

“What the hell do you want, Ione? I don’t understand. Don’t tell me this was convenience, that I was the male easily to hand when you happened to make your mind up. You wanted my baby. And now you’ve told me about it. If you hate me so much, you wouldn’t have done that.”

“I don’t hate you.” She gripped him tighter. “I don’t.”

“Then what?” He made an effort not to shout. Every emotion in his head was freefalling. Thought was almost impossible, only instinct, blind response. “Jesus Christ, do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?”

“Well what do you want out of this, Joshua? Do you want to be a part of this child’s life?”

“Yes! Jesus, how can you question that?”

“What part?”

“A father!”

“How will you be a father?”

“In the same way you’re a mother.”

She took both his hands in hers, quelling the trembling. He shook her loose angrily. “You can’t be,” she said. “I have an affinity bond with the baby. So does Tranquillity.”

“Jesus. I can get symbionts, I can be equal to you and this

bloody habitat. Why are you trying to block me out of this?"

"Joshua. Listen to me. What would you do all day? Even if you were my consort, officially my husband. What would you do? You can't run Tranquillity. That's me, that's what I do. And then it'll be the job of our first child."

"I don't know, I'll find something. I'm versatile."

"There is nothing. There can never be anything for you in Tranquillity, not permanently. I keep telling you this, you are a starship captain. This is your port, not your home. If you stay here, you'll become like your father."

"Leave my father out of this."

"No, Joshua, I won't. He was the same as you, a great captain; and he stayed here in Tranquillity, he never flew after you were born. That's what wrecked him."

"Wrong."

"I know he didn't fly again."

Joshua looked at her. For all his instinct, his experience, that beautiful face defeated him every time. What went on inside her head could never be known. "All right," he said abruptly. "I'll tell you. He had it all, and lost it. That's why he never flew again. Staying here didn't break his heart, it was broken before that."

"Had what?"

"Everything. What all us owner captains fly for. The big strike, a flight that kills the banks. And I had it with Norfolk. I was *this* close, Ione, and loving it. That mayope exchange deal could have earned me hundreds of millions, I would have become one of the plutocrats that infest this bloody habitat. Then I would have been your equal. I would have had my empire to run, I could have bought a fleet of ships just like Parris Vasilkovsky. That's what I'd do during the day. And we'd be able to get married, and none of this question about how *worthy* I am would ever arise."

“It’s not about being worthy, Joshua. Don’t say that, don’t ever. You stopped the Alchemist from being used, for heaven’s sake. You think I look down on you for that? How could some dusty deskbound company president compare to what you are? Joshua, I am so proud of you it hurts. That’s why I wanted you as the baby’s father. Because there is nobody better, not just your genes or your intuition, there can be no heritage finer than yours. And if I thought for one second there was a single chance you would be happy staying here with me, as my husband, or my partner, or just fitting me in as one of your harem, then I would have *Lady Mac* flung into a recycling plant to stop you leaving. But you won’t be happy, you know that. And you’d end up blaming me, or yourself; or worse, the child, for keeping you here. I couldn’t stand that, knowing I was responsible for your misery. Joshua, you’re twenty-two, and untamed. And that’s beautiful, that’s how it should be, that’s your destiny as much as ruling Tranquillity is mine. Our lives have touched, and I thank God they have. We’ve both been rewarded with two children by it. But that’s all. That’s all we can ever be. Ships that pass in the night.”

Joshua searched round for the anger that had blazed so bright just a moment ago. But it had gone. There was mostly numbness, and a little shame. I ought to fight her, make her see I’m necessary. “I hate you for being right.”

“I wish I wasn’t,” she said tenderly. “I just hope you can forgive me for being so selfish. I suppose that’s my heritage; Saldanas always get their way, and to hell with the human fall out.”

“Do you want me to come back?”

Her shoulders slumped wearily. “Joshua, I’m going to drag you back. I’m not forbidding you anything, I’m not saying you can’t be a father. And if you want to stay in Tranquillity and make a go of it, then nobody will help and sup-

port that decision more than me. But I don't believe it will work, I'm sorry, but I really don't. It might for years, but eventually you'd look round and see how much you'd lost. And that would creep into our lives, and our child would grow up in an emotional war zone. I couldn't stand that. Haven't you listened to anything I've said? You're going to be the joy of your child's life, he's going to ache for when you visit and bring presents and stories. The times you'll spend together will be magical. It's you and I that cannot be inseparable, one of history's great love affairs. That's the *convention* of fatherhood you'll be missing, nothing more."

"Life never used to be this complicated."

The sympathy she felt for him was close to a physical suffering. "I don't suppose it was before I came along. Fate's a real bitch, isn't she."

"Yeah."

"Cheer up. You get joy without responsibility. The male dream."

"Don't." He held up a warning finger. "Don't make a joke of this. You've altered my life. Fair enough, encounters always result in some kind of change. That's what makes life so wonderful, especially mine with the opportunities I have. You're quite right about my wanderlust. But encounters are chance, natural. You did this quite deliberately. So just don't try and make light of it."

They sat with their backs resting on the dune for some time, saying nothing. Even Tranquillity was silent, sensing Ione's reluctance to discuss what had been said.

Eventually they wound up leaning against each other. Joshua put his arm around her shoulder, and she started crying again. A sharing, if not of sorrow for what had been done, then reluctant acceptance. "Don't leave me alone tonight," Ione said.

"I will never understand you."

Preparing to go to bed took on the quality of a religious ceremony. The bedroom's window overlooking the underwater vista was opaqued, and the lights reduced to the smallest glimmer. All they could see was each other. They undressed and walked slowly down the steps into the deep spar hand in hand. Bathing was accomplished with scented sponges, graduating into erotic massage. Their lovemaking which followed was deliberately extreme, ranging from aching tenderness to a passion that bordered brutality. Each body responding perfectly to the demands of the other, an exploitation that only their complete familiarity with one another could achieve.

The one aspect they could never recapture was the emotional connection they'd experienced in the previous few days. This sex was a reversion to their very first time, fun, physically enjoyable, but essentially meaningless. Because they didn't mean the same to each other. The attraction was almost as strong as before, but of the devotion there was little evidence. Joshua finally conceded she was right. They'd come full circle.

He wound up lying across the bed, cushions in disarray around him, and Ione sprawled over his chest. Her cheek stroked his pectoral muscles, rejoicing in the touch.

"I thought the Lords of Ruin sent their children off to be Adamists," he said.

"Father's and grandfather's children became Adamists, yes. I've decided mine won't. Not unless that's what they decide they want to become, anyway. I want to bring them up properly, whatever that is."

"How about that; a revolution from the top."

"Every other part of our lives is changing. This particular little ripple won't be noticed amid the storm. But having a family in whatever form will move me closer to my human

heritage. The Lords of Ruin have been terribly isolated figures before.”

“Will you marry, then?”

“That really is stuck in your brain, isn’t it? I have no idea. If I meet someone special, and we both want to, and we’re in a *position* to, then of course I will. But I am going to have a great many lovers, and I’ll have even more friends; and the children will have their friends to play with in the parkland. Maybe even Haile will come back and join in the fun.”

“That sounds like the kind of neverland I’d want to grow up in. Question is now, will it ever happen? We have to survive this crisis first.”

“We will. There’s a solution out there somewhere. You said, and I agree.”

He ran his fingers along her spine, enjoying the happy sighs it incited. “Yeah. Well let’s see if this Tyrathcan God can offer any hints.”

“You’re really looking forward to the flight, aren’t you? I told you, this is what you are.” She snuggled up closer, one hand stroking his thigh. “What about you? Will you marry? I’m sure Sarha would be interested.”

“No!”

“Okay, strike Sarha. Oh, of course, there’s always that farm girl on Norfolk, you know . . . oh what’s her name, now?”

Joshua laughed, and rolled her over, pinning her arms above her head. “Her name, as you very well know, is Louise. And you’re still jealous, aren’t you?”

Ione stuck her tongue out at him. “No.”

“If I can’t hack it as a consort for you, I hardly think a life tilling the fields is going to enthrall me.”

“True.” She lifted her head, and gave him a fast jocose kiss. He still didn’t let go of her arms. “Joshua?”

He groaned in dismay, and collapsed back onto the mattress beside her; which sent out slow waves to flip the cushions. “I hate that tone. I always hear it right before I wind up in deep shit.”

“I was only going to ask, what did happen to your father that last flight? *Lady Mac* got back here with a lot of fuselage heat damage and two jump nodes fused. That couldn’t be pirates, or a secret mission for the Emperor of Oshanko, or rescuing a lost ship from the Meridian fleet that was caught in a neutron star’s gravity well, or any of the other explanations you’ve come up with over the years.”

“Ye of little faith.”

She rolled onto her side, and propped her head on one hand. “So what was it?”

“Okay, if you must know. Dad found a xenoc shipwreck with technology inside that was worth a fortune; they had gravity generators, a direct mass energy converter, industrial scale molecular synthesis extruders. Amazing stuff, centuries in advance of Confederation science. He was rich, Ione. He and the crew could have altered the entire Confederation economy with those gadgets.”

“Why didn’t they?”

“The people who’d hired *Lady Mac* to prospect for gold asteroids turned out to be terrorists, and he had to escape down a timewarp in the centre of the xenoc wreck.”

Ione stared at him for a second, then burst out laughing. Her hand slapped his shoulder. “God, you’re impossible.”

Joshua shifted round to give her a hurt look. “What?”

She put her arms round him and moulded her body contentedly to his, closing her eyes. “Don’t forget to tell that one to the children.”

Tranquillity observed Joshua’s expression sink to mild exasperation. Elaborate thought routines operating within

the vast neural strata briefly examined the possibility that he was telling the truth, but in the end decided against.

Harkey's Bar was having a modest resurgence in fortune. Relative to the absolute downtime endured during the quarantine when its space industry clientele were careful with their money, this was a positive boom. Not back up to pre-crisis levels yet; but the ships were returning to Tranquility's giant counter-rotating spaceport. Admittedly they were mundane inter-orbit vessels rather than starships, but nonetheless they brought new cargoes, and crews with heavy credit disks, and paid the service companies for maintenance and support. The masters of commerce and finance living in the starscraper penthouses were already making deals with the awesome Edenist industrial establishment in whose midst they had so fortuitously materialized. It wouldn't be long before all the dormitoried starships were powered up and started travelling to Earth, and Saturn, and Mars, and the asteroid settlements. Best of all, the buzz was back among the tables and booths, industry gossip was hot and hectic. Such confidence did wonders for liberating anticipation and credit disks.

Sarha, Ashly, Dahybi, and Beaulieu had claimed their usual booth, as requested by Joshua who'd told them he wanted a meeting. They didn't have any trouble, at quarter to nine in the morning there were only a dozen other people in the place. Dahybi sniffed at his coffee after the waitress had departed. Even their skirts were longer at this time of day. "It's not natural, drinking coffee in here."

"This time isn't natural," Ashly complained. He poured some milk into his cup, and added the tea. Sarha *tsked* at him; she always mixed it the other way round.

"Are we flying?" Dahybi asked.

"Looks like it," Beaulieu said. "The captain authorized

the service engineering crew to remove the hull plates over *Lady Mac*'s damaged node. The only reason to do that is to replace it."

"Not cheap," Ashly muttered. He stirred his tea thoughtfully.

Joshua pulled the spare seat out and sat down. "Who's not cheap?" he asked briskly.

"Replacement nodes," Sarha said.

"Oh, them." Joshua stuck up a finger, and a waitress popped up at his side. "Tea, croissants, and orange juice," he ordered. She gave him a friendly smile, and hurried off. Dahybi frowned. Her skirt was short.

"I'm flying *Lady Mac* tomorrow," Joshua told them. "Just as soon as the *Oenone* returns from the O'Neill Halo with my new nodes."

"Does the First Admiral know?" Sarha inquired lightly.

"No, but Consensus does. This is not a cargo flight, we'll be leaving with Admiral Saldana's squadron."

"We?"

"Yes. That's why you're here. I'm not going to press gang you this time. You get consulted. I can promise a long and very interesting trip. Which means I need a good crew."

"I'm in, Captain," Beaulieu said quickly.

Dahybi sipped some coffee and grinned. "Yes."

Joshua looked at Sarha and Ashly. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the Tyrathca Sleeping God, so we can ask it how to solve the possession crisis. Ione and the Consensus believe it's on the other side of the Orion nebula."

Sarha deliberately looked away, studying Ashly's face. The pilot was lost in stupefaction. Joshua's simple words were the perfect bewitchment for a man who'd given up normal life to witness as much of eternity as he could. And Joshua knew that, Sarha thought. "Monkey and a banana,"

she muttered. "All right, Joshua, of course we're with you." Ashly nodded dumbly.

"Thanks," Joshua told them all. "I appreciate it."

"Who's handling fusion?" Dahybi asked.

"Ah," Joshua produced an uncomfortable expression. "The not-so-good news is that our friend Dr Alkad Mzu is coming with us." They started to protest. "Among others," he said loudly. "We're carrying quite a few specialists with us this trip. She's the official exotic physics expert."

"Exotic physics?" Sarha sounded amused.

"Nobody knows what this God thing actually is, so we're covering all the disciplines. It won't be like the Alchemist mission. We're not on our own this time."

"Okay, but who do you want as fusion officer?" Dahybi repeated.

"Well . . . Mzu's specialist field at the Laymil project was fusion systems. I could ask her. I didn't know how you'd all feel about that."

"Badly," Beaulieu said. Joshua blinked. He'd never heard the cosmonik express a definite opinion before, not about people.

"Joshua," Sarha said firmly. "Just go and ask Liol, all right? If he says no, fine, we'll get someone else. If he says yes, it'll be with the understanding that you're the captain. And you know he's up to the job. He deserves the chance, and I don't just mean to crew."

Joshua looked round the other three, receiving their encouragement. "Suppose there's no harm in asking," he admitted.

The crews were starting to refer to themselves as the Deathkiss squadron. On several occasions the phrase had almost slipped from Rear-Admiral Meredith Saldana's own mouth as well. Discipline had kept it from being spoken,

rather than neural nanonic prohibitions, but he sympathised with his personnel.

The sol-system news companies were hailing Tranquility's appearance in Jupiter orbit as a huge victory over the possessed, and Capone in particular. Meredith didn't see it quite that way. It was the second time the squadron had gone up against the possessed, and the second time they'd been forced to retreat. This time they owed their lives entirely to luck . . . and his own rebel ancestor's foresight. He wasn't entirely sure if the universe was being ironic or contemptuous towards him. The only certainty in his life these days was the squadron's morale, which was close to non-existent. His day cabin's processor datavised an admission request, which he granted. Commander Kroeber and Lieutenant Rhoecus air swam through the open hatch. They secured their feet on a stikpad and saluted.

"At ease," Meredith told them. "What have you got for me?"

"Our assignment orders, sir," Rhoecus said. "They're from the Jovian Consensus."

Meredith gave Commander Kroeber a brief glance. They'd been waiting for new orders from the 2nd Fleet headquarters in the O'Neill Halo. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Sir, it's a secure operation. CNIS has located an antimatter production station, they asked Jupiter to eliminate it."

"Could have been worse," Meredith said. For all it was rare, an assault on an antimatter station was a standard procedure. A straightforward mission like this was just what the crews needed to restore confidence in themselves. Then he noticed the reservation in Rhoecus's expression. "Continue."

"A supplementary order has been added by the Jovian

Security sub-Consensus. The station is to be captured intact.”

Meredith hardened his expression, knowing Consensus would be observing his disapproval through Rhoecus’s eyes. “I really do hope that you’re not going to suggest we start arming ourselves with that *abomination*.”

If anything, Rhoecus seemed rather relieved. “No, sir, absolutely not.”

“Then what are we capturing it for?”

“Sir, it’s to be used for fuelling the *Lady Macbeth*’s anti-matter drive unit. Consensus is sending a pair of ships beyond the Orion nebula.”

The statement was so extraordinary Meredith initially didn’t know what to make of it. Though that ship’s name . . . Oh yes, of course, Lagrange Calvert; and there was also the matter of a ludicrously ballsy manoeuvre through Lalonde’s upper atmosphere. “Why?” he asked mildly.

“It’s a contact mission with the non-Confederation Tyrathca. We believe they may have information relevant to possession.”

Meredith knew he was being judged by Consensus. An Adamist—a Saldana—being asked by Edenists to break the very law the Confederation was formed to enforce. At the least I should query 2nd Fleet headquarters. But in the end it comes down to trust. Consensus would never initiate such a mission without a good reason. “We live in interesting times, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir; unfortunately, we do.”

“Then let’s hope we outlive them. Very well. Commander Kroeber, squadron to stand by for assault duties.”

“Consensus has designated fifteen voidhawks to join us, sir,” Rhoecus said. “Weapons loading for the frigates has been given full priority.”

“When do we leave?”

“The *Lady Macbeth* is undergoing some essential maintenance. She should be ready to join the squadron in another twelve hours.”

“I hope this Lagrange Calvert character can stay in formation,” Meredith said.

“Consensus has every confidence in Captain Calvert, sir.”

The two of them sat at a table by the window in Harkey’s Bar. Glittering stars chased a shallow arc behind them as their drinks were delivered. Two slender crystal flutes of Norfolk Tears. The waitress thought that wonderfully romantic. They were both captains, he in crumpled overalls but still with the silver star on his shoulder, she in an immaculate Edenist blue satin ship-tunic. A handsome couple.

Syrinx picked her glass up and smiled. “We really shouldn’t be drinking. We’re flying in seven hours.”

“Absolutely,” Joshua agreed. He touched his glass to hers. “Cheers.” They both sipped, relishing the drink’s delectable impact.

“Norfolk was such a lovely world,” Syrinx said. “I was planning on going back next midsummer.”

“Me too. I’d got this amazing deal lined up. And . . . there was a girl.”

She took another sip. “Now there’s a surprise.”

“You’ve changed. Not so uptight.”

“And you’re not so irresponsible.”

“Here’s to the sustainable middle ground.” They touched glasses again.

“How’s the refit coming on?” Syrinx asked.

“On schedule so far. We’ve got the new reaction mass tanks installed in *Lady Mac*’s cargo holds. I left the engineering team plumbing them in. Dahybi is running integration protocols through the new node; there’s some kind of

software disparity with the rest of them. But then there always is a problem with new units, the manufacturers can never resist trying to improve something that works perfectly well already. He'll have it debugged ready for departure time."

"Sounds like you have a good crew."

"The best. How's *Oenone*?"

"Fine. The supplement fusion generators are standard items. We already had the attachment points for them in the cargo cradles."

"Looks like we're running out of excuses, then."

"Yeah. But I bet the view from that side of the nebula is quite something."

"It will be." He hesitated for a moment. "Are you all right?"

Syrinx studied him over the top of the flute; her ability to read Adamist emotions was quite adroit these days, so she considered. His genuine concern gladdened her. "I am now. Bit of a basket case for a while, after Pernik, but the doctors and my friends helped put me back together again."

"Good friends."

"The best."

"So why this flight?"

"Mainly *Oenone* and I are flying because we think this is how we can contribute best. If that sounds superior, I apologise, but it's what I feel."

"It's the *only* reason I'm here. You know, you and I are pretty unique. There's not many of us who've come face to face with the possessed and survived. That does tend to focus the mind somewhat."

"I know what you mean."

"I've never been so scared before. Death is always so difficult for us. Most people just ignore it. Then when you start to see your last days drifting away you content your-

self that you've had a good life, that it hasn't been for nothing. And, hey, there might be an afterlife after all, which is good because deep down you've convinced yourself you did your best, so the plus column is always going to be in the black when it comes to Judgement day. Only there isn't a Judgement day, the universe doesn't care."

"Laton worked it out; that's what gets me. I've retrieved that last message of his time and again, and he really believed Edenists won't be trapped in the beyond. Not even one in a billion of us, he said. Why, Joshua? We're not that different, not really."

"What does Consensus think?"

"There's no opinion yet. We're trying to ascertain the general nature of the possessed, and compare it to our own psychological profile. Laton said that would provide us with an insight. The Mortonridge Liberation ought to generate a great deal of raw data."

"I'm not sure how helpful that'll be. Every era has a different outlook. What's thoroughly normal behaviour for a Seventeenth Century potter is going to be utterly different from you. I always think Ashly's ridiculously old fashioned on some things; he's horrified by the way kids today can access stim programs."

"So am I."

"But you can't restrict access, not in a universal data culture like ours. You have to educate society about what's acceptable and what isn't. A little adolescent experimentation isn't harmful, in moderation. We have to concentrate on pushing the moderation aspect, help people come to terms with what's out there. The alternative is censorship, which the communication nets will defeat every time."

"That's defeatism. I'm not saying people shouldn't be educated about the problems of stim programs; but if you made the effort, Adamist culture could abolish them."

“Knowledge can’t be destroyed, it has to be absorbed and accommodated.” He glanced dolefully out at Jupiter. “As I tried to argue with the First Admiral. He wasn’t terribly impressed, either.”

“I’m not surprised. The fact we’re going to use antimatter on this flight is restricted information. Rightly so.”

“That’s different—” Joshua began, then grunted. “Looks like I’m not going to make it past the beyond. Don’t think like an Edenist.”

“No, that’s not right. This is just a difference in beliefs. We both agree stim addiction is a dreadful blight, we just differ on how to treat it. We still think the same way. I don’t understand this! Damn it!”

“Let’s hope the Sleeping God can show us the difference.” He gave her a tentative look. “Can I ask a personal question?”

She rubbed the tip of her index finger round the rim of the flute, then sucked on it. “Joshua Calvert, I have a devoted lover, thank you.”

“Er, actually, I was wondering if you had any children.”

“Oh,” she said, and promptly blushed. “No, I don’t. Not yet anyway. My sister Pomona has three; it makes me wonder what I’ve been doing with my time.”

“When you do have children, how do you raise them? Voidhawk captains, I mean. You don’t have them on board, do you?”

“No, we don’t. Shipboard life is for adults, even aboard a voidhawk.”

“So how do they grow up?”

“What do you mean?” It was a strange question, especially from him. But she could see it was important.

“They haven’t got you there as a mother.”

“Oh, I see. It doesn’t matter, for them anyway. Voidhawk captains tend to have fairly large extended families. I must

take you to see my mother some time, then you'll see first-hand. Any children I have while I'm still flying with *Oenone* will be taken care of by my army of relatives, and the habitat as well. I'm not propagandising, but Edenism is one giant family. There's no such thing as an orphan among us. Of course, it's hard on us captains, having to kiss good-bye to our babies for months at a time. But that's been the fate of sailors for millennia now. And of course, we do get to make up for it at the end. When *Oenone's* eggs are birthed, I wind up at ninety years old in a house with a dozen screaming infants. Imagine that."

"Are they happy, those other children? The ones you have to leave behind."

"Yes. They're happy. I know you think we're terribly formal and mannered, but we're not mechanoids, Joshua, we love our children." She reached over and squeezed his hand. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah. I'm okay." He concentrated on his flute. "Syrinx. You can count on me during the flight."

"I know that, Joshua. I reviewed the Murora memory a few times, and I've spoken to Samuel, too."

He gestured out at the starfield. "The real answer lies out there, somewhere."

"Consensus has known that all along. And as the Kiint wouldn't tell me . . ."

"And I'm not smart enough to help the research professors . . ."

They smiled. "Here's to the flight," Syrinx said.

"Soaring where angels fear to fly."

They downed the remainder of their Norfolk Tears. Syrinx blew heavily, and blinked the moisture away from her eyes. Then she frowned at the figure standing at the bar. "Jesus, Joshua, I didn't know there was two of you."

The enjoyable surprise of hearing an Edenist swear in

such a fashion was quelled with pique when he saw who she was talking about. He stuck his hand up and waved Liol over.

“Delighted to meet you,” Liol said when Joshua introduced them. He polished up the Calvert grin for her benefit, and kissed her hand.

Syrinx laughed, and stood up. “Sorry Liol, I’m afraid I had my inoculation some time ago.” Joshua was chuckling.

“I’ll leave the pair of you to it,” she said, and gave Joshua a light kiss. “Don’t be late.”

“Got her address?” Liol asked from the side of his mouth as he watched her walk away.

“Liol, that’s a voidhawk ship-tunic. Syrinx doesn’t have an address. So how are you?”

“Absolutely fine.” Liol reversed a chair, and straddled it, arms resting on the back. “This is party city for me all right. I think I’ll move Quantum Serendipity here after the crisis.”

“Right. Haven’t seen much of you since we docked.”

“Well hey, no surprise there. That Dominique, hell of a girl.” He lowered his voice to a throaty gloating growl. “Game on, five, six times a night. Every position I know, then some that’s got to be just for xenocs.”

“Wow.”

“Last night, you know what? Threesome. Neomone joined in.”

“No shit? You record a sensewise?”

Liol put both hands down on the table, and stared at his brother. “Josh.”

“Yep.”

“For Christ’s sake take me with you.”

Kerry was the first planet, the test. Catholic Irish-ethnic to the bedrock, its inhabitants gave the priests of the Unified Church a very hard time. Stubbornly suspicious of technol-

ogy, it took them a half a century longer than the development company projected to reach full technoindustrial independence. When they did achieve it, their economic index never matched the acceleration curve of the more driven Western-Christian work-ethic planets. They were comfortably off, favoured large families, traded modestly with nearby star systems, contributed grudgingly to the Confederation Assembly and Navy, and went to Church regularly. There were no aspirations to become a galactic player like Kulu, Oshanko, and Edenism. Quiet people getting on with their lives. Until the possession crisis arrived.

The planet was seven light-years from New California, and worried. Their Strategic Defence network was the absolute minimum for a developed world; and combat wasp stocks were never kept very high; maintenance budgets were also subject to political trimming. Since the crisis began, and especially post-Arnstat, Kerry had been desperately trying to upgrade. Unfortunately their industrial stations weren't geared towards churning out military hardware. Nor were they closely allied to Kulu or Earth who did produce an abundance of such items. The Edenists of the Kerry system, orbiting Rathdrum, lent what support they could; but they had their own defences to enhance first.

Still, went the hope and reasoning, that's the benefit of being galactic small fry, Capone isn't going to bother with us. When it came to the effort of mounting a full scale invasion along the lines of Arnstat they were absolutely right. Which is why Al's sudden change of policy caught them woefully unprepared.

Twelve hellhawks emerged five and a half thousand kilometres above Kerry's atmosphere, and fired a salvo of ten (fusion powered) combat wasps each. The bitek craft immediately started accelerating at six gees, flying away from

each other in an expanding globe formation. Their combat wasps raced on ahead of them, ejecting multiple submunitions. Space was infected by electronic warfare impulses and thermal decoys, a rapidly growing blind spot in Kerry's sensor coverage. Submunitions began to target sensor satellites, inter-orbit ships, spaceplanes, and low orbit SD platforms. A volley of fusion bombs detonated, creating a further maelstrom of electromagnetic chaos.

Kerry's SD network controllers, surprised by the vehemence of the attack, and fearing an Arnstat-style assault, did their best to counter. Platforms launched counter salvos of combat wasps; electron beams and X-ray lasers stabbed out, slashing across the vacuum to punch submunitions into bloating haze-balls of ions. Electronic warfare generators on the platforms began pumping out their own disruption. After four seconds spent analysing the attack mode, the network's coordinating AI determined the hellhawks were engaged in a safe-clearance operation. It was right.

Ten front-line Organization frigates emerged into the calm centre of the combat wasp deluge. Fusion drives ignited, driving them down towards the planet at eight gees. Combat wasps slid out of their launch tubes, and their drives came on.

The AI had switched all available sensor satellites to scanning the frigates. Radars and laser radars were essentially useless in the face of New California's superior electronic warfare technology. The network's visual pattern sensors were being pummelled by the nuclear explosions and deception impulse lasers, but they did manage to distinguish the unique superhot energy output of antimatter drives. The ultimate horror unchained above Kerry's beautiful, vulnerable atmosphere.

Unlike ordinary combat wasps, a killstrike didn't eliminate the problem. Hit a fusion bomb with a laser or kinetic

bullet, and there is no nuclear explosion, it simply disintegrates into its component molecules. But knock out an antimatter combat wasp, and the drive's confinement spheres will detonate into multi-megaton fury, as will as the warheads.

As soon as the launch was verified, the AI's total priority was preventing the antimatter combat wasps from getting within a thousand kilometres of the stratosphere. Starships, communication platforms, port stations, and industrial stations were reclassified expendable, and left to take their chances. Every SD resource was concentrated on eliminating the antimatter drones. Weapons were realigned away from the hellhawks and frigates, and brought to bear solely on the searing lightpoints racing over the delicate continents. Defending combat wasps performed drastic realignment manoeuvres; platform-mounted rail guns pumped out a cascade of inert kinetic missiles along projected vectors. Patrolling starships accelerated down at high-gees, bringing their combat wasps and energy beam weapons in range.

The hellhawks fired another barrage of combat wasps, sending them streaking away from the nebulous clot of plasma which the initial drone battle had smeared across the sky. They were aimed at the remaining low orbit SD platforms shielding the continent below. Apart from activating the platforms' close-defence weapons, there was little the network controllers could do. Hurling towards the planet, the frigates began to diverge, curving away from each other. Nothing challenged their approach. The continent was completely open to whatever they chose to throw at it.

As the antimatter exploded overhead in a pattern that created an umbrella of solid incandescent radiation three thousand kilometres across, they made a strange selection. Two hundred kilometres above the atmosphere, each warship

flung out a batch of inactive ovoids, measuring a mere three metres high. Their task complete, the frigates curved up, striving for altitude with an eight-gee acceleration. A second, smaller salvo of antimatter combat wasps was fired, providing the same kind of diversionary cover as they'd enjoyed during their descent.

This time, the invaders didn't have it all their own way. The number of weapons focused on, and active within, the small zone where the frigates and hellhawks were concentrated began to take effect. Even Kerry's second-rate hardware had the odds tilting in its favour. A nuclear tipped submunition exploded against one of the frigates. Its entire stock of antimatter detonated instantaneously. The radiation blaze wiped out every chunk of hardware within a five hundred kilometre radius. Outside the killzone, ships and drones spun away inertly, moulting charred flakes of null-foam. Exposed fuselages shone like small suns under the equally intense photonic energy release. To those on the planet unlucky enough to be looking up at the silent, glorious blossoms of light during the first stage of the battle, it was as though the noon sun had suddenly quadrupled in vigour. Then their optic nerves burnt out.

Two of the hellhawks were crippled in the explosion, their polyp penetrated by lethal quantities of gamma radiation. One of the frigates was unable to handle the massive energy impact. The dissipation web beneath its hexagonal fuselage plates turned crimson and melted. The patterning nodes facing the massive explosion flash suffered catastrophic failures as the radiation smashed delicate molecular junctions into slag. The fusion drives failed. Plumes of hot vapour squirted angrily out of emergency vent nozzles. Inside, the crew charged through their contingency procedures, desperate to sustain the integrity of the antimatter confinement spheres in their remaining combat wasps.

None of their Organization colleagues went back for them. As soon as the eight remaining frigates reached a five thousand kilometre altitude, they jumped outsystem. The hellhawks followed within seconds, leaving Kerry's population wondering what the hell had happened. Behind the shrinking wormhole interstices, the black eggs thundered earthwards with total impunity. SD sensors never found them amid the electronic disorder. People on the planet couldn't see their laser-like contrails against the dazzling aftermath of the orbital explosions.

They fell fast before decelerating at excruciatingly high gees in the lower atmosphere. Sonic booms rocked across the sleepy farmland, the first indication that anything was wrong. When the rural folk started to scan the sky in mild alarm, all that was to be seen were chunks of flaming debris streaking down from the battle—to be expected, claimed those who knew something of such things. The eggs reached subsonic speed a kilometre above the land. Petals flipped out from the lower half, presenting a wider surface area to the air, doubling the drag coefficient. At four hundred metres, the drogue chute shot up. Two hundred metres saw the main chute deployment.

Two hundred and fifty of the black eggs thudded to ground at random across an area measuring over three hundred thousand square kilometres. The petals failed on eight, while a further nine suffered chute failure. The remaining two hundred and thirty three produced a bone-rattler landing for their passengers, bouncing and rolling for several metres before they came to a halt. Their sides slit open with a loud *crack*, and the possessed stepped forth to admire the verdant green land they had volunteered to infiltrate.

The hellhawks arrived back at New California thirty hours later. They didn't even get a hero's welcome. The Organi-

zation already knew the seeding flight had been a success; information from the infiltrators had already squirmed its way back through the beyond.

Al was jubilant. He ordered Emmet and Leroy to put together another five seeding flights immediately. The fleet crews and asteroids cooperated enthusiastically. The success was nothing like as momentous as the Arnstat victory, but it kicked in a resurgence of confidence throughout the Organization. We're a power again, was the shared opinion. Beefs and recalcitrance sloped away.

The *Varrad* discarded its fantasy starship image as it approached Monterey. It slid over the docking ledge pedestal and slowly sank down, radiating a desultory relief.

You did well, Hudson Proctor told Pran Soo, the hellhawk's resident soul. **Kiera says she's pleased with you.**

Commence nutrient fluid pumping, Pran Soo said flatly.

Sure thing. Here it comes. Enjoy.

Hudson Proctor gave a short command, and the fluid surged along the pipes and into the hellhawk's internal reserve bladders.

Two of us were exterminated, Pran Soo announced to the other hellhawks. **Linsky and Maranthis. They were irradiated when Kerry's SD network took out the Dorbane. It was awful. I felt their structure withering.**

Price we pay for victory, Etchells said swiftly. **Two of us, against an entire Confederation planet taken out.**

Yeah, said Felix, who possessed the *Kerachel*. **Kerry had me real worried. When it comes to drinking contests and pub brawls, they'd got us beat every time.**

Keep your Goddamn pinko loser opinions to yourself, Etchells sneered back. **This was a concept-proving mission. What the fuck do you know about overall strategy? We're the hard edge of operations, the cosmic shock troops.**

Give it a rest, you boring little prat. And don't pretend you were ever in an army. Even armies have a minimum IQ requirement.

Oh yeah? What you know. I killed fifteen men when I was in combat.

Yeah, he was a nurse. Couldn't read the label on the medicine bottle.

Careful, shit-for-brains.

Or what?

I'm sure Kiera would be interested to know about this sedition you're spreading. See what a little fasting does to your attitude.

SHUT THE FUCK UP, YOU BOLLOCKBRAINED NAZI REDNECK MORON.

The general affinity band fell silent for quite some time.

Were you listening to all that? Pran Soo asked Rocio on singular engagement.

I heard, the *Mindori's* possessor replied. **I think things might be starting to slide our way.**

Could be. I'm sure each of us can do simple maths. Two of us per soft-target planet. When we start hitting hard targets, Kiera's going to have a full scale strike on her hands.

Which she'll win unless we can provide everyone with an alternative food source.

Yeah. How's it going?

I have been tracking the *Lucky Logorn*, they're almost back at Almaden.

You think this Deebank guy will go for our pitch?

He was the first to offer us a deal. At least he'll listen to what I suggest.

The First Admiral had stayed away from the CNIS secure laboratory ever since the incident in court three. Maynard Khanna had been a damn fine officer, not to mention young

and personable. The boy would have gone a long way in the Confederation Navy, so Samual Aleksandrovich had always told himself. With or without my patronage. Now he was dead.

The funeral ceremony in Trafalgar's multi-denominational church had been short and simple. Dignified, as was fitting. A flag draped coffin, the enduring image of military service for centuries, placed reverently on a pedestal before the altar by the Marine dress guard. It was intended as a focus for their honour. But Samual had thought it looked more like a sacrificial offering.

Standing in the front pew, mouthing the words of a hymn, he suddenly wondered if Khanna was actually watching them. Information gleaned from captured possessed indicated those ensnared in the beyond were aware of events inside the real universe. It was a moment of profound spookiness; he even lowered his hymn book to stare at the coffin in suspicion. Was this why the whole funeral ritual had started back in pre-history times? It was one of the most common cross-cultural events, a ceremony to mark the passing of life. The deceased's friends and relatives coming to pay homage, to wish them well on their way. It would be reassuring for a soul, otherwise so naked and alone, to gain the knowledge that so many considered their life to be worthwhile.

The remnants of Maynard Khanna's body mocked the notion of a fulfilled existence. Young, tortured to death, his ending had been neither swift nor noble.

Samual Aleksandrovich had raised his hymn book again and sung with a vigour which surprised the other officers. Perhaps Khanna would witness the mark of devotion from his superior officer, and draw some comfort from the fact. If it made a difference, the effort should be made. Now Samual Aleksandrovich was having to confront the cause of

his regret. Jacqueline Couteur was still possessing her stolen body, immune from the usual laws that would deliver justice upon such a treacherous multiple murderess.

He was accompanied by Mae Ortlieb and Jeeta Anwar from the Assembly President's staff, as well as admiral Lalwani and Maynard Khanna's replacement, Captain Amr al-Sahhaf. The presence of the two presidential aides he found mildly annoying; an indication of how his decisions and prerogatives were increasingly coming under political scrutiny. Olton Haaker had that right, Samuel acknowledged, but it was being wielded with less subtlety as the crisis drew out.

For the first time he was actually thankful for the Mortonridge Liberation. Positive physical action on such a massive scale had diverted the attention of both the Assembly and the media companies from Navy activities. The politicians, he conceded grimly, might have been right about the psychological impact such a campaign would create. He'd even accessed a few rover reporter sensevises himself to see how the serjeants were doing. My God, the mud!

Dr Gilmore and Euru greeted the small elite delegation with little sign of nerves. A good omen, Samuel thought. His spirits lifted further when Gilmore started to lead them along to the physics and electronics laboratory section, away from the demon trap.

Bitek Laboratory Thirteen was almost the same as any standard electronic research facility. A long room lined with benches, several morgue-like slabs arranged up down the centre, and glass-walled clean rooms at one end. Tall stacks of experimental equipment were standing like modern megaliths on every surface, alongside ultra-high-resolution scanners and powerful desktop blocks. The only distinguishing items the First Admiral could see were the clone

vats. Those you normally wouldn't find outside an Edenist establishment.

"Exactly what are you demonstrating for us?" Jeeta Anwar asked.

"The prototype anti-memory," Euru said. "It was surprisingly easy to assemble. Of course, we do have a great many thoughtware weapons on file, which we've studied. And the neural mechanisms behind memory retention are well understood."

"If that's the case, I'm surprised no one has ever designed one before."

"It's a question of application," Gilmore said. "As the First Admiral pointed out once, the more complex a weapon is, the more impractical it becomes, especially in the field. In order for the anti-memory to work, the brain must be subjected to quite a long sequence of imprint pulses. You couldn't just fire it at your opponent the same way you do a bullet. They have to be looking straight into the beam, and a sharp movement, or even an inappropriately timed blink will nullify the whole process. And if it was known to be in use, retinal implants could be programmed to recognize it, and block it out. However, once you hold a captive, application becomes extremely simple."

Mattox was waiting for them by the last clean room, looking through the glass with the air of a proud parent. "Testing has been our greatest stalling point," he explained. "Ordinary bitek processors are completely useless in this respect. We had to design a system which duplicates a typical human neurone structure in its entirety."

"You mean you cloned a brain?" Mae Ortlieb asked, a blatant note of disapproval in her voice.

"The structural array is copied from a brain," Mattox said defensively. "But the construct itself is made purely from

bitek. There was no cloning involved.” He indicated the clean room.

The delegation moved closer. The room was almost empty, containing a single table which held a burnished metal cylinder. Slim tubes of nutrient fluid snaked out of the base to link it with a squat protein cyler mechanism. A small box protruded from the side of the cylinder, half-way up. Made of translucent amber plastic, it contained a solitary dark sphere of some denser material, set near the surface. The First Admiral upped the magnification on his enhanced retinas. “That’s an eye,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Mattox said. “We’re trying to make this as realistic as possible. Genuine application will require the anti-memory to be conducted down an optic nerve.”

A black electronic module was suspended centimetres from the bitek eye, held in place by a crude metal clamp. Fibre optic cables trailed away from it, to plug into the clean room’s utility data sockets.

“What sort of routines are you running inside the construct?” Mae Ortlieb asked.

“Mine,” Euru said. “We connected the cortex to an affinity capable processor, and I transferred a copy of my personality and memories into it.”

She flinched, looking from the Edenist to the metal cylinder. “Isn’t that somewhat unusual?”

“Not relative to this situation,” he replied with a smile. “We are attempting to create the most realistic environment we can. For that we need a human mind. If you would care to give it a simple Turing test.” He touched a processor block on the wall beside the clean room. Its AV lens sparkled.

“Who are you?” Mae Ortlieb asked, with some self-consciousness.

“I suppose I ought to call myself Euru-two,” the AV lens

replied. "But then Euru has transferred his personality into a neural simulacrum twelve times already to assist with the anti-memory evaluation."

"Then you should be Euru-thirteen."

"Just call me junior, it's simpler."

"And do you believe you've retained your human faculties?"

"I don't have affinity, of course, which I regard as distressing. However, as I won't be in existence for very long, it's absence is tolerable. Apart from that, I am fully human."

"Volunteering for a suicide isn't a very healthy human trait, and certainly not for an Edenist."

"None the less, it's what I committed myself to."

"Your original self did. What about you, have you no independence?"

"Possibly if you left me to develop by myself for several months, I would become reluctant. At the moment, I am Euru senior's mind twin, and as such this experiment is quite acceptable to me."

The First Admiral frowned, troubled by what he was witnessing. He hadn't known Gilmore's team had reached quite this level. He gave Euru a sidelong glance. "I'm given to understand that a soul is formed by impressing coherent sentient thought on the beyond-type energy which is present in this universe. Therefore, as you are a sentient entity, you will now have your own soul."

"I would assume so, admiral," Euru junior replied. "It is logical."

"Which means you have the potential to become an immortal entity in your own right. Yet this trial will eliminate you forever. This is an alarming prospect, for me if not for you. I'm not sure we have the moral right to continue."

"I understand what you're saying, Admiral. However,

my identity is more important to me than my soul, or souls. I know that when I am erased from this construct, I, Euru, will continue to exist. The sum of whatever I am goes on. This is the knowledge which rewards all Edenists throughout their lives. Whereas I now exist for one reason, to protect that continuity for my culture. Human beings have died to protect their homes and ideals for all of history, even though they never knew for certain they had souls. I am no different to any of them. I quite plainly choose to undergo the anti-memory so that our race can overcome this crisis.”

“Quite a Turing test,” Mae Ortlieb said sardonically. “I bet the old man never envisaged this kind of conversation with a machine trying to prove its own intelligence.”

“If there’s nothing else,” Gilmore said quickly.

The First Admiral looked in at the cylinder again, contemplating a refusal. He knew such an instruction would never be allowed to stand by the President. And I don’t need that kind of interventionism in Navy affairs right now. “Very well,” he said reluctantly.

Gilmore and Mattox exchanged a mildly guilty look. Mattox datavised an instruction to the clean room’s control processor, and the glass turned opaque. “Just to protect you from any possible spillback,” he said. “If you’d like to access the internal camera you can observe the process in full. Not that there will be anything much to see. I assure you the spectrum we’re using to transmit the anti-memory has been blocked from the sensor.”

True to his word, the image the delegation received when they accessed the sensor was pallid, the colour almost non-existent. All they saw was a small blank disc slide out of the electronic module, positioning itself over the encapsulated eye. Some iconic overlay digits twisted past, meaningless.

“That’s it,” Mattox announced.

The First Admiral cancelled his channel with the proces-

sor. The clean room's window turned transparent again, in time to catch the disc retract back into the electronic module.

Gilmore faced the AV lens. "Junior, can you hear me?" The lens's diminutive sparkle remained constant.

Mattox received a datavise from the construct's monitoring probes. "Brainwave functions have collapsed," he said. "And the synaptic discharges are completely randomized."

"What about memory retention?" Gilmore queried.

"Probably around thirty to thirty-five per cent. I'll run a complete neurological capacity scan once it's stabilized." The CNIS science team members smiled round at each other.

"That's good," Gilmore said. "That's damn good. Best percentage yet."

"Meaning?" the First Admiral asked.

"There are no operative thought patterns left in there. Junior has stopped thinking. The bitek is just a store for memory fragments."

"Impressive," Mae Ortlieb said reflectively. "So what's your next stage?"

"We're not sure," Gilmore said. "I have to admit, the potential for this thing is frightening. Our idea is to use it as a threat to force the souls away from their interface with this universe."

"If it works on souls themselves," Jeeta Anwar pointed out.

"That prospect is bringing about a whole range of new problems," Gilmore conceded cheerlessly.

"Let me guess," Samuel said. "If anti-memory is used on a possessed, you will also erase the host's memories, and destroy their soul."

"It seems likely," Euru said. "We know a host's mind is still contained within their brain while the possessing soul

retains control of the body. The host's reappearance after zero-tau immersion forces the possessor out proves that."

"So, anti-memory cannot be used on an individual basis?"

"Not without killing the host's soul as well, no sir."

"Will this version work in the beyond?" Samual asked sharply.

"I doubt it would ever get through to the beyond," Mattox said. "At present, it's too slow and inefficient. It managed to dissipate Junior's thought processes; but as you saw, it didn't get all the memories. The areas of the mind which are not employed when the anti-memory strikes are likely to be insulated from it as the thought channels which would ordinarily connect them are nullified. If you analogise the mind with a city, you're destroying the roads and leaving the buildings intact. Given that the connection a possessing soul has with the beyond is tenuous at best, there is no guarantee the anti-memory would manage to pass through in its current form. We must develop a much faster version."

"But you don't know for sure?"

"No sir. These are estimations and theories. We won't know if a version works until after it's proved successful."

"The trouble with that is, a successful anti-memory would exterminate every soul in the beyond," Euru said quietly.

"Is that true?"

"Yes, sir," Gilmore said. "That's our dilemma. There can be no small scale test or demonstration. Anti-memory is effectively a doomsday weapon."

"You'll never get the souls to believe that," Lalwani said. "In fact, given what we know of conditions in the beyond, you wouldn't even get many of them to pay attention to the warning."

“I cannot conceivably permit the use of a weapon which will exterminate billions of human entities,” the First Admiral said. “You have to provide me with alternative options.”

“But Admiral—”

“No. I’m sorry, Doctor. I know you’ve worked hard on this, and I appreciate the effort you and your team have made. Nobody is more aware than myself of just how extreme the threat which the possessed present. But even that cannot justify such a response.”

“Admiral! We’ve explored every option we can think of. Every theorist I’ve got in every scientific discipline there is has been working on ideas and wild theories. We even tried an exorcism after that priest on Lalonde claimed his worked. Nothing. *Nothing* else has come close to being viable. This is the only progress we have made.”

“Doctor, I’m not denigrating your work or your commitment. But surely you can see this is completely unacceptable. Morally, ethically, it is wrong. It cannot be anything other than wrong. What you are suggesting is racial genocide. I will tell you this, the authorization to use such a monstrosity will never come from my lips. Nor I suspect, and hope, would any other Navy officer issue it. Now find me another solution. This project is terminated.”

The First Admiral’s staff ran a quiet sweepstake to see how long it would be before President Haaker datavised for a conference, the winner called it in at ninety-seven minutes. They sat facing each other across the oval table in a security-level-one sensenviron bubble room. Both kept their generated faces neutral and intonations level.

“Samual, you can’t cancel the anti-memory project,” the President opened with. “It’s all we’ve got.”

In his office, Samual Aleksandrovich smiled at the way

Haaker used his first name, the man always did that when he was going to adopt a totally intransigent line. "Apart from the Mortonridge Liberation, you mean?" He could imagine the tight lips drawn at that jibe.

"As you so kindly pointed out earlier, the Liberation is not a solution to the overall problem. Anti-memory is."

"Undoubtedly. Too final. Look, I don't know if Mae and Jeeta explained this fully to you, but the research team believe it would exterminate every soul in the beyond. You can't seriously consider that."

"Samual, those souls you're so concerned about are attempting to enslave every one of us. I have to say I'm surprised by your attitude. You're a military man, you know that war is the result of total irrationality combined with conflict of interest. This crisis is the supreme example of both. The souls desperately want to return, and we cannot allow them to. They will extinguish the human race if they succeed."

"They will ruin almost everything we have accomplished. But total life extinction, no. I don't even believe they can possess all of us. The Edenists have proved remarkably resistant; and the spread has all but stopped."

"Yes, thanks to your quarantine. It's been a successful policy, I won't deny that. But so far we've been unable to offer anything that can reverse what's happened. And that's what the vast majority of the Confederation population want. Actually, that's what they insist upon. The spread might have slowed, but it hasn't stopped. You know that as well as I do. And the quarantine is difficult to enforce."

"You really don't understand what you're proposing, do you. There are billions of souls there. Billions."

"And they are living in torment. For whatever reason, they cannot move on as this Laton character claimed is possible. Don't you think they'd welcome true death?"

“Some of them might. I probably would. But neither you nor I have the right to decide that for them.”

“They forced us into this position. They’re the ones invading us.”

“That does not give us the right to exterminate them. We have to find a way to help them; by doing that we help ourselves. Can you not see that?”

The President abandoned his image’s impartiality and leant forwards, his voice becoming earnest. “Of course I can see that. Don’t try to portray me as some kind of intransigent villain here. I’ve supported you, Samual, because I know nobody can command the Navy better than you. And I’ve been rewarded by that support. So far we’ve kept on top of the political situation, kept the hotheads in line. But it can’t last forever. Sometime, somehow, a solution is going to have to be presented to the Confederation as a whole. And all we’ve got so far is one solitary possible answer: the anti-memory. I cannot permit you to abandon that, Samual. These are very desperate times; we have to consider everything, however horrific it appears.”

“I will never permit such a thing to be used. For all they are different, the souls are human. I am sworn to protect life throughout the Confederation.”

“The order to use it would not be yours to give. A weapon like that never falls within the prerogative of the military. It belongs to us, the politicians you despise.”

“Disapprove of. Occasionally.” The First Admiral permitted a slight smile to show.

“Keep on searching, Samual. Bully Gilmore and his people into finding a decent solution, a humanitarian one. I want that as much as you do. But they are to continue to develop the anti-memory in parallel.”

There was a pause. Samual knew that to refuse now would mean Haaker issuing an official request through his

office. Which in turn would make his position as First Admiral untenable. That was the stark choice on offer.

“Of course, Mr President.”

President Haaker gave a tight smile, and datavised his processor to cancel the meeting, safe in the knowledge that their oh-so diplomatic clash would be known to no one.

The encryption techniques which provided a security-level-one conference were, after all, known to be unbreakable. The most common statistic quoted by security experts was that every AI in the Confederation running in parallel would be unable to crack the code in less than five times the life of the universe. It would, therefore, have proved quite distressing to the CNIS secure communications division (as well as their ESA and B7 equivalents, among others) to know that a perfect replica of a 27-inch 1980's Sony Trinitron colour television was currently showing the image of the First Admiral and the Assembly President to an audience of fifteen attentive duomillenarians and one highly inattentive ten-year-old girl.

Tracy Dean sighed in frustration as the picture vanished to a tiny phosphor dot in the middle of the screen. “Well, that's gone and put the cat amongst the pigeons, and no mistake.”

Jay was swinging her feet about while she sat on a too-high stool. As well as being their main social centre, the clubhouse catered for the retired Kiint observers who weren't quite up to living by themselves in a chalet anymore. A huge airy building, with wide corridors and broad archways opening into sunlit rooms that all seemed to resemble hotel lounges. The walls were white plaster, with dark-red tile floors laid everywhere. Big clay pots growing tall palms were a favourite. Tiny birds with bright gold and scarlet bodies and turquoise membrane wings fluttered in and out through the open windows, dodging the purple

provider globes. The whole theme of the clubhouse was based around comfort. There were no stairs or steps, only ramps; chairs were deeply cushioned; even the food extruded by the universal providers, no matter what type, was soft, requiring little effort to chew.

The first five minutes walking through the building had been interesting. Tracy showed her round, introducing her to the other residents, all of whom were quite spry despite their frail appearance. Of course they were all very happy to see her, making a fuss, patting her head, winking fondly, telling her how nice her new dress was, suggesting strangely named biscuits, sweets and ice creams they thought she'd enjoy. They didn't move much from their lounge chairs; contenting themselves with watching events around the Confederation and nostalgic programmes from centuries past.

Jay and Tracy wound up in the lounge with the big TV for half the afternoon, while the residents argued over what channel to watch. They flipped through real-time secret governmental and military conferences, alternating those with a show called "Happy Days," which they all cackled along to in synchronisation with the brash laughter track. Even the original commercial breaks were showing. Jay smiled in confusion at the archaic unfunny characters, and kept sneaking glances out of the window. For the last three days she'd played on the beach with the games the universal providers had extruded; swam, gone for long walks along the sand and through the peaceful jungle behind the beach. The meals had easily been as good as the ones in Tranquillity. Tracy had even got her a processor block with an AV lens that was able to pick up Confederation entertainment shows, which she watched for a few hours every evening. And Richard Keaton had popped in a couple of times to see how she was getting on. But, basically, she was

fed-up. Those planets hanging so invitingly in the sky above were a permanent temptation, a reminder that things in the Kiint home system were a bit more active than the human beach.

Tracy caught her wistful gaze once and patted her hand. "Cultural differences," she said confidentially as the mortified Fonz received his army draft papers. "You have to understand the decade before you understand the humour."

Jay nodded wisely, and wondered just when she'd be allowed to see Haile again. Haile was a lot more fun than the Fonz. Then they'd flicked stations to the First Admiral and the President.

"Corpus will have to intervene now," one of the other residents said, a lady called Saska. "That anti-memory could seep outside the human spectrum. Then there'd be trouble."

"Corpus won't," Tracy replied. "It never does. What is, is. Remember?"

"Check your references," another woman said. "Plenty of races considered deploying similar weapons when they encountered the beyond. We've got records of eighteen being used."

"That's awful. What happened?"

"They didn't work very well. Only a moderate percentage of the inverse transcendent population were eliminated. There's too much pattern distortion among the inverses to conduct an anti-memory properly. No species has ever developed one that operates fast enough to be effective. Such things cannot be considered a final solution by any means."

"Yes but that idiot Haaker won't know that until after it's been tried," Galic, one of the men, complained. "We can't possibly allow a human to die, not even an inverse. No human has ever died."

“We’ve suffered a lot though,” a resentful voice muttered.

“And they’ll start dying on the removed worlds soon enough.”

“I tell you, Corpus won’t intervene.”

“We could appeal,” Tracy said. “At the very least we could ask for an insertion at the anti-memory project to monitor its development. After all, if anyone’s going to come up with an anti-memory fast enough to devastate the beyond, it’ll be our weapons-mad race.”

“All right,” Saska said. “But we’ll need a quorum before we can even get the appeal up to an executive level.”

“As if that’ll be a problem,” Galic said.

Tracy smiled mischievously. “And I know of someone who’s perfectly suited to this particular insertion.” Several groans were issued across the lounge.

“Him?”

“Far too smart for his own good, if you ask me.”

“No discipline.”

“We never ran observer operations like that.”

“Cocky little bugger.”

“Nonsense,” Tracy said briskly. She put her arm round Jay. “Jay likes him, don’t you, Jay?”

“Who?”

“Richard.”

“Oh.” Jay held up Prince Dell; for some unexplainable reason she hadn’t managed to abandon the bear in her room. “He gave me this,” she announced to the lounge at large.

Tracy laughed. “There you go then. Arnie, you prepare the appeal, you’re best acquainted with the minutiae of Corpus protocol procedures.”

“All right.” One of the men raised his hands in gruff submission. “I suppose I can spare the time.”

The TV was switched back on, playing the signature tune for "I Love Lucy." Tracy pulled a face, and took Jay's hand. "Come on, poppet, I think you're quite bored enough already."

"Who's the Corpus?" Jay asked as they walked through the front entrance and into the sharp sunlight. There was a black iron penny-farthing bicycle mounted on a stone pedestal just outside. The first time Jay had seen it, she'd taken an age to work out how people were supposed to ride it.

"Corpus isn't a who, exactly," Tracy said. "It's more like the Kiint version of an Edenist Consensus. Except, it's sort of a philosophy as well as a government. I'm sorry, that's not a very good explanation, is it?"

"It's in charge, you mean?"

Tracy's hesitation was barely noticeable. "Yes, that's right. We have to obey its laws. And the strongest of all is non-intervention. The one which Haile broke to bring you here."

"And you're worried about this anti-memory weapon thing?"

"Badly worried, though everyone is trying not to show it. That thing could cause havoc if it gets released into the beyond. We really can't allow that to happen, poppet. Which is why I want Richard sent to Trafalgar."

"Why?"

"You heard what they were saying. He lacks discipline." She winked.

Tracy led her back to the circle of ebony marble above the beach. Jay had seen several of them dotted around the cluster of chalets, including a couple in the clubhouse itself. A few times she'd even seen the black spheres blink into existence and deposit somebody. Once she'd actually scampered on to a circle herself, closing her eyes and holding her

breath. But nothing had happened. She guessed you needed to datavise whatever control processor they used.

Tracy stopped at the edge of the circle, and held up a finger to Jay. "Someone to see you," she said.

A black sphere materialized. Then Haile was standing there, half-formed arms waving uncertainly.

Friend Jay! Much gladness.

Jay squealed excitedly, and rushed forward to throw her arms around her friend's neck. "Where've you been? I missed you." There was plenty of hurt in the voice.

I have had time learning much.

"Like what?"

A tractamorphic arm curled round Jay's waist. **How things work.**

"What things?"

The Corpus. Haile's tone was slightly awed.

Jay rubbed the top of the baby Kiint's head. "Oh that. Everyone here's really annoyed with it."

With Corpus? That cannot be.

"It won't help humans with possession, not big help like we need, anyway. Don't worry, Tracy's going to lodge an appeal. Everything will be all right eventually."

This is goodness. Corpus is most wise.

"Yeah?" She patted Haile's front leg, and the Kiint obediently bent her knee. Jay scrambled up quickly to sit astride Haile's neck. "Does it know any good sandcastle designs?"

Haile lumbered off the ebony circle. **Corpus has no knowledge concerning the building of castles from sand.** Jay grinned smugly.

"Now you two be good," Tracy said sternly. "You can swim, but you're not to go out of your depth in the water. I know the providers will help if you get into trouble, but

that's not the point. You have to learn to take responsibility for yourselves. Understood?"

"Yes, Tracy."

I have comprehension.

"All right, go on then, have fun. And Jay, you're not to stuff yourself with sweets. I'm cooking supper for us tonight, and I shall be very cross if you don't eat anything."

"Yes, Tracy." She squeezed her knees into Haile's flanks, and the Kiint started moving forwards, taking them quickly away from the old woman.

"Did you get into lots of trouble for rescuing me?" Jay asked anxiously after they'd left Tracy behind.

Corpus has much understanding and provides forgiveness.

"Oh good."

But I am not to do it again.

Jay scratched her friend's shoulders fondly as they hurried down towards the water. "Hey, you're getting lots better at walking."

The rest of the afternoon was a delight. Like old times back in Tranquillity's cove. They swam, and the attendant universal provider extruded a sponge and a brush so Haile could be scrubbed, they built some sandcastles, though this fine loose sand wasn't terribly good for it, Jay risked asking for a couple of chocolate almond ice creams—was pretty sure the provider would tell Tracy if she had any more—they swatted an inflated beach ball to and fro, and once they'd tired themselves out they talked about the Kiint home system. Haile didn't know much more than Tracy had already explained, but whatever new question Jay asked, the Kiint just consulted Corpus for an answer.

The information was rather intriguing. For a start, the cluster of retirement chalets were one of three such human

establishments on an otherwise uninhabited island fifty kilometres across. It was called The Village.

“The island’s called The Village?” Jay asked in puzzlement.

Yes. The retired human observers insisted this be so. Corpus suggests there is much irony in the naming. I know not about irony.

“Cultural difference,” Jay said loftily.

The Village was one of a vast archipelago of islands, home to the observers of eight hundred different sentient xenoc races. Jay looked longingly at the yacht anchored offshore. How fabulous it would be to sail this sea, where every port would be home to a new species.

“Are there any Tyrathca here?”

Some. It is difficult for Corpus to insert into their society. They occupy many worlds, more than your Confederation. Corpus says they are insular. This has troubled Corpus recently.

Haile told her of the world she was living on now, called Riynine. Nang and Lieria had selected a home in one of the big cities, a parkland continent studded with domes and towers and other colossi. There were hundreds of millions of Kiint living there, and Haile had met lots of youngsters her own age.

I have many new friends now.

“That’s nice.” She tried not to feel jealous.

Riynine was invisible from The Village; it was a long way around the Arc, almost behind the dazzling sun. One of the capital planets, where flocks of xenoc starships arrived from worlds clear across the galaxy, forming a spiralling silver nebula above the atmosphere.

“Take me there,” Jay pleaded. She ached to see such a wonder. “I want to meet your new friends and see the city.”

Corpus does not want you alarmed. There is strangeness to be had there.

“Oh please, please. I’ll simply die if I don’t. It’s so unfair to come all this way and not see the best bit. Please, Haile, ask Corpus for me. Please!”

Friend Jay. Please have calmness. I will appeal. I promise.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She jumped up and danced around Haile, who snaked out slender tractamorphic arms to try and catch her.

“Hey there,” a voice called. “Looks like the two of you’re having a good time.”

Jay stopped, breathless and flushed. She squinted at the figure walking across the glaring sand. “Richard?”

He smiled. “I came to say goodbye.”

“Oh.” She let out a heavy breath. Everything in her life was so temporary these days. People, places . . . She tilted her head. “You look different.”

He was wearing a deep-blue uniform, clean and creased; with shining black boots. A peaked cap was tucked under his arm. And the ponytail was gone; his hair trimmed down to a centimetre high crop. “Senior Lieutenant, Keaton, Confederation Navy, reporting for duty, ma’am.” He saluted.

Jay giggled. “This is my friend, Haile.”

Hello, Haile.

Greetings Richard Keaton.

Richard tugged at his jacket, shifting his shoulders. “So what do you think? How do I look?”

“It’s very smart.”

“Ah, I knew it. It’s true. All the girls love a uniform.”

“Do you really have to go?”

“Yep. Got drafted by our friend Tracy. I’m off to Trafalgar to save the universe from the wicked Doctor Gilmore. Not that he knows he’s being wicked. That’s part of the problem, I’m afraid. Ignorance is a tragic part of life.”

“How long for?” She hadn’t quite realized things would move so fast. Tracy had only talked about the insertion a few hours ago. And now here it was, about to happen.

“Not sure. That’s why I wanted to make sure I saw you before I left. Tell you not to worry. Tracy and all her cronies mean well, but they get panicked too easily. I want you to know the human race is a lot smarter and resilient than those wonderful old coots think we are. They’ve seen too much of us at the wrong end of history. I know what we are now. And this is the time that counts. We stand a damn good chance, Jay. I promise you that.”

She put her arms round him. “I’ll look after Prince Dell for you.”

“Thanks.” He looked about with theatrical slyness, and lowered his voice. “When you get the chance . . . ask the provider for a surfboard and a jetski. And that was your idea. Okay?”

She nodded extravagantly. “Okay.”

This refit hadn’t been on quite the scale as the last two she’d undergone; but there was no doubt about it, the *Lady Macbeth* was an honoured source of income to the service and engineering companies that operated in Tranquillity’s counter-rotating spaceport. Several of her life support capsule fittings had collapsed under the incredible acceleration of the antimatter drive. Then there were the additional reaction mass tanks to install in the cargo bays. A whole new specialist sensor suite wired in for Kempster Getchell, as well as loading a fleet of small survey satellites. Hull plates had been removed to allow the replacement energy patterning node to be installed.

When Ione floated into the docking bay’s control centre, the nullfoam spray nozzles were folding back against the

sides of the bay. *Lady Mac* glistened a pristine silver-grey under the ring of lights at the top of the steep metal crater.

Joshua was talking to some of the staff operating the consoles in front of the windows, discussing colour and style for the name and registration. A spindly waldo arm was already sliding out under the direction of one operator, its ion-jet painter head rotating into position.

“You’re supposed to be launching in twenty-eight minutes,” Ione said.

Joshua glanced across and smiled. He left the control centre staff, and glided over to her. They kissed. “Plenty of time. And you can’t fly without a name on the fuselage. Besides, the C.A.B. inspectors have already cleared us for flight.”

“Did Dahybi sort out the new node?”

“Yeah. Eventually. We had to get him some help. A void-hawk actually went and collected two of the manufacturer’s software team from the Halo for us. They solved the synchronization glitch. Jesus, I love ultra priority projects.”

“Good.”

“We just have to load the combat wasps, and Ashly’s flying our new MSV over from the Dassault service bay. Your science team is already on board. We got Kempster and Renato along with Mzu and the agents. Parker Higgens insisted on travelling in the *Oenone* with Oski Katsura and her assistants.”

“Don’t be offended,” Ione said. “Poor Parker gets dreadfully spacesick.”

Joshua gave her a blank look, as if she’d come out with a non sequitur. “And we’ve got the serjeants in zero-tau as well. *Lady Mac*’s hauling a much bigger load than *Oenone*.”

“It’s not a contest, Joshua.”

He grinned lopsidedly and pulled her close. “I know.”

Liol erupted through the hatchway. “Josh! There you are. Look, we can’t—oh.”

“Hello, Liol,” Ione said sweetly. “So have you been enjoying yourself in Tranquillity?”

“Er, yeah. It’s great. Thanks.”

“You made a big impression on Dominique. She can’t stop talking about you.”

Liol grimaced, appealing silently to Joshua.

“I don’t think you’ve said goodbye to her yet, have you?” Ione asked.

Liol’s blush was beyond the ability of any neural nanonic override to control. “I’ve been very busy helping Josh. Er, hey, perhaps you could do it for me?”

“Yes, Liol.” She struggled against a laugh. “I’ll let her know you’ve gone.”

“Thanks, Ione, I owe you one. Er, Josh, we really need you on board now.”

Ione and Joshua both started chuckling after he vanished back out of the hatch. “You take care,” she told him after a while.

“Always do.”

The ride back to her apartment took a long time. Or perhaps it was because she suddenly felt so lonely.

He took it all very well, Tranquillity said.

You think so? He hurts a lot inside. There’s a lot to be said for ignorance being bliss. But then again, he would’ve guessed eventually. I wouldn’t have been doing either of us any favours, not in the long run.

I am proud of your integrity.

Not much compensation for a broken heart . . . Sorry, that was bitchy of me. Hormones again.

Do you love him?

You’re always asking that.

And each time you give me a different answer.

I have very strong feelings for him. You know that.

God, having two children with a man shows something. He's absolutely adorable. But love . . . love I don't know. I think I love what he is, not him. If I truly loved him, I would've tried to make him stay. We could've found something worthwhile for him to do here. Then again, maybe it's me. Maybe I can never love anyone that way, not when I have you. She closed her eyes on the empty tube carriage, and watched the docking cradle slide *Lady Mac* up out of the bay. The starship's thermo-dump panels unfolded, and the umbilicals jacked into sockets around her lower hull section disengaged. A cloud of gas and silver dust blew away. Bright blue ion flames burned around the starship's equator, and she lifted smoothly.

Ten thousand kilometres away, Meredith Saldana's squadron was coming together in formation. The *Oenone* lifted cleanly from its pedestal, and swept out to join *Lady Mac*. The two very different starships matched velocities, and headed towards the squadron.

I am no substitute for a human, Tranquillity said gently. **I would never claim you.**

I know. But you're my first love, and you always will be my love. That's strong competition for a man.

Voidhawk captains succeed.

You're thinking of Syrinx.

And all her kind.

But they're Edenists. They have it different.

Perhaps you should get to know some while we're here. They at least would not be intimidated by me.

Good idea. But . . . I don't know if it's because I'm a Saldana, but I just don't feel right about embracing Edenism as the solution to all my problems. It's a wonderful culture. But if we stayed here, if I had an Edenist for a partner, we'd wind up becoming absorbed.

We have no future returning to Mirchusko. The Laymil are no longer a mystery.

I know. But I'm still not converting to Edenism. We're unique, you and I. We might have been created for one purpose, but we've evolved beyond that now. We have our own lives to live; we have the right to chose our own future.

If the possessed don't do that for us.

They won't. Joshua's flight is only one of a hundred different explorations into this problem. The human race will surmount this.

Not without change. Edenism will change, they will surely have to rethink their attitude to religion.

I doubt it. They'll see the beyond as justifying their stance that spirituality is a null concept, everything has a natural explanation however bizarre. Laton telling them they won't be caught in the beyond will simply reinforce their position.

Then what do you propose?

I'm not sure. Perhaps nothing except for a clean start in a new star system. After that we'll see what happens.

Ah. Now I think I understand the urge for you to have and keep this child. You intend to found a new culture. A people who have affinity, but outside the context of Edenism.

That's very grand: founding a culture. I'm not sure my ambition extends to that.

You are a Saldana. Your family has done this once already.

Yes, but I've only got one womb. I can hardly birth an entire race.

There are ways. Exowombs. People who might like to try something new. Look how many youngsters

flocked to Kiera Salter's call—false though it was. And new habitats can be germinated.

Ione smiled. **This excites you, doesn't it? I've never known you quite so enthusiastic before.**

I am intrigued, yes. I had never given the future much consideration. My life has been spent running human affairs and dealing with the Laymil project.

Well, we'll have to wait until the immediate crisis is over before we consider our options. But it would be something, wouldn't it? Creating the first post-possession culture, one that overthrows this ridiculous Adamist prejudice against bitek. We could incorporate the best of both cultures.

Now you talk like a true Saldana.

Luca Comar reined in his horse at the end of the drive, and dismounted to wait. It was near to midday, and people were drifting in from the fields to take a break. He didn't begrudge them that, the sticky heat was quite something. Bloody unnatural for Norfolk.

But it was the community's choice. Every day's weather was a constant summer optimum, with bright light and warm breezes; while the nightly rains doused the land. Such a combination produced a vicious humidity. He was worried it might start to affect the aboriginal plants; late summer was normally a period of gradually increasing rain and reducing heat. There was also the question of how they'd react to missing Duchess's crimson light. So far there was no visible malaise, but he felt uneasy about it.

But these conditions seemed to be doing wonders for the new cereal crops. He'd never seen them so advanced. It was going to be a great harvest. Things are getting back to normal.

You could tell the world was at rights just from the general mood. There was a heartiness that'd been missing be-

fore. Individual homes were being taken care of, kept properly clean and tidy, not just *wished* presentable. People paid attention to their clothes and general appearance.

And there'd been no sign of Bruce Spanton and his motley crew for awhile now. Though Luca had heard from other community leaders he was down at the southern end of Kesteven, giving decent folk a hard time. Apart from the odd problem like that, this was becoming a good life, gentle and unhurried. Satisfying.

Oh really, you'll live it for a quintillion years, will you?

Luca shook his head, clearing it to open his perception wide. He'd sensed her approaching early this morning. A solitary figure making her way across the wolds, a knot in the uniformity of thought enveloping the county. Unhurried, untroubled. Not a threat like Spanton. But certainly a curiosity. Something about her was slightly out of kilter. He didn't have a clue what.

So just before Cricklade's lunch bell was rung, Luca had told Johan he would go and investigate the stranger. They still had newcomers drift in. Anyone prepared to work was given a place in the community.

The stranger was half a mile away now, dawdling along the main road in some kind of vehicle. Luca frowned. That's a Romany caravan. The sight was a pleasing one, bringing up the old memories. Young girls pleased with his attentions, the coquettish and blatant. Their bodies yielding willingly, in fields of tall corn, secluded glades, darkened caravans. Year after year I proved my sexuality with them.

I?

He wrapped his horse's reins around one of the spikes on the huge wrought iron gate, feet shuffling impatiently. The caravan's driver must have been aware of his mood, yet her horse's plodding gait never altered. It was a big sturdy horse, Luca saw while it was on the last couple of hundred

yards, its piebald coat muddied and a wild mane in long tangles. He got the impression that it could have hauled the caravan right round the world without pausing.

It kept on coming, and Luca twitched slightly, knowing his nerve was being tested. He refused to give ground as the huge beast lumbered inexorably towards him. At the last minute, the woman sitting on the driver's bench *clucked* softly, and pulled back on her slender reins. The caravan halted, rocking slightly on its lightweight spoke-sprung wheels. Carmitha applied the brake, and hopped down. She studied the man edging cautiously round Olivier. The horse whinnied at him.

"Greetings," he said. Then gave a sudden start as he found himself staring into the twin barrels of her shotgun. Not for the first time, she regretted giving Louise Kavanagh her pump-action weapon.

"My name is Carmitha. I am not one of you. I am not a possessor. Is that a problem?"

"None!"

"Good. Believe me, I will know if it becomes one. I do have some of your powers." She concentrated, and the seat of Luca's trousers became very hot indeed.

He twisted about, frantically slapping at the fabric with his hands before it started smouldering. "Bloody hell."

Carmitha smiled artfully. His thoughts were equally agitated, pastel whorls of colour that hung just outside her physical sight. I can read them, she told herself happily. Along with the rest of the magic.

The heat gone, Luca squared himself, recovering some dignity. "How did you . . ." His jaw moved silently. "Carmitha? Carmitha!"

She shouldered the shotgun, and brushed some loose strands of hair from her face. "I see part of you remembers. Then, no man would ever forget an afternoon in my bed."

“Eh.” Luca blushed. The memories were certainly strong and colourful, with her vital flesh hot beneath his hands, the smell of her sweat, rapturous grunting. He felt the stirrings of an erection.

“Down boy,” she murmured laconically. “What do you call yourself these days?”

“Luca Comar.”

“I see. At the town they said you were the one in charge up here. Nice irony, that. But then you’re all reverting.”

“I am not reverting!” he said indignantly.

“Of course not.”

“How have you got our powers?”

“I’ve no idea. It must be something to do with this place you’ve taken us to. After all, you don’t have any contact with the beyond any more, do you?”

“No. Thank God.”

“So it must be the way everybody’s thoughts impinge on reality here. Congratulations, you made us all equal in the end. Grant must be real pissed about that.”

“If you say so,” he said disdainfully.

Carmitha had a throaty chuckle at the umbrage on show. “Never mind. Just as long as you lot realize you can’t turn me into a host for one of your own anymore, we’ll get along okay.”

“What do you mean, get along?”

“It’s very simple. I hate what you’ve done to these people, don’t be under any illusion about that. But there’s nothing I can do about it; nor you, now. So I might as well try and live with it, especially as you’re reverting and re-establishing everything that’s gone before.”

“We are not reverting,” he insisted. Yet there was the nagging worry about just how much of Grant Kavanagh’s personality he was employing these days. I must stop being

so dependent on him, treat him as encyclopaedia, nothing more.

“Okay, you’re not reverting, you’re mellowing out. Call it whatever you want to salvage your dignity. I don’t care. Now, I’ve spent the last few weeks hiding out in the woods, and I’m getting very sick of cold rabbit for breakfast. I also haven’t had a hot bath for a while either. As you’re probably aware. So I’m looking for a place to stay over for a while. I’ll pull my weight, cooking, cleaning, pruning; whatever you like. It’s what I always do.”

Luca pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip. “You shouldn’t have been able to hide from us before. We’re aware of the whole world.”

“My people still have the earthlore your kind—both of you—have forgotten. When you brought magic back into the world, you made the old enchantments strong again, no longer just words mumbled by crazed old women.”

“Interesting. Are there any more of you?”

“You know how many caravans are here for the midsummer collection. You tell me.”

“I don’t suppose it matters. Even if all the Romanies survived, you don’t have the power to take us back to the universe we escaped from.”

“That idea really frightens you, doesn’t it?”

“Terrifies, actually. But then you can see that if you have got our ability.”

“Hummm. So, do I get to stay?”

He deliberately let his gaze meander over her leather jerkin, remembering the full breasts and flat belly which lay beneath. “Oh, I think I can find room for you.”

“Ha! Well don’t even think about that!”

“Who, me? I’m not Grant anymore.” He walked back to his horse, and took the reins off the gate.

Carmitha slid her shotgun into the leather holster beside

the seat, and started to lead Olivier along the drive with Luca. The caravan wheels crunched loudly on the gravel. "Damn this humidity." She wiped a hand across her brow, mussing her hair again. "We are going to have a winter, aren't we?"

"I expect so. I'll certainly make sure we have it on Kesteven, anyway. The land needs a winter."

"Make sure! My God. What arrogance."

"I prefer to call it practicality. We know what we need, and we make it happen. That's one of the joys of this new life. There's no fate any more. We control destiny now."

"Right." She looked round the grounds of the big stone manor house as they approached it. Surprised by how little had changed. But then the possessed tendency to establish glorious facades over everything they occupied was nullified here. When you already live in what was essentially a palace, you don't need gaudy energistic trinkets to enhance your status. For some reason, the sight of the well maintained fields was comforting. The normality, I suppose. What we all crave.

Luca led her into the courtyard at the side of the house. The solid stone walls of the manor and the stable wings magnified the clatter which the hooves and caravan wheels made on the cobblestones. It was hotter in the confines of the courtyard, too. Something Carmitha's small energistic ability could do little about. She took off her jerkin, ignoring the way Luca openly looked at the way her thin dress stuck to her skin.

One of the stables was a burnt-out hulk, with long soot-marks lashing up over the stone above each empty window. The centre of its slate roof had collapsed inwards. Carmitha whistled silently. Louise hadn't been lying. Several groups of field labourers were sheltering from the radiant sky in open doorways. They were munching on big sandwiches

and baguettes, passing bottles round. Carmitha could feel every pair of eyes on her as Luca took her over to the remaining stable.

“You can put Olivier in here,” he said. “I think the stalls are big enough. And there’s oats in the sacks at the far end. The hose is working as well, if you want to wash him down first.” It was something of which he seemed quite proud.

Carmitha could well imagine Grant’s Kavanagh’s reaction if the hose hadn’t been working. “Thank you, I’ll do that.”

“Okay. Are you going to sleep in the caravan?”

“I think that’s for the best, don’t you?”

“Sure. When you’re ready, go into the kitchen and ask for Susannah. She’ll find something for you to do.” He started to walk away.

“Grant . . . I mean Luca.”

“Yeah.”

Carmitha held her hand out. Light sparked sharply off the diamond ring. “She gave it to me.”

Luca stared at it in shocked recognition, and took a couple of fast paces towards her. He grabbed her hand and brought it up in front of his face. “Where are they?” he demanded hotly. “Damn it, where did they go? Are they safe?”

“Louise told me about the last time she saw you,” Carmitha said coolly. She glanced pointedly at the burnt out stable.

Luca clenched his fists, his face contorted in anguish. Every thought in his head was suffused with shame. “I didn’t . . . I wasn’t . . . Oh, shit! Goddamn it. Where are they? I promise you, I swear, I am not going to hurt them. Just tell me.”

“I know. It was a crazy time. You’re ashamed and sorry, now. And you’d never harm a hair on their heads.”

“Yes.” He made an effort to regain control. “Look, we

did terrible things. Brutal, inhuman things. To people, women, children. I know it was wrong. I knew the whole time I was doing it, and I still kept on doing them. But you don't understand what was driving me. Driving all of us." He shook an accusing finger, shouting. "You've never died. You've never been that insanely fucking *desperate*. Lucifer's deal would have been the most blessed relief from that place we were imprisoned. I would have done that. I would have walked right through the gates of hell and begged to be let in if I'd just been given the chance. But we never were." He crumpled, energy withering from his body. "Damn it. Please? I just want to know if they're all right. Look, we've got some other non-possessed here, kids; and there's more in the town. We look after them. We're not total monsters."

Carmitha looked round the courtyard, almost embarrassed. "Are you letting Grant know all this?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. I promise."

"Okay. I don't know exactly where they are. I left the pair of them at Bytham, they took the aeroambulance. I saw it fly away."

"Aeroambulance?"

"Yes. It was Genevieve's idea. They were trying to reach Norwich. They thought they'd be safe there."

"Oh." He held his horse tightly, almost as though he would fall without its support. His face brimmed with regret. "It would take me months to reach the city. That's if there's a ship that'll take me. Damn!"

She put a tentative hand on his arm. "Sorry I'm not much more help. But that Louise is one tough girl. If anyone is going to avoid possession, it'll be her."

He stared at her incredulously, then gave a bitter laugh. "My Louise? Tough? She can't even sugar her own grapefruit for breakfast. God, what a stupid bloody way to bring

up children. Why did you do that? Why don't you let them see the world for what it really is? Because they're born to be ladies, our society protects them. I protect them, as every father should. I give them everything that's right and decent in the world. Your society is *shit*, worthless, irrelevant; it doesn't even qualify as a society; you're playing out a medieval pageant, not living. Being pathetic and insignificant isn't a way of defending yourself and everyone you love. People have to face up to what's outside their own horizon. Nothing was outside, not until you demon freaks came and ruined the universe. We have lived here for centuries and made ourselves a good respectable home. And you scum ruined that. Ruined! You stole it from us, and now you're trying to rebuild everything you say you hate. You're not even bloody savages, you're below that. No wonder hell didn't want you."

"Hey!" Carmitha shook him hard. "Hey, snap out of it."

"*Don't touch me!*" he screamed. His whole body was trembling violently. "Oh God." He sank to his knees, hands pressed into his face. A wretched voice burbled out between clawed fingers. "I'm him, I'm him. There's no difference any more. This isn't what we wanted. Don't you understand? This isn't how life's supposed to be here. This was meant to be paradise."

"No such place." She rubbed the top of his spine, trying to ease some of the badly knotted muscles. "You've just got to make the best of it. Like everybody else."

His head bobbed weakly in what Carmitha supposed was acknowledgement. She decided this probably wasn't the best time to tell him his dear precious Louise was pregnant.

10

Mortonridge was bleeding away into the ocean, a prolonged and arduous death. It was as though all the pain, the torment, the misery from a conflict that could never be anything other than excruciatingly bitter had manifested itself as mud. Slimy, insidious, limitless, it rotted the resolve of both sides in the same way it ravaged their physical environment. The peninsula's living skin of topsoil had torn along the spine of the central mountain range to slither relentlessly down-slope into the coastal shallows. All the rich black loam built up over millennia as the rainforests regenerated themselves upon the decayed trunks of timelost past generations was sluiced away within two days by the unnatural rain. Reduced to supersaturated sludge, the precious upper few metres containing abundant nitrates, bacteria, and aboriginal earthworm-analogues had become an unstoppable landslip. Hill-sized moraines of mire were pushed along valleys, bulldozed by the intolerable pressure exerted by cubic kilometres of more ooze behind.

The mud tides scoured every valley, incline, and hollow; exposing the denser substrata. A compacted mix of gravel and clay, as sterile as asteroid regolith. There were no seeds

or spores or eggs hidden tenaciously in its clefts to sprout anew. And precious few nutrients to succour and support them even if there had been.

Ralph used the SD sensors to watch the thick black stain expanding out across the sea. The mouth of the Juliffe had produced a similar discoloration in Lalonde's sea, he remembered. But that was just one small blemish. This was an ecological blight unmatched since the worst of Earth's dystopic Twenty-first Century. Marine creatures were dying in the plague of unnatural dark waters, choking beneath the uncountable corpses of their mammalian cousins.

"She was right, you know," he told Cathal at the end of the Liberation's first week.

"Who?"

"Annette Ekelund. Remember when we met her at the Firebreak roadblock? She said we'd have to destroy the village in order to save it. And I stood there and told her that I'd do whatever I had to, whatever it took. Dear God." He slumped back in the thickly cushioned chair behind his desk. If it hadn't been for the staff in the Ops Room on the other side of the glass wall he would probably have put his head in his hands.

Cathal glanced into the sparkling light of the desktop AV pillar. The unhealthy smear around Mortonridge's coast had grown almost as a counterbalance to the shrinking cloud. It was still raining over the peninsula, of course, but not constantly. The cloud had almost reverted to a natural weather formation, there were actual gaps amid the thick dark swirls now. "Chief, they did it to themselves. You've got to stop punishing yourself over this. No one who's been de-possessed in zero-tau is blaming you for anything. They're gonna give you a fucking medal once this is over."

Medals, ennoblement, promotions; they'd all been mentioned. Ralph hadn't paid a lot of attention. Such things

were the trappings of state, government trinkets of no practical value whatsoever. Saving people was what really counted; everything else was just an acknowledgement, a method of reinforcing memory. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted that. Mortonridge would never recover, would never grow back to what it was. Maybe that was the best memorial, a decimated land was something that could never be overlooked and ignored by future generations. A truth that remained unsusceptible to the historical revisionists. The Liberation, he had decided some while ago, wasn't a victory over Ekelund, at best he'd scored a few points off her. She'd be back for the next match.

Acacia rapped lightly on the open door, and walked in, followed by Janne Palmer. Ralph waved at them to sit, and datavised a codelock at the door. The sensenviron bubble room closed about them. Princess Kirsten and Admiral Farquar were waiting around the oval table for the daily progress review. Mortonridge itself formed a three dimensional relief map on the tabletop, small blinking symbols sketching in the state of the campaign. The number of purple triangles, indicating clusters of possessed, had increased dramatically over the last ten days as the cloud attenuated allowing the SD sensors to scan the ground. Invading forces were green hexagons, an unbroken line mimicking the coastline, sixty-five kilometres inland.

Admiral Farquar leant forwards, studying the situation with a despondent expression. "Less than ten kilometres a day," he said sombrely. "I'd hoped we would be a little further along by now."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd tried walking through that devilsome mud," Acacia said. "The serjeants are making excellent progress."

"It wasn't a criticism," the admiral said hastily. "Given the circumstances, they've performed marvellously. I sim-

ply wish we could have one piece of luck on our side, everything about these conditions seems to swing in Ekelund's favour."

"It's starting to swing back," Cathal said. "The rain and the mud have triggered just about every booby trap they left in wait for us. And we've got their locations locked down now. They can't escape."

"I can see the actual campaign is advancing well on the ground," Princess Kirsten said. "I have no complaint about the way you're handling that. However, I do have a problem with the number of casualties we're incurring, on both sides."

The relevant figures stood in gold columns at the top of the table. Ralph had done his best to ignore them. Not that he could forget. "The suicide rate among the possessed is increasing at an alarming rate," he conceded. "Today saw it reaching eight per cent; and there's very little we can do about it. They're doing it quite deliberately. It's an inhibiting tactic. After all, what have they got to lose? The whole purpose of the campaign is to free the bodies they've captured; if they can deny us that opportunity then they will weaken our resolve, both on the ground and in the political arena."

"If that's their reasoning, then they're badly mistaken," Princess Kirsten said. "One of the main reasons for the Kingdom's strength is because my family can take tough decisions when the need arises. This Liberation continues until the serjeants meet up on Mortonridge's central mountain. However, I would like some options on how to reduce casualties."

"There's only one," Ralph said. "And it's by no means perfect. We slow the front line's advance and use the time to concentrate our forces around the possessed. At the moment we're using almost the minimum number of serjeants

against each nest of them we encounter. That means the serjeants have to use a lot of gunfire to subdue them. When the possessed realize they've lost, they stop resisting the bullets. Bang, we lose. Another of our people dies, and the lost souls in the beyond have another recruit."

"If we increase the number of serjeants for each encounter, what sort of reduction do you expect us to be looking at?"

"At the moment, we try to have at least thirty per cent more serjeants than possessed. If we could reach double, then we think we can hold the suicide rate down to a maximum of fifteen per cent each time."

"Of course, the ratio will improve naturally as the length of the front line contracts and the number of possessed decreases," Admiral Farquar said. "It's just that right now we're about at maximum stretch. The serjeants haven't got far enough inland to decrease the length of the front line appreciably, yet they're encountering a lot of possessed."

"That entire situation is going to change over the next three to four days," Cathal said. "Almost all the possessed are on the move. They're retreating from the front line as fast as they can wade. The advance is going to speed up considerably, so the length will reduce anyway."

"They're running for now," Janne Palmer said. "But there's a lot of heavy concentrations of them fifty kilometres in from the front line. If they've got any sense, they'll regroup."

"The more of them there are, the stronger they get, and the more difficult they'll be to subdue. Especially in light of the suicides," Acacia said. "I've had the AI drawing up an SD strike pattern to halt their movements. I don't think they should be allowed to retreat any further. We're worried that we'll wind up with a solid core at the centre which will be

just about impossible to crack without large scale casualties.”

“I really don’t want to wait three to four days for an improvement,” Princess Kirsten said. “Ralph, what do you think?”

“Denying them the ability to congregate is my primary concern, ma’am. They’ve already got a lot of people in Schallton, Ketton, and Cauley, I do not want to see that increase any further. But if we prevent them from moving from their present locations, and then switch our tactics to a slower advance, you’re looking at almost doubling the estimated time of the campaign.”

“But with significantly reduced casualties?” the Princess asked.

Ralph looked over at Acacia. “Only among the people who’ve been possessed. Trying to subdue them with a larger number of serjeants using less firepower will significantly increase the risk to the serjeants.”

“We volunteered for this knowing the risks would be great,” Acacia said. “And we are prepared for that. However, I feel I should tell you that a significant number of serjeants are suffering from what I can only describe as low morale. It’s not something we were expecting, the animating personalities were supposed to be fairly simple thought routines with basic personalities. It would appear they are evolving into quite high-order mentalities. Unfortunately, they lack the kind of sophistication which would allow them to appreciate their full Edenist heritage. Normally we can mitigate one person’s burden by sharing and sympathising. However, here the number of suffering is far in excess of the rest of us, which actually places quite a strain on us. We haven’t known a scale of suffering like this since Jantrit.”

“You mean they’re becoming real people?” Janne Palmer asked.

“Not yet. Nor do we believe they ever will do. Ultimately they are limited by the capacity of the serjeant processor array, after all. What I am telling you is that they’re progressing slightly beyond simplistic bitek servitors. Do not expect machine levels of efficiency in future. There are human factors involved which will now need to be taken into account.”

“Such as?” the Princess asked.

“They will probably need time to recuperate between assaults. Duties will have to be rotated between platoons. I’m sorry,” she said to Ralph. “It adds considerable complications to the planning. Especially if you want them to prevent the possessed suicides.”

“I’m sure the AI can cope,” he said.

“It looks like the campaign is going to take a lot longer whatever option we go for,” Admiral Farquar said.

“That does have one small benefit,” Janne Palmer said.

“I’d love to hear it,” the Princess told her.

“Reducing the flow of de-possessed is going to alleviate some of the pressure on our medical facilities.”

Back in her private office, Kirsten shuddered, a movement not reproduced inside the bubble room. That, out of all the other horrors revealed by the Liberation, had upset her the most. Cancers were such a rarity in this day and age, that to see several bulging from a person’s skin like inflated blisters was a profound shock. And there were very few de-possessed who didn’t suffer from them. To inflict such an incapacitating disease for what was apparently little more than vanity was hubris at an obscene level. That it might also be simple blind ignorance was almost as bad. “I have requested aid from the Kingdom and our allies as a matter of urgency,” she said. “We should start to receive shipments

of medical nanonic packages over the next few days. Every hospital and clinic on the planet is being used, and civilian ships are being deployed to fly people out to asteroid settlements in the system—not that they have many beds or staff, but every little bit helps. I just wish we could ferry people outsystem, but at the moment I can't break the quarantine for that. In any event, my Foreign Minister has cautioned me that there would be some reservation from other star systems about accepting our medical cases. They're worried about infiltration by the possessed, and I can't say I blame them."

"Capone's new lunacy doesn't help ease the paranoia," Admiral Farquar grunted. "Damn that bastard."

"So you would prefer the slow down scenario?" Kirsten asked.

"Very much so, ma'am," Janne Palmer said. "It's not just a question of providing medical support, there are transport bottlenecks as well. It's improved slightly now we can land aircraft at the coastal ports, but we have to get the de-possessed there first, and they need care which my occupation forces really aren't geared up to provide."

"General Hiltch, what do you favour?"

"I don't like slowing down the advance, ma'am. With all respect to Admiral Farquar's SD officers, I don't think they'll be able to prevent the possessed from congregating. Slow their movements, maybe, but halt them no. And once that happens, we'll be in a real mess. The kind of firepower we're going to need to break open Ketton at the moment is way in excess of any assault so far. We have to prevent it from turning into a runaway situation. At the moment we're dictating the pace of events to them, I'd hate to abandon that level of control. It's our one big advantage."

"I see. Very well, you'll have my decision before dawn local time."

The sensenviron ended with its usual abruptness, and Kirsten blinked irritably, allowing her eyes to register the familiar office. Touching base with normality. Necessary, now. These nightly reviews were becoming a considerable drain. Not even the Privy Council Grand Policy Conclaves back in the Apollo Palace had quite the same impact, they implemented policies that would take decades to mature. The Liberation was all so *now*. Something the Saldanas were not accustomed to. In any modern crisis, the major decision would be whether or not to dispatch a fleet. After that, everything was down to the admiral in charge.

I make political decisions, not military ones.

But the Liberation had changed all that, blurring the distinction badly. Military decisions were political ones.

She stood up, stretching, then went over to Allie's bust. Her hand touched his familiar, reassuringly sober features. "What would you do?" she murmured. Not that she would ever be accused of making the wrong choice. Whatever it was, the family would support her. Her equerry, Sylvester Geray, scrambled to his feet in the reception room, the chair legs scraping loudly on the tushkwood floor as Kirsten came out of her office.

"Tired?" she asked lightly.

"No ma'am."

"Yes you are. I'm going back to my quarters for a few hours. I won't need you before seven o'clock. Have a sleep, or at least a rest."

"Thank you, ma'am." He bowed deeply as she walked out.

There were few staff about in the private apartments, which was how she liked them. With the rooms all dark and quiet, it was almost how she imagined a normal home would be late in the evening. An assistant nanny and a maid were on duty, sitting up chatting quietly in the lounge next

to the children's bedrooms. Kirsten stood outside for a moment, listening; the nanny's fiancé was in the Royal Navy, and hadn't called her for a couple of days. The maid was sympathising.

Everyone, Kirsten thought, this has touched and involved every one of us. And the Liberation is only the beginning. So far the Church had been noticeably unsuccessful in quelling people's fears of the beyond. Though Atherstone's Bishop reported that attendance was high in every parish on the planet, greater than Christmas Eve, he'd said almost in indignation.

She opened the door to Edward's study without knocking, only realising her mistake once she was well inside. There was a girl with him on the leather settee; his current mistress. Kirsten remembered the security file Jannike Dermot had provided: minor nobility, her father owned an estate and some kind of transport company. Pretty young thing, in her early twenties, with classic delicate bonework. Tall with very long legs; as they all invariably were with Edward. She stared at Kirsten in utter consternation, then frantically tried to adjust her evening dress to a more modest position. Not that she could achieve much modesty with so little fabric, Kirsten thought in amusement. The girl's wine glass went flying from trembling fingers.

Kirsten frowned at that. The antique carpet was Turkish, a beautiful red and blue weave; she'd given it to Edward as a birthday present fifteen years ago.

"Ma'am," the girl squeaked. "I . . . We . . ."

Kirsten merely gave her a mildly enquiring glance.

"Come along, my dear," Edward said calmly. He took her arm and escorted her to the door. "Affairs of state. I'll call you in the morning." She managed a strangled whimper in response. A butler, responding to Edward's datavise, appeared and gestured politely to the by-now thoroughly

frightened and bewildered girl. Edward shut the study door behind her, and sighed.

Kirsten started laughing, then put her hand over her mouth. “Oh Edward, I’m sorry. I should have let you know I was coming.”

He spread his hands wide. “*C’est la vie.*”

“Poor thing looked terrified.” She knelt down and picked the wine glass up, dabbing at the carpet. “Look what she did. I’d better get a valet mechanoid, or it’ll stain.” She datavised the study’s processor.

“It’s a rather good Chablis, actually.” He picked the bottle out of its walnut cooler jacket. “Shame to waste it, would you like some?”

“Lovely, thank you. It has been a very bad day at the office.”

“Ah.” He went over to the cabinet and brought her a fresh glass.

Kirsten sniffed at the bouquet after he’d poured. “She was jolly gorgeous. Slightly young, though. Wicked of you.” She brushed at imaginary dust on his lapel. “Then again, I can see why she’s so obliging. You always did look rather splendid in uniform.”

Edward glanced down at his Royal Navy tunic. There were no Royal crests, just three discreet medal ribbons—earned long ago. “I’m just doing my bit. Though they are all depressingly young at the base. I think they regard me as some kind of mascot.”

“Oh poor Edward, the indignity. But not to worry, Zandra and Emmeline are terribly impressed.”

He sat on the leather settee and patted the cushion. “Come on, sit down and tell me what’s wrong.”

“Thank you.” She stepped round the small mechanoid that was sniffing at the wine stain, and sat beside him, welcoming his arm around her shoulders. The secret of a suc-

cessful royal marriage: don't have secrets. They were both intelligent people, which had allowed them to work out the grounds of a sustainable domestic arrangement a long time ago. In public and in private he was the perfect companion, a friend and confidant. All she required was loyalty, which he supplied admirably. In return he was free to gather whatever perks his position presented—and it wasn't just girls; he was an avid art collector and bon viveur. They even still slept together occasionally.

"The Liberation is not progressing as well as could be," he said. "That much is obvious. And the net is overloading with speculation."

Kirsten sipped some of the chablis. "Progress is the key word, yes." She told him about the decision she was faced with.

After she'd finished, he poured some more wine for himself before answering. "The serjeants developing advanced personalities? Humm. How intriguing. I wonder if they'll refuse to go back into their habitat multiplicities when the campaign is over."

"I have no idea; Acacia never ventured an opinion. And to be honest, that part is not my problem."

"It might be if they all start applying for citizenship afterwards."

"Oh God." She snuggled up closer. "No. I'm not even going to consider that right now."

"Wise lady. You want my opinion?"

"That's why I'm here."

"You can't ignore the serjeant situation. We are utterly dependent on them to liberate Mortonridge, and there's a hell of a way to go yet."

"A hundred and eighty thousand people de-possessed, seventeen thousand dead, so far; that leaves us with one-point-eight-million left to save."

“Exactly. And we’re about to enter the phase which will see the heaviest fighting. If they keep advancing at their current rate, the front line will reach the first areas where the possessed are concentrated the day after tomorrow. If you slow them now, the serjeants are going to start taking heavy losses just before that. Not good. I’d say, keep things as they are until the front line hits those concentrations, then shift to General Hiltch’s outnumbering tactics.”

“That’s a very logical solution.” She stared at the wine. “If only all I had to consider were numbers. But they’re depending on me, Edward.”

“Who?”

“The people who’ve been possessed. Even locked away in their own bodies, they know the Liberation is coming now; a practical salvation from this obscenity. They have faith in me, they trust me to deliver them from this evil. And I have a duty to them. That duty is one of the few true burdens placed on the family by our people. Now I know there is a way of reducing the number of my subjects killed, I cannot in all conscience ignore it for tactical convenience. That would be a betrayal of trust, not to mention an abdication of duty.”

“The two impossibles for a Saldana.”

“Yes. We have had it easy for an awful long time, haven’t we?”

“Shall we say: moderately difficult.”

“Yet if I want to reduce the death rate, I’m going to have to ask the Edenists to take it on the chin for us. You know what bothers me most about that? People will expect it. I’m a Saldana, they’re Edenists. What could be simpler?”

“The serjeants aren’t quite Edenists.”

“We don’t know what the hell they are, not any more. Acacia was hedging her bets very thoroughly. If they’re worried enough to bring the problem to me, then it has to be

a substantial factor. One I cannot discount from the humanist equation. Damn it, they were supposed to be automations.”

“The Liberation is a very rushed venture. I’m sure if Jupiter’s geneticists had been given enough time to design a dedicated soldier construct then this would never have arisen. But we had to borrow from the Lord of Ruin. Look, General Hiltch was given overall command of the Liberation. Let him make the decision, it’s what he’s paid for.”

“Get thee behind me,” she muttered. “No, Edward, not this time. I’m the one who insisted on reducing the fatalities. It is my responsibility.”

“You’ll be setting a precedent.”

“Hardly one that’s likely to be repeated. All of us are sailing into new, and very stormy territory; that requires proper leadership. If I cannot provide that now, then the family will ultimately have failed. We have spent four hundred years engineering ourselves into this position of statesmanship, and I will not duck the issue when it really counts. It stinks of cowardice, and that is one thing I will never allow the Saldanas to stand accused of.”

He kissed her on the side of her head. “Well you know you have my support. If I could make one final observation. The personalities in the serjeants are all volunteers. They came here knowing what their probable fate would be. That purpose remains at their core. In that, they are like every pre-Twenty-first Century army; reluctant, frightened even, but committed. So give them the time they need to gather their nerve and resolution, and then use them for the purpose for which they were created: saving genuine human lives. If they are truly capable of emotion, then their only hope of gaining satisfaction will come from achieving that.”

Ralph was eating a cold snack in Fort Forward's command complex canteen when he received the datavise.

"Slow the assault," Princess Kirsten told him. "I want that suicide figure reduced as low as you can practically achieve."

"Yes ma'am. I'll see to it. And thank you."

"This is what you wanted?"

"We're not here to recapture land, ma'am. The Liberation is about people."

"I know that. I hope Acacia will forgive us."

"I'm sure she will, ma'am. The Edenists understand us pretty well."

"Good. Because I also want the serjeant platoons given as much breathing space between assaults as they require."

"That will reduce the rate of advance even further."

"I know, but it can't be helped. Don't worry about political and technical support, General, I'll ensure you get that right to the bitter end."

"Yes ma'am." The datavise ended. He looked round at the senior staff eating with him, and gave a slow smile. "We got it."

High above the air, cold technological eyes stared downwards, unblinking. Their multi-spectrum vision could penetrate clean through Mortonridge's thinning strands of puffy white cloud to reveal the small group of warm figures trekking across the mud. But that was where the observation failed. Objects around them were perfectly clear, the dendritic tangle of roots flaring from fallen trees, a pulverised four-wheel-drive rover almost devoured by the blue-grey mud, even the shape of large stones ploughed up and rolled along by thick runnels of sludge. In contrast, the figures were hazed by shimmering air; infrared blobs no more substantial than candle flames. No matter which com-

bination of discrimination filters it applied to the sensor image, the AI was unable to determine their exact number. Best estimate, taken from the width of the distortion and measuring the thermal imprint of the disturbed mud they left behind, was between four and nine.

Stephanie could feel the necklace of prying satellites as they slid relentlessly along their arc from horizon to horizon. Not so much their physical existence; that kind of knowledge had vanished along with the cloud and the possessed's mental unity. But their avaricious intent was forever there, intruding upon the world's intrinsic harmonies. It acted as a reminder for her to keep her guard up. The others were the same. Messing with the sight on a level which equated to waving a hand at persistent flies. Not that satellites were their problem. A far larger note of discord resonated from the serjeants, now just a couple of miles away. And coming closer, always closer. Machine-like in their determination.

At first Stephanie had ignored them, employing a kind of bravado that was almost entirely alien to her. Everybody had, once they'd reached the shelter (and *dryness!*) of the barn. The building didn't amount to much, set on a gentle hillock, with a low wall of stone acting as a base for composite panelling walls and a shallow roof. They'd stumbled across it five horrendous hours after setting out from the end of the valley. McPhee claimed that proved they were following the road. By then, nobody was arguing with him. In fact, nobody was speaking at all. Their limbs were trembling from exertion, not even reinforcing them with energetic strength helped much. They'd long since discovered such augmentation had to be paid for by the body in the long run.

The barn had come pretty much at the end of their endurance. There'd been no discussion about using it. As soon

as they saw its dark, bleak outline through the pounding rain they'd trudged grimly towards it. Inside there was little respite from the weather at first. The wind had torn innumerable panels off the carbotanium frame, and the concrete floor was lost beneath a foot of mud. That didn't matter, in their state, it was pure salvation.

Their energistic power renovated it. Mud flowed up the walls, sealing over the lost panels and turning to stone. The rain was repelled, and the howl of the wind muted. Relief united them again, banishing the misery of the retreat from the valley. It was an emotion which produced an overreaction of confidence and defiance. Now, they found it possible to ignore the occasional mind-scream of anguish as another soul was wrenched from its possessed body by the peril of zero-tau. They cooperated gamely in searching round outside for food, adopting a campfire jollity as they cleaned and cooked the dead fish and mud-smearred vegetables.

Then the rain eased off, and the serjeants crunched forwards remorselessly. Food became very scarce. A week after the Liberation began, they left the barn, tramping along the melted contour line which McPhee still insisted was the road. Even living through the deluge under a flimsy roof hadn't prepared them for the scale of devastation wrought by the water. Valleys were completely impassable. Huge rivers of mud slithered along, murmuring and bubbling incessantly as they sucked down and devoured anything that protruded into their course.

Progress was slow, even though they'd now fashioned themselves sturdy hiking attire (even Tina wore strong leather boots). Two days spent trying to navigate through the buckled, decrepit landscape. They kept to the high ground, where swathes of dark-green aboriginal grass were the only relief from the overlapping shades of brown. Even

they were sliced by deep flash gorges where the water had found a weak seam of soil. There was no map, and no recognizable features to apply one against. So many promising ridges ended in sharp dips down into the mud, forcing them to backtrack, losing hours. But they always knew which way to travel. It was simple: away from the serjeants. It was also becoming very difficult to stay ahead. The front line seemed to move at a constant pace, unfazed by the valleys and impossible terrain, while Stephanie and her group spent their whole time zigzagging about. What had begun forty-eight hours ago as a nine mile gap was down to about two, and closing steadily.

“Oh, hey, you cats,” Cochrane called. “You like want the good news or the bad news first?” He had taken point duty, striding out ahead of the others. Now he stood atop a dune of battered reeds, looking down the other side in excitement.

“The bad,” Stephanie said automatically.

“The legion of the black hats is speeding up, and there’s like this stupendously *huge* amount of them.”

“What’s the good?” Tina squealed.

“They’re speeding up because there’s like a road down here. A real one, with tarmac and stuff.”

The others didn’t exactly increase their pace to reach the bedraggled hippie, but there was a certain eagerness in their stride that’d been missing for some time. They clambered up the incline of the dune, and halted level with him.

“What’s there?” Moyo asked. His face was perfect, the scars and blisters gone; eyes solid and bright. He was even able to smile again, doing so frequently during the last few days they’d spent in the barn. That he could smile, yet still refuse to let them see what lay underneath the illusory eyeballs worried Stephanie enormously. A bad form of denial.

He was acting the role of himself; and it was a very thin performance.

“It’s a valley,” she told him.

He groaned. “Oh hell, not again.”

“No, this is different.”

The dune was actually the top of a steepish slope which swept down several hundred yards to the floor of Catmos Vale, a valley that was at least twenty miles wide. Drizzle and mist made the far side difficult to see. The floor below was a broad flat expanse whose size had actually managed to defeat the massive discharges of mud. Its width had absorbed the surges that coursed out of the narrower ravines along either side; spreading them wide and robbing them of their destructive power. The wide, boggy river channel which meandered along the centre had siphoned the bulk of the tide away, without giving it a chance to amass in dangerously unstable colloidal waves.

Vast low-lying sections of the floor had turned directly into quagmire from the rain and overspill. Entire forests had subsided, their trunks keeling over to lean against each other. Now they were slowly sinking deeper and deeper as the rapidly expanding subsurface water level gnawed away at the stability of the loam. Watched over the period of a day or two, it was almost as if they were melting away.

Small hillocks and knolls formed a vast archipelago of olive-green islands amid the ochre sea. Hundreds of distressed and emaciated aboriginal animals scurried about over each of them, herds of kolfrans (a deer-analogue) and packs of the small canine ferrangs were trampling the surviving blades of grass into a sticky pulp. Birds scuttled among them, their feathers too slick with mud for them to fly.

Many of the islands just below the foot of the slope had sections of road threaded across them. The eye could stitch

them together into a single strand leading along the valley. It led towards a small town, just visible through the drizzle. Most of it had been built on raised land, leaving its buildings clear of the mud; as if the entire valley had become its moat. There was a church near the centre, its classic grey stone spire standing defiantly proud. Some kind of scarlet symbols had been painted around the middle.

“That’s got to be Ketton,” Franklin said. “Can you sense them?”

“Yes,” Stephanie said uncomfortably. “There’s a lot of us down there.” It would explain the condition of the buildings. There wasn’t a tile missing from the neat houses, no sign of damage. Even the little park was devoid of puddles.

“I guess that’s why these guys are like so anxious to reach it.” Cochrane jerked a thumb back down the valley.

It was the first time they’d actually seen the Liberation army. Twenty jeeps formed a convoy along the road. Whenever the carbon-concrete surface left the islands to dip under the mud, they slowed slightly, cautiously testing the way. The mud couldn’t have been very deep or thick, barely coming over the wheels. A V-shaped phalanx of sergeants followed on behind the jeeps, big dark figures lumbering along quite quickly considering none of them was on the road. On one side of the carbon-concrete strip, their line stretched out almost to the central river of mud; on the other it extended up the side of Catmos Vale’s wall. A second train of vehicles, larger than the jeeps, was turning into the valley several miles behind the front line.

“Ho-lee shit,” Franklin groaned. “We can’t make that sort of speed, not over this terrain.”

McPhee was studying the rugged land behind them. “I cannot see them up here.”

“They’ll be there,” Rana said. “They’re on the other side

of the river as well, look. That line is kept level. There's no break in it. They're scooping us up like horse shit."

"If we stay up here we'll be nailed before sunset."

"If we go down, we can keep ahead of them on the road," Stephanie said. "But we'll have to go through the town. I have a bad feeling about that. The possessed there know the serjeants are coming, yet they're staying put. And there's a lot of them."

"They're going to make a stand," Moyo said.

Stephanie glanced back at the ominous line moving towards them. "They'll lose," she said, morosely. "Nothing can resist that."

"We've no food left," McPhee said.

Cochrane used an index finger to prod his purple sunglasses up along the bridge of his nose. "Plenty of water, though, man."

"There's nothing to eat up here," Rana said. "We have to go down."

"The town will hold them off for a while at least," Stephanie said. She resisted glancing at Moyo, though he was now her principal concern. "We could use the time to take a break, rest up."

"Then what?" Moyo grunted.

"Then we move on. We keep ahead of them."

"Why bother?"

"Don't," she said softly. "We try and live life as we always wanted to, remember? Well I don't want to live like this; and there might be something different up ahead, because there certainly isn't anything behind. As long as we keep going, there's hope."

His face compressed to a melancholic expression. He held one arm out, moving his hand round to try and find her. She gripped his fingers tightly, and he hugged her against him. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," she murmured. "Hey, you know what? The way we're heading, it takes us right up to the central mountain range. You can show me what mountain gliding is like."

Moyo laughed gruffly, his shoulders trembling. "Look, guys, I hate to fuck up my karma any more by breaking up your major love-in scene here, but we have to decide where we're like going. Like *now*. This is one army that doesn't take time out, you dig?"

"It has to be down to Ketton," Stephanie said briskly. She eyed the long slope below. It would be slippery, but with their energistic power they ought to cope. "We can get there ahead of the army."

"Only just ahead," Franklin said. "We'll be trapped in the town. If we stay up here, we can still keep ahead of them."

"Not by much," McPhee said.

"And you'll not have time to gather any food," Rana said. "I don't know about you, but I know I can't keep this pace up for much longer without eating a full meal. We must consider the practicalities of the situation. My calorie intake has been very low over the last couple of days."

"It's a permanent downer," Cochrane said. "Your practical problem is that you don't eat properly anyway."

She glared at him. "I really hope you aren't going to suggest I should eat dead flesh."

"Oh brother," he raised his arms heavenwards. "Here we go again. Check it out: no meat, no smoking, no gambling, no sex, no loud music, no bright lights, no dancing, no fucking fun."

"I'm going down to Ketton," Stephanie said, overriding the pair of them. She started to walk down the slope, her hand holding on to Moyo's fingers. "If anyone else wants to come, you'd better do it now."

"I'm with you," Moyo said. He moved his feet along cau-

tiously. Rana shrugged lightly, and started to follow. A reefer slid up out of Cochrane's fist and the tip ignited. He stuck it in his mouth and went after Rana.

"Sod it!" Franklin said wretchedly. "All right. But we're giving up by going down there. There'll be no way out of that town."

"You can't keep ahead of them up here," McPhee said. "Look at the bastards. It's like they can walk on mud."

"All right, all right."

Tina gave Rana a desperate look. "Darling, those *things* will simply demolish the town. And we'll be in it."

"Maybe. Who knows? The military always makes ludicrously extravagant propaganda claims about their macho prowess. Reality invariably lags behind."

"Yo, Tina." Cochrane proffered the reefer. "Come with us, babe. You and me, we could like have our last night on this world together. Fucking-A way to go, huh?"

Tina shuddered at the grinning hippie. "I'd rather be captured by those beastly things."

"That's a no, is it?"

"No it is not. I don't want us to split up. You're my friends."

Stephanie had turned to watch the little scene. "Tina, make up your mind." She started off down the slope again, leading Moyo.

"Oh *heavens*," Tina said. "You simply never give me time to decide anything. It's so unfair."

"Bye, doll," Cochrane said.

"Don't go so fast. I can't keep up."

Stephanie made a deliberate effort to expel the woman's whining from her mind. Concentrating solely on navigating her way down the slope. She had to take quite a shallow angle, constantly reinforcing the slippery soil below her

boot soles with energistic power. Even then her progress was marked by long skid marks.

"I can sense a lot of possessed below us," Moyo said when they were a hundred yards above the quagmires of the valley floor.

"Where?" Stephanie asked without thinking. She hadn't been paying attention to what waited below, traversing the tricky slope required her complete attention. Now she looked up, she could see the convoy of jeeps was barely a mile behind them. The sight gave her heart a cold squeeze.

"Not far." His free hand pointed out across the valley. "Over there."

Stephanie couldn't see anyone. But now she scrutinized the mental whispers around the edge of her perception she was aware of rising anticipation in many minds.

"Hey, Moyo, man, good call." Cochrane was scanning the valley. "Those cats are like *low* in the mud. I can't see anyone."

"Come on," Stephanie said. "Lets find out what's happening."

The last section of the slope started to flatten out, allowing them to increase their speed. Stephanie was tempted just to keep to the undulating foothills that ran along the valley wall. They could certainly make good time on the reasonably dry ground. Except it curved gradually away from Ketton. One of the visible sections of road was about three hundred yards away across a perfectly flat expanse of slough. Stephanie stood on the edge, mud oozing round her ankles. Her boots kept her feet dry, but as a precaution she made the leather creep up her shins towards her knees. The silence down here was unnerving, it was as if the mud had some kind of anti-sound property. "I don't think it's very deep," she ventured.

"One way to find out," McPhee said vigorously. He

struck out for the road with confident strides. Mud slogged away slowly from his legs as he ploughed across. "Come on, ye great bunch of woofers. It's not like *we* can drown." Cochrane and Rana gave each other a reluctant glance, then started in.

"It's going to be all right," Stephanie said. She kept a tight grip on Moyo's hand, and they waded in together. Tina held on to Franklin's hand as they went in. The action drew a lecherous grin from Cochrane.

Stephanie was right about it not being particularly deep, but the mud was soon up to her knees. After a couple of attempts to clear a trench through it with her energistic power, she gave up. The mud responded so sluggishly it would have taken at least an hour for them to reach the road by such a method. This had to be crossed the hard way, and the level of exertion needed to keep going placed a terrible strain on already fatigued muscles. All of them diverted their energistic power to force recalcitrant legs forward against mud that seemed to exert an equal pressure against them. Their efforts were given an extra edge by the onward march of the army. They were travelling almost at right angles to the front line, losing precious separation distance with every minute.

Stephanie kept telling herself that as soon as they made the road they'd be able to build it back up again. But even using the road, there was a lot of mud to surmount before Ketton, and her body was already approaching its physical limit. She could hear Cochrane wheezing loudly, a sound which carried a long way over the quagmire.

"They're right ahead of us now," Moyo said. He'd opened the front of his oilskin jacket in an attempt to cool himself. The drizzle was seeping through his energistic barrier, combining with sweat to soak his shirt. "Two of them. And they're not happy with us."

Stephanie glanced up, trying to distinguish the source of the animus thoughts. The slight rise carrying the road was seventy yards in front. Badly mangled grass and a few straggly bushes gleaming dully in the grizzly skin of rain-water. Dozens of ferrangs were pelting about excitedly, running together in packs of six or seven. Their cohesive motion reminded her of fish schools, every movement enacted in unison.

"I can't see anyone," McPhee grunted. "Hey, shitheads," he shouted. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Oh groovy," Cochrane said. "Way to go, dude. That'll make them real friendly. I mean it's not like we're in cosmically deep shit at this point and need help, or anything."

Tina let out a miserable gasp as she slipped. "I hate this fucking mud!"

"You tell it as it is, babe." Franklin helped her up, and the two of them leant against each other as they forced their way onwards. Stephanie glanced back down the length of Catmos Vale, and sucked in a fast breath. The jeeps were barely half a mile away. Fifty yards to solid ground.

"We're not going to make it."

"What?" Moyo asked.

"We're not going to make it." She was panting heavily now. Not bothering with clothes, appearance, any energetic frippery—even the satellites would be able to see her now. She didn't care. All that mattered was maintaining the integrity of her boots and shoving near-useless legs one in front of the other. Muscle spasms were shaking her calves and thighs.

Rana stumbled, falling to her knees. Mud squelched obscenely as it closed over her legs. She blew heavily, her face radiant, glistening with sweat. Cochrane sloshed over and put his arm under her shoulders, dragging her up. The glutinous mud was reluctant to let go. "Hey, man, give me

a hand here," he yelled at the land ahead. "Come on, you guys, quit fooling around. This is like bigtime serious."

The ferrang packs dodged round each other as they wheeled about aimlessly. Whoever the people were up ahead, they chose not to reveal themselves. A slight single-tone mechanical whine was becoming audible. The jeep engines.

"Get me to her," Moyo hissed.

He and Stephanie staggered over to the faltering couple. McPhee had come to a halt twenty yards from the land, staring back at them. "Keep going," Stephanie yelled at him. "Go on. Somebody's got to get out of this."

With her help, Moyo took some of Rana's weight from Cochrane. They slung her between them, and kicked their way forward again. "My legs," Rana groaned miserably. "I can't keep them going. They're like fire. God damn it, this shouldn't happen, I can move mountains with my mind."

"No matter," Cochrane said through gritted teeth. "We got you now, sister." The three of them stumbled forwards. McPhee had reached the land, standing just above the mud to urge them on. Tina and Franklin were almost there. The pair of them were plainly exhausted. Only the big Scot seemed to have any stamina left.

Stephanie brought up the rear. The jeeps were seven hundred yards away now, on a stretch of dry road. Picking up speed. "Shit," she whispered. "Oh shit oh shit." Even if McPhee started sprinting right now, he'd never make it to Ketton; they'd overhaul him easily. Perhaps if the rest of them started flinging white fire at the serjeants . . . What a ridiculous thought, she told herself. And I don't have any to spare. I must focus on channelling my energistic power.

Ten yards to go.

I won't put up a fight. It wouldn't be the slightest good, and it might damage the body. I owe her that much.

At the heart of her mind she could feel the captive host stirring in anticipation. All four of them staggered up out of the mud, and simply collapsed on the soggy ground next to Tina and Franklin. And she still couldn't see the owners of the two minds impinging so strongly on her perception.

"Stephanie Ash," a woman's voice said from the empty air. "I see your timing is as fucking atrocious as always."

"Any second now," an unseen man announced.

Both of their minds were hot with eagerness. Somewhere nearby, the slow-motion wheeze of bagpipes started up, swirling to a level piercing tone. Stephanie raised her head. Halfway between her and the jeeps, a lone Scottish piper stood facing the vehicles. Dressed in a kilt of Douglas tartan, black leather boots shining, he seemed totally oblivious of the mortal foe riding towards him. His fingers moved sedately as he played "Amazing Grace." One of the serjeants in the front vehicle was standing up to get a clear look in over the mud-caked windscreen.

"I like it," McPhee hooted.

"Our call to arms," the concealed man replied. "It has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, no?"

Stephanie glanced round urgently, trying to pin down the voice. "Call to arms?"

An explosion sounded in the distance, rumbling fast over the quagmires and stagnant pools smothering Catmos Vale. A mine had detonated under the leading jeep, punching the front of the chassis into the air. It crashed down, spilling serjeants across the road. Blue white smoke billowed out from the crater in the concrete. Lumps of debris rained down. The other jeeps braked sharply. Serjeants froze all along the front line, crouching down.

The piper finished, and bowed solemnly at his enemies. There was a dull, potent *thock*, loud enough to quiver Stephanie's gullet. Then another. A whole barrage started

up, the individual thumps merging into a single soundwave. Tina squealed in fright.

“Ho shit,” Cochrane growled. “Those are mortars.”

“Well done,” said the woman. “Now keep down.”

It was, the Liberation’s coordinating AI acknowledged, a classic ambush, and executed perfectly. The jeeps were confined to one of the narrowest strips of land in the valley, unable to veer away. A sleet of mortar shells fell upon them, ranged precisely. High explosives detonated in a near constant bombardment, pulverizing the stalled vehicles, and shredding the serjeants riding them. Smoke, flame, and spumes of superfine mud belched out, obliterating the car-nage from view.

The AI could do absolutely nothing to prevent it. Radar pulses from the SD sensor satellites swept the length of the valley, but they required several seconds to acquire lock on. The first bombardment lasted for ninety seconds, then the mortar operators switched to airburst shells, and changed elevation. Dense black clouds burst open above the line of serjeants as they toiled desperately through the quagmire. Broad circles of mud erupted into cyclones of beige foam as the shrapnel slashed down, obliterating the struggling figures.

Only then did the SD radars finish backtracking the mortar trajectories. The AI launched its counterstrike. Incandescent scarlet beams stabbed down in retaliation, vaporising the possessed and their weapons in micro-seconds. Over a dozen patches of dry land were targeted. Supersonic torrents of steam flared out from the base of each impact. When they gusted away, the mortar sites had been reduced to shallow craters of hardbaked clay, their centres still radiant. They chattered softly as the drizzle fell, prizing open millions of tiny heat stress fractures.

The empty silence returned. Swirls of smoke drifted over

the valley floor, dissipating slowly to reveal the burning wrecks of the jeeps. Spread out across the quagmire, the ruptured bodies of the serjeants were gradually claimed by the mud's tireless embrace. Within an hour, there would be little left to hint at the conflict.

Stephanie found herself clawing into the soft soil, every muscle locked solid to resist the laser pulse. It never came. She let out a wretched sob, surrendering to the severe shaking that claimed her limbs. Two of the ferrang packs crept towards Stephanie and her friends. They dissolved into a pair of human figures dressed in dark grey and green combat fatigues. Annette Ekelund and Soi Hon looked down at them with anger and contempt.

"You idiots could have got us blown back into the beyond by blundering about like that," Annette said. "What if dear Ralph considered you to be part of this operation? They would have zeroed this patch of ground for sure."

Cochrane lifted his head, mud dribbling down his face to saturate his wild beard. His dead reefer was squashed against his lips. He spat it out. "Well like fuck me gently with a chainsaw, sister. I'm real sorry to cause you any inconvenience."

Not even Lalonde's oppressive climate prepared Ralph for the awesome humidity when he stepped out of the Royal Marine hypersonic transport plane. It prickled his skin at the same time as it siphoned away vital body energies. Just breathing it in was exhausting.

With the last strands of cloud at last gusting out to sea, the tropical sun could finally exert its full strength against poor malaised Mortonridge. Thousands of square kilometres of mud began to effervesce, thickening the air with hot cloying vapour. Looking round from the top of the airstair, Ralph could see long ribbons of tenuous white cloud flow-

ing with oily tenacity around the hummocks and foothills of the broad valley. More mist was percolating up from the highlands on either side, with long snow-white streamers spilling out through clefts in the valley walls to slither down the slope like slow-motion waterfalls.

He sniffed at the air. Threaded through the blanket of clean moisture were the traces of corruption. The peninsula's dead biomass was starting to rot and ferment. In another few days the stench would be formidable, and no doubt extremely unhealthy. One more factor to consider. Though it was a long way down on the priority list.

Ralph hurried down the aluminium stairs, with Brigadier Palmer and Cathal just behind him. For once there was no Marine detail waiting to guard him. They'd landed outside the staging camp established in the mouth of Catmos Vale. Hundreds of programmable silicon igloos had sprung up in rows like giant powder-blue mushrooms, a miniature recreation of Fort Forward. The only people here were sergeants, occupation troops, and medical case de-possessed. Plus a handful of rover reporters; all officially authorized Liberation correspondents, with a pair of Royal Marine information officers shepherding them.

When he looked up the valley, the loose smears of mist blurred into a single featureless white sheet carpeting the floor. His enhanced retinas zoomed in on the only visible feature, the slim greyish spire of Ketton's church rising out of the mist. Just by looking at it, Ralph could sense the possessed mustering in the town, a replay of the gentle mental pressure they'd all known in the days of the red cloud.

"She's here," he murmured. "The Ekelund woman. She's in Ketton."

"Are you sure?" Cathal asked.

"I can feel her, just like before. In any case, she's one of

their leaders, and this bunch are well organized.” Cathal gave the distant spire a dubious glance.

The camp’s commander, Colonel Anton Longhurst, was waiting at the bottom of the airstairs. He saluted Ralph. “Welcome to Catmos Vale, sir.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Looks like you’ve got yourself an interesting command here.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll show you round. That’s after . . .” he indicated the reporters.

“Ah yes.” Ralph kept his ire under control. They’d probably all be using audio discrimination programs, the bastards never missed a trick.

The information officers signalled the all clear, and the rover reporters closed in. “General Hiltch, Hugh Rosler with DataAxis; can you please tell us why the front line has stalled?”

Ralph gave a wan, knowing smile to the plain-looking man in a check shirt and sleeveless jacket who’d asked the question. An in-your-face transmission of the cordial public persona he’d developed and deployed for the last few weeks. “Oh come on, guys. We’re consolidating the ground we’ve already recovered. There’s a lot more to the Liberation than just rushing forward at breakneck pace. We have to be sure, and I mean absolutely sure, that none of the possessed has managed to sneak through. Don’t forget, it was just one possessed who got into Mortonridge that was responsible for this in the first place. You don’t want a repeat of that, do you?”

“General, Tim Beard, Collins; is it true the serjeants simply can’t hack it anymore now that the possessed have started to put up real resistance?”

“No, it is categorically not true. And if you show me the person who said that, I’ll give them a personal and private demonstration of my contempt for such a remark. I flew in

here today, and you people drove in from the coast.” He waved a hand back at the mud-covered land. “They walked the whole way from the beaches, engaged in tens of thousands of separate combat incidents. And on the way they’ve rescued nearly three hundred thousand people from possession. Now does that really sound as though they can’t hack it to you, because it doesn’t to me.”

“So why isn’t the front line continuing its advance?”

“Because we’ve reached a new stage of the campaign. Forgive me for not broadcasting our gameplan before, but this kind of reinforcement manoeuvre was inevitable. As you can see, we’ve reached Ketton, which has a large number of well organized and hostile possessed in residence—and this is just one of several such assemblies around Mortonridge. The army is simply redeploying accordingly. When we have sufficient resources assembled, then the sergeants will take the town. But I have no intention of committing them until I’m convinced such an operation can be achieved with the minimum of loss on both sides. Thank you.” He started to walk forwards.

“General, Elizabeth Mitchell, Time Warner; one final question, please.” Her voice was authoritative and insistent, impossible to ignore. “Have you got any comment about the defeat in the valley?”

Trust the owner of that voice to ask something he’d really rather avoid, Ralph thought. “Yes, I have. In hindsight advancing down Catmos Vale so fast was a tactical error, a very bad one; and I take full responsibility for that. Although we knew the possessed are equipped with hunting rifles we weren’t expecting them to have artillery. Mortars are about the crudest kind of artillery it’s possible to build; but even so, very effective given certain situations. This was one of them. Now we know what the possessed are capable of, it won’t happen again. Every time they use a new

weapon or tactic against us, we can analyse it and guard against it in future. And there are only a very limited number of these moves they can play.” He moved on again, more determined this time. A fast datavise to the two information officers, and there were no more shouted questions.

“Sorry about them,” Colonel Longhurst said.

“Not a problem for me,” Ralph replied.

“You shouldn’t play up to scenes like that,” Cathal said in annoyance as they made their way to the camp’s headquarters. “It’s undignified. At least you could hold a proper press conference with vetted questions.”

“This is as much propaganda as it is physical war, Cathal,” Ralph said. “Besides, you’re still thinking like an ESA officer: tell nobody, and tell them nothing. The public wants to see authority in action on this campaign. We have to provide that.”

Convoys of supply trucks were still arriving at the camp, Colonel Longford explained as he took them on an inspection tour. The Royal Marine engineering squads had little trouble securing the programmable silicon igloos; this section of land was several metres above the mud of the valley floor. But there were logistics problems with supplying the troops.

“It’s taking the trucks fifteen hours to get here from the coast,” he said. “The engineers have virtually had to rebuild the damn road as they went along. Even now there are some sections that are just lines of marker beacons in the mud.”

“I can’t do anything about the mud,” Ralph said. “Believe me, we’ve tried. Solidifying chemicals, SD lasers to bake it; they’re no good on the kind of scale we’re dealing with here.”

“What we really need is air support. You flew out here.”

“This was the first inland flight,” Janne Palmer said.

“And your landing field could barely accommodate the hypersonic. You’ll never be able to handle cargo planes.”

“There’s plenty of clear high ground nearby, we can build a link road.”

“I’ll look into authorizing it,” Ralph said. “We should certainly consider flying in the serjeants ready for the assault on the town.”

“Appreciate that,” the colonel said. “Things out here are a little different than the AI says they should be.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m here, to see how you’re coping.”

“We are now. It was bedlam the first day. Could certainly have done with the planes to evac the injured and the depossessed out. That ride back to the coast isn’t doing them any good.”

They came to the big oval hall where Elana Duncan and her team had set up shop. The massive boosted mercenary greeted Ralph with a casual salute of her arm, *clicking* her claws together. “Not much ceremony in here, General,” she said. “We’re rather too crowded for that right now. Go see whatever you want, but don’t bother my people, please, they’re kind of busy right now.”

Ten zero-tau pods were lined down the centre of the hall, all of them active. The big machines with their thick power cables and compact mosaic of components looked strangely out of place. Or it could be out of era, Ralph acknowledged. The rest of the hall was given over to cots for the serjeants, a field hospital whose primitiveness dismayed him. Elana’s mercenaries were carrying large plastic bottles and rolls of disposable paper towels, doing their rounds along the dark bitek constructs. There was a strong chemical smell in the air which Ralph couldn’t place. He had some distant memory of it, but certainly not one indexed by his neural nanon-

ics, nor a didactic memory—although they were notoriously inaccurate when it came to imparting smells.

Ralph went over to the first serjeant. The construct was sucking quietly at the tube of a clear polythene bag containing its nutrient syrup, a liquid like thin honey. “Did you get hit by the mortars?”

“No, General,” Sinon said. “I wasn’t here for the Catmos Vale incident. I am, I believe, one of the lucky ones. I have participated in six assaults which resulted in a possessed being captured, and received only minor injuries during the course of those actions. Unfortunately, that means I have walked the whole way here from the coast.”

“So what happened?”

“Moisture exposure, General. Impossible to avoid, I’m afraid. As I said, I was slightly injured previously, resulting in small cracks within my exoskeleton. Although they are not in themselves dangerous, such hairline fissures are ideal anchorages for several varieties of aboriginal fungal spores.” He indicated his legs.

Now that he knew what he was looking for, Ralph could see the long lead-grey blotches crisscrossing round the serjeant’s lower limbs; they were slightly fuzzy, like thin velvet. When he glanced along the row of cots, he could see some serjeants where the fungus was full grown, smothering their legs in a thick furry carpet, like soggy coral.

“My God. Does that . . .”

“Hurt?” Sinon enquired. “Oh no. Please don’t be concerned, General. I don’t feel pain, as such. I am aware of the fungus’s presence, of course. It does itch rather unpleasantly. The major problem is derived from its effect on my blood chemistry. If left unchecked the fungus would extrude a quantity of toxins that my organs will be unable to filter out.”

“Is there a treatment?”

“Funnily enough, yes. An alcohol rub to eradicate the bulk of the fungus, followed with iodine, appears to be effective in eliminating the growth. Of course, further exposure to these conditions will probably reintroduce the spores, especially as they appear to thrive in this current humidity.”

“Iodine,” Ralph said. “I thought I knew that smell. Some of the Church clinics on Lalonde used the stuff.” The incongruity of the situation was starting to nag at him. He could hardly be playing the role of older officer giving comfort to a young trooper. If Sinon followed usual Edenist lines, he must have been at least a hundred and fifty when he died. Older than Ralph’s grandfather.

“Ah, Lalonde. I never visited. I used to be a voidhawk crew member.”

“You were lucky; I was posted there for years.”

Somebody started wailing, a piteous gasping cry of bitterness. Ralph looked up to see a couple of the boosted mercenaries helping a man out of a zero-tau pod. He was wrapped in tattered grey clothes, almost indistinguishable from the folds of pale vein-laced flesh drooping from his frame. It was as if his skin had started to melt off him.

“Aww shit,” Elana Duncan snapped. “Excuse me, General, looks like we’ve got another crash course anorexic.” She hurried over to help her colleagues. “Okay, let’s get some protein infusers on him pronto.” The de-possessed man was puking a thin greenish liquid on the floor, an action which was almost choking him.

“Come on,” Ralph said. “We’re just in the way here.” He led the others out of the hall; ashamed that the most helpful thing he personally could do was run away.

Stephanie went out on to the narrow balcony and sat in one of the cushioned deck chairs next to Moyo. From there she

could look both ways along Ketton's high street where squads of Ekelund's guerrilla army marched about. All signs of the mud deluge had been ruthlessly eradicated from the town, producing a pristine vision of urban prosperity. Even the tall scarlet trees lining the streets and central park were in good health, sprouting a thick frost of topaz flowers.

They had been billeted in a lovely mock-Georgian town house, with orange brick walls and carved white stone window lintels. The iron-railed balcony ran along the front, woven with branches of blue and white wisteria. It was one of a whole terrace of beautiful buildings just outside the central retail sector. They shared it with a couple of army squads. Not quite house arrest, but they were certainly discouraged from wandering round and *interfering*. Much to Cochrane's disgust.

But Ekelund and her ultra-loyalists controlled the town's diminishing food supply, and with that came the power to write the rules.

"I hate it here," Moyo said. He was slumped down almost horizontally in his chair, sipping a margarita. Four empty glasses were already lined up on the low table beside him, their salt rims melting in the condensation. "The whole place is wrong, a phoney. Can't you sense the atmosphere?"

"I know what you mean." She watched the men and women thronging the road below. It was the same story all over Ketton. The army gearing up to defend the town from the serjeants massing outside. Fortifications were first conceived as ghostly sketches in the air, and then made real by an application of energetic strength. Small factories around the outskirts had been placed under Delvan's command. He had his engineers working round the clock to churn out weapons. Everybody here moved with a purpose. And by

doing so, they gave each other confidence in their joint cause.

“This is fascist efficiency,” she said. “Everybody beaver-ing away as they’re told for her benefit, not their own. There’s going to be so much destruction here when the ser-jeants come in. And it’s all so pointless.”

His hand wavered in the air until he found her arm. Then he gripped tight. “It’s human nature, darling. They’re afraid, and she’s tapped into that. The alternative to putting up a fight is total surrender. They’re not going to go for that. *We* didn’t go for that.”

“But the only reason they’re in this position is because of her. And we weren’t going to fight. I wasn’t.”

He took a large drink. “Ah, forget about it. Another twenty-four hours, and it won’t matter any more.”

Stephanie plucked the margarita from his hand and set it down on the table. “Enough of that. We’ve rested here quite long enough. Time we were moving on.”

“Ha! You must be drunker than me. We’re surrounded. I know that, and I’m fucking blind. There’s no way out.”

“Come on.” She took his hand and pulled him up from the chair.

Muttering and complaining, Moyo allowed himself to be led inside. McPhee and Rana were in the lounge, sitting round a circular walnut table with a chess game in front of them. Cochrane was sprawled along a settee, surrounded by a haze of smoke from his reefer. A set of bulky black and gold headphones were clamped over his ears, buzzing loudly as he listened to a Grateful Dead album. Tina and Franklin came in from one of the bedrooms when they were called. Cochrane chortled delightedly at the sight of Franklin tucking his shirt in. He only stopped at that because Stephanie caught his eye.

“I’m going to try and get out,” Stephanie told them.

“Interesting objective,” Rana said. “Unfortunately, la Ekelund is holding all the cards, not to mention the food. She’s hardly given us enough to live on, let alone build our strength back to a level where we can contemplate hiking through the mud again.”

“I know that. But if we stay in the town we’re going to get captured by the serjeants for sure. That’s if we survive the assault. Both sides are upping their weapons hardware by an alarming degree.”

“I told you this would happen,” Tina said. “I said we should have stayed above the valley. But none of you listened.”

“So what’s the plan?” Franklin asked.

“I haven’t got one,” Stephanie said. “I just want to change the odds, that’s all. The serjeants are about five miles away from the outskirts. That leaves a lot of land between us and them.”

“So?” McPhee asked.

“We can use that space. It certainly improves our chances from staying here. Maybe we can sneak through the line in all the confusion when they advance. We could try disguising ourselves as kolfrans; or we could hide out somewhere until they pass by us. It’s got to be worth a try.”

“A non-aggressive evasion policy,” Rana said thoughtfully. “I’m certainly with you on that.”

“No way,” McPhee said. “Look, I’m sorry Stephanie, but we’ve seen the way the serjeants move forwards. You couldn’t slide a gnat between them. And that was before the mortar attack. They’re wise to us using the ferrangs as camouflage now. If we go out there, we’re just going to be the first to be de-possessed.”

“No, no, wait a minute,” Cochrane said. He swung his feet off the settee and walked over to the table. “Our funky sister might be on to something here.”

“Thanks,” Stephanie grunted sarcastically.

“Listen, you cats. The black hats and their UFOs are like scoping the ground out with microscopes, right? So if we like cooperate with each other and dig ourselves a nice cozy bunker out in the wilderness, we could sit tight down there until they’ve invaded the town and moved off.”

Several surprised looks were passed round. “It could work,” Franklin said. “Hot damn!”

“Hey, am I like *the man*, or what?”

Tina sneered. “Definitely a what.”

“I keep expecting to be asked for my ident disk,” Rana said as the seven of them walked down Ketton’s main street.

They were the only people not wearing military fatigues. Ekelund’s army gave them suspicious glances as they passed by. Cochrane’s tinkling bells and cheery, insulting waves didn’t contribute to making them inconspicuous. When they walked out of the house, Stephanie considered junking her dress and adopting the same jungle combat gear style. Then she thought to hell with that. I’m not hiding my true self anymore. Not after what I’ve been through. I have a right to be me.

Near the outskirts, the road led between two rows of houses. Nothing as elaborate as the Georgian town house, but comfortably middle-class. The barrier between town and country was drawn by a deep vertical-walled ditch, with thick iron spikes driven into the soil along the top. Some kind of sludge trickled along the bottom of the trench, stinking of petrol. The arrangement wasn’t terribly practical, it was more a statement than a physical danger.

Annette Ekelund was waiting for them, lounging casually against one of the big spikes. Several dozen of her army were ranged beside her. Stephanie was quite sure the hulking guns they had slung over their shoulders would be

impossible to lift without energistic power fortifying their muscles. Three-day stubble seemed compulsory for the men, and everyone wore ragged sweatbands.

“You know, I’m getting a bad case of *déjà vu* here,” Annette said with ersatz pleasantry. “Except this time you haven’t got a good cause to tug my heartstrings. In fact, this is pretty close to treachery.”

“You’re not a government,” Stephanie said. “We don’t have loyalties.”

“Wrong. I am the authority here. And you do have obligations. I saved your pathetic little arse, and all these sad bunch of losers you have trailing round with you. I took you in, protected you, and fed you. Now I think that entitles me to a little loyalty, don’t you?”

“I’m not going to argue this with you. We don’t want to fight. We won’t fight. That gives you three choices, you either kill us here on the spot, imprison us which will take up valuable manpower, or let us go free. That’s the only issue, here.”

“Well that’s actually only two choices then, isn’t it? Because I’m not diverting anybody from their assigned duty to watch over ingrate shits like you.”

“Fine, then make your choice.”

Annette shook her head, genuinely puzzled. “I don’t get you, Stephanie, I really don’t. I mean, where the fuck do you think you’re going to go? They do have us surrounded, you know. An hour walking down that road, and you’re straight into zero-tau. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. And you will never ever get out of jail again for the rest of time.”

“We might be able to dodge them in open ground.”

“That’s it? That’s your whole game plan? Stephanie, that’s pitiful even for you.”

Stephanie pressed closer to Moyo, unnerved by the level

of animosity running free in Annette's thoughts. "So what's your alternative?"

"We fight for our right to exist. It's what people have been doing for a very long time. If you weren't such a small-town imbecile you'd see that nothing easy ever comes free; life is cash on delivery."

"I'm sure it is, but you haven't answered my question. You know you're going to lose, what's the point in fighting?"

"Let me explain," Soi Hon said. Annette flashed him a look of pure anger, then nodded permission.

"The purpose of our action is to inflict unacceptable losses on the enemy," Soi Hon said. "The serjeants are almost unstoppable here on the ground, but the political structure behind them is susceptible to a great many forces. We might not win this battle, but our cause will ultimately triumph. That triumph will come sooner once the Confederation leadership is forced to retreat from ventures like this absurd Liberation. Their victory must be as costly as we can make it. I ask you to reconsider your decision to leave us. With your help, the time we have to spend in the beyond will be reduced by a considerable margin. Just think, the serjeant you exterminate today may well be the one that breaks the camel's back."

"You lived before Edenism matured, didn't you?" Moyo asked.

"The habitat Eden was germinated while I was alive. I didn't survive long after that."

"Then I have to tell you, what you're talking is total bullshit. The political ideologies you're basing your justifications on are centuries out of date—just like all of us. Edenism has a resolution which is frightening in its totality."

"All human resolve can be broken in the end."

Moyo turned his perfect, unseeing eyes to Stephanie, and twisted his lips in a humble grimace. "We're doomed. You can't reason with a psychopath and a demented ideologue."

"You should tell your boyfriend to watch his lip," Annette said.

"Or what?" Moyo laughed. "You said it, psycho mamma, you told Ralph Hiltch all those weeks ago: the possessed don't lose. It doesn't matter how many bodies of mine you blast away. I will always be back. Learn to live with me, because you can never escape. For all of eternity you have to listen to me whining on and on and on and on . . . How do you like that, you dumb motherfucker?"

"Enough." Stephanie patted his shoulder in warning. He couldn't see Annette's expression, but he'd be able to sense her darkening thoughts. "Look, we're just going to go, all right."

Annette turned and spat into the trench. "You know what's down there? Its something called napalm. Soi Hon told us about it, and Milne made up the formula. There's tons of the stuff; lying down there, in squirt bombs, loaded into flame throwers. So when the serjeants come over, it's going to be barbecue time. And that's just this section. We've got a shitload of grief rigged up for them around this town. Every street they walk down is going to cost them in bodies. Hell, we're even running a sweepstake, see how many we can take with us."

"I hope you win."

"The point is, Stephanie, if you leave now, you don't come back. I mean that. If you desert us, your own kind, then you're our enemy just as much as the non-possessed are. You're going to be trapped out there between the serjeants and me. They'll shove you into zero-tau, I'll have you strung up on a crucifix and fried. So you see, it's not me that makes the choices. In the end, it's down to you."

Stephanie gave her a sad smile. "I choose to leave."

"You stupid bitch." For a moment, Stephanie thought the woman was going to launch a bolt of white fire straight at her. Annette was fighting very hard to control her fury.

"Okay," she snapped. "Get out. Now."

Praying that Cochrane would keep his mouth shut, Stephanie tugged Moyo gently. "Use one of the spikes," she murmured to McPhee and Rana. They both began to concentrate. The nearest spike started to droop, lowering itself like a drawbridge across a moat. When its tip touched the other side, the metal flattened out, producing a narrow walkway.

Tina was over first; shaking and subdued at the naked hostility radiating from Ekelund and imitated by her troops. Franklin guided Moyo over. Stephanie waited until the other three were on the far side before using it herself. When she turned round, Annette was already marching back down the road into Ketton. Soi Hon and a couple of others walked behind her, taking care not to come too close. The remaining troops stared hard over the trench. Several of them primed the pump action mechanism on their guns.

"Yo, nooo problem, dudes," Cochrane crooned anxiously. "We're outta here. Like yesterday."

It was midday, the sun blazed down on them like a visible X-ray laser, and the mist had gone long ago. Three miles ahead, the rumpled foothills of the valley wall rose up out of the sluggish quagmires. The serjeants were strung out across the slopes, forming a solid line of dark blobs standing almost shoulder to shoulder. Larger groups were arranged at intervals behind the front line, reserves ready to assist with any sign of resistance.

A couple of miles behind, the air shimmered silver, twisting lightbeams giddily around Ketton. Dry mud creaked

and crumbled under their feet as they tramped along the gently undulating road. They weren't going particularly fast. It wasn't just hunger draining their bodies. Apathy was coming on strong.

"Oh hell," Stephanie said abruptly. "Look, I'm sorry."

"What for?" McPhee asked. There was bravado in his voice, but not his thoughts.

"Oh come on!" She stopped and flung her arms out, turning full circle on a heel. "I was wrong. Look at this place. We're snowflakes heading straight for hell."

McPhee gave a grudging look around the flat, featureless valley floor. During the few days they'd rested in Ketton the mud had claimed just about every fallen tree and bush. Even the long pools between the quagmires were evaporating away. "Not much in the way of ground cover, granted."

She gave the big Scot an admonitory stare. "You're very sweet, and I'm really glad that you're with me. But I goofed. There's no way we can avoid the serjeants out here. And I do think Ekelund was serious when she said we wouldn't be allowed back in."

"Yeah," Cochrane said. "That's the impression I got, too. You know, that bug is shoved so far up, it's going to be flapping its way out of her mouth any day now."

"I don't understand," Tina said miserably. "Why don't we just stick to Cochrane's original idea, and dig in?"

"The satellites can see us, lass," McPhee said. "Aye, they don't know how many of us there are, exactly, or what we're doing. But they know where we are. If we stop moving and suddenly vanish, then the serjeants will come and investigate. They'll realize what we've done and excavate us."

"We could split up," Franklin said. "If we walk about at random and keep crossing each other's tracks, then one or

two of us could vanish without them realizing. It'd be like a giant-sized version of the shell game."

"But I don't want us to split up," Tina said.

"We're not splitting up," Stephanie told her. "We've been through too much together for that. I say we face them together with dignity and pride. We have nothing to be ashamed of. They're the ones who have failed. That huge, wonderful society with all its resources, and all it can do is fall back on violence instead of trying to find an equitable solution for all of us. They've lost, not us."

Tina sniffed, and dabbed at her eyes with a small handkerchief. "You say the most beautiful things."

"Certainly do, sister."

"I'll face the serjeants with you, Stephanie," McPhee said. "But it might be a good idea to get off this road first. I'll give you good odds our friends behind have got it in their mortar sights."

Ralph waited until there were twenty-three thousand serjeants deployed at Catmos Vale before giving the go ahead to take the town. The AI estimated at least eight thousand possessed were trapped inside Ketton. He wasn't going to be responsible for unleashing a massacre. There would be enough serjeants to overcome whatever lay ahead.

As soon as the first mortar attack had finished, the AI had pulled the front line back. Then the flanks, up in the high ground above the valley, had been directed forwards again. By the time the sun fell, Ketton was surrounded. To start with, the circle was simply there to prevent individual possessed from trying to sneak out. Any large group that tried their luck would be warned off with SD lasers in a repeat of the firebreak protocol across the neck of the peninsula.

Very few did attempt to run the gauntlet. Whatever method of discipline Ekelund was using to keep her people

in check, it was impressive. The perimeter was progressively reinforced as planes and trucks brought in fresh squads. Occupation forces were also assembled and dispatched around the front line, ready to handle the captured possessed. Medical facilities were organized to cope with the predicted influx of new, unhealthy bodies (though shortages of equipment and qualified personnel were still acute). The AI had exhaustively analysed every possible weapon from history which the possessed could have constructed, and computed appropriate counter-measures.

Ralph was quietly pleased to see that the simplest policy was amongst the oldest: the best defence is a good offence. He might not be able to employ saturation bombardment against the town, or melt it down into the bedrock. But he could certainly rattle the doors of Ekelund's precious sanctum, a quite severe rattling, in fact. "Quake them," he datavised.

Two thousand kilometres above Ombey, a lone voidhawk began its deployment swoop.

Ralph waited beside the rectangular headquarters building with Acacia and Janne Palmer standing beside him. They all stared along Catmos Vale at the sliver of dense mangled air at the far end which marked the town. Maybe he should have been back at the Fort Forward Ops Room, but after visiting the camp he realized how restricted and isolated he was sitting in his office. Out here, at least he had the illusion of being involved.

It was one of the larger patches of land above the lagoons and mires that cluttered the valley floor. Plenty of aboriginal grass poked up through the solidifying cloak of mud, as yet untrampled by animals. There were even some trees surviving near the centre; they'd fallen down, their lower branches stabbing into the soft ground; but the trunks were

held off the ground, and their battered leaves were slowly twisting to face the sky.

Stephanie made her way over to them, putting the road a quarter of a mile behind her. The ground around the sagging boughs was deeply wrinkled, producing dozens of small meandering pools of brackish water. She threaded her way through them, into the small dapple of shade thrown by the leaves, and sank down with a heavy sigh. The others sat down around her, equally relieved to be off their feet.

"I'm amazed we didn't step on a mine," Moyo said. "Ekelund must have rigged that road. It's too tempting not to."

"Hey guys, let's like turn her into an unperson, please," Cochrane said. "I don't want to spend my last remaining hours in this body talking about that bitch."

Rana leant back against a tree trunk, closed her eyes and smiled. "Well well, we finally agree on something."

"I wonder if we get a chance to talk to the reporters," McPhee said. "There's bound to be some covering the attack."

"Peculiar last wish," Rana said. "Any particular reason?"

"I still have some family left alive on Orkney. Three kids. I'd like to . . . I don't know. Tell them I'm all right I suppose. What I'd really like to do is see them again."

"Nice thought," Franklin said. "Maybe the serjeants will let you record a message, especially if we cooperate with them."

"What about you?" Stephanie asked.

"I'd go traditional," Franklin said. "A meal. You see, I used to like eating, trying new stuff, but I never really had much money. So, I've done most everything else I want to. I'd have the best delicacies the universe can offer, cooked by the finest chef in the Confederation, and Norfolk Tears to go with it."

“Mine’s easy,” Cochrane said. “That’s like apart from the obvious. I wanna re-live Woodstock. Only this time I’d listen to the music more. Man, I can like only remember about five hours of it. Can you dig that? What a bummer.”

“I want to be on the stage,” Tina said breathlessly. “A classical actress, in my early twenties, while I’m so beautiful that poets swoon at the sight of me. And when my new play opens, it would be The event of the year, and all the Society people in the world are fighting to buy tickets.”

“I’d like to walk through Elisea woods again,” Rana said. She gave Cochrane a suspect look, but he was listening politely. “It was on the edge of my town when I was growing up, and the Slandau flowers grew there. They had chroma-tactile petals; if you touched one, it would change colour. When the breeze blew through the trees it was like standing inside a kaleidoscope. I used to spend hours walking along the paths. Then the developers came, and cleared the site to make room for a factory park. It didn’t matter what I said to anyone, how many petitions I organized; the mayor, the local senator, they didn’t care how beautiful the woods were and how much people enjoyed them. Money and industry won every time.”

“I think I’d just say sorry to my parents,” Moyo said. “My life was such a waste.”

“The children,” Stephanie said. She grinned knowingly at McPhee. “I want to see my children again.”

They fell silent then, content to daydream what could never be.

The sky suddenly brightened. Everyone apart from Moyo looked up, and he caught their agitation. Ten kinetic harpoons were descending, drawing their distinctive dazzling plasma contrails behind them. It was a conical formation, gradually expanding. A second batch of ten harpoons ap-

peared above the first. Sunglasses automatically materialized on Stephanie's face.

"Oh shit," McPhee groaned. "It's yon kinetic harpoons, again."

"They're coming down all around Ketton."

"Strange pattern," Franklin said. "Why not fire them down all at once?"

"Does it matter?" Rana said. "It's obviously the signal to start the attack."

McPhee was eyeing the harpoons dubiously. The first formation was still expanding, while the blazing, ruptured air around their nose cones was growing in intensity.

"I think we'd better get down." Stephanie said. She rolled over, and imagined a sheet of air hardening protectively above her. The others followed her example.

The harpoons Ralph had chosen to deploy against Ketton were different to the marque he'd used to smash Mortonridge's communication net at the start of the Liberation. These were considerably heavier and longer, a design which helped focus their inertia forwards. On impact, they penetrated clean through the damp, unresisting soil. Only when they struck the bedrock below did their tremendous kinetic energy release its full destructive potential. The explosive blast slammed out through the soft soil. Directly above the impact point, the whole area heaved upwards as if a new volcano was trying to tear its way skywards. But the major impetus of the shockwaves radiated outwards. Then the second formation of harpoons hit. They formed a ring outside the first, with exactly the same devastating effect.

Seen from above, the twenty separate shockwaves spread out like ripples in a pond. But it was the one very specific interference pattern they formed as they intersected which was the goal of the bombardment. Colossal energies

clashed and merged in peaks and troughs that mimicked the surface of a choppy sea, channelling the direction in which the force was expended. Outside the two strike rings, the newly formatted shockwaves rushed off across the valley floor, becoming progressively weaker until they sank away to nothing more than a tremble which lapped against the foothills. Inside the rings, they merged into a single contracting undulation, which swept in towards Ketton, building in height and vigour.

Annette Ekelund and the troops manning the town's perimeter defences watched in stupefaction as the newborn hill thundered towards them from all directions. The surviving network of local roads leading away from the outskirts were ripped to shreds as the swelling slope flung them aside. Boulders went spinning through the air in long lazy arcs. Mud foamed turbulently at the crest while mires and pools avalanched down the sides, engulfing the frenzied herds of kolfrans and ferrangs.

It grew higher and higher, a tsunami of soil. The leading edge reached Ketton's outlying buildings, trawling them up its precarious ever-shifting slope. Defence trenches either slammed shut or split wide as though they were geological fault lines, their napalm igniting in third-rate imitation of lava streams. People diverted every fraction of their energetic strength to reinforcing their bodies, leaving them to bounce and roll about like human tumbleweed as the demented ground trampolined beneath them. Without the possessed to maintain them, the prim, restored houses and shops burst apart in scattergun showers of debris. Bricks, fragments of glass, vehicles, and shattered timbers took flight to clot the air above the devastation.

And still the quake raced on, hurtling into the centre of the town. Its contraction climaxed underneath the charming little church, culminating in a solid conical geyser of

ground fifty metres high. A grinding vortex of soil erupted from its pinnacle, propelling the entire church into the sky. The elegant structure hung poised above the cataclysm for several seconds before gravity and sanity returned to claim it. It broke open like a ship on a reef, scattering pews and hymn books over the blitzed land below. Then as the quake's pinnacle ebbed, shrinking down, the church tumbled over, walls disintegrating into a deluge of powdered bricks. Yet still, somehow, the spire remained almost intact. Twisting through a hundred and eighty degrees, with its bell clanging madly, it plunged down to puncture the tormented crater of raw soil that now marked the quake's epicentre. Only then, did its structural girders crumple, reducing it to a pile of ruined metal and fractured carbon-concrete.

Secondary tremors withdrew from the focal point, weaker than the incoming quake, but still resulting in substantial quivers amid the pulverised ruins. The quake's accompanying ultrasound retreated, only to echo back off the valley walls. In ninety seconds, Ketton had been abolished from Mortonridge; leaving a two-mile-wide smear of treacherously loose soil as its sole memorial. Spears made from building rafters jabbed up out of the rumpled black ground, ragged lumps of concrete were interspersed with the mashed up remnants of furniture, every fragment embedded deep into the loam. Rivulets of flaming napalm oozed along winding furrows, belching out black smoke. A curtain of dust thick enough to blot out the sun swirled overhead.

Annette raised herself to her elbows, fighting the mud's suction; and swung her head slowly from side to side, examining the remains of her proud little empire. Her energetic strength had protected her body from broken bones and torn skin, though she knew that there was going to be heavy bruising just about everywhere. She remembered being

about ten metres in the air at one point, cartwheeling slowly as a single storey café did a neat somersault beside her to land on its flat roof, power cables and plastic water pipes trailing from a wall to lash about like bullwhips.

Strangely enough, through her numbness, she could admire the quake; there was a beautiful precision to it. Strong enough to wreck the town, yet pitched at a level that enabled the possessed to protect themselves from its effects. As dear Ralph had known they would. Self preservation is the strongest human instinct; Ketton's buildings and fortifications would be discarded instantly in the face of such a lethal threat.

She laughed hysterically, choking on the filthy dust. "Ralph? I told you, Ralph, you had to destroy the village first. There was no need to take it so fucking literally, you shit!" There was nothing left now to defend, no banner or cause around which she could rally her army. The serjeants were coming. Unopposed. Unstoppable.

Annette flopped onto her back, expelling grit from her eyes and mouth. Her mouth puffed away, eager for much needed oxygen. She had never been so utterly terrified before. It was an emotion shining at the core of every mind littered around her in the decimated town. Thousands of them. The one aspect they had left in common.

The trees had stood up and danced during the quake. They left the cloying mud behind with loud sucking sounds and pirouetted about while the ground rearranged itself. It was probably an impressive sight. But only from a distance.

Stephanie had screamed constantly as she wriggled frantically underneath the carouselling boughs, ducking the smaller branches that raked the ground. She'd been struck several times, slapped through the air as if by a giant bat.

Only the energistic power binding her body's cells together had saved her from being snapped in two.

Tina hadn't been so fortunate. As the ground started to calm, one of the trees had fallen straight on top of her. It pushed her deep into the soaking loam, leaving only her head and an arm sticking out. She was whimpering softly as the others gathered round. "I can't feel anything," she whispered. "I can't make myself feel."

"Just melt the wood away," McPhee said quickly, and pointed. "Here to here. Come on, concentrate."

They held hands, imagining the scarlet bark parting, the hard dark wood of the trunk flowing like water. A big chunk of the trunk turned to liquid and splattered down on the mud. Franklin and McPhee hurried forward and pulled Tina out from the mud. Her hips and legs were badly crushed, blood was running out of several deep wounds, splintered bones protruded through the skin.

She looked down at her injuries and wailed in fear. "I'm going to die! I'm going to go back to the beyond."

"Nonsense, babe," Cochrane said. He knelt down beside her and passed his hand over one of the abdominal cuts. The torn flesh sealed over, melding together. "See? Don't give me none of this loser shit."

"There's too much damage."

"Come on, guys," Cochrane looked up at the rest of the group. "Together we can do it. Each take a wound."

Stephanie nodded quickly and sank down beside him. "It'll be all right," she promised Tina. The woman had lost an awful lot of blood, though.

They circled her, and laid on their hands. Power was exerted, transmuted by the wish to heal and cleanse. That was how Sinon's squad found them, kneeling as if in prayer around one of their own. Tina was smiling up placidly, her pale hand gripping Rana, their fingers entwined.

Sinon and Choma approached cautiously through the jumbled trees, and levelled their machine guns at the devout-seeming group. "I want all of you to lie down flat, and put your hands behind your head, now," Sinon said. "Do not attempt to move or apply your energistic power."

Stephanie turned to face him. "Tina's hurt, she can't move."

"I will accept that claim for the moment, providing you do not try to resist. Now, the rest of you lie down."

Moving slowly, they backed away from Tina and lowered themselves onto the mushy loam.

You can come forward, Sinon told the rest of the squad. **They appear to be compliant.**

Thirty serjeants emerged from the tangle of branches and twigs, making remarkably little sound. Their machine guns were all trained on the prone figures.

"You will now leave your captured bodies," Sinon said.

"We can't," Stephanie said. She could feel the misery and fear in her friends, the same as that found in her own mind. It was turning her voice to a piteous croak. "You should know by now not to ask that of us."

"Very well." Sinon took his holding stick out.

"You don't have to use those things, either," Stephanie said. "We'll go quietly."

"Sorry, procedure."

"Look, I'm Stephanie Ash. I'm the one that brought the children out. That must count for something. Check with Lieutenant Anver of the Royal Kulu marines, he'll confirm who I am."

Sinon paused, and used his processor block to query Fort Forward's memory core. The image of the woman certainly appeared to match, and the man with flamboyant clothes and a mass of hair was unmistakable.

We can't rely on what they look like, Choma said. They can forge any appearance they want.

Providing they cooperate, there is no reason to use unnecessary force. So far they have obeyed, and they know they cannot escape.

You're far too trusting.

"You will get up one at a time when instructed," Sinon told them. "We will escort you back to our field camp where you will be placed in zero-tau. Three machine guns will be trained upon you at all times. If any order is refused, we use the holding sticks to neutralize your energistic ability. Do you understand?"

"That's very clear," Stephanie said. "Thank you."

"Very well. You first."

Stephanie climbed cautiously to her feet, making sure every motion was a slow one. Choma flicked the nozzle of his machine gun, indicating the small track through the collapsed trees. "Let's go." She started walking. Behind her, Sinon was telling Franklin to get up.

"Tina will need a stretcher," Stephanie said. "And someone will have to guide Moyo, he's damaged his eyes."

"Don't worry," Choma said gruffly. "We'll make sure you all get to the camp okay."

They emerged from the trees. Stephanie looked at where Ketton had been. A dense cloud of dark-grey dust churned over the annihilated town. Small fires burned underneath it, muted orange coronas shining weakly. Twenty slender purple lines glowed faintly in the air above, linking the cloud with the top of the atmosphere. Streaks of lightning discharged along them intermittently.

"Bloody hell," she murmured. Thousands of serjeants were walking along the valley floor towards the silent, murky ruins. The possessed cowering within knew they were coming. Raw fear was spilling out of the dust cloud

like gaseous adrenaline. Stephanie's heart started to beat faster. Cold shivers ran along her legs and up her chest. She faltered.

Choma nudged her with his machine gun. "Keep going."

"Can't you feel it? They're frightened."

"Good."

"No, I mean really frightened. Look."

Glimmers of burgundy light were escaping through gaps in the dust cloud. Billowing tendril-like wisps around the edges were flattening out, becoming smooth and controlled. The shield against the open sky was returning.

"I didn't think you were stupid enough to try that again," Choma said. "General Hiltch won't permit you to hide."

Even as he spoke an SD electron beam stabbed down through the clear air. A blue-white pillar two hundred metres wide that struck the apex of the seething roof of dust. It sprayed apart with a plangent boom, sending out broad lightning forks that roamed across the boiling surface to skewer into the mud. This time, the possessed resisted. Ten thousand minds concentrated within a couple of square miles, all striving for the same effect. To be free.

The random discharges of the SD beam were slowly tamed. Jagged forks compressing into garish rivers of electrons that formed a writhing cage above the dust. Carmine light brightened underneath. Fear turned to rapture, followed swiftly by determination. Stephanie stared across at the clamorous spectacle, her mouth open in astonishment, and pride. Their old unity was back. And with it came a formidable sense of purpose: to achieve the safety that so many other possessed had obtained. To be gone.

The red light in the cloud strengthened to a lambent glare, then began to stain the ground of the valley floor. A bright circular wave spreading out through the mud and sluggish water.

“Run,” Stephanie told the confounded serjeants. “Get clear. Please. Go!” She braced herself as the redness charged towards her. There was no physical sensation other than a near-psychosomatic tingle. Then her body was glowing along with the ground, the air, her friends, and the hulking bodies of the serjeants.

“All right!” Cochrane whooped. He punched the air. “Let’s go for it, you crazyass mothers.”

The earth trembled, dispatching all of them to their knees again. Sinon tried to keep his machine gun lined up on the nearest captive, but the ground shook again, more violently this time. He abandoned that procedure, and flattened himself. All the serjeants in the Ketton assault linked their minds through general affinity, clinging to each other mentally with a determination that matched their grip on the ground.

“What is happening?” he bellowed.

“We’re like outta here, man,” Cochrane shouted back. “You’re on the last bus out of this universe.”

Ralph watched the red light inflate out of the dust cloud. Datavises from SD sensors and local occupation forces spread around Catmos Vale relayed the image from multiple angles, granting him complete three hundred and sixty degree coverage. He knew what it looked like from the air, from the ground, even (briefly) as it engulfed marines who were following close behind the serjeants. But most of all, he just stared ahead as it poured out across the valley.

“Oh my God,” he breathed. It was going to be bad. He knew that. Very bad.

“Do you want a full SD strike?” Admiral Farquar asked.

“I don’t know. It looks like it’s slowing.”

“Confirmed. Roughly circular, twelve kilometres across. And they’ve got two thirds of the serjeants in there.”

“Are they still alive?” Ralph asked Acacia.

“Yes, General. Their electronics have collapsed completely, but they’re alive and able to use affinity.”

“Then what—” The ground shifted abruptly below his feet. He landed painfully on his side. The programmable silicon buildings of the camp were jittering about. Everywhere, people were on their knees or spread-eagled.

“Shit!” Acacia shouted.

A sheer cliff was rising up vertically right across the valley floor, corresponding to the edge of the red light. Huge cascades of mud and boulders were tumbling down its face. The red light followed them down, pervading the rock, and growing brighter.

Ralph refuted his instinct. What he was seeing was just too much, even though he knew they’d done this to entire planets. “They can’t,” he cried.

“But they are, General,” Acacia replied. “They’re leaving.”

The cliff was still ascending. Two hundred metres now, lifting with increasing confidence and speed. It was becoming difficult to look at as the light turned scarlet, casting long shadows across the valley. Three hundred metres high, and Ralph’s neural nanonics had crashed in the backwash of the blossoming reality dysfunction. On the ground around him, the battered blades of grass were wriggling their way back upwards again, shedding their cloak of mud to turn the camp into a verdant parkland. Fallen trees bent their trunks like the spine of an old man rising from his chair, cranking themselves upright again.

The vivid red light began to diminish. When Ralph squinted against it, he could see the cliff retreating from him. It was five hundred metres high, moving away with the majestic serenity of an iceberg. Except it wasn’t moving, he realized. It was shrinking, the red light contracting in on itself, enveloping the island of rock which the pos-

sessed had uprooted from Mortonridge to sail away into another universe. As it left he could see its entire shape, a flat-topped inverted cone wrapped with massive curving stress ridges that spiralled down to its base, as if it had unscrewed itself from the peninsula.

Air was roaring hard overhead, sucked into the space the island was vacating. It still hovered in the centre of the valley, but now it was becoming insubstantial as well as small. The light around it turned a dazzling monochrome white, obliterating details. Within minutes it had evaporated down to a tiny star. Then it winked out. Ralph's neural nanonics came back on line.

"Cancel the other two assaults," he datavised to the AI. "And halt the front line. Now."

He scrambled cautiously to his feet. The reinvigorated grass was withering all around him, shrivelling back to dry brown flakes that crumbled away in the howling wind. Images from the SD sensors showed him the full extent of the massive crater. Its edges had already begun to subside, mountain-sized landslides were skidding downwards, taking a very long time to reach the bottom. Waiting for them five kilometres down was a medieval orange glow that fluctuated in no comprehensible rhythm. He frowned at that, not understanding what it could be. Then the vivid area ruptured, and a vast fountain of radiant lava soared upwards.

"Whoever's left, get them back," he shouted desperately at Acacia. "Get them as far away from the lip as possible."

"They're already retreating," she said.

"What about the others? The ones on the island? Can your affinity still reach them?"

Her forlorn look was all the answer he needed.

Stephanie and her friends looked at the serjeants, who stared back with equal uncertainty. For the first time in

what her dazed thoughts insisted must have been hours, the ground had stopped oscillating beneath her. When she looked up, the sky was a starless ultradeep blue. White light flooded down from nowhere she could see—but felt right, what she wanted. Her gaze tracked round to where the other side of the valley had been. The blank sky came right down to the ground, and the true size of their island became apparent. A tiny circle of land edged with a crinkled line of hillocks, adrift in its own eternal universe.

“Oh no,” she murmured in despair. “I think we screwed up.”

“Are we free?” Moyo asked.

“For now.” She started describing their new home to him.

Sinon and the other serjeants used the general affinity band to call to each other. There were over twelve thousand of them spread out around the island. Their guns worked, their electronics and medical nanonics didn’t (several had been injured in the waves of quakes), affinity was unaffected, and there were new senses available. Almost a derivative of affinity, allowing him to sense the minds of the possessed. And there was also the energistic power. He picked a stone from the mud and held it in his palm. It slowly turned transparent, and began to sparkle. Not that a kilogram of diamond was a lot of use here.

“Could you dudes like give this heavy military scene a break now?” Cochrane asked.

It would appear our original purpose is invalid in this environment, Sinon told his comrades. He shouldered his machine gun. “Very well. What do you propose we do next?” he asked the hippie.

“Wow, man, don’t look at me. Stephanie’s in charge around here.”

“I’m not. And anyway, I haven’t got a clue what happens now.”

"Then why did you bring us here?" Choma asked.

"Because it's not Mortonridge," Moyo said. "That's all. Stephanie told you, we were frightened."

"And this is the result," Rana said. "You must now face the consequences of your physical aggression."

We should regroup and pool our physical resources, Choma said. It may even be possible for us to use the energistic power to return to the universe.

Their minds flashed together into a mini-consensus and agreed to the proposal. An assembly area was designated.

"We are going to join up with our comrades," Sinon told Stephanie. "You would be very welcome to come with us. I expect your views on the situation could prove valuable."

That last image of Ekelund popped up annoyingly in Stephanie's mind. The woman had banished them from Ketton. But Ketton no longer existed. Surely they wouldn't be excluded now? Somehow she couldn't convince herself. And the only other alternative was staying by themselves. Without food. "Thank you," she said.

"Wait wait," Cochrane said. "You guys have like got to be kidding. Look, the end of the world is maybe half a mile away. Aren't you even curious what's out there?"

Sinon looked to where the island's crumpled surface ended. "That's a good suggestion."

Cochrane grinned brightly. "You cats'll have to get used to them if you're going to hang with me."

The breeze picked up considerably as they approached the edge of the island. Blowing outward, which troubled the serjeants. Air had become a finite commodity. Long rivulets of mud were sliding gently to the edge and spilling over, dribbling down the cliff like ribbons of candle wax. There was nothing else to see. No break in the uniformity of the midnight blue boundary of the universe that might indicate another object, micro or macro. The realization they were

on their own percolated through all of them, growing stronger as they approached the rim.

It was only Cochrane who inched his way cautiously right up to the edge and peered down into the murky void of infinity which buoyed them along. He spread his arms wide and threw his head back, letting the breeze flowing over the island blow his hair around. "WAAAAAHOOOO." His feet jiggled about crazily as he cried out ecstatically: "I'm on a fucking flying island. Can you believe this? Here be dragons, mom! And they're GROOVY."

11

For some reason, the tangled strands of black mist which filled this dark continuum would always slide apart to allow Valisk through. Not one wisp had ever touched the polyp. The habitat personality still hadn't managed to determine the nature of movement outside its shell. Without valid reference points, there was no way of knowing if it was sailing along on some unknowable voyage, or the veils of darkness were simply gusting past. The identity, structure, and quantum signature of their new continuum remained a complete mystery. They didn't even know if the ebony nebula was made from matter. All they did know for certain was that a hard vacuum lay outside the shell.

Rubra's uncorked brigade of descendants had devoted considerable effort into modifying spaceport MSVs into automated sensor platforms. Five of the vehicles had already been launched, their chemical rockets burning steadily as they raced off into the void. Combustion, at least, remained an inter-universal constant. The same could not be said for their electronic components. Only the most basic of systems would function outside the protection of the shell, and even those decayed in proportion to the distance travelled.

The power circuits themselves failed at about a hundred kilometres, by which time the amount of information transmitted had fallen to near zero. Which was information in itself. The continuum had an intrinsic damping effect on electromagnetic radiation; presumably accounting for the funereal nature of the nebula. Physicists and the personality speculated that such an effect might be influencing electron orbits, which in turn would explain some of the electrical and biochemical problems they were encountering.

The gigantic web of ebony vapour wouldn't touch the probes, either, denying them a sample/return mission. Radar was utterly useless. Even laser radar could only just track the modified MSVs. Ten days after the axial light tube was powered up, they were floundering badly. No experiment or observation they'd run had resulted in the acquisition of hard data. Without that, they couldn't even start to theorize how to get back.

By contrast, life inside the habitat was becoming more ordered, though not necessarily pleasant. Everybody who'd been possessed required medical treatment of some kind. Worst hit were the elderly, whose possessors had quite relentlessly twisted and moulded their flesh into the more vigorous contours sported by youthful bodies. Anyone who'd been overweight was also suffering. As were the thin, the short; anyone with different skin colour to their possessor, different hair. And without exception, everyone's features had been morphed—that came as naturally as breathing to the possessed.

Valisk didn't have anything like the number of medical nanonic packages required to treat the population. Those packages that were available operated at a very low efficiency level. Medical staff who could program them correctly shared the same psychologically fragile demeanour as all the recently de-possessed. And Rubra's descendants

were tremendously busy just trying to keep the habitat supplied with power to give much assistance to the sick. Besides, the numbers were stacked hard and high against them.

After the initial burst of optimism at the return of light, a grim resignation settled among the refugees as more and more of their circumstances were revealed to them. An exodus began. They started walking towards the caverns of the northern endcap. Long caravans of people wound their way out from the starscraper lobby parks, trampling down the dainty parkland paths as they set off down the interior. In many cases, it took several days to walk the twenty kilometre length across the scrub desert. They were searching for a haven where the medical packages would work properly, where there was some kind of organized authority, a decent meal, a place where the ghosts didn't lurk around the boundaries. That grail wasn't to be found amid the decrepit slums encircling the starscraper lobbies.

I don't know what the hell they expect me to do for them, the habitat personality complained to Dariat (among others) as the first groups set out. **There's not enough food in the caverns, for a start.**

Then you'd better work out how to get hold of some, Dariat replied. **Because they've got the right idea. The starscrapers can't support them any more.**

Power within the towers was as erratic as it had been ever since they arrived in the dark continuum. The lifts didn't work. Food secretion organs extruded inedible sludge. Digestion organs were unable to process and flush the waste. Air circulation tubules spluttered and wheezed.

If the starscrapers can't sustain them, then the caverns certainly won't be able to, the personality replied.

Nonsense. Half the trees in your interior are fruiting varieties.

Barely a quarter. In any case, all the orchards are down at the southern end.

Then get teams organized to pick the fruit, and strip the remaining supplies from the starscrapers. You'd have to do this, anyway. You are the government here, remember. They'll do as you tell them; they always have. It'll be a comfort having the old authority figure take charge again.

All right, all right. I don't need the psychology lectures.

Order, of a kind, was established. The caverns came to resemble a blend of nomad camps and field hospital triage wards. People slumped where they found a spare patch of ground, waiting to be told what to do next. The personality resumed its accustomed role, and started issuing orders. Cancers and aggravated anorexias were assessed and prioritized, the medical packages distributed accordingly. Like the fusion generators and physics lab equipment, they worked best in the deeper caverns. Teams were formed from the healthiest, and assigned to food procurement duties. There were also teams to strip the starscrapers of equipment, clothes, blankets—a broad range of essentials. Transport had to be organized.

The ghosts followed faithfully after their old hosts, of course, flittering across the desert during the twilight hours to skulk about in the hollows and crevices decorating the base of the northern endcap during the day. Naked hostility continued to act as an intangible buffer, preventing them from entering any of the subterranean passages.

It also expelled Dariat. The refugees didn't distinguish between ghosts. In any case, had they discovered he was the architect of their current status, their antipathy would probably have wiped him out altogether. His one consolation was that the personality was now part self. It wouldn't disregard him and his needs as an annoying irritation.

In part he was right, though the assumption of privilege was an arrogant one—the pure Dariat of old. However, in these strange, dire times, there were even useful jobs to be had for cooperative ghosts. The personality gave him Tolton as a partner, and detailed the pair of them to take an inventory of the starscrapers.

“Him!” Tolton had exclaimed in dismay when Erentz explained his new duties.

She looked from the shocked and indignant street poet to the fat ghost with his mocking smile. “You worked well together before,” she ventured. “I’m proof of that.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Okay. Most of that row need seeing to.” She gestured at the long line of beds along the polyp wall. It was one of eight similar rows in the vaulting cavern; made up from mattresses or clustered pillows hurriedly shoved into a loose kind of order. The ailing occupants were wrapped in dirty blankets like big shivering pupas. They moaned and drooled and soiled themselves as the nanonic packages sluggishly repaired their damaged cells. Their helpless state meant they needed constant nursing. And there were few enough people left over from the teams prospecting the habitat able to do that.

“Which starscraper do we start with?” Tolton asked.

Each starscraper took at least three days to inventory properly. They’d adopted a comfortable routine by the time they started on their third, the Djerba. The tower had survived Valisk’s recent calamities with minimal damage. Kiera’s wrecking teams hadn’t got round to “reclaiming” it from Rubra’s control. There had been few clashes between possessed and servitors inside before it was abandoned. That meant it should contain plenty of useful items. They just needed cataloguing.

To send the work teams down on a see/grab brief was in-

efficient, especially as there were so few of them. And the personality's thought routines had almost been banished from the habitat's extremities; its memories of room contents were unreliable at best.

"Mostly offices," Tolton decided as he waved a lightstick around. He was holding one in his hand, with another two slung across his chest on improvised straps. Together, the three units provided almost as much illumination as one working at full efficiency.

"Looks like it," Dariat said. They were on the twenty-third floor vestibule, where the walls were broken by anonymously identical doors. Tall potted plants in big troughs were wilting, deprived of light their leaves were turning yellow-brown and falling onto the blue and white carpet.

They moved down the vestibule, reading names on the doors. So far offices had resulted in very few worthwhile finds; they'd learned that unless the company was a hardware or medical supplier there was little point in going in and searching. Occasionally the personality's localized memory would recall a useful item, but the neural strata was becoming more incapable with each floor they descended.

"Thirty years," Tolton mused. "That's a long time to hate." There hadn't been much else to do except swap life stories.

Dariat smiled in recollection. "You'd understand if you'd ever seen Anastasia. She was the most perfect girl ever to be born."

"Sounds like I'll have to write about her some time. But I think your story is more interesting. Man, there's a lot of suffering in you. You died for her, you actually did it. Actually went and killed yourself. I thought that kind of thing really did only happen in poems and Russian novels."

“Don’t be too impressed. I only did it after I knew for sure souls existed. Besides—” He gestured down at his huge frame and grubby toga. “I wasn’t losing a lot.”

“Yeah? Well I’m no sensewise star, but I’m hanging on to what I’ve got for as long as I can. *Especially* now I know there are souls.”

“Don’t worry about the beyond. You can leave it behind if you really want to.”

“Tell that to the ghosts upstairs. In fact, I’m even keener to hang on to my body while we’re in this continuum.”

Tolton stopped outside a sensewise recording studio, and gave Dariat a shrewd look. “You’re in touch with the personality, is there any chance of us getting out of here?”

“Too early to say. We really don’t know very much about the dark continuum yet.”

“Hey, this is me you’re talking to. I survived the whole occupation, you know. Quit with the company line and level with me.”

“I wasn’t going to hold anything back. The one conjecture all my illustrious relatives are worried about is the lobster pot.”

“Lobster pot?”

“Once you get in, you can’t get out. It’s the energy levels, you see. Judging by the way our energy is being absorbed by this continuum’s fabric it doesn’t have the same active energy state. We’re louder and stronger than normal conditions here. And that strength is slowly being drained away, just by being here. It’s an entropy equilibrium effect. Everything levels out in the end. So if we take height as a metaphor, we’re at the bottom of a very deep hole with our universe at the top; which means it’s going to take a hell of an effort to lift ourselves out again. Logically, we need to escape through some kind of wormhole. But even if we knew how to align its terminus coordinates so that it opens

inside our own universe, it's going to be incredibly difficult to generate one. Back in our universe, they took a lot of very precisely focused energy to open, and the nature of this continuum works against that. With this constant debilitation effect, it may not be possible to concentrate enough energy, it'll dissipate before it reaches critical distortion point."

"Shit. There's got to be something we can do."

"If those rules do apply, our best bet is to try and send a message out. That's what the personality and my relatives are working towards. If they know where we are, the Confederation might be able to open a wormhole to us from their side."

"*Might be able?*"

"All new suggestions welcome. But as it stands, getting them to lower us a rope is the best we can come up with."

"Some rescue plan. The Confederation has its own problems right now."

"If they can learn how to grab us back, they'll be half way to solving them."

"Sure."

They reached the end of the vestibule and automatically turned round.

Nothing here, Dariat reported. We're moving down to the twenty-fourth floor.

All right, the personality replied. There's a hotel, the Bringnal, a couple of floors down from where you are now. Check its main linen store, we need more blankets.

You're going to ask one of the teams to lug blankets up twenty-five floors?

All the large hoards above that level have been used. And right now it's easier to find new ones than wash the old; nobody's got enough energy for that.

All right. Dariat faced Tolton, taking care to exaggerate his speech. “They want us to find blankets.”

“Sounds like a real priority job we got ourselves here.” Tolton slithered through a partly open muscle membrane and into the stairwell. The quivering lips didn’t bother him nearly so much now.

Dariat followed him, taking care to use the gap. He could slip through solid surfaces, he’d found, if he really wanted to. It was like sinking through ice.

One of the random power surges flowered around them. Electrophorescent cells shone brightly again, illuminating the stairs in stark blue-tinged light. A jet of foggy air streamed out of a tubule vent, sounding like a sorrowful sigh. A thin film of grey water was slicking every surface. Tolton could see the breath in front of his face. He gripped the handrail tighter, fearful of slipping.

“We’re not going to be able to salvage stuff from the starscrapers for much longer,” Tolton said, wiping his hand against his leather jacket. “They’re getting worse.”

“You should see what kind of state the ducts and tubules are in.”

The street poet grunted in resentment. He was actually eating a lot better than most of the population. Inventory duties had a great many perks. The private apartments with their small stocks of quality food and fashionable clothes were his to pick over as he wished. The salvage teams were only interested in the larger stores that were in restaurants and bars. And now the endless succession of lightless floors no longer bothered him, he was glad to be away from the caverns with all their suffering—and smell.

Dariat.

The startled tone made him halt. **What?**

There’s something outside.

Affinity made him aware of the consternation spreading

through his relatives, most of whom were in the counter-rotating spaceport and the caverns.

Show me.

One of the slow flares of red and blue phosphorescence was shimmering through the ebony nebula, sixty kilometres away from the southern endcap. As it dwindled, several more began to bloom in the distance, sending pastel waves of light washing across the gigantic habitat's shell. The personality didn't believe the sudden increase in frequency was a coincidence. It was busy concentrating on collecting the images from its external sensitive cells. Once again, Dariat was uncomfortably aware of the effort expended in what should be a simple observation routine.

A speck of hoary-grey flitted among the strands of blackness, snapping in and out of view. Following the smooth curving motions put Dariat in mind of a skier, the thing's course was very much like a slalom run. Every turn brought it closer to Valisk.

The nebula doesn't get out of its way, the personality remarked. It's dodging the braids.

That implies a controlling intelligence, or at least animal-level instinct.

Absolutely.

The initial consternation of Rubra's descendants had given way to a slick buzz of activity. Those out in the spaceport were activating systems, aligning them on the visitor. An MSV was powered up, ready for an inspection/interception flight.

An MSV can't match that kind of manoeuvrability, Dariat said. The visitor performed a fast looping spiral around a grainy black curlicue, shooting off in a new direction parallel to Valisk's shell, fifteen kilometres distant. Visual resolution was improving. The visitor was about a hundred metres across, appearing like a disk of ragged

petals. **Even a voidhawk would have trouble making rendezvous.**

The visitor darted behind another frayed column of blackness. When it re-emerged it was soaring almost at right angles to its original course. Its petals were bending and flexing.

They look like sails to me, Dariat said.

Or wings. Although I don't understand what it could be pushing against.

If this continuum has such a low energy state, how come it can move so fast?

Beats me.

Several spaceport dishes started tracking the visitor. They began transmitting the standard CAB xenoc interface communication protocol on a multi-spectrum sweep. Dariat allowed his affinity bond to decline to a background whisper. "Come on," he told a frowning Tolton. "We've got to find a window."

The visitor didn't respond to the interface protocol. Nor did it show any awareness of the radar pulses fired at it. That was perhaps understandable, given that they produced no return signal. The only noticeable change as it spun and danced ever-closer was the way shadows congealed around it. Visually it actually appeared to grow smaller, as though it were flying away from the habitat.

That's like the optical distortion effect which the possessed use to protect themselves with, Dariat said. He and Tolton had found a snug bar called Horner's on the twenty-fifth floor. The two big oval windows were misted over inside, forcing Tolton to wipe them clean with one of the coarse table cloths. His breath kept splashing against the icy glass, condensing immediately.

Well we did choose a realm suitable for ghosts, the personality said.

I've never heard of a ghost that looked like that.

The visitor was within five kilometres of the shell now, about where the filigree of nebula strands began. There was only empty space between it and the habitat now.

Maybe it's scared to come any closer, the personality said. **I am considerably larger.**

Have you tried an affinity call?

Yes. It didn't respond.

Oh. Well. Just a thought.

The visitor left the convoluted weave of the nebula and flashed towards the vast bulk of the habitat. By now its deceptive *glamour* had reduced it to a rosette of oyster ribbons twirling gracelessly in the wake of a fluctuating warp point. The image of the nebula and its strange borealis storms fluxed and bent as the visitor traversed them; oscillating between iridescent scintillations and a black boundary deeper than an event horizon. Nothing about it remained stable.

It streaked over to within fifty metres of the shell then veered round to follow the curve, wriggling wildly from side to side. The quick serpentine orbit allowed it to cover a considerable portion of the habitat's exterior.

It's searching, the personality said. **That implies a degree of organisation. It has to be sentient.**

Searching for what?

A way in, I imagine. Or something it can recognize, some method of establishing communication.

Do any of the spaceport defences still work? Dariat asked.

You have to be bloody joking. We need all the allies we can get.

Before we fused, you used to be the mother of all suspicious neurotic bastards. I think that would be a preferable attitude for you right now.

Well that's the effect of your mature calming influ-

ence for you. So you've only got yourself to blame. But don't worry, I'm not going to send the MSV after it.

Thank Tarrug for that.

Our visitor should be coming over your horizon any second now. Perhaps your eyes will do better than my sensitive cells.

"Wipe the glass again," Dariat told Tolton.

The soaking table cloth smeared the moisture in long streaks. Tiny flecks of frost were glistening dull white over the rest of the big oval. Tolton switched off two of his light-sticks. Both of them peered forward. The visitor arched over the rim of the shell, lensing thin spires of vermilion and indigo light as it came. They wavered in the runnels of water, wobbling insubstantially before sinking back down into the visitor's core. Now all that remained was a black knot in the continuum's fabric racing over the dark rust-coloured polyp.

Tolton's weak grin was bloated with uncertainty. "Am I being paranoid, or is that heading towards us?"

In the earlier time and place, long ago and far away, they had called themselves the Orgathé. Now, names had lost all meaning and relevance, or perhaps they themselves had devolved into something else, such was the way of this atrocious existence. There were many others adrift in the dark continuum, sharing their fate. Identity was no longer singular. A myriad of racial traits had blended and faded into a singleton over the aeons.

Purpose, though, purpose remained steadfast. The quest for light and strength, a return to the sweet heights from whence they had all fallen. A dream sustained even within the mélange. Few forms existed now outside of the mélange. The process of diminution claimed every life to fall into these depths. But this one had risen yet again, buoyed up by the tides of chaotic chance that rioted within

the mélange, spat out to roam the murk for as long as it had strength. The freeflying state of such escapees was still that of the Orgathé, though the essence of many others rode upon its wings. Its chimerical shape was a tortured mockery of the once glorious avian lords who ruled the swift air currents of their homeworld.

Ahead of it now drifted the exotic object. It was composed of a substance to be found only in the oldest of the Orgathé's memories, those that pre-dated the dark continuum. How strange that it could barely recognize the antecedent of its own salvation.

Matter. Solid organized matter. Alive with a heat so fierce it took the Orgathé some time to acclimatise to the radiance; elevating itself to a near ecstatic level of warmth. Incredibly, just within the scorching surface, a sheet of life energy burned bright and vigorous. The entire object was a single mighty entity. Yet passive. Vulnerable. This was a feast which would sustain a huge proportion of the mélange for a long time. It might even trigger a total dispersal.

The Orgathé slithered close to the object's surface, feeling the mind within follow its flight. Vast swirls of rich thought flowed underneath it as it basked in the warmth. But there was no way to reach the abundant life-energy through the hard surface. If the Orgathé attempted to claw its way through, it would surely incinerate itself. Contact with so much heat for so long could probably not be sustained. But the craving within itself from proximity to so much vital life-energy was overwhelming.

There must be some way in. Some orifice or chink. The Orgathé coasted along over the object, heading for the spikes radiating out from the centre. They were smaller, weaker than the rest of it. Long hollow minarets leaking their energy away into the dark continuum. The life-energy was shallower here, the heat not so intense. Each of the

structures was broken by thousands of dark ovals, curtained by cooler sheets of transparent matter. Light twinkled briefly through some of them, never lasting long. Except one. A single oval burning steadily.

The Orgathé glided eagerly towards it. Two flames of life-energy gleamed behind the transparent sheet. One naked, the other clad in hot matter; both enraging the Orgathé's craving. It surged forward.

"FUCK!" Tolton screamed. He dived to one side, scattering tables and chairs. Dariat jumped the other way just as the Orgathé hit the window. Frost blossomed like a living thing, strands of long delicate crystals multiplying across the glass, then reaching out through the air. Shapes moved on the other side of the hoary fur, dark indistinct serpents, thicker than a human torso, that could be tentacles or tongues scrabbling furiously at the outer surface. The unmistakable grinding shriek of deep score lines being ripped into the material penetrated the bar, drowning out Tolton's terrified cries.

Do something! Dariat wailed.

You name it, I'll do it.

Tolton was scuttling backwards on his hands and legs, unable to take his eyes from the window. The serpent shapes were writhing with rabid aggression as they clawed their way through. A badly stressed *snap* sounded above the vicious squealing; corresponding to a thin dark shadow materializing across the frosted window. Furniture was rattling, shaking its way erratically across the floor. Glasses and bottles abandoned on top of the marble bar juddered vigorously and tumbled off.

It's coming through! Dariat cried. When he tried to clamber to his feet, he discovered he didn't have the strength. Fatigue was numbing every limb.

“Kill it!” Tolton bellowed.

We can try and zap it, the personality said, like we did the possessed.

Just bloody do it!

It might kill you as well; we don't know.

You're part me. Do you seriously think I want *that* to catch me?

Very well.

The personality began to re-route its patched-up power supply. Diverting current away from the axial light tube and the caverns, pumping the precarious fusion generators up to their maximum output. Electricity poured back into the Djerba starscraper's organic conductor grid. The first-floor windows blazed with golden light; mechanical and electronic systems came alive in frantic chitters of movement and data emissions. Milliseconds later the second floor sprang back to life. The third, fourth . . .

Dazzling shafts of light sliced out from the Djerba's windows, piercing the gloom outside. They snapped downward storey by storey towards the beleaguered twenty-fourth floor. The personality gathered its major thought routines and plunged them down into the starscraper, a sensation like diving into a pitch-black well shaft. Bitek networks were swiftly resurrected around its descending mentality.

A dead zone was concentrated around Horner's window. The external polyp was so cold the personality could no longer calibrate it. Living cells deeper in had frozen solid. The personality could feel vibrations running through the floor as the Orgathé pounded and scraped against the window.

Junctions within the organic conductor web switched polarity, high order sub-routines cancelled the safety limiters. Every erg of power from the fusion generators was channelled into Horner's. Ceiling strips of electrophorescent

cells ignited, flooding the bar with searing white light. Organic conductors behind the walls fused, burning out long lines of polyp in a cascade of amber sparks. Incandescent arcs stormed through the air as a lethal charge of electrons was fired into the external wall.

Coming on top of the heat and life-energy, the electron hammer blow was just too much. The Orgathé recoiled from the window, appendages flailing madly as the streams of alien energy churned within its body. There was a brief glimpse of sinuous chrome-black tendrils bristling with curving blades coiling back protectively around a bulbous midsection. Ragged wing petals began to flex. Then the distortion smeared it with refracted scintillations from the gleaming starscraper, and it shot away at a bruising acceleration. Within seconds it was lost inside the nebula.

Dariat took his arm away from his face. The tremendous barrage of noise and light saturating the bar had faded. A few sparks were still popping out from the deep scorch marks in the walls. The glossy electrophorescent cells had shattered and shrivelled to rain across the floor, their fragments curling up, puffing out licks of smoke.

You all right, my boy? the personality enquired.

Dariat looked down at himself. The feeble yellow glow from Tolton's remaining lightstick showed his spectral body unchanged. Though possibly more translucent than usual. He still felt terribly weak. **I think so. I'm bloody cold, though.**

Could have been worse.

Yeah. Dariat felt the personality's major routines withdrawing from the starscraper. The lights were going off again in the upper floors, autonomic bitek functions shutting down.

He struggled to his knees, shivering intensely. When he looked round he could see ice encrusted on every surface,

turning the bar into an arctic grotto. The electrical discharge had melted very little of it. That was probably what had saved them; it was several centimetres thick over the window. And the fracture pattern in the glass underneath was unnervingly pronounced.

Tolton was spasming on the floor, spittle flecking his lips. His hair was rimed with frost. Each shallow panted breath was revealed in a cloud of white vapour.

“Shit.” Dariat staggered over to him. Just in time he remembered not to try and touch the tormented body. **Get a medical team down here.**

Oh yeah. I'll get right on it. They should be with you in about three hours.

Shit. He knelt down next to Tolton, and leaned right over, staring into delirious eyes. “Hey.” Limpid fingers clicked right in front of Tolton’s nose. “Hey. Tolton. Can you hear me? Try and steady your breathing. Take a deep breath. Come on! You’ve got to calm your body down. Breathe.”

Tolton’s teeth chattered. He gurgled, cheeks bulging.

“That’s it. Come on. Breathe. Deep. Suck that air down. Please.”

The street poet’s lips compressed slightly, making a whistling sound.

“Good. Good. And again. Come on.”

It took several minutes for Tolton’s bucking to subside. His erratic breathing reduced to sharp gasps. “Cold,” he grunted.

Dariat smiled down at him. “Ho boy. You had me worried there. We really don’t need any more ghosts floating around in here right now.”

“Heart. My heart. God! I thought . . .”

“It’s okay. It’s over.”

Tolton nodded roughly, and tried to lever himself up.

“Stop! You just lie there for another minute longer. There’s no paramedic service any more, remember? First thing we need is some proper food for you. I think there’s a restaurant on this floor.”

“No way. As soon as I can get up, we’re leaving. No more starscrapers.” Tolton coughed, and started to glance round. “Jesus.” He scowled. “Are we safe?”

“Sure. For now, anyway.”

“Did we kill it?”

Dariat grimaced. “Not exactly, no. But we gave it a hell of a fright.”

“That lightning bolt didn’t kill it?”

“No. It flew off, though.”

“Shit. I nearly died.”

“Yeah. But you didn’t. Concentrate on that.”

Tolton slowly eased himself into a sitting position, wincing at each tiny movement. Once he was propped up against a table leg, he reached out and caressed the ice which was engulfing a chair, fingers stroking curiously. He gave Dariat a grim look with badly bloodshot eyes. “This isn’t going to have a happy ending, is it?”

The seven hellhawks glided in towards Monterey, acknowledging the query from the SD network defence as the sensors locked on.

The Sevilla SD network was a hell of a lot stronger than anything we were briefed about, they told Jull von Holger, when he asked how the mission had gone. Seven frigates were lost, and we’re all that’s left of our squadron.

Did the infiltration succeed?

We think over a hundred got through.

Excellent.

Neither side said anything more. Jull von Holger could

sense the quiet rage of the surviving hellhawks. He chose not to mention the fact to Emmet Mordden; the hellhawks were all Kiera's problem.

Go straight to the docking ledges, Hudson Proctor told the hellhawks. We've already cleared the pedestals. You'll be fed as soon as you land. He focused on Kiera's face. She smiled her brightest ingénue smile, pouring as much gratitude into her thoughts as possible for her deputy to relay. "Well done. I know it's not easy, but believe me there won't be many more of these ridiculous seeding missions." She arched an eyebrow in query to Hudson. "Was there a reply?"

He coloured slightly at the emotional backlash to her little speech that flooded the affinity band. "No. They're pretty tired."

"I understand." Her sweet expression hardened. "End your contact."

Hudson Proctor nodded curtly, signalling it had been done.

"You hope there ain't going to be many more seeding flights, you mean," Luigi said indolently.

The three of them were sitting in one of the smaller, more private lounges above the asteroid's docking ledges, waiting for the last member of their group to arrive. Kiera's small revolution had picked up a respectable degree of momentum over the last ten days. The success of the seeding flights had bolstered Al's popularity and authority considerably. But that triumph came with a high price in terms of starships, and quite a few people were starting to acknowledge that the infiltration campaign was short-termism. Slowly, quietly, Kiera had exploited that. Being able to see the dissatisfaction and worry in people's minds gave her a handy advantage when it came to spotting potential recruits.

Silvano Richmann came in and took his seat around the coffee table. There was a cluster of bottles in the centre, he poured himself a shot of whisky.

“The Sevilla flotilla is back,” Kiera told him. “Seven frigates and five hellhawks got zapped.”

“Fuck.” Silvano shook his head in dismay. “Al’s putting together another fifteen of these missions. He just doesn’t see it.”

“He sees it the way he wants to see it,” Kiera said. “They’re successful in that they’re landing infiltrators each time. The Confederation is going apeshit. We’re knocking off five of their planets a day. It buys him complete respect and loyalty with the Organization down on the planet.”

“While my fleet gets chopped to shit,” Luigi snapped. “That goddamn whore Jezzibella. She’s got him by the balls.”

“Not just your fleet,” Kiera said. “I’m losing hellhawks fast. Much more of this, and they’ll leave.”

“Where to?” Silvano asked. “They’ve got to stick with you. That was a neat sting you pulled on them with the food.”

“The Edenists keep making offers to try and lure them away,” Hudson said. “Etchells keeps us informed. The latest offer is that they’ll actually accept the blackhawk host personality into their habitat neural strata, leaving our guys as the only soul in there. In exchange they get all the food they want, providing they just cooperate with the Edenists, help them find out about our powers.”

“Shit,” Silvano muttered. “We gotta stop this. I’d be mighty tempted by any offer that got rid of this body’s host soul.”

“Wouldn’t we all,” Kiera said. She sat back and sipped at her wine. “Okay, the question is, how far are you prepared to go?”

“Pretty goddamn obvious for me,” Luigi said. “I’ll waste that shit Capone myself. Busting me down to a fucking errand boy. Nobody could have handled Tranquillity any different.”

“Silvano?”

“He’s got to go. But there’s one condition for me signing up with you. And it ain’t negotiable.”

“What’s that?” Kiera asked, though she was fairly sure she knew. Silvano was feared as Al’s chief enforcer, but he did have one major difference with his boss.

“After we do this, there are no more non-possessed in the Organization. We take them all out. Understood?”

“Suits me,” Kiera said.

“No way!” Luigi shouted. “I can’t run my fucking fleet with just possessed crews. You know that. You’re shitting on me here, man.”

“Yeah? Who says there’s going to be a fucking fleet after this. Right, Kiera? We’re doing this for our own safety. We’re going to take New California out of here; out of this universe. Just like all the other possessed have done. And for that, we can’t afford no non-possessed to be around. Come on, Luigi, you know that. As long as there’s one of them left, they’re going to be plotting and scheming how to get rid of us. For Christ’s sake. We steal their bodies from them. If you was alive right now, you wouldn’t give jack shit about anything else other than getting them back from us.” He slammed his tumbler back down on the table. “We eliminate all the non-possessed, or there’s no deal.”

“Then there’s no fucking deal,” Luigi stormed.

Kiera held up her hands. “Boys, boys, this is how Al wins. You ever heard of divide and rule? All of us have different interests, and the only way we can hang on to them is if we’re part of the Organization. Only the Organization needs a fleet, and hellhawks, and lieutenants that have to be

kept in line.” She shot Silvano a significant look. “He’s made it complicated so that we have to support him to keep our own places. What we’ve got to do is dismantle the Organization, but rig whatever’s next so that we three come out on top.”

“Like what?” Luigi asked suspiciously.

“Okay, you want the fleet back, right? Tell me why?”

“Because it’s fucking mine, you dumb broad. I built that fleet up from nothing. I was here right from the start, the day Al walked into San Angeles City Hall.”

“Fair enough. But all the fleet did was make you a player. Do you really want to risk flying to Confederation planets and going up against their SD networks? They’re getting wise to us now. These seeding flights are pissing them off bad. They’re killing us out there, Luigi.”

“So? Like I should care. I’m the admiral. I don’t have to go with them every time.”

“The whole fleet doesn’t have to go anywhere, Luigi; that’s the point. What you need is to exchange the fleet for something else that will keep you in the game, right?”

Luigi eyed her cautiously. “Maybe.”

“That’s what we’ve got to work out between the three of us. Right now, we can carry the Organization if we eliminate Capone. But the Organization’s a dead end. Dishing out tokens instead of money, for Christ’s sake. If we take it over, we’ve got to use it to establish a new type of government. One that has us at the top.”

“Like what?” Silvano asked. “The second New California leaves this universe then nobody needs any kind of government.”

“Says who?” Kiera sneered. “You’ve seen the cities down there. Unless the Organization keeps putting the squeeze on the farmers to supply food, they’d collapse overnight. If New California escapes this universe, every-

one on it is going to have to turn into some kind of medieval peasant just to stay alive. And that's such bullshit. Five per cent of the population working in the fields can sustain the rest of us. Now I don't know what kind of society we can build on the other side, but I'm damned if I'm going to live in a mud hut and spend my days walking behind a horse's arse to plough a field. Especially when someone else can be made to do it for me."

"So what are you saying here?" Silvano asked. "That we keep the farmers working while the rest of us live it up?"

"Basically, yeah. It's just like what I've done with the hellhawks, but on a much bigger scale. We have to keep the farmers farming, and we have to be in charge of distributing the food to the urban areas. Convert the Organization into a giant supplier; and the only people who get supplied, are the ones who we say."

"You'd need a fucking army for that!" Luigi exclaimed.

Kiera gestured magnanimously. "There you are then. That's what you turn the fleet into. Find a portable weapon that's effective against the possessed: something like those bastard serjeants use on Mortonridge, manufacture it up here, and equip our supporters with it. Use the same chain of command network that's already in place, but with a land army to back it up instead of the SD platforms."

"That might work," Silvano said. "So if Luigi's got himself an army, what do I get?"

"Communications are vital, otherwise this whole thing will just collapse. And we'd need to be more subtle with the farmers than forcing them at gunpoint. That's an enforcer's job."

He poured himself another whisky. "Okay. Let's talk about it."

Western Europe always took his dogs for a walk himself. Dog ownership was a healthy reminder of responsibility; you either do it properly or not at all. There weren't many crises which could make him skip a day. Though he suspected one of his staff was going to have to start substituting fairly soon.

The formal lawns extended for over three hundred metres from the back of the house (they were yards back in the days when he bought the estate, but even he had fallen to using that appalling modern French metric system now). A hedge of ancient yews marked the end, ten metres high, laden with their squishy dull-red berries. He pushed through the gap marked by crumbling stone pillars that used to be gateposts, making a mental note to get a gardening construct to prune the twigs. The carpet of dry needles compressed beneath his brogues as the Labradors scampered round him. It was meadowland beyond, the shaggy grass thick with daisies and buttercups. A gentle slope led down to a long still lake eight hundred metres away. He whistled softly, and threw his stick.

"Found them," North America datavised.

"Who?"

"The possessed Quinn Dexter left behind in New York. Just to make you more insufferable, you were right. He went for the Light Bringer sect."

"Ah." The Labradors found the stick, one of them clamped it in his jaw. Western Europe slapped his hands on his thighs, and the dogs started to bound back to him. "How bad is it?"

"Not too bad, I believe. I lost the High Magus, of course. I guess he suicided. But there are several actives left. Two of them called me before the energistic effect glitched their neural nanonics. They're taking over the covens one at a

time. Eight down already, including the arcology headquarters in the Leicester skyscraper.”

“Numbers?”

“That’s the good news. About ten possessed to each coven. The moron acolytes are actually welcoming them, and doing as they’re told. Their new masters are just sitting tight, and holding some pretty gross orgies. They’ve made sure each coven’s electronics are switched off, not that many of their units were ever interfaced with the net anyway.”

“I knew it. They’re moving with a purpose.”

“Definite infiltration tactics. They’ve got their foothold, now they’re waiting.”

“If they’re spreading to each dome, then some of them must be on the move.”

“Yes, I know. And they’ve had it easy in all the confusion. With all those riots resulting from the vac-train shutdown there’s been a lot of vandalism; that makes it tough for the AI to locate glitches.”

“So when are you going to hit the covens?”

“Good question. I wanted your opinion on that. If I hit them now, then whoever’s moving about will be warned and go to ground. That’ll leave New York vulnerable.”

Western Europe took the stick from the Labrador, and paused. “Yes, but if you wait until every coven is taken over, you’ll have a lot of the bastards to deal with. Someone will inevitably get through the police cordons, and you’ll be back in the same leaky boat. How many covens can you monitor in real time?”

“All of them. That’s already being done. Those I have no direct access to are being watched by agents.”

“Then you’ve got it covered. Wait until a group of possessed shows up at a new coven, then take them all out together.”

“And if there’s more than one group moving round?”

“I’m paranoid, but am I paranoid enough. What sort of assault were you planning?”

“GISD tactical team, with shoot to kill orders. Wipe each coven out, I don’t want prisoners to interrogate. Fletcher is still cooperating with Halo’s science teams.”

“Given the stakes, here, I’d suggest using a gamma pulse against them first. You’ll get peripheral casualties, but it’ll be nothing like as bad as an SD strike. Send the tactical teams in to secure and mop up afterwards.”

“All right. I can live with that.”

“We might even get a vote of confidence from our illustrious colleagues.”

“Not even this century’s geneering can make pigs fly yet. I’ll get the assault organized for three hundred hours EST.”

“If you need any help, just whistle.” Western Europe smiled happily, and slung the stick high into the air.

Not even B7 could block news of events inside New York from spilling out across the global net. Speculation had been hot and intense ever since the arcology’s vac-trains had been shut down after the Dome One “incident.” Several riots had been captured by rover reporters; two of whom had been badly injured during the coverage, adding extra spice to the sensewise. Then eleven hours later, the North American Commissioner had appeared before the press once more to announce the investigation had been completed, and confirm the incident was not caused by the possessed. It was in fact a professional assassination carried out in Grand Central Station involving a sophisticated weapons implant and a chameleon suit. Business rivals of the deceased Bud Johnson were currently being sought for questioning.

The vac-trains had been re-opened. The rioters and loot-

ers had cleared the streets. The police reinforcements had been stood down. Celebrity news presenters were given extended programmes to cover the paranoia raging across the planet. The arrival of the *Mount's Delta* appeared to have acted as the trigger for a multitude of small events that were blamed on the possessed, culminating in the Grand Central Station disturbance. And Capone's recent switch in tactics to flying infiltration attacks against Confederation planets served to exacerbate people's fears. The Confederation Navy and local SD networks seemed unable to prevent the Organization's strike flotillas. After the quarantine appeared to be preventing the spread, worlds were starting to fall again. Everyone, ran the feeling, was vulnerable.

But the lifting of the vac-train restrictions eased the tension a little, right up until 2:50 EST when they were abruptly shut again. Frustrated commuters datavised the information to the news agencies within ten seconds. New York's rover reporters, who had descended en masse into the arcology's bars after a hard day's sensationalising, were hauled back out onto the concrete canyons by their editors. Agencies which datavised information requests to the arcology's civic authority were met with blank puzzlement. Nobody had told the graveyard shift about the vac-trains. The police precinct houses were equally baffled. Even the urgent requests to in-house sources produced a blank, at least in the ten minutes that counted.

With all of the B7 supervisors on-line and observing, North America gave the order to launch the assault.

The Internal Security Directorate tactical teams had been arriving in New York ever since the vac-trains started running again. By the time the assault was launched, there were over eight hundred personnel deployed around the various sect covens. They were all armed with projectile weapons loaded with chemical or electric rounds. Comple-

menting them were the gamma lasers. Intended for anti-terrorist interception situations, they were powerful enough to penetrate at least five metres of carbon-concrete. Such a range would allow the teams to strike at targets holed up deep inside skyscrapers and megatowers. One would usually be sufficient to eliminate an entire room full of hostiles instantaneously.

North America had ringed each coven with nine, while the Leicester skyscraper had fifteen ranged against it. The supervisor's deepest worry was that the possessed with their extended senses would discover the preparations. To try and deny them any hint, engineering mechanoids had been used throughout the day to unpack and install the gamma lasers in surrounding buildings. Give-away human supervision had been kept to an absolute minimum. As well as the gamma lasers, North America had the exits and service tunnels rigged to electrify anyone who scuttled down them. That was the most dangerous aspect of the work, but again mechanoids with New York's civic service emblem on their sides trundled along modifying wires and cables without drawing questions or interest.

The tactical teams had assembled several blocks away to avoid attention. North America started to move them forward simultaneously with closing down the vac-trains. He also closed down all road traffic and metro transit carriages inside the arcology, and sealed the domes from each other; an aspect the news agencies didn't realize until a lot later. According to every asset and functional bug infiltrated into the covens, neither the possessed nor the acolytes were aware of the preparations. They didn't even know the tactical teams were advancing.

The gamma ray lasers fired at 2:55 EST. The fifteen beams transfixing the Leicester skyscraper swept through the lower eight stories which made up the sect's headquar-

ters. They used a scan pattern, switching between vertical and horizontal to cover every cubic centimetre. When the beams were aimed right through the core of the skyscraper, the energy was absorbed by the structure, while furnishings and composite walls ignited instantly under the intense radiation barrage. Thick, radiant orange lines were scratched across the carbon-concrete support pillars and floors as the beams traversed the building. The air was superheated, dissolving into its component atoms. Windows detonated outward from the appalling pressure, showering the street below with daggers of glass.

Fire sprinklers burst into life, only for their water to vaporise first into steam then clouds of ions. Glaring blue and violet streamers jettied out of the smashed windows, and fountained up the skyscraper's elevator shafts. Ruptured air-conditioning ducts provided secondary routes for the heatstorm to pervade the building. The entire lower floors were engulfed in a dazzling fireball.

Human bodies caught within the flexing three-dimensional mesh of beams burst apart from the terrible energy input. Their water content exploded into steam as the carbon combusted. When the beams reached the outer sections of the skyscraper, they were powerful enough to pierce clean through the walls. Surrounding skyscrapers were strafed with the radiation, resulting in vast tracts of damage. Then the sharp spires of ions exhaled by the Leicester played across their outer walls, igniting dozens of ordinary fires.

The gamma ray lasers switched off. The night was filled with the roar of flames and the screams of those being burnt alive. There was enough light thrown out from the fires to light the entire district. Unharmed residents of the nearby buildings lucky enough to live on the lower floors rushed onto the street; while those higher up could only stare out

helplessly as the flames took hold. The images they relayed to the news agencies, which were distributed across the planet in real-time, showed the GISD tactical teams marching down every approach road to the Leicester. Against the raging orange flames, their heat-proof flexarmour suits appeared as matt-black silhouettes. Weapons with long snouts were cradled casually on their arms as they walked into the conflagration with astounding nonchalance.

Three times, figures rushed out of the skyscraper's main entrance doors, making their bid for freedom. They were like fire monsters, flames shooting from every part of their bloated figures. The tactical team guns spat short pulses of turquoise flame with quiet efficiency, and the fiery creatures crumpled to burn unhindered on the wide sidewalk.

It was those scenes of perfunctory extermination which finally convinced the world that the possessed had somehow penetrated the titanic defences of the Halo. The political fallout was considerable. A motion of impeachment was put before the Govcentral Grand Senate, condemning the President for not informing the senatorial defence committee in advance. The President, who could hardly publicly admit to knowing nothing about the situation, fired the chiefs of GISD Bureaus 1 through 4, for gross insubordination and overreaching their authority. The GISD's New York chief was charged with reckless homicide, and put under immediate arrest. Such machinations went almost unnoticed by the public, who were fed a continual stream of updates of the on-the-ground aftermath by the news agencies.

Once the tactical teams had confirmed that there were no possessed left alive in any of the sect covens, they withdrew. Only then were the emergency services allowed in. It took ten hours for the fire department mechanoids to extinguish the last fires. Paramedic crews followed them

through the burnt out floors. The arcology hospitals were swamped by casualties. Preliminary insurance damage estimates ran into hundred of millions of G-dollars. Dome One's mayor, in conjunction with the other fourteen mayors of the arcology, instigated an official day of mourning, and opened a bereavement fund.

Officially, one thousand two hundred and thirty-three people died in the assault against the New York possessed; nearly half as a result of being hit by gamma radiation. The rest were either burned or asphyxiated. Over nine thousand needed hospital treatment for minor burns, shock, and other injuries. Double that number lost their homes; with several hundred businesses forced to try and relocate. The vac-trains in and out of New York remained closed.

"Well?" North Pacific asked. It was five hours after the tactical teams had finished their sweep of the covens, and B7 had reconvened to hear the genuine results.

"We got a hundred and eight possessed, that's the best estimate I can provide. There wasn't a hell of a lot left for the forensic crew to analyse after the gamma lasers finished."

"I'm more interested in the ones you didn't eliminate."

"Eight of the electrocution traps we rigged along possible escape routes were triggered. The teams pulled eleven corpses out of various ducts and service tunnels."

"Quit stalling!" South America said. "Did any of them get out?"

"Probably, yes. Forensics thinks maybe three or four people got past the electrocution traps. There's no way of telling if they were possessed or not, but it would take one inhumanly tough mother to survive what we threw at them."

"Shit! We're right back where we started. You're going to have to initiate this kind of slaughter operation each time

they regroup. Only now they don't have any convenient sects to flee back to."

"Well this time, I'm going to insist on keeping New York's vac-trains shut," North Pacific said. "We can't let them get out of New York."

"I quite agree," Western Europe said.

"Only because you can't risk another vote."

"There's no need to get personal. We remain on top of the situation."

"Really? Where's Dexter, then?"

"When the time comes, I will eliminate him."

"You're so full of shit."

The K5 star had a catalogue number, but that was all. Only three planets were in orbit around it, two of them smaller than Mars, and a gas giant fifty-thousand kilometres in diameter. Undistinguished in astronomical terms, it lay forty-one light-years outside the loose boundary of space claimed by the Confederation. There had been a single scoutship visit in 2530, which quickly established its worthlessness. As far as official records were concerned, that was the first and last time humans had visited the barren system. Certainly the Navy never bothered with it; their patrols were stretched thin enough as it was searching for illegal activity within the Confederation and through the stars fringing the boundary. Although the surrounding wreath of stars was an obvious location for illegal operations (and several highly dubious independent colony ventures), forty-one light-years was just too far away to justify the expense of regular inspection flights.

Such a safeguard made it ideal for the black cartel. Their antimatter station orbited five million kilometres from the star's surface, a closeness which stretched human materials science to its limit. The radiation, heat, particle, and mag-

netic forces it encountered were appalling. An approaching ship would see it as a simple black disk sailing across the incandescent solar glare. Sixty kilometres in diameter, it cast a significant cone-shaped umbra behind it; a zone insulated from the star's heat, the one place where hell's proverbial snowflake might just have survived. The surface facing the star was a radial concertina array of solid state cells absorbing the incredible blast of heat and converting it directly into electricity. At the back they glowed a gentle pink, utilizing their own shade to radiate the immense thermal load away into space. In total, the array was capable of generating over one and a half terawatts of electricity.

The antimatter production system itself was housed in a cluster of boxy silver-white industrial modules right in the centre of the array. The mundane method of churning out antimatter was essentially unchanged since the late Twentieth Century; although the levels of scale and efficiency had risen considerably since the first few experimental antiprotons had been manufactured in high-energy physics laboratories. Production requires individual protons to be accelerated until their energy becomes greater than a gigaelectron-volt, at which point each one has more energy in its motion than its mass. Once that state has been achieved, they are collided with heavy nuclei, resulting in a spray of elementary particles that includes antiprotons, antielectrons, and antineutrons. These are then separated, collected, cooled, and merged into antihydrogen. But it is that initial proton acceleration stage which absorbs the phenomenal amount of electricity produced by the solar array in its entirety.

The whole operation was overseen by a crew of twenty-five technicians, stationed in a large, heavily-shielded rotating carbotanium wheel that floated deep inside the array's umbra. They had now been joined by eight members of the

Organization to keep them in line. Taking over the station had been absurdly easy.

Because the black cartel took the elementary precaution of installing its own modified neural nanonics in everyone who knew of the station's location, there could only ever be two kinds of visitor: the Confederation Navy on a search and destroy mission, or a legitimate buyer. The arrival of Capone's lieutenants came as a severe shock to the crew. The few hand weapons available were utterly useless against the possessed; their only other option was to kamikaze. Once the Organization's terms and conditions had been laid on the line, that was postponed indefinitely. The same kind of uneasy stand-off balance between need and fear that had claimed New California settled across the station.

After supplying the first Organization convoy with every gram of antimatter held in storage, the station had been operating a full production schedule ever since, attempting to cope with Capone's desperate demands for more. Starships came from New California every five or six days for new supplies.

Admiral Saldana's squadron made no attempt at stealth or subtlety when it jumped into the system, emerging twenty-five million kilometres from the star. Navy starships always had a tremendous advantage against the stations they hunted. Deep inside the star's gravity field, there could be no quick escape for the station's crew. Defensive weapons were almost useless. Not even antimatter propulsion and warheads could produce their usual overwhelming advantage; in such proximity to the star, combat wasp sensors were almost blind.

Standard procedure for the Navy starships was to launch a volley of kinetic projectiles in a retrograde orbit. It was a

tactic that would quickly exhaust the station's stock of drones, leaving them with beam weapons alone. Against a swarm of ten thousand harpoons, their chances of vaporizing every one before it hit was effectively nil. That was assuming the station sensors were even capable of locating the incoming missiles to begin with. In most cases the hellish solar environment completely masked their approach. And the Navy vessels would never issue a warning, the station might never know of their presence until the first missile struck.

All the attackers needed was a single strike against the production system. Any large explosion would inevitably set off a chain reaction within the antimatter storage chambers. The resulting blast could at times be five or six times the size of a planet-buster, depending on how much of the substance was in store.

This time it was going to have to be a little different. Meredith Saldana waited impatiently on the *Arikara's* bridge while the voidhawks deployed around the star in small swallow manoeuvres. Each of them launched a pack of small sensor satellites to scan the huge magnetosphere in which they were all immersed.

Locating the station was easy enough, though the sheer volume of space they were searching through made it a lengthy task. The *Arikara's* tactical situation computer started to receive datavises from the satellites, blending them into a harmonized picture of the whole near-solar environment. When the information was complete, it showed the star as a dark sphere surrounded with graded shells of pale gold translucence. The innermost seethed like a restless sea as the magnetic forces fluxed and coiled, above that they smoothed out considerably.

A tiny knot of twisted copper light was sliding along a circular, five million kilometre orbit. The squadron's com-

parative position was fed in, and Meredith began issuing orders. Because of their vulnerability to the star's heat and radiation, the voidhawks maintained their orbits, enabling them to keep watch for any emerging starships. The Adamist starships flew inward. Eight frigates were vectored into high inclination orbits, a location from which they could launch a kinetic assault on the station. The remaining starships, including *Lady Macbeth*, aligned themselves on an interception course and accelerated along it at three gees.

When they were three million kilometres away, the *Arikara* pointed her main communication dish on the station, and boosted the signal to full strength.

"This communiqué is directed to the station commander," Meredith datavised. "This is the Confederation Navy ship *Arikara*. Your illegal operation is now terminated. Ordinarily, you would be executed for your actions in producing antimatter, but I have been authorized to offer you transport to a Confederation penal colony planet if you cooperate with us. This offer is also applicable to any possessed who are resident at the station. I will require your answer within one hour. Failure to respond will be taken as a refusal to cooperate, and you will be destroyed." He datavised the flight computer to repeat the message, and the squadron waited.

It took ten minutes for a static-heavy signal to emerge from the station. "This is Renko, I'm the guy Al left in charge around here. And I'm telling you to get the fuck out of here before we smear your pansy asses across the sun. You got that clear, pal?"

Meredith glanced across the bridge's acceleration couches to where Lieutenant Grese was lying. The intelligence officer managed to grin, despite the gee force.

“That’s a break,” he said. “We got Capone’s source, no matter what the outcome.”

“I believe the Navy is due a break,” Meredith said. “Especially our section of it.”

“He’ll have to stop those bloody infiltration flights now. His fleet will need all the antimatter they’ve got left to defend New California.”

“Indeed.” Meredith was almost cheerful when he ordered the computer to datavise a reply to the station. “Consult your crew, Renko. You’re in the losing position here. All we have to do is launch a single missile once an hour. You have to fire five each time just to make sure it doesn’t get through. And we’re in no hurry, we can keep shooting at you for a couple of weeks if we have to. There’s just no way you can win. Now are you going to accept my offer, or do you want to go back to the beyond?”

“Nice try, but you don’t mean it. Not for us, leastways. I know you guys, you’ll slam us into zero-tau the second we put our hands up.”

“For what it’s worth, I am Rear Admiral Meredith Saldana, and you have my word that you will be given passage to an uninhabited world capable of supporting human life. Consider your alternatives. If we attack the station, you go back to the beyond, if I’m lying about transporting you to a planet you go back. But there is the very strong possibility that I’m not lying. Can you really reject that hope?”

Along with the rest of the squadron, Joshua had to wait another twenty minutes for the answer. Eventually, Renko agreed to surrender. “Looks like we’re on,” Joshua said. They were accelerating hard again, preventing him from smiling. But there was no hiding the rise of excitement in his labouring voice.

“Christ, the other side of the nebula,” Liol marvelled. “What’s the furthest anyone’s ever been before?”

“A voidhawk scout group travelled six hundred and eighty light years from Earth in 2570,” Samuel replied. “Their course took them directly galactic north, not in this direction.”

“I missed that,” Ashly complained. “Was there anything interesting out there?”

Samuel closed his eyes, questioning the voidhawks racing along their orbits millions of kilometres away. “Nothing unusual, or dramatic. Stars with possible terracompatible planets, stars without. No sentient xenoc species.”

“The Meridian fleet went further,” Beaulieu said.

“Only according to legend,” Dahybi countered. “Nobody knows where they vanished to. In any case, that was centuries ago.”

“Logically then, they must have gone a long way if no one’s ever found them.”

“Found the wreckage, more like.”

“Such pessimism is bad for you.”

“Really? Hey, Monica.” Dahybi lifted one hand to make an appeal before the acceleration made him lower it fast again. “Do your lot know where they went? It could be important if they’re waiting out there for us.”

Monica stared stubbornly at the compartment’s ceiling, a headache building behind her compressed eyeballs that no program could rid her of. She really hated high gees. “No,” she datavised (her throat was suffering along with the rest of her), irritated she couldn’t put any emphasis into her digitalized speech. Not that snapping at the crew would endear her to them, but their relentless discussions of utter trivia were starting to chafe. And she’d possibly got a month or more to go. “The ESA was in its infancy back when the Meridian fleet was launched. Even today I doubt we’d bother planting assets in with a bunch of paradise seeking fools.”

"I don't want to know what's there," Joshua said. "The whole point of this mission is discovery. We're real explorers going out on a limb, first for at least a century."

"Amen to that," Ashly said.

"Where we are now is new for most people," Liol said. "Just look at that station."

"Standard industrial modules," Dahybi said. "Hardly exotic or inspiring." Liol sighed sadly.

"Okay, we're getting close to injection point," Joshua announced. "Systems review, please. How's our fuselage holding out?" The flight computer was datavisaging images from the localized sensors into his neural nanonics. *Lady Mac's* thermo dump panels were fully extended, constantly rotating to present their narrow edges towards the raging star. Their flat surfaces were glowing radiant pink as they expelled the ship's accumulated heat. He'd programmed a permanent spin into their vector, a fifteen minute cycle to ensure the immense thermal input was distributed evenly across the fuselage. Fine manoeuvring was slow, given the additional reaction mass they were carrying, but the balance compensation programs were handling it providing he kept tweaking them.

"No hot spots yet," Sarha reported. "That extra layer of nulltherm foam is doing its job quite well. But it is picking up a lot of particle radiation, far more than we're used to. We'll have to watch that."

"Should lose it when we get behind the shield," Liol said. "Won't be long now."

"See?" Beaulieu told Dahybi. "You are surrounded by optimists."

The squadron's interception ships were sliding into an orbital slot three thousand kilometres behind the antimatter station. If Renko did decide to switch off the storage confinement chambers, the radiation impact from the blast

would tax the shielding on the starships to an uncomfortable degree. But they should be safe. So far, he appeared to be cooperating.

Commander Kroeber was handling the negotiation on how the hand over was to be accomplished. The civil starship already docked at the station was to depart with everyone on board. It would rendezvous with one of the squadron's marine cruisers. The possessed would disembark and proceed directly to the brig under heavily armed guard where they would stay for the duration of the flight. Any indication of them using their energistic power, for whatever reason, would result in a forty-thousand-volt current being run through the brig. The cruiser, accompanied by two frigates, would fly directly to an uninhabited terra-compatible world (currently in the middle of an ice age) where the possessed would be shot down to the tropical-zone surface in one-way descent capsules, with a supply of survival equipment. There would be no further contact with that planet by the Confederation, apart from delivering any further possessed with whom similar exceptional deals had been made.

Kroeber's other offer, that they help the CNIS with its research into energistic power until such time as a solution was found for possession, was summarily rejected.

Once the possessed were safely incarcerated, another marine cruiser would rendezvous with the starship and take off the station's regular crew ready to transport them to a penal planet. Complete control of the station systems was to be handed over to the Navy technical crew, who would remote test their new domain. If total access was confirmed, a third marine cruiser would dock with the station itself, and perform a boarding and securement manoeuvre.

After some haggling, mainly over the contents of the survival equipment they could take with them down to the icy

planet, Renko agreed to the arrangement. *Lady Macbeth's* crew watched the proceedings through the sensors. The hand-over went remarkably smoothly, taking just less than a day. A datavise from the first marine cruiser showed the possessed, dressed defiantly in double-breasted suits, laughing brashly as they were led into the brig. The station crew looked frankly relieved that they'd escaped with exile. They datavised over their access codes without a qualm.

"You may proceed to docking, Captain Calvert," Admiral Saldana datavised. "Lieutenant Grese informs me we are now in full command of the station. There is enough antimatter in storage for your requirements."

"Thank you, sir," Joshua replied. He triggered the fusion drives. The simple course over to the station had been plotted for hours. Accelerate, flip, and decelerate. They were already inside the station's umbra and commencing final rendezvous manoeuvres when the Organization's convoy arrived.

"Eleven of them, sir," Lieutenant Rhoecus said. "Confirmed emergence twenty-three million miles out from the star, eighty-nine million miles from the station."

"Threat assessment?" the admiral enquired. How typical, he thought, that something should come along to thwart the squadron's mission once again.

"Minimal." The Edenist liaison officer appeared almost happy. "*Ilex* and *Oenone* report there are five hellhawks and six frigates in the enemy formation. Their hellhawks can't swallow down to us, not at this altitude. And even if we assume the frigates are armed with antimatter combat wasps, they would take hours to reach us accelerating continually. I've never heard of a combat wasp that has an hour's fuel in it."

"They'd have to be custom built," Grese said. "Which is

unlikely for Capone. And even if they do exist, we can evade them easily at this distance.”

“Then Calvert can carry on?” the admiral asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Kroeber, inform the *Lady Macbeth* to proceed as planned. I’d appreciate it if the good captain didn’t dawdle.”

“Aye, sir.”

Meredith reviewed the tactical display. The *Oenone* was barely five million kilometres from the cluster of Organization ships. “Lieutenant Rhoecus, voidhawks to group together twenty-five million kilometres directly above the antimatter station. I don’t want them isolated, it might give the hellhawks ideas. Commander Kroeber, move the rest of the squadron up to rendezvous with the voidhawks, the frigates in high inclination orbits to meet us there. Two of our frigates to remain with the station until *Lady Macbeth* has completed her fuelling. Once they’re at a safe distance, the station is to be destroyed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Meredith instructed the tactical computer to compile options. The resulting assessment just about matched his own opinion. The two sides were evenly matched. He had more ships, but the Organization was expected to be armed with antimatter combat wasps. And if he did order the squadron up to intercept, it would take hours to reach them. The Organization ships could simply jump away, leaving only the voidhawks to pursue them—who would then be outgunned.

Effectively, it was a stand-off. Neither side could do much to affect the other.

Yet I cannot allow them to go unchallenged, Meredith thought, it sets a bad precedent. “Lieutenant Grese? What do we know about the non-possessed crews on board Orga-

nization ships? Just how much of a hold does Capone have on them?"

"According to the debriefings we've conducted; they all have family being held captive on Monterey. Capone is very careful about who is given command authority over antimatter. So far it's a strategy that's worked for him. A number of crews on ordinary Organization starships have managed to eliminate their possessed officers and desert. But we've never had any indication of attempted mutiny on ships equipped with antimatter."

"Pity," Meredith grunted as the *Arikara* started to accelerate up to the rendezvous with the voidhawks. "Nevertheless, I'll issue them with the same ultimatum as the station was given. Who knows, the opportunity to capitulate might be enough to spark a small rebellion."

Etchells listened to the admiral's message as it was beamed out to the convoy. Slippery, vague promises of pardons and safe passage. None of it was relevant to him.

We repeat Edenism's offer to you, the voidhawks added. You may transfer your host's personality over to us, and we will provide your nutrient fluid. All we ask in return is your help in finding a satisfactory resolution.

Don't any of you bastards even answer, Etchells warned his fellow hellhawks. They're running scared. They wouldn't make that kind of offer unless they were absolutely desperate.

He could sense the uncertainty rumbling through their affinity bond. But none of them were brave enough to challenge him directly. Satisfied he'd kept them in line for now, Etchells asked the convoy's commander what he intended to do. Withdraw, came the answer, there's nothing else we can do.

Etchells wasn't so sure. The Navy hadn't destroyed the station. And that went against everything the Confederation stood for. There had to be a phenomenal reason for such a change of policy. We should stay, he told the convoy commander. They cannot engage us for hours yet. That gives us a chance to discover what they are doing here. If they're going to start using antimatter against us, Capone should be told. Reluctantly, the commander agreed. However, he did order the Adamist ships to accelerate towards a new jump coordinate that would take them back to New California, leaving the hellhawks to observe the station.

It was difficult to look directly into that dangerous glare. Etchells's sensor blisters began to suffer from glare spots, similar to purple after-images which plagued human eyes. He started to roll lazily, flicking his ebony wingtips to bank against the gusts of solar particles, switching the view between the blisters. Even then, concentrating on that tiny speck millions of kilometres away was inordinately stressful. A headache began to pound away inside his stolen neurone structure.

None of the electronic sensors loaded into his cargo cradles were any use, they were mostly military systems, intended for close defence work. And his distortion field couldn't reach that far. The visual spectrum provided him with the greatest coverage. He could see the Navy's Adamist ships accelerating up out of the star's enormous gravity field, little sparks of light, actually brighter than the photosphere.

After half an hour, three more fusion drives ignited around the station. Two of them started to follow the Navy squadron. The last one took a different course altogether; curving round the star's southern hemisphere on a very high inclination trajectory.

Etchells opened his beak wide to let out an imaginary

warble of success. Whatever it was doing, the lone starship had to be the reason behind the Navy's strange action. He issued a flurry of instructions to the other hellhawks. Despite his brute-boy attitude, Etchells had actually absorbed a great deal of information from his host's mentality. The facade of toughness was a deliberate ploy—always let your opponents believe you're dumber than you are. Becoming Kiera's most dependable and trusted hellhawk made sure she wouldn't risk him on those mad seeding flights, or any other dangerous actions. Convoy escort was about the safest duty to pull.

Wasted decades spent bumming round pointless mercenary actions across the Confederation, had taught him to disguise his true potential. Survival was dependent on intelligence and the lowest cunning, not worthy courage. And he knew for sure that surviving his current situation was going to take a great deal of ingenuity. Like Rocio in the *Mindori*, he had come to admire his new bitek form, finding it utterly superior to a human body. Quite how he could hang on to it was a question he'd been unable to resolve. There would be no place for hellhawks in the place where possessed took their planets to escape the universe, he was sure. And the Confederation would never rest until they'd solved the problem of how to evict souls back into the beyond permanently.

So he bided his time, keeping a giant yellowing eye open for some opportunity to save his own ass, and to hell with his comrades.

The Navy's unconventional behaviour might just be the break he'd been looking for.

When the last three starships were thirty thousand kilometres from the antimatter station, it exploded with a violence which outshone the prominence arching through the

chromosphere below. As if in acknowledgement of their defeat, the hellhawks swallowed away.

The voidhawks analysed the way their distortion fields applied energy against space-time to open a wormhole interstice. All five hellhawks appeared to be heading back to New California.

They have left the remaining frigates extremely vulnerable, Auster, *Ilex*'s captain, reported to Rhoecus. What are the admiral's orders?

Hold your position. If you attack they will just jump clear. We could harass them all the way home, but there is no tactical advantage to be gained from that. Our objective has been accomplished.

Very well.

Syrinx.

Yes, Rhoecus.

***Oenone* is cleared to rendezvous with the *Lady Macbeth*. The admiral wishes you both bon voyage.**

Thank you.

Etchells didn't believe the voidhawks would follow, certainly not instantaneously. The hellhawks all swallowed ten light-years clear of the star, then swallowed again three seconds later. Unless a voidhawk had been with them to observe the second swallow, there was no way of knowing where they'd gone.

Four of them carried on back to New California. Etchells returned directly to the star, emerging twenty-two million kilometres above its south pole. With the voidhawks all clustered together in their twenty-five million kilometre equatorial orbit, there was no way they could detect his wormhole terminus opening and closing. His position was ideal to observe the Navy starships flying out from their low orbit. His sensor blisters didn't have to focus against

the overwhelming white blaze. Even his headache started to fade.

He did keep a cursory watch on the Navy ships as they rose out of the gravity field, but it was the lone ship heading south that interested him. When it was twenty million kilometres from the star its drive cut out. Etchells projected its course, and started to check his captured spatial memories. Given its jump alignment there were twenty possible Confederation systems it could be heading for. And one other. Hesper-LN. The Tyrathca planet.

12

Fifteen minutes Courtney sat up at the bar waiting. Four men offered to buy her a drink. Not as many as usual, but then there were very few civilians abroad these days. Even the Blue Orchid was suffering from the scare stories flashing across the net, its numbers well down. Normally it would be jammed at this time of night; the kind of not-quite-sleazy club where lower-middle management could hang out after work and not have to worry if someone else from the company saw them. Courtney had been in a lot worse than this. The doormen didn't give her any hassle even though her ass was virtually hanging out of her cocktail dress. Courtney liked the dress, cool black fabric with straps on the front to hold her titties up high, and more cross straps down the cut out back. It made her look hot, without being too cheap.

Banneth said she looked good wearing it. Best thing the sect had ever done putting her in this dress; she'd never been so fem before. And it worked. There hadn't been a night she didn't deliver for them. Sometimes twice. It was a good gig, taking the men back to one of the student rent hotels where the sect had squeezed the manager. Then as soon as the mark's pants were off, Billy-Joe, Rav, and Julie would storm

in and kick the shit out of him. Then when he was unconscious Billy-Joe took a recording of his bioelectric pattern and emptied his credit disk.

She'd done much the same thing for all of the last three years since her brother introduced her to the Light Bringer. Except to start with she'd attracted paedopervs, who mostly had their own dens to take her to, or just hauled her into the dark end of a downtown alley. Those days, it had been Quinn Dexter who pimped her. In a strange way, she'd always been safer with him in charge. No matter how big a sicko the man was, Quinn had always arrived in time.

Now she was fifteen, and too big to pass for a juvenile any more. Banneth had switched the hormones she took. This new batch didn't prevent her breasts from growing; quite the opposite, they promoted development. She'd still got a skinny frame, but now she was huge with it. In the last nine months her targets had changed completely. It wasn't the pervs who wanted her now, just the losers. Courtney reckoned she'd come out of the alteration okay. Big tits was one of the mildest modifications Banneth made to sect members.

The fifth man to ask if she was all right and did her glass need freshening had what it took. Overweight, round face with perspiration on his brow, hair slicked back with gel, a good suit cleaned too often. His expression was hesitant, ready for a slapdown. Courtney drained her glass, and held it out to him, smiling. "Thanks."

He was too fat to dance. That was a shame, she liked to dance. So that meant having to sit and listen to about an hour of bitching—his boss, his family, his apartment; how none of it was going right for him. The drone was so she'd see he was a real genuine guy who'd had a couple of bad breaks lately, hoping for the sympathy fuck.

She made all the right sounds at the right places. After this time working the arcology's clubs she could probably have

filled in his life story just by looking at him. Proof of that: she never chose wrong. They always had a loaded disk. After the hour and three drinks he had enough nerve to make his innocent suggestion. To his utter surprise the answer was a demure smile and a hurried nod.

It wasn't far to the student hall, which was good. Courtney didn't like getting into a cab with them; there was too much chance Billy-Joe might lose her. She didn't look to see if the three sect members were trailing after her down the street. They'd be there. This was a real smooth routine now.

Twice though, she thought she heard footsteps following. Real distinctive, regular thuds of someone using a lot of metal in their heels. Dumb idea, there was a whole bunch of people walking along the street. When she did snatch a look, there was no one she could see that looked like a cop. Just a bunch of civilians scurrying around, making out their stupid lives meant something.

The cops were her only worry. Even given the fact less than a quarter of the targets reported the assault and theft, it wouldn't take an AI to spot the pattern. But Banneth would know if there was any sort of operation being mounted. Banneth knew fucking everything going down in Edmonton. It was scary, sometimes. Courtney knew some of the sect's acolytes didn't really believe in God's Brother, they were just too shit-scared of Banneth to step out of line.

"This is it," she told the man. They'd stopped outside the worn entrance of a two-century-old skyscraper. A couple of genuine students were sitting on the steps, taking charges from a power inhaler. They looked at Courtney with glazed uncaring eyes. She pulled the man past and into the foyer.

In the elevator he made his first tentative move. Going for a kiss, which she let him have. Tongue straight down her throat. He didn't have time for anything more; the room they'd hijacked for the night was on the third floor. Its real

owner lost somewhere in the arcology as the black stimulant program shorted out her neurones.

“What are you studying?” he asked once they were inside.

That caught her short. She didn't have a story in place for that—he wasn't supposed to care. Nothing to help here, either. The room was a usual student's jumble, badly lit with fleks and clothes everywhere, a decades-old desktop block on the one shabby table. Courtney didn't read too good, so she couldn't tell what the tiny print on the flek cases said.

Easy way out. She shoved the shoulder straps down, and let her tits bobble free. That shut him up. It took him about thirty seconds to push her down on the bed, then one hand was up her skirt while the other was squeezing a tit crudely. She groaned like it was good, hoping Billy-Joe and the others got a fucking move on. Sometimes the shits waited and let the man fuck her. Watching the show through some sensor or peep hole, getting off on the scene and laughing quietly. They always claimed it looked less like a set-up if they came in afterwards. Banneth laughed too if she complained.

The man's hand was tugging at her panties. Mouth all hot and slobbering over a nipple. Courtney tried not to grimace. Then she was shivering, as if the conditioning duct had suddenly dumped a shitload of ice into the air.

He gave out a single puzzled grunt, pulling his head back. They looked at each other for an instant, both equally bewildered. Then a white hand clamped over his gelled hair, yanking his head away from her. He yelled in shock and pain as he was pulled off her and flung over the room. His flabby body hit the opposite wall with a loud crash, and crumpled to the floor. A figure in a black robe was standing at the side of the bed, blank hood tipped down towards Courtney. She drew in a breath to shriek, knowing fucking well this wasn't Billy-Joe or any of the others.

“Don’t,” the figure warned. The darkness inside the hood withered to reveal the face.

“Quinn!” Courtney squeaked. A smile flicked her lips. “Quinn? God’s Brother, where the fuck did you come from? I thought you got transported.”

“Long story. Tell you in a minute.” He turned and went over to the quivering man, grabbed his head and pulled back viciously. The man’s throat was exposed along its entire length, skin stretched tight.

“Quinn, what are you . . . Urrgh!” Courtney watched in a kind of interested shock as a couple of sharp fangs slid out of Quinn’s mouth. He winked at her as he lowered his head to bite the man’s neck. She could see Quinn’s Adam’s apple bobbing as he sucked down the blood, several drops dribbled past his lips. The man was whimpering in high-pitched terror. “Oh fuck, Quinn, that’s disgusting.”

Quinn stood up, grinning, and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, smearing the blood. “No it’s not. It’s the final conquest. Blood is the best food a human can have. Think on it; every nutrient you need all nicely refined and cooked ready for you. It’s your right to take it from the followers of the false lord you defeat. Use them to make you strong, Courtney, replenish your body.” He looked down at the fat man who was clutching the neck wound desperately. Blood was pouring through his fingers.

Courtney giggled at the feeble gurgling sounds the man was making. “You’ve changed.”

“So have you.”

“Yeah!” She cupped her tits and lifted them. “Grew these for a start. Good, aren’t they?”

“God’s Brother, Courtney, you are a total slut.”

She straightened a leg and dangled her shoe from one toe. “I like what I am, Quinn. That’s my serpent beast, remem-

ber? Dignity is a weakness, along with all the other crap on the middle-class wish list.”

“You did listen to the sermons.”

“Sure did.”

“So how’s Banneth?”

“Same, I guess.”

“Not for long. I’m back now.” He held out his hands, making simple gestures. The room began to change; the walls darkening, furniture turning to matt black cast iron. Manacles appeared on the metal railings at the head of the bed.

Courtney looked round wildly at the manifestations, and scrambled backwards over the crumpled duvet, cramming herself into a corner away from Quinn. “Shit, you’re a possessed!”

“Not me,” he said softly. “I possess. I am the one God’s Brother has chosen as his Messiah. This power the returning souls have depends on the force of their will. And nobody believes in themselves more than me. That’s how I regained control of my body, through the belief He gave me in myself. Now I’m stronger than a hundred of those snivelling lost dickheads.”

Courtney unfolded her legs and peered forward. “It is you, isn’t it. I mean, like really you. You’ve got your own body and everything.”

“You never were very quick, were you? But then, it was never your brain the sect wanted.”

“Were you in New York?” she asked in quiet admiration. “I saw all the fighting on the AV. The police killed skyscrapers full of people they were so scared.”

“I was there a while back. I was also in Paris, Bombay, and Johannesburg, which the police don’t know about yet. Then I gave in to myself, and came home.”

“I’m glad you did.” Courtney bounded off the bed, and

flung her arms round him, licking from his ear to his mouth. “Welcome back.”

“You will follow me now, not Banneth.”

“Yes.” She slid her tongue over the tacky blood congealing on his chin, tasting its salt.

“You will obey.”

“Of course.”

Quinn focused on the thought currents in her brain, and knew she was telling the truth. Not that he'd expected anything else from Courtney. He opened the door and let the other three in. Billy-Joe and Rav he knew from before; it hadn't taken much to cow them. Five people standing made the little student room badly cramped, their breath helping to heat it up. Fast breathing which came from nerves and excitement. They were all eager to see what Quinn would do next.

“I came back to Earth so I could bring down the Night,” he told them. “You'll play a big part in that, and so will the possessed. I'm going to leave a nest of you in every arcology. But Edmonton is special for me, because Banneth's here.”

“What you going to do to her?” Billy-Joe asked.

Quinn patted the slender youth's wire-like arm. “The worst I can imagine,” he said. “And I've spent a lot of time imagining.”

Billy-Joe's mouth split into an oafish grin. “All right!”

Quinn looked down at the fat man. He was gasping like a fish. Blood had formed an enormous puddle on the scuffed tile floor. “You're dying,” Quinn said cheerfully. “Only one way to save you now.” Fields of energy shifted at his command, exerting a specific pressure against reality. The cries of the souls began to filter out of the beyond. “Courtney, hurt him.”

She shrugged to the others, and kicked the man hard in the crotch. He shivered, eyes bugging before the lids began to

flutter uncontrollably. An extra squirt of blood pumped out of the wound.

“And again,” Quinn directed mildly. In his mind, he was dictating terms to the lost souls who clustered round the weak rent between universes. Hearing the pleas of those who claimed they were worthy. Making his judgement.

Courtney did as she was told, watching in fascination as a soul (a real dead person!) took control of the wretched man. The wound closed up. He started hissing in consternation. Tiny rivulets of lightning slithered along the creases of his blood-soaked suit fabric.

“Give him something to drink,” Quinn said.

Billy-Joe and Julie ransacked the cupboards for cans of soda, popping them and handing them down to the grateful possessed.

“It’ll take you a while to replace that much blood,” Quinn said. “Just lie there and take it easy for a while. Enjoy the show.”

“Yes, Quinn,” the possessed muttered weakly. He managed to roll onto his back, the effort coming close to making him faint.

The iron manacles snapped open loudly. Courtney took one look at them, and glanced back enquiringly at Quinn. His robe was already dissolving. “You know how to use them,” he told her.

She wriggled out of her dress and bent over the bed, placing her wrists in the manacles. They hinged shut, and locked.

Ilex emerged above Avon, radiating profound satisfaction (and considerable hunger). Every Edenist within Trafalgar picked up the emotional emission, and smiled simultaneously at the results Auster was declaring. Lalwani immediately declassified the strike mission against the antimatter station, and the navy press office started relaying the infor-

mation to the system's news companies. Everything happened so fast that the First Admiral's staff only just managed to officially brief Jeeta Anwar before the Presidential office staff received it off the communication net.

The voidhawk's easy two-gee flight to the naval base's docking ledges was considerably more relaxed than the last time it had burst out of wormhole close to Trafalgar. General affinity hummed with a great many ironic comments pointing this out to its triumphant crew.

Two hours after *Ilex*'s arrival, Captain Auster was escorted into the First Admiral's office by Lieutenant Keaton, the newest member of the admiral's staff. Samuel Aleksandrovich greeted the Edenist captain warmly, and gestured to the sunken reception area. Lalwani and Kolhammer joined them on the leather couches, while the lieutenant served tea and coffee. As he was moving round with their china cups, the bulky AV cylinder at the apex of the ceiling shimmered brightly, and the images of President Haaker and Jeeta Anwar materialized in the reception area.

"My congratulations to the Navy, Admirals, Captain," Haaker said. "The destruction of an antimatter station at this time is particularly satisfying."

"Capone's antimatter station, Mr President," Kolhammer said significantly. "That's a considerable bonus."

"Essentially he will be unable to mount any more of these damnable infiltration missions against Confederation planets, let alone attempt another full scale invasion along the lines of Arnstat," Samuel said. "That means he's been neutered. We shall now resume our harassment campaign, and enhance it considerably this time around. That should wear down the hellhawks, and deplete his stock of antimatter in defence. Given its unstable social base, we expect the Organization to collapse within a few weeks, two months at the most."

“Unless he pulls another rabbit out of his capacious fedora,” Haaker said. “I don’t mean to disparage your action against the antimatter station, Samual, but in Allah’s name, it was a long time coming. Possibly too long. According the latest report I have, nearly a third of Kerry’s population is now possessed, and it’s only a question of time until the remainder are taken over. On top of that, we know of eleven other worlds Capone has successfully managed to infiltrate. That means we’ll lose them, too, you know that as well as I do. And there will no doubt be starships currently en route, telling us of more infiltrations launched before the station was destroyed. Your pardon, but this success rings hollow indeed.”

“What else would you have us do?”

“You know very well. How is Dr Gilmore’s project progressing?”

“Slowly, as Mae Ortlieb has been telling you.”

“Yes, yes.” Haaker waved an irritable hand. “Well keep me informed of any further developments. Preferably ahead of the media.”

“Yes, Mr President.”

The image of the President and his aide vanished.

“Ungrateful old git,” Kolhammer muttered.

“It’s understandable,” Lalwani said. “The Assembly is beginning to resemble a zoo these days. The ambassadors have realized that for once their magnificent speeches alone aren’t going to solve this crisis. They’re shouting for action, though of course they don’t name a specific.”

“The antimatter ought to relieve a lot of pressure on the Navy,” Kolhammer said. “We should be able to press individual governments to maintain the civil starflight quarantine.”

“There’s still a lot of reticence there,” Lalwani said. “The smaller, more distant asteroids are suffering badly from the

economic situation. To them, the conflict is a remote one. That justifies their clandestine flights.”

“It’s only remote until their selfish idiocy allows a possessed into their settlement,” Kolhammer snapped.

“We’re making progress on identifying the principal offenders,” Lalwani said. “I’m getting a lot of cooperation from other intelligence agencies. Once we’ve confirmed the offence, the problem then becomes a diplomatic one.”

“And everything goes pear-shaped,” Kolhammer said. “Bloody lawyers.”

Samual put his tea cup down on the central rosewood table, and turned directly to Auster. “You were with Meredith’s squadron at Jupiter, I believe?”

“Yes, Admiral,” Auster said.

“Good. I accessed all of your report on the antimatter station mission while the *Ilex* was docking; and I’d like you to tell me directly why Consensus is sending two ships to the other side of the Orion nebula. *Specifically* why one of them is the *Lady Macbeth*. I simply could not make it plainer that I expected Captain Calvert and that despicable Mzu woman to remain in Tranquillity, and incommunicado.”

The voidhawk captain gave a slight bow, his face respectfully grave. Despite all the mental bolstering which came from unity with other Edenists, and his link with *Ilex*, facing the displeased First Admiral was quite an ordeal. “I assure you, Consensus regards the Alchemist problem with the utmost seriousness. However, there was some on-the-ground information available which required reassessing your prescription.”

Samual Aleksandrovich settled back in the leather upholstery, knowing he shouldn’t enjoy playing the inflexible tyrant. Sometimes it was hard to resist. “Go on.”

“The Lord of Ruin has discovered that the Tyrathca religion may have some physical basis.”

"I didn't know they had a religion," Kolhammer said. His neural nanonics was running a search through various encyclopaedia files.

"That was also something of a revelation," Auster said. "But they do, and their God would appear to be some kind of powerful artefact. They believe it capable of saving them from human possessed."

"So Consensus sent a pair of starships to investigate," Samual said.

"Yes. Given the distance involved, the only kind of Adamist ship that can get there is one that has an antimatter drive."

"And such a flight also removes Calvert and Mzu from any possible contact with the possessed. How very convenient."

"Consensus considered it so, Admiral."

Samual laughed dryly. "Lagrange Calvert meeting a real live god. What a spectacle. We should be able to see that clash of egos from this side of the nebula." Lalwani and Auster grinned in unison.

"Well, there are slimmer straws to grasp, I suppose," Samual said. "Thank you, Captain, and my congratulations to *Ilex* on a successful mission."

The Edenist stood, and bowed formally. "Admiral." Lieutenant Keaton went with him to the door.

Although he considered it faintly ridiculous, if not rude, Samual waited until Auster was outside before speaking to the other two admirals. Privacy was a hard concept for him to abandon; and he knew Lalwani kept their secure sessions confidential as a matter of courtesy. "A god?" he asked Lalwani.

"I don't know anything about it," she said. "But Consensus wouldn't embark on such a course unless it had a degree of confidence in the result."

“Very well,” Samual said. “I’d like to receive a complete briefing from the Jovian Consensus, please.”

“I’ll see that we’re updated.”

“Until we are, we won’t be including biblical salvation in our strategic planning sessions.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“That just leaves us with our last current problem,” Samual said. “Mortonridge.”

“Could have told you that was a waste of time,” Kolhammer retorted.

“You did. Frequently. As did I. But it is first and foremost a politically motivated campaign. However, we cannot ignore the fact it isn’t going quite to plan. This latest development is unnerving to say the least. It also looks as though our marine battalions are going to be tied up there for a longer than we originally estimated.”

“Longer! Ha,” Kolhammer said in disgust. “Have you accessed any of those sensevises? God, that mud. The whole bloody Liberation is completely stalled.”

“It hasn’t stalled, they’re just encountering more problems than they anticipated,” Lalwani said.

Kolhammer chuckled, and raised his coffee cup in salute. “I’ve always been a massive admirer of the Edenist ability to understate. But I think defining a chunk of land fifteen kilometres across that suddenly takes flight and wanders off into another dimension as a little problem is possibly the best example yet.”

“I never said *little*.”

“Ketton’s disappearance isn’t my main concern,” Samual said. He received the surprised look which the others gave him with calm humour. “I was thinking about the medical difficulties de-possession is leaving us with. So far we’ve been fortunate the news companies have been playing it down, but that won’t last. People will eventually wake up to

the implications if we're ever successful in returning planets like Lalonde and Norfolk to this universe. There's been a commendable effort by the Kingdom's allies to assist with fresh medical supplies, but the number of cancer-related deaths is still rising." He clicked his fingers at Keaton, who was hovering near the samovar.

"Sir." The lieutenant stepped forward. "Trafalgar's medical office have been examining the consequences of de-possession. Frankly, we're lucky Mortonridge doesn't have a larger population. The Kingdom and its allies should just manage to provide enough nanonic packages to cope with two million cancer patients. Though we're dubious about correct application; the number of experienced doctors is a critical factor. However, we estimate that an entire planet of de-possessed, with an average population of three quarters of a billion, would essentially exhaust the entire Confederation's medical facilities. To our knowledge, the possessed have so far taken over eighteen planets, with several hundred additional asteroid settlements. And we expect the planets Capone has infiltrated will soon join them. Ultimately, we could be dealing with as many as thirty planetary populations, possibly more than that."

"Shit," Kolhammer exclaimed. He gave the youngish lieutenant a very worried frown. "So what's going to happen if we get them all back?"

"Given the development level of cancers we've seen on the de-possessed so far, there will be a rapid and extremely high mortality rate among their respective populations if they remain untreated."

"That's a very clinical way of putting it, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. You should also consider, the possessing souls are either unaware of the damage they're inflicting on their hosts, or are unable to cure it. Their energistic power is capa-

ble of repairing physical injury, but we haven't seen them deal with this kind of illness yet. It may be they can't."

"What are you getting at?" Lalwani asked.

"Unless the biochemical environment on the planets they've removed from this universe is radically different in some way, then the possessed will all be suffering like this no matter where they are. In which case, if they don't start to effect some kind of treatment, their host bodies might die."

Lalwani's shock was so vehement she couldn't prevent some of it from leaking into the general affinity band. Edenists in the asteroid automatically opened their minds, proffering emotional support.

Reluctantly, Lalwani refused. "Thirty planetary populations?" she demanded, incredulous. She glanced from the lieutenant to the First Admiral. "You knew?"

"I accessed the report this morning," Samuel admitted. "And I haven't informed the President, yet. Let him get on top of the Assembly again before we break news like this."

"Dear God," Kolhammer muttered. "If we pull them back from wherever they've gone, we won't be able to save them. And if we leave them alone, they won't survive either." He gave Keaton a look that was almost a plea. "Did the medical office come up with *any* ideas?"

"Yes sir, they had two."

"Finally! Someone with some bloody initiative. What are they?"

"The first is fairly simple. We broadcast a warning to the possessed groups we know are still remaining in this universe. Ask them to stop trying to change the appearance of their host bodies. It should appeal to their own self interest."

"If they don't just ignore it as propaganda," Lalwani said. "By the time a tumour actually becomes noticeable, it's usually too late for primitive medical treatments."

“Nonetheless, we will definitely proceed with that option,” Samual said.

“And the second?” Kolhammer asked.

“We formally request the Kiint ambassador for help.”

Kolhammer let out a disgusted breath. “Ha! Those bastards won’t help us. They’ve already made that clear enough.”

“Um, sir?” Keaton said. He gave the First Admiral a glance, and received a nod of permission. “They said they wouldn’t provide us with a solution to possession. In this case, we’re just asking them for material aid. We know they have a more sophisticated technology than ours; human companies have been buying upgrades and improvements for a variety of products ever since we made contact with them. And now with the Tranquillity incident we know they haven’t abandoned their manufacturing base as thoroughly as they claimed. They may well be able to produce the kind of medical systems we require in the quantities we’ll need. After all, we’ll only have a use for them if we solve the possession problem for ourselves. If the Kiint are as sympathetic as they assure us they are, then there is a good chance they’ll say yes.”

“Excellent analysis,” Lalwani said. “We can’t possibly ignore the option.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Samual said. “In fact, I’ve already requested a personal meeting with Ambassador Roulor. I’ll sound him out about the prospect.”

“Good move,” Kolhammer said. “That’s a commendable advisory team your medical office put together, Samual.”

It felt strange to be back. Quinn stalked through the ghost realm, observing the sect’s Edmonton headquarters. His peculiar, hazy perception of the real world from this shadowed existence might account for his new interpretation of the fa-

miliar rooms and corridors. Or it could just be time and a very different attitude to when he was last here.

This had been home for many years. A place of refuge and of terror. Now it was just a cluster of gloomy chambers, devoid of any appeal or memories. The routine of the place hadn't changed, though it was slowing down, much to the fury of the senior acolytes. He smiled as they shouted and brutalized the juniors. His fault. His word was spreading.

All of Edmonton would soon be aware of his arrival. So far he'd taken over eight covens, and was ready to visit the remainder. Those that had fallen under his thrall were now actively pursuing the will of God's Brother. Over the last few days he'd been dispatching several small groups to attack strategic sections of the arcology's infrastructure. Generators, water stations, transport junctions; they'd all been damaged to some degree. It was primitive stuff, chemical explosives concocted from formulae loaded into public databanks centuries ago by freethink anarchists, the files replicated so many times they were impossible to erase. On Quinn's orders, the possessed would only supervise the missions, never actually venturing to the target themselves. That was left to the faithful: useful, disposable, imbeciles. He couldn't risk the authorities discovering a possessed in Edmonton, not yet. So for now such destruction would appear to be the work of a breakaway sect faction, fanatics who had split away from their High Magus. That way they would appear as sympathisers to the anarchist groups in Paris, Bombay, and Johannesburg that were also bombing and terrorizing their fellow citizens.

The authorities would discover who was behind it eventually. But by then he would have established enough cells of possessed to bring about the Night.

Quinn arrived at the temple, and surveyed it slowly. A tall chamber, more elaborate than the smaller covens. Pictures of

violent depravity alternated with runes and pentagons along the walls. A wreath of small yellow flames flickered weakly around the tarnished inverted cross on the altar. He was drawn to the big slab as the memories of this place finally returned. There was the pain of his initiation, then more pain as he was used for further ceremonies. Each time, Banneth had smiled down serenely; a dark angel ministering to his body. Drugs and packages were applied, and an obscene variety of pleasure would be combined with his agony. Banneth's laugh would wrap around him, taking on the power of an indecent caress. She/he/it, that terrible androgynous multi-sexed monster, conditioned him to respond to the torment in the way that generated the most enjoyment—for it. Eventually the two extremes of sensation merged, becoming one.

A triumph, Banneth had declared. The creation of the perfect sect mentality. Birthing the serpent beast.

Quinn gave the altar a curious look, seeing himself bound to it, skin glistening with sweat and blood as he screamed. The pain and the images were real enough, but he couldn't recall anything before then. It was as if Banneth had created his flesh at the same time as his mind.

"Quinn? Is that you, Quinn?"

Quinn turned slowly, squinting at the ghostly figure sitting on the front pew. A face he was sure he knew, belonging to this place but from a long time ago. The figure stood, a hunched up adolescent in a torn leather jacket and dirty jeans. He was pitifully insubstantial. "It is you, isn't it? You remember me, Quinn. It's me. It's Erhard."

"Erhard?" He wasn't sure.

"Damn, we shovelled shit together for long enough. You must remember."

"Yes. Yes, I do." A novice acolyte who'd joined the sect around the same time as Quinn. One who lacked the strength to survive such a brotherhood. The same relentless battery of

ordeals and punishments which had fortified Quinn had crushed Erhard. It had culminated in a ritual in the temple, one which Banneth had never intended Erhard to live through. There was rape and torture and drugs and burrowing parasites of Banneth's devising; atrocities performed to the hot chants and wild laughter of the entire headquarters coven. Erhard's final pleas had risen above their chorus, a thin wail of ultimate terror. Then Banneth had brought the jewelled sacrificial knife down in a fast slash.

The joy Quinn had experienced that day was almost orgasmic. He'd been the one tasked to carry the knife for Banneth.

"It's not fair, Quinn. I don't belong here. I hate this place. I hate the sect."

"You never did feed your serpent beast," Quinn said contemptuously. "Now look at you. You're as much a loser now as you ever were."

"It's not fair!" Erhard cried. "I didn't know what the sect was like, not really. And then they killed me. You killed me, Quinn. You were one of them."

"You deserved it."

"Fuck you. I was nineteen. I had my life, and you took it away, you and that psycho fruit Banneth. I want to kill Banneth. I swore I would."

"No!" Quinn stormed. Erhard quailed, cowering back from the command. "Banneth does not die," Quinn said. "Not ever. Banneth belongs to me."

The ghost edged forward, holding out a hand as though feeling the warmth thrown out by a fire. "What are you?"

Quinn giggled quietly. "I don't know. But God's Brother has shown me what I've got to do." He walked out of the temple, leaving the ghost behind.

Three figures were marching along the corridor, one of them with desperate reluctance. Quinn recognized him.

Acolyte Kilian. They'd met a few days ago. All three frowned as they passed their invisible watcher, puzzled by why they suddenly felt so chilly.

Quinn followed them. He knew where they were going, he'd taken this route himself enough times. Soon he would see it again: Banneth. That's all it would be, this time. Just a look, a reminder of that face. Nothing fast would happen to Banneth. It had taught Quinn well, in that respect. The most delectable punishments were the slowest ones. And when Night came, it would be in tandem with eternity.

Darkness has arrived. Even when the acolytes didn't whisper it, the phrase hung in the smoky air of the sect's Edmonton headquarters. A threat more menacing than any sadism the sergeant acolytes could bestow.

Banneth knew what that meant. The AV projectors were broadcasting a constant coverage of the New York situation, which the entire headquarters coven was obsessed by. The acology's continuing isolation. Rumours of free possessed. Portents wherever you looked. And many of the coven looked very hard indeed.

Their work suffered as a consequence. Income from the scams and hustling were well down in every coven across town. Even she, the High Magus, couldn't rack up much enthusiasm. What chance did the lesser maguses have?

When she did rage at the sergeant acolytes, they just shuffled their feet and muttered dourly that there was little point continuing their old activities. Our time has come, they said, God's Brother is returning to Earth. Who cares about knocking off dumb-ass civilians. Given the creed of the Light Bringer sect, it wasn't an attitude she could effectively argue against. The irony of the situation didn't escape her.

All she could do was keep listening to the rap from the street, hunting out clues. It was a thin source of information,

especially now. Like a great many of Earth's arcologies, Edmonton was slowly shutting down as it spewed out its own fear. Commercial districts were reporting increasing absenteeism. People were calling in sick, taking holidays. Parks and arcades were nearly deserted. Football, baseball, ice hockey, and other game fixtures were played to small crowds. Parents kept their kids away from day clubs. For the first time in living memory it was always possible to get a seat on metro buses and tube carriages.

The vac-trains weren't shut. Keeping the routes open was a bravado example of Govcentral confidence, intended to reassure people that Earth was still safe. Passenger numbers were under thirty per cent. Nobody wanted to do anything that brought them into contact with other people, especially strangers. Civic utility companies had to threaten employees with lawsuits to keep essential services going. Government workers were intimidated with the prospect of disciplinary proceedings if they didn't perform their duties as normal, especially the police. The mayors were desperate to provide the image of normality in the hope the public would follow their cue. A desperation that was taking on increasingly surreal dimensions in the face of such stubborn public reticence.

Banneth kept dispatching sect members to wander through the eternal half light gullies that were downtown streets, hunting any sign of a score. The usual broken inhabitants shuffling along the sidewalks would huddle away from them in sealed-up doorways, sniffing suspiciously as they strutted past. Cop cars swished along silently, creating whirlpools of silvery wrapping foils; the only vehicles moving at ground level. They slowed as they drew level with the sect gangs, examining the sullen faces through misty armoured glass before tooting the siren and accelerating away. Forcing them to go out was a mostly futile exercise. But she had persevered

while the world slowly choked on its own paranoia. And now it seemed as though she'd got lucky.

Acolyte Kilian was doing his level best not to shake as the sergeant acolytes hurriedly left him alone in Banneth's inner sanctum. The chamber was buried at the centre of the skyscraper which the sect used as its headquarters. As with the Light Bringer covens the world over, the original layout of rooms and corridors had been corroded and corrupted as acolytes burrowed their way through walls and ducts like human maggots. Haphazard partitions were hammered and cemented up behind them, creating a bizarre onion-layer topology of chambers and cells that protected the core. Banneth had dwelt there for nearly three and a half decades without once ever venturing out. There was no need now, everything necessary to make her life enjoyable was brought to her.

Unlike several High Maguses she was aware of, Banneth didn't go in for ostentation. Her senior acolytes were permitted whatever decadent luxuries they could steal and bribe for themselves. But they lived several floors above her, decorating their apartments with expensive hedonistic amenities, and harems of beautiful youths and freakish supplicants. She indulged herself on somewhat different levels.

When Kilian started to look round, he found he was in a place that was way beyond the worst-case scenarios that acolytes whispered among themselves. Banneth's sanctum was an experimental surgery. Its mainstay was a broad bench desk with high-capacity processor blocks and shiny new medical equipment. Three stainless steel tables were lined up in the middle of the floor, with discreet leather restraint straps placed strategically round the edges. Life support canisters were arranged around the walls, like huge glass pillars. Aquarium-style lighting caps shone brightly on their contents. Kilian really wished they didn't, the things inside were

enough to make him shit his pants. People, in a few of them. Suspended by a white silk web in some thick clear fluid, tubes going into their mouths and noses (those that still had mouths and noses). Always with their eyes open, looking about. Acolytes he remembered from not so long back; with new appendages grafted on; others with parts removed, their incisions raw and open to reveal the missing organs. Then there were the less than human creatures, made worse by having very human pieces attached. Clusters of organs bound together by a plexus of naked pumping veins. Animals, game cats and gorillas with the tops of their skull removed, and no brain left inside. Pride of place on the wall above the work desk was taken by an ancient oil painting of a young woman in a dress with a stiff bodice and long skirt.

Although Kilian had never been in the sanctum before, it was the place where everyone came eventually, either for boosting or punishment. Banneth performed both types of operation herself. Now he stood as still as his trembling limbs would allow as the High Magus walked briskly across the floor to him.

Banneth's face had a male jawline, a blunt protuberant blade of bone. But that was the only masculine feature, the eyes and mouth were soft, very feminine. A shaggy pelt of straw-blond hair completed the enigma. Kilian glanced nervously at the white shirt Banneth wore. Everyone said the High Magus got aroused at the sight of fear. If her nips were jutting, then she was in the feminine stage of her cycle.

Dark circles of skin were definitely tenting the cotton. Kilian wondered if it really made a difference. Banneth was a hermaphrodite—by design, so rumour said. She looked as if she was about twenty, either as a male or a female; though age was an easy enough cosmetic adaptation. Nobody knew how old she really was, nor even how long she had been

High Magus. In fact, legend and rumour were all that existed about her past. Questions were discouraged.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” Banneth said. Her hand stroked Kilian’s cheek, the cool skin of her knuckles drifting gently along his cheekbone. An appraisal by a gifted sculptor, finding his exact form. He quivered at the touch. Pink eyes with feline irises blinked in amusement at his reaction.

“Nervous, Kilian?”

“I don’t know what I’ve done, High Magus.”

“That’s true. But then a barely human grunt like you doesn’t know much of anything. Do you? Well don’t worry yourself too much. Actually, you’ve been quite useful to me.”

“I have?”

“Amazingly, yes. And as you know, I always reward the devout.”

“Yes, High Magus.”

“What can I do for you now, I wonder?” She began to circle the apprehensive acolyte, grinning boyishly. “You’re how old now? Twenty-five, isn’t it? So I ask myself what does a nice young boy your age always want. And the answer’s a much bigger cock, of course. That’s pretty standard. I can do that, you know. I can snip off that pitiful rat-sized cock you’ve got now, and replace it with something much better. A cock that’s as long as your forearm and as hard as steel. You would like me to do that, wouldn’t you?”

“Please, High Magus,” Kilian whimpered.

“Was that a ‘yes please,’ Kilian?”

“I . . . I just want to help you. However I can.”

She blew him a kiss, still prowling her circuit around him. “Good boy. I asked to see you because I’d like to know something. Do you believe in the teachings of the Light Bringer?”

Trick question, Kilian screamed silently. If I say no, she’ll

do whatever she wants as punishment; if I say yes she'll ask me to prove it through endurance. "All of it High Magus, every word. I've found my serpent beast."

"An excellent answer, Kilian. Now tell me this: do you welcome the coming darkness?"

"Yes, High Magus."

"Really? And how do you know it's coming?"

Kilian risked a glance over his shoulder, trying to follow the High Magus as she circled round him. But she was directly behind him now, and the only thing he really noticed was the way the eyes of the acolytes in the life support containers were tracking her movements. "The possessed are here. He sent them, our Lord. They're going to bring His Night to the whole world."

"So everyone says. The whole arcology is talking about nothing else. Indeed the whole planet has little else to say. But how do you know? You, Kilian?"

Banneth stopped in front of him, lips curved in a sympathetic, expectant smile.

I'll have to tell the truth, Kilian realized in horror. But I don't know if that's what she wants to hear. Fuck! Oh God's Brother, what'll she do to me if it's wrong? What will she turn me into?

"Cat got your tongue?" Banneth asked coyly. The smile hardened slightly, becoming less playful. Her glance flicked to one of the life support canisters containing a puma. "Of course, I can give the cat your tongue, Kilian. But what would I fit in its place? What would be appropriate do you think? I have so much material I don't really need any more. Some of it is long past its sell-by date. Ever felt flesh that's started to decay, Kilian? Necromorphology is a somewhat acquired taste. You never know, though, you might get to like it in time."

"I saw one!" Kilian shouted. "Oh fuck, I saw one. I'm sorry High Magus, I didn't tell my sergeant acolyte, I . . ."

She kissed his ear lobe, shocking him into silence. "I understand," she whispered. "Really I do. To understand the way people think, you must first understand the way they work. And I've made the workings of the human body my special area of study for a long time. Physiology begets psychology, you might say. Mightn't you, Kilian?"

Kilian *hated* it when the High Magus talked all this weird big-word shit. He never knew how to answer. None of the acolytes did, not even the seniors.

"It—I saw him in the Vegreville dome coven's chapel," Kilian said. He knew for sure now that the High Magus wanted to hear about the possessed. Maybe this would get him off the hook.

Banneth stopped her pacing, standing directly in front of the woeful acolyte. There were no more smiles left on her androgynous face. "You didn't tell your sergeant acolyte because you thought you'd wind up in deep shit. Because if the possessed are real, then the sect hierarchy that you've so devoutly been kissing ass to for the last six years will be replaced by them. By telling everyone what you'd seen you would in effect be spreading sedition; though I doubt you would be able to rationalize it quite like that. To you it was simple instinct. Your serpent beast looks after you, it puts you first. As indeed it should, in that respect you've been loyal to yourself and God's Brother. Of course, you couldn't resist telling a few people, could you? You should have known better, Kilian. You know I reward acolytes who betray their friends to me."

"Yes, High Magus," Kilian mumbled.

"Well I'm glad that's settled then. Unfortunately the golden rule of the sect is that I am to be told everything. I and I alone decide what is important, and what is not." Banneth

walked over to one of the stainless steel tables, and tapped a finger on it. "Come over here, Kilian. Lie down for me."

"*Please, High Magus.*"

"Now."

If he'd thought running would have done him the slightest good, he would have run. Actually, he even had the wild thought that he could attack Banneth. The High Magus was physically weaker. But that idea was resolved in a second by a simple clash of wills. He was foolish enough to glance at her pink eyes.

"That's a very bad thought," Banneth said. "I don't like that at all."

Kilian walked over to the table, taking the smallest steps possible. In the faintly violet light thrown out by the life support containers, he could see the scuffed silvery surface was sprinkled with small black flecks of dried blood.

"Remove your clothes first," Banneth told him. "They get in the way of what I want to do."

The initiation ceremonies, the punishments, the degradations he'd undergone for the sect—none of them prepared him for this. Simple pain he could endure. It was soon over, making him all the meaner, stronger for it. Each time his serpent beast would come away slightly larger, more dominant. None of that helped him now. Each garment he took off was another portion of himself sacrificed to her.

"In times gone by, they used to say the punishment should fit the crime," Banneth said. Kilian removed his jeans, and she smiled thinly at his flabby legs. "An appropriate sentiment, I always thought. But now I believe it's more fitting that the body part should fit the crime."

"Yes," Kilian said thickly. That, he needed no explanation for. He had spent hour after hour mucking out the pigs as part of his duty. All the acolytes had to do it. All of them detested the filthy squealing animals. It was an insidious reminder of

what fate ultimately greeted Edmonton sect members, no matter you were being disciplined or rewarded.

Banneth's herd were special; developed centuries ago when geneering was in its infancy. They were originally designed to provide organs for human transplants. A worthy project, to help people with worn out hearts or failed kidneys. Pig organs were the same size as human ones, and it was the first practical success of the geneticists to modify porcine cells so they didn't trigger a rejection by their new host's immune system. For a few brief years at the start of the Twenty-first Century the concept had flourished. Then medical science, genetics, and prosthetic technology had raced on ahead. Humanized pigs were abandoned and forgotten by everyone except medical historians and a few curious zoologists. Then Banneth had come across the obscure file in some long-outdated medical text.

She had identified and traced descendants of the original pigs, and began breeding them anew. Modern genetic improvements had been sequenced in, strengthening the bloodline. It was the raw primitiveness of the concept which appealed to her. The sect's use of modern technology was so much at odds with its basic gospel. Pigs and old fashioned surgery were an ideal alternative.

When an acolyte needed boosting, it wasn't AT muscle she implanted to enhance the original human ones. Like the rest of the porcine organs, the muscles wouldn't cause rejection. Pig skin, too, was thicker, sturdier, than its human counterpart. Lately, she had begun to experiment with other animals. Grafted monkey feet turned an acolyte into an efficient acrobat, useful for gaining entry to upper-storey floors. Lighter leg bones allowed them to outrun police mechanoids. Given time and research subjects, she knew she could match any modification used by cosmoniks and the combat boosted

mercenaries so prevalent out there among the Confederation worlds.

The surgical techniques could also be used to rectify behaviour. For example, an attempt to run away from the sect would be easily curtailed by replacing legs with trotters. In Kilian's case, Banneth hadn't finalized on an effective lesson. Though she did favour extending and re-routing his colon into the back of his throat, so that every time he wanted to shit, he'd have to do it through his mouth. The extra tubing would give him a very thick neck. A nice irony, that. It would match his thick head.

When he was naked, she made him lie face down on the table, then used the straps to secure him in place. Creative punishment would have to wait. Since he blurted confirmation about a possessed, only one thing had mattered to her. She smeared a big dollop of depilatory cream on the back of his neck, and squirted it off with a cold water hose. It left his skin clean and bare, ready to receive the nanonic implant package.

Kilian wasn't permitted an anaesthetic or sedative. He groaned and whimpered continually as the personality debrief filaments pierced his brain; their brutal intrusion sparking cascades of aberrant nerve impulses that sent spasms rippling along his limbs. Banneth sat on one of the desk bench stools, sipping a chilled, hand-mixed martini as she supervised the procedure, occasionally datavisaging new instructions into the package. After nearly two hours, the first erratic impulses started to flood back along the invading filaments. Banneth brought her AI on-line to analyse and interpret the confusing deluge of impulses. Visualizations that were nothing more than randomized detonations of colour slowly calmed as the AI began to marshal Kilian's synaptic discharges into ordered patterns. Once his thought patterns had been catalogued and correlated with his neural structure, his

entire consciousness became controllable. The filaments could simply inject new impulses into the synaptic clefts they'd penetrated, superseding any natural thoughts he had.

Kilian was thinking about his family, such as it was. Mother and two younger half-brothers, living in a couple of dingy rooms in a downtown skyscraper over in the Edson dome. Years ago, now. Mother surviving on a Govcentral parent work-pay scheme; never there during the day. All he had was the constant noise, the shouted arguments, fights, music, footsteps, metroline traffic. At the time he'd wanted nothing more than to escape. A bad decision.

"Why?" Banneth asked.

Kilian flinched. He was sprawled on the sagging bed-settee by the window, looking fondly at all the familiar old objects that had occupied his brief childhood.

Now Banneth stood by the doorway, regarding him contemptuously. She was brighter than anything else in the room, more colourful.

"Why?" she repeated.

A spherical wave of pressure contracted through Kilian's skull, squeezing his thoughts out through his mouth in an unstoppable stream. "Because I left this to join the sect. And I wish I hadn't. I hate my life, I fucking hate it. And now I'm on your table and you're gonna turn me into a dog, or chop my dick off and give it to someone else to fuck me with. Some kind of crap like that. And it's not fair. I didn't do anything wrong. I've always done whatever the sect asked. You can't do this to me. You can't, please God. You're not human. Everybody knows that. You're a fucking weirdo freak cannibal."

"Now there's gratitude. But who gives a fuck about this pathetic little comfort regression you're in. I want when you saw the possessed."

The pressure wave found another part of Kilian's mind to

crush. He screamed out loud as memories erupted like fountains of acid behind his eyes. Home was coldly scorched out of existence, huge great sections of it peeling away like rotten flesh to reveal the Vegreville chapel's temple. Kilian had been there three days back, sent by his sergeant acolyte to pick up some package. He didn't know what was in it, just that: "Banneth wants it fast."

The coven was different than before. There was a new atmosphere percolating through the dark nest of rooms. They regarded him as a joke. His urgency to complete the assignment, to get the package and leave, made them snigger and scoff. Every time he asked them to be quicker they delighted in delaying. They were like frisky kids at a day club who'd found a new boy to taunt and bully.

Eventually he'd been taken to the temple where the senior acolyte told him the package was waiting. The chamber walls were made from thousands of slim metal reinforcement rods welded together, the inside of a bird's nest woven out of iron twigs. Its altar was a tight-packed mound of rusty spikes, their tips all shaved down to the same length. Twin flames rose out of the bristling metal at each end, long yellow tongues dancing in the gloom. Pews were composite roof planks nailed to a variety of pedestals. The sect's usual runes were still on the walls, but they were barely visible now. A single new slogan had been sprayed everywhere: Night is coming. On the walls, on the ceiling, even on the floor.

Kilian was made to enter alone, his little escort clustering round the thick doors behind him, giggling wildly. His annoyance dropped away as he walked quietly towards the altar, replaced by growing nervousness. Three figures waited silently for him behind the altar, clad in black robes. These garments had none of the embellishments or pentagons usually favoured by senior sect members. If anything it made them appear even more menacing than usual. Their faces

were almost lost inside the large hoods. Flickering yellow beams from the candles would occasionally reveal a feature within two of the hoods: bloodshot eyes, hooked nose, wide mouth. The third hood could have been empty for all that Kilian saw. Even when he reached the altar, he could see nothing inside that night-like cavity of fabric.

“The High Magus sent me,” he stammered. “You’ve got a package for me, yeah?”

“We certainly have,” a voice said from somewhere inside that veiled hood.

Alert now, Banneth ran the voice through an analysis program, though ordinary memories of voices were a notoriously unreliable source for such verification programs. Nonetheless, it showed remarkable similarities to recordings of Dexter’s voice. Kilian trembled as the hidden figure slowly held out an arm. He was almost expecting a pistol nozzle to poke out at him. But it was just a snow-white hand that emerged from the voluminous sleeve. A small plastic container was dropped carelessly on the altar.

“Our gift to Banneth. I hope it is useful.”

Kilian scooped it up hurriedly. “Right. Thanks.” All he wanted now was to get the fuck out of here. These guys were almost as creepy as Banneth.

“I am interested that the High Magus is carrying on as though nothing is happening.”

Kilian didn’t know how to answer. He cast a glance over his shoulder, wondering if he should make a dash for it. Not that he could ever get out of the chapel unless he was allowed to. “Well, you know how it is.” He shrugged lamely.

“I certainly do.”

“Sure. I’d better get this back to her, then.”

“The Night will fall.”

“I know.”

“Excellent. Then you will join us when the time comes.”

“My serpent beast is strong.”

A head emerged from the hood, the darkness slowly washing backwards to expose more and more features. “You’ll need to be,” Quinn said.

Banneth froze the image. No doubt about it. Skin as white as snow, eyes infinite pools of black—though that could have just been emotion-aggravated exaggeration. But it was Quinn.

The High Magus smiled thinly as the image hung in her mind. The fierceness which had once so animated him, and fascinated her, was gone. If anything, he looked rather stressed out. Crinkled lines radiated away from the corner of his eyes, while those sweet cheeks were rather sadly sunken.

She concentrated her thoughts, focusing on the personality traits of one individual. **Dexter’s in Edmonton. One of my acolytes encountered him three days ago.**

Ah. Thank you, Western Europe replied.

The ten ships in the convoy emerged above New California, immediately confirming who they were to Monterey’s SD command. For once the hellhawks accompanying the frigates hadn’t raced on ahead. They were quite content to let the convoy commander break the bad news they were carrying.

Where’s Etchells? Hudson Proctor asked once the four remaining hellhawks had checked in.

We don’t know, Pran Soo said. **He left us to scout round the antimatter station. He will probably emerge soon.**

You’re sure the Confederation destroyed it?

The frigates were still there. They saw it explode.

A fact which the convoy commander was very reluctantly confirming to Monterey. The news was all around the asteroid within thirty minutes, and down to New California’s

cities in roughly the same timescale. Word spread across the countryside within a couple of days. The more remote Organization asteroid settlements lagged behind by anything up to a week. The last ones actually got to hear about it from Confederation propaganda broadcasts—who damn well weren't going to miss that opportunity.

This time Emmet Mordden refused point blank to be the one who had to tell Al. So the senior lieutenants decided that Leroy Octavius should be awarded the honour. Their unspoken thought as they watched him waddle out of the asteroid's command centre was that he too would chicken out and simply tell Jezzibella.

A lifetime juggling temperamental personalities in the entertainment industry had left Leroy wise to that option. Knowing that Jezzibella was the only guarantee his own precious body and soul remained intact, he simply couldn't permit her position to be weakened. Leroy gathered his courage and went down to the Nixon Suite. Walking along the last few metres to the doors his legs had more than a little wobble of apprehension. The two gangsters on guard outside picked up on his emotions, and studiously avoided eye contact as they opened the big doors for him.

Al and Jezzibella were having breakfast in the conservatory, a long, narrow room with one wall made entirely of curving enhanced sapphire, which gave a slightly bluish tint to the view of the planet and stars outside. The opposite wall had vanished beneath a trelliswork of flowering vines. Pillars running the length of the conservatory were transparent tubes, aquariums filled with the strange and beautiful fish from a dozen worlds.

There was only one table, a broad wrought iron oval, with a vase of orange lilies in the middle. Al and Jezzibella sat next to each other, dressed in identical aquamarine bath-

robes, and casually munching toast. Libby was limping round the table, pouring coffee.

Al looked up as Leroy came in. His welcoming smile faded when he caught the anxiety in the obese manager's mind. "You don't look too happy, Leroy, my boy. What's eating you?" Jezzibella glanced up from her history book.

Leroy took a breath and plunged in. "I have some news. It's not good."

"Okay, Leroy, I ain't gonna bite you because those wiseasses dumped a shitty job on you. What the fuck's happened?"

"That last convoy we sent to the antimatter station just made it back. Thing is, the Navy was there waiting for them. They blew it up, Al. We're not going to get any more antimatter, not ever."

"Jesus H Christ!" Al's fist thumped the table, bouncing the crockery. Three slim scars throbbed white on his cheek. "How the hell did they find out? Ain't *nothing* we do more careful than sending the convoy to the station. Did the last lot get followed?"

"I don't know, Al. The frigates'll dock in another ninety minutes; maybe the captains'll tell us more."

"They'd fucking better." Al's fists clenched. He stared at the starfield outside the conservatory.

Leroy hesitated, glancing at Jezzibella. She inclined her head silently to the door. It was all the permission Leroy needed; he ducked his head at Al, and shifted himself the hell out of there as fast as his thick legs would allow. Jezzibella waited patiently, not saying anything. By now she was well used to the cycle of Al's moods.

After a minute in which he could have been frozen, Al roared: "Fuck it!" and smashed a fist down on the table again. This time it had his energistic power behind the blow. The iron bent alarmingly. Plates, jam pots, cups, and the vase

went sliding down the new valley to crash together along the fold. He stood up fast as the boiling coffee splashed onto the floor with the lilies. His chair legs caught on the tiling. "FUCK!" Al spun round and kicked the chair, sending it flying into the curving sapphire window. Libby whimpered in fright, cradling the milk jug as if it alone could protect her. Jezzibella sat back, holding on to the coffee cup she'd saved. Her expression was strictly neutral.

"Goddamn motherfucking shit-eating bastards! That was *my* goddamn station. *Mine*." He put both hands under the buckled table and shoved it upwards. The entire thing went somersaulting along the conservatory. Crockery tumbled away to smash against the floor. Libby cowered as one of the heavy metal legs flashed centimetres above the bun of her grey hair. "Nobody takes my property away from me. No Body! Don't they know who the fuck they're dealing with here? I'm not some chickenshit small-time loser pirate! I am Al goddamn Capone. I've got a fleet that kicks the shit out of whole planets, for Christ's sake. Are they fucking insane? I'll blow that whole stinking pennyass navy of theirs out of the goddamn water. That knucklehead Ruski admiral is gonna get a baseball rammed so far up his ass he'll be pitching it out of his mouth."

"Space," Jezzibella said firmly.

"*What?*" Al whirled round and bellowed at her. "What did you fucking say to me?"

"You'll blow them out of space. Not water. We're not on Earth now, Al."

He pulled a fist back. It shook violently as he held it over her. Then he swung round and punched one of the tall aquariums. The glass shattered. Water and a shoal of long purple fish poured out of the big hole, splattering the hem of his robe.

“Shit. Goddamn.” He danced backwards, trying to keep his house slippers out of the water.

Jezzibella calmly lifted her feet off the tiles as the tide swirled round her chair. Fish started wriggling frantically over the mosaic, their movements skidding them against the planters. “Did you have antimatter when you started?”

Al was watching the fish in mild perplexity; as if he couldn’t quite understand where they’d come from. “What?” he demanded.

“You heard.” She deliberately looked away from him, and gave Libby a gracious smile. “Go and fetch a bucket, or something, there’s a dear.”

“Yes, poppet,” Libby said nervously. She scurried away.

“You frightened her,” Jezzibella accused.

“Fuck her,” Al said irritably. “What did you say about antimatter?”

“First off, we’ve still got tonnes of the stuff. Think how many convoys got through.”

“Tonnes?”

“Alright, not tonnes, but certainly kilograms. Work it out if you don’t believe me: one kilogram equals two and a fifth pounds. So the fleet and the SD network still has more than enough to wipe the floor with any Confederation Navy task force stupid enough to try its luck against New California. Then there’s Kingsley Pryor. You haven’t forgotten him, have you?”

Al stopped his mental arithmetic. He was actually very good at it, a hangover from the days when he was working as an accountant in Baltimore. Jez was right again, they had got a healthy stash of the superbomb material. And no he hadn’t forgotten Kingsley, exactly, it was just a long time since they set him loose on his clandestine assignment. “That flaky asshole? I’ve written him off. Christsave, it’s been too long.”

“No it hasn’t. He’s a courier, not a missile. He’ll get there eventually.”

“Could be.”

“Will be, and then you’ve won. Once the Confederation’s been broken, you don’t have to worry about New California being hauled back here.”

“Could be,” he sighed. “But we ain’t going to get any more antimatter. Hell, Jez, if they send two task forces, we’re up shit creek.”

“They won’t. Believe me. It’s a political impossibility. So we’re back to my original question. You didn’t have antimatter when you started out, and you still managed to take over this planet. Antimatter was a beautiful bonus, Al. And you used it perfectly. You’ve not only got the Confederation public terrified of you, but with those infiltration flights you’ve weakened them physically. Twenty-five planets seeded. That’s *crippled* their economies and leadership. They can’t challenge you on your home ground. No way. And that’s what really counts.” She extended her legs, and rested her heels on one of the two remaining chairs. “We’re never going to see Navy warships outside this window. Not now. You’re secure, Al. You’ve made it clean. You’ve dug the moat to keep those bastards out, now concentrate on cementing what you’ve conquered. Don’t let those moaning weaklings who claim to be your friends chip away at the Organization.”

“God damn, you’re beautiful.” He splashed through the thin runnels of water to kiss her. She smiled up at him, and used a forefinger to tickle under his chin.

“The guys are going to go apeshit about losing the station.”

“They’re going to be frightened, that’s all,” she said. “Just show them they don’t have to be, that you’re in charge of the situation. They need that reassurance. They need you, Al, no one else can hold things together.”

“You’re right. I’ll call the senior lieutenants in. Spin them some bullshit, and kick ass.”

Her hand curled round the back of his neck. “It can wait an hour.”

Al buckled down on his disapproval when he arrived at the Chiefs of Staff office. No point in biting people’s balls off before they’d even started the meeting. It was just—he couldn’t help remembering what the plush office had looked like the first time they’d used it. Tidy and gleaming, with coffee served from a silver pot into elegant china. Now, it was suffering from the general tide of crap washing through Monterey. Without mechanoids, nothing was being cleaned, let alone polished. There were plates and crumpled sachets on the table, dating back three or four meetings; cups with mould growing in the bottom. No one could be bothered to take them back to the nearest canteen.

It wasn’t good. Not at all. Jez was right. He had to consolidate what he’d got. Make things function smoothly again. Like it all had at the start.

Kiera was last to arrive. That was getting to be a habit. Al couldn’t work out if she was doing it to annoy him, or to make everyone take notice of her. She took her place halfway down the side of the table, between Patricia and Leroy. Al performed his own theatre by getting up again and refilling his coffee cup from the wheezing espresso machine.

“Hey, Leroy, where’s Webster?” Al asked suddenly. “He should be dishing this stuff out.”

The manager broke off his murmured conversation with Patricia and glanced round the office in surprise. “Kid’s probably skiving off.”

“Yeah? I ain’t seen him about for a while. How come?” Now he thought about it, Al couldn’t remember the last time the boy had been in attendance. It was goddamn typical of

the sloppy way things were being run these days. No hostage was more important than Webster Pryor; he was the only person who could make Kingsley Pryor go through with the assignment.

Leroy took out his pocket block and typed quickly, summoning up staff rotas. The results made him uneasy, which everyone was very aware of. "He's down in the kitchens, I think. That was his last assignment, helping the chef. His supervisor hasn't reported back since."

Al sat down and stirred his coffee. "Silvano, where's the kid?"

The morose lieutenant's scowl deepened. "I don't fucking know."

"It's your job to fucking know. Je-zus, I put you in charge of keeping people in order, and you can't even look after a brat. You know what's riding on keeping Webster in line. He's more important than all the other hostages put together."

"Sure, Al. I'll find him."

"You'd better. Fuck me, this is goddamn typical of how slack things are getting up here." He took a sip of coffee, making sure his temper sank back. "Okay, are you guys all up to speed on what's happened with the antimatter station?" By the way everyone mumbled and avoided his eye he guessed they were. "Well don't all make out like it's the end of the world. It ain't. We just about achieved what we set out to do. Dwight, how many planets have we screwed now?"

The fleet commander flushed as everyone concentrated on him. "Seventeen confirmed infiltrations, Al. We're waiting for another two flights to get back."

"Nineteen planets." Al grinned round the lieutenants. "Plus Arnstat. Not bad. Not bad at all. We've kicked so much shit into the Navy's face they can't even see us now. And if

they do try a raid . . . What'll happen, Emmet? We still got what it takes to see them off?"

"No problem, Al. The SD platforms are all armed with antimatter, along with half the fleet. The only Navy ships that'll visit New California for a rumble are the ones on a suicide mission."

"Glad to hear it. You all hear that, too?" He searched round, trying to spot any major-league dissenters with his ethereal senses as they all swore they heard and approved. There was the obvious ones; Kiera with her cool contempt, the rest were just jittery, or, like Silvano, sullen and resentful. But so far he was carrying it. "Okay, so we've done what we set out to when we walked into City Hall. We got us an entire planet, along with a haul of space factories. And the important thing is, we took out the nearest opposition. This planet is a fucking fortress now. That means we can ease up on watching our backs, and get on with running this shebang properly. Leroy, how's the food situation down on the surface?"

"Nobody's starving, Al. The farms aren't producing as much as they did before. But they are producing. I think we can get them back up to the old levels if the lieutenants on the ground applied some pressure. We need to motivate them."

"Okay. So food is something we can improve if we had the time. Mickey, your boys jiving you, or are they marching round like a bunch of krauts whenever you give the word?"

Mickey Pileggi licked at the beads of sweat that had suddenly erupted on his upper lip. "I got them under control, Al. Yeah. Sure thing."

"Mickey, you're full of crap. This whole fucking joint is going down the pan. We've been humping away at the Confederation so bad, we ain't noticed the rain coming in."

"That's what you wanted."

Al stopped in full flow, hauling back on his anger. He'd

just been getting nicely into his spiel. “Kiera, stop being such a ballbuster. I did what I had to to protect us. Ain’t nobody here gonna argue with that.”

“I’m not arguing, Al. I’m saying the same thing as you. We are where we are, because this is where you’ve brought us.”

“You want to be somewhere else right now?”

“No.”

“Then shut the fuck up. I’m telling you, all of you; now is when we start getting things working properly again. You gotta start keeping tabs on the soldiers under your command, else everyone’s gonna finish up going AWOL like Webster. And that way, we wind up in deep shit. We gotta have things working smoothly around here again. If you don’t start exerting some proper discipline then the whole Organization’s gonna fall apart. And if it goes down, then we go down with it.”

“Al, the Organization is set up to keep the fleet working,” Kiera said.

“Hey, fucking lady Einstein, you just worked that out for yourself, or did one of the kids from the gym explain it when he was banging you?” Al chuckled loudly, encouraging the others to join in.

“I’ve always known it. I just wondered if you did.”

Al’s humour faded out. “What are you getting at?”

“The only reason we need the fleet is if New California remains in this universe.”

“Aw shit, not this crap again. Don’t you get it? If we leave, then the Confederation longhairs are going to be free to dream up some way of snatching us back. We have to stay here, it’s the only way we can see what’s coming.”

“And if you see something like that coming at you, Al, what are you going to do about it? A technology powerful enough to pull a planet back from the other side of the beyond. Launch a combat wasp at it? Believe me, if the Con-

federation ever gets to be that powerful, then we don't stand a chance. But I don't think they'll ever learn how to do anything like that. We can do it because we've got the devil's own power charging us up. No chunk of machinery can challenge that. If we leave, then I say we're going to be a hell of a lot safer there than we are here."

There was an itch in Al's palm, running across his skin exactly where he gripped the handle of his baseball bat. He held off from making it real. Her talk about the devil being behind them made him uncomfortable. A Catholic by birth, he didn't like examining the implications of what he was now, nor why. "We ain't pinning our future on what you *think* might be right, sister," he growled. "If we want a certainty, then we stay right here."

"The Organization can be transported down to the planet," Kiera said, as if Al hadn't even spoken. "We can use the SD network to keep our power base secure until we assume control of the cities. After that, we use ground troops to enforce order. Al was right about that. There's been too much slippage allowed recently. We know we have to keep the farms and a lot of the industries going if we want any kind of decent life on the other side. It'll take a strong, positive government to achieve that. And that's us."

"We can do all that crap, and still stay here," Al said. His voice had become little more than a whisper. That worried those who had been with him the longest, though Kiera didn't seem to notice the barely concealed danger. "When I want someone else to tell me how to run my Organization, I'll let you know. Got that, baby doll? Or do I need to make it real plain for you?"

"I hear what you say, Al." The tone was amused indolence.

"That's smart of you. Now I want the rest of you guys to start doing like I've said. We need a crackdown like God's foot is stomping through the clouds. I want things up and

jumping around here. Put the word out to your soldiers, as of now you shape up or ship out. And out is where you don't want to be."

Al told Emmet and Silvano to stay behind after the others trooped out. He flicked a switch to turn the wall clear, and waited impatiently as transparent waves skidded about in front of him. With his mind all het up, it was hard to cool down his energetic power. Eventually, the wall stabilized, giving him a view across the SD Tactical Operations Centre. Five people were sitting behind the long ranks of consoles; two of them playing cards.

"The bitch is good," Al said. He was surprised more than anything.

"She used to be married to a politician," Silvano said. "Knows how to sound plausible."

"Certainly convinced me scooting our asses out of here is a good idea," Al muttered. He turned back to his two senior lieutenants. "Emmet, is what she said right? Can we take the planet out of their reach? I mean, right away?"

Emmet wiped a hand across his forehead. "Al, I can make the machines we've got work for you. Do a few repairs, make sure everything's plugged in where it oughta be. But, shit, questions like that . . . That's out of my league, Al, way out. You need a theoretical physicist, or a priest. But even if they can learn how to do that, it's not gonna be tomorrow. We'd be safe there a long time. And could be we'd learn how to keep ourselves there. Shit, I just don't know, Al."

"Ha." Al sat himself down, annoyed by how badly he'd come out of the clash. "And we don't get to find out, neither. God damn that bitch. Now she's declared for the running away option, I've gotta make my stand to stay here. And you can be certain she'll start shouting her idea about."

"Leaving this universe has a strong appeal to the pos-

sessed,” Silvano said. “It’s intrinsic. Perhaps you should bow to the inevitable, boss.”

“You think I’m gonna knuckle under to that whore?”

“Not to her, no. But she’s backing a winning idea.”

“I still need the hellhawks a while,” Al said. “Emmet, you done anything more about building another feeding trough for them?”

“Sorry, Al, haven’t had time.”

“You’ve got it now.”

Banneth was making her preliminary preparations to Kilian when one of the senior acolytes pounded on the door of her sanctum. Kilian gurgled weakly as she eased the slim tube deeper inside him.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Banneth promised him cheerfully, and fastened a clamp around the incision to stop the bleeding. She stripped the thin isolation gloves from her hands as she walked over to the door.

“A body, High Magus,” the acolyte panted. “There’s a body in the temple.”

She frowned. “Who?”

“Acolyte Tilkea, High Magus. He was butchered. We didn’t authorize it. Tilkea is one of the better ones.”

“I see.” Banneth datavised a codelock at her sanctum door, and strode off towards the temple. “How awful, a corpse we didn’t authorize.”

“Yes, High Magus,” the acolyte agreed nervously. Like everyone in the headquarters, he never knew if she was joking or not.

Even by the standards of the sect, the killing was fairly extreme. The remains of acolyte Tilkea were suspended from strands of carbon wire above the altar, arms and legs extended wide. Large hooks punctured the skin above his shoulder blades, as well as his buttocks, wrists, and ankles,

fastening him to the wires. His chest had been split open from throat to crotch, ribs levered apart to allow the internal organs to spill out. They'd splattered down on the altar, along with a small lake of blood. Banneth circled the corpse carefully, while a gaggle of acolytes stood at a respectful distance. It was ironic, she thought, that a death in the temple where they themselves had killed hundreds over the last few decades should invoke such trepidation. A sign of the times.

The blood was still warm. Banneth took a small medical block from her pocket, and pressed its sensor pad against Tilkea's glistening liver. "This happened within the last half hour," she announced. "Was he on duty in here?"

"Yes, High Magus."

She datavised the headquarters network processor, and instructed it to review the security systems. Nobody had left the building within the last hour. "I want every door guarded by a team of five acolytes. You can issue the hand weapons, chemical projectiles only."

The senior acolytes hurried to obey. When she stood up, Banneth saw the writing on the wall behind the altar. Someone had used Tilkea's heart as a sponge, scrawling in blood: **Darkness has arrived.** Her gaze switched from that to the wires disappearing into the shadows cloaking the ceiling. "Who fixed them up there?" she asked quietly. Not a difficult job, but hardly one that could be done unnoticed. The acolytes simply shrugged helplessly.

This is a very elaborate death, Banneth told Western Europe. It obviously took some time to prepare. And getting in and out of the building would be hard even for the possessed. My AI is running a constant glitch scan.

It wouldn't be difficult for Dexter, Western Europe replied. From what we've seen so far he can circumvent all your electronics. I'd suggest he's starting a war of nerves. If he's as fixated on you as we believe, then a quick death will hardly suffice.

I expect you're right.

Cheer up, it confirms that he's still in Edmonton. And if Tilkea was killed only half an hour ago, he can't have left yet. I'll have the vac-trains shut down immediately.

If Dexter can make himself invisible, he's probably still inside this temple right now. Banneth resisted the urge to stare round into the many dark recesses. **I imagine he'll want to see my reaction.**

You could make him happy. Scream, faint; that kind of thing.

I'll consider it for the future.

Perhaps you ought to trigger your gender cycle early, Western Europe suggested. Shift into a man.

I fail to see the relevance.

A male's aggression would probably be a more appropriate response to this situation. Dexter is a raging psychotic, after all.

Banneth dispatched a dry laugh down the affinity bond. **That's one of my more treasured privileges, an intimate knowledge of both psychological profiles owned by the human race. I can exploit the relevant weaknesses to perfection. Men have less of a conscience, I'll grant you; but your claim that you're rougher and tougher is a rather sad ego-enhancing lie you tell yourselves.**

Charmed, I'm sure. Well if you don't want to do that, is there anything else you need?

I can't think of anything. This place is so heavily booby trapped I'm more worried about one of these bumpkin acolytes setting off a charge than I am an invasion of possessed.

Very well.

Are you watching the other sects?

Yes. North America and I have them all covered. Eight of Edmonton's chapels have been taken over by possessed. It's only a matter of time until the remainder fol-

low. Quinn has also started to sabotage Edmonton's infrastructure. The acolytes have been sent out several times to damage fusion generators and water pumping stations. They actually got through in three or four instances.

I haven't noticed any reduction in services.

Because there haven't been any. Not yet. But the margins are being cut; which raises an considerable question mark over Dexter's ultimate goal. However, it's proved an interesting footprint for us. There have been similar acts in Paris and Bombay.

You think that's where he's been?

Yes. I'm investigating Paris myself, of course. The East Asian supervisor is giving the Bombay sect his personal attention.

Your observers here should keep watch for Courtney and Billy-Joe. Banneth concentrated on their images. They've been missing for a couple of days now. Dexter used to pimp Courtney for me when he was an acolyte. You couldn't classify her as a friend, but she'll be loyal to him. If he keeps anyone close, it'll be her.

Thank you. We'll keep an eye out.

The program's visualization took the form of a three dimensional spider web that filled the entire universe. Strands were all primary colours, crossing and recrossing against each other, a weave that stretched away to an infinity where they blurred into null-grey uniformity. Louise's mind hung in the centre, looking in every direction at once.

What her neural nanonics were showing her was Earth's communication net. Or at least, part of London's informational structure. Then again, it might have been just the Ritz's internal house network. She wasn't entirely sure, only that this was what surrounded her room's net processor . . . when she ran this particular symbology protocol, anyway. There

were some interpretations which were like cybernetic coral, others that had cartoon roads, looping gas-giant rings, even one that was an intertexture of glowing liquids. But this, she felt, was the most real.

Information taxis were flooding back towards her, silent sparkles of light riding the strands down to the centre, condensing around her like a new galaxy. A response to the latest questor she'd fired into the digital aether; the fiftieth variant on that one basic inquiry: find a connection between Quinn Dexter and Banneth, any category. She'd tried multiple combinations of the most preposterous phonetic spellings, removed time restrictions so that the questors could search centuries-old memories, allowed fictional works (every media type from books onwards) to be incorporated. If she could just get that first connection, discover a single positive reference, then the questors and news hounds and directory extractors and credit profilers and a hundred other search programs installed in her neural nanonics could be unleashed on Banneth like dogs after a hax.

The information taxis loaded their passenger files into the analysis program she was running in primary mode. "Oh hell," she groaned. The neuroiconic display vanished, and she propped herself up on her elbows.

Genevieve was sitting at the room's desk, running an English geo-historical tutorial through her processor block. She gave her big sister a sympathetic look. "Zeroed out again?"

"Yep." Louise leaned over the side of the bed, and hunted round for her shoes. "Not a single file entry, not that combines them."

"You've just got to keep asking." Genevieve indicated the pile of flek cases on the desk. "Computers aren't smart, just fast. Garbage in, garbage out."

"Is that so?" Louise wasn't going to quibble about Gen's new-found interest of boning up on educational texts. It was

better than games. Trouble was, the knowledge was superficial.

Like mine.

“I don’t know enough,” she confessed. “Even with the program tutors to help me format the questor.” It wasn’t just her inability to get a lead on Banneth that bothered her. There was still no response from Joshua. She’d sent half a dozen messages now without so much as an acknowledgement from Tranquillity. “I need professional help.”

She was back. Andy Behoo sighed helplessly as soon as he saw her walk in. The magic was only slightly soiled by Genevieve trailing after her. This time he didn’t even bother to say anything to the customer he was serving before he abandoned them. Louise was standing in the middle of the shop, looking round with that same slightly befuddled expression as the first time. She smiled lightly when she saw him approaching (not too fast, don’t run—you’ll look pathetic).

“Back for some more?” he asked. God, what a stupid thing to say. Why not just yell out: I don’t have a life.

“I’d like to choose some programs, yes,” Louise said.

“Excellent.” His eyes tracked up and down in a fast sweep, feeding the image into a memory cell. Today she wore a lemon-yellow dress made from a sparkly fabric that was tight around her bottom; and a pair of antique wire rimmed sunglasses. An odd combination, but very stylish. You just had to have considerable poise to carry off the effect. “What can we get you?”

“I need a very powerful questor. You see. I’m trying to find someone, and I’ve got very little information about them. The NAS2600 questor can’t locate them for me.”

Interest in what she was saying actually diverted Andy’s eyes from her cleavage. “Really? It’s usually pretty good.

Your friend must be very well hidden.” And pray it’s her loathsome fiancé.

“Could be. Can you help?”

“What I’m here for.” Andy walked back to his counter, working out in his mind what he could do to use the situation. He plain didn’t have the nerve to ask her outright if she’d like to come for a drink with him after work. Especially not with Genevieve at her side. But there had to be some way he could get to see her again, outside Jude’s Eworld.

He was very conscious of Liscard, the general manager, tracking his progress. Liscard had been on edge ever since a couple of Special Branch cops had paid Jude’s Eworld a visit. They’d taken the manager back into her office, and spoken to her for over an hour. Whatever they said, her suppresser programs couldn’t get a grip on her subsequent nerves. She’d certainly given Andy a hard time all day, snarling at him for little or no reason.

Andy had a horrible feeling it might all be connected with Louise. Specifically de-stinging her and Genevieve. If they had been Govcentral bugs, then Jude’s Eworld had probably broken the law removing them. But there’d been no real reprimand. The sellrats had been nibbling on curiosity and rumour ever since. Each of them bragged about their own special shady customer who was the probable cause.

The shop’s inventory flashed up in Andy’s head, and he ran through the specs for questors. “I expect half of your trouble is that the 2600 questor only reviews current file indexes,” he told Louise. “What we need to do is get you one that’ll review entire files and disregard data status, that should help with obscure references.” Andy ducked down below the counter top, and looked at the clutter of fleks stacked up on the shelves below. “Here we go.” He surfaced, holding up a flek case. “Killabyte. It’s almost an AI in its own right. A one shot request that operates on fuzzy breeder

intuition, which means it can utilise whatever references it finds to build new associations which you haven't loaded in, and search through them. It won't taxi back until it's found the answer, no matter how long it takes. Tenacious little bugger."

"That's good. Thank you, Andy."

"What I'd really like to give you is the Hyperpeadia, but we haven't got any fleks of it in stock right now. If it's used in tandem with Killabyte I'd guarantee you'll find your friend. They're the two market leaders right now."

"I'm sure Killabyte will be fine."

"I'll put in an order for Hyperpeadia. The software collective won't datavise it to us, they're worried about bootlegs." He put his elbows on the counter and leaned towards her in a confidential fashion. "Course, the encryption has already been cracked. You can get a pirate clone at any stall in Chelsea market, but it'll probably have transcription degradation. Best you have an original. It'll be here tomorrow morning. I can have it delivered straight to wherever you're staying."

"I'm at the Ritz." Louise fished round in her shoulder bag and produced the hotel's courtesy collection disk.

"Ah." Andy held up the counter's delivery log block to accept the Ritz's code. "Your fiancé hasn't arrived yet, then?" Genevieve had to bend over and hide her face in her hands to stop the giggles.

"No, not yet," Louise answered levelly. "But I'm expecting him any day now. He's already in the solar system. I was wondering if you could help me with something else?"

"Sure. Anything!"

Louise smiled demurely at his enthusiasm. I ought to be firmer with him. But somehow being firm with Andy Behoo would be like drowning kittens. "It's just in case the questors

can't find what I want. You said some private detectives use the store. Could you recommend one?"

"I can ask," he said thoughtfully. "Hang on a minute."

Liscard gave him an alarmed look as he walked over to her. "A private dick?" she mumbled when Andy asked which one he should recommend.

"Yeah," Andy said. "One that's good at finding people. Do you know if any of them are?"

"I think so," Liscard stammered. She waited apprehensively. As soon as the Kavanagh girls had come back into the store, she'd established a sensewise link to the address which the Special Branch officers had given her. Her retinas and audio discrimination program had been capturing the scene for whoever was at the other end of the link. She didn't have the nerve to load any of the tracer programs available to employees of Jude's Eworld. The software houses who produced them guaranteed they would be completely undetectable, but she wasn't about to take the risk. Not with the people who claimed they were from Special Branch. When she asked her fixer in the local police about them he'd abruptly told her never to contact him again, and cut the datavise.

"What do you want me to say?" she datavised to the anonymous receiver.

"There's someone I know who can help the girl," came the answer.

Liscard datavised the information directly into Andy's neural nanonics. He took his time walking back across the shop, a measured approach allowed him to savour her shape. The images he'd snatched before were fine as far as they went, but they amounted to little more than photonic dolls in his sensenviron. After conjuring them up he was left craving for more substantial replicants. Now, with his retinas switched to infrared, and feeding through discrimination pro-

gram, he could trace her abdominal muscle pattern and rib cage through the fabric of her dress. A scan grid overlay revealed the precise three-dimensional measurements of those wonderful breasts. And her skin tone spectrum was already on file; that would be a simple continuation for the sculptor program, extending up from the legs, and down from her bare shoulders. That just left the taste of her as he ran his tongue along her belly and down between her thighs. The correct pitch as she cried out in gratitude, the praise she would moan to him, her greatest ever lover.

Andy hated himself for resorting to sensenviron sprites. It was the final humiliating proof that he was a complete loser. But she was so fantastic. Better to have loved and lost, than never loved at all. Even if that love was purely digital.

“What’s the matter with him?” Genevieve asked loudly. “Why’s he looking at you all funny?”

Andy’s smile was a thin mask over his horror as her piping voice broke through his distracted thoughts. Cool sweat was beading across his flushed skin. His neural nanonics couldn’t help dispel the blush, they were too busy fighting down his erection.

Louise gave him a vaguely suspicious look. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Andy mumbled. He scurried back behind the counter, ignoring Genevieve’s frown. “I think the person you want is Ivanov Robson. He specializes in missing persons, both kinds.”

“Both kinds?”

“Yeah. Some people are genuinely missing; they drop out of life, or haven’t updated their directory entries—like your friend. Then there’s the kind who’re deliberately trying to vanish; debtors, unfaithful partners, criminals. You know.”

“I see. Well thank you, this Mr Robson sounds about right.”

Andy datavised the detective's address and eddress over. Louise smiled and gave him an uncertain wave as she walked out. Breath whistled out between Andy's crooked teeth. His hands were shaking again, forcing him to grip the edge of the counter. Idiot. Idiot. *Idiot!* But she hadn't stormed out, or made an issue of his stupid erotic daydreaming. There was still a chance.

Yeah, about the same as me getting crowned King of Kulu.

He looked down to double check. The counter's middle shelf held a stack of fifteen Hyperpeadia fleks, all with their wrapping intact. His one and only excuse to see her again.

The taxi pulled up at the end of Fernshaw Road, where it intersected with Edith Terrace. Louise and Genevieve stepped out, and the door slid shut behind them. The vehicle accelerated away silently down the road. It had deposited them in a quiet residential street, where the pavements were actually made from slabs of stone rather than a simple band of carbon-concrete. Silver birch and sycamore trees that must have been a couple of centuries old lined both sides of the road, their giant boughs merging together to provide a gentle emerald shield against the fierce sunlight. The houses were all ancient two or three storey affairs, painted white or cream. Bricks and slate roofs were betraying their age by sagging and bulging; centuries of subsidence and environmental decline had distorted every wall and support timber. Window frames were tilted at the oddest angles. There wasn't a straight line to be seen anywhere in the street. Each house had a tiny front garden, though they'd all been paved over; the massive trees absorbed so much light they prevented any shrubs or vines from growing underneath.

"This must be it," Louise said dubiously. She faced a high wall with a single golden oak door in it, heavily tarnished with age. There was a brass panel with a grill on one side. It

looked far too primitive to datavise at. She pressed the ivory button on top.

“Yes?” the grille squealed.

“I’m here to see Mr Robson,” she said. “I called before. I’m Louise Kavanagh.”

The door buzzed loudly, and she pushed it open. There was a rectangular patio beyond, running along the front of the building; home to a set of wrought iron furniture and a couple of dead conifer bushes in cracked pots. The front door, a duplicate of the one behind, was open. Louise peered cautiously into the small hallway. A blonde girl, barely older than she, was standing behind a reception desk whose surface was smothered with folders, flek cases, and china coffee mugs. She was staring into a small AV pillar that protruded from the top of a very expensive-looking stack of processor blocks. Pale turquoise light from the sparkling pillar was reflected in her narrow, brown eyes. Her frozen posture was one of shock.

Her only acknowledgement of the sisters’ entry was to ask: “Have you accessed it?” in a hoarse voice.

“What?” Genevieve asked.

The receptionist gestured at the pillar. “The news.”

Both sisters stared straight into the pillar’s haze of light. They were looking out across a broad park under a typical arcology dome. Right across the centre of their view, a big tapering tower of metal girders had collapsed to lie in a lengthy sprawl of contorted wreckage across the immaculate emerald grass. Several of the tall, cheerfully shaggy trees that surrounded it had been smashed and buried beneath the splinters of rusty metal. A vast crowd encircled the wreckage, with thousands more making their way along the paths to swell their numbers. They were people in profound mourning, as if the tower had been some precious relative. Louise could see

they all had their heads bowed, most were weeping. Thin cries of grief wove together through the air.

“Bastards,” the receptionist said. “Those utter bastards.”

“What is that thing?” Genevieve asked. The receptionist gave her a startled look.

“We’re from Norfolk,” Louise explained.

“That’s the Eiffel Tower,” the receptionist said. “In Paris. And the Nightfall anarchists blew it up. They’re a bunch of crazies who’re going round wrecking things over there. It’s their mission, they say, preparing the world for the fall of Night. But everyone knows they’re just a front for the possessed. Bastards.”

“Was the tower really important?” Genevieve asked.

“The Eiffel Tower was over seven hundred years old. What do you think?”

The little girl looked back into the projection. “How horrid of them.”

“Yes. I think that’s why there is a beyond. So that people who do things like that can suffer in it until the end of time.”

A glassed-in spiral stair took Louise up to the first floor. Ivanov Robson was waiting for the sisters on the landing. Travelling in the *Far Realm* had accustomed Louise to people who didn’t share the bodyform template she’d grown up with. And of course, London had an astonishing variety of people. Even so, she nearly jumped when she first saw Robson. He was the biggest man she’d ever seen. Easily over seven feet tall, and a body that seemed bulky even for that height. Not that any of it was fat, she noticed. He was frighteningly powerful, with arms thicker than her legs. His skin was the deepest ebony, glossy from a health club’s spar treatment. With thick gold-tinted auburn hair twirled into a tiny pony tail, and wearing a stylish yellow silk business suit, he looked amazingly dapper.

“Miss Kavanagh, welcome.” From the confident humour

in his smooth voice, it was obvious he knew the effect he had on people.

Floorboards creaked under his feet as showed them into his office. The bookcases reminded Louise of her father's study, although there were very few leather-bound volumes here. Ivanov Robson eased himself into a wide chair behind a smoked-glass desk. The surface was empty apart from a slimline processor block and a peculiar chrome-topped glass tube, eighteen inches high, that was full of clear liquid and illuminated from underneath. Orange blobs glided slowly up and down inside it, oscillating as they went.

"Are they xenoc fish?" Genevieve asked. It was the first time she'd spoken. The huge man had even managed to quash her usual bravado. She'd kept well behind Louise the whole time.

"Nothing as spectacular," Ivanov said. "It's an antique, a genuine Twentieth Century lava lamp. Cost me a fortune, but I love it. Now, what can I do for you?" he tented his fingers, and looked directly at Louise.

"I have to find somebody," she said. "Um, if you don't want to take the case when I've told you who, I'll understand. I think she's called Banneth." Louise launched into a recital of her journey since leaving Cricklade, not quite as heavily edited as usual.

"I'm impressed," Ivanov said softly when she'd finished. "You've come face to face with the possessed, and survived. That's quite a feat. If you ever need money, I know a few people in the news media."

"I don't want money, Mr Robson. I just want to find Banneth. None of the questors seem to be able to do that for me."

"I'm almost embarrassed to take your money, but I will, of course." He grinned broadly, revealing teeth that had been plated entirely in gold. "My retainer will be two thousand fuseodollars, payable in advance. If I locate Banneth, that

will be another five thousand. Plus any expenses. I will provide receipts where possible.”

“Very well.” Louise held out her Jovian Bank credit disk.

“A couple of questions first,” Ivanov said after the money had been transferred. He tilted his chair back, and closed his eyes in thought. “The only thing you know for certain about Banneth is that she hurt Quinn Dexter. Correct?”

“Yes. He said so.”

“And Banneth definitely lives on Earth? Interesting. Whatever happened between the two of them sounds very ugly, which implies they were involved in some kind of criminal activity. I think that should provide my investigation with an adequate starting point.”

“Oh.” Louise didn’t quite look at him. It was so obvious, laid out like that. She should have sent a questor into criminal archives.

“I am a professional, Louise,” he said kindly. “You do know the possessed have reached Earth, don’t you?”

“Yes. I accessed the news from New York. The mayor said they’d been eliminated, though.”

“He would. But Govcentral still hasn’t opened the vac-train lines to New York. That should tell you something. And now we’ve had the Eiffel Tower blown up for no reason other than to demoralize and anger people. That probably means they’re in Paris as well. A feat like that is beyond the ability of some stimbrained street gang. What I’m trying to say, Louise, in my dear bumbling way, is that if Quinn Dexter is here, then he’ll be heading for Banneth as well. Now do you really want to bump into him again?”

“No!” Genevieve squeaked.

“Then bear in mind that’s where your current path is taking you.”

“All I need is Banneth’s address,” Louise said. “Nothing else.”

“Then I will do my best to ensure you receive it. I’ll be in touch.”

Ivanov waited until the sisters were circling down the spiral stair before asking: **Do you want me to give her Banneth’s address?**

I’m afraid it’s a bit pointless right now, Western Europe answered. **Edmonton has been sealed up, with Quinn inside. I can’t get her in to meet him; so she’ll just have to sit this out on the substitute’s bench for a while.**

13

The prospect of interstellar flight had been real to certain sections of the human race for a long time before *Sputnik One* thundered into orbit. A notion which began with visionaries like Tsiolkovskii, Goddard, and somewhat more whimsical science fiction writers of that age, was quickly taken up and promoted by obsessive space activists when the first micro-gee factories came on line, proving that orbital manufacturing was a profitable venture. With the development of the O'Neill Halo and the Jupiter mining operation in the Twenty-first Century the concept finally began to seem practical. Asteroids were already being hollowed out and made habitable. Now it was only an engineering and finance problem to propel them out of Earth orbit and across the gulf to Proxima Centauri. There were no theoretical show stoppers; fusion or antimatter engines could be built to accelerate the giant rocks up to speeds of anything between five and twenty per cent of lightspeed, depending on which physicist you asked. Generations of crew would live, tend their machinery, and die within the rock as they crawled across the emptiness, with the anticipation that their descendants would inherit a fresh world.

Sadly, human nature being what it is, century-duration flights were just too long, the ideal of colonization too abstract to motivate the governments and large institutions of the time into building these proposed space arks. The real clincher, inevitably, was cost. There could never be any return on the investment. So it seemed as though the fresh start idealists would just have to go on dreaming.

One such thwarted dreamer was Julian Wan, who, more resourceful than his colleagues, persuaded the board of the New Kong corporation to research faster than light travel. His pitch was that it would be a small, cheap project testing the more dubious equations of Quantum Unification Theory, essentially a few wild theoretical physicists with plenty of computer time. But if it could be made to work, the commercial opportunities would be phenomenal. Noble concern for human destiny and the search for pure knowledge never got a look in.

New Kong successfully tested the ZTT drive in 2115, and the arkship concept was quickly and quietly discarded. Beautifully detailed plans and proposals drawn up by a multitude of starflight societies and associations were downloaded into university library memories to join the ranks of other never-made-it technologies like the nuclear powered bomber, the English Channel bridge, geostationary solar power stations, and continent birthing (the so-called Raising Atlantis project, where fusion bombs were proposed to modify tectonic activity). Then the Tyrathca world of Hesperia-LN was discovered in 2395, along with the news that it was actually a colony founded by an arkship. The old human plans were briefly revisited by history of engineering students, interested to see how they stood up to comparison with a proven arkship. That academic interest faded away inside of a decade.

Joshua, who fancied himself as something of a spaceflight buff, was fascinated by the dull blip of light which *Lady*

Mac's sensors were focused on. It was in a wildly elliptical orbit around Hesper-LN, with a twelve thousand kilometre perigee and four hundred thousand kilometre apogee. Fortunately for their mission, it was just under three hundred thousand kilometres away from the Tyrathca planet, and climbing.

They'd emerged two million kilometres out from Hesper-LN; a distance which put them safely beyond the planet's known SD sensor coverage. The Tyrathca world was not a cradle for the kind of space activity found above industrialized human worlds. There were a few low-orbit docking stations, industrial module clusters, communication and sensor satellite networks, and twenty-five SD platforms supplied and operated by the Confederation Navy. Not that there was a lot of worry about pirate activity, the Tyrathca simply didn't manufacture the kind of goods which could be sold on any human market let alone the underground one. The Confederation was far more concerned by the prospect of blackmail by a rogue starship captain armed with ground-assault weapons. Although they didn't have consumer products, the Tyrathca did mine gold, platinum, and diamonds among other precious commodities for their indigenous industries. And the colony had been established in AD 1300; rumours of vast stockpiles accumulated over millennia persisted on every human world. Any bar or dinner party would have someone who knew somebody else who had been told of a first-hand witness who'd walked through the endless underground caverns filled with their glittering dragon hoards.

So the Navy maintained a small cost-ineffective outpost to guard against the possibility of any inter-species *incident*. It had been abandoned, along with all the other human-maintained systems, when the Tyrathca broke off contact. According to the briefing Monica and Samuel had given to

the *Lady Mac*'s crew, the Tyrathca would find it difficult to keep the SD systems functional for very long.

"But we have to expect them to try," Monica said. "Their ambassador was pretty damn insistent that we don't intrude on them again."

Joshua and Syrinx assumed the SD network was on-line and fully functional, and planned their tactics accordingly. The goal was to land an explorer team on Tanjuntic-RI, who would attempt to locate a reference to the Sleeping God in the arkship's ancient electronics. Getting them inside unnoticed was the big problem.

Both craft were in full stealth mode when they emerged. Jumping into the system, Joshua had aligned *Lady Mac* so that her vector would carry her in a rough trajectory from the emergence coordinate towards the arkship. As long as he didn't have to use either the fusion or antimatter drives, the starship would probably remain undetected. At this stage, they were back up; there to rush in and provide covering fire in case things got noisy and *Oenone* had to rescue their team. They were using passive sensors only, with just the chemical verniers firing occasionally to hold them stable; every non-essential system was in stand-by mode, reducing the power consumption and with it their thermal emission. Internal heat stores were soaking up the fusion generator output, although they could only last for a couple of days before the thermo-dump panels would have to be extended to dissipate the heat. Even that wasn't too much of a problem, the radiation could be directed away from the SD network sensors. They'd have to be extremely unlucky to be discovered by anything that guarded Hesper-LN.

"Picking up some radar pulses from the SD network," Beaulieu reported. "But it's very weak. They're not scanning for us. Our hull coating can absorb this level easily."

“Good,” Joshua said. “Liol, what about spacecraft activity?”

“Infrared’s showing twenty-three ships using their drives above the planet. The majority are travelling between low orbit and the SD platforms. Four seem to be heading up for high polar orbits. I’d say they’re complementing the platforms. But none of them are moving very fast, half a gee maximum. They are big ships, though.”

“That’s how the Tyrathca like them,” Ashly said. “Plenty of room to move round in the life support sections. It’s like being inside a bloody cathedral.”

“Offensive potential?”

“If they’re armed with human-made combat wasps, considerable,” Liol said. “With that drive signature I’m assuming they’re Tyrathca inter-planetary ships; they have a dozen asteroid settlements to provide the planetary industries with several kinds of bulk microgee compounds. Which means their payload is considerably larger than ours. They’re like highly manoeuvrable weapons platforms.”

“Wonderful.” Joshua datavised the new bitek processor array they’d installed during the last refit. “*Oenone*, what’s your situation?”

“I remain on schedule, Joshua. We should be rendezvousing with Tanjuntic-RI in another forty-two minutes. The exploration team is suiting up now.”

Unlike the *Lady Macbeth*, *Oenone* had been able to accelerate and manoeuvre after emerging above the planet. By reducing its distortion field to a minimum, the voidhawk could accelerate at half a gee towards the arkship. Given the distance involved, the network satellites were unable to pick up such a small ripple in space-time. The disadvantage was, with such a reduced field the voidhawk couldn’t perceive a fraction of the local environment it usually did. If for some unaccountable reason, the Tyrathca had surrounded Tanjuntic-

RI with proximity mines, they wouldn't know until they were very close indeed.

Syrinx always hated being dependent on just the sensor blisters and passive electronic arrays. The voidhawks' ability to pervade a huge spherical volume of space around the hull was intrinsic to their flight.

We managed like this in our Navy days, *Oenone* said, unperturbed.

Syrinx grinned in the half-light of the bridge. The crew toroid's internal power consumption was minimal as well. **You mean back when we were young and foolish?**

This is not a foolish venture, the voidhawk chided. **Wing-Tsit Chong considers it of the utmost importance.**

Me too. But this part just brings back memories. Of Thetis, though she didn't mention him. Lately she'd started to wonder if her brother had managed to elude the beyond as that ever-damned Laton had promised. Mild feelings of guilt had kept her away from his strange stunted existence within the Romulus multiplicity before they left. Really, what was the point in preserving him when his soul was free?

What is our best landing point, do you think? *Oenone* asked.

As always, the voidhawk knew when she needed distracting. **I'm not sure. Show me what we can see.** She accessed the all-too scant files on Tanjuntic-RI stored in the on-board processors, and attempted to match them up with the image the voidhawk was seeing.

Tanjuntic-RI had been completely abandoned less than fifty years after it arrived in the Hesper-LN star system. An unduly harsh treatment by human standards, but it had fulfilled every duty its long-dead builders had required of it, and the Tyrathca were not a sentimental species. Fifteen thousand years old, it had travelled one thousand six hundred light-years to ensure the Tyrathca race didn't die along with their

exploding home star. Five separate, successful colonies had been established along its route. Each time the arkship had stopped inside a star system to create a new colony, the Tyrathca had virtually rebuilt it, refuelled it, then carried on with their crusade of racial survival. Even so, there are limits to the most sturdy machinery. After Hesper-LN was founded, Tanjuntic-RI was left to circle ceaselessly above the planet.

Borrowing *Oenone's* sensor blisters, Syrinx could see the details becoming clear as they glided in for a rendezvous. Tanjuntic-RI was a dark cylindrical rock six kilometres long, two and a half in diameter. Its surface was a gentle mottle of flattened craters, resembling a wind-sculpted ice field. Remnants of vast machines sketched out a random topology of tarnished metal lines along the floors of the meandering valleys. These appurtenances had succumbed to millennia of particle impacts and vacuum ablation. What had once been a surface bristling with elaborate towers and radiator panels the size of lakes was left with little more than their stubby mounting fixtures as a reminder of past grandeur. The forward end was the most heavily speckled, due mainly to the extensive remnants of a coppery hexagonal grid.

With Tanjuntic-RI capable of travelling at over fifteen per cent lightspeed, a collision with a single pebble at that speed could result in catastrophic damage. So in flight the arkship was protected by a plasma buffer, a cloud of electrically charged gas that broke up and absorbed any mass smaller than a boulder. It rode ahead of the arkship, a luminous mushroom-shape held in place by a magnetic field generated by the superconductor grid.

Right in the centre of the grid, aligned along the rotation axis, was the arkship's spaceport. Although the concept was the same as the counter-rotating spaceports on Edenist habitats, the Tyrathca had fashioned an elaborate conical struc-

ture made up from tiers of disks. Its peak disappeared below the surface of the rock, as if it were a kind of giant arrow tip which had impaled itself in some forgotten era. The larger disks at the top end had broken off centuries ago, probably when the magnetic bearing seized up. Those that remained were vacuum ablating, their edges fraying like worn cloth, while their flat surfaces slowly dissolved, reducing their overall thickness. With the last maintenance crew departing thirteen centuries previously, the vast sheets of metal were down to a few centimetres thickness, and perforated by thousands of micrometeorite holes.

Oenone was also relaying the image of the arkship to the little exploration team suiting up in the crew toroid's airlock prep chamber. Given the clandestine nature of their mission, Monica Foulkes and Samuel were leading the team. There were only two technical staff coming with them; Renato Vella, who was Kempster Getchell's chief assistant, and Oski Katsura, head of the Laymil project's electronics division. Their job would be to reactivate Tanjuntic-RI's electronic library and extract whatever files concerning the Sleeping God that they could locate. Tactical support was supplied by four serjeants, loaded with Ione's personality.

Kempster Getchell and Parker Higgins were also in the prep chamber; helping with the suits when they were asked, but mainly rehearsing mission goals with Renato and Oski. The formless black silicon of the SII suits had enveloped each of the team, now they were busy clipping their rigid exoskeleton suits on top. They were using standard issue Confederation Navy Marine armour, generator reinforced monobonded carbon with power augmentation. As sleek and featureless as the SII suits, they were designed for both asteroid and ship assault roles, capable of supporting and keeping the wearer active in high gee environments, and with built in manoeuvring packs.

The team started to run integration diagnostics. Arm joints bent and twisted, sensor inputs flicked through the spectrum. Monica, Samuel, and the serjeants ran their weapons interface programs, and stowed the various items of lethal hardware on their belts and racks once the suit processor confirmed the connection. Oski and Renato started picking up their blocks and equipment kits; there were too many to hang on their belts, so they were both using small chestpacks.

Kempster held Renato's pack steady as it adhered to the armour suit. "I can't feel the weight," the young astronomer datavised. "I just have to balance right. And I've even got a program for that."

"The wonders of science," Kempster muttered. "Mind you, I ought to be flattered. Commando raids to acquire astronomical data. I suppose that's a sign of how important my profession has become."

"The Sleeping God isn't an astronomical event," Parker chided irritably. "We're sure of that now."

Kempster smiled at the blank neutral-grey back of his assistant. Now he was ready, Renato datavised *Oenone's* processor array for an update on their approach. Tanjunctic-RI's dilapidated spaceport was a hundred and fifty kilometres away, and the voidhawk's sensor blisters had it in perfect focus. The large disks were separated by a single central column that appeared to be made up from hundreds of braided pipes. They were spaced far enough apart, a hundred metres at least, to admit ships between them. Tyrathca craft had used them as hangar floors, anchoring themselves to docking pins and plugging into the utility sockets. Now, the disks were essentially flat sheets of decaying metal; their thin lattice of ancillary systems had evaporated away along with the rim.

"We're not going to land on those, are we?" Renato Vella asked. "They don't look very reliable."

Samuel used his suit's bitek processor to datavise a reply.

“*Oenone* will take us in under the bottom disk. We’ll go EVA and try and find a way in along the spaceport’s support column.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Monica datavised. “The archaeology team from the O’Neill Halo got in easily.”

“A hundred and thirty years ago,” Kempster said. “The decay rate Tanjuntic-RI is suffering from could well make things difficult for you. The original route may be blocked.”

“This isn’t an archaeology project, doc,” Monica datavised. “We’ll just cut our way in if we have to. Decay should help us there. The structure won’t put up much resistance.”

Kempster caught Parker’s eye, the two of them registering their disapproval in unison. Cut it open, indeed!

“At least we have a basic layout file of the internal chambers,” Oski datavised. “If we really did have to explore, I doubt we’d achieve anything.”

“Yeah,” Monica agreed. “How come the Tyrathca allowed that university team in?”

“Wrong question,” Parker said. “Why shouldn’t they? The Tyrathca couldn’t understand our interest in the arkship at all. You know they seal up and abandon a house once the breeders have died? Well Tanjuntic-RI is a similar case. Once something of theirs has ended its natural life, it becomes . . . *invalid*, is about the nearest definition we have. They just don’t use it, or visit it again. And it’s not due to the kind of respect we have for graves; they don’t consider their relics or burial houses to be sacred.”

“Weird species,” Monica datavised.

“That’s what they think of us, too,” Parker said. “The various Lords of Ruin have asked them on several occasions if they would join the Laymil research project, another viewpoint would always be valuable. It was the same answer each

time. They're simply not interested in examining obsolete artefacts."

Oenone folded its distortion field to almost nothing as it crept across the last kilometre to Tanjuntic-RI. The arkship was rotating around its long axis once every four minutes, with only a small wobble picked up over the centuries. Which said a lot for how well they'd managed the internal mass distribution, Syrinx thought. As a result of the minute instability, the spaceport was pursuing a small loop which the voidhawk could match easily.

They slid in under the bottom disk, which was only seventy metres in diameter. The short length of the support column which emerged from the disk's centre to burrow into the rock was twenty-five metres wide.

That lower disk must have been used to dock the Tyrathca analogue of our MSV's, Syrinx suggested. With the big inter-planetary ships on the top deck.

That would be logical, *Oenone* agreed. I wonder what they looked like?

Very similar to those the Tyrathca use today, Ruben said. They don't innovate much. Once a system is finalized they never change it.

That doesn't make a lot of sense, Serina said. How can you know when something is as good as possible unless you keep analyzing and tinkering with the design? A bicycle is a good, efficient method of getting from one place to another, but the car came along because we weren't satisfied with it.

I hadn't really thought about it, Ruben admitted. Now you mention it, thirteen hundred years is a long time to stick with one design, an awful lot more if you add their voyage time to that. We're still improving our fusion drives, and we've only had them six hundred years.

And they're a lot better than Tyrathca fusion drives,

Oxley said. **We've been selling them improvements ever since we made contact.**

You're applying human psychology to them, Ruben said. **It's a mistake. They don't have our intuition or imagination. If it works, they really don't try to fix it.**

They must have some imagination, Cacus protested. **You can hardly design an arkship without it.**

Ask Parker Higgens, Ruben said. A slight tinge of defensiveness was leaking into his affinity voice. **Maybe he can explain it. I guess being slow and methodical gets you there in the end.**

Syrinx examined the twisted braid of pipes and girders that made up the spaceport's support column. Following her silent urging, *Oenone* expanded its distortion field enough to pervade the dilapidated structure. A picture of entwined translucent tubes filled her mind. The number of black-crack flaws in the metal and composite was alarming, as was the thinness of individual tubes. **That really is very fragile,** she declared. **Samuel, please be careful when you egress. It won't take much to snap the spaceport clean off.**

Thanks for the warning.

Oenone rotated gently, turning its crew toroid airlock towards the lead-grey shaft. Standing in the open hatch, Samuel's suit sensors showed him the stars slip past until he was facing the wrinkled mesh of metal. Even though it was basically just a frayed mechanical structure, it had a quality that told him it wasn't human. Neatness, he decided, it lacked neatness, the kind of confident elegance that was the signature of human astroengineering. Where humans would use failsofts and multiple redundancy, the Tyrathca built tough simple devices in tandem. If one was taken out of service for repair or maintenance they trusted the second to remain functional. And it was obviously a philosophy which worked.

Tanjuntic-RI's existence and triumph was evidence of that. It was just . . . reality at one degree from human sensibilities.

The voidhawk's movement halted. Shadows plagued the hull, turning the marbled polyp a dingy walnut. Gravity in the airlock faded away as the distortion field flowed away from it.

This is as close as we can get, Syrinx said. The archaeology team went in just above the bearing ring.

The spaceport support column appeared to be holding steady just past the lip of the hull. Stars waved about behind it. Samuel triggered the cold gas jets in his armour, and drifted out from the airlock. Gaps in the column were easy enough to find. The original close weave of pipes and structural girders had been loosened when the bearings seized up, opening a multitude of chinks, though it was impossible to guess which one had been used by the archaeology team all those years ago. He selected one ten metres above the huge bearing ring set in the rock.

Nitrogen puffed out from tiny nozzles around his slimline manoeuvring backpack, edging him closer to the gap. It was lined with a buckled pipe on one side, and a tattered conduit casing on the other. He reached out with his left gauntlet, and made a tentative grab for one of the flaky cables inside the conduit. Dust squirted out around his fingers, and tactile receptors in his palm told him the cable had compressed slightly in his grip. But it held. His main worry had been that everything they touched along the column would disintegrate like so much brittle porcelain.

"Okay, there's a degree of integrity left in the material," he datavised back to the rest of the team. "You can come over. I'm going in."

Helmet and wrist lights came on, and he shone the beams into the black cavity ahead. When the column bearings seized up, the torque stress exerted by the spaceport's inertia

had splintered hundreds of structural girders, ripping apart the multitude of pipes and cables they carried. The result was to fill the inside of the column with a forbidding tangle of wreckage. Samuel activated his inertial guidance block. Bright green directional graphics flicked up over the monochrome sensor image, and he eased himself forward. According to his suit sensors, the spaces between the interlocking struts contained a thin molecular haze from the slowly ablating metal.

The chinks were becoming smaller, with fragments scraping against his armour as he hauled himself in the direction the graphics indicated. He pulled a ten centimetre fission knife from his belt. The blade's yellow light shone brightly, shimmering off the strands of ash-grey metal. It cut through without the slightest resistance.

I feel like some kind of Victorian soldier aristocrat hacking through a jungle, he confided to the *Oenone's* crew.

Scraps of crumbling metal were whirling round him, bouncing and twirling off the corners and angles of the sham-bolic maze. The second armour-suited figure had reached the gap: Renato Vella, who was quickly wriggling along after him. One of the serjeants was next, followed by Monica, another serjeant, then Oski Katsura. Syrinx and the crew used the sensor blisters to watch them vanish inside one after the other.

Looking good, she said, sharing a quiet confidence with her crew.

Parker Higgins and Kempster Getchell walked into the bridge, and took the chairs Syrinx indicated. "They're making progress," Edwin told the two elderly science advisors. "At this rate, Samuel will have reached the main airlock chamber in another ten minutes. They could be at their target level in a couple of hours."

"I hope so," Tyla said. "The quicker we're away from here, the better. This place gives me the creeps. Do you suppose the Tyrathca souls are watching us?"

"An interesting point," Parker said. "We've not had any reports of our returning souls encountering a xenoc soul in the beyond."

"So where do they go?" Oxley asked.

"We'll put that on the list of questions for the Sleeping God," Kempster said jovially. "I'm sure that's quite trivial compared to—" he broke off as all the Edenists froze, closing their eyes in unison. "What?"

"A starship," Syrinx hissed. "*Oenone* can sense its distortion field. Which means the Tyrathca detectors will pick it up, too. Oh . . . bloody hell."

I see you, the *Stryla* gloated.

Etchells hadn't realized that there was a voidhawk accompanying the rogue Adamist starship. Not until he swallowed in above Hesper-LN, and started scanning round for the ship he'd pursued from the antimatter station. There was plenty of activity above the xenoc planet, big sedate ships powering their way into high inclination orbits, complementing the protective sphere thrown up by the SD platforms. The twin moons were sending out constant gravitational perturbations as they orbited round each other, half a million kilometres above Hesper-LN itself. A network of sensor satellites. An unusually thick band of dust slithering above the upper Van-Allen belt. He had to move around cislunar space in small swallows so that his distortion field could complete a clean sweep above the planet. The Adamist starship was easy to locate, a tight curve in the uniformity of space-time. He focused on it, prying and probing at its composition by creating a multitude of tiny ripples within his distortion field, seeing how they reacted to the encounter, the diffraction pattern cre-

ated as they washed across the hull and internal machinery. One thing was clear, it wasn't a Navy ship. The layout was all wrong for that. And Navy ships didn't have an antimatter drive. Its main fusion generators were shut down, leaving just a couple of ancillary tokamaks to power the life support capsules; and the biggest give-away of all: its thermo-dump panels were retracted. It was in stealth mode.

A Confederation Navy sanctioned starship on a clandestine mission in the Tyrathca system. It would have to be a very important mission to risk an inter-species clash at this delicate time. Etchells knew damn well it had to be connected to the issue of possession somehow. Nothing else would warrant approval. When he extrapolated its trajectory, he saw it was going to fly past a moonlet. He ran through a batch of his stolen almanac memories, discovering that the moonlet was actually an arkship, abandoned over a thousand years ago after a flight from an exploding star. His knowledge of Tyrathca history was almost zero, although the fundamentals were there. But he certainly couldn't imagine any connection with their ancient ship and the possession crisis.

A quick swallow manoeuvre put him a thousand kilometres from Tanjuntic-RI, hours ahead of the Adamist starship, and he began to examine it. That was when he found the stealthed voidhawk lurking so close to the surface it was almost touching.

His flush of achievement was tempered by continuing worry. What the hell were they doing here? It had to be important. Critical, even. Which meant it was a threat to him. Among all his possible options, one thing was very clear. They had to be prevented from achieving their goal, whatever it was.

This is captain Syrix of the voidhawk *Oenone*. Who am I addressing?

The name's Etchells, and I'm one of Capone's hell-hawks.

Leave this star system immediately. We will not hesitate to use force to make you comply.

Tough bitch, huh? Well, give me a reason to leave. In fact, I'd like you to tell me what you two are doing here.

Our task is not your concern. Leave, now.

Wrong. I think it has a lot to do with me. Etchells launched a combat wasp at the arkship, then immediately swallowed away. The wormhole terminus opened a hundred kilometres from the Adamist starship. He loaded a hunter program into another combat wasp, and launched it as he emerged into real space.

As soon as Syrinx warned him a hellhawk had arrived, Joshua initiated combat status. He knew damn well their cover either had been, or was about to be, blown. *Lady Mac*'s main fusion generators powered up, the full suite of combat sensors rose out of their recesses, combat wasp launch tubes opened. Alkad Mzu and Peter Adul hurriedly secured themselves on the large, zero-tau capable acceleration couches in the lounge. Up in the bridge, webbing tightened around the crew.

“Wormhole terminus opening,” Beaulieu warned. “One hundred kilometres.”

Joshua triggered the *Lady Mac*'s triple fusion drives. That close wasn't an accident, the hellhawk had their exact coordinate. “Liol, maser the bastard.”

“On it, Josh.” A targeting program went primary in his neural nanonics. Three of the starship's eight maser cannons aligned themselves on the terminus and fired. The beams caught the hellhawk as it slid out, and tracked it perfectly. At a hundred kilometres, the inverse square law meant they couldn't kill the hellhawk immediately. Joshua didn't care about that. He just wanted to force it away. *Lady Mac* could take a lot more radiation punishment than any bitek construct if the hellhawk wanted an energy beam duel.

It didn't. A single combat wasp shot out of its launch cradle, curving round to intercept *Lady Mac*. The hellhawk's harpy shape wavered and imploded into a narrow polyp ovoid pimpled by steel-grey mechanical modules. It rolled frantically, trying to dodge the beams. After three seconds of futile manoeuvring, its distortion field applied a near-infinite force against space, and an interstice blossomed open. Joshua fired four combat wasps to intercept the incoming drone, and changed course again. His crew groaned in dismay as they accelerated at ten gees. Space behind *Lady Mac*'s triad of dazzling fusion drive plumes ruptured into a gale of plasma as the combat wasps ejected their submunitions. A curtain of nuclear explosions erected an impenetrable barrier while particle beams and X-ray lasers lashed out.

"I think we're clear," Beaulieu datavised. "Our combat wasps knocked out their combat wasp."

Joshua reviewed the sensor data, which was calming as the expanding plasma wreathes from the explosions turned to purple then began to decay through the spectrum. Stars began to shine through the squall of enraged ions again. He reduced their acceleration to four gees, and switched course once more.

"We just ditched our softly softly policy," Sarha grunted.

"Yeah," Dahybi said. "Whoever possesses that hellhawk knows their tactics. One combat wasp was never going to hurt us. But it made us expose ourselves to the SD network."

"Not just us," Beaulieu said.

The sensors were showing them another combat wasp clash developing several hundred kilometres away from Tanjuntic-RI. "Syrinx, where the hell did it go?" Joshua datavised. "Could you get a fix?"

"It swallowed over to the moons," Syrinx said.

Joshua already had the star system's almanac file open. He reviewed the data on the twin moons. Airless rocks, three

thousand kilometres in diameter. If they hadn't been orbiting Hesperia-LN they'd be categorised as exceptionally large asteroids. "There's nothing there for it," he protested. "The Tyrathca don't even bother mining them the ore's so poor."

"I know. We think it's just a good location for a tactical withdrawal at this point in time. And it'll be at least partially shielded from the SD sensors. The Tyrathca probably don't know it's here."

"Great. Did you manage to get the team in?"

"Yes, they're in. But *Oenone* is now holding station a hundred kilometres out from Tanjuntic-RI in case the hellhawk tries to swallow in and launch some more combat wasps. The arkship is very fragile, Joshua, it couldn't withstand a nuclear assault. That leaves us totally exposed. The Tyrathca's sensors have already locked on to us."

The flight computer reported that three radars were already focused on *Lady Mac*'s hull. "Shit." Joshua shut down the fusion drives and let the starship coast along. Their trajectory wasn't taking them anywhere near Tanjuntic-RI anymore. "They're watching us, too," he told Syrinx. "Now what?"

"It's their move. We wait."

The message came eight minutes later, beamed at both *Lady Macbeth* and *Oenone* from one of the low orbit docking stations. "Human craft, you are not permitted here. You have fired weapons above our planet. This is an act of war. Leave now. Do not return."

"Brief, but not open to much misinterpretation," Ashly said as the message began to repeat. "I'm surprised they didn't put in an *or else*."

"They just have," Beaulieu said. "Three ships on their way to intercept us. One-point-two-gee acceleration."

"For them, that's really racing along," Liol said. "The Tyrathca hate high gees."

“Another three fusion drive ignitions,” Beaulieu said. “One heading for us. Two aligning on Tanjuntic-RI.”

“At least we’re out of range from the platforms’ combat wasps,” Liol said. “That could have been nasty.”

“What’s your assessment?” Joshua asked Syrinx. He started to run the Tyrathca ship trajectories through some tactical analysis programs. While he was doing it, another two ships ignited their fusion drives and started to fly up on a course for the arkship.

“I think the situation’s still manageable,” she replied. “Providing it doesn’t escalate any further.”

“Yeah. I’m working on that aspect. We’ve got to make sure the team can continue. You’re going to have to stop that hellhawk from coming back to Tanjuntic-RI.”

“We can swallow out to the moons and keep it very busy. But that leaves the team without protection. One of those Tyrathca ships is bound to investigate the arkship. Even with their phlegmatism, they’ll want to know what we’re doing here.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll divert them. You get over to the moons.”

“Acknowledged.” Joshua lifted his head, and smiled round at his crew.

“Oh God,” Sarha moaned with unfeigned consternation. “I hate it when you smile like that!”

“Cheer up. We’re going to invade Hesper-LN.”

The rotating airlock chamber had survived the spaceport bearing seizure almost intact. Samuel cut through the wall and floated into the big empty space. His helmet lights automatically defocused, throwing their radiance all around him. It was a cylindrical chamber, fifteen metres in diameter, and fifty long; stark even by Tyrathca standards. The walls were lined with a petrified sponge material resembling pumice

stone, with thousands of regularly spaced indentations. Each one was just big enough to accept a Tyrathca breeder's hoof.

There were three airlock hatches at each end, large circular affairs with chunky electromechanical locking rims. Precisely halfway down the chamber was a bulging hoop; the rotating seal to provide the Tyrathca with a pressurized transfer from the arkship to the spaceport. Now, its working fluid had evacuated, internal components were reduced to granular sculptures of their former selves; a technological cave etching.

Renato Vella squirmed into the chamber with jerky motions, knocking large chips of the wall material from the edge of the hole Samuel had cut. "Oh great, late era gloomy," he pronounced. "They didn't exactly go in for frills, did they?"

"I doubt a translator could even find an equivalent word," Samuel datavised back.

The first serjeant was emerging from the hole, fracturing even more wall material as it came. There was an almost identical hole a third of the way round the wall, slightly larger. A matching opening had been made next to one of the airlocks at the ship end of the chamber. Samuel's gauntlets gripped the indentations in the desiccated sponge fabric, and he moved cautiously hand over hand towards it.

"This must be where the archaeology team cut their way in," he datavised. "Wait. Yes." The suit sensors showed him a small plastic box fixed close to the jagged rim by a blob of epoxy, narrow lines of red human lettering covered a third of its dark blue surface. "Some kind of communication block. There are several cables running through the hole." He ordered his suit communicator to transmit a standard interrogation signal. "No response. I guess the power's drained by now."

"Shame," Renato datavised. "It would have been convenient to have some kind of communication net in there."

“We could probably power it up again,” Oski replied. “It’s only a century old, the processors will be fully functional.”

“Forget it,” Monica told them. “The bitek processors can keep us in touch with each other and *Oenone*. We’re not going to be inside long enough to justify getting cosy.”

“We hope,” Samuel said. With the whole team now in the airlock chamber, his helmet lights refocused into wide beams. He grasped the edge of the old hole and pulled himself through.

The archaeology team had cut their way into a broad corridor that served one of the large jammed-up airlocks. It was a simple, square section shaft sliced straight through the rock, with the spongy hoof-grab fabric along the floor, and pipes fastened to both walls. He barely did more than look round, when Syrinx announced the presence of a hellhawk. She gave them a running commentary as the other team members emerged into the corridor.

“The *Oenone* is swallowing over to the moons to tag the hellhawk,” Syrinx told them. “*Lady Macbeth* will distract the Tyrathca.”

“For how long?” Monica asked.

“As long as possible,” Joshua replied. “Worst case, we fail completely. Their first ship should reach Tanjuntic-RI in fifty-three minutes—mark.”

“That’s no good. We won’t even have reached the second level by then.”

“I’ll swap with you any time.”

“Sorry, Joshua; that wasn’t a complaint. How did that hellhawk know we were here?”

“Probably followed us from the antimatter station,” Syrinx said. “It wouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Thank you, Captains,” Samuel datavised. “We’ll try to be as quick as we can.”

“If things get too hot, let us know,” Joshua replied.

“We’d better get on,” Samuel told the team. “Every minute of lead time could be indispensable later.” He ordered his backpack to fire the cold gas jets, and slid easily along the corridor to the first big airlock. Monica triggered her own backpack, and glided after him.

The corridor flared out around the airlock, which was a typical example of Tyrathca engineering: a square of titanium four metres in diameter with rounded corners, edged with locking seals, thick, sturdy, and reliable. And vacuum welded into place. The archaeology team had solved the egress problem by cutting out a metre-wide circle of metal from the Tyrathca slab and installing their own airlock. It was a simple mechanical hatch with frictionless hinges and seals. A chrome handle was half-recessed in the middle, with standard operating instructions stencilled beside it.

Samuel secured himself and pulled the handle. His armour’s power augmentation barely kicked in to help. The handle slid up, and rotated ninety degrees.

“One up to human engineering,” Renato datavised as Samuel pushed the hatch inwards.

“Not really,” Oski datavised. “It’s our materials science that makes the difference. The hatch was designed for long-term vacuum exposure. Their airlock was built with regular maintenance services in mind.”

There was another corridor identical to the first on the far side of the airlock. One of the serjeants shut the small hatch after them. This corridor also ended in a big titanium airlock, with an identical human hatch inserted. Samuel pulled the lever up. Before he could attempt to push the hatch open, his suit sensors advised him of an environment change. “It’s venting,” he datavised. “Very small nitrogen release, minute contamination. Pressure must be equalising.”

“Open it,” Monica datavised. “There can’t be any real atmosphere in there. We’re wasting time.”

Samuel gripped one of the titanium spars with one gauntlet, and pushed with the other. The suit's power augmentation whined on the threshold of audibility. A whirl of silvery dust scooted around Samuel's armour as the hatch flipped back.

"Just how many of these corridors are there?" Renato asked as he air-swam through, only to be faced with yet another blank rock shaft. His inertial guidance display showed him it was inclined slightly, heading away from the rotation axis. Though there was still no appreciable gravity.

"This is the last one, according to our file," Samuel said.

The airlock at the far end had a human hatch in it; there was also a small plaque.

**HIGH YORK UNIVERSITY
ARCHAEOLOGY EXPEDITION OF 2487**

**We respectfully offer our tribute to the
generations of Tyrathca who ventured
forth in this vessel.**

**In this place we have stumbled through
the remnants of greatness, eternally thankful
for the glimpse of nobility they reveal.**

**Though the Tyrathca have no god, they
are clearly not devoid of miracles.**

Renato floated over to the silvered plaque after Monica moved aside. "Well that's a nice way to start," he datavised. "The archaeology expedition never found any reference to a Tyrathca god."

"We knew that already," Oski datavised. "Besides, I doubt they were looking. The only memory files they accessed

were in the systems management architecture. We've got to go a lot deeper than that to find anything useful."

Samuel shifted his sensors from the plaque to the hatch. "I don't think I've ever felt more like a grave robber."

"There have been worse assignments," Monica datavised. "For you as well as me, I suspect."

Samuel didn't reply. He grasped the hatch's handle and pulled up. This time there was a significant gas vent.

"This is it," Oski datavised. "We're in. Terracompatible nitrogen oxygen mix, several trace gases. Three per cent standard atmospheric pressure. No water vapour content. Guess it's too cold. Registering thirty degrees below zero."

"Checks with the file," Monica confirmed. Samuel pushed the hatch open and glided through.

The archaeology expedition had spent six weeks exploring the interior of Tanjuntic-RI. Given the timescale, it could hardly be thorough. But the main sections were all mapped, allowing the nature of the arkship's engines and environmental maintenance mechanisms to be inspected. Tanjuntic-RI was arranged in three principal levels. Along the rotation axis were three long cylindrical chambers six hundred metres wide. Each contained a shallow lake which served as the principal biological recycling system. The water was a combination fish-tank/ algal air regenerator, powered by a thermal lighting array strung along the axis. Surrounding that was an extensive warren of hemispherical caverns linked by kilometre after kilometre of broad corridors. This level was devoted to engineering and flight maintenance; the caverns filled with machinery, everything from fusion generators to chemical filtration plants, cybernetic factories to mineral storage silos. The rear quarter of the caverns were all used to house support systems and fuel for the fusion engines.

Encircling the second level were the eight principal life support rings. Tunnelled out of the rock and lined with metal,

like giant binding bands; they had a rectangular cross section, five hundred metres wide, a hundred metres high. Their floor was a single looped strip of Tyrathca tower houses threaded by narrow roads of greenery, a computer design program's notion of urban pleasantries.

"We need the third level, ring five," Oski datavised as soon as they were through the last airlock. "That's where the archaeologists found the control offices." A three dimensional map of the interior expanded into her mind. Her guidance block extended a glowing green line through the tunnels, linking her present location to ring five.

The last airlock had brought the team into a standard-sized corridor that circled the forward end of the arkship. Over a hundred other corridors branched off from it. Gravity was barely noticeable, taking several minutes to pull objects towards the floor. Monica used her gas jets to take her over to a clump of human crates stacked against the wall. The thin, freezing atmosphere had turned the white plastic a faint cream. She read some of their labels. "Nothing we can use," she datavised. "It's their camp equipment. Programmable silicon shelters, life support units, microfusion generators; that kind of thing."

"What about lighting?" a serjeant asked.

"Good question." Monica shifted position, scanning more labels. "Yes, here we go. Monochrome projectors, three hundred metre illumination radius. I don't think they're self powered, though."

"Leave it," Samuel datavised. "We don't have the time." He fired his manoeuvring pack and started drifting along the corridor. The wall opposite the airlocks had archways leading away into the interior, their depth defeating his suit sensors and lights. "There should be a lift here somewhere. Ah." The fifth archway had a palm-sized plastic disk stuck on the wall beside it, a small lifelong beacon light in the centre.

Samuel couldn't resist flicking it with a gauntlet finger as he went past. There was no spark of light from the beacon, its tritium-decay power source had been exhausted decades ago.

His gas jets squirted strongly, steering him through the archway. Fifteen metres down the corridor was a lift door: a single panel of metal ten metres long and three high. The team didn't even pause by it. There was a smaller door on either side, each heading a ramp that spiralled, DNA-fashion, around the entire length of the lift shaft. One of them was open; it had a dead light beacon just inside.

"This should take us nearly a kilometre straight down," Samuel datavised.

"At least it'll be a smooth ride once the gravity kicks in," Renato datavised. "Thank god the Tyrathca don't use steps. Can you image the size and spacing?"

Monica halted in mid-air beside the doorway and focused her suit beams through the gap. The downward slope was barely noticeable, though the curve was pronounced. She took a tube dispenser from her belt, and thumbed out the first disk. Jupiter had supplied the little bitek sensors, completely transparent disks a centimetre wide. Their affinity range was only a few kilometres—enough for this mission. She pressed it against the door rim. It stuck instantly. When she requested an affinity bond with it from her suit's bitek processor, the disk revealed a fish-eye view of the corridor, with the suits floating before the ramp doorway.

"Pity we don't have a swarm of bitek insects covering the interior," she datavised. Samuel didn't rise to the jibe. "But this'll give us plenty of warning. There's a motion trigger if anything starts moving around behind us."

"Onward, then," Samuel datavised. His gas jets flared, pushing him along the ramp.

Everyone's bitek processor received Joshua's troubled

hail. "I'm afraid you're going to have company," he announced.

Lady Mac was accelerating at six gees, a quarter of a million kilometres above Hesper-LN and heading in a shallow curve around the planet's north pole. Two five-strong formations of Tyrathca ships were heading out to intercept, rising from their hundred thousand kilometre orbits at one and a half gees. He wasn't worried about them, nor the three ships that were on course for the twin moons to investigate the antics of the two bitek starships. Another group of four ships were flying straight for Tanjuntic-RI, seventy-five thousand kilometres from *Lady Mac*.

"Definite interception course," Beaulieu confirmed. "Looks like they want to know what was going on there."

"Wonderful," Joshua grunted. "The only way to stop them is if they think we're hostile."

"I think they know that already," Sarha said with as much irony as five gees allowed.

As soon as they'd accelerated along their present course, Joshua had launched three combat wasps. There was no real target designation, just the planet; and they were programmed to detonate ten thousand kilometres above the atmosphere if they managed to get that far. But the Tyrathca didn't know that. All they'd seen was three nuclear missiles charging in towards their planet at twenty-seven gees: an unprovoked attack from a human starship that was continuing to manoeuvre in a hostile manner.

Joshua changed course again, flying along a vector which would take him below the ships heading for Tanjuntic-RI—logically, a position he could bombard the planet from. Another two combat wasps flew out of their tubes, searing fusion drives thrusting them towards the four ships.

It was a good tactical move, which almost paid off. Three

of the Tyrathca ships changed course to defend themselves against the combat wasps and pursue *Lady Mac*. The fourth remained on course for the arkship.

“Thirteen ships heading right at us,” Beaulieu confirmed. “Twelve SD platforms have also acquired lock on. No combat wasp launch yet.”

Joshua reviewed the tactical situation display again, purple and orange vector lines flipping round inside his skull. *Lady Mac* was now heading in almost the opposite direction to the last Tyrathca ship. There was nothing left he could do to distract it. The only option left was an attack, which wasn’t an option at all. First he would have to reverse his current vector which would take up a vast amount of time and delta-V, then he would have to fight his way past the three other ships with their potentially large stock of combat wasps. And even if he achieved that, he’d have to kill the ship to stop it rendezvousing.

It was a bad deal. The Tyrathca crewing the ship were innocent—just trying to defend themselves and their world against aggressive xenocs. Although, if you looked at it in an abstract way, they could well be all that stood between the exploration team and salvation from the possessed. Can you really allow a dozen Tyrathca to bring about the end of an entire race because of what was essentially a communication breakdown on a multitude of levels?

Joshua used the bitek array to call the exploration team and warn them of the approaching ship. “We estimate it’ll dock in another forty minutes,” he said. “Just how long do you need?”

“If everything goes without a hitch, a couple of hours,” Oski said. “But I would think a day would be more realistic.”

“A day is out of the question,” Joshua said. “If I get seriously noisy out here I might be able to buy you an hour or so.”

“That’s not necessary, Joshua,” a serjeant said. “This is a very big ship. If they do come on board, they’ll have to find us.”

“Not too difficult with infrared sensors.”

“That’s assuming a straightforward pursuit scenario. Now we know the Tyrathca are coming, we can make that pursuit extremely difficult for them. And there is also the Horatius option to consider. We four are expendable, after all.”

“Our weapons are superior, as well,” Monica said. “Now we haven’t got to worry about the hardware glitching on us, we can deploy some real firepower.”

“What about getting out afterwards?” Dahybi asked.

“Advance planning for a situation this fluid is a waste of time,” Samuel said. “Let’s wait until we have the relevant data before we consider how to achieve extraction.”

“Okay,” Joshua said reluctantly. “Your call. But we’re here if you need us.” He returned to the tactical situation. *Lady Mac* wasn’t in any real danger from the planet’s defences. She was too far away from the Tyrathca ships and SD platforms. At this separation distance, any combat wasp would take a minimum of fifteen minutes to reach them. The starship could jump out of trouble long before that.

“Right, let’s keep these bastards busy,” Joshua said. He instructed the flight computer to fire another combat wasp at the planet.

Halfway down the giant spiral ramp, the easiest way to descend was to sit and slide. Black frost had coated the floor, sending broad tendrils scurrying up the wall like frigid creepers. Along with the others Monica was bumping along on her bum as if she was on an après ski glissade, gradually picking up speed, and ignoring the total lack of dignity. Clouds of filthy ice motes were spraying up from where the suit was making its grinding contact with the ramp. Every now and

then she'd hit an uneven patch and glide through the air for a metre.

"Getting near the bottom," Samuel datavised.

He was two people down the line from Monica, nearly obscured by the black particle haze. Suit beams were jouncing about chaotically, throwing discordant shadows across the walls.

Monica put her gauntlets down to try and brake her speed. They just skipped and skidded about. "Just how do we slow down?" she asked.

"Manoeuvring pack." Samuel triggered the jets at full throttle, feeling the gentle thrust slow him. The serjeant directly behind bumped into his back. "Everybody at once, please."

The ramp shaft was suddenly full of whirling pearly-white fog as ice granules and nitrogen blended together, boosting the air pressure. Suit lights fluoresced it to a uniform opacity.

Monica shifted to micro-radar as her speed slowed drastically. This time when she put her hands down she pressed hard enough to activate the augmentation. It allowed her to dig her fingertips into the sheet of ice, producing a loud wince-inducing screech as they gouged out ten straight furrows. She halted on a relatively flat section. Radar showed her the end of the ramp fifteen metres ahead and the other armour suits skating elegantly to a halt around her. The white fog vanished as quickly as it'd emerged, sucked away back up the ramp, and out through the archway ahead.

They picked themselves up and scanned round. The ramp had come out at an intersection of eight corridors. Beacons had been stuck on each archway. The ice along the floor of every corridor was slightly rumped, like stone paving slabs worn by centuries of feet. Nothing else showed the archaeology expedition had once passed this way.

"This is where we should split up," one of the serjeants

datavised. "Two of us will lay heat trails, while you head for ring five."

Monica accessed the archaeology expedition's map file, and integrated it with her inertial guidance block. Orange graphics overlaid her sensor vision, indicating the corridor they should take. She took another sensor disk from the tube and stuck it on the wall. "Okay. You two take care, they'll be here in another twenty minutes. Oski, Renato, let's go." The four humans and two remaining serjeants started off down the corridor, bouncing along in low glides in the one-third gravity field.

Ione's quad mind started to melt away into four more individual, independent identities as the serjeants separated from each other. One of her chose a corridor which the map file showed would lead towards a chemical plant of some kind. She drew a laser pistol and datavised it to a very low power setting, with an intermittent discharge varying over three seconds. As she walked forwards in long loping steps she began sweeping it in a short arc, keeping the muzzle pointed at the ground. Speckle points of warmth blossomed around her feet—never enough to thaw the ice, just to make an imprint. To an infrared sensor it would appear as if several people had walked along beside her.

The darkness which contracted around the bubble of light from her suit lights was absolute, isolating her to an unnerving degree, a fact only slightly alleviated by affinity contact with her other three selves and Samuel.

My third experience of life outside Tranquillity, and it's just rock tunnels not much different from Ayacucho. But a lot more oppressive, and that's without the possessed after me.

The others in the team were feeling the same low harmonic of unease. Monica was leading now, a locomotion auto-balance program keeping her movements smooth and steady in the low gravity. Despite the depressing surround-

ings, their easy progress was confidence enhancing. She'd had a lot of misgivings about the whole mission, and this part most of all. In her mind during the flight here, Tanjuntic-RI had taken on the appearance of a large chunk of debris, just like the fragments that made up the Ruin Ring. Reality was considerably better. Nothing was broken inside the arkship, merely neglected and cold. She could even imagine revitalizing the old wanderer. If the fusion generators could be started up again, and power fed through the distribution net, it would be a simple matter for light and heat to return.

"How come they abandoned this?" she asked. "Why not rendezvous with an asteroid and use it as a ready-made base for their microgee industry?"

"Because of the upkeep," Oski datavisaged back. "The whole thing is interdependent, you can't just keep a life support ring going and dump the rest. And it's big. Keeping it functioning would take too much effort for the level of return. They were much better off building smaller-scale asteroid habitation caverns from scratch."

"Shame. At the very least the Tyrathca could have made a fortune selling it as a human tourist destination."

"That'll be that famous phlegmatism of theirs. They just don't care about it."

After five minutes they came to the first second-level cavern. A hemisphere two hundred metres high, the walls ribbed by bands of tubes. There was a single huge machine in the centre, supported by ten three-metre-thick pipes that rose out of the ground to act as its legs. Another ten pipes emerged from the top of the machine to vanish into the chamber's apex. The team stood just inside the entrance, playing their suit beams over the metal beast. Its sides were fluted with long glass columns, tarnished on the inside with heat-blackened chrome. Valves, coils, relays, motors, intake grids, high-

voltage transformers, and pumps protruded from the rest of the edifice like metallic warts.

“What in Christ’s name is that?” Renato asked.

“Access your file,” Oski told him. “It’s some kind of biological reactor. They bred a lot of organic compounds inside it.”

Renato walked over to one of the big pipes and took a look directly underneath the reactor’s formidable bulk. The casing had cracked as the arkship lost its heat, allowing ragged strings of some blue green compound to ooze out all over the base. They’d clotted in hanging webs before freezing solid. Smears and stains of other liquids were splattered across the floor.

“There’s something wrong with all of this,” Renato datavised.

“What do you mean?” Samuel asked.

“Just look at this thing.” The young astronomer slapped his hand against the pipe. Even in the rarefied atmosphere, the suit audio sensors could pick up a faint clang. “It’s, like . . . immortal. I can’t imagine anything else occupying this chamber since the day they left their star. I know they’ll have rebuilt it a hundred times during the voyage. And I know they go for the brute strength engineering solutions. But I don’t understand how nothing can have changed in fifteen thousand years. Nothing, for Christ’s sake. How can you draw a line across your technology and say we will never develop anything that goes beyond this?”

“You’ll be able to ask them soon,” Monica datavised. “Their ship will reach us in another ten minutes. Look, Renato, I know this is all fascinating, but we really don’t have the time. Okay?”

“Sure, I’m sorry. I just hate unsolved puzzles.”

“That’s what makes you a good scientist. And I’m glad you’re here to help us. Now, this is the corridor we want.”

Monica left another sensor disk on one of the stolid pipes and started walking again. Renato took a last glance at the ancient reactor and followed her. The two serjeants brought up the rear.

“The Tyrathca ship is definitely docking,” Beaulieu said. “They’ve matched velocities with Tanjuntic-RI.”

“Bugger,” Joshua grunted. They were enjoying a slight lull in the three-dimensional chess game that was the high-orbit diversion. *Lady Mac* was accelerating at one gee, sliding over Hesperia-LN’s pole at a hundred and seventy-five thousand kilometres altitude. Eighteen combat wasps were arrowing in towards her from every direction, a classic englobing manoeuvre. The closest one would reach them in another four minutes. At least the hellhawk wasn’t a current factor. Syrinx confirmed they were still chasing the *Stryla* round the two moons.

“Liol, break the bad news to the team, will you?” Joshua concentrated on the starship’s systems schematic, ordering the flight computer to configure the hull for a jump. Somewhere near the back of his mind, almost in the subconscious, was a smiling astonishment that he could now be so confident about taking part in a space battle. Contrast his, and the crew’s, calm responses and performance today to the frantic shouting and adrenaline powered high-gee desperation above Lalonde, and it was as though they used to belong in an alternative universe. The major difference, of course, was that he’d initiated this, he was calling the shots.

“Dahybi?”

“Nodes charged and on line. Ready to jump, Captain.”

“Great. Let’s see how accurate we can be.” He cut the fusion drives and initiated the jump.

The watching Tyrathca saw the dangerous invader vanish from the middle of their combat wasp swarm. SD sensors

picked up its emergence point simultaneously, fifty thousand kilometres from where it had jumped. Its fusion drive came on again, powering it back down towards the planet, presenting fresh danger to the population. The pursuing craft all changed course to resume their chase.

A crackling smog of hot ions splashed across the front of Tanjuntic-RI as the Tyrathca ship finished its approach manoeuvre. Electrical discharges flashed along the remnants of the superconductor grid, burning off the fragile surface molecules in scintillating spectral fountains. The pilot hadn't bothered to rendezvous at a distance and nudge in towards the spaceport cone using secondary drives. Their flight vector was projected to bring them to a halt less than a kilometre from the arkship, completely disregarding the damage the fusion drives would inflict on the ancient vessel.

The ship was a typical Tyrathca inter-planetary craft, a simple cylinder a hundred and fifty metres wide, three hundred long. Unlike human designs which were built round a load-carrying gantry to which modules and capsules were attached as required, this had everything encased inside an aluminium hull. A basic, ugly workhorse of a ship, discoloured by years of exposure to the thermal and ultraviolet emissions of Hesper-LN's star. Four big rectangular hatches were spaced equidistantly round its front end, while five stumpy fusion rocket nozzles protruded from the rear.

When it finished its deceleration burn it was floating parallel to Tanjuntic-RI's spaceport, two kilometres out. Small chemical rockets flared around its edges, brilliant sulphur yellow flames pushing the ship in towards the rotation axis. It started to turn at the same time, aligning its base towards the spaceport. The chemical rockets around its front end throttled up to maximum, and two fusion rockets ignited briefly. Their plasma plumes stabbed out, twin incandescent

spears transfixing the centre of the spaceport. The burn didn't last for more than a couple of seconds, nor was it particularly powerful. But the damage caused was immense. Metal and composite detonated into vapour, roaring out from the impact point.

It was too much for the enfeebled spaceport structure to withstand. The entire cone of stacked disks snapped off close to the base, tumbling away. Individual disks tore loose, spinning off in every direction, spewing fragments as they went. One disk actually collided with Tanjuntic-RI, crumpling as if it were made from paper before it started to rebound. All that was left of the spaceport's support column was a shattered ten metre stub sticking out from the rock. It was rapidly eclipsed as the massive Tyrathca ship positioned itself directly overhead. Two hatches hinged open, and several dozen pale ovoid shapes were ejected. At first they drifted as aimlessly as thistledown in a zephyr, then puffs of gas erupted from small spouts around their crests, and they started to fly in towards the broken end of the support column.

Hesper-LN's twin moons were not a hospitable location for spacecraft. Their clashing gravity fields had drawn in a great deal of cosmic debris since their formation, and continued to do so. Dust, sand, and smaller motes were eventually liberated by the solar wind, light-pressure and high energy elementary particles blowing them back out towards the stars. But the larger chunks remained. Pebbles, boulders, entire asteroids; once they'd fallen into a looping orbit, they were slowly hauled in over the millennia as the ever-changing gravity perturbed their new orbit. Ultimately, they wound up at the central Lagrange point, poised equidistantly between the moons. It was a cluttered zone over a hundred kilometres across, visible from the surface of Hesper-LN as a fuzzy grey patch. In composition, it mimicked a galaxy, with the

largest asteroids clumped together at the centre, surrounded by a whirl of smaller boulders and stony nuggets.

A place, then, where the use of combat wasps and energy beams was essentially impossible. You could stay within its fringes and observe your enemy waiting outside with impunity. Providing you could ward off the clouds of dark, high-velocity gravel swirling endlessly around the periphery of the Lagrange cluster.

Oenone's attempts to pursue the hellhawk inside the cluster had come to nothing. After twenty minutes of dangerous slaloming and weaving, during which it gained barely a hundred metres on the contemptuous hellhawk, *Syrinx* had decided enough was enough. They were draining the energy cells at an alarming rate to maintain the distortion field, essential to deflect the hail of stone from the hull. And they would need that power later, no matter what the outcome at Tanjuntic-RI. She told *Oenone* to halt and match the orbital vector of the surrounding particles.

Once Etchells realized he was no longer being actively pursued, he also eased back, and simply held his position. They were no more than fifteen kilometres apart. Though the only way they knew that was by sensing each other with their distortion fields, visual or radar observation was impossible.

This is not a valid status quo, *Syrinx* told the hellhawk. There are three *Tyrathca* ships on their way to us. You cannot stay inside the cluster forever. Leave this system.

Not a chance, Etchells said. You've got to stay here with me, now. That means I've won. You can't achieve whatever the fuck you came here to do. And your Adamist pals are in deep shit. They're neutered, too.

With reservations, I will accept that observation, she told him, careful not to let any emotional context slip into the affinity contact. He obviously wasn't aware they'd landed

the team in Tanjuntic-RI. All they had to do was keep him here until Oski and Renato had accessed the files.

String him along, she told the crew. **I want to monitor the spacecraft situation. We may have to move in a hurry.**

Of course, Cacus said.

Ruben, get our new fusion generators on line. I'd like Oenone's energy cells recharged as fast as possible. When we leave here, I want to be able to leave this hellhawk far behind.

Understood. Ruben ordered the processor array to begin the generator power up sequence.

The links between the second and third levels on Tanjuntic-RI were mainly cargo lifts. Again, each of them was wrapped by the ubiquitous spiralling ramps. The exploration team had to engage their boot spikes as they made their way down one which led to ring five. Icy floors combined with the strengthening gravity provided a treacherous environment.

There was a large airlock chamber at the bottom, with doors more suited to bank vaults than spaceships. But this had been the Tyrathca's first line of defence against a breach in the upper levels, their design philosophy had come into its own here. As tribute to that efficiency, Tanjuntic-RI's caverns and rings still retained a tiny atmosphere after thirteen centuries of disuse.

A cache of human machinery was spread out before the door at the end of the ramp: a couple of microfusion generators, mobile cherry-picker platforms, industrial thermal inducer plates, hydraulic rams, and electromechanical actuators; all hooked together with loosely bundled cables and flexible hoses. The archaeology expedition had used them to reactivate the massive airlock. It was a quarter open, allowing them access to ring five. Four small jeeps were

parked just inside, standard airless-planet mobility vehicles, with large low-pressure tyres and a composite latticework chassis. Ridiculously dainty in comparison to the engineering on display around them.

Samuel went over and inspected them, flicking switches on the dashboard. "I'm getting a response from the control processor," he datavised. "There's some power left in the standby circuits, but that's about all. The main energy cells are dead."

"Irrelevant," Monica datavised. She ordered her suit lamps to emit a high-wattage pulse, and readied the sensors. Her neural nanonics memory froze the image when the lights flared. Buffer programs isolated the image for her to examine.

Not even the suit's lights could penetrate the gloom right across the ring. As a result, the curvature effect was completely lost. She was standing in a metal cave, walls, floor, and ceiling made up from millions of aluminium alloy panels, heat sealed to the naked rock underneath and welded together. Plants had been grown up the walls while the arkship was occupied, vigorous creepers clawing their way along metal trellises. Their leaves were black and wizened now, dead from lack of water and light long before the heat seeped away into space. But the cold had arrived before they'd fallen in their final autumn, sprinkling them with frost then freezing them into place against the dull metal tiling.

The ring's ceiling had an analogue in human warehouse roofs; criss crossed with thick pipes and sturdy gantry crane rails, giving the vast chamber an overtly industrial feel. Its illumination had been provided by thousands of large circular disks of smoked glass, which peered out of the gaps.

"A winter wonderland palace," Monica datavised. "Even if it was built by the devil's own elves."

"How could they live in this, for Christ's sake?" Renato

asked. "It's just a machine. There's no attempt to make it pleasing or hospitable. You couldn't stay inside all of your life, it would drive you insane."

"Us," Oski datavised. "Not them. They don't have our psychological profile."

"I expect they would find one of our habitats to be equally disenchanting," Samuel said.

"The Tyrathca have arrived," one of the serjeants datavised.

Everyone saw it through the sensor disk Monica had left up in level one. A flash of light from the airlock which led up to the spaceport support column. Large jagged sections of the square titanium hatch flew into the corridor, rebounding from the walls amid cascades of ice chips to twirl away in both directions. The Tyrathca emerged, and began moving in a slow canter towards the entrance to the spiral ramp. They were in spacesuits, which made it hard to tell between breeders and soldiers. Although the SII had tried many times to sell them programmable silicon suits modified to their physiology, they'd resolutely stuck to their own original design.

The body of Tyrathca spacesuits was made from a tough flexible plastic, a silvery blue in colour, like metallic silk. They formed overalls that were loose and baggy enough for the big creatures to slip into easily, with concertina-like tubes for legs and arms. After that, instead of inflating them with oxygen, they were pumped full with a thick gel, expelling all the air. Given how many limbs (and therefore joints) a Tyrathca body had, such a concept neatly did away with the problem of providing multiple pressurized joints on every suit. In order to breathe, they wore simple tight-fitting masks inside the suits. Oxygen tanks, a regulator mechanism, and a heat exchanger were worn in a pack along their backs, with two black radiator fins running along their spine. Additional equipment was carried on a harness around their necks.

“Looks like subtlety is another trait we don’t share,” Monica datavised. “They must have blown out every airlock along that first corridor to get inside. The sensor disk is registering a lot of gas motion in that corridor. They just don’t care that Tanjuntic-RI is going to vent its remaining atmosphere.”

“If they don’t, we shouldn’t,” Renato datavised. “It won’t affect our mission.”

“They’re all armed,” Samuel datavised. “Even the breeders.”

The Tyrathca were each carrying a pair of long matt-black rifles, with coiled leads plugged into power packs on their harnesses. Monica put an armaments library file into primary mode, and let it run through the catalogue for a match. “Masers,” she datavised. “Fairly basic medium-output projectors. Our armour should withstand an energy strike from them. But if we get caught in a saturation situation we’ll be in trouble. And they’re carrying other ordnance as well. I think I can make out some guided rockets, and EE grenades on those harnesses. Human-built.”

“I wonder who sold those to them,” Oski datavised. “I thought the Confederation didn’t permit armaments sales to the Tyrathca.”

“Not relevant,” Samuel datavised. “Come on, let’s locate that control office the archaeology expedition found.”

Monica bled in her suit sensor’s infrared visualization as they moved off. The Tyrathca buildings materialized around her, tapering towers of a pale blue luminescence, like flame frozen against the empty blackness which stretched out along the ring. It was a cold necropolis, with every street and building identical, as if each section had been stamped from the same die and laid out end to end. Gardens of tangled plants besieged each of the towers, their entwined stalks caught in the act of sagging. Unrelenting cold had turned the vegeta-

tion as hard and black as cast iron. Fanciful leaves, strangely shaped flowers and bloated seed pods had all been reduced to the same sombre shade of charcoal.

"Damn, those Tyrathca can move fast in low-gee," Samuel datavised. They hadn't been walking ten minutes, and already the Tyrathca had reached the bottom of the first spiral ramp. A sensor disk showed one of them sweeping a portable electronic scanner over the floor while the others waited behind. The group split into three, following the various thermal trails.

"I make that eighteen coming our way," Monica datavised. "I think we've got four breeders. They're slightly larger."

"I will return to the entrance," one of the serjeants datavised. "I will have time to lay several false heat trails before they reach this ring. That should split them again. And I may manage to close the airlock door. Either way, it will reduce the force that will ultimately pursue you."

"Thank you," Monica datavised.

The serjeant turned round, and walked back down the road.

"And then there were five," Renato muttered uneasily round his respirator tube.

Ione wanted to know as soon as possible what the Tyrathca intended. The knowledge would certainly help her plan the kind of tactics needed to keep them away from the team. The two diversion serjeants had busily laid their heat trails, meandering between several of the big machinery chambers on the second level. That was when she found that the map made by the archaeologists was not perfect. Several times, she'd had to use her inertial guidance to work out where she was when corridors didn't correspond to the indicated layout. It was a factor to consider when she sketched in her possible escape routes. The Tyrathca wouldn't suffer from such mis-

information. Tanjuntic-RI's exact topology would be known to them; passed down from generation to generation via their chemical program glands.

One of the diversion serjeants was now hanging back from the archway that opened into a hemispherical chamber. It was a big space, occupied by what appeared to be a refinery constructed entirely out of glass. Colonnades, spheres, bulbs, and minarets formed their own miniature city, bound together with a tangled lattice of tubes. Individual containers were full of coloured liquids that had turned to ice. Cracks were visible everywhere. If heat ever did return to this chamber, the whole edifice would probably collapse.

There were three other entrances to the glass refinery, the one opposite the serjeant was where the heat trail from the ramp led. Sensor disks on the corridor wall showed Ione the Tyrathca advancing steadily along it. Ione waited. She knew her suit's heat signature would be visible to the Tyrathca as soon as they entered the refinery chamber, shining with the tenacity of a red dwarf star against the arctic corridor.

The first Tyrathca came in. Stopped. Raised the scanner it was holding, pointing it directly at her. Her suit communication block picked up a burst of encrypted data. The whole column of Tyrathca came to a halt. Then two of them moved up to support the first. They immediately fanned out on either side of the chamber, reducing her target opportunity.

Damn, she said. I think we can kiss the entrapment goodbye. The rest are waiting to see what happens.

It was to be expected, Samuel replied. They are soldier-caste, after all. Bred for conflict. The breeders don't need to impart chemical programs of tactics among them; such knowledge is instinctive.

The serjeant moved out of the shallow alcove which had been masking it. Ione was ordering the communication block to open a channel on the frequency the Tyrathca were using

when both the soldiers fired their maser rifles. The beams struck the serjeant's armour, almost overloading its energy dissipation web. She jumped, a movement enhanced considerably by low gravity and the suit's augmentation. At the same time she triggered the EE charges she'd placed above each of the chamber's entrances. Tonnes of rock descended in four separate avalanches, sealing the three Tyrathca in.

Ione climbed to her feet, and focused the suit sensors back. The jump had sent her soaring fifty metres down the corridor, barely avoiding hitting the roof. Small lumps of rock were spinning and bouncing towards her in lazy motions. The sensor disks in the refinery chamber showed nothing but a swirling cloud of dust, while the others showed the remaining Tyrathca retreating swiftly. They started to split up, vanishing down side corridors where there were no sensors to follow them.

The bad news is they're operating a shoot-to-kill policy, she said. I guess they're not curious why we're here.

That's to be expected, Samuel said. You don't evolve an entire caste devoted to aggression unless you have a great need for them. The Tyrathca social structure is based around a clan hierarchy, they are extremely territorial. And we're violating their oldest piece of territory in defiance of their explicit instructions.

Yes. Well at least you know what to expect when they reach ring five. Now I'd better get out of here before they pop up from some secret passage and shoot me.

The control offices were a series of rooms bored into the wall of ring five, fourteen hundred metres from the spiral ramp. Simple open rectangles, plated in aluminium alloy, with the floor covered in composite. Each room was lined by bulky computer terminals, with twin rosette keyboards for Tyrathca fingers. The walls above them were covered by

long display screens to project the arkship's engineering schematics and navigational plot. To all intents and purposes, this was Tanjuntic-RI's bridge.

According to the archaeology expedition there was less frost and ice inside, which had permitted them to reactivate several of the electronic systems without much trouble. The control offices were on an independent environmental circuit with a much reduced humidity level; and the airlocks were shut prior to the arkship's final evacuation so there was no contamination from ring five's damper atmosphere.

The archaeology expedition had known the sealed rooms were important; they'd traced the arkship's internal communication network, and discovered the principal node was inside. With due respect, they'd installed their own hatches in the Tyrathca airlocks, as they had up in level one. There was no worry about atmospheric contamination any more, not with all the water frozen out. But they wanted to maintain the environmental integrity. This was the first human exploration through an artefact belonging to a sentient xenoc species; ethics was a paramount concern—even though the Tyrathca were indifferent to such matters.

So, Monica and the others discovered, was someone else.

The large titanium rectangles leading to the control offices had been reactivated and opened, swinging back against the chamber wall. Not only that, the safety interlocks had somehow been circumvented, allowing all three to be opened at once. The five suited figures stood in front of the opening, scanning round with their sensors.

"This has got to be it," Monica datavised. "The human hatches are still here. The archaeologists didn't install them anywhere else."

"Has there been another expedition since the first?" Renato asked.

"If there was, then neither Earth, Jupiter, nor Kulu knew

anything about it,” Samuel datavised. “I have to say that’s extremely unlikely.”

“In any case, why not just use the archaeology team’s hatches?” Renato asked. “We know they work. It must have taken a lot of effort to get these brutes open again.”

Oski stepped forward gingerly, using a hand-held sensor pad to scan around the airlock rim. “I can’t pick up any electrical impulses. But this was opened very recently. There’s still some very faint thermal traces in the surrounding structure. They probably had to warm the airlocks back up to their operating temperature to get them to function again.”

Monica resisted the instinct to whirl round and check the streets of the necropolis behind. Her suit’s micro radar was scanning constantly for any sign of local movement. But the arkship’s chill had somehow managed to stroke her skin through the armour. “How recent?” she asked.

“Within the last five days.”

“And not human,” Renato datavised.

“Why do you say that?”

“Obvious. If it was our species, they would have used the hatches the archaeologists installed. Whoever it was, they were too big to fit through them.”

“It has to be the Kiint,” Samuel datavised. “After all, they are partly the reason we’re here. Ione and Kelly were right, Lieria was interested in the Sleeping God. And this is the obvious place where information on it would be stored. They must have teleported in here not long after they left Tranquillity. And simply opening the original airlock is the kind of elegance I’d expect from them. We’ve seen what the Tyrathca do to doors that won’t budge for them.”

“Why not just teleport directly inside the control offices?” Monica asked.

“They’re extremely small on a cosmic scale. I’m guessing

such an action would require impossible accuracy, especially over three hundred light years from Jobis.”

“Could be. Do you think they’re still here?”

Oski pointed her sensor pad along the short airlock tunnel. “It’s inert as far as I can tell.”

“And our time is running out,” Monica datavised. “Let’s get in there.”

The control offices were noticeably warmer. Suit sensors detected thermal concentrations around three of the computer terminals in the second room. “This is the astrogration centre,” Oski datavised. “One of our information targets. If we’re to get a fix on the Sleeping God’s location, we ought to find it stored in here.”

“Get started,” Monica datavised. The sensor disks were showing her the Tyrathca moving through the second level chamber with the biological reactor. They’d slowed their advance slightly since the diversion serjeant’s attempted entrapment, treating each chamber with suspicion, never allowing more than three soldiers inside together. Even so, they’d be at the spiral ramp leading to ring five in another fifteen minutes.

Oski and Renato knelt down beside one of the terminals, and spread out their equipment. Monica, Samuel, and the last serjeant quickly searched the remaining rooms, then went back out into ring five.

“We should backtrack a bit and lay some false heat trails,” Monica datavised. “That will give us a few minutes more.”

“I don’t think it will,” Samuel replied. “By the time they get here, it will be obvious to them that we came for the control offices. Diversions won’t work. We shall have to defend our position.”

“Shit, I hope not, because this is a tactical lost cause. They can come at us from all sides, and we don’t have a way out.”

“But we do have superior weaponry. Let’s just hope we don’t have to use it.”

“Fine. And now we’ve actually reached the mission target, why don’t we start thinking of a way out of here.”

The second diversion serjeant had rigged a hundred-and-fifty-metre length of corridor. A simple enough entrapment: wait until the lead Tyrathca reached the EE charge, then trigger both of them. The length of corridor should trap all twelve of the pursuing xenocs between the rockfalls. But when the lead Tyrathca approached the first EE charge, it slowed, and the others stopped. Ione cursed as it moved forwards carefully, waving its scanner round. She must have left an abnormal thermal trace in the corridor when she was placing the EE charges.

The Tyrathca consulted the scanner display a final time, and pointed its maser rifle at the corridor roof. If the beam did wash over the EE charge’s trigger electronics, the radiation would destroy them.

Annoyed, Ione set off the EE charge, bringing down a five metre section of roof. It didn’t harm any of the Tyrathca. They cantered back down the corridor and split up, presumably to bypass the blockage and pick up the diversion serjeant’s heat trail again. Although without any sensor disk coverage, she couldn’t be sure where they were. She started to move again, heading deeper into the arkship’s interior, certain they weren’t ahead of her, at least.

Oski was in her element. Worry about her physical predicament had vanished completely as she and Renato removed the computer terminal panels, exposing the circuitry inside. Tyrathca electronics lagged behind current human systems by several generations—if not centuries. She hadn’t dealt

with anything this crude since her compulsory History of Electronics semester while she was studying for her degree.

Renato followed her datavised instructions efficiently, tracing the terminal's main power cable and splicing in one of the energy matrices they'd brought with them. Small coloured symbols ringing the rosette keyboard lit up.

"Thank heavens they don't have any imagination," Oski datavised. "I'd hate to try and do this kind of thing on non-standard systems in the timescale we've got. But that's a null concept for the Tyrathca."

"Which I still think is a paradox," Renato datavised. "Imagination is the root cause of all fresh ideas. You can't design a starship without it. It's the Siamese twin of curiosity."

"Which they also don't seem to have much of."

"But probing your environment is a basic survival trait. You have to know if there's any kind of threat out there if you want to keep on living. Then you have to work out how to overcome it."

"I'm not arguing. Let's just save it for another time, okay?" Oski began attaching the processor blocks she'd brought to the databuses inside the terminus; unspooling long ribbons of fibre optic cable with custom built interface plugs on the end. The Laymil project had the specifications of known Tyrathca electronic systems on file in Tranquillity, of course; but she'd referenced the archaeology expedition's records to be sure. Tanjuntic-RI's systems were identical to those used today, even down to the size and configuration of the sockets. Fifteen thousand years of standardisation! Renato was right: that wasn't merely odd, it was downright eerie.

The interface plugs clicked smoothly into their sockets, and the block datavised that the high density photonic link had been established. Which was ridiculous. She'd been waiting to apply a chemical spray that would have eased the

plugs into place. It had been invented by her division to clean up optical contacts that had been exposed to the vacuum, dust, and general degradation of the Ruin Ring; they used a lot of it on the scant remnants of Laymil electronics they acquired.

She put the spray canister down and picked up a micro scanner. "I can accept that their electronics are in a much better condition than the Laymil modules we have," she datavised. "The environment here is so much more benign, and they haven't been abandoned as long. But *this* lucky is absolutely impossible." The blocks finished assembling an iconographic display of the terminal's architecture. "The entire terminal is on-line, there isn't a single element not functioning. The Kiint didn't just access this, they repaired the damn thing to full operational status. Some of these components are brand new, for heaven's sake."

"How much of it is new?"

"According to my scanner, it's just processors and some support circuitry. The memory crystals are original. Which makes sense. They want the data stored inside them, just like us."

"Can you get it?"

"No problem." They already knew the Tyrathca program language, and there was certainly no such thing as security protocols or codes to guard against unauthorised access. Before leaving Tranquillity, the division's software experts had written customised questors that could examine all the information contained within Tyrathca memory crystals. Oski datavised the first batch of pre-formatted programs into the terminus architecture. Some of them were hunting for distinct references, while the others were classifying the information according to file type. The pair of them accessed the questor results as they returned.

“Well, it would have been too much to expect a direct reference to the Sleeping God,” Renato datavised.

“No mention of an unusual cosmological event, either,” Oski observed. She studied the file index, seeing what kind of database they’d activated, and shaping the next batch of questors accordingly. “We have plenty of navigational fixes.”

“I’m going to see if the questors can find a list of star fixes they used to align their communication laser during the flight. At least that’ll give us an idea of their contact protocol with the other arkships.”

“Good idea. I’ll see if any other arkship flight paths are stored in here. That should tell us what kind of spatial volume we’re dealing with.”

The questors revealed several tens of thousands of star fixes performed to align the interstellar communication laser. Eighty-five per cent of them were performed during the first six thousand years of the flight, after that the number of communiqués transmitted and received by the arkship dropped off considerably. During the latter stages of the flight, the star fixes were performed almost exclusively to align the laser on the five colony planets which Tanjuntic-RI had established.

With the fixes established, Oski began to search for associated files. “The messages aren’t stored in here,” she datavised eventually. “I keep getting a link code with all the laser alignment files. But it’s to a different system altogether.”

“Do you know where it is?” Renato asked.

“Not yet.” She composed a new batch of questors, and sent them probing through the terminal’s basic management routines. “How are you doing?”

“Unpleasantly successful. The Tyrathca built over a thousand arkships.”

“Good god.”

“Yeah, quite. If they all travelled as far as this one, that

gives us a phenomenal area to search through for their Sleeping God. We're talking about a percentage of the entire galaxy. Small, admittedly. But everything is relative. Parker and Kempster will love this."

The questors started to display their answers to Oski. "Ah, here we go. The files we want are stored in some kind of principal archive. I've got the identification code."

"But it could be anywhere. We can't access anything from here."

"Yes. Come on. We want the office which dealt with the arkship's general systems. We'll see if we can activate one of the terminals in there, and call up a general schematic."

The maser beam caught the diversion serjeant on its thigh as it was crossing one of the hemispherical chambers. Ione's response was automatic, a fast powered dive behind a huge clump of machinery. The beam cut off as she fell behind it. Her armour's electronic warfare block had pinpointed the origin. The Tyrathca was shooting from just inside one of the corridors.

She loaded the coordinate into her weapons hardware. A homing grenade shot out of her belt dispenser, curving over the top of the sheltering machinery. An EE explosion obliterated the corridor entrance. Another maser slashed across the serjeant's armour. Ione rolled quickly, swinging the launcher round. A second homing grenade eliminated the corridor the Tyrathca soldier was charging out of.

They're moving bloody fast, she told her other selves and Samuel. **It was a good pincer manoeuvre**. She used the suit's sensors to scan down the corridor ahead. No motion or anomalous infrared source was detectable.

You can't go back, the serjeant with Monica and Samuel down in ring five told her. **You know they're behind you**.

Yes. She unclipped a magazine from her belt and slotted it

into her multi-barrelled launcher as she walked over to the one remaining corridor entrance. Three slender missiles were fired at two second intervals, streaking away down the lightless tunnel. The serjeant flattened itself against the wall.

Each of the three missiles was tipped with a neutron pulse warhead. They detonated simultaneously, soaking a five hundred metre length of the corridor with a lethal cascade of radiation. If there had been any Tyrathca lurking down there, the neutron bombardment would have killed them almost instantaneously. Holding the fat missile launcher in one hand, and an X-ray laser in the other, the diversion serjeant started to creep down the radioactive corridor.

“Oski, progress report, please,” Monica datavised. A sensor disk showed her the Tyrathca massing at the top of the spiral ramp which led down to ring five. “We’re getting a little critical out here.”

“I’m in the general systems layout. Should have the archive location any second now. This is another terminal the Kiint have refurbished. That must mean we’re on the right track.”

“Oski,” Samuel datavised. “Please store as much of the layout as possible. It might help us to get out of here.”

“To get out?” Monica queried.

“Yes. I have an idea.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

“One moment.” **Syrinx?**

Yes Samuel. Are you making progress?

Not as much as I’d like, but yes. Oski will start to datavise the information we have acquired so far to you and the *Lady Macbeth* in case we do not get out.

There’s still only one Tyrathca ship at Tanjuntic-RI. They’ll be no match for *Oenone*. As long as you can get back up to what’s left of the spaceport support column, you’ll be fine.

That may prove difficult. The Tyrathca soldier-caste are very capable, as the serjeants are discovering. And they know where we have to return to. An ambush would be easy for them.

What do you propose?

Monica and I were both present when Dr Mzu escaped from Tranquillity.

Now wait a minute—Syrinx protested.

I could do that, *Oenone* said. If the *Udat* can, I can. There was considerable eagerness in the voidhawk's mental tone.

No, Syrinx said, instinctively protective. *Tanjuntic-RI* is a hell of a lot smaller than *Tranquillity*. You'd never fit into one of the rings.

But I would fit into the level-one chambers.

That was what I was going to suggest, Samuel said. We ought to be able to reach one of them. And I doubt the hellhawk could swallow in to harass you. Whereas if you came back here to fight your way past the Tyrathca ship, it could certainly complicate the situation for you.

I can do it, *Oenone* insisted.

Are you sure? This isn't just bravado, is it?

You know I can. And we would honour *Udat*'s memory by doing so.

All right. Syrinx couldn't hide the pride and simmering excitement in her mind. Samuel, we'll attempt to pick you out from one of the axial chambers.

Thank you, Samuel said emphatically.

Oski and Renato were almost running as they emerged from the control office airlock. Their suit programs were having to limit the augmentation to stop them from hitting their heads on the airlock chamber ceiling. "I've found the archive." Renato datavised the layout file over to Monica, Samuel, and

the serjeants. "It's on the other side of the ring, a kilometre away."

"Move out," Monica datavised. Her guidance block was analysing the new data, incorporating it into existing files.

"According to this file, there's a ramp up to the second level just past the archive," Samuel datavised. "I'll blow the airlock hatch, and we'll evacuate through there as soon as you've got the information."

"Sounds good," Renato datavised.

The five of them were skating along the lightless streets in long low bounds, utterly reliant on their guidance programs. Nothing changed around them. At every turn, the wintered towers were the same ahead and behind, their infrared signatures identical.

"The Tyrathca are on their way down the ramp to this ring," datavised the serjeant who was guarding the entrance. "I've rigged the airlock. Do you want me to blow it?"

"No," Monica datavised. "Wait until they're all inside the ring, then blow it."

"You want to trap them in here?" Renato datavised. "With us?"

"Good tactics," Samuel confirmed. "If we block them now, we won't know where they are, nor how they gain entry. But once they're in, they can't get out easily, and we can monitor them via the sensor disks. It gives us the strategic high ground."

A glimmer of infrared started to shine down the corridor ahead of the diversion serjeant, like an autumnal dawn. Ione stopped and slapped a magazine of smart-seeker missiles in the launcher, datavising the Tyrathca profile into their processors. Suit sensors showed a similar infrared glow expanding behind her.

Surrounded, she informed her other selves. **Be warned. They really are making good use of their knowledge.**

A couple of neutron pulse tipped missiles were fired at the group behind her. She dropped a grenade, and started to run forwards. Smart-seeker missiles sliced out of the big launcher ahead of her. The neutron pulses went off. She triggered the grenade, bringing down the corridor roof. Small EE detonations were flaring up ahead as the missiles punctured the Tyrathca spacesuit fabric, burying themselves deep in the xenoc bodies before detonating.

Infrared vision was wiped out in splashes of brilliant crimson. Still firing missiles. Something like a medium-sized cannonball hit her right leg. Exploding. She was flung violently against the ceiling, bouncing down against the floor. Internal bones snapped. Cracks multiplied across her exoskeleton. But the armour held, reinforced by the molecular binding generators.

The diversion serjeant raised its head, dislodging various rocks which were lodged on its helmet. It moved its arms, actuators pushing hard against the weight of rocks holding its torso down. More rocks slithered off the armour. Two soldier-caste Tyrathca were bounding towards it. Ione waited until they were fifteen metres away, and fired a couple of homing grenades.

The sensor disk by the spiral ramp up in level one noted a rise in the thermal environment beyond its pre-set parameters, and broadcast an alert. Visual observation showed twenty new Tyrathca marching into the interior.

“Oh God,” Monica datavised. “Just what we need.”

“It will take them forty minutes to reach ring five,” Samuel datavised. “If Oski hasn’t retrieved what we need by then I doubt it will matter.”

They were fifty metres short of the ring wall, passing the last of the towers. Five sets of suit lights slithered erratically over the wall, kindling small refractive auras from the curtain of frosted creeper leaves.

“There,” Renato datavised. Rather uselessly, he raised an arm and pointed. But the others saw where his suit lights had come to rest, and focused their own beams on the spot. The airlock door to the archive was very similar to those of the control offices. And like them, open.

“It’s recent,” Oski datavised. “Several faint infrared footprints, very similar to those at the control offices.”

“Monica, you go in with them,” Samuel datavised. “I’ll set the charges ready to open that ramp for us.”

Monica drew an X-ray laser rifle from her belt, and switched her homing grenades to active mode. Feeling slightly more confident, she stepped through the open airlock. Oski and Renato had been issued with the same weapons suite as she, but not even full field combat programs could turn a pair of academics into decent troops. She didn’t have surprise on her side. Instead she went for speed, flashing through the final doorway with sensor gain on maximum. Radar and infrared covered the whole interior of the archive chamber in milliseconds. The results filtered through her tactical location program, which declared there was nothing active inside.

“You can come in,” she datavised.

The archive was substantially different to the control offices. A lot larger, a long hall tunnelled out of naked rock, with an arching ceiling thirty metres high. Despite having Tyrathca-sized computer terminals and display cases, it was the most human place they’d seen in Tanjuntic-RI.

Principally, Monica decided, because it was instantly recognisable: a museum. Five-metre glass cube display cabinets were standing in regimented rows the whole length of

the hall. The glass was fogged by grime and ice. When they shone their suit beams on the cabinets, the contents were visible only as intriguing dark shadows. From what they could discern, it was machinery inside; the outlines had too many flat sides and regular angles to be anything biological.

Each line of cubes was divided into sections by broad areas given over to computer terminals clustered round a central hexagonal pedestal of giant display screens. Oski walked over to the nearest one. "These zones must be the archive's operating stations," she datavised. Her light beams fanned up and down the casings, then settled on the screens. "There's a plaque here." Neural nanonics put her Tyrathca translation program into primary mode. "Atmospheric engineering," she read out. "They must cover different disciplines at each station. Try and find anything relating to navigation or communications."

"Can you see if the Kiint repaired any of the terminals?" Renato asked. "That would save a minute or two."

"Nothing like that showing yet," Monica datavised.

Renato walked along a row of the big cubes, annoyed they were all so opaque. The first station of terminals was mineral distillation, followed by thermal maintenance, then distillation mining. On impulse he wiped a gauntlet against the ice on one cube, upping the brightness on his suit lights. It was a chunk of machinery inside. "These gizmos look like they're brand new," he datavised. "I'm not sure this is a museum. Could be they archived actual physical components, the ultimate template back-up in case something screwed up their electronics."

"Any kind of disaster big enough to eradicate their crystal memories would wreck these machines first," Oski datavised. "Besides, think how many different components there are to make Tanjuntic-RI work. A hell of a lot more than we can see in here."

“Okay, so it’s just the really critical ones.”

“I think I’ve found it,” Monica datavised. “This terminal has been spruced up, and it’s still a couple of degrees warmer than the rest.”

Oski scanned her suit sensors round to locate the ESA operative. “What’s the station?”

“Planetary habitation.”

“That doesn’t sound quite right.” She hurried over to where Monica was standing, suit lights converging on one of the terminals.

“The Tyrathca are now in ring five,” the serjeant guarding the ramp entrance datavised. “I am blowing the airlock behind them.”

Despite her high suit sensor resolution, Monica could receive no indication of the explosion. “Oski, we really don’t have any more time to hunt round,” she datavised. “Just get what you can from this terminal, and pray the Kiint knew what they were doing.”

“Confirmed.” The electronics specialist knelt down beside the terminal, and started working on the front panel.

Ione was tracking the Tyrathca through multiple observation points as they spread out through the streets of ring five. As soon as the airlock detonated and collapsed behind them, trapping the last two in the rubble, they had deployed in a wide sweep formation. The sensor disks were picking up microwave radar pulses from several of the soldiers. Their emissions helped to target the first batch of homing grenades which she launched, eliminating a further three. Then they wised up to that and switched the radars off. She launched a swarm of smart seeker missiles, programming them to flit above the tops of the towers. Arrowing down as soon as they located a suit.

The launch betrayed her general direction. Ultimately, an-

other plus point. She was on the other side of the airlock from the control offices and archive, drawing them away from the exploration team.

One of the sensor disks showed a soldier raise a rifle the size of a small human cannon. Ione started running, not caring about the lack of cover. A tower disintegrated behind her; the blast strong enough to create a rumble in the ring's near-non-existent atmosphere. Big nodules of debris crashed into neighbouring towers, shattering the brittle concrete. Three of them toppled over, throwing up thick clouds of black dust which surged along the streets in every direction, blocking vision in all spectrums.

Monica followed what she could of the fight via the sensor disks. Nervous energy created a nasty itch along her spine and ribs. It was impossible to scratch through the suit. Even twisting round inside the armour was useless. There was nothing she could do to assist Oski and Renato. The pair of them had exposed the terminal's electronics, and were busy attaching their own blocks to the primitive components inside. Their fluid motions were bringing effective results. Little lights were flashing around the rosette keyboard, and the monitor screen was producing a snowstorm of green and scarlet graphics.

She started walking round the outlying display cubes, alert for any other signs of Kiint activity. It was the one contribution she could still make. Not that it would be a lot of use at this point. It wasn't until after she'd started on her second circuit of the planetary habitation station that her subconscious alarm grew strong enough to make her stop and take a proper look at what she was seeing. The shapes inside the opaque cubes were no longer nice and regular.

With real unease replacing her anxiety now, Monica swiped her gauntlet over the crinkled, sparkling ice, rubbing

a patch clear. Her suit lights brightened, converging on the cube. Visual sensors altered their focus. Monica took a half step back, breath catching in her throat. Her medical monitor program warned her of a sudden fast heart rhythm. "Samuel?" she datavised.

"What is it?"

"They've got xenocs in here. Xenocs I've never seen before." She scanned her sensors across the creature inside the cube, building up a pixel file image for the Edenist. It was bipedal, shorter than a human, with four symmetrically arranged arms emerging from mid-torso. No elbow or knee joints were apparent, the limbs moved as a single unit. Bulbous shoulder/hip joints hinted at a considerable articulation. All four arms ended in stumpy hands with four claw-fingers; while the legs finished in rounded pads. The head was a fat cone, with deep folds of skin ringing a thick neck, which would permit a great deal of rotation. There was a vertical gash, which could be either a nose or mouth, and deep sockets that could have held eyes.

"My God, Samuel, it's sentient. It's wearing things, look." She focused on an arm, where a silver bracelet was wrapped around the wizened caramel skin. "That could be a watch, I think. It's certainly technological. They caught a sentient xenoc and stuffed the poor bastard for their kids to look at in this freak show. Oh for Christ's sake, what are we dealing with here?"

"You're jumping to some very wild assumptions, Monica."

"Then you explain what the fucking hell it's doing in here. I'm telling you, they put it on show. It must have come from one of the planets they stopped at."

"You're in an archive, not a circus zoo."

"Is that supposed to make me happy? So this is scientific

not entertainment. What were they doing studying it? It's sentient. It's not a laboratory creature."

"Monica, I know it's shocking, but it isn't relevant to our current situation. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to ignore it for the moment."

"Jesus fucking wept." She spun round, and marched back towards the terminal where Oski and Renato were working. Heat and anger kept her going for several paces. Then she stopped and scanned the cube again. Her suit lights refracted off the gritty ice with its dark adumbrate core of sorrow and suffering.

When they'd come on board, she'd wondered about Tyrathca souls watching them. Now all she could think about was the soul of the unknown xenoc; lost and alone, crying out desperately for others of its kind. Could it see her now? Was it shouting its pleas for salvation from some obscure corner of the dreadful beyond? Unheard even by its own deities?

The medical monitor warned Monica she wasn't breathing properly. She made an effort to inhale in a regular motion. "Oski? How are you doing?"

"I'm not sure. There are some files in here that look like communiqués. I've just reverted to our fall-back option. We're copying every memory to analyse later."

"How long?"

"Programming is almost complete. It'll take half an hour to datavise all their files over to our processors."

"We can't afford that."

"I know. The bitek processors can shunt the information directly over to *Oenone* and *Lady Mac* in real time. We just have to hope the Tyrathca don't come in here and find out what we're doing until it's finished."

"That's a safe enough bet. I expect they'll be too busy chasing us."

How the hell did they get up there? Ione asked.

At least three Tyrathca soldiers were cantering along ring five's ceiling gantries. The narrow metal walkways threaded amongst the crane rails and irrigation pipes were shaking alarmingly as the heavy bodies thundered down them. But they were holding. And they provided the Tyrathca with a dangerously effective vantage point.

There were now six separate smears of billowing dust blotting out entire sections of the ring, evidence of shattered towers caught in the increasingly brutal crossfire. Tyrathca bodies lay everywhere, bleeding fluid and heat onto the cold alloy floor. One of the two remaining serjeants was limping badly, its suit leg crushed almost flat around the knee. Caught by a huge chunk of debris whose inertia defeated the binding generators. Several processors and hardware units on its belt were dead, ruined by maser fire.

Worse, from a tactical viewpoint, only one Tyrathca was currently stalking it. The remainder had moved away from the mayhem it'd unleashed to chase down the remaining heat trails. Four of them, including one breeder, were congregating round the open airlock into the control offices.

"They know we went in there now," Samuel datavised.

"The ones on the gantries will be looking for us," Ione datavised. "And they'll see us soon enough."

"We've finished programming the file extraction," Oski said. "The data is being received by the starships."

"Excellent. Get out of the archive, I'm about to blow the airlock. Ione, can you take out the soldiers on the gantries?"

"I'll try."

"At this point, you're not expendable to us, okay? We're going to need back-up to get out of here."

"Understood. But only one of me will be able to keep up with you on the ramp."

The injured serjeant raised its missile launcher, and fired the two remaining smart seeker missiles. They soared off into the gloom, twin spikes of intense amber light, seemingly rising out of sight around the ring's curvature. It began to limp into the seething dust, heading back towards the archive. Searching round on its belt, Ione found a magazine containing neutron pulse missiles. Only four of the twelve responded to a datavise. She slipped the magazine into the launcher anyway.

When the others made it to the shelter of the ramp, she could then make life seriously unpleasant for the Tyrathca left in ring five.

Samuel and the last serjeant were waiting for Monica, Oski, and Renato right outside the archive. Monica's thoughts were still in such turmoil after finding the xenoc that she didn't trust herself to say anything to him.

"There's still one soldier-caste left up on the gantry," Samuel datavised. "Not that it matters much now." He triggered the charges he'd laid around the airlock.

They were close enough to see the flash: a dazzling ripple of pure white light that burst across the ring, fading fast.

Samuel started running straight at it. They only had a hundred and fifty metres to go. He datavised instructions to the others, who activated their rocket launchers. A semicircle of towers fell in unison as the missiles pulverised their ground floors. Dust strangled the thin plumes of potent flame, sending out a curtain of impenetrable darkness that fountained straight upwards.

The airlock leading to the ramp had been wrenched to one side by the charges Samuel had laid around its rim, buckling the thick slab of titanium like so much plastic sheeting. A tide of rock had spewed out of the gap, narrowing it still further. His boots dislodged small loose fragments as he scrambled

up. There was enough space to pass through, providing he turned sideways. As soon as he was on the other side, he started slapping EE charges on the walls. Monica and the others wriggled through the gap, with the serjeant bringing up the rear.

Eighteen combat wasps were closing on *Lady Mac*, the third time in an hour Hesper-LN's defences had launched such a salvo at them. Each time, *Lady Mac* had simply jumped away before any of them were in range, leaving the drones to search round helplessly for their target.

"Good job the Tyrathca never met anything hostile when they were on their voyage here," Joshua remarked. "I mean, Jesus, they are absolutely crap at space warfare. Why do they keep firing salvos when we're far enough above the planet to jump?"

"They're lulling us into complacency," Ashly said cheerfully. "They've worked out roughly where we've got to emerge next time, and they've flown their superweapon there ready to zap us."

"Nope. Keeping the jump emergence coordinate as a random variable is file-one in the combat manual."

"They wouldn't have a superweapon anyway," Liol said. "Building stuff like that takes inventive flair. And they just ain't got it."

"They do seem to be very dogmatic," Dahybi said. "As they haven't got a combat capable starship to field against us, their options are limited."

"Limited, yes," Joshua agreed. "But not to one." He studied the tactical display. The nearest combat wasp would be close enough to start deploying submunitions in another two minutes. "Stand by for jump. Sarha, how's the memory dump coming on?"

“No problems, Joshua. The bitek array is accepting the load.”

“Great, let’s hope there’s something useful in there.” He cut the fusion drives, holding the starship stable with ion thrusters. The flight computer showed him the energy patterning node status as the combat sensors retracted. “Here we go.” They emerged forty thousand kilometres from the combat wasp swarm. Hesperia-LN’s SD network took nearly three minutes to acquire lock on.

“Are you launching another combat wasp?” Liol asked.

“Not yet,” Joshua said. He datavised the bitek array for a link to the exploration team. “Where are you?”

“Coming up to level two,” Monica replied. “The ramp is sealed behind us, so if we don’t get ambushed, we’ll be at level one in another twelve minutes.”

“Okay, thanks, Monica. Syrinx, we’d better start finalizing our next move.”

“Agreed. We must assume the blackhawk will try and follow us again.”

“I can throw it off with multiple consecutive jumps. Can you do something similar?”

“No problem. Designate a rendezvous coordinate.”

“That’s trickier. This bloody diversionary battle has screwed around with our vector. I can get a rough alignment on the second planet with a small burn. We’ll slingshot around it, and re-align on the Orion nebula. After that, we can lose the hellhawk.”

“Very well. *Oenone* will swallow out to the second planet as soon as we’ve picked the team up. See you there.”

The second level cavern housed a gigantic fusion generator, three pale metal spheres standing one on top of the other, eighty metres high. Arching buttresses of pipes and cables were wrapped around the main section like mechanized

viaducts, sinking away into the walls and floor. A quintet of heat exchangers surrounded it. Fluids had leaked from their valves and feed tube junctions, dribbling down the casings to solidify in colourful multi-layered ribbons. The cavern's irradiated rock kicked off datavised Geiger warnings as soon as the exploration team bounded in from one of the corridors.

"This is it," Samuel datavised. "Our shortcut."

"It will be very short with this radiation level if we're not careful," Monica datavised. "This is as bad as a fission core meltdown. What kind of fuel did they use?"

"Heaven only knows." Samuel scanned his sensors across the pipes that disappeared into the curving apex overhead. "Any of those three." His suit's tactical program datavised the designation icon to the others, highlighting the pipe he'd chosen. "According to the file Oski pulled from the control offices it's a thermal gas duct. The exchangers transferred some of their heat along it to keep the level-one lakes warm. It's an express route straight there. All we have to do is slice it open."

Monica didn't argue with him, despite the sudden doubts. She'd stayed with Oski and Renato in the archive, leaving details of their withdrawal to Samuel. That was teamwork. And it was as though he'd been her partner forever. They knew they could rely on each other now. She took the stumpy laser rifle from her belt, datavised its control processor for a continual burn, and lined it up on the pipe he'd designated.

Five ruby red beams stabbed out, puncturing the pipe. Bright molten metal droplets drizzled down slowly, losing their radiance before they reached the ground. Monica's radar caught the movement just before the maser beam hit her suit. A couple of homing grenades fired immediately from her dispenser, looping through the three dimensional maze of pipes to smash the corridor entrance where the Tyrathca soldier was lurking.

Backwash from the EE blast rolled her across the ground to clang against the base of a heat exchanger. Her infrared sensor caught a blur of motion away on the other side of the chamber. Radar was useless, there was too much machinery in the way.

“They’re in,” she warned.

“Oski, Renato, finish cutting the pipe open,” Samuel ordered. “We’ll take care of them.”

One of the Tyrathca cannon fired, blowing a hole in the side of the fusion generator. Monica grabbed her missile launcher, and fired off a pair of smart seekers. Samuel was kangaroo jumping up the side of a heat exchanger. Homing grenades spat out of his dispenser, zipping away to pummel the corridor entrances. Maser beams slashed at him. Monica’s sensors triangulated their origin, and she launched more smart seekers in retaliation. Explosions ripped round the chamber as the corridor entrances were closed.

“Pipe’s open,” Oski datavised.

“Go straight in,” Samuel datavised. “We’ll cover you.”

Monica dived under a buttress, scanning at ground level. The lower section of four hot Tyrathca spacesuit legs was visible ahead of her, below a coil-wound beam. She chopped them with the laser, slashing straight through the fabric. Large globs of weird purple gel burped out, oscillating wildly as they bounced off the floor and machinery. The Tyrathca stumbled and fell. Monica slid the laser along its flank. A tidal wave of gel blobs erupted. Then the body went into explosive decompression.

Oski’s manoeuvring pack fired at full power, lifting her towards the apex of the cavern. Every suppresser program she had that could squash down on her fear was in primary mode. They must have worked, she was quietly delighted at how calmly she was reacting to being shot at. Guidance programs bent her flight around the clutter of arching pipes as she rose

higher and higher. She actually passed a two metre section of the pipe on her way up, its edges still glowing pink as it tumbled end over end.

A maser beam struck her legs. The suit's tactical program shot a homing grenade down in response. Then she was concentrating solely on her flight, arrowing for the gaping hole they'd sliced in the pipe. Its rim flashed past her, catching her shoulder, and scraping along her arms. Then she was completely inside. Radar was the only sense which functioned in here, showing a rigid, featureless tube stretching out above her for nearly three hundred metres. Her manoeuvring pack thrusters throttled down, slowing her to a less reckless speed as the gravity dropped off. A second armour suit slid into the pipe below her.

"Hell of an escape route," Renato datavised.

Etchells had no warning that the *Oenone* was going to swallow away from the twin moons. The crew were still boring him crazy with their promises and propaganda when it happened. But he felt it go, a massive tear in the uniformity of his distortion field.

What are you doing? he asked. The Tyrathca ships were still hours away.

We're leaving now, Ruben said. **Why don't you go home? Think about what we've been saying.**

There was a momentary lapse in the affinity contact. Etchells observed the amount of energy *Oenone* applied to open the wormhole interstice, determining the terminus location. They had returned to that damn arkship!

Why are you here? he demanded. **What's so special about that ship?**

If you join our efforts to solve this crisis, then such questions will be answered for you, Syrinx said.

Fuck your psychobabble bullshit. He sent the energy

flashing through his patterning cells, uncomfortably aware of how much he had expended in warding off impacts from the Lagrange point particles. A wormhole opened, and he dived down it, emerging into real space again, barely twenty kilometres from the arkship.

The *Oenone* was probing the ancient vessel very thoroughly with its distortion field (an act which Etchells didn't understand). And the large Tyrathca ship was firing its secondary drive, moving up from its holding position at the front of Tanjuntic-RI. Etchells didn't really want to go into combat against the xenocs at this point, especially not with uncertain allies like the Edenists.

Oenone was performing another swallow manoeuvre.

You can't elude me, Etchells said.

Fine, Syrinx replied with icy superiority. **Follow us in, then.**

Etchells derived the voidhawk's wormhole terminus. Which was impossible. They were swallowing *inside* the arkship. There were cavities in there, he could feel them. Tenuous bubbles within the hard rock. So very small.

He didn't dare. That kind of accuracy was staggering.

The Tyrathca ship had risen above the arkship's horizon. It launched fifteen combat wasps straight at him. He swallowed away fast.

The level-one cavern was quickly and silently saturated with light, revealing the cyclorama of frozen water. Ripples and waves were caught in mid-swell, drained of colour as they had been of heat. The endocarps were different. Flat cliffs of rock, rimmed with ledges of metal just above the ice. One of them boasted a tiny pinprick of warmth. Five armour-suited figures hovered in front of it, watching the light source expand; twisted fragments of starlight threaded through the

length of the wormhole to spray out at random. There was no other indication of the terminus opening.

As the light dimmed it shone across *Oenone*'s marbled blue hull, glinting off the crew toroid. The huge voidhawk swept round the lake's curvature towards the exploration team, skirting the rickety old axial gantry with simple grace.

You've no idea how good it is to see you, Samuel said, accompanying the statement with a wash of gratitude and relief.

You too, *Oenone* replied. **I knew I could do this.**

Etchells conceded defeat. He wasn't going to find out why the two starships had come here, not now. *Oenone* was inside the arkship for less than five minutes before swallowing away again. Its wormhole terminus opened out above the star system's second planet. The Adamist ship jumped there as well.

Etchells joined them, at a non-threatening distance, observing the Adamist ship fly round the planet on a tight slingshot trajectory. When it jumped, Etchells tried to follow. But it must have used multiple consecutive jumps, because he couldn't find it anywhere near the emergence coordinate. With his energy patterning cells badly depleted, and his nutrient reserve getting low, he began the long, lonely trip back to New California. It was time to hand the whole problem over to Kiera and Capone.

14

Candles shaped like dark lily pads bobbed about over the bath water, never managing to touch the two bodies resting in the middle. Several of them had become mired in the burgs of apple-scented bubbles, their wicks sizzling as the flames struggled to stay alight. More candles were flickering gamely along the bath's marbled rim, half a metre tall; they were cemented into place by thick rivulets of wax. As the only source of light in the suite's dilapidated bathroom, their weak yellow flickers bestowed an appropriately dingy appearance.

For years the Chatsworth had been one of central Edmonton's most renowned five-star hotels, attracting the wealthy and the famous. But successive changes of management and ownership had seen it decay badly over the last two decades as too much of its cash flow had been diverted from maintaining standards to inflating shareholder dividends. Eventually it was trading solely on its name, and that could never last. Now it was closed for a much needed refurbishment and re-launch. But the work crews and their mechanoids hadn't even started stripping the old fittings out when New York's problems with the possessed hit the

AV news. After that, most of Earth's long-term commercial investment projects were put on hold while the financiers and entrepreneurs waited to see what the outcome would be. The Chatsworth included.

Quinn had taken it over with quiet efficiency to use as his home base in the arcology. The three-man caretaker team left inside were possessed, and every last connection to the outside world was severed: power, water, data, air conditioning. He knew that police and government security forces tracked the possessed by the glitches they caused, but they could only do that when there was working processor-governed machinery nearby. So he and his loyal followers made do with the water left in the hotel tanks, cooked on camping gear in one of the ritzy function rooms, and used candles. Bath water was heated purely by energistic power. The soaps and oils were stolen from a local mall. Along with booze.

Quinn reached for the bottle of Norfolk Tears chilling in an ice bucket among the candles, and poured the pale liquid over Courtney's glistening breasts. She giggled as her nipples hardened from the cold, and arched herself further out of the water. There were bruises and teeth marks on her gold-tanned skin, evidence of Quinn's recent predilections. She didn't mind the kind of sex he wanted; it was kind of interesting, the physical things he could do with his new black magic. That kind of misused power really turned her on, further proof of his omnipotence. He didn't have to worry about censure, or being caught. He wrote the rules now. And there was never much pain, nor did it last long. He didn't have to hurt her to confirm their relationship; he knew she had submitted herself completely to him and the cause. Joyfully, too. By embracing the serpent beast in its dark lair, Courtney's life had changed, becoming so much better. Hotter. Brighter. She got all the stuff like clothes and

AV fleks she wanted now; and she didn't have to take shit from anyone anymore, either. Not bad going for a sect whore.

Quinn threw away the bottle, and started to lick the luxurious drink off her skin. "This is the fucking max," he said. "You know, it really is true; the bad guys get the best of everything. Best clothes. Best drugs. Best babes. Best parties. Best sex. It's fucking *great*."

"We're the bad guys?" Courtney asked, puzzled. "I thought we were doing the right thing smashing up the world?"

Quinn stood up, sending the floating candles surfing into the bubbles. His erection grew to a thick flesh sword hanging over Courtney's upturned face. "We're both; we're bad and we're right. Believe it."

Her confusion vanished, and she was smiling with simple contentment again. "I believe in you." She cupped his balls, squeezing like he'd taught, and started to lick the length of his dick.

"After I've finished fucking you, I'm going to go over and kill another one of Banneth's people," Quinn said. "This time, I'm going to do it right in front of her. Force her to see how impotent she is."

"I don't get it." Courtney sat back, glancing up inquiringly. "Why don't you just march in there and start torturing her? It's not like she can stop you, or anything."

"Because this is exactly what she did to me. To us. All of us. She frightens people. It's her bang. What she can do to you up in that sanctum of hers is so fucking freaky and scary it hammers into your brain like some monster prick. All you can think of is how to stop her doing anything bad to you. Everybody in the coven knows they're gonna be strapped down on one of her tables some day. All you can do is ask God's Brother that when it's your turn, she does

something that boosts you. Nothing you can do about the pain. That's fucking standard issue with Banneth."

"I see what you're doing," Courtney said, pleased with herself. "You're stalking her."

"That's a part of it, yeah. Each time I go over there and kill one of her people, it ruins a little more of what she is. The Banneth they all fear is growing smaller and smaller every day. Even dickheads that dumb are going to realize that the one person who can defeat anything is utterly helpless against the coming Night. I want her sitting there while the entire headquarters' coven freaks out and deserts her. I'm going to make that he-bitch feel what we all did. That she's a total nothing; all that power she's spent fuck-knows how many decades building up isn't worth shit any more. She used to make people piss themselves just by being sarcastic. *Sarcastic*, for shit's sake! Can you believe that? But that's how strong she was. Well now she's going to *know* what I'll do to her, and she's going to *know* there's no way out when I come for her. That puts me in control, and me on top. It switches her whole life around; screws with the way her brain's wired. I love that almost as much as I love the pain I'm going to inflict."

Courtney rubbed her cheek along his dick, eyes closed in dreamy admiration. "I want to watch."

"You can." He beckoned. She was taken up against the wall, hands pinned above her head. A loutish violation of hard thrusts, energetically strengthened muscles overcoming any hindrance to pummel his body against hers. In his mind he let it be Banneth, enhancing the pleasure.

Halfway through, when Quinn's orgasm was building, Billy-Joe knocked tentatively on the door. "Get in here, you little shit," Quinn yelled. "Wait. Watch us."

Billy-Joe did as he was told. Standing well out of the way. Keeping still, but with inflamed eyes following every

aspect of Courtney's contortions. Quinn finished with her, and let go. She sank to the floor, propped up clumsily against the wall, shivering heavily. Her hands stroked gingerly over her body, touching the fresh bruises.

"What do you want?" Quinn asked.

"It's one of the possessed come to see you," Billy-Joe said. "He's one of the new ones. Come from the Lacombe sect. Says he's got to see you. It's like real urgent, he says."

"Shit." Quinn's skin dried; his robe materialized around him. "Hey! You want any of those healed up?"

"It's all right, Quinn," Courtney said thickly. "I've got some cream and stuff to rub on. I'm fine."

"This better be fucking important," Quinn said. "I told you dickheads not to move around the arcology. The police are going to be watching for you."

"I was careful," the possessed man said. His name was Duffy. He'd taken over the Lacombe coven's magus. Unlike the magus, Quinn judged him devout enough to God's Brother. Duffy had been left in charge of the coven, organizing several successful strikes against Edmonton's infrastructure.

Quinn sat down in one of the lounge's fraying leather armchairs, and let his mind wander through the Chatsworth and its neighbouring buildings. They were only a couple of blocks away from Banneth's headquarters, a location perfect in every respect.

There were no suspicious minds anywhere near. If Duffy had been spotted and followed, then the police were keeping well back. Quinn resisted the impulse to go over to the window and pull back one of the tatty curtains to peer down onto the street. "Okay, you haven't completely fucked up. What is it?"

“This magus, Vientus, I been squeezing him. He ain’t a magus, not a real one. Doesn’t believe in God’s Brother.”

“Big deal. None of those shits ever did, not really.”

Duffy played with his hands, wretchedly nervous. Nobody liked the idea of telling Quinn what to do—like shut up and *listen*—but this was vital.

“All right,” Quinn grunted. “Go on.”

“He’s some kind of secret police informer. Has been for years. Every night he makes a report to some kind of supervisor about what the coven’s been doing and what’s going down on the street.”

“That’s impossible,” Quinn said automatically. “If the police had that kind of information they would have raided the coven.”

“I don’t think the supervisor’s that kind of police, Quinn. Not like you get in the local precinct house. Vientus never met them, he just datavised the information to some address each night. There was other stuff going on, too. Vientus sometimes got told to target people for this supervisor, local business people, buildings that needed to be firebombed. And they’d talk about what other gangs were doing, and if they needed to be chopped back. Real detailed shit like that. It was almost like the supervisor was running the coven, not Vientus.”

“Anything else?” Quinn was listening, but not really paying attention. He was too involved thinking through the implication, and with that came a growing sense of alarm.

“This supervisor must have had some influence with the cops. Quite a bit, I guess. There were times when Vientus got useful sect members released from custody. All he had to do was ask the supervisor for them, and the cops would let them go. Easy bail, or community work sentence, some shit like that.”

“Yeah,” Quinn said quietly. That recollection was one of

the most bitter he owned. Waiting in Edmonton's Justice Hall for days with the dwindling prospect that Banneth would get him released. Banneth could make the whole legal system do tricks for her, like every judge owed her a favour. Murder suspects out on parole within an hour. Stim suppliers given house arrest sentences.

"Er." Duffy was sweating badly now. "And, er . . . the supervisor had told Vientus to look out for you."

"Me? The supervisor used my name?"

"Yes. There was a visual file on you and everything. The supervisor said you were using the possessed to take over sect covens, and they thought you'd try to kill Banneth."

"Shit!" Quinn stood up, and sprinted for the door. Half-way across the lounge he shifted into the ghost realm, running through the closed door without breaking stride.

Half past two Edmonton local time, and the arcology was at its quietest. Solaris tubes suspended underneath the elevated roads between the uptown skyscrapers shone down on deserted streets. Hologram adverts swarmed up the frontage of the ground level shops, bright fantasy worlds and beautiful people shining enticingly. An army of municipal mechanoids crawled along the pavements in front of them, spraying their solvents on tacky patches and guzzling down fast food wrappers. The only pedestrians left to avoid were a few late night stimheads thrown out of clubs by the bouncers, and romantic youthful couples slowly strolling the long route home.

Quinn adopted Erhard's image as he hustled along the street. Not an exact replicant, but a reasonable facsimile of the pathetic ghost. Good enough to deceive any characteristics recognition program scanning pedestrian faces through the street monitor sensors for a glimpse of Quinn Dexter. He stopped by the taxi rank a full block from the

Chatsworth, and the barrier slid down. One of the sleek silver Perseus cabs glided up out of the subway garage, opening its door for him.

Quinn pulled the seatbelt on with one hand, keying in his destination on the central control column with the other. He transferred the displayed fee from his bank disk and the little vehicle sped off along the street.

It all made a frightening amount of sense. He remembered the High Magus in New York; who obviously knew too much to risk being possessed. And back in Edmonton when he'd been a junior acolyte; the way everyone on a sect gig had to tell their sergeant acolyte all the crap that was going down on the street. It happened every single day. The sergeants would report to the senior acolytes, who in turn reported to Banneth. An uncompromising routine, drilled in to Quinn along with all the others right from their initiation. Information is the weapon which wins all wars. We need to know what the gangs are doing, what the police patrols are doing, what the locals are doing. Every coven was the same, in every arcology. The sect knew the moves of every downtown illegal on the whole planet.

"Perfect!" Quinn shouted. He thumped his fist into the seat cushion. "Fucking perfect." The taxi was starting to rise up a ramp to the elevated express-road. Vertical lines of blanked windows zipped past as they increased speed, then curved round to a horizontal blur. Thousands of slumbering minds slipstreamed through his consciousness. Restful and content. Just as they were supposed to be. As they had to be.

Arcologies were the social equivalents of nukes. Half a billion people crammed into a couple of hundred square kilometres; an impossibility of human nature. The only society which could conceivably hang together in those circumstances was a total-control dictatorship. Everything licensed and regulated with no tolerance of dissent or rebel-

lion. Anarchy and libertarian freedoms didn't work here, because arcologies were machines. They had to keep working smoothly, and the same way. Everything interlocked. If one unit fucked up, then every other unit would suffer. That couldn't be allowed. Which was a paradox, because you couldn't keep the jackboot stamping down forever. However benign a dictatorship, some generation down the line will rebel. So somebody, centuries ago, had worked out how to keep the lid screwed down tight. An old enough idea, never quite managed in practice. Until now. A government department that quietly and secretly takes control of society's lowest strata. Criminals and radical insurgents actually working for the very people whose existence they threaten.

Quinn could feel his energistic power starting to boil up. His thoughts were so hot with fury he could barely contain the power. "Gotta keep it in," he spat through clenched teeth. One mistake now, and they'd have him. "Got to." He pummelled his hands against his head, the shock of the craziness helping to bring himself back under control. Deep breath, and he glanced out of the cab's window. Uptown's layout was second nature, though he'd rarely experienced it from an elevated road before, much less a cab. They'd be taking the down ramp soon, angling in to Macmillan Station. Minutes only.

His breathing evened out, though he was still outraged. The sect, the awesome gospel he'd given his very life to, was being used as the front of some ultra-spook department. No wonder Banneth and Vientus could fix for an acolyte's bail with the cops; they *were* the fucking cops. Anyone with the slightest potential for danger was sucked in by the sect. And if they couldn't be cowed into dumb obedience and neutralized that way, then they were thrown to the cops and given an Involuntary Transportee sentence.

“That was me,” he whispered in pride. “Banneth couldn’t subdue me. Not even with all that shit she can do to bodies. Not me!” So the cops had been told about the persona-sequestrator nanonics he was bringing into the arcology. He’d always wondered who’d tipped them off, who the traitor was amongst his fellow devout. There probably had never even been any in the carton.

Banneth. Always fucking Banneth.

The taxi drew up in front of one of the hundreds of vehicle entrance bays to Macmillan Station. Quinn knew there and then that he was in the deepest shit imaginable. He climbed out of the cab and walked slowly into the main concourse.

The giant arena of corporate urban architecture was almost as empty as the streets outside. There were no arrivals. No streams of frantic passengers racing away from the tops of the escalators. Icons had evaporated from the informationals, which were hanging motionless in the air. Stalls had been folded up and abandoned by their sellrats. A few clumps of listless people stood under holoscreens, cases clutched tightly, staring up at the single red message that was repeated like a parallel mirror image everywhere you looked across the station: ALL VAC-TRAIN SERVICES TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED. Even the scattering of ghosts Quinn could see were wandering aimlessly about their haunt, their expressions even more glum and bewildered than usual.

A group of cops were standing together outside a closed BurrowBurger outlet, drinking from plastic cups, talking quietly among themselves. The loud echo of his footsteps as he walked towards them stirred way too many memories inside Quinn’s skull. It was the same concourse, same dark cop uniform. Then, there had been pounding feet, heart thudding hard in his chest. Screams as people dived out of

his way, shouted warnings. Alarms blaring. Brilliant lightbursts. The pain of the nervejam shot.

“Excuse me, officer; could you tell me what’s happening here? I have a connection to San Antonio in half an hour.” Quinn smiled Erhard’s twitchy smile at the cops. It must have been a good copy; most of them sneered. Finally, the failed acolyte had performed a useful service for God’s Brother.

“Check the station bulletin,” one of them said. “Christ’s sake.”

“I, a ha, I don’t have a set of neural nanonics. I qualify for the company loan scheme next year.”

“Okay . . . sir; what we have here is a vacuum breach. The tunnels were pressurizing, so the transit company had to activate the emergency seals. There’s a repair crew down there now. Should be fixed in a day or so. Nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you.” Quinn walked back to the taxis.

I can’t get out, he realized. God’s Brother! The bastards have snared me here. Unless I can get to the other arcologies, His work will remain incomplete. The Night may be held off. And that cannot be allowed. They are thwarting the Light Bringer Himself!

It was frightening, the way he’d been lulled into a false sense of security. He, of all people. Ever suspicious, ever mistrustful. And he’d fallen into their trap. Yet they must be frightened of *him* to go to such elaborate lengths. Whoever they were.

He stood outside a taxi for a long time, working out where he should go. In the end, there wasn’t a lot of choice. He was in Edmonton for one person. And only one person would be able to tell him who his real enemy was.

This was the part Billy-Joe didn't like. He was holding a laser pistol in one hand, there was a heavy-calibre magnetic carbine hanging on a strap round his left shoulder, fitted with a magazine of EE-tipped projectiles, a bag full of EE demolition charges on his right shoulder, codebuster and ELINT blocks on his belt, and a slim omniview band worn like a tiara on his forehead to boost his sight. It was enough hardware to start a war. Kicking the shit out of Courtney's punters was Billy-Joe's usual gig. Fast, nasty, and personal. None of this commando shit, where security systems would shoot back at him if anybody in the group screwed up.

But Quinn had wanted to stir things up in Edmonton, keep the cops busy and away from uptown. So Billy-Joe was sneaking down a lightless alley at half past four in the morning with ten other acolytes from Duffy's coven.

"This is the place," said the possessed man who was leading them, and stopped at a blank section of the alley wall.

He gave Billy-Joe the creeps, maybe even more than Quinn. One of the five possessed which Duffy had let into the bodies of snatched civilians. They all lived at the coven headquarters, treating the acolytes like shit and lording it up: the core of what Quinn promised was to be the army of the Night. Billy-Joe wasn't so sure about all that dark destiny stuff now, despite all he'd seen Quinn do. From where he was, it was just replacing one bunch of turds for another. The sect never changed; he always got dumped on no matter who was in charge.

The possessed rested his hands on the wall, tensing as if he was trying to push it over. He probably could, Billy-Joe acknowledged. And that was without energistic power. He was at least thirty centimetres taller than Billy-Joe, and must have weighed half as much again.

A door materialized in the wall, made of wooden planks

with big black iron bolts and with a sturdy circular handle. It opened silently, letting a wedge of bright light spill out into the fetid alley. There was a long hall of machinery on the other side; bulky turbine casings half-submerged in the carbon-concrete floor. Billy-Joe was looking down on them from at least sixty metres; the door had opened onto a high metal gantry running round the inside.

“In you go,” the possessed man ordered. His bass voice rumbled along the alley, agitating the rats.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to use your power,” Billy-Joe said. “The cops know how to look for it now.”

“They can only detect those fireballs we use,” the possessed said glibly. “Listen, kid; Quinn wants you to bugger up this water station, he was real keen for you to do that. That’s why I’m here with you, so I can let you guys in quietly. Now, unless you’d like to go in by the front gate, this is the way to do it.”

Three of the sensors perched along the top of the alley wall picked up the blasé assurance, relaying it to the intrigued supervisors of North America and Western Europe. The big possessed man had been leaving a trail of glitched processors ever since the little sabotage group emerged from the coven headquarters.

The ever-vigilant AI had datavised North America as soon as the first two were confirmed. A GISD covert tactical team had been dispatched to shadow them within seconds. But the trail had been so ridiculously blatant that North America had alerted Western Europe, and kept the tactical team a block away. Both of the B7 supervisors waited to see exactly where Billy-Joe and the others were heading.

“I can’t let them damage the water station,” North America said. “Edmonton’s operating margins are becoming critical as it is, thanks to Quinn’s vandalism.”

"I know," Western Europe said. "And our big friend has to know that as well. Use the snipers to target the waster scum, but don't let them shoot this new possessed. I've become very curious about his attitude."

"Haven't we all." North America issued his orders to the tactical team, who started to take up position inside the water station hall.

Internal sensors showed the sabotage group sneaking in through the new door, glancing from side to side to make sure no one was watching them, then stalking along the catwalk in an almost theatrical mime of caution. Nine of them went inside. Then the possessed man grabbed Billy-Joe's shoulder with a meaty hand and pulled him back just as he was about to slip through. White fire spat from the fingertips of his free hand, soaring into the hall. A couple of balls struck an electrical junction panel, detonating loudly.

"What the fuck?" Billy-Joe gasped. He struggled uselessly in that implacable grip as his colleagues shouted in panic. The door slammed shut with a vociferous *bang*, and vanished. "You bastard!" Billy-Joe screamed. He swung his laser pistol round, and fired at the chuckling possessed at point blank range. Nothing happened. The weapon's electronics had crashed.

Several explosions sounded inside the hall, reverberating through the solid wall. Both supervisors watched with little interest as the tactical team eliminated the saboteurs. Their attention was focused almost entirely on the small, intense drama unravelling outside in the alley.

"Traitor!" Billy-Joe yelled recklessly. "You killed them, they're dying in there."

The possessed man's grip tightened, lifting Billy-Joe off the floor, and bringing their faces close together. "Quinn's gonna chop you into rat bait," Billy-Joe hissed in defiance.

"I spared you so you can deliver a message to him."

“What? What . . . I—”

A palm slapped into Billy-Joe’s cheek. It was hard enough to make bones rattle. A red veil flashed up over Billy-Joe’s vision, like someone had shot the omniview band with a targeting laser. He groaned, tasting blood. “Are you listening to me?” the possessed purred.

“Yeah,” Billy-Joe whimpered miserably.

“You tell Quinn Dexter that the friends of Carter McBride are coming for him. We’re going to piss all over his crazy little schemes, then we’re going to make him pay for what he’s done. Understand? The friends of Carter McBride.”

“Who are you?”

“I just told you, dickhead.”

Billy-Joe was dropped to stumble among the slippery bags of trash and fleeing rats. A boot kicked his ass with terrible force, sending him flying. He hit the wall and rebounded, crying out at the pain stabbing through his buttocks.

“Now start running,” the possessed said. “I want you out of here before the cops start hunting us.”

“Keep the tactical team away from them,” Western Europe said. A shout had almost escaped from his lips, the revelation was so astounding.

“Thank you for your insight,” North America said caustically. “They’ll stay clear.”

“My God, we’ve got an ally. A bona fide ally. A possessed at war with Quinn Dexter.”

“We won’t have him for very long, I suspect.”

The big possessed man was almost chasing a terrified Billy-Joe along the alley. They emerged onto a broad patch of wasteland, cracked sheets of carbon-concrete with rows of severed metal support pillars sticking up all along the

edges. Typical of that area on the edge of dome, dominated by warehouses and shabby industrial buildings.

“What are you talking about?” Western Europe demanded.

“Smart boy, this friend of Carter McBride. He’s heading for the utility labyrinth.” North America datavised the file over.

Neural icons flowed together, producing a horrendously complex three dimensional maze for Western Europe to examine. Pipes, tunnels, subway tracks, underground cargo roads, power conduits, they all seemed to interlock under that one section of the dome. It was a nexus where utility providers and transport industries joined together to supply Edmonton with the essentials its inhabitants expected; the busy powerhouse behind the public stations, efficient suppliers, and immaculate malls. The ground for kilometres around the water station was riddled with concrete warrens and bunkers, with a thousand entrances and ten thousand junctions.

“And those are just the ones marked on the file,” North America said bitterly. “Christ knows what’s actually down there.”

The possessed man and Billy-Joe stopped beside a giant metal trapdoor whose rectangular rim was marked out by thin lines of thistles. It hinged upwards, tearing the tangle of yellow tap roots with a loud ripping sound. Crumbs of soil dribbled down into the chasm revealed underneath. The top rungs of a rusty ladder were just visible. Billy-Joe started to climb down. The possessed man followed. As soon as his head was level with the ground, the trapdoor closed over him. For a second, the rim glowed purple, as if it had been haloed by neon tubes.

“I bet he just sealed it up,” North America said.

“Get the tactical team over there fast,” Western Europe

said. "Welding the edges isn't going to stop them cutting it open, not with their firepower."

"They're on their way."

"Can the AI track him down there?"

"It's already accessed all sensors and processors in the labyrinth. But that shaft they went down was an inspection and maintenance access for an old industrial heat exchange coolant fluid pipe. There's no active electronics in there, it hasn't been used for fifty years. They could come out anywhere."

"Damn it. Flood the place with your bitek insects. Use every operative you have to physically cover the exits. We cannot let him escape."

"Please. Don't tell me how to manage my assets. I have some experience in these matters."

"I apologise," Western Europe said. "Damn, this is so frustrating. That possessed could be the real break we're looking for. He might manage to neutralize Dexter for us. We have to make contact."

The tactical team reached the metal trap door and promptly carved a circle out of it. One by one they hurried down the ladder.

"Billy-Joe would probably lead us direct to Dexter," Western Europe said. "If we could just find him when he comes out."

"Maybe," North America said. "I'm not making any promises."

Searching the labyrinth was a huge operation, though subtle enough to avoid the attention of the media. Police were diverted from their usual patrol routes to cover every entrance. Swarms of bitek spiders, bees, earwigs, and roaches were released into the maze of tunnels and passageways, their examination coordinated by North America's sub-

sentient bitek processor array. Every employee working in the labyrinth was stopped and questioned as they came on and off shift. The AI assumed direct control of every mechanoid the labyrinth companies used, reassigning them to assist the search.

North America discovered several stim dens, enough deadbeats to populate a couple of condos, caches of weapons dating back decades, and enough illegally dumped toxic waste canisters to warrant urgent official attention. There were also a large number of bodies, ranging from the freshly dumped to skeletons picked clean by the rats.

Of Billy-Joe and the friend of Carter McBride there was no sign.

“Carter McBride?” Incredulity swept all Quinn’s anger away as the name finally registered. “God’s Brother! This possessed definitely said Carter McBride? You’re sure?” Quinn could barely remember Carter’s face, just one of the little brats running loose round Aberdale. Then, as he found out later, Laton had the boy murdered, making it look as though the Ivets had done it. The villagers had systematically set out to kill Quinn and his colleagues in revenge.

“Yes,” Billy-Joe said. His limbs wouldn’t stop trembling. He expected Quinn to blast him into a lump of smoking meat when he returned to the Chatsworth. In fact, he’d been wondering if he should even bother returning to the old hotel at all. Five hours of shitting himself about the consequences as he slunk round diseased tunnels full of those fucking rats and worse. Expecting the cops to burst out of the walls any second. Getting mugged. Fucking mugged! Some bunch of deadbeats clubbing him over the head and making off with most of his gear. Not daring to shoot them in case the cops detected his weapon.

It had taken a long time before he trudged back to the

Chatsworth. In the end he did it because he believed Quinn would ultimately win. Edmonton would fall into a state of demonic anarchy, ruled over by sect possessed. And when that happened, the dark messiah would catch up with Billy-Joe. Explanations would have to be made. Punishment would follow that. So he came back. This way only one failure had to be accounted for.

“Shit,” Quinn breathed. “Him! It’s got to be him again.”

“Who?” Courtney asked.

“I don’t know. He keeps . . . pissing me off. He’s appeared a few times now, screwing with what I do. What else did he say?” he asked Billy-Joe.

“That he was going to wreck whatever you were doing.”

“Figures. Anything else?” The tone was unnervingly mild.

“You’ll pay for what you’ve done. He said it, Quinn, not me. I swear.”

“I believe you, Billy-Joe. You’ve been obedient to Our Lord. I don’t punish loyalty. So he said he’d make me pay, did he? How?”

“Just that he’d catch up with you. Didn’t say nothing else.”

Quinn’s robe changed, the fabric hardening around his limbs. “I shall enjoy that encounter.”

“What are you going to do, Quinn?” Courtney asked.

“Shut up.” He stalked over to the window and peered down through a gap in the heavy curtains. Cars and trucks flashed along the ramp five stories below, curving down to street level. Fewer vehicles than usual, and the crowds on the sidewalk were noticeably thinner. But then Edmonton had been in a mild panic for most of the day since the early morning commuters discovered the vac-trains were closed. Every Govcentral spokesperson in the arcology assured the reporters that there were no possessed loose. Nobody be-

lieved them. Things were falling apart across the domes. But not in the way Quinn intended.

I don't fucking believe this, he raged silently. Some kind of supercops know I'm here. I can't bring about the fall of true Night without the vac-trains. And now heaven's own bastard vigilante is gunning for me. God's Brother, how could everything go so *wrong*? Even Banneth is diminished.

It was another of His tests. It must be. He is showing me the true path to Armageddon lies elsewhere. That as His messiah I must not rest, not even to gorge my own serpent beast. But who the fuck is Carter's friend? If he knew Carter, then he must be someone from Lalonde, Aberdale itself. One of the men.

Although that conclusion hardly reduced the field of suspects. All the men at that sewer of a village hated him. He forced himself to be calm, to remember the few words the bastard had spoken back on Jesup asteroid when he fucked up the sacrifice ceremony.

"Remember this part?" Quinn's own mimicked face had taunted. So whoever it was had witnessed the sect ceremony before, then. And was from Aberdale.

The realization was so pleasurable it blessed Quinn's face with the kind of smile usually bought by orgasm. He turned from the window. "Call everyone," he told one of the nervous acolytes. "We're going to tool up and march against Banneth. I want every one of my followers to accompany me."

"Shit, we're going for her?" Courtney's eyes were shining with greed.

"Of course."

"You promised I could watch."

"You will." It was the only way. The cops would only

allow the vac-trains to run again if they thought they'd eliminated all the possessed in the arcology.

Quinn would bring them together, and do to them what Carter McBride's friend had done to the sabotage group. After that, time would become his most powerful weapon. Not even the supercops could keep the vac-trains closed for months when there were no further signs of possession.

"But first, I have something else which needs taking care of."

Courtney did as she was told and switched on a processor block, establishing a link with Edmonton's net. Quinn stood a couple of metres away, watching the little screen over her shoulder as the questor was launched into Govcentral's main citizens directory. It took eight minutes before the requested file expanded into the block's memory. He read down the information, and smiled victoriously. "Her!" he said, and thrust the block towards Courtney and Billy-Joe, showing them the picture he'd found. "I want her. You two go down to the vac-train station and wait. I don't give a fuck how long you have to stay there for, but the first vac-train out of here, you take it and you get over to Frankfurt. Find her, and bring her to me. Understand? I want her alive."

A call from reception informed Louise that she had a delivery to accept. The house telephone was almost identical to the chunky black instruments back on Norfolk, except it had a bell rather than a shrill chime. Now she had neural nanonics, the whole thing seemed absurdly primitive. Presumably, for people who didn't have them as their sole planetary communication system, they were endearingly quaint. Part of the Ritz's old-world elegance.

Louise looked around the lobby as soon as the lift doors opened, curious about what could have been sent to her. She was sure all the department stores had delivered. Andy

Behoo was slouching against the reception desk under the suspicious gaze of the concierge. He jerked to attention when he saw Louise, his elbow nearly knocking over a vase of white freesia. She smiled politely. "Hello, Andy."

"Uh." He stuck his hand out, holding a flek case. "The Hyperpeadia questor's arrived. I thought I'd better bring it round myself to make sure you got it okay. I know it was important to you."

The concierge was watching with considerable interest. He didn't get to see such naked adoration very often. Louise gestured towards the other end of the vaulting chamber. "Thank you," she said when Andy pressed the flek into her hand. "That's very kind."

"Part of the service." He smiled broadly, crooked teeth on show.

Louise was rather stuck for what to say after that. "How are you?"

"You know. The usual. Overworked underpaid."

"Well you do a very good job at the shop. I'm grateful for the way you looked after me."

"Ah." Andy's world was suddenly very short on oxygen. But she'd come down by herself. That must mean her fiancé hadn't arrived yet. "Um, Louise."

"Yes?"

Her soft smile was wired directly into his brain's pleasure centre, shorting out his coordination. He knew he was making a right old balls up of this. "I was wondering. If you haven't got anything planned, that is. I mean, I'll understand if you have and all that. But I thought, you know, you haven't been in London long and had a chance to see much of it. So if you like, I could take you out to dinner. This evening. Please."

"Oh. That's really sweet of you. Where?"

She hadn't said no. Andy stared, his smile numbed into

place. The most beautiful, classy, sexy girl in existence hadn't said no when he asked her for a date. "Huh?"

"Where do you want to go for dinner?"

"Um, I thought the Lake Isle. It's not far, over in Covent Garden." He'd asked Liscard for a two week advance on his pay, just in case Louise said yes; Liscard granted it on a four per cent interest rate. That way he could actually afford the Lake Isle. Probably. It had cost a lot more than he'd expected to reserve the table; and that deposit was non-refundable. But the other sellrats all said it was the right kind of place to take a girl like Louise.

"That sounds nice," Louise said. "What time?"

"Seven o'clock. If that's okay?"

"That's fine." She gave him a light kiss on his cheek. "I'll be here."

Andy walked back with her to the waiting lift. There had been something about a dress code in the datavise when he reserved the table. He now had two and a quarter hours to find a dinner jacket. A clean one, that fitted. It didn't matter. A man who'd got himself a date with Louise Kavanagh could do anything. Louise pressed the button for her floor. "You don't mind if I bring Genevieve, do you? I really can't leave her here by herself, I'm afraid."

"Uh." From nirvana to hell in half a second. "No. That'll be lovely."

"I don't want to spend an evening with *him*," Genevieve whined. "He's all peculiar. And he fancies you. It's creepy."

"Of course he fancies me," Louise said with a grin. "He wouldn't have asked me out otherwise."

"You don't fancy him, do you?" a thoroughly shocked Genevieve asked. "That would just be too hideous, Louise."

Louise opened the wardrobe and started to rifle through the dresses they'd managed to acquire on their shopping

trips. “No, I don’t fancy him. And he’s not peculiar. He’s quite harmless.”

“I don’t understand. If you don’t fancy him, why did you say yes? We can go out by ourselves. Please, Louise. London isn’t nearly as dangerous as Daddy thinks it is. I like it here. There’s so much to do. We could go to one of the West End shows. They sell tickets at reception. I checked.”

Louise sighed and sat down on the bed. She patted the mattress, and Gen made a show of being reluctant to sit beside her. “If you really, really don’t want to go out with Andy for the evening, I’ll cancel.”

“You’re not going to kiss him or anything, are you?”

“No!” Louise laughed. “Devil child. What a dreadful thing to say.”

“Then *why*?”

Louise stroked the dark hair from Gen’s face, letting the flexitives ripple it over her ears. “Because,” she said softly. “I’ve never been asked out to dinner with a boy before. Not to a fancy restaurant where I can dress to kill. I don’t suppose it’ll ever happen again. Not even Joshua asked me out. Not that he could, of course. Not when we were at Cricklade.”

“Is he the baby’s father?”

“Yes. Joshua’s the father.”

Gen brightened. “That means he’s going to be my brother-in-law.”

“Yes. I suppose it does.”

“I like Joshua. It’ll be stupendous having him living at Cricklade. He’s such jolly fun.”

“Oh yeah. He’s fun all right.” She closed her eyes, remembering the way his hands had caressed. Warm and skilful. It had been so long since she’d seen him. But he did promise . . . “So, what do I tell Andy Behoo, then? Do we go, or do we stay here all night?”

“Can I wear my party dress, too?” Gen asked.

The scene playing out above the B7 sensenviron conference room table was the one involving the failed sabotage attempt against Edmonton's water station. It wasn't a particularly good image, the station's perimeter sensors were hardly commercial-quality; but the two humanoid figures shouting at each other had enough colour and resolution to sketch in their individual features. Billy-Joe was being suspended several centimetres off the floor of the alley by the large possessed man. Their noses were almost touching. Then Billy-Joe was slapped hard, more words were exchanged. The two of them ran off down the squalid alley.

"We think we know who Carter McBride is," Western Europe told the other supervisors as the recording ended. "The AI found several references. He was the child of a colonist family on the same starship that took Quinn Dexter to Lalonde. According to the Lalonde Development Company files I accessed, the McBrides were also in the same village that Dexter was assigned to for his work-time."

"A friend of Carter McBride," Southern Africa mused. "You mean this new possessed was on Lalonde?"

"Yes," Western Europe said. "And the whole Quallheim Counties trouble was originally thought to be an Ivet rebellion over the killing of some boy. The obvious conclusion is that it was Carter. That implies the possessed who blew the sabotage group in Edmonton has to be someone killed on Lalonde at around the same time."

"So you're saying that this possessed person is out for revenge against Quinn Dexter?"

"Exactly," North America said. "We have a new ally."

"Bullshit," South Pacific said sharply. "Just because the possessed have internal disputes, that doesn't make one faction friendly towards us. Suppose this new possessed does manage to eliminate Dexter? Do you really think he'll just

conveniently vanish for us afterwards? I certainly don't. In any case, we're not exactly communicating with him, are we? You lost him and this waster boy. What kind of amateurism is that?"

"I'd like to see you do better in that goddamn labyrinth," North America snapped.

"Given the speed at which this new development broke, I think the situation was handled as adroitly as possible," Western Europe said. "However, it does introduce some new factors which I believe warrant our consideration."

"Such as?" North Pacific asked suspiciously.

"I believe it will force Dexter to abandon all his activities for a while. Unfortunately, this wretched little oik Billy-Joe couldn't be intercepted, so we must assume he returned to Dexter and passed on the message he was given. As a consequence, Dexter will know he has a possessed stalking him; and that after the sabotage mission was exposed, the authorities have confirmed there are possessed in Edmonton. If we're right about his reasons for being here—to wreck as much of the planet as possible—he'll have no choice but to ignore Banneth and either abandon or betray the remaining possessed in the arcology. Then he'll lay low until political pressure forces the North American senate to reopen the vac-train lines. Face it, we can't keep them shut for months unless there is a visible threat to rattle the public with. Time is on his side. We're already compromising ourselves with the actions we've taken to date."

"Not a chance," South Pacific blurted. She pointed a hostile finger at Western Europe. "Very smooth. But I can see what you're angling for, and I say no. No way."

"Angling for what?" Central America asked.

"He wants us to open Edmonton's vac-train routes."

"Count me out," Asian Pacific said quickly.

"Absolutely not," East Asia agreed. "We've got Dexter

bottled up in one place. Keep him there. You'll just have to improve your surveillance techniques and track him down."

"He's goddamn invisible!" North America stormed. "You saw what happened in Grand Central Station. There aren't any techniques to improve that can catch up with that kind of ability."

"If we don't re-open the vac-train routes, then we'll be condemning Edmonton and everyone in it to possession," Western Europe said. "And very probably removal from this universe. Remember what happened to Ketton on Mortonridge. That's what they'll do to it. They can't survive here."

"That outcome is certainly acceptable to me," North Pacific said. "We've discussed this through before. Better to lose one arcology if that means saving the rest."

"But we don't have to," Western Europe insisted. "Dexter becomes visible to us when he's moving. That's when he's vulnerable."

"He's not visible," South Pacific said. "We know he's moved simply by the destruction he leaves behind. I mean, shit, blowing up the Eiffel Tower! Face it, we can't catch him."

"We have to make the attempt. It's the reason we exist, the only reason. If we cannot protect Earth from a single possessed when we have the opportunity, especially because of political cowardice, then we have failed."

"I'm not buying into any of this noblesse oblige crap, I never did. That might be your heritage, but it certainly isn't mine. We formed B7 out of sheer bloody minded self interest. And you were a big part of that, don't forget. We exist to protect our own interests. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that means protecting Earth and looking out for its citizens. Well bravo us. I don't begrudge them that expenditure. But this is not one of those benevolent times. This time we safeguard ourselves against possession, and especially

against Quinn bloody Dexter. I'm sorry about the inhabitants, but Edmonton falls to this Night of his. Probably Paris and the others as well. Tough. We'll be safe, though."

"I was wrong," Western Europe said coldly. "It's not political cowardice. You're frightened of him."

"That's beneath contempt," South Pacific sneered. "I'm not going to open the vac-trains simply because you insult me."

"I know that. I was just insulting you anyway. You deserve it."

"Big deal. Don't tell me you're not making preparations to desert the sinking ship."

"All of us are, as we all know. It would be foolish not to. But for me it's a last resort. To be perfectly honest, starting afresh on some new world holds little appeal. I suspect the same applies to the rest of you."

The representations around the table remained silent.

"Exactly," Western Europe said. "We have to defeat Dexter on the ground. Our ground."

"By letting Edmonton fall, we are defeating him," Central America said. "He'll vanish from the whole planet along with the arcology."

"He won't. He's too smart to fall into that trap, and his agenda is different to the ordinary possessed. The vac-trains will be opened again no matter how determined you all are. It's only a matter of time. I say we should lure him out into a target ground of our own choosing."

"He's already exterminated four of Banneth's acolytes in her own headquarters," Military Intelligence said. "We know he keeps going back there, yet we still haven't managed to kill the little bastard. I don't see how taking him to another arcology helps."

"We can't change Banneth's environment now, that would

be too blatant. Dexter would be warned off. But we can take her to a more suitable location for a strike.”

“You just said he’ll sacrifice his vendetta against Banneth to achieve his greater objective,” Asian Pacific said. “Do try to present a consistent argument, please.”

“I can get him out of Edmonton,” Western Europe insisted. “The Kavanagh girls appearing at this stage will be an irresistible enigma to him. He’ll have to follow them to find out what’s happening. And they will be manoeuvred wherever I choose.”

“Well you needn’t try choosing my territory,” South Pacific said.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. This requires efficiency and total cooperation. Qualities apparently beyond your ability to provide.”

“Lead him into your territory then.”

“I intend to.”

“Then what are you whining about?”

“I don’t want any interference. This requires finesse. If I initiate this operation, you stay out of it. No surprise Presidential decrees wrecking my preparations. No media novas. We all know what we’re capable of if we want to screw each other over. We’ve been at it long enough in our other arenas, but this is not the time for those sort of games.”

South Pacific looked from Western Europe to North America. “You two do whatever you like. But you do it between yourselves. Your territories are now embargoed, along with Bombay and Johannesburg. Would you like to put a counter motion to the vote?”

“No,” Western Europe said. “I have what I want.”

In the end Andy had to go back to Liscard and ask for a further advance. Four week’s pay at seven and a half per cent interest! He deliberately didn’t put a calculator program in

primary mode, didn't want to know how long he was going to be shackled to Jude's Eworld to finance one date. But he could hardly ask Louise to pay for Genevieve. That would be cheap.

This time when he walked into the lobby of the Ritz, the concierge smiled pleasantly. Andy's dinner jacket had been loaned from someone he'd done repair work for a couple of months back; midnight black with a reasonably fashionable cut. The white dress shirt he'd borrowed from a fellow sell-rat, along with the scarlet bow tie. His black shoes came from a neighbour. Even the silk handkerchief in his top pocket was his mother's. In fact the only thing he wore of his own were his boxer shorts. He could risk that, somehow he was pretty sure Louise wouldn't get to see them tonight.

Seven o'clock and she wasn't there. Six minutes past and he was debating if he should ask reception to call her room. Eight minutes, and he knew he'd been stood up. Hardly surprising.

The lift doors opened. Louise was wearing a full length gown of deep-blue fabric, accessorised by a small rust-coloured waistcoat. No longer the breezy teenager who'd sauntered into Jude's Eworld needing assistance, her demeanour had gained twenty years. Andy didn't bother recording her image into a memory cell. No program could ever capture that combination of beauty and sophistication. His own recollection of this moment would stay with him throughout his entire life, he knew.

When he smiled at her, it was almost in sadness. "Thank you for coming."

Her answering expression was uncertain, sensing somehow just how important this had become for him. "I'm flattered to be asked, Andy." She prodded Genevieve.

"Thank you very much for letting me come along," the lit-

tle girl said. There was nothing in the voice that gave hint of duplicity.

“That’s okay,” Andy said. “Hey, you look great. Give us a twirl.”

Genevieve smiled in appreciation, and put her arms out to turn a complete circle. Her scarlet dress flapped about. A slim chain was fastened round her throat, its tarnished pendant bobbing against her neckline. Andy looked straight at Louise. “Another five years and the boys won’t know what hit them.”

“What do you mean?” Genevieve asked.

“He means you’re very pretty,” Louise told her.

“Oh.” Genevieve blushed, but still managed to grin up at Andy.

Having her along wasn’t so bad, after all, Andy found. In fact, she removed a lot of the tension that would probably have come from being alone with Louise for the whole evening. It wasn’t boy-girl, one on one; with him desperate to impress with every word. That, he acknowledged, would have been an utter disaster.

He paid for the short taxi ride to Covent Garden. The Lake Isle was one of a hundred restaurants in the area. It had an antique frontage enclosing a small bar, with a seating area at the back which was inexplicably large given the size of the neighbouring buildings, and too shiny to be genuinely old. As they stepped inside, Louise tapped Andy’s shoulder. “We’re going Dutch tonight. No arguments. I brought Gen along after all. It wouldn’t be fair.”

The head waiter handed them over to an assistant waiter, who showed them to a table. Glancing round, Louise thought that they were possibly overdressed. But she couldn’t turn down the chance to wear the blue dress, and Andy certainly didn’t complain. If eyes had been hands, he would’ve crushed her.

“Did you find your friend?” he asked once they were seated.

“Not yet. That detective you recommended seemed quite good, though. Thank you.”

The wine list appeared. Louise looked wistfully at the Norfolk Tears, not quite believing the price. She let Andy choose; a dry white wine from the Jovian habitats, and sparkling mineral water for Gen.

“You can have one glass of wine,” Louise said when her sister started to look mutinous.

“Yes, Louise. Thank you, Louise.”

She stared the little girl down. Gen had been threatened with dire retribution if she stepped out of line during the meal.

It was a strange evening. Louise enjoyed it for the knowledge it gave her. What it would really be like to live in a vibrant arcology, and be asked out by boys. Dressing up. The taste of exotic food. Conversation that wasn't just about crops, relatives, and local events; but of the momentous things facing the Confederation, and how the Navy was coping, and the latest news from the Mortonridge Liberation campaign. She had the freedom to say what she thought, based on her personal experience. To have an astonishing tale to tell, and be listened to.

While it was happening, she could actually forget how phony it all was. That she could never actually be that girl about town, because she was due to be a mother. That Joshua had never seen her dressed like this. How life could never be lived without a care anymore now that the human race knew the beyond awaited. And Quinn Dexter, who stalked Earth's beautiful, awesome arcologies, ready to smash them into a trillion pieces.

Over dessert she found herself looking at Andy in what was near to envy. He could still have that life; chase girls, go

out partying with his friends, attend university, earn his degree, write his programs, travel. Possibly. If the possessed didn't win.

"Are you okay?" Andy asked. He'd been in the middle of telling her about his plans to set up his own software house when he'd raised enough money. This month's dream.

"I'm sorry." She put her hand on top of his, and squeezed softly. "You probably won't believe the cliché, but this has been one of the nicest evenings of my whole life. I'm very grateful you asked me out." The look of utter longing he gave her in reply nearly made her cry for what could never be. She caught their waiter's attention. "Three glasses of Norfolk Tears, please."

Genevieve stopped attacking her dessert bowl with a spoon in an attempt to scrape out the very last morsels of chocolate orange soufflé. She smiled in hopeful astonishment.

"Yes, you, too," Louise laughed. To Andy she said: "My treat. If you've never had it, you should. It's the only way to end an evening as perfect as this."

The drinks arrived in slim crystal glasses on a silver tray. Louise sniffed gently at the bouquet. "Wessex County, probably the Clayton estate."

"Yes miss," the startled waiter said. "That's right."

The three of them raised their glasses. "To living life, not wasting it," Louise said.

They drank to that.

Louise received the datavise when they were in the taxi heading back to the Ritz; a purple telephone handset icon blinking silently at the corner of her vision (NAS2600 had thousands of symbols and sounds to choose from—but this was the most familiar). The sense of cosiness which the

evening had engendered immediately shrank away. It couldn't be anything other than business.

Her neural nanonics acknowledged the call, and Ivanov Robson's icon tag replaced the purple telephone.

"I've got some good news for you," the detective datavised. "I've found Banneth."

"Where?" Louise datavised back.

"She's currently in Edmonton."

"Thank you." That was one of the arcologies which the news had said was isolated. "Do you have an address for her?"

"Certainly." He datavised the file over. "Louise, you may have a problem selling this story of yours to her. If that happens, please call me. I might be able to help."

"Of course, and thank you again."

The doorman gave Andy a dubious stare when they got back to the hotel. Louise saw him hesitate, full of his old uncertainties, and felt an uncomfortably strong stab of sympathy. "Wait for me inside the lobby," she told Genevieve.

Her sister smiled mischievously up at Andy, winked, then skipped inside.

Thankful no giggles had been audible, Louise took a deep breath. "I have to go now, Andy."

"Can I see you again?"

The amount of hope in his voice was awful. I should never have agreed to come out tonight, she thought, he was always going to misinterpret it. Yet for all his faults, he has a good heart. "No, Andy, I'm sorry. I have this person I need to find, and I also have my fiancé. I shall be leaving Earth as soon as I can. It wouldn't be right, not for either of us. I don't want you to think this is something it isn't."

"I see." His head drooped down.

"You can kiss me goodnight, though," she said shyly.

More in fear than joy, he pressed himself against her,

touching his lips to hers. When they parted, her mouth crinkled up in compassion. "I really did enjoy tonight, Andy. Thank you."

"If it doesn't work with your fiancé, and you come back . . ." he began optimistically.

"You'll be top of my list. Promise."

He watched her disappear through the doors, standing with his arms hanging limply at his side. The finality of it was appalling. For one mad moment he wanted to rush after her.

"You'll get over it, son," the doorman said. "Plenty more of them out there."

"Not like her!" Andy shouted back.

The doorman shrugged, and smiled with infuriating smugness.

Andy turned fast, and walked away through the night-time crowds that were clogging the pavement. "I kissed her, though," he whispered. "I really did." He gave an incredulous little guffaw as the enormity of the contact finally registered. "I kissed Louise Kavanagh." Laughing broadly he set off towards Islington; he was far too broke to pay for a metro trip.

Louise waited until Genevieve was tucked up in bed before she called Banneth.

"Hello. You don't know me, but I'm Louise Kavanagh. I'm calling to warn you about someone called Quinn Dexter. Do you know him?"

"Fuck off." The contact was cancelled.

Louise datavised Banneth's address to the room's net processor again. "Look, this is important. I met Quinn Dexter on Norfolk, and he's going to . . ."

A red cross icon flashed persistently as the contact was cancelled again. The next time Louise datavised Banneth's address she got a filter program which requested her icon tag.

She loaded it in, only to be told she wasn't on the receiver's approved reception list. "Damnation!"

"What's the matter?" Genevieve peered over at her from the bed, duvet clutched round her shoulders.

"Banneth won't talk to me. I don't believe this, after everything we've been through to warn her. How . . . How *stupid*."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Call Robson, I suppose." She datavised the detective's address into the processor, wondering if the man was psychic. Not a bad thing for a private eye.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I'll come right over."

The cocktail lounge was a mistake. Louise sat at a table by herself and ordered an orange juice while she waited for Ivanov Robson to arrive. The decor was as polished as the rest of the hotel, with honey-brown wooden panels and gold-framed mirrors covering the walls. Chandeliers kept it well lit, although it seemed shady, like a woodland glade. There were enough different bottles behind the rosewood bar to make the shelving look like an art exhibition.

Whether it was the wine and Norfolk Tears finally catching up with her, or just the superb cushioning of the deep leather chair, Louise suddenly started to feel warm and drowsy. It didn't help that she had to deflect seemingly dozens of offers from young (and not-so-young) men to buy her a drink and keep her company. She was worried that she was being too sharp when she turned them down. Whatever would mother say?

One of the tailcoated waiters eventually came over, an ancient man with large white sideburns who put her in mind of Mr Butterworth. "Are you sure you want to stay here, miss?" he asked kindly. "There are quieter rooms available for residents."

"I'll take care of her," Ivanov Robson said.

"Of course, sir." The waiter bowed, and backed away.

The giant detective's gaze slid along the line of men sitting up at the bar. All of them suddenly found something else of interest.

"No offence, Louise, but if you're going to wear that kind of dress, you really shouldn't be in a bar by yourself. Not even here. It sends out some seriously strong signals." He sat down in the chair beside her, his bulk making the leather creak.

"Oh." She looked down, only just realizing she was still in the blue dress she'd worn as a treat for Andy. "I think I may have had too much to drink. I went out for a meal with a friend earlier on."

"Indeed? I didn't think you were wearing it for my benefit. Though I would have been highly flattered. You look quite gorgeous."

Louise blushed. "Um . . . thank you."

"You do know your neural nanonics have a suppression program to deal with a wee bit too much mouth-alcohol interaction, don't you?"

"No."

"Well they do. Perhaps if you were to put it into primary mode, this would be a more productive meeting."

"Right." She called up the control architecture, and hunted round for the suppresser program. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually the bar wasn't so warm. Deep breaths conjured up the kind of alertness she employed during difficult school exams.

A cut-crystal tumbler of whisky had appeared on the small table at Ivanov's side. He took a sip, watching her intently. "Better now?"

"Yes. Thank you." Though she was unhappy about the

dress; people were still giving her the kind of looks Andy had, but without his endearing reticence.

“What happened with Banneth?” Ivanov asked.

“She cut me off. I couldn’t tell her anything.”

“Humm. Not entirely surprising. I accessed several facts about her during my investigation that indicate she’s not an average citizen. The Edmonton police have amassed a rather large file on her activities. They believe she’s involved with some kind of criminal organization; supplying illegal hormones and bitek products. Any mention of her former colleagues is bound to make her prickly. And you were right about this Dexter character, he was deported; the charge was aggravated resistance of arrest. The cops suspected he was a courier for Banneth.”

“Now what do I do?”

“You have two options. One, you can forget it and stay in London. We’re safe for now. I keep my ear close to the ground, the possessed haven’t appeared here yet.”

“I can’t. Please don’t ask why, but I have to give Banneth a proper warning. I didn’t come all this way to be thwarted by the last mile.”

“I understand. In that case, I reluctantly advise you to visit Edmonton. If you meet Banneth face to face she’ll see you are neither a police entrapment agent, nor a nutcase. She’ll take your warning seriously.”

“But Edmonton has been isolated.”

“Not any more.” He took a sip of whisky, watching her closely. “The vac-trains have started running again. I guess the authorities have eliminated the possessed, or think they have.”

“Quinn Dexter will be there,” she said softly.

“I know. That’s why I advised you to stay away before. However, if you’re set on this, I’ll accompany you and pro-

vide what protection I can. If he's as bad as you say he is, it won't amount to much. But it's better than nothing."

"You'd do that?"

"You'll have to pay for it. But I include bodyguard services in my job description."

It still wasn't over. Louise fought to hold back the fear she felt at the prospect of walking into an arcology where she was sure Quinn would visit. But dear Fletcher had been so adamant, and she'd promised. "Do you know where Banneth is?"

"Yes. I have a contact in the Edmonton police who's keeping me informed. If you decide you want to do this, we can go straight to her. You deliver your message, and we walk out. I doubt that'll take more than ten minutes. We could be back here in London in less than five hours."

"I can't leave Gen. Not even for that."

"I'm sure the hotel can arrange for someone to look after her tonight."

"You don't understand. She's my responsibility; Gen and I are all that's left of our home, our family, maybe even our whole planet. I can't put her in any more danger. She's only twelve years old."

"The danger is the same here as it is in Edmonton," he said levelly.

"No it isn't. Just being in the same arcology as Banneth is dangerous. Govcentral should never have opened the vac-trains to Edmonton again."

"I can get my hands on the kind of weapon which the Liberation army is using on Mortonridge. They're proven against the possessed. That puts the odds back in our favour."

She gave him a long look, puzzled by his attitude. "It's like you want me to go."

"All I'm doing is explaining the options to you, Louise. We agreed before that I know most of the ground rules in this

arena, didn't we. This kind of mission is well inside my expertise."

Maybe it was his sheer presence, or just his intimidating size, but Louise certainly felt a lot safer with the detective around. And everything he said did sound plausible.

She propped her forehead up against a hand, surprised to find she was perspiring. "If we go, and I don't like what we find at Banneth's home, then I'm not going in to meet her."

Ivanov smiled gently. "If it's so bad that even you can see it's wrong, I won't let you go in."

Louise nodded slowly. "All right. I'll go and fetch Gen. Can you book us some tickets?"

"Sure. There's a vac-train in thirty minutes. We can be at Kings Cross by then."

She climbed to her feet, dismayed at how tired she'd become.

"Oh, and Louise? Appropriate clothing please."

The AI picked up the deluge of telltale glitches a few seconds before frantic citizens started to bombard Edmonton's police with emergency datavises about the army of the dead that had risen to march through the centre of the dome. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun shone down brightly from an admirable storm-free sky, illuminating the scene perfectly. Cars and metro buses performed emergency braking manoeuvres as their motors jammed and power cells failed. Their occupants spilled out, sprinting away from the advancing possessed and sect acolytes. Pedestrians hammered against closed doors, desperate for admission.

Quinn had spent most of the afternoon carefully positioning his minions along the four main roads leading to the sect's headquarters. Ordinary acolytes were easy: dividing them into pairs or threes, designating cafes and shops where they should wait, keeping their weapons out of sight in bags

or backpacks. The possessed were more difficult; he had to identify deserted offices or empty ground-floor apartments for them. A couple of non-possessed acolytes who'd been given basic didactic electronics courses would break in and deactivate any processors they found, leaving it safe for the possessed to wait inside. It had taken two hours to get everyone into position. None of them complained, at least not to his face. They all accepted that it was part of some grand strategy to bring about his Night. The only thing standing in their way, he told them, was the sect headquarters and the traitors inside.

With every possessed in Edmonton assembled (except one, Quinn thought glumly), Quinn had given the order to advance. If the supercops were as good as he suspected, then the response would be swift and effective. None of the possessed, and few acolytes, would survive.

Quinn walked the first few paces with his small doomed army as they flooded out into the streets, pulling out their weapons and taking on a variety of gruesome appearances. Once everyone was committed, he discreetly slipped away into the ghost realm.

Those civilians lucky enough to be behind the possessed when they emerged slowed their retreat and glanced nervously over their shoulders. The more commercially minded among them contacted local media offices and began to relay senseises. Anyone receiving the show was presented with an astonishing display of defiance; the deliberate flaunting of a prowess which even the possessed could never truly own. A magnificent final charade, blowing their cover in a single grand *fuck you* gesture. Entire offices of editorial staff froze in slack-jawed amazement at what they were witnessing.

The marchers closed swiftly on the unexceptional fifty-storey skyscraper. There were over a hundred in each of the groups, spearheaded by the possessed. Elaborate, archaic

warrior costumes sparked and flashed, ripe with energistic power. Whenever they passed the pillars which supported elevated roads, the air would seethe with wrestling coils of miniature lightning bolts, grounding out through the metal amid jittering spumes of molten droplets. Following close behind their silent deadly leaders, the bulk of each group was made up by the non-possessed acolytes; striding along blithely, weighed down by the largest pieces of weapons hardware the covens had stashed away in their secret armouries.

None of them paid any attention to the whimpering civilians scampering out of their way, they were focused on the skyscraper alone. Vehicles littering the street ahead of them flared electric-blue before bursting apart into a sleet of black granules. The army of the damned walked through the smouldering wreckage. Again, it was all panache. Showtime.

To the majority of Edmonton's citizens, the skyscraper that was the centre of their wrath was just a modest, ordinary building divided into standard commercial and residential sections. The police knew different, as did most of the locals. Rumours of the sect presence inside began to filter back to the media anchors. But by then professional rover reporters were on the scene, watching the police seal off the area and armed squads take up position.

Sixty per cent of Earth's population was now on-line, waiting for the shoot out. The greatest audience in history.

Inside the sect headquarters, the senior acolytes broke open the armoury and began handing out heavy-calibre chemical projectile rifles and machine guns to the acolytes. There was little panic; the beleaguered sect members were almost glad they had a tangible enemy at last. Banneth herself supervised setting up their defences. First she established a ring of snipers peeking through the skyscraper's windows,

then consolidated their heavier firepower around the convoluted barriers inside.

She hurried round all of them, issuing orders and offering encouragement—never threats, not now. Quinn and the possessed had become the new fear-figures. It was interesting that they had now returned to her. After all Quinn had done to fill them with doubt and mistrust, the random tortures and deaths he had silently enacted throughout the headquarters had come to nothing in the end. They still believed that she was the stronger of the two.

You realize this is probably a diversion, don't you? she asked. **He's most likely planning to snatch me or kill me in the battle.**

Possibly, Western Europe replied equitably. **Personally, I believe this pathetic conflict he's staging is purely a case of collateral slaughter while he achieves his real goal: escaping from our grasp.**

Thanks. That makes me feel a lot better.

Frightened? You?

Wouldn't you be?

If I was physically in your position, no doubt I would, yes. But I'm not, am I?

Don't give me that natural superiority crap.

I apologise.

Very magnanimous. Does that mean you've got the SD platforms zeroed in on me?

I'm afraid so, yes. Again, I doubt if we'll have to use them. Quinn won't reveal himself, not today.

Banneth took a look along the familiar darkened corridors of the headquarters as she made her way back to her own rooms. On her orders, they were lit with candles and crude chemical batteries powering low-voltage halogen bulbs—technology the possessed would be unable to glitch without considerable effort. Not that it particularly mattered, she

thought, we're not protecting anything we can salvage. After this, the headquarters would be no more. All her acolytes were doing was fighting a delaying action until the police and B7 eliminated Quinn's ersatz invasion. But then, the sect was nothing more than a B7 creation anyway. A convenient umbrella for them and her.

She walked through the temple giving it a nostalgic look. The first rocket hit the skyscraper; a light EE tipped anti-armour missile. Duffy fired it; Quinn had given him the honour of opening the fighting as a reward for unswerving loyalty to the cause of Night. The explosion sent shockwaves yammering through the skyscraper's structure, blowing out a huge crater on the northern corner and shattering hundreds of surrounding windows. Huge lumps of rubble cascaded down onto the street to smash apart in front of the possessed. The surviving snipers inside picked themselves up and opened fire.

The vac-train carriage had seating for a hundred. Louise, Genevieve, and Ivanov Robson were the only people using it. In fact, Louise had only seen a dozen or so people milling about on the platform at King's Cross when they got on. She wasn't sure if they were passengers or station staff.

Despite her growing uncertainty, and Gen's sulky resentment, she'd followed the private detective in through the airlock door. Even now there was something about him that reassured her. Even beyond physical size, he had a self-confidence greater than Joshua. Which was saying a lot. She settled back with dreamy thoughts of her fiancé filling her mind. Although the seats were worn, they were comfortable; and her alcohol suppresser program was off. Joshua had such a warm smile, she remembered. It would be so nice to have it shine on her again.

"I love you, and I'm coming back for you." His words.

Spoken to her when they were naked and alone, their bodies clinging together. A promise that could be nothing but totally honest.

I *will* find him again, despite all this horrid mess.

Her news hound program alerted her to the situation developing in Edmonton. She went through Time Universe to access a sensewise of the fight. And there she was, crouched behind one of the abandoned buses, peering cautiously round the front at the crazy army marching along the street. Dazzling white fireballs were pumping up from a dozen upstretched hands, smacking into the skyscraper. Flames were roaring out of windows and missile craters all the way up the first eight or nine stories. Heavy-calibre guns were firing down in retaliation, pummelling the carbon-concrete sidewalk with small intense topaz explosions. Several bodies were scattered along the street, clothes still smouldering from beam weapon scorches.

Figures began to race past the bus. Police in dark-grey armour suits, hauling even larger automatic guns than those in use up ahead. Their movements were arachnid, scuttling from cover to cover. They began to fire; the discharge from their weapons a continuous howl ripping into the delicate tissue of her inner ear. She started, hands halfway to her ears before the reporter's audio limiter program cut in. Then she was ducking down as multiple explosions ploughed up the street. White fireballs flew directly overhead.

Louise reduced the sensewise to monitor function, bundling it away until it became a vivid real-time memory. She looked at Ivanov. "Now what?" she asked. "They won't let this train into Edmonton now, will they? Surely?"

"They ought to. Access the overview commentary. The possessed are concentrated in one area, and the police have them contained. They've got enough firepower concentrated on them to exterminate ten times as many as there are on the

ground. Besides, if we were being diverted, the train company would have told us immediately.”

Louise accessed the carriage’s processor, and requested a schedule update. It reported that they were going to arrive in Edmonton in forty-one minutes. “That doesn’t make any sense. The authorities were paranoid about outbreaks before.”

“It’s politics. Edmonton is trying to prove they don’t have a problem with the possessed; that they’re on top of the situation.”

“But—”

“I know. They should have waited until after this fight is over before any grand announcements. Being premature with the good news is hardly new for Govcentral. As soon as the Edmonton isolation was announced, a lot of highly connected lobbyists will have been called in to pressure the president’s office and sympathetic senators to have the vac-train lines re-opened. If Edmonton is taken out of the global economic loop, all the companies in the arcology will start to fall behind their competitors; and an entire arcology is a huge market for outside companies to sell into; that’s a factor, too.”

“They’re endangering people because of money?” Louise asked in astonishment. “That’s awful.”

“Welcome to Earth.”

“Don’t they understand what’ll happen if the possessed get into other arcologies?”

“Of course they do. Now the possessed have been exposed in Edmonton, there’ll be an equal amount of pressure applied to close the vac-trains down again. Action and reaction, Louise.”

“You mean we might not get out after we arrive?”

“We will. There’ll be enough time. I promised you: back home again in five hours. Remember?”

She glanced over at Gen, who was sleeping, curled up in the seat, her small face scowling even as she dreamed. "I remember." Not that there was much she could do about her worries now. The train was going to stop in the arcology. She hadn't felt this out of control since that first mad horse ride away from Cricklade the day Quinn Dexter appeared.

That the fight around the skyscraper would be uneven was never in doubt. Even so, the effectiveness of the police tactical team was impressive. Heavy-calibre portable weapons deployed by the front line were backed up by X-ray lasers from the rear support groups, far enough back to resist glitching by the possessed. As a consequence, very few possessed actually made it in to the skyscraper; and judging by the amount of gunfire coming from inside, the sect members weren't exactly a pushover. That was where the commercial senseise coverage ended. B7 immediately switched to the surviving sensors in the headquarters, watching nervous, indistinct figures creeping along dark smoke-filled corridors. One of them walked over a grid with twenty thousand volts running through it. The body ignited into a pillar of flame hot enough to melt the concrete corridor around it.

"Well, that's a neat trick," Northern Europe said. "What kind of energy level is that, do you think?"

"Could be total chemical conversion," Central America suggested. "It can't be a direct mass energy reaction. That would eliminate the entire arcology."

"Hardly relevant," South Pacific said.

"On the contrary," Central America said. "The more we learn of their ability, the closer we come to defeating them."

"You can hardly classify their death throes as part of their ability."

"All information is useful," Western Europe said, deliberately bleeding a note of snobbery in to his representation's

voice. "We wouldn't have had this kind of success without it."

"Success?" South Pacific pointed at the image above the conference table. The possessed had burnt out, leaving a human sculpture of ash standing amid the drizzle of molten carbon-concrete. It pitched over, disintegrating into a slush of grey flakes. "That's a success; Edmonton under siege from the possessed? May we please be preserved from your failures."

"By studying the data on Dexter we determined his likely course of action. I told you he'd betray the remaining possessed to us. This merely proves I was right all along."

"And Edmonton is not under siege," North America said. "The police tactical teams have the possessed surrounded."

"Wrong," South Pacific said. "That friend of Carter McBride won't be among this group. You haven't got him surrounded."

"He is not a threat to anyone other than Dexter," Western Europe said.

"Only in your book. As far as I'm concerned, nothing has changed. One invisible possessed and one elusive possessed are running round loose. Your territories remain embargoed."

"Thank heavens for that. We all know what would happen to Edmonton if you had any say in events over here."

"At least with my way only one arcology suffers. I can't believe you're willing to expose another to Dexter."

"You can't win at this level without taking risks. And I do intend to win. Dexter is the epitome of all we have fought against these last five hundred years. He is the yobbish anarchy that B7 has successfully banished from this world. I'll not have him return. The investment in blood and money it has cost us must be honoured."

"You sound like a third-rate Shakespearean king the night before battle. Damn, and you accuse me of arrogance."

Banneth walked back into her sanctum as the police tactical team searched through the rest of the sect headquarters for any possessed that might have survived the assault. She knew none had, but it wasn't her place to interfere. The North American supervisor had given the police commissioner instructions that she was to be left alone, along with her suite of rooms. Senior officers had taken up position outside the doors to enforce the order in case any of the tactical team turned bolshie. People hyped high on adrenaline after a fight were liable to have a healthy disregard for authority, especially where the possessed were concerned.

The rest of the sect, those that had survived, weren't so fortunate. Police officers, while sympathetic to their erstwhile allies, were disarming and cuffing them. The temple was proving a popular viewing point for awed, angry officers. Quinn's last two victims were still in there on show. And when the forensic crew got to work they'd find an awful lot of DNA samples around the altar and in the drains. It was going to be a busy night down at Edmonton's justice hall.

The sanctum was a wreck. A couple of lights had survived when the ceiling cracked open, hanging on their cables, spinning slowly round and round. Clear fluid from the life support canisters sloshed over Banneth's shoes, several centimetres deep and tinged with blood. Most of the canisters had been smashed, spilling their bizarre occupants on to the floor. Their tubules had invariably torn out, depriving them of the vital chemicals she was feeding into them, leaving the poor creatures to flop their limbs (those that had any) feebly until death overcame them. The organs and appendages that were simply being suspended until she found a use for them were ruined.

Banneth picked up the oil painting of Mary Shelley and tipped the broken glass out of its frame. Life-support fluid

had discoloured the canvas quite badly. She stared at the author's drawn face for a moment, then sighed and cast the painting aside. "How poetic," she said quietly. Her suspicions about the sanctum were strengthening. There was an awful lot of damage considering it hadn't taken a direct hit. If the structural quakes and blastwaves from the explosions had been this powerful they ought to have brought down the entire skyscraper.

Louise Kavanagh has arrived, Western Europe said. **Please stick to the scenario we worked out.**

Sure. She knew her rebelliousness was coming through. Not that it mattered. She certainly couldn't evade the supervisors. That was the bargain she'd shaken on all those years ago. Not that she'd ever suspected it would come to this: a suicide bait. But when you sign in blood, you must expect the devil to write the small print in his favour.

Go down to one of the lower floors, Western Europe said. **I don't want Louise to see your little dungeon of horrors. It's important she isn't upset by you.**

Banneth hesitated. Her legs quivered, a pointed reminder of what this particular affinity bond was capable of. If she refused, they would simply take her over and puppet her body.

Okay, God's Brother I'm doing it. Just don't expect me to smile and say thanks. She turned slowly, gazing carefully round the ruins. One last nostalgic look. A cool breeze drifted against her cheek, causing the dangling lights to sway as they spun. The door was shut.

Is something the matter? North America asked.

No, she said, then relented. They could pick up on her emotional state easily enough through affinity. **Possibly. I think he might be in here with me right now. I have the feeling I'm being watched. It's the spookiest thing.** She projected a starched ironic smile.

Call out, Western Europe said excitedly. **Challenge him.**

Provoke him. Something. See if you can get him to materialize. We only need a second.

“Quinn? Is that you, my little darling? Are you here at last?” Banneth put out a hand and stroked the central table, fingers lingering on the straps. “Have you come home to me? You’re not afraid are you, my darling? I made you better than that. Remember that beautiful pain that birthed you. I cleansed you of fear amid that pain so you could serve God’s Brother properly. And you have, haven’t you. How you’ve grown since I banished you. The very messiah of darkness, now. That’s what you claim, isn’t it. But can you do what you claim, or have you become flawed? I can correct that, Quinn, I can make you whole again. Submit to me. Return to me, and I’ll love you in that very special way. Our way. Just like before.” She held up the strap invitingly.

Quinn trembled in fury. He wanted to take her there and then. Every word she spoke, each mocking syllable teased out the memories of what she’d done to him. This room had been the place where the real violations had been performed. His screaming and her silken laughter mingling long into the nights. The urge to reverse those acts made his serpent beast howl in torment as he denied himself. *She* should be the one bound by those straps. He should be the one standing over the table.

His hands reached out to her, ready to caress and crush.

An annoyed frown creased her face, verging on petulance. “It’s no good,” she muttered. “The little prick can’t hear me.”

Quinn leaned closer, puzzled. It was as though she was talking to someone.

Banneth came to a decision, and strode out of the door, anger evident in every tense muscle and furious grimace. Her mind-tone was sullen and extremely fearful. It was similar to those Quinn had perceived in his sacrificial victims. He followed her as she stomped through the headquarters. Two police officers fell in beside her, escorting her down the stairs.

More proof of the treachery she had indulged in at the expense of God's Brother. As if he needed more.

They came to an office below the headquarters edifice itself. The place belonged to an alcohol wholesaler, one of the sect's commercial fronts. And Quinn received the biggest shock of all since he'd returned to Earth. The Kavanagh sisters were there, waiting for Banneth.

Louise was amazed to find they'd arrived at the skyscraper featured on the news sensewise. It did make her wonder about Ivanov Robson, though. For a start, there was something very odd about the way he was always right about things. And then there was this "contact" he had inside the Edmonton police division. She could believe that he'd worked with police departments before, and no doubt a few favours were owed on both sides. But to pass so effortlessly through the cordon of armed police around the skyscraper was hard to credit.

Nonetheless, the major in charge of the tactical squad had been waiting to greet them when their taxi pulled up fifty metres short from the rear of the buzzing crowd. Now it was safe, thousands of Edmonton's ordinary citizens had flocked in to soak up whatever was left of the drama. Rover reporters and several district councillors formed the inner wall, pressing against the barriers, shouting and datavising the line of implacable police for snatches of information, or pleading to be allowed just that fraction closer than their rivals.

Six tactical team officers fell in around Louise's party and cleared their way through the tightly packed crowd. Inside the barriers, the fire department was doing most of the work. Hoses snaked away from large tenders, trailing down from mechanoids that were scampering across the vertical walls of the skyscraper, extinguishing the last of the fires. The police were concerned only in bundling the surviving combatants

from both sides into secure trucks so they could be driven away to the justice hall. One of them, a girl younger than Louise, was sobbing hysterically, kicking and bucking violently as four officers carried her to a waiting truck. She screamed: "The messiah lives! His Night will claim you all!" as they flung her unceremoniously inside.

Just as they were going in through the main entrance, three fully grown pigs rampaged out, squealing and grunting as they raced down the broken stairs towards the street. Sweating, angry officers chased after them. Louise simply stood aside and let them go past; it was one of today's milder insanities.

The major led them inside. Fire and explosions had wrecked the lobby. Water and foam from the fire mechanoids was pooling underfoot. Lighting came from temporary rigs set up at strategic corners. None of the lifts or escalators were working. They went up four flights of stairs before being shown into some kind of office that had escaped any serious damage. Despite the fires, Louise felt chilly. The major left them, and a strange-looking woman walked in.

At first Louise wasn't entirely sure she was a woman. Her jaw was strong enough to be male, although her feminine figure countered the argument. And the way she walked, straightforward easy strides, that was masculine, too. The oddest feature was her eyes with their pink irises. When she looked at Louise, there was no hint of what she was thinking.

"I don't know who you people are," Banneth said. "But you must have a lot of clout to get in here right now." She stared at Genevieve. For the first time her face betrayed an emotion. "Very strange," she muttered in puzzlement.

"I have contacts," Ivanov said modestly.

"I'm sure you do."

"My name is Louise Kavanagh. I called you earlier, about Quinn Dexter. Do you remember?"

“Yes. I remember.”

“I think he may have done all this; or at least sent people to do it. He told me he was coming back to Earth to get you. I did try and warn you.”

Banneth’s gaze remained on Genevieve, who was fingering her pendant. “So you did. My mistake for not listening. Although as you can imagine, I have good reason to be sceptical. Quinn was deported. I didn’t expect to see him again.”

“He really hated you. What did you do to him?”

“We had several disagreements. As you might have guessed, my occupation is outside the mainstream. I earn a living by supplying certain items to people, which cannot be bought through normal commercial channels. It’s an activity which has brought me into conflict with the police on several occasions. Dear Quinn was one of my couriers. And he rather stupidly got caught. That was the reason he was deported, in fact. I expect he blames me for his sentence. I didn’t contribute to his defence; at the time I was using my contacts to protect myself. His incompetence landed me in a very difficult legal situation. So you see, the antipathy is mutual.”

“I’m sure it is,” Louise said. “But he’s a possessed now, one of the strongest. That makes him very dangerous, especially to you.”

Banneth gestured round. “I’m beginning to appreciate that. Though I’m curious, why are you, someone I’ve never met before, interested in saving me? I guarantee, I really am someone a nice girl like you wouldn’t want to meet.”

Louise was beginning to ask herself the same thing. Banneth was nothing like the image in her mind; she’d been expecting a slightly older version of herself: innocent and bewildered. Not this cold, criminal woman, whose every gesture and syllable was rich with disdain. “He was obsessed with you, and people need to be warned what he’s capable of.

I'm frightened that once he's murdered you, he'll do to Earth what he did to Norfolk. That was my home planet, you see."

"How very noble and unselfish of you, Louise. Behaviour no one on this planet is remotely accustomed to. Not in this day and age." She arched an eyebrow at Ivanov. "So what do you suggest I do now?"

"I'm not sure," Louise said. "I just had to deliver the warning, I promised myself that. I didn't really think about afterwards. Can you convince the police to give you a twenty-four hour guard?"

"I expect that if I told them a possessed was hunting me, they'd probably show Quinn where I was, and laugh a lot while they were doing it. I've used up every contact and legal resource I had merely to avoid getting arrested for the crime of being in the same building he attacked."

"Then you'll have to leave."

"I can see this means a lot to you. But the police have killed every possessed involved in the attack. I wouldn't worry. Quinn Dexter's soul is back where it belongs, suffering badly in the beyond."

"You don't know that," Louise insisted. "If any of them survived, it'll be him. At least leave here until the police confirm there are no more possessed left in Edmonton. If they didn't get him, he'll come after you again. I know he will. He told me. Killing you is a filthy obsession with him."

Banneth nodded. Reluctantly, Louise considered, as if there was something demeaning in taking advice from her. What horrible snobbery. To think of everything I risked in coming to her aid, not to mention the money it's cost. Not even Fletcher would have bothered if he'd known how awful she is.

"I suppose there's no harm in playing it safe," Banneth said. "Unfortunately, Quinn knows all my associates and safe houses here in the arcology." She paused. "The vac-trains are

open to half of Europe and most of North America; though the rest of the world seems more sceptical about Edmonton's assurances. Good for them."

"We're going back to London this evening," Ivanov Robson said. "Do you know anyone there you can stay with?"

"Like you, I have contacts."

"Okay, I can arrange for a police tactical team to escort us back to the station. But once we get to London, you're on your own."

Banneth gave an indifferent shrug.

Quinn watched the entire scene play out, resisting the impulse to interfere at Banneth's petty lies. He was captivated, not just by what was said, but the emotional content behind the words. Louise backed every word she spoke with intense fervour. Banneth was her usual serene, egotistical self, a state she shared with the husky private detective (which made Quinn highly suspicious of him). It was pure theatre. It had to be. Yet it must be a paradox. Louise Kavanagh had no script, no coaching; she believed what she was saying, that she had some higher mission to save Banneth from him. That couldn't be forged. The entire thing must have been orchestrated by the supercops.

For whose benefit? That was the really unnerving part.

There was no possible way Louise could have found Banneth unless the High Magus wanted her to. The girl must have been steered here by the supercops for one reason, to get Banneth out of Edmonton. Yet Banneth was part of the supercop set-up, she didn't need Louise to tell her where to go. It didn't make any sense.

One thing he couldn't ignore, the vac-trains were running again. Though that might be the trap, the reason for this charade. To snare him on the ocean bed halfway between conti-

nents; even he couldn't get out of that. But how would they know if he was on board a specific train?

He followed the group out of the office and down the stairs, not really paying much attention. His mind was savaging the possibilities. If they could detect me when I'm in this realm, they would have done everything they could to destroy me. That means they can't. So this must be a ploy to lure me out. The supercops know I want Banneth, so they're using her as bait. The vac-train isn't the trap; wherever she goes in London is their kill arena. And that's where they'll be: this planet's strongest, most subtle line of defence against His Night.

Quinn smiled lustily and increased the speed of his gliding walk through the ghost realm, determined not to let Louise and her party out of his sight. After so many false starts, the true Armageddon was beginning.

15

It was a foul job, but better than scouting round the starscrapers. Tolton and Dariat were driving a truck slowly over Valisk's grass plains in search of servitor bodies. Food was becoming a critical commodity within the enfeebled habitat. During Kiera's reign the possessed had simply helped themselves to existing supplies with little thought devoted to replenishing them. Then after plunging into the dark continuum, the survivors had turned to butchering the wild terrestrial animals that had fallen into unconsciousness. Large cooking pits had been dug outside the northern end-cap caverns, where the Starbridge tribes took charge of trussing the beasts on long poles to be roasted over the flames as if for a medieval banquet. It was a predictably monotonous diet of goat, sheep, and rabbits; but nourishing enough. None of the other lethargic survivors complained.

Now that operation was being accelerated. The animals were gradually slipping from their strange comas into death. Their carcasses had to be recovered and cooked before they started to decay. If it was hung in the coolest caverns, properly cured meat could be stored for several weeks and still remain edible. Building up a stockpile of food was also a

logical precaution to be undertaken in times of war. Rubra's regiment of descendants all knew about the visitor, and had been surreptitiously supplementing their armaments ever since. The remaining survivors hadn't been told.

Tolton wondered if that was why he and Dariat had been given this particular task, so he wouldn't have much contact with the refugees occupying the caverns.

"Why should the personality distrust you?" Dariat asked as the street poet drove them along the side of a stream in one of the shallow valleys meandering through the southern grasslands. "You're one of the real survivors of the possessed occupation. You've proved yourself as an asset as far as it's concerned."

"Because of what I am; you know I'm on the side of the underclass, that's my nature. I might warn them."

"Do you think warning them is helping them? They're in no fit state to put up any resistance if that thing comes back. You know damn well my illustrious relatives are the only ones who stand a chance of stopping it. Go ahead and tell the sick there's some kind of homicidal ice dragon stalking us, see how much you improve their morale. I don't want to preach homilies, but class distinction has been suspended for the duration. We're divided into effectives and dependants, now. That's all."

"All right, damn it. But you can't keep them in ignorance forever."

"They won't be. If that thing ever gets inside, everyone's going to know about it."

Tolton gripped the top of the steering wheel with both hands, and slowed so he could watch Dariat's answer. "You think it will come back?"

"The opinion is a resounding yes. It wanted something the first time, and all we did was make it mad at us. Even assuming it has the wackiest psychology possible, it'll come back. The only questions are: when? And: will it be alone?"

“Bloody hell.” Tolton twisted the throttle again, and sent the truck splashing through a shallow section of the stream. “What about the signalling project? Can we call the Confederation yet?”

“No. There’s still a team working on it, but most of my relatives are doing what they can to beef up the habitat defences.”

“We still have some?”

“Not many,” Dariat admitted.

Tolton saw a suspicious avocado-green lump amid the wispy tips of pink xenoc grass, and slowed the truck to a halt. The body of a large servitor lizard was lying curled up on the ground. A tegu, geneered for agronomy maintenance, it measured one and a half metres from nose to tail, with long rake-like fingers on its hands. There were hundreds of them in Valisk, patrolling the streams where they were employed to clear jams of dead grass and twigs that built up along rocky snags.

Dariat stood and watched as his friend bent over and gingerly touched the creature’s flanks.

“I can’t make out if it’s alive or not,” Tolton complained.

“It’s dead,” Dariat told him. “There is no life energy left in the body.”

“You can tell that?”

“Yeah. It’s like a little internal glow; all living things have it.”

“Hell. You can see that?”

“It’s similar to seeing, yes. I guess my brain just interprets it as light.”

“You haven’t got a brain. You’re just a ghost. A whole bunch of thoughts strung together.”

“There’s more to me than that, if you don’t mind. I’m a naked soul.”

“Okay. There’s no need to get touchy about it.” Tolton grinned. “Touchy. Get it? A ghost, touchy.”

“I hope your poetry is better than your humour. After all, you’re the one that’s got to pick it up.” His translucent foot nudged the dead lizard.

Tolton’s grin crumpled. “Bugger.” He went round to the back of the truck, and lowered the tailgate. There were already three dead servitor chimps lying on the metal floor. “I didn’t mind the goats so much, but this is like cannibalism,” he grumbled.

“Monkeys were a delicacy in several pre-industrial societies back on Earth.”

“No wonder they all died out, then; their kids ran off to the city and lived happily ever after on Chinese takeaway.” He put his hands under the lizard’s body, disgruntled by the dry-slippery feel of the scales and the way they shifted so easily over protuberant bones. Muttering about the truck’s lack of a winch, he started to drag the body over to the tailgate. The lizard was quite a weight, needing several stages to haul it up the steep ramp. Tolton was flushed by the time he finally skewed it over the chimps. He jumped down and shoved the tailgate back up, shoving the latches home.

“Good job,” Dariat said.

“Just as long as I don’t have to butcher them, I don’t care.”

“We should get back. That’s a big load already.”

Tolton grunted in agreement. The trucks had been stripped down to the minimum number of systems; there were no governing processors, no power steering, no collision alert radar, nor impact-triggered seat webs. A power cell was wired directly to the wheel hub motors, with the throttle as the only control. Such an arrangement gave the vehicles a modicum of reliability, though even that was far from a hundred per cent. Switching them on was always a lottery. And if they had too much weight in the back they wouldn’t work at all.

Dariat, the personality called. The visitor is back, and it's not alone.

Oh Thoale. How many?

A couple of dozen, I think. Maybe more.

Once again, Dariat knew how much mental effort it took for the personality to focus on the approaching specks. Even then, he wasn't sure it was observing all of them. As before, pale streaks of turquoise and burgundy were fluxing within the strands of the dusky nebula outside. A scattering of wan grey dots swished between the ragged strands, curving sharply at each turn, but always coming closer. Their movements were confusing, but even so the personality should have been able to track them.

Dariat looked through the truck's grimed windscreen. The Northern endcap was thirty kilometres away, suddenly a huge distance across the rolling grasslands and scrub desert. It would take them at least forty minutes to get there, assuming the cloying blades of pink grass didn't get any thicker before they reached one of the rough tracks. And that was a long time to be alone in this continuum. Not that the caverns would offer much sanctuary.

It was ironic, Dariat thought: he who had managed to isolate himself for thirty years, now wanted to surround himself with people. He could never forget that debilitating cold the visitor had inflicted on him last time. His soul was unprotected in this realm. If he was going to truly die, he preferred to do it in the company of his own kind. He turned to Tolton, making sure his lips were exaggerating his words. "Does this thing go any faster?"

The street poet gave him a panicked glance. "Why?"

"Because now would be a good time to find out."

"The bastard's come back?"

"More than one."

Tolton twisted the throttle urgently, nudging the speed up to over forty kilometres an hour. The wheel hub motors

started making erratic buzzing sounds—normally they were completely silent. Dariat used affinity to watch the visitors' approach. The personality had activated the seven lasers and two masers emplaced around the rim of the counter-rotating spaceport. As before, there was no radar return from any of the visitors.

The first ones began their final dash from the shifting fringe of the nebula through the clear space to the habitat's shell. They were condensing the darkness around themselves now, twirling sharp horns of light in kaleidoscopic arcs. Optical sensors locked on, aligning the energy weapons on one of the giveaway distortion swirls. Nine intense energy beams pinioned the visitor. Its sole response was to spin faster, wriggling wildly along its trajectory as it plummeted in towards the shell. The radial spires of distorted luminescence flared brighter and higher. Then it was falling behind the tips of the starscrapers, beyond the weapons' elevation. They slid back to find another target. It, too, was unaffected by the energy strike.

The personality stopped firing. Anxiety spread like a mental virus among Rubra's descendants as they waited to see what the visitors would do next. The personal weapons they'd prepared were distributed and primed. Not that anyone held out much hope. If the spaceport lasers couldn't harm them, then rifles (however large the calibre) were going to be completely useless. Not that anybody refused them. Having a hefty chunk of destructive hardware you could grip in your hands was always a nice psychological boost.

The Orgathé led a swarm of its eager kith towards the giant living object, soaking up the blaze of heat which it threw away so casually. They had come to pre-empt the absorption that was the fate of all beings in the dark continuum, gorging on as much of its life-energy as they could before it reached the mélange. Once that happened, so many of the

entities entombed within would be empowered to resurrection and individuality that the whole *mélange* would be loosened, possibly even breaking apart for a short while. But there would never be enough energy to return them all to the place from which they'd fallen. That privilege could only be granted to those who empowered themselves before the dispersal.

That was why it had called upon the others, the strongest of their kind, able to fly far and long from the *mélange*. Together they might successfully storm the object where one had failed. To be rewarded with enough energy to elevate themselves out of the dark continuum was worth any risk.

The *Orgathé* swooped closer. Huge waves of thought rippled through the layer of life energy below the object's surface, focusing on it. Pillars of energy lashed out from the dead section at the far end; a kind unusable by the *Orgathé*. It closed its boundary against the flow, letting the power splash apart harmlessly. The pillars of energy vanished when it dove down close to the surface. Its kith were following it down, hungered by the abundant energy, crying victoriously among themselves.

Ahead now were the hollow spindles protruding from the object's midsection. The *Orgathé* increased its speed, hardening itself with a reckless expenditure of energy. It remembered the sheet of transparent matter it had landed on before. Easy to identify amid the thousands of other identical sheets inlaid along the length of the spindle, a dead section, drained of life-energy and heat. This time, the *Orgathé* didn't slow down.

The window of Horner's bar detonated inwards with a terrifyingly violent explosion. Craggy shards of crystal blasted into the bar, scything through the furniture. Frozen, ice-cloaked tables and chairs disintegrated into billowing clouds of glossy silvery fragments. Then the entire maelstrom reversed its flow, and howled out through the shattered win-

dow. The badly shredded main door into the vestibule buckled and collapsed, allowing the air to rush through.

Emergency pressure locks all across the twenty-fifth storey started to slide shut. They were mechanical systems, self-powered, activated by simple failsafe pressure sensors. The majority of them were unaffected by the malaise inflicted by the dark continuum. Only a minority of the starscraper's muscle membranes reacted to the potentially lethal development.

The personality concentrated hard, ensuring that the muscle membranes around the Djerba's lobby were shut, then tried to reach the floors immediately below that. Its thought routines encountered a tide of exhaustion that grew worse the further it inserted itself into the starscraper. Only the vaguest images from the twenty-fifth floor were available.

The Orgathé gripped the rim of the bar's window with several appendages, waiting until the gale subsided. Bottles detonated in mid flight as they were swept across the room, their exotic liquor solidifying in weird bulbous shapes the instant they broke free of the glass. Anything which struck the Orgathé simply bounced off, gyrating away into the void outside. As soon as the roar of air began to ebb, it moved into the starscraper. The wall around the empty door simply burst apart as it went through.

Still there was no clear image of it as it moved along the vestibule; all the sensitive cells could discern before they died was a tumour of darker shadow within the lightless chamber. And now the habitat personality was having to divert its attention to the rest of the Orgathé swarm that were slamming their way through other starscraper windows. Emergency pressure locks and muscle membranes were closing throughout the deserted structures, desperately trying to contain the atmospheric breaches.

The Orgathé continued to surge forward into the starscraper, hunting round for concentrations of life-energy

to consume. It was spread thinly here, nothing like as rich as the layer beneath the object's outer surface. Instinctively, the Orgathé barged upwards towards that mammoth source. Flat planes of matter splintered as it hammered through them. Further harsh gusts of gas whistled past. Then it found what it wanted, a solid stream of liquid suffused with life-energy pouring along the core of the starscraper. It moved as close as it could, siphoning the heat out of the thick wall of matter surrounding the stream until the outside began to crack. Then it bored through with a couple of appendages, and immersed their tips in the current. Sweet, vital life-energy flowed back into the Orgathé, replenishing it after its considerable exertions. It settled down and began consuming the apparently infinite torrent, growing in a way impossible before.

Three trucks approached the ring of dilapidated hovels encircling the Djerba's lobby. Each vehicle had two people inside, a nervous driver and an even more nervous lookout armed with a heavy calibre rifle. They began to nudge along the muddy tracks between the precarious walls, heavy wheels squelching cans and empty sachet wrappers into the ground.

Past the hovels, they pulled up short of the lobby. As with all Valisk's internal buildings, it was an elaborate edifice, a dome shape from gradually inclined tiers of long white polyp window arches with a circular apex of amber-tinted crystal. Inside, it had the kind of furniture nests and large marble floors endemic to any human travel station. A few cracked windows along the bottom tier, and smashed furniture smeared across the floor, was the only evidence of past battles between Kiera and Rubra.

Tolton gave it all a jaundiced look. "God, I really didn't expect to be coming back here," he grumbled.

"You're not alone," Dariat told him.

Erentz climbed down out of the passenger seat, keeping her rifle trained squarely on the lobby. The visitors had been in Valisk for thirty hours now. In all that time, not one of them had emerged from a starscraper, nor made any hostile move. If it hadn't been for the broken windows and closed emergency locks there would be no evidence of their incursion at all. After their desperate efforts to gain entry, such inactivity had everyone troubled and confused. The personality was determined to discover what nefarious activity they were cooking up in the starscrapers.

The lifts were clumped together in the centre of the lobby, a broad column of grey polyp reaching half way to the amber crystal above. Its curving wall was inset with silvery mechanical doors. One of them slid open as the group approached. Erentz put down the large case of equipment she was carrying, and inched over to the rim so she could snatch a look down. The top of the lift was out of sight, leaving a dark circular shaft with vertical rails that faded from sight after a few metres. She shone a torch into the gulf. All that did was show her more of the rails, and another set of emergency fire-control doors on the inside. If she leaned right over, she could just make out the door below.

From what I can discern, the visitor is now on the twenty-second floor, the personality said. I have managed to seal off the floors below, so the twenty-second remains fully pressurized. The twenty-third is the same. Twenty-four is partially pressurized. Twenty-five is now in a vacuum. Your only escape route, Erentz, is up. Dariat, I imagine you can use the lower floors. A vacuum really shouldn't bother you.

Dariat nodded thoughtfully. **Let's try not to put that theory to the test, okay? Besides, where would I go once I reach the bottom?**

It took twenty minutes to prepare. Three of the group started to rig up a winch they'd brought, securing it on the

lobby floor with large bolts. The rest helped Erentz into the silver-grey suit which she was going to wear for the reconnaissance. They'd chosen a thermal emission suit, capable of protecting its wearer from extreme temperatures. It had a thick layer of insulation with a molecular structure similar to the nulltherm foam used by starships. The one drawback to that particular property was that the heat generated by a living body's organs and muscles couldn't escape. Any wearer would cook themselves to death inside thirty minutes. So before getting into it, Erentz had to put on a tight-fitting regulator overall made from heat absorber fabric. It was capable of soaking up and storing her body's entire output for seven hours before having to be drained.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Tolton asked as he sealed the outer gauntlets to her sleeves. The suit's puffy appearance was making her look like an arctic skier.

"You were down there with it before," she answered. "It has some kind of active heat-sink ability. I've got to have something to shield me from that if I get too close. And I can't risk wearing an SII suit, not in this continuum; there's no guarantee it'll even work below the first floor."

"All right. If you're happy . . ."

"I'm not." She slipped the suit's breathing mask on, fiddling with it until it was comfortable. The suit wasn't pressurized, but the mask maintained her air supply at a constant temperature.

Tolton handed her the electron rod. Its spiked tip was capable of giving off a ten thousand volt shock. "This should stop it getting too close. Electricity seems to be our one constant these days. It can blast the possessed back into the beyond, and it certainly scared the visitor."

She held up the rod, then slipped it into her belt next to a laser pistol and a fission blade. "I feel like I'm off to poke the tiger," she mumbled round the mask.

I'm sorry, said the personality. **But we really do need to know what these things are up to.**

Yeah yeah. She pulled the helmet visor down, a transparent material thick enough to give the world a gentle turquoise shade. **You ready?** she asked Dariat.

Yes. His affinity voice might have said it, but his mind didn't.

The winch cable had been looped round a pulley at the top of the lift shaft. It ended in a couple of simple straps which Erentz clipped onto a harness around her torso. Above the straps, there was a simple control box on a flexible stalk, with four buttons to govern the winch. She tugged at the thin cable, testing its strength.

It's a linked molecule silicon fibre, explained one of the engineers who'd rigged it up. **Totally reliable; it can support a hundred times your body weight.** He indicated a small toggle-like handle nesting in the junction between the two straps. **This is your fast retrieval handle. The winch drum is recoil-wound, like a spring. The further you go down, the tighter the tension. So if you need to get back up here in a hurry, forget the control box, simply twist and pull. It'll reel you in fast. And the whole mechanism is mechanical, so no demon spook can mess with it.**

Thanks. Erentz touched the little toggle reverently, the way she'd seen Christians stroking a crucifix. She walked over to the rim of the lift shaft, switching on her helmet and wrist lights. **We're on.**

Dariat nodded and came over to stand behind her. He put his arms round her chest. His legs he bent so they were wrapped round hers, his feet hooking together between her ankles. It felt like a solid hold. **I think I'm secure.**

Erentz stepped off into space, and swung out into the shaft. She dangled over black emptiness, rotating very slowly. Dariat weighed nothing at all. The only way she

knew he was still there was the faintest glow coming from his arms as they clung to her. **All right, let's go see what it's up to.** She pressed the descent button, and the cable started to play out, lowering her. The last she saw of the lobby was three people crowded shoulder to shoulder in the bright doorway, craning down to watch her. Twenty-two floors is a long way to go when you're hanging on the end of an invisible cable in absolute darkness.

The shaft's horizontal pressure seal on the thirtieth storey is closed, the personality said. **The drop is not as fearsome as you imagine it.**

I'm really trying not to imagine it at all, she shot back waspishly.

Dariat didn't say anything. He was too busy fighting the fatigue trembles in his legs. The awkward position he was in made his muscles prone to cramps. Stupid for a ghost, he told himself repeatedly.

The lift doors kept sliding by, buff silver panels affixed to the polyp by a web of support rails and actuator cabinets. Dariat kept trying to use the sensitive cells on each floor to survey the vestibule as they dropped past, but the neural strata was badly affected by the dark continuum's enervation. The thought routines inside were confused and slow, providing meagre pictures of the darkened corridors. Even those had vanished by the twenty-first storey. Real worry began to seep into Dariat's thoughts. It was the visitor who was causing this part of the affliction. Almost an anti-presence, soaking up life and heat like some hazy event horizon. This was *alien* at its extreme.

Here we are, Erentz said. She slowed their descent until they were level with the doors to the twenty-second floor vestibule.

I don't think I can hold on for much longer, Dariat said. **My arms are starting to ache.**

Erentz's mind was moderately incredulous, but she

spared him a direct comment. She started to sway, building up pendulum momentum, carrying them closer to the shaft wall each time. Catching hold of the struts and conduits beside the door was easy, and she steadied them against the polyp, feet resting on a latch motor casing. There was an emergency release handle on the top rail, which she turned through ninety degrees. The door slid open with a quiet hiss of compressed air.

With one hand poised ready on the retrieval toggle, she shuffled along the lower rail and swung round the edge of the door. **Okay so far**, she told the personality and all her relatives who were monitoring her progress. The vestibule was as dark as the lift shaft. Even the emergency lights had failed. Frost glinted everywhere her lights touched. The suit's environment sensor reported the air was fifty degrees below freezing. So far here electronic systems were functioning close to their operational parameters.

Erentz slowly unclipped the winch cable, and secured it on a strut just inside the rim of the door; easily available in a hurry. She and Dariat shared an affinity layout of the floor, with the visitor's approximate position indicated by a black blob. It wasn't very precise, and they both knew that since the floor's bitek and electronics had failed, it could have moved without the personality knowing.

That was one of the reasons the personality had wanted Dariat along on the reconnaissance. They knew he was affected by the visitor, implying he might just be able to sense it while Erentz in her insulated suit would remain unaware. As theories went, it wasn't the most inspiring. In the end, Dariat only agreed to accompany Erentz because he knew more than most just how grim their position was. The personality held nothing from him, treating him almost as an adjunct of itself, like an exceptionally mobile observation sub-routine (or favourite pet, he thought on occasion). They desperately needed quantifiable data on the dark continuum

if they were going to get a message out to the Confederation. So far the probes and quantum analysis sensors had returned next to zero information. The visitor was the only source of new facts they'd encountered. Its apparent ability to manipulate energy states could prove valuable.

"Earth's recipe for omelettes," Dariat murmured silently. "First steal some eggs."

Let's go, Erentz said.

Try as he might, Dariat couldn't find true fear in her mind. Apprehension aplenty, but she genuinely believed they would be successful.

They set off along the gently curving vestibule, heading for the visitor. Fifteen metres from the lift, a massive hole had been punched through the floor. It was as if a bomb had detonated, smashing the neat layers of polyp into a jumble of large slabs and pulverised gravel. Nutrient fluid, water, and sludge had leaked out from various severed tubules, oozing down the piles of detritus before turning to rucked tongues of dull grey ice. They stood at the broken rim, and looked down.

We won't stand a chance against this thing, Dariat said. **Holy Anstid, look at what it can do; the strength of the fucking thing! That polyp's over two metres thick, look. We've got to get out of here.**

Calm down, the personality replied. **Whoever heard of a ghost being frightened?**

Well, hear it and weep. This is suicidal.

Physical strength alone didn't do this, Erentz said. **It was helped by the cold. If you lower the polyp's temperature far enough it becomes as brittle as glass.**

That's a real comfort to know, Dariat retorted scathingly.

The personality is right, we shouldn't balk just because of this. It demonstrates that the visitor uses cold the same way we use heat, that's all. If we'd wanted to break through a wall, we'd heat it with lasers or an in-

duction field until it weakens. This is an example of how logic progresses in this continuum; concentrating enough energy to heat something is fantastically difficult here, so the visitors simply apply the inverse.

But we don't know how they apply it, Dariat said. So we can't defend ourselves against it.

Then we need to find out, Erentz said simply. And you have to admit, if this is how it moves about, we'll definitely hear it coming.

Dariat cursed as she started to pick her way over the loose debris bordering the hole. He knew now why the personality had picked her. She had more gung-ho optimism than a whole squadron of test-pilots. Reluctantly, he started to follow.

There were deep gouge marks in the floor that had torn the scarlet and lemon carpet into crumpled waves. The naked polyp underneath was pocked with small craters in a triangular pattern every couple of metres. Dariat had no trouble picturing them as talon marks. The visitor had bulldozed its way along the vestibule, cracking the walls and shredding the furniture and fittings. Then it had veered off deeper into the interior of the starscraper. According to the personality, it was resting right against the core. The door to a large apartment suite was missing, along with a considerable chunk of the surrounding wall. Erentz halted several of metres short, and ran her suit's wrist beams around the big aperture.

The vestibule on the other side is undamaged, she said. It has to be in there.

I agree.

Can you tell for certain?

I'm a ghost, not a psychic.

You know what I mean.

Yeah. But I feel okay so far.

She knelt down and began unhooking sensors from her

belt, screwing them onto a telescopic pole. **I'll just run a visual and infrared scan first, with spectral and particle interpretation programs hooked in, no active sweeps.**

Try a magnetic scan as well, the personality suggested.

Right. Erentz added one last sensor to the small clump, then looked round at Dariat. **Okay?**

He nodded. She extended the pole cautiously. Dariat used affinity to receive the results directly from the bitek processor governing the sensors, seeing a pale image of the frosted wall sliding past. It was superimposed with translucent sheets of colour that shimmered with diffraction patterns, the results of the analysis programs, which Dariat fully failed to understand. He shifted the focus, cancelling everything but the raw visual and infrared image.

He watched the edge of the smashed wall go past. Then there was nothing. **Is it still working?** he asked.

Yes. There's absolutely no light in there. No electromagnetic emissions at all. That's odd, the walls should register on the infrared no matter how cold they are. Its like the visitor has thrown some kind of energy barricade across the hole.

So go for an active scan, Dariat said. **Laser radar, perhaps.**

Simpler if you just go and take a peek, the personality said.

No bloody way! You don't know it's an energy barricade; that might be the visitor itself hiding round the corner.

If it was that close, you really would sense it.

We don't know that for sure.

Stop farting about like an old woman and go stick your head round the edge.

Erentz had already pulled the telescopic pole back. She wasn't going to give him any support at all.

Okay, I'll look. The whole notion was even worse than

when he'd taken that suicide pill back in Bospoort's apartment. At least then he'd had a pretty good idea what he was letting himself in for. **Shine as much light over here as you can**, he told Erentz.

She put the last sensor back on her belt, then pulled out the laser pistol and a small tubular flare launcher. **Ready.**

They both moved over to the other side of the vestibule, giving Dariat a better angle. Erentz focused her helmet beams on the gap as he crept towards it. There was nothing to see. The beams could have been trying to illuminate a cold neutron star for all the effect they had.

Dariat was standing opposite the gap now. **Shit. Maybe it is an event horizon. I can't see a bloody thing in there.** It was as if the universe ended inside the apartment. An uncomfortable analogy, given their circumstances.

Stage two, then, Erentz said. She brought her flare launcher up, aiming it at the gap. **Let's see if this exposes anything.**

We shouldn't rush into this, Dariat said quickly.

Fine, the personality interjected. **As you can't see anything from outside, and you don't want to use the flare, why don't you just go in there and take a look around.**

It might think the flare is some kind of weapon, Dariat said.

Then what do you suggest?

I'm just saying, that's all. It doesn't hurt to be prudent.

We've taken every precaution we can. Erentz, use the flare.

Wait! Right out on the very edge of visibility, there was a perturbation in the curtain of darkness. Faint shadow-shapes moved sinuously, the surface distortion of something stirring deep inside. The blackness started to recede from him with the leisurely speed of an outgoing tide, uncovering the edges of the apartment.

His mind was aware of Erentz's finger tightening on the launcher's release trigger. Determination in her mind not to come back without some useful information on the visitor.

No. Don't . . .

The flare streaked across the vestibule, a searing-white magnesium blaze that punctured the pseudoveil across the gap. Dariat looked directly into the shattered apartment.

Paradoxically, the new strength it had gained was weakening the Orgathé as a whole. As it absorbed the life-energy contained within the stream of liquid, its once-quiet riders began to rise out of their unity. It was no longer a singleton. The collective which had originally formed the Orgathé was separating. Before, they had bound their meagre scraps of life-energy together, a synergistic combination which had allowed them to fly free of the mélange. Together, they had been strong. Now there was more than enough life-energy to make them strong individually. They had no real need for each other any more.

Physically, they remained in the same place. There was no reason to move. Quite the opposite. They needed to stay and consume the life-energy which would finally allow them their independence. That ultimate condition hadn't yet been achieved, though it was very close now. Already the Orgathé's physical composition was changing in anticipation of the splendid moment. Internally, it had begun to compartmentalise; dividing in a mockery of biological cell multiplication, with each section attaining a unique shape. The Orgathé had become a womb for a dozen different species.

Then it sensed the two entities approaching. Their flames of life-energy were too small and weak to be worthy of any active intervention. The liquid supply of life-energy was far more enriching than any it would gain by devouring individuals. The Orgathé simply coiled the darkness protectively around itself and carried on consuming.

And Erentz fired the flare into the apartment. Dariat saw the vast bulk of the Orgathé clinging to the far wall, a sagging glossy-black membrane with flabby protuberances that pulsed in discordant rhythms, as if something was scrabbling round underneath. Tentacle-like bands of raw muscle were wound round it so tightly they quivered with tension.

The flare smacked into a wall, bounced, dropped to the frost-sprinkled carpet where its started to burn through into the polyp. Heat and light drenched the apartment in equal proportions. The Orgathé could ward off the light, but not the heat. That penetrated right through its fractions, bringing a wave of pain with it.

Dariat watched the Orgathé peel apart like segments of rotting fruit as it fell off the wall. A torrent of ice-frothed sludge poured out of two puncture holes it had been suckling from. The thick bubbling tide swept a grotesque menagerie of malleable creatures across the floor before it. They tottered and rolled chaotically in the dimming light, churning up the slough. Multi-jointed legs scrabbled round in the same fashion as a newborn deer attempting to stand. Damp wings fluttered ineffectually, flinging off fantails of sticky droplets. Mouths, beaks, and gullets pumped and gasped in silence.

Oh fuck, Dariat moaned. The habitat's affinity band was stunned into mortified silence as he shared his vision with everybody.

Erentz started to back down the vestibule, fear sending cold shivers along her limbs. The flare sputtered and died, sending up a final spiral wisp of smoke. Just before the light vanished, Dariat thought the creatures were solidifying, their skin hardening. In the darkness, he heard a *clack* as might be made by teeth in an excessively large jaw snapping shut. Dizziness struck him like a rubber truncheon. He staggered away from the apartment, almost unaware of Erentz's suit lights bobbing about wildly as she started running.

Move, Dariat! The level of worry in the personality's plea goaded him into taking a few shaky steps. **Come on, boy. Get the fuck out of there.** He took a few more steps, sobbing in frustration at the weakness that had infected his spectral limbs. Lodging in his mind, though not through the gateway of affinity, was an awareness of the visitor's stupendous hunger.

Dariat had stumbled on for several metres before he even realized he was going the wrong way. Wretched despair produced a pitiful growl in his throat. "Anastasia, help me."

Come on boy. She wouldn't want you to give up, not now.

Angry at the injustice of her memory being used against him, he glanced over his shoulder. Erentz's lights were almost out of sight as she raced away. He saw a halo of darkness eclipse the thin slices of fading light behind him. His legs almost gave out at the sight.

Keep going. I've got you a way out.

He took a couple more fumbling steps before the personality's words even registered. **Where?**

Next lift shaft. The door is jammed open.

Dariat could see very little now. It wasn't just the lack of light, his vision was misted with grey. Only his memory placed the lift shaft for him, and that was being reinforced by the personality. Four or five metres ahead, and on his left.

How's that going to help? he asked

Simple, the lift is stalled ten stories down. You just jump. Land on top, and walk through the door. You can do that, you're a ghost.

I can't, he wailed. **You don't understand. Solid matter is hideous.**

While the visitor right behind you is . . . what?

Sobbing he ran his hand along the wall, and found the open lift door. The visitor was sliding smoothly and silently

towards him; chilling him further. He sank to his knees, perched right on the edge as if in prayer.

Not ten stories. That'll kill me.

Exactly which of those solid bones in your transparent body do you think you'll break? Listen to us you little shithead, if you had any scarp of decent imagination at all you'd just float up to the lobby. Now JUMP!

Dariat could actually sense the polyp dying all around him as the visitor swept towards him. **Lady Chi-ri, help me.** He topped over the lip and into the eternal lift shaft.

Erentz sprinted as hard as she could back down the vestibule. Something was stopping her frantic muscles from delivering their best. She felt feeble. She felt nauseous. The rucked carpet did its devious best to trip her.

Keep going, the personality implored passionately.

She didn't actually look round. Didn't need to. She knew something was coming after her. The floor was vibrating as a heavy body pounded along. Strident screeches were repeated again and again as some claw or fang ripped across the polyp. And cold was penetrating her suit as if there was no insulation at all. Without ever looking back, she waved the laser pistol behind her and fired off a series of wild shots. They had no apparent effect on her pursuer.

Affinity showed her the group up in the lobby. Her relatives were snatching up their weapons, thumbing the safeties. Tolton, in ignorance from his lack of affinity, was becoming frantic, shouting: "What? What?"

You are approaching the hole in the floor, the personality warned.

"Shit!" She intended it as a defiant bellow. It came out as a whimper. Her body was twice its proper weight. The weakness seemed to amplify her fear, clotting her mind with dread.

An easy jump, the personality promised. Don't stop running. It's just a question of timing and sure footing.

Where's Dariat? she asked suddenly.

Four more paces. Concentrate.

It was as though she was already losing her balance, leaning too far forward and having to windmill her arms to keep upright. The edge wobbled towards her. Her knees were bending and she didn't know why.

Now!

The personality's command fired her muscles. Erentz leapt across the hole, flinging her arms forward. She hit the floor on the other side, and collapsed, tumbling painfully. Elbows and knees managed to hit every jutting chunk of rubble.

Get up. You're almost there. Come on!

Groaning in anguish, she staggered to her feet. As she turned, her wrist beams shone back across the hole. Erentz screamed. The Orgathé itself had come after her. Still the largest and strongest of all the dissociated collective, it clawed its way along the vestibule after the small fleeing entity. There was no way it could fly in here. Even though it was diminished in physical size by the separation of the others, the vestibule was too narrow for its wings to be extended. As it was, the Orgathé had to hunch in on itself to avoid the ceiling.

Fury powered it now. Fury at being ripped from the nourishment. It had been *so* close to achieving the energy level it wanted. To have that triumph burned away was excruciating. It didn't care about feeding again, it didn't even care about breaking out of the dark continuum. It wanted vengeance.

Erentz jerked into motion again. Pure adrenaline-rush terror overrode her recalcitrant leg muscles. She sprinted for the open lift door. A gust of buffeting air told her the Orgathé

had sprung across the hole behind her. There wasn't going to be enough time to fasten the cable straps to her harness.

She slammed into the wall at the side of the lift doors, spinning round to face the Orgathé. It had obscured itself in folds of darkness again. Only the purposeful ripples slithering across the nebulous surface hinted at the terrible menace contained within. She fired the laser pistol, simply to see the darkness stiffen around the beam's impact point. A wavering dawn of pink light bloomed behind the Orgathé, making a mockery of the weapon.

The flare, the personality urged. **Fire the flare at the bugger.**

Erentz had nothing else left. All there could be now was a jump into the shaft, and hope the fall killed her before the Orgathé caught her. She brought the slim launcher tube up, pointing it at the centre of the ethereal darkness, and pulled the trigger.

A pathetically small spark of incandescence plunged into the vast Orgathé. It spasmed uncontrollably, appendages writhing to thrash against the walls and ceiling. Huge splinters of polyp were sent whirling in dangerous cascades from the force of the blows. Erentz stared at the monster as it bucked about, incredulous that a tiny flare could induce such an awesome result. The whole vestibule was shaking violently.

Yeah, fascinating, said the personality. **Now get out of there while it's distracted.**

She snatched the straps from the strut where she'd secured them. Only one was attached to the harness when she yanked down on the toggle. The power of the rewind made her yip in shock as she went hurtling upwards. Unexpected gee forces tore the laser pistol and the flare launcher from her hands. The narrow band of the shaft wall illuminated by her lights was a continuous blur of grey.

Brace yourself, the personality said.

Abruptly she was in freefall, still rocketing up. Coils of cable floated sedately around her. The lobby door was visible above: blank white rectangle. It expanded at a frightening rate. Then she was slowing, reaching the top of her arc, level with the door. The slack loops of cable sped through the pulley just as she started to fall, and she was wrenched to a halt. Hands reached out to haul her in through the door. She sank down on the black and white marble tiles of the lobby floor, taking fast gulps of air. Her helmet was removed. Annoying voices buzzed querulously in her ears.

“Where is he?” Tolton demanded. “Where’s Dariat?”

“Down there,” she panted miserably. “He’s still down there.” Her mind sent out a desperate affinity call to the ghost. All she could perceive in return was a faint incoherent cry of consternation.

A brutal howl of tearing metal and disintegrating polyp reverberated out of the lift shaft’s open doors. The whole group froze, then looked at the gap as one.

“It’s coming up,” Erentz stammered. “Holy shit, it’s coming after me.”

They scattered, racing for the lobby doors and the trucks outside. Erentz’s exhaustion and bulky suit slowed her to little more than a hobble. Tolton grabbed her arm and pulled her along.

The Orgathé exploded out of the top of the lift shaft at near-sonic velocity, a comet of anti-light. It punched through the lobby roof without even slowing down. Big, lethal shards of amber crystal slashed down, shattering on the marble tiles. Erentz and Tolton both dived for cover under one of the upturned couches as a surf of crystal fragments skittered around them.

The personality watched the visitor curve round and flatten out; perceptive cells strained to keep it in focus. It was a roughly triangular patch of slippery air, surrounded by black diffraction rainbows similar to a magnified heat shimmer ef-

fect. Big iron-hard hailstones pattered onto the grass below it. A kilometre above the parkland, it started to curve round, heading back for the Djerba's lobby. Tolton and Erentz had reached his truck. Both of them were squinting up against the reddish glare of the axial light-tube, trying to spot the visitor. He squeezed the throttle round as far as it would go, and the wheels grumbled into life. They trundled towards the wall of shanty huts at less than ten kilometres per hour.

"Faster!" Erentz yelled frantically.

Tolton reset the throttle. It made no difference to their speed. Another of the trucks was rocking lazily over the ground twenty metres away, going even slower than they were. "This is all the juice we've got," Tolton barked.

Erentz was staring at a thin line of wavering silver-black air that was sliding through the sky towards them. Pellucid streamers were unfurling below it, like long coiling jellyfish tendrils. She knew what they were intended for, and what they were going to grab. "This is it. Endgame."

No it's not, the personality said. Get in amongst the shacks. Forget the trucks, and make sure you take all your lasers and flares with you.

With the rest of the personality's plan expanding into her mind, she shouted: "Come on," to Tolton.

He braked the truck just short of the first rickety hut of plastic sheeting and lashed-up composite poles. They started running down the muddy alley between precarious walls. High above them, the Orgathé had started its approach run, a cascade of hail falling all around it.

Erentz and her relatives started firing their lasers round wildly. "Incinerate it!" she bellowed at Tolton. "Burn it all." Bright scarlet beams slashed at walls and roofs, scorching long lines in the plastic. Edges smouldered and started to burn, curling and dripping. Flames spat along junctions, pumping out jets of black smoke.

The group had congregated in one of the larger open

yards between the flimsy buildings. Tolton was shrinking back from the apparent madness, shielding his face from the heat that the eager, leaping flames were throwing out. "What are you doing?" he cried.

Erentz started firing her flare launcher at piles of rubbish. There were several spectacular bursts of flame as bundles of packaging and abandoned containers ignited. Sooty flakes wafted round in the microthermals. "It can't stand the heat," she shouted at the bewildered street poet. "The flames can beat it back. Come on, help us!" Tolton aimed his own laser, adding to the melee.

The Orgathé was just visible, a lenticular patch of shaded, rippling air, itself distorted by the heat gushing upwards from the tips of the flames. It held its course, arrowing down towards them, until the last possible moment. The long scrabbling tendrils hanging from its underbelly parted furiously as they skimmed the flames.

Tolton couldn't see it anymore. His eyes were smarting from the bitter chemical smog billowing out from the roaring plastic. Lush ebony smoke was swirling round his legs, obscuring the ground. Heat seared the skin over the back of his hands as he held them up to defend his face. He could smell singeing hair. A puissant blast of air sent him staggering to his knees, whipping the smoke round into a blinding cyclone. For a second the heat vanished, replaced by its absolute opposite. Glistening sweat transmuted into frost right across his body. He thought his blood was going to turn solid inside his veins, the cold was so frighteningly intense. Then it was gone.

Smoke was rolling itself into vortex spirals as hail stung his face.

"**Yes!**" Erentz shouted up at the retreating Orgathé. "We beat the bastard. It's frightened."

It's repelled, the personality chided. **There's a big difference.**

Sensitive cells showed her the airborne monster coming round back to the shanty village in a long curve. The flames from the first buildings they'd fired were shrinking.

Move to a new section, the personality said. Let's hope the bugger gives up before you run out of things to burn.

The Orgathé made another five attempts to assail Erentz and her group before it finally withdrew and flew deeper into the habitat interior. Over half of the shanty village had been razed by then. Tolton and the others were caked in grime, and retching badly from the smoke and fumes. Their exposed skin was cracked and bleeding from the heat. Only Erentz, with her suit and mask, was unaffected.

You'd better start walking towards the caverns, the personality said. We'll have a couple of trucks sent to pick you up.

Erentz slowly surveyed the blackened ruins with their slowly solidifying lakes of molten plastic. **Couldn't we just wait here? These guys have been through hell.**

Sorry, more bad news. We think the other sections of the visitor are coming up from the Djerba. The last few functioning systems we've got in there are being extinguished floor by floor. It can't be anything else.

Shit. She gave the lobby an apprehensive look. **What about Dariat?**

Nothing.

Damnit.

We are he. In us he lives on.

He'd argue that.

Yes.

There must have been fifty of those brutes down there.

No, the personality said. The glimpse we were given of the visitor without its visual shield was a brief one, but detailed memory analysis of the scene indicates

twelve, at most fifteen, were birthed from the mother creature. We don't believe they are anything like the size of the one which has pursued you.

Well that's a real big relief.

They started picking their way through the sulphurous, carbonized wreckage of the buildings, heading for the track that wound its way across the scrub desert to the northern endcap. Tolton balked until Erentz started explaining the reason for urgency. "So we can't get down there to find what happened to him?" he asked.

"Not until we know it's clear. And then . . . what do the remnants of a ghost look like? It's not as if there are going to be any bones."

"Yeah," Tolton gave the lobby a final, remorseful look over his shoulder. "I suppose not."

The Orgathé cruised through the air, scanning the inside of the object for the nearest source of life-energy. The interior was even worse than the external shell. Here the living layers were protected by many metres of dead matter with just the thinnest sprinkling of cells smeared on top. Plants, that had a pitiful content of life-energy. No use to the Orgathé, it needed to regain the true richness which lay beneath. There were several entrances back down to the protruding spindles, which it ignored. This time it wanted a more secure feeding place.

For a while it scouted round over the pink grasslands before eventually turning towards the strip of liquid. Just above the beaches and coves of the far side the surface was riddled with large cave entrances, leading deep into the solid mantle of matter. In there, large currents of the life-energy burned brightly, flowing through vast layers of living cells stacked one on top of the other. Tunnels of living fluids formed complex warrens, thousands of tributary channels

connecting to the town-sized organs encased within the end-cap.

The Orgathé landed on a broad expanse of platinum sand that formed one of the trim little coves. Elaborate filigrees of glacial frost sprang out from its feet as it clawed its way up to the nearest cave. As soon as it reached the buff, grass and bushes perished instantly, their leaves turning a rancid brown and freezing into shape. It barely scraped through the cave entrance. Mock-stalactites snapped off as its hardened carapace brushed against them, shattering as they clattered to the floor. The Orgathé's appendages were modified then hardened by further expenditures of energy to help it bulldoze its way past constrictions and awkward bends. Contact with the hot matter bruised its body, but it was slowly acclimatising to the heat endemic within the habitat.

After a while it came up against a huge tunnel conveying the living fluid. It broke through the thick wall and eased its entire body into the driving torrent. For the first time since it had slipped into the dark continuum it knew contentment. With that came the shiver of expectation.

The trucks still hadn't reached Erentz and the others, though she could just see a small dark speck moving somewhere out there on the scrub desert ahead of them. Walking had become an automatic trudge while her mind followed the flight of the visitor. Valisk's general affinity band was filled with speculation and comment as the personality and Erentz's relatives discussed what was to be done next.

Coverage once the Orgathé moved into the cave wasn't so easy. Tracking its movement was a question of following the null-zone surrounding it by the trail of dead polyp left in its wake.

The damn thing has definitely broken into the nutrient artery feeding my mineral digestion tract, the per-

sonality said. **It's creating severe flow pressure problems.**

What's it actually doing to the nutrient fluid? Erentz asked. **Can you sense any change?**

The fluid has been chilled down considerably, which is understandable given what we know of the visitor's intrinsic capability. And over ninety per cent of the corpuscles are dead. A strange outcome, the fluid temperature alone is not sufficient to kill them.

When Dariat and I disturbed it down in the Djerba, it'd broken into one of the starscraper's nutrient fluid tubules. That must be what it's after. It's feeding on your nutrient fluid.

An excellent hypothesis. However, it is not digesting the fluid, we would have been alerted to the loss of volume. And we strongly doubt we have a compatible biochemistry.

It must need something the nutrients contain. Can you run an analysis on the fluid in the Djerba and the other starscrapers where you have visitors squatting?

One moment.

Erentz felt the personality's principal thought routines focusing on the vast network of tubules and conduits that wormed through Valisk's gigantic mitosis layer, probing for aberrations. A big part of the problem in locating any interference was the way the nutrient fluid was pumped into and around the starscrapers. For a start there were many different types. Some just fed the mitosis layer and the muscle membranes, others fed the environmental filter organs down in the basement floors. Specialist fluids supplied the food synthesis organs in each apartment. And all of them underwent a long cycle from the digestive and treatment organs of the southern endcap to the starscrapers and back again, taking several days to complete the circuit. The entire process was autonomic, with the governing sub-routines and spe-

cialist monitoring cells inside the tubule walls watching for known toxins seeping into the fluid. They weren't looking for whatever kind of corruption was being inflicted by the visitor.

With the bitek systems inside the starscrapers currently functioning erratically at best, the return flow was sluggish. Some of the corpuscles had been naturally depleted by the organs they were intended to replenish, while a fair quantity returned still carrying the fresh molecules and oxygen they were originally bound with. It made a review of the fluid that was emerging from the starscrapers inordinately difficult. Eventually, though, the personality said: **We concur that the visitors are all somehow consuming the nutrient fluids. The proportion of dead corpuscles is approaching ninety per cent in some tubules. The nature of the consumption is unclear. We can only conclude it is somehow connected with their heat-sink ability; certainly there is no detectable physical digestion involved.**

They're ghouls, she said. Dinosaur-sized parasites. We've got to find some way of stopping them.

Fire is the only effective method we've discovered so far. It will take time to manufacture flame throwers.

It'll have to be done. They'll eat you alive otherwise.

Yes. Until we can build the appropriate weapons hardware, we're shutting down the supply of nutrient fluid to the starscrapers.

Good idea. She could see the trucks growing out of the scrub desert, trundling along the hard-packed dirt track. **Maybe that'll stop them multiplying. If we can't, the bastards will evolve into a plague.**

Fifty light-years from Hesper-LN, *Lady Mac* and the *Oenone* moved tentatively towards each other. Joshua had to use radar for the manoeuvre, while Syrinx utilized the void-

hawk's distortion field. This deep in interstellar space there wasn't enough starlight to illuminate a white gas-giant. Two small technological artefacts coated in non-reflective foam were simply zones of greater darkness. The only clue to their existence an observer might have had was when they occasionally eclipsed a distant star.

When Joshua did fire *Lady Mac's* ion thrusters to lock attitude, Syrinx had to blink water from her eyes in reflex. The blue flames were completely dazzling to *Oenone's* deep space acclimatised optical sensor blisters. Both ships extended their airlock tubes and docked. Joshua led Alkad, Peter, Liol, and Ashly into the voidhawk's crew toroid. They'd come for a conference to review the data from Tanjuntic-RI and determine the next stage of the flight. The two physicists were obviously required. Joshua had brought Ashly because of his wide experience and delight in new and strange cultures, which might be useful. Liol's presence was a little harder to justify. Out of all of them, he'd seen the least of the universe. It was just that . . . Joshua was getting used to having him around, someone he didn't have to explain everything to. They thought the same way about the same things. That made Liol useful back-up if he wanted to argue a point of contention.

Syrinx was waiting for them at the inner airlock hatch, a sly reminiscence in her mind at the last time Joshua had come aboard when the two ships were docked. If she'd ever had any lingering doubts about him, they'd ended at Hesperia-LN. Now she was glad it was he accompanying *Oenone* rather than some gruesomely efficient Confederation Navy captain from Meredith Saldana's Deathkiss squadron.

She led the party into *Oenone's* main lounge. The long compartment was furnished with plain autumn-red couches which matched the gentle curvature of the walls. Glass-fronted shelves displayed a large, varied collection of objects the crew had collected during their flights, ranging

from simple pebbles to antique carvings, even examples of unusual consumer products.

Monica was sitting with Samuel in one of the couches. Joshua took the one next to theirs, which put him opposite Renato, Oski, and Kempster. Alkad and Peter sat with Parker, who gave his former colleague a simple polite greeting, as if he had no feelings about her activities and motives. Joshua didn't believe that for a second.

Syrinx claimed a seat next to Ruben, and smiled round. "Now we're all here: Oski, did we retrieve everything from the arkship?"

The electronics specialist glanced at the slim processor block on the rosewood table in front of her. "Yes. We managed to datavise all the files stored in the Planetary Habitation terminal into our processors. They're all translated now. There's a lot of information on the five planets they colonized prior to Hesper-LN."

"And I've been accessing some of the files," Monica said. "I was right, one of those planets was inhabited by a sentient species. They were at an early industrial age." She datavised the lounge's processor. An AV lens on the ceiling came alive, projecting a laser-like cone of light down into the compartment. A series of two dimensional pictures materialized at the base, just above the decking. Aerial reconnaissance shots of grey, dirty towns, their brick and stone buildings sprawled across a landscape of blue-green vegetation. They all had rows of factories clustering around the outskirts, tall drab chimneys squirting thick smoke into the azure sky. Small vehicles moved along narrow stone roads, puffing out exhaust fumes. Cultivation was extensive, with human-style checkerboard squares of fields cutting into forests and lapping against the steeper hills.

Tyrathca spaceplanes started to feature in the pictures, landing in the fields and meadows outside towns. Crowds of the four-armed bipeds Monica had found in the archive dis-

play cube were shown running from armed soldier-caste Tyrathca. Close-ups of the quirky alien buildings with their arched roofs. They didn't have windows in the outer walls, instead a funnel-like light well delivered illumination to the interior. The architectural arrangement was obvious: many of them had been struck by Tyrathca missiles, exposing the burnt-out structure.

At some time, what passed as the xenocs' army had rallied. Crude artillery pulled by lumbering eight-legged horse-analogue beasts had been deployed against the spaceplanes. Masers reduced them to smouldering ruin.

"Jesus," Joshua muttered when the file had finished. "A genuine invasion by bug-eyed space aliens. The whole thing looked like snatches from a low budget adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*."

"I'm afraid it was inevitable," Parker said in regretful tones. "I'm beginning to learn the hard way just how rigidly individual species stick to their own philosophies and laws, and how different that philosophy can be to ours."

"They committed genocide," Monica said, glaring at the old project director. "If there's any of those xenocs left alive, they've probably been enslaved. And you're calling it a philosophy? For fuck's sake!"

"We regard genocide as one of the worse crimes a person or government can commit," Parker said. "The massive extermination not only of life, but an entire way of living. Such an act repels us, and rightly so, because that's the way we are. We have emotion and empathy, some would say they govern us. I remind you the Tyrathca do not have these traits. The nearest they come to emotion is the protectiveness they extend to their children and their clan. If you put a breeder caste into a human war crimes court to answer for this atrocity it would never be able to understand what it was doing there. They cannot be judged by our laws, because our laws are the embodiment of our civilization. We cannot con-

demn the Tyrathca, however much we despise what they do. Human rights are precisely that: human.”

“They took over an entire planet, and you don’t think they’ve done anything wrong?”

“Of course they have done wrong. By our standards. And by our standards, so have the Kiint in continually refusing to give us the solution to possession which we know they have. What are you proposing, that we file charges against Jobis as well?”

“I’m not talking about filing charges, I’m talking about the whole Tyrathca situation. We have to reconsider our mission in view of what we’ve uncovered.”

“What do you mean, reconsider?” Joshua asked. “The original circumstances haven’t changed, and our goal certainly hasn’t. Okay, the Tyrathca committed a terrible crime thousands of years ago. We personally, these two ships, can’t do anything about that. But we do know to treat them more cautiously than before. When we get back, the Confederation Assembly can work out what to do about the genocide.”

“If they’re allowed to take that initiative,” Monica said quietly. “I admit I’m angry about the genocide. But I’m more worried about the present day implications.”

“How can that affect us?” Alkad asked. “And I speak of someone with direct experience of a genocide. What we’ve seen is awful, yes. But it was a long time ago, and a long way off.”

“It affects us,” Monica said, “Because it shows us the Tyrathca in their true light. Consider, we’ve now established that there were a thousand arkships.”

“One thousand two hundred and eight,” Renato said. “I rechecked the flightpath files.”

“Great, even worse,” Monica said. “Even assuming each of them was less successful than Tanjuntic-RI, say they only

founded a couple of colonies apiece, that gives them a population at least two to three times greater than the Confederation.”

“Spread over a huge volume of space,” Kempster said. “And not a cohesive political entity like our civilization.”

“Only because there’s been no need for them to achieve unity,” Monica said. “So far. Look, I’m in intelligence; Samuel and I both spend our time assessing potential risk, it’s what we’re trained for. We catch problems in their embryonic stage. And that’s the situation we have here. We’ve discovered a massive threat to the Confederation, in my opinion at least as dangerous as possession.”

“Physically dangerous,” Samuel interjected. He smiled for the interruption. “I do concur with Monica that the Tyrathca present us with an unexpected problem.”

“Crap,” Joshua said. “Look at what we did to them back at Hesper-LN. You and the serjeants defeated an entire regiment of the soldier caste. And *Lady Mac* flew circles round their ships. Confederation technology means we outclass them by an order of magnitude.”

“Not quite, Joshua,” Ashly said. The pilot was still gazing at the last picture projected by the AV lens, an apprehensive expression on his face. “What Monica is saying is that we’ve stirred up the proverbial hornets’ nest. The potential of the Tyrathca threat is a serious one. If all those thousands of colony worlds joined together, sheer numbers would present us with a huge problem. And they do have Confederation technology, we sold them enough weapons in the past. They could retro-engineer combat wasps if they had to.”

“You saw how they used them against *Lady Mac*,” Joshua said. “The Tyrathca can’t handle space warfare, they don’t have the right kind of neural wiring for that kind of activity.”

“They could learn. Trial and error would improve them. Granted they’ll probably never be as good as us. But that’s where their superior numbers come in, and it works against us. In the very long haul they could wear us down.”

“Why should they?” Liol asked. He spread his arms wide in appeal. “I mean, Christ, you’re sitting here talking like we’re at war with them. Sure they’re narked we jumped into their system and raised a little hell. But this flight is totally deniable, right? Nobody’s going to admit to sending us. You don’t commit your entire race to a conflict that will kill billions because we beat up a chunk of wreckage they’d already abandoned.”

“We tend to overlook what they are so that we can maintain our preferred policy of diplomatic tolerance,” Samuel said. “We like to see them as slightly simple, and stubborn; the ultimate big lummoX. A species we can feel superior to, without them ever being aware of our complacent condescension. While in fact, they are a species so aggressive and territorial that they have evolved a soldier caste. *Evolved* one. We can barely comprehend the drive behind such a phenomena. Such a thing requires tens of millennia to achieve. Throughout all that time on their homeworld the social climate maintained the pressures necessitating such a development. Their history is a solid monoculture of conflict.”

“I still don’t see how that makes them a danger,” Liol persisted. “If anything it works in our favour. We provided the Hesper-LN Tyrathca with the ZTT drive over two hundred years ago. And what do they do with it? Do they rush off to contact their long-lost relatives on the first five colony worlds? Bollocks. They’ve founded more colony worlds for themselves, so their immediate relatives could benefit. They didn’t want to share that little technological gem with anybody else.”

“You’re right,” the Edenist said. “Providing you add one qualifier: to date. As Monica said, we are dealing with the concept of potential here. In one respect, the Tyrathca are like us; an external threat will unite them. The arkships themselves are proof of that.”

“We’re not a threat to them!” Liol was almost shouting.

“We haven’t been until now,” Monica said. “Until now

they didn't know we could become *elemental*. They were so disturbed by the prospect of human possessed they immediately opted for isolation. We have become a danger. Possessed humans have attacked Tyrathca settlements. Our already superior military strength has been multiplied by an unknown amount. Remember they do not see humanity divided between possessed and non-possessed. We are one species, that has suddenly and dramatically changed for the worse." She pointed to the projection. "And now we've seen what happens to xenoc species which come into dispute with the Tyrathca."

Liol lapsed back into silence. Scowling, worried now rather than angered by losing the argument.

"All right," Joshua said. "There's a potential for conflict between the Tyrathca and the Confederation, assuming we survive possession intact. It still doesn't affect our mission."

"The Confederation should be warned of this development," Monica said. "We have learned more about Tyrathcan nature than anyone has before. And with their isolation policy, nobody else is likely to find out. That knowledge is now of considerable strategic importance."

"You're not seriously suggesting we turn back already?" Joshua asked.

"I have to concur with Monica, that's now a factor we should consider," Samuel said.

"No no," Joshua said. "You're blowing this out of all proportion. Look, we're forty-two light-years from Yaroslav, which is the nearest Confederation star system. *Lady Mac* would have to expend a lot of delta-V to match velocities. We'd take over a day to get there, and the same to get back here. And right now, time is the biggest critical factor we have. Who knows what the possessed are cooking up behind us? They might even have taken over the Yaroslav system."

"Not the Edenist habitats," Monica said. "Voidhawks could distribute our warning."

“The *Oenone* would only need a day to get to Yaroslav and back,” Ruben said. “That’s not so much of a delay.” He gave Syrinx an encouraging smile.

She didn’t return it. “I really don’t want us to separate at this point,” she said. “Besides, we haven’t even established how the search for the Sleeping God is progressing. I think we should at least hear the status review from Parker’s team before we go making that kind of decision.”

“Agreed,” Joshua said quickly. Monica glanced at Samuel, then shrugged. “Okay.”

Parker leaned forward, permitting himself a small smile. “At least I have one piece of good news for us: we have confirmed the Sleeping God does exist. There’s a reference in one of the Tyrathca files.”

There were smiles all round the lounge. Ashly clapped his hands together, and let out an exhilarated: “Yes!” He and Liol grinned broadly at each other.

“The file didn’t tell us what the bloody thing was,” Kempster said gruffly. “Just what it did. And that’s really weird.”

“Assuming it’s true,” Renato said.

“Don’t be such a depressive, my boy. We’ve already been through that aspect. The Tyrathca don’t invent stories, they can’t.”

“So what can it do?” Joshua asked.

“From what we can determine, it transported one of their arkships a hundred and fifty light-years. Instantaneously.”

“It’s a stardrive?” Joshua asked in disappointment.

“I don’t think so. Oski, would you put this in perspective for us, please.”

“Certainly.” She datavised the processor block on her table, clearing the final picture of the Tyrathca invasion from the AV projection. “This is a simulation of Tanjuntic-RI’s flightpath from Mastrit-PJ to Hesper-LN, based on what we’ve discovered in the files from the arkship.” The

AV lens projected a complex stargate chart centred on the colourful smear of the Orion nebula. A red star on the opposite side of the nebula from the Confederation was surrounded by a swarm of informational icons. "Mastrit-PJ is now either a red giant or supergiant, and it has to be quite close to the far side of the nebula, which is why we've never seen it before. Now, the Tanjuntic-RI flew right round the nebula. We don't know which way round; the Tyrathca have never revealed the location of their other colonies to us, and we didn't extract enough information from their terminals to determine them. However, we know for certain that it stopped eleven times en route, eventually finishing up at Hesperia-LN. Five of those stops were to found colonies; the others were in star systems without a biocompatible planet, so they just refuelled and repaired Tanjuntic-RI, and carried on." A thin blue line extended out from Mastrit-PJ, linking eleven stars in a rough curve going around on the galactic South side the luminescent nebula. "This course is important, because it actually cut the arkship off from direct line of sight to Mastrit-PJ. Their communication laser simply wasn't powerful enough to penetrate the dust and gas that makes up the nebula. So after the fourth star they visited, all messages to and from Mastrit-PJ had to be relayed through the colonies. Which is also why the latter communiqué files were stored in the Planetary Habitation terminal."

"We think Mastrit-PJ's stellar expansion must account for the eventual fall off in message traffic," Renato said eagerly. "Towards the end of the flight, Tanjuntic-RI was communicating with the colonies alone. Some messages were also forwarded from colonies established by other arkships, but there was nothing coming from Mastrit-PJ at all."

"I'm surprised there ever was," Alkad said. "If it detonated into a red giant, nothing should have survived. The star's planets would have been consumed."

"They must have set up some kind of redoubt in the

cometary halo,” Renato said. “Their astroengineering resources were quite considerable by that time, after all. The Tyrathca who didn’t get to leave on arkships would have made some kind of survival attempt.”

“Fair assumption,” Alkad acknowledged.

“But that civilization would be finite,” Renato said. “They have no new resources to exploit, they can’t replenish themselves like the arkships do at every new star system. So eventually, they died off. Hence the lack of messages in the last five thousand years.”

“But one of the last communiqués from Mastrit-PJ was the one concerning the Sleeping God,” Parker said. “A century later, they finally went off air. Tanjuntic-RI had beamed a message back, asking for further details, but by then they were eight hundred light-years away. The Mastrit-PJ civilization was probably extinct before the first colony world received the original communiqué.”

“Can we see it, please?” Ruben asked.

“Of course,” Oski said. “We isolated the relevant text from the message, there’s a lot of softbloat garbage about source and compression. And they repeat each message thousands of times over about a fortnight to ensure the entire chunk is eventually received intact.” She gave them a file code. When they accessed it, the processor showed a simple text sheet.

INCOMING SIGNAL RECEIVED

DATE 75572-094-648

SOURCE FALINDI-TY RELAY

MASTRIT-PJ REPORTS

FLIGHTSHIP SWANTIC-LI SIGNAL RE-ACQUIRED

DATE 38647-046-831.

LAST SIGNAL RECEIVED DATE 23867-032-749.

INCLUDED

TRANSMISSION DETAILS
SWANTIC-LI REPORTS

DATE 29321-072-491. PLASMA BUFFER FAILURE WHILE DECELERATING INTO STAR SYSTEM ***** . MULTIPLE IMPACT DAMAGE. 1 HABITATION RING DEPRESSURIZED. 27 INDUSTRIAL SUPPORT CHAMBERS DEPRESSURIZED WITH ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT LOSS. 32% POPULATION KILLED. LIFE-SUPPORT FUNCTIONS UNSUSTAINABLE. TOTAL LIFE-SUPPORT CESSATION EXPECTED WITHIN 7 WEEKS. NO INHABITABLE PLANETS IN STAR SYSTEM. SENSORS LOCATED AN EXTENSIVE SPATIAL DISTURBANCE ORBITING THE STAR. IT IS A DORMANT SOURCE OF GODPOWER. IT SEES THE UNIVERSE. IT CONTROLS EVERY ASPECT OF PHYSICAL EXISTENCE. ITS REASON IS TO ASSIST PROGRESS OF BIOLOGICAL ENTITIES. OUR ARRIVAL WOKE IT. WHEN WE ASKED FOR ITS HELP IT TRANSPORTED SWANTIC-LI TO THIS STAR SYSTEM 160 LIGHT-YEARS AWAY, WHERE THERE IS A HABITABLE PLANET. TO ANY WHO COME AFTER US, WE DEEM IT AN ALLY OF ALL TYRATHCA.

DATE 29385-040-175. SWANTIC-LI POPULATION TRANSFERRED TO HABITABLE PLANET. COLONY GOERTHT-WN ESTABLISHED.

Tagged on to the end of the file were three pictures. The quality was uniformly low, even after passing through discrimination and amplification filter programs. All of them showed a silver-grey smear against a stellar background. Whatever the object was, the Tyrathca of Coastuc-RT had reproduced its shape almost exactly: a broad disk with coni-

cal spires rising from each side. Its surface was smooth, without any visible markings or structures, a constant metallic sheen.

“How big is it?” Joshua asked.

“Unknown,” Renato said. “And unknowable. We don’t have any references. There was no focal length given for any of the pictures, so there’s no way we can put a number on the beast. It could be gas-giant sized, or a couple of kilometres across. The only clue I have to go on is their claim that it comes complete with an extensive spatial disturbance, which I’m assuming is some kind of intense gravity field. That would tend to prohibit anything too small. The one object that can qualify as coming near to filling the parameters we’ve got so far is a small neutron star, but that couldn’t have this shape.”

Joshua gave Alkad a long look. “Neutron stars of whatever size don’t have the properties described by the Tyrathca in that communiqué,” she said. “Nor do they look like that. I think we have to conclude it’s an artefact.”

“I’m not going to quibble with anyone’s theories,” Kempster said. “Plain and simple, we don’t have enough information to determine its nature. Sitting here trying to second guess what five fuzzy pictures are showing us is completely pointless. What we have established, is the existence of something with some very strange properties.”

“The term ‘godpower’ is fascinating,” Parker said. “Especially as we’re not dealing with spoken nuances. Plain text gives our translation a much higher level of accuracy.”

“Ha!” Kempster waved a dismissive hand at the director. “Come off it, we don’t even have an accurate definition of God in our own language. Every culture assigns different values to God. Humanity has used the term to mean everything from creator of the universe to a group of big angry men who have nothing better to do than mess about with the weather. It’s a concept, not a description.”

“However you want to squabble over semantics, God implies an extraordinary amount of power in any language.”

“Godpower, not God,” Ruben corrected pointedly. “That has to be significant, too. It’s definitely an artefact of some kind. And as the Tyrathca didn’t build it, we’ve probably got as much chance as anyone of switching it back on.”

“It was dormant, and their approach woke it up,” Oski said. “Sounds like you don’t even have to press the button to activate it.”

“I say it still sounds like a stardrive to me,” Liol said, with a nod to Joshua. “The communiqué said it assists the progress of biological entities, and it shunted that arkship a hundred and sixty light-years. That seems pretty clear cut. No wonder the Tyrathca thought it was bloody miraculous. They don’t have FTL technology. And a stardrive big enough to transport an arkship is going to be built on one hell of an impressive scale. It was bound to astonish them, even with their fatalistic phlegmatism.”

“They said a lot of things about it,” Joshua said. “None of which quite match up. What I mean is, none of the qualities they’ve given it are aspects of a single machine. Stardrives don’t observe the universe, nor do they control physical existence.”

“I could add several questions,” Syrinx said. “Like what is it doing in a star-system with no biocompatible planet? It would also appear that there’s some kind of controlling sentience. Remember the Tyrathca asked it for help, they didn’t just switch it to stardrive function and fly away.”

“They couldn’t have anyway,” Samuel said. “It sent Swantic-LI to a system with an inhabitable planet. In other words, it knew there was one there when the Tyrathca didn’t.”

“That makes it benign, as well,” Kempster said. “Or at least, friendly; presumably to biological entities. And I’m just arrogant enough to believe that if it was co-operative

with the Tyrathca it really ought to extend the same courtesy to us.”

Joshua looked round the group. “If no one has anything to add about its abilities or nature, I think we’ve learned enough to confirm we should continue with this mission. Monica, you want to say no?”

The ESA agent pressed her head into her hands and stared at the decking. “I agree this thing sounds pretty impressive, but I wasn’t just drawing attention to the Tyrathca to be a pain. They do worry me.”

“Not on any timescale we have to worry about,” Oski said. “Even assuming you’re one hundred per cent right, and they now see the human race as a dangerous plague to be wiped out. It would be decades before they can even contemplate such an action. Take the worst case, and assume they’ve already travelled from Hesperia-LN to the other colonies Tanjuntic-RI founded. They still won’t be able to build ZTT starships for years to come, not in any quantity. Frankly, I have my doubts they would ever manage it. Retro-engineering our systems would be extremely difficult for them, given their lack of intuition. Even if they did crack it, they’d have to build production stations. So even if this flight takes us a couple of years, we’ll still be back well in time to warn the First Admiral.”

Monica consulted Samuel. “I think that’s reasonable,” he said.

“All right,” she said reluctantly. “I admit I’m curious about this Sleeping God.”

“Good,” Joshua said. “Next question, where the hell is it? You left the star system location blank.”

“It’s a ten digit coordinate,” Kempster said. “I can give you a direct translation if you really want. Unfortunately, it’s total nonsense, because we don’t have the Tyrathca almanac from which it was taken.”

“Oh bollocks!” Liol slumped back into the couch, slap-

ping the cushion fabric in frustration. "You mean we've got to go back into Tanjuntic-RI?"

"Unwise," Samuel said. "I believe the hornets' nest analogy applies. We really did stir them up."

"Can't the *Oenone* work it out?" Liol asked. "I thought voidhawks have a real good spatial awareness."

"They do," Syrinx said. "If we had a Tyrathca almanac, we could take you straight to the star with the Sleeping God. But first we need that almanac, and there's only one place to get it from. We have to go back."

"Not so," Kempster said cheerily. "There is a second star system where we know it exists: Mastrit-PJ itself. Even better, they received Swantic-LI's messages direct; there may be others which were never relayed to Tanjuntic-RI. All we have to do is fly around the Orion nebula, any red giant star will shine at us like a damn great beacon. As soon as the sensors see it, we can work out a valid approach vector."

"More promising, from our point of view, Mastrit-PJ is now uninhabited," Parker said. "This time we'll be able to undertake a more leisurely, and thorough, retrieval of the files we want from the ruins."

"We don't know how long this redoubt civilization has been dead for," Oski said, a note of worry in her voice. "The condition of the Laymil relics are bad enough, and they're only two and a half thousand years old. I can't promise I can recover anything from electronics that have been exposed to space for twice that long."

"If necessary, we can just scout round the stars closest to Mastrit-PJ for other Tyrathca colonies. There must be a lot of them in that area. They won't have been warned about us devious humans yet. The point is, we can find copies of that almanac on the other side of the nebula."

"I wasn't disputing that," Oski said. "I'm just saying, for the record, there may be problems."

"You're all overlooking one thing," Joshua said. He al-

most smiled when he received their indignant looks. “Is there even going to be a Sleeping God waiting for us if the Kiint get there first? And what the hell do they want with it anyway?”

“We can’t not continue because of the Kiint,” Syrinx said. “In any case, we don’t have real proof that . . .” she trailed off under Joshua’s mocking gaze. “All right, they were at Tanjuntic-RI. But we knew they were interested before we set out. It’s because of them we’re here now. To my mind, this just proves the Sleeping God is a big deal.”

“All right,” Joshua said. “The other side of the nebula, it is.”

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Fifty years ago, Sinon had visited the Welsh-ethnic planet Llandilo, where he'd spent a cold three hours straddling sunrise to watch a clan of New Druids welcome the first day of spring. As pagan ceremonies went, it was a fairly boring affair for an outsider, with off-key singing and interminable Gaelic invocations to the planet's mother goddess. Only the setting made it worthwhile. They'd gathered on the headland of some eastward-facing coastal cliffs, where a line of tremendous granite pillars marched out to sea. God's colonnade, the locals called it.

When the sun rose, pink and gold out of the swaddling sea mist, its crescent was aligned perfectly along the line of pillars. One by one, their tops had blazed with rose-gold coronas as the shadows flowed away. Gladdened by nature's poignancy, the congregation of white-clad New Druids had finally managed to achieve a decent harmony and their voices rang out across the shore.

It was a strange recollection for Sinon to bring to his new serjeant body with its restricted memory capacity. He certainly couldn't remember his reason for retaining it. An overdose of sentiment, presumably. Whatever the motive,

the Llandilo memory was currently providing a useful acclimatisation bridge to the present. Nine thousand of the serjeants trapped on Ketton's island had gathered together near the edge of the plateau to exert their will, with the remainder joining their endeavours via affinity as they walked resolutely over the mud towards the rendezvous point. They weren't praying, exactly, but the visual similarity with the New Druids was an amusing comfort. The beleaguered Edenists needed whatever solace they could garner from the dire situation.

Their first, and urgent, priority had been to stem the gush of atmosphere away from the flying island before everybody suffocated. A simple enough task for their assembled minds now they had acquired some degree of energistic power; the unified wish bent whatever passed for local reality into obedience. Even Stephanie Ash and her raggedy little group of followers had aided them in that. Now it was as though the air layer around the outside of the island had become an impregnable vertical shield.

Encouraged and relieved, they stated their second wish loud and clear: to return. In theory, it should have been easy. If a massive concentration of energistic power had brought them here to this realm, then an equally insistent concentration should be able to get them back. So far, this argument of logical symmetry had failed them utterly.

"You dudes should give it a rest," Cochrane said irritably. "It's real spooky with all of you standing still like some zombie army."

Along with the others of Stephanie's group, the redoubtable hippie had spent a quarter of an hour trying to help the serjeants open some kind of link back to the old universe. When it became obvious (to them) that such a connection was going to be inordinately difficult, if not impossible, he'd let his attention drift. They'd ended up sit-

ting in a circle round Tina, giving her what support and comfort they could.

She was still very weak, sweating and shivering as she lay inside a heavily insulated field sleeping bag. One of the sergeants with medical knowledge who'd examined her said that loss of blood was the biggest problem. Their direct infusion equipment didn't work in this realm, so it had rigged up a primitive intravenous plasma drip feed for her.

Stephanie's unvoiced worry was that Tina had suffered the kind of internal injuries they could never repair properly with their energistic power, however much they willed her to be better. As with Moyo's eyes, the subtleties of the flesh had defeated them. They needed fully-functional medical nanonic packages. Which wasn't going to happen here.

Her other concern was exactly what would happen to the souls of anyone whose body died in this realm. Their connection with the beyond had been irrevocably severed. It wasn't a prospect she wanted to explore. Though looking at Tina's poorly acted cheer, she thought they might all find out before too long.

Sinon broke out of his trance-state, and looked down at Cochrane. "Our attempt to manipulate the energistic power is not a physically draining exercise. As there is nothing else for us to do here, we consider it appropriate to continue with our efforts to return home."

"You do, huh? Yeah, well, I can dig that. I purge myself with yoga. It's righteous. But, you know, us cats, we've got to like *eat* at some time."

"I'm sorry, you should have said." Sinon walked over to one of the large piles of backpacks and weapons which the sergeants had discarded. He found his own and unfastened the top. "We don't ingest solid food, I'm afraid, but our nutrient soup will sustain you. It contains all the proteins and vitamins required by a normal human digestion system." He pulled out several silvery sachets and distributed them round

the dubious group. "You should supplement the meal with water."

Cochrane flipped the cap off the sachet's small valve and sniffed suspiciously. With everyone watching intently, he squeezed a couple of drops of the pale amber liquid onto his finger, and licked at them. "Holy shit! It tastes like seawater. Man, I can't eat raw plankton, I'm not a whale."

"Big enough to qualify," Rana muttered under her breath.

"We have no other source of nourishment available," Sinon said in mild rebuke.

"It's fine, thank you," Stephanie told the big serjeant. She concentrated for a moment, and her sachet solidified into a bar of chocolate. "Don't pay any attention to Cochrane. We can imagine it to be whatever taste we like."

"Bad karma'll get you," the hippie sniffed. "Yo there, Sinon. You got a glass going spare? I figure I can still remember what a shot of decent bourbon tastes like."

The serjeant rummaged round in his pack, and found a plastic cup.

"Hey, thanks, man." Cochrane took it from him, and transformed it into a crystal tumbler. He poured a measure of the nutrient soup out, watching happily as it thinned into his favourite familiar golden liquor. "More like it."

Stephanie peeled the wrapper from her chocolate, and bit off a corner. It tasted every bit as good as the imported Swiss-ethnic delicacy she remembered from her childhood. But then, in this case the memory is the taste, she told herself wryly. "How much of this nutrient soup have you got left?" she asked.

"We each carry a week's supply in our pack," Sinon said. "That period is calculated on the assumption we will be physically active for most of the time. With careful rationing it should last between two and three weeks."

Stephanie gazed out across the rumpled grey-brown mud which made up the surface of the flying island. Occasional

pools of water glinted in the uniform blue-tinted glare that surrounded them. A few scattered ferrangs and kolfrans nosed around the edges of drying mires, nibbling at the fronds of smothered vegetation. Not enough to provide the combined human and serjeant inhabitants with a single meal. "I guess that's all the time we've got then. Even if we had warehouses full of seed grain, three weeks isn't enough time to produce a crop."

"It is debatable if the air will sustain us for that long anyway," Sinon said. "Our estimate for the human and serjeant population on this island is twenty-thousand-plus individuals. We won't run out of oxygen, but the increase in carbon dioxide caused by that many people breathing will reach a potentially dangerous level in ten days' time unless that air is recycled. As you can see, no vegetation survives to do this. Hence our determination to explore the potential of our energistic power."

"We really ought to be helping you," Stephanie said. "Except I don't see how we can. None of us have affinity."

"The time might come when we need your instinct," Sinon said. "Your collective will brought us here. It is possible that you can find a way back. Part of our problem is that we don't understand where we are. We have no reference points. If we knew where we were in relation to our own universe, we might be able to fashion a link back to it. But as we played no part in bringing the island here, we don't know how to begin the search."

"I don't think we do either," Moyo said. "This is just a haven for us, a place where the Liberation isn't."

"Interesting," Sinon said. More serjeants started to listen to the conversation, eager for any clue that might be scattered amid the injured man's words. "You weren't aware of this realm before, then?"

"No. Not specifically. Although I suppose we were aware that such a place existed, or could exist. The desire to reach it is endemic among us—the possessors, that is. We want to

live where we don't have any connection to the beyond, and where there's no night to remind us of empty space."

"And you believe this is it?"

"It would seem to fill the criteria," Moyo said. "Not that I can vouch for the lack of night," he added bitterly.

"Are the other planets here?" Sinon asked. "Norfolk and all the others? Were you aware of them at any time?"

"No. I never heard or felt anything like that when we moved here."

"Thank you." **Instinct appears to be the governing factor**, he said to the others. **I don't believe we can rely on it for answers.**

I don't understand why we can't simply wish ourselves back, Choma said. **We have a power equal to theirs; we also have a commensurate desire to return.**

The united minds in their mini-consensus decided there were two options. That the possessed had spontaneously created a sealed continuum for themselves. An improbable event. While that would account for several properties of this realm—the failure of their electronic hardware, the cutting off of the beyond—the creation of an entirely new continuum by manipulating existing space-time with energy would be an inordinately complex process. Coming here was achieved by sheer fright, which discounted such a procedure.

More likely, this continuum already existed, secluded among the limitless dimensions of space-time. The beyond was such a place, though with very different parameters. They must have been thrown deep inside the multitude of parallel realms conjunctive within the universe. In such circumstances, home would be no distance at all away from where they were now. At the same time, it was on the other side of infinity.

There was also the failure to open even a microscopic wormhole, despite a formidable concentration of their ener-

gistic strength. That did not bode well at all. Before, ten thousand possessed had opened a portal wide enough to embrace a lump of rock twelve kilometres in diameter. Now, twelve thousand serjeants couldn't generate a fissure wide enough to carry a photon out.

The explanation had to be that energy states were different here. And in eleven days' time, that simple difference was going to kill them when the clean air ran out.

Stephanie watched Sinon for a couple of minutes, until it became apparent that he wasn't going to say anything else. She could sense the minds of the serjeants all around her, just. There was none of the emotional surges which betrayed normal human thoughts. Just a small, even, glow of rationality, which occasionally fluttered with a hint of passion, a candle flame burning a speck of dust. She didn't know if that was indicative of Edenist psyches, or normal serjeant mentality.

The swarthy bitek constructs remained unnervingly motionless as they stood in a loosely circular formation. Every new platoon which arrived immediately discarded their backpacks and joined their fellows in stationary contemplation of their predicament. As far as Stephanie could tell, they were the only humans among them. The newly arrived serjeants had all given the remnants of Ketton a wide berth. Yet she could sense a stir of minds amid the ruined town. As first puzzled why not one of them had ventured out to talk to the serjeants, she'd now assigned a certain resignation to the fact.

"We should go over and talk to the others," she said. "Having this kind of division is ridiculous in these circumstances. If we're going to survive, we have to cooperate and work together."

McPhee sighed, and wriggled his large frame comfortably over the sleeping bag he was lying on. "Oh lass, you only see good in everyone. Open your eyes. Remember what yon bastards did to us, and let them stew."

"I'd like to open my eyes," Moyo said harshly. "Stephanie's right. We should at least make an attempt. Setting up different camps is stupid."

"I didn't mean to offend. I'm just pointing out that they've made no attempt to talk to us or the serjeants."

"They're probably too nervous of the serjeants," Stephanie said. "It's only been half a day, after all. I doubt they even know how much trouble we're in. They're not as disciplined as the Edenists."

"They'll find out eventually," Rana said. "Let them come to us when they're ready. They won't be so dangerous then."

"They're not dangerous now. And we're in a perfect position to make the first move."

"Whoa there, sister," Cochrane said. He struggled up into a sitting position, which sent a lot of bourbon slopping out of his tumbler. "Not dangerous? Like funky! What about the Ekelund chick? She put up some mighty fine barricades last time we waved goodbye."

"That situation hardly applies anymore. You heard Sinon. We're going to die if we don't find a way out of here. Now I don't know if their help will make any difference, but it certainly won't reduce our chances."

"Urrgh. I like hate it when you're reasonable, it's the ultimate bad trip. I know it's bigtime wrong, and I can never escape."

"Good. You'll come with us, then."

"Oww shit."

"I'll stay here with Tina," Rana said quietly, and gave her friend's hand a small squeeze. "Someone has to keep her comfortable."

Tina smiled with hollow defiance. "I'm such a nuisance." There was a chorus of indignant reassuring no's from the group. They all hurriedly smiled at her or made encouraging gestures. Moyo's face wore a forlorn expression as he fumbled round for Stephanie's guiding hand.

“We won’t be long,” she told the pair of them positively. “Sinon?” She tapped the serjeant lightly on its shoulder. “Would you like to come with us?”

The serjeant stirred. “I will. Making contact is a good idea. Choma will accompany us, also.”

Stephanie couldn’t quite sort out the reason she was doing this. There was none of the automatic protectiveness which had driven her to help the children back on Mortonridge. Not even the sense of paternalism which had kept them all together in the weeks before the Liberation. She supposed it could have been simple self-preservation. She wanted the two sides working together to salvage this situation. Anything other than their wholehearted effort might not be enough.

The ground outside Ketton had suffered few changes following the quake. There was the shallowest of curves across the width of the island, betraying the original shape of the valley from which it had been snatched. Long hummocks bordered the slowly drying mires, rambling gently across the slope like the sand-ripples of a tidal estuary. All that remained of the forests which had smothered the foothills were denuded black branches poking resolutely skywards. There was no sign of the roads which had survived the deluge; the quake had swept them away. Twice they found craggy sheets of carbon concrete jutting up from the mud, leaning over at acute angles. Neither of them corresponded to their memory of where the road had been.

With the loam all churned up again, Stephanie found her feet sinking a couple of inches at every step. It wasn’t as bad as when they’d raced to keep ahead of the jeeps, but walking was an effort. And they still hadn’t fully regained their strength. Half a mile from the outskirts of the town, she stopped for a rest, disappointed at how hard she was breathing. Each inhalation made her feel guilty at the way she was poisoning the air.

From a distance, Ketton was at least different to the surrounding land. Individual, tightly-packed zones of colour supported the theory that although most of the buildings were damaged, they at least remained loosely intact. Now she could see what a fallacy that was. She should have been warned by the complete absence of trees.

Cochrane prodded his narrow purple sunglasses up to his forehead, and peered ahead. "Man oh man, what were you cats thinking of? I mean, this is like *wasted*, with the world's biggest capital W."

"The harpoon assault against Ketton was intended to deprive the occupying possessed of any tactical cover," Sinon said. "We have suffered considerable attrition due to your booby traps and ambushes. As you were determined to make a stand here, General Hiltch was equally resolved to deny you any advantage the town itself could offer. I believe the quake was also supposed to be a psychological blow as well."

"Yeah?" the hippie scoffed. "Well that backfired on you, didn't it? Look where scaring us shitless got you."

"You consider yourself better off here?" McPhee laughed snidely at Cochrane's chagrin.

"Is it bad?" Moyo asked.

"There's nothing left," Stephanie told him. "Nothing at all." Up close the patches of colour were actually just dull variations of grime, low mounds of rubble that fused into the mud. Even with their energetic power almost undimmed, the possessed had made no attempt to resurrect the buildings. Instead, people were picking their way among the ruins, a constant swarm of movement.

As they drew closer, she realized there was nothing aimless and disorientated in the actions of the survivors. They were methodically excavating the mounds, scooping out quantities of bricks and shattered concrete with a combina-

tion of physical and energistic force. It was all very purposeful and efficient. In other words, organized.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," she said in a low voice as they reached the outer knolls of rubble. "I think Ekelund might still be in charge here."

"In charge of what?" Cochrane asked. "This is like a municipal landfill site. And they've only got ten days to live."

A team of two women and one man, barely out of his teens, were working away on one of the piles, shifting large metal frames as if they were made of plastic. They'd already dug several short tunnels into the pile. Battered composite boxes of sachets had been stacked neatly just above the mud. The three of them stopped what they were doing as Stephanie and Sinon walked over. Stephanie's spirits fell even further when she saw they were wearing army fatigues.

"We thought we ought to see if there was anything we could do to help," she said. "If there's somebody trapped in the wreckage, or anything."

The young man scowled, looking between her and her companions. "Nobody trapped. What you doing with those Kingdom monster things? You some kind of spy?"

"No, I'm not a spy," she said carefully. "There is nothing for anyone to spy on here. We're on this island together. Nobody has anything to hide any more. There's nothing to fight for, not amongst ourselves."

"Oh yeah? How much food have you got? Not much, I'll bet. Is that why you're here?" His anxious glance slipped to the small stack of boxes they'd uncovered.

"The serjeants have enough food to last us, thank you. Who's actually in charge here?"

The man was opening his mouth to answer when an incredible stab of hot pain punctured Stephanie's hip. It was so intense she couldn't even cry out in shock. She was flung back by the force of the impact, the world spinning madly about her. Landing on her back, she saw her limbs splayed

out in the air. Gore and blood splattered onto the mud around her as she went limp.

I've been shot!

Everyone was shouting wildly. Dashing about in total confusion. The air hazed over with bright scintillations, thickening protectively around her. Stephanie raised her head, looking along her body with numb interest. Her trousers and blouse were glistening crimson with blood. There was a long rent in the fabric over her hip, showing the torn flesh and splinters of bone underneath. Shock gave her vision a perfect clarity. Then her head suddenly became very warm, and the hideous pain returned. She screamed, her vision turning grey as her muscles relaxed, dropping her head down into the mud again.

"Stephanie! Fuck, oh fuck, what's happened?"

That was Moyo, his anguish and fright making her frown.

"Ho-lee shit! Those dudes shot her. Yo, Stephanie, babe, you hear me? You hang on. It's like a scratch. It's nothing. We'll fix it for you."

A dark demon was kneeling beside her, its carapace alive with wriggling sparks.

"I'm applying pressure. It should stop the bleeding. Focus your thoughts on repairing the bone first."

Stephanie was receding from them, only vaguely aware of a dry liquid spilling all across her torso. It was deepest over her hips, exerting a cool weight. A beautiful opalescent cloud twinkled languidly in front of her eyes. Soothing to watch. She could feel her yammering heart slowing to a more pedestrian rhythm. Which brought her frantic gasps back under control. That was good. She still harboured a lot of guilt about using all that air.

"It's sealing up."

"God, the blood."

"She's all right. She's alive."

"Stephanie, can you hear me?"

Long shivers were rippling up and down her body. Her skin had turned to ice. But she could blink her eyes into focus. The faces of her dear friends were staring down, paralysed with grief.

Her lips flicked into a tiny smile. "That hurt," she whispered.

"Just take it easy," Franklin grunted. "You're in shock."

"Certainly am." Moyo's hand was clutching her upper arm so tightly it was painful. She tried to reach for him, offer some reassurance.

"The wound has been repaired," Sinon said. "You have lost a considerable amount of blood, however. We'll need to take you back to our camp, and get some plasma into you."

Something familiar was creeping into her sphere of consciousness. Familiar and unwelcome. Cold, hard thoughts, reeking of callous satisfaction.

"I told you so, Stephanie Ash. I told you not to come back here."

"You piece of fascist shit!" McPhee bellowed. "We're no' armed."

Stephanie struggled to lift her head. Annette Ekelund was standing at the head of some thirty or so soldiers. She was wearing an immaculately pressed pale khaki field commander's uniform, complete with forage cap. Three stars glinted unnaturally on her epaulettes. A powerful hunting rifle was cradled casually in her hands. Holding Stephanie's gaze, she worked the bolt slowly and deliberately. A spent cartridge case was ejected.

Stephanie groaned, her shoulders sagging with dismay. "You're insane."

"You bring the enemy into our camp, and you expect to go unpunished. Come come, Stephanie, that's not how it works."

"What enemy? We came to see if you needed help. Don't

you understand?" She wanted to retreat back into the numb oblivion of pain and shock. It was preferable to this.

"Nothing has changed simply because we've won. They are still the enemy. And you and your loony bin refugee friends are traitors."

"Excuse me," Sinon said. "But you have not won. This island has no food. The air will run out in ten days' time. All of us have to find a way back before then."

"What do you mean the air's running out?" Delvan asked.

Sinon's voice became louder. "There is no fresh air in this realm, only what we brought with us. At the current rate, our breathing will exhaust it in ten days, a fortnight at the most."

Several soldiers in the ranks behind Ekelund exchanged solicitous glances with each other.

"Simple disinformation," Annette said dismissively. "It sounds very plausible. If we were back in our old universe I'd even believe it myself. But we're not. We're in the place of our choosing. And we chose an existence that would carry us safely down through eternity. This is as close to classical heaven as the human race will ever get."

"You specified the boundary qualifications," Sinon said. "A realm where you were cut off from the beyond, and night is a null concept. But that's all you did. This realm isn't going to safeguard you from folly. It's not some actively benign environment that will happily provide every need. You are responsible for what you bring here, and all you brought was a lump of lifeless rock with a thin smear of air on top. Tell me, I'm interested, how do you think this island is going to sustain you for tens of thousands of years?"

"You are a machine. A machine designed with one purpose, to kill. That is all you understand. You have no soul. If you had, you would feel at one with this place. You would know its glory. This is where we longed to be. Where we are safe, and at peace. You have lost, machine."

"Yo there." Cochrane had raised his hand. He smiled

broadly, radiating enthusiasm like an eager schoolboy. "Um, lady, I'm normally like *organic* I'm so in touch with the music of the land. And I gotta tell you, I don't feel shit for this lump of mud. There's no karmic vibes here, babe. Believe me."

"Believe a seditious junkie? I think not."

"What do you want?" Stephanie asked. She could see Cochrane losing his cool if he kept on arguing with Ekelund. That would turn out bad for everybody. Ekelund needed very little justification to exterminate all of them. In fact, Stephanie was wondering what was holding her back. Probably just enjoying her gloat.

"I don't want anything, Stephanie. You broke our arrangement and came here to me, remember?"

"In peace. Wanting to help."

"We don't need help. Not from you. Not here. I have everything under control."

"Stop this."

"Stop what, Stephanie?"

"Let them go. Give these people back their liberty. For pity's sake, we'll die here if we can't find a way out, and you've got them fenced in by your authoritarian regime. This isn't heaven. This is a huge mistake we got panicked into making. The serjeants are trying to help us. Why can't you cooperate with that?"

"Ten hours ago, these *things* you've befriended were trying to kill us. No, worse than kill. Any of us they capture, they throw back into the beyond. I didn't see you rushing to hand back your nice new body, Stephanie. You went crawling out of Ketton hoping to hide in the dirt until they passed over."

"Look if it's some kind of revenge trip you want, then just shoot me in the head and get it over with. But let the others go. You can't condemn everyone on this island just because you have so much fear and hatred inside."

“I abhor your assumed nobility.” Annette walked past Cochrane and Sinon to stand over Stephanie. The barrel of the rifle hung inches above her clammy forehead. “I find it utterly repellent. You can never accept that you might be wrong. You perpetually claim the moral high ground as if it’s some kind of natural inheritance. You use your own sweetness-and-light nature as a shield to ignore what you’ve done to the body you’ve stolen. That disgusts me. I would never try to deny what I am, nor what I’ve done. So just for once, admit the truth. I did what was right. I organized the defence of two million souls, including yours, and prevented you from being cast back into that horror. Tell me, Stephanie, was that the right thing to do?”

Stephanie closed her eyes, squeezing small trickles of moisture out onto her cheeks. Maybe Ekelund is right, maybe I am trying to ignore this monstrous crime. Who wouldn’t? “I know what I’ve done is wrong. I’ve always known. But I haven’t got a choice.”

“Thank you, Stephanie.” She turned to Sinon. “And you, death machine, if you believe what you say, then you should switch yourself off and allow real humans to live longer. You’re wasting our air.”

“I am human. More so than you, I suspect.”

“The time will come when we will throw the serpent back out into the emptiness.” She smiled without humour. “Enjoy the fall. It looks like being a long one.”

Sylvester Geray opened the doors to Princess Kirsten’s private office and gestured Ralph to go through. The Princess was sitting at her desk, with the French doors open behind her, allowing a slight breeze to ruffle her dress. Ralph stood to attention in front of her, saluted, then put his flek down on the desk. He’d worked on the single file stored inside during the flight over from Xingu.

Kirsten looked at it with pursed lips, making no attempt to

pick it up. "And that is . . . ?" She said it with the air of someone who knew very well what it contained.

"My resignation, ma'am."

"Rejected."

"Ma'am, we lost twelve thousand serjeants at Ketton, and God knows how many possessed civilians went with them. I gave the order. It is my responsibility."

"It certainly is, yes. You assumed that responsibility when Alastair placed you in charge of the Liberation. And you will continue to bear that responsibility until the last possessed on Mortonridge is placed in zero-tau."

"I can't do it."

Kristen gave him a sympathetic look. "Sit down, Ralph." She indicated one of the chairs in front of the desk. For a second it appeared as though Ralph might refuse, but he gave a subdued nod and eased himself down.

"Now you know what being a Saldana is like," she told him. "Admittedly, we're not faced with quite such momentous decisions every day, but they still pass across this desk here. My brother has authorized fleet deployments which have resulted in a far higher cost of life than Ketton. And as you of all people know, we indirectly license the elimination of people who would one day cause trouble for the Kingdom. Not very many, and not very often, perhaps, but it mounts up over the course of a decade. Those decisions have to be made, Ralph. So I grit my teeth, and give the necessary orders, the really tough ones that the Cabinet would have a collective fit over if they were ever made to take them. That's genuine political power. Making the decisions which affect other people's lives. The overall daily running of the Kingdom is our domain, us Saldanas. Now call us what you like: ruthless dictators, heartless capitalists, or benign guardians appointed by God. The point is, what we do, we do very well indeed. That's because we take those decisions without hesitation."

“You’re trained to, ma’am.”

“True. But so are you. I admit the scale here is vastly different to what an ESA head of station is accustomed to. But in the end, you’ve been deciding who lives and who dies for some time now.”

“I got it wrong!” Ralph wanted to shout at her, make her see reason. Something in his subconscious held him back. Not out of respect, or even fear. Perhaps I just want to know I did the right thing. Nobody else in the Kingdom, except perhaps Alastair II himself, could provide that assurance and have it mean anything.

“Yes Ralph, you did. You got it very badly wrong. Squeezing the possessed into Ketton was a bad move, even worse than using electron beams against the red cloud.”

He looked up in surprise, meeting the Princess’s uncompromising stare.

“Were you looking for compassion, Ralph? Because you won’t get it in here, not from me. I want you back on Xingu revising the advance across Mortonridge. Not just because you’re there to stop me and the family from taking the blame. I remember you the night we discovered Ekelund and the others had landed on this planet. You were driven, Ralph. It was mighty impressive to watch. You didn’t compromise a single decision to Jannike or Leonard. I enjoyed that. People of their rank don’t often get publicly stonewalled.”

“I didn’t realize you were paying me that much attention,” Ralph grunted.

“Of course you didn’t. You had one job to do, and nothing else mattered. Now you have another job. And I expect you to see it through.”

“I’m not the right man. That drive you saw, that’s what landed us with the Ketton fiasco. The AI gave me several options. I chose the brute force approach because I was too fired up for a rational alternative. Hammer them with over-

whelming firepower and battalions of troops until they capitulate. Well now you know what that policy leaves us with. A damn great hole in the ground.”

“It was a painful lesson, wasn’t it?” She leant forward, determined to convince rather than alienate. “That just makes you better qualified to carry on.”

“Nobody will trust me.”

“Snap out of that self-pitying bullshit routine right now.”

Ralph almost smiled. Sworn at by a Saldana Princess.

“This is what war is about, Ralph. The Edenists aren’t going to carry grudges; they were part of the decision-making process to storm Ketton. As for the others, the marines and occupation forces, they all hate you anyway. One more cock-up by the chief isn’t going to make any difference to their opinion. They’ll get their orders for the next stage, and the lieutenants and NCOs will make sure they’re carried out to the letter. I want you to issue those orders. I’ve asked you twice, now.” Her finger pushed the flek back over the desk, a chessmaster going for checkmate.

“Yes ma’am.” He picked up the flek. Somehow he’d known all along it would never be that easy.

“Right,” Kirsten said briskly. “What’s your next move?”

“I was going to recommend my successor change our assault policy again. One of our principal concerns over the Ketton incident is how the inhabitants and serjeants are going to survive. Even if the possessed were stockpiling all the town’s supplies, there can’t be much food left wherever they’ve gone.”

“You’re guessing.”

“Yes ma’am. But unless we have totally misread the situation, it is a logical one. Prior to this, the possessed have removed entire planets to this hidden sanctuary dimension of theirs. A planet gives them a viable biosphere capable of feeding them. Ketton is different, it’s just rock with a layer

of mud on top. It's just a question which they run out of first, air or food."

"Unless they find one of the other planets where they can take refuge."

"I hope they can do that, ma'am, I really do. I don't know what kind of conditions exist wherever they are, but they would have to be very weird indeed if it enables them to land that section of rock on a planet. In fact, we believe the strongest possibility is that they'll return once they realize how much trouble they're in. The geologists say that'll cause all kinds of trouble, but we're preparing for the eventuality."

"Good grief." Kirsten tried to imagine that vast section of countryside coming down to land in its own crater, and failed. "You realize, if they do come back, it will have a profound implication for the other planets? That would be proof that they can be returned as well."

"Yes ma'am."

"All right, this is all interesting theorizing, but what was the change of policy?"

"After we reviewed Ketton's problems, we started to consider the supply situation on Mortonridge itself. Thanks to the deluge, there is no fresh food left at all; the satellites haven't managed to find a single field of crops left intact on the whole peninsular. Some animals managed to survive; but they're going to die soon because there's nothing left for them to feed on. We know the possessed cannot use their energetic power to create any food, not out of inorganic matter. So it's only a matter of time until they run out of commercially packaged food."

"You can starve them out."

"Yes. But it's going to take time. Mortonridge had an agricultural economy. Most towns have some kind of food industry, either a processing factory or warehouse. If the possessed organize properly and ration what they've got,

they can hold out for a while yet. What I'd suggest we do is continue the front line's advance, but modify the direction they're taking. The serjeants can still engage small groupings of possessed in the countryside without too much worry. Larger concentrations in the towns should be left alone. Set up a firebreak around them, leave a garrison to watch, and then just wait until the food runs out."

"Or they pull another disappearing act."

"We believe Ketton happened because the possessed we'd trapped there were pressured into reacting by the assault. There's a big psychological difference between seeing ten thousand serjeants marching towards you and simply squabbling among yourselves over the last sachets of spaghetti bolognese."

"The longer we leave them possessed, the worse condition the bodies will be in. And that's before malnutrition."

"Yes, ma'am. I know that. There's also the problem that if we just simply contract the front line the way we have been doing, we'll push a lot of possessed into one giant concentration in the middle. We'll have to split Mortonridge into sections. That'll mean redeploying the serjeants to drive inland in columns and link up. And if we're leaving serjeants behind as garrisons, the numbers available for front line duties will be depleted just when we need them most."

"More decisions, Ralph. What I said to you the other day about providing political cover still stands. Do what you have to on the ground, leave the rest to me."

"Can I expect any improvement in the medical back-up situation? We're really going to need it if we start sieges."

"The Edenist ambassador has indicated that their habitats will take the worst cancer cases from us, but their void-hawks are badly stretched. Admiral Farquar is looking into making troop transports available, at least they have zero-tau pods in them. In fact, I've asked Alaistair for some Kulu

Corporation colony transport ships. We can start storing patients until the pressure on facilities eases off.”

“That’s something, I suppose.”

Kirsten stood and datavised Sylvester Geray that the audience was over. “The most fundamental rule of modern society: Everything costs more and takes longer. It always has done, and always will do. And there’s nothing you or I can do about it, General.”

Ralph managed a small bow as the doors opened. “I’ll bear it in mind, ma’am.”

“I think I can manage to walk now,” Stephanie said.

Choma and Franklin had carried her back to the serjeant’s camp on an improvised stretcher. She’d lain on the muddy ground beside Tina, a sleeping bag wrapped round her legs and torso and a plasma drip in her arm. Too weak to move, she’d dozed on and off for hours, falling victim to vague anxiety-drenched dreams. Moyo had stayed at her side the whole time, holding her hand and mopping her brow. Her body was reacting to the wound as if she’d come down with a fever.

Eventually, the cold shivers passed, and she lay passively on her back gathering her woozy thoughts back together. Nothing much had changed: the serjeants were still standing motionless all around. Occasionally, a circular patch of air high above them would inflate with white light and pulse briefly before extinguishing. If she closed her eyes, she could sense the flow of energistic power into the zone they designated: an intense focal point that was attempting to tear a gap in the fabric of this realm. The pattern which they applied the energy changed subtly every time, but the result was always the same: dissipation. This realm’s reality remained stubbornly intact.

Choma looked over from where he was examining Tina’s lower spine. “I would rather you did not exert yourself for a

while longer," he said to Stephanie. "You did lose a lot of blood."

"Just like me," Tina said. It was little more than a whisper. Her arm lifted a couple of inches off the ground, hand feeling round through the air.

Stephanie touched her, and they twined fingers. Tina's skin was alarmingly cold.

"Yes, I ought to take things easy, I suppose," Stephanie said. "We won't get better if we stress ourselves."

Tina smiled and closed her eyes, a contented hum stealing away from her lips. "We are getting better, aren't we?"

"That's right." Stephanie kept her voice level, hoping the discipline would also keep her thoughts from fluttering. "Us girls together."

"Just like always. Everybody's been so kind, even Cochrane."

"He wants you back on your feet, so he can carry on trying to get you on your back again."

Tina grinned, then slowly dropped back into a semi-slumber.

Stephanie raised herself onto her elbows, imagining the sleeping bag fluffing up into a large pillow. The fabric rose up to support her spine. Her friends were all there, watching her with kind or mildly embarrassed expressions. But all of them were concerned. "I'm such an idiot," she said bitterly to them. "I should never have gone back to Ketton."

"No way!" Cochrane boomed.

McPhee spat in the direction of the ruined town. "We did the right thing, the human thing."

"It's not you who is to blame," Rana said primly. "That woman is utterly deranged."

"Nobody knew that more than me," Stephanie said. "We should have taken some elementary precautions at least. She could have shot all of us."

“If showing compassion and trust is a flaw, then I’m proud to say I share it with you,” Franklin said.

“I should have guarded myself,” Stephanie said, almost to herself. “It was stupid. A bullet would never have done any damage before; we were careful back on Ombey. I just thought we would all pull together now we’re in the same predicament.”

“That was a big mistake.” Moyo patted her hand warmly. “First you’ve made since we met, so I’ll overlook it.”

She took his hand, and brought it up to her face, kissing his palm lightly. “Thank you.”

“I don’t think being prepared and paranoid would have been much use to us anyway,” Franklin said.

“Why not?”

He held up one of the nutrient soup sachets. The silver coating gradually turned blue and white as the shape rounded out. He was left holding a can of baked beans. “We’re not as strong here. Changing that sachet would have taken an eyeblink back in the old universe. And that’s why they can’t get back.” He indicated the serjeants just as another white blaze of air above them broke apart into expanding rivulets of blue ions. “There isn’t enough power available here to do what we did. Don’t ask me why. Presumably it’s got something to do with being blocked from the beyond. I expect those rifles Ekelund has could cause quite a bit of harm no matter how hard we make the air around ourselves.”

“Any more good news for the patients?” Moyo asked, scathingly.

“No, he’s right,” Stephanie said. “Besides, hiding from the facts now isn’t going to help anyone.”

“How can you be so calm about it? We’re stuck here.”

“Not exactly,” she said. “Being an invalid has had one benefit. Sinon?”

Since the unfortunate trip to Ketton, the serjeants had

been keeping a cautionary watch on the town in case Ekelund made any hostile move. Sinon and Choma had taken the duty, combining it with helping the two patients. It wasn't particularly difficult; from their slightly raised elevation they could see anything moving across the bland stretch of ochre mud between them and the desolated town. There would be plenty of warning if anyone came.

Sinon was checking over a batch of the sniper rifles which the serjeants were equipped with. Not that he expected they would be used. If Ekelund did send her people, the serjeants would simply establish a barrier around their camp similar to the one holding in the air around the island, offering passive, yet insurmountable, resistance.

He put down the sight he was cleaning. "Yes?"

"Are you and the others aware we're actually moving?" Stephanie asked him. For some time, she'd been watching what passed for a sky in this realm. When they'd first arrived, it had appeared to be a uniform glare being emitted from some indefinable distance all around them. But as she'd lain there looking at it, she became aware of subtle variants. There were different shades arching above the flying island, arranged like flaccid waves, or streamers of thin mist. And they were moving, sliding slowly in one direction.

As Stephanie started to describe them, more and more serjeants broke away from their mental union to look upwards. A mild emotion of self-censure washed through the assembled minds. We should have noticed this. Direct observation is the most basic method to gather data on an environment.

By using affinity to link their vision together, the serjeants could scan the sky like some multi-segment telescope. Thousand of irises tracked the same faint wavering irregularity as it passed gently overhead. Parallel minds performed basic mental arithmetic to derive the parallax, putting the aberration roughly fifty kilometres away.

“As the bands of dimmer light seem to be fluctuating slightly in width, we conclude there is some kind of extremely tenuous nebula-like structure enveloping us,” Sinon told the fascinated humans. “However, the source of the light remains indeterminable, so we cannot say for certain if it is the nebula or the island which is moving. But given that the speed appears to be close to a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour, we are tentatively assigning movement to the island.”

“Why?” Rana asked.

“Because it would take a great deal of force to move the nebula at that speed. It’s not impossible, but as the environment outside the island is essentially a vacuum, the problem of what force could be acting on the nebula is multiplied by an order of magnitude. We cannot detect any physical or energy impacting against the island, ergo, there is no ‘wind’ to push it along. We concede that it could still be expanding from its origin point, but as the fluctuations within it indicate a reasonably passive composition, such a possibility is unlikely.”

“So we really are flying,” McPhee said.

“It would appear so.”

“I don’t want to like piss all over your parade or anything,” Cochrane said. “But have you cats ever considered we might be like *falling*?”

“The direction of flow we can see in the nebula makes that unlikely,” Sinon said. “It appears to be a horizontal movement. The most probable explanation is that we emerged at a different relative velocity to this nebula. Besides, if we had been falling since we arrived, then whatever we are falling towards would surely be visible by now. To exert such a powerful gravitational field, it would be massive indeed; several times the size of a super-Jovian gas-giant.”

“You don’t know what kind of mass or gravity are natural in this realm,” McPhee said.

“True. This island is proof of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our gravity hasn’t changed since we arrived. Yet we are no longer part of Ombey. We assumed it has remained normal because the subconscious will of everyone here required that it do so.”

“Holy shit.” Cochrane jumped up, giving the bottom of his wide velvet flares a startled glance. “You mean, we’re only dreaming there’s gravity?”

“Essentially, yes.”

The hippie clenched his hands, and pressed them hard against his forehead. “Oh man, that is a total bummer. I want my gravity to be the real stuff. Listen, you don’t fool around with something as basic as this. You just don’t.”

“Reality is now essentially contained in your mind. If you perceive gravity acting on you, then it is real,” the serjeant said imperturbably.

A large lighted reefer appeared in Cochrane’s hand, and he took a deep drag. “I am heavy,” he chanted. “Heavy, heavy, heavy. And don’t no one forget that. You listening to me, people? Keep thinking it.”

“In any event,” Sinon told McPhee. “If we were in the grip of a gravity field, the nebula would be falling with us. It isn’t.”

“Some good news,” McPhee grunted. “Which is also no’ natural here.”

“Forget the academics of the situation,” Moyo said. “Is there any way we can use it?”

“We intend to set up an observation detail,” Sinon said. “A headland watch, if you like, to see if there is anything out there in front of us. It could be that all the other planets the possessed removed from the universe are here in this realm with us. We will also start using our affinity to call for help;

it's the only method of communication we have that works here."

"Oh man, no way! Who's going to hear that? Come on, you guys, get real."

"Obviously we don't know who, if anyone, will hear. And even if there is a planet out there, we doubt we'd be able to reach its surface intact."

"You mean alive," Moyo said.

"Correct. However, there is one strong possibility for rescue."

"What?" Cochrane yelled.

"If this is the realm where all the possessed yearn to go, then it is conceivable Valisk is here. It might hear our call, and its biosphere would be able to support us. Transferring ourselves inside would be a simple matter."

Cochrane let out a long sigh, blowing long trails of sweet-smelling green smoke from his nostrils. "Hey, yeah, more like it, dude. Good positive thinking. I could dig living in Valisk."

Watching was one thing the humans could do almost as well as the serjeants, so Stephanie and her friends hiked across the final kilometre to the edge of the island to help establish the headland lookout camp. It took them over an hour to get there. The terrain wasn't particularly rough. Crusted mud cracked and squelched under their feet, and they had to go around several pools of stagnant water. But Tina had to be carried the whole way on a stretcher, along with her small array of primitive medical equipment. And even with energetic strength reinforcing her body, Stephanie had to stop for a rest every few minutes.

Eventually, they reached the top of the cliff, and settled themselves down fifty metres short of the precipice. They'd chosen the brow of a mound, which gave them an excellent uninterrupted view out across the glaring emptiness ahead.

Tina was placed so she could look outward by just raising her head, making her feel a part of their enterprise. She smiled a painful tired thanks as they rigged her plasma container up on an old branch beside her. The ten serjeants accompanying them clumped their backpacks together, and sat down in a broad semicircle like a collection of lotus-position Buddhas.

Stephanie eased herself down on a sleeping bag, quietly content the journey had ended. She promptly turned a sachet of nutrient soup into a ham sandwich and bit in hungrily. Moyo sat beside her, allowing his shoulder to rest against hers. They exchanged a brief kiss.

“Groovy,” Cochrane hooted. “Hey, if love is blind, how come lingerie is so popular.”

Rana regarded him in despair. “Oh very tactful.”

“It’s a joke,” the hippie protested. “Moyo doesn’t mind, do you, man?”

“No.” He and Stephanie put their heads together and started giggling.

Giving them a slightly suspicious look, Cochrane settled down on his own sleeping bag. He’d changed the fabric to scarlet and emerald crushed velvet. “So how about a sweep-stake, you dudes? What’s going to come sailing over the horizon first?”

“Flying saucers,” McPhee said.

“No no,” Rana said primly. “Winged unicorns ridden by virgins wearing Cochrane’s frilly white lingerie.”

“Hey, come on, this is serious, you guys. I mean, like our lives depend on it.”

“Funny,” Stephanie mused. “Not so long ago I was wishing death was permanent. Now it could well be, and I’d like to keep on living just that little bit longer.”

“I would like to ask why you believe you will actually die?” Sinon enquired. “You have all indicated that is what will happen in this realm.”

"It's like the gravity, I suppose," Stephanie said. "Death is such a fundamental. That's what we expect at the end of life."

"You mean you are willing your own extinction?"

"Not exactly. Being free of the beyond was only a part of what we wanted. This realm was supposed to be marvelously benign. It probably is, if we were on a planet. We wanted to come here and live forever, just like the legends of heaven. And if not forever, certainly thousands of years. A proper life, like we used to think we had. Life ends in death."

"In heaven, death would not return you to the beyond," Choma ventured.

"Exactly. This life would be better than before. Energistic power gives us the potential to fulfil our dreams. We don't need a manufacturing base, or money. We can make whatever we want just by wishing it into being. If that can't make people happy, nothing can."

"You would never know a sense of accomplishment," Sinon said. "There would be no frontier to challenge you. Electricity is virtually non-existent, denying you any kind of machinery more advanced than a steam engine. You expect to live for a good portion of eternity. And nobody can ever leave. Forgive me, I do not see that as paradise."

"Always the downside," Cochrane muttered.

"You might be right. But even a jail planet trapped in the Eighteenth Century followed by genuine death is better than the beyond."

"Then your energies would surely be better directed in solving the problem of human souls becoming trapped in the beyond."

"Fine words," Moyo said. "How?"

"I don't know. But if some of you would cooperate with us, then avenues of possibility would be opened."

"We are cooperating."

“Not here. Back in the universe where the Confederation’s scientific resources could be marshalled.”

“All you ever did when we were on Ombey was assault us,” Rana said. “And we know the military captured several possessed to vivisect. We could hear their torment echoing through the beyond.”

“If they had cooperated, we wouldn’t have to use force,” Choma said. “And it was not vivisection. We are not barbarians. Do you really think I wish to consign my family to the beyond? We want to help. Self-interest dictates that if nothing else.”

“Another wasted opportunity,” Stephanie said sadly. “They do mount up, don’t they.”

“Someone is coming from the town,” Choma announced. “They are walking towards our encampment.”

Stephanie automatically turned to look back over the mud prairie behind them. She couldn’t see anything moving.

“It is only five people,” Choma said. “They don’t appear hostile.” The serjeant continued to give them a commentary. A squad was dispatched to intercept the newcomers, who claimed they were leaving Ekelund, disillusioned by the way things were in the ruined town. The serjeants directed them to the headland group.

Stephanie watched them approach. She wasn’t surprised to see Delvan was with them. He was dressed in his full nineteen-hundreds army officer regalia, a dark uniform of thick wool with plenty of scarlet, gold, and imperial purple-ribbons.

“Phallogocentric military.” Rana sniffed disdainfully, and made a show of turning round to gaze out over the precipice.

Stephanie gestured to the newcomers to sit down. They all seemed apprehensive about the kind of reception they’d receive.

“You dudes had enough of her, huh?”

“Admirably put,” Delvan conceded. He turned a sleeping

bag into a tartan-pattern blanket, and lounged across it. "She's gone completely batty. Mad with power, of course. Saw it enough times back in the Great War. Any spark of dissension is classed as mutiny. I expect she'll have us shot, if she ever sees us again. Quite literally."

"So you deserted."

"I'm sure she'll see it that way, yes."

"We believe we can keep her forces away," Sinon said.

"Glad to hear it, old chap. Things were getting pretty dire back there. Ekelund and Soi Hon are still preparing for some kind of conflict. She's got the power, you see. Now there's no beyond for souls to flee back into, the threat of discipline is jolly effective. And of course she's in charge of dishing the food out. A whole bunch of silly asses still believe in what she's doing. That's all it ever takes, you know, one leader with a bunch of loyalists to enforce orders. Damn stupid."

"What does she think is going to happen?" Stephanie asked.

"Not too sure about that. I don't think she is, either. Soi Hon keeps sprouting on about how we are as one with the land, and how you serjeant chaps are ruining our harmony. They're egging each other on. Trying to convince the rest of those poor sods over there that everything will be dandy once you've been thrown over the edge. Utter bilge. Any idiot can see this chunk of land isn't going to be the slightest use to anyone no matter who's on it."

"Only Annette could think that this island is worth fighting over."

"I agree," Delvan said. "Sheerest bloody folly. Seen it before. People become obsessed with one idea and can't let go. Don't care how many die in the process. Well, I'm not going to help her. I made that mistake before. Never again."

"Yo, man, welcome to decentville." Cochrane held out a silver flask.

Delvan took a small nip, and smiled appreciatively. "Not bad." He took a larger drink, and passed it on. "What exactly are you all looking for out there?"

"We don't know," Sinon said. "But we'll recognize it when we see it."

Jay spent twenty minutes correcting and castigating the universal provider after breakfast that morning. It kept reabsorbing the dress and extruding a new one for her. The variations were small, but Jay was determined to get it right. Tracy had sat in on the session for the first five minutes, then patted Jay lightly and said: "I think I'll leave the pair of you to it, sweetie."

The design she wanted was simple enough. She'd seen it back in the arcology one day: a loose, pleated reddish skirt that came down to the knee, and blended smoothly up into a square-cut neck top that was bright canary-yellow, the two colours interlocking like opposing flames. It had looked wonderful on the shop mannequin two years ago, expensive and attractive. But when she asked, her mother said no, they couldn't afford it. After that, the dress had come to symbolise everything wrong with Earth. She always knew what she wanted in life, but she could never get to it.

Tracy knocked on the bedroom door. "Haile will be here in a minute, poppet," she called.

"Coming," Jay yelled back. She glared at the globe floating over the wicker chair. "Go on, spit it out."

The dress glided out through the purple surface. It still wasn't right! Jay put her hands on her hips, and sighed in disgust at the provider. "The skirt is still too long. I told you! You can't have the hem level with the knee. That's awful."

"Sorry," the provider murmured meekly.

"Well I'll just have to wear it now. But you're going to get it right when I come back this evening."

She hurriedly pulled the dress on, wincing as it went over

the bruise on her ribs (the edge of the surfboard had whacked her hard when she fell off). Her shoes were totally wrong as well: white sneakers with a tread thick enough to belong on a jungle boot. Blue socks, too. Sighing at her martyrdom one last time, she picked up the straw boater (at least the provider had got that right) and perched it on her head. A quick check in the mirror above the sink to see just how bad the damage was. That was when she saw Prince Dell lying on the bed. She screwed her face up, riddled with guilt. But she couldn't take him with her to Haile's home planet. Just couldn't. The whole flap over the dress was because she was the first human to go there. She felt very strongly that she ought to look presentable. After all, she was kind of like an ambassador for her whole race. She could imagine what her mother would say; carrying a scruffy old toy about with her simply wasn't on.

"Jay!" Tracy called.

"Coming." She burst through the door and scampered out onto the chalet's little veranda. Tracy was standing beside the steps, using a small brass can with a long spout to water one of the trailing geraniums. She gave the little girl a long look.

"Very nice, poppet. Well done, that was a good choice."

"Thank you, Tracy."

"Now just remember, you're going to see lots of new things. Some of them are going to be quite astonishing, I'm sure. Please try not to get too excitable."

"I'll be good. Really."

"I'm sure you will." Tracy kissed her lightly. "Now run along."

Jay started down the steps, then stopped. "Tracy?"

"What is it?"

"How come you've never been to Riynine? Haile said it's really important, one of their capital planets."

"Oh, I don't know. Too busy when that kind of sightsee-

ing would have excited me. Now I've got the time, I can't really be bothered. Seen one technological miracle, seen them all."

"It's not too late," Jay said generously.

"Maybe another day. Now run along, you'll be late. And Jay, remember, if you want the toilet, just ask a provider. No one's going to be embarrassed or offended."

"Yes, Tracy. Bye." She pressed a hand on the top of her boater, and raced off across the sand to the ebony circle.

The old woman watched her go, over-large knuckles gripping the handle of the watering can too tightly. Bright sunlight caught the moisture poised at the corner of her eyes. "Damn," she whispered.

Haile materialized when Jay was still ten metres away from the circle. She whooped, and ran harder.

Friend Jay. It is a good morning.

"It's a wonderful morning!" She came to a halt beside Haile, and flung an arm round the baby Kiint's neck. "Haile! You grow every day."

Very much.

"How long till you get to adult size?"

Eight years. I will itch all that time.

"I'll scratch you."

You are my true friend. Shall we go?

"Yes!" She did a little jump, smiling delightedly. "Come on, come on!"

Blackness plucked both of them away.

The falling sensation didn't bother Jay at all now. She just shut her eyes and held her breath. One of Haile's appendages was coiled comfortingly round her wrist.

Weight returned quickly. Her soles touched a solid floor, and her knees bent slightly to absorb the impact. Light was shining on her closed eyelids.

We are here.

“I know.” She was suddenly nervous about opening her eyes.

I live there.

Haile’s tone was so eager Jay just had to look. The sun was low in the sky, still casting off its daybreak tint. Long shadows flowed out behind them across the large ebony circle they’d arrived on. It was out in the open air, with the rumpled landscape sweeping away for what seemed like a hundred kilometres or more to the horizon. Flat-cone mountains of pale rock, crinkled with pale-purple gorges, rose regally out from the lavish mantle of blue-green vegetation; not strung out in a range as normal, but spread out across the whole expanse of steppe. Large serpentine rivers and tributary streams threading through the vales glinted silver in the fresh sunlight, while tissue-fine sheets of pearl-white mist wound around the lower slopes of the mountains. The vista was nature at its most striking. Yet it wasn’t natural; this was what she imagined the inside of an Edenist habitat would be like, but on an infinitely larger canvas. There was nothing ugly permitted here; designed geology ensured this world would have bayous rather than dark, stagnant marshes, languid downs instead of lifeless lava fields.

That didn’t stop it from being truly lovely, though.

There were buildings nestled amid the contours; mainly Kiint domes of different sizes, but with some startlingly human-like skyscraper towers mingled among them. There were also structures that looked more like sculptures than buildings: a bronze spiral leading nowhere, emerald spheres clinging together like a cluster of soap bubbles. Each of the buildings was set by itself; there were no roads, or even dirt tracks as far as she could see. Nevertheless, undeniably, she was in a city; one that was conceived on a vaster, grander scale than anything the Confederation could ever achieve. A post-urban conquest of the land.

“So where do you live?” she asked.

Haile's tractamorphic arm uncoiled from her wrist and straightened out to point. The ebony circle was surrounded by a broad meadow of glossy aquamarine grass-analogue bordered by clumps of trees. They at least looked like natural forests rather than carefully composed parkland. Several different species were growing together, black octagonal leaves and yellow parasols competing for light and space; long smooth boles, capped with a fuzzy ball of pink fern-fronds, had stabbed up from the tops of more bushy varieties, resembling giant willow reeds.

A steel-blue dome was visible through the gaps in the trees half a kilometre away. It didn't look much bigger than the ones back in Tranquillity.

"That's nice," Jay said politely.

It has difference to my first home in the all around. The universal providers have eased life greatly here.

"I'm sure. So where are all your friends?"

Come. Vyano has been told about you. He would like to initiate greetings.

Jay gasped as she turned to follow the baby Kiint. There was a huge lake behind her, with what she assumed could only be the castle of some magical Elf lord. Dozens of featureless, tapering white towers rose from its centre; the tallest spires were those right at the centre of the clump, easily measuring over a kilometre high. Delicate single-span bridges wove their way through the gaps between the towers, curving around each other without ever touching. As far as she could understand it, they followed no pattern or logic; sometimes a tower would have as many as ten, all at different levels, while others had only a couple. The whole edifice scintillated with brilliant red and gold flashes as the strengthening sunlight slithered slowly across its quartz-like surface. It was as dignified as it was beautiful.

"What is that?" she asked as she hurried after Haile.

This is a Corpus locus, a place for knowledge to grow and ripen.

“You mean like a school?”

The baby Kiint hesitated. **Corpus says yes.**

“Do you go to it?”

No. I am still receiving many primary educationals from the Corpus and my parents. First I must understand them fully. That is a hardness. When I have understanding I can begin to expand my own thoughts.

“Oh, I get it. That’s like the way we do it, too. I have to receive a lot of didactic courses before I can go on to university.”

You will go to university?

“I suppose so. I don’t know how on Lalonde, though. There might be one in Durringham. Mummy will tell me when she comes back and things get better.”

I hope for you.

They had reached the lake’s shore. Its water was very dark, even when Jay stood on the shaggy grass-analogue right at the edge and peered over cautiously she couldn’t see the bottom. The surface reflected her image back at her. Then it started to ripple slightly.

Haile was walking out towards the white towers. Jay paused for a moment to watch her friend. There was something not quite right about the scene, something obvious which her mind couldn’t quite catch.

Haile was about ten meters from the shore when she realized Jay wasn’t following. She swung her head round to look at the girl. **Vyano is in here. Do you not want to meet him?**

Very slowly, Jay cleared her throat. “Haile, you’re walking on the water.”

The baby Kiint looked down at where her feet-pads were dinting the surface of the lake. **Yes. Query puzzlement. Why do you find wrongness?**

“Because it’s water!” Jay shouted.

There is stability for those wishing to attend the locus. You will not fall in.

Jay glared at her friend, though intense curiosity was a strong temptation. Tracy’s warning rang clear in her mind. And Haile would never trick her. She put a toe cautiously on the water. The dark surface bent ever so slightly as she began to apply pressure, but her shoe couldn’t actually break the surface tension and get wet. She put even more weight on her foot, allowing her whole sole to rest on the water. It supported her without any apparent strain.

A couple of tentative steps, and Jay glanced from side to side, giggling. “This is brilliant. You don’t need to build bridges and stuff.”

You have happiness now?

“You bet.” She started to walk towards Haile. Slow ripples expanded out from under her shoes, clashing and shimmering away. Jay couldn’t stop the giggles. “We should have had this in Tranquillity. We could have got out to that island, then.”

Rightness.

Smiling happily, Jay let Haile’s arm tip wrap round her fingers, and together they walked over the lake. After a couple of minutes the towers of the locus seemed no closer. Jay began to wonder just how big they were.

“Where’s Vyano, then?”

He comes.

Jay scanned the base of the towers. “I can’t see anybody.”

Haile stopped, and looked down at her feet, head swaying from side to side. **I have sight.**

Promising herself she wouldn’t yelp or anything, Jay looked down. There was movement beneath her feet. A small pale-grey mountain was sliding through the water, twenty metres beneath the surface. Her heart did sort of go *thud*, but she clamped her jaw shut and stared in amazement.

The creature must have been bigger than any of the whales in her didactic zoology memories. There were more flippers and fins than Earth's old behemoths, too. A smaller version of the creature was swimming along beside it, a child. It curved away from its parent's flank, and started to race upwards, its fins wriggling enthusiastically. The big parent rolled slowly, and dived off into the depths.

"Is this Vyano?" Jay exclaimed.

Yes. He is a cousin.

"What do you mean cousin? He's nothing like you."

Humans have many sub-species.

"No we don't!"

There are Adamists and Edenists, white skin, dark skin; more shades of hair than colours in the rainbow. This I have seen for myself.

"Well, yes, but . . . Look here, there's none of us live underwater. That's just totally different."

Corpus says human scientists have experimented with lungs that can extract oxygen from water.

Jay recognized that particular mental tone of pure stubbornness. "They probably have," she conceded.

The aquatic Kiint child was over fifteen metres long; flatter than a terrestrial whale, with a thick tractamorphic tail that was contracting into a bulb as it neared the surface. Its other appendages, six buds of tractamorphic flesh, were spaced along its flanks. To help propel it through the water, they were currently compressed into semicircular fans that undulated with slow power. Perhaps the most obvious pointer to a shared heritage with landbound Kiint was the head, which was simply a more streamlined version that had six gills replacing the breathing vents. The same large semi-mournful eyes were shielded with a milky membrane.

Vyano broke surface with a burst of spray and energetic waves, which churned outward. Jay was suddenly trying to keep her balance as the lake's surface bounced about under-

neath her like some hyperlastic trampoline. Haile was bobbing up and down beside her, in almost as much trouble, which was slightly reassuring. When the swell had eased off, a mound of glistening leaden flesh was floating a couple of metres away. The aquatic Kiint formshifted one of its flank appendages into an arm, tip spreading out into the shape of a human hand.

Jay touched palms.

Welcome to Riynine, Jay Hilton.

“Thank you. You have a lovely world.”

It has much goodness. Haile has shared her memories of your Confederation worlds. They are interesting also. I would like to visit after I am released from parental proscription.

“I’d like to go back, too.”

Your plight has been spoken of. I grieve with you for all that has been lost.

“Richard says we’ll pull through. I suppose we will.”

Richard Keaton is attuned to Corpus, Haile said. He would not tell untruths.

“How could you visit the Confederation? Does that jump machinery of yours work underwater as well?”

Yes.

“But there wouldn’t be much for you to see, I’m afraid. Everything interesting happens on land. Oh, except for Atlantis, of course.”

Land is always small and clotted with identical plants. I would see the life that teems below the waves where nothing remains the same. Every day is joyfully different. You should modify yourself and come to dwell among us.

“No thank you very much,” she said primly.

That is a sadness.

“I suppose what I mean is, you wouldn’t be able to see

what humans have achieved. Everything we've built and done is on the land or in space."

Your machinery is old to us. It holds little attraction. That is why my family returned to the water.

"You mean you're like our pastorals?"

I apologise. My understanding of human references is not complete.

"Pastorals are people who turned away from technology, and lived life as simply as they can. It's a very primitive existence, but they don't have modern worries, either."

All races of Kiint embrace technology, Haile said. The providers cannot fail now; they give us everything and leave us free.

"This is the bit about you which I don't really get. Free to do what?"

To live.

"All right, try this. What are you two going to be when you grow up?"

I shall be me.

"No no." Jay would have liked to stamp her foot for emphasis. Given what she was standing on, she thought better of it. "I mean, what profession? What do Kiints spend all day doing?"

You know my parentals were helping with the Laymil project.

All activity has one purpose, Vyano said. We enrich ourselves with knowledge. This can come from simply interpreting the observed universe or extrapolating thoughts to their conclusion. Both of these are complementary. Enrichment is the result life is dedicated to. Only then can we transcend with confidence.

"Transcend? You mean die?"

Body lifeloss, yes.

"I'm sure doing nothing but thinking is all really good for

you. But it seems really boring to me. People need things to keep them occupied.”

Difference is beauty, Vyano said. There is more difference in the water than on land. Our domain is where nature excels, it is the womb of every planet. Now do you see why we chose it over the land?

“Yes. I suppose so. But you can’t all spend the whole time admiring new things. Somebody has to make sure things work smoothly.”

That is what the providers do. We could not ascend to this cultural level until after our civilization’s machinery had evolved to its current state. Providers provide, under the wisdom of Corpus.

“I see, I guess. You have Corpus like Edenists have Consensus.”

Consensus is an early version of Corpus. You will evolve to our state one day.

“Really?” Jay said. Arguing philosophy with a Kiint wasn’t really what she had in mind when she wanted to visit Rynine. She gestured round, trying to indicate the locus and all the other extravagant buildings: an act of human body language which was probably wasted on the young aquatic Kiint. “You mean humans are going to wind up living like this?”

I cannot speak for you. Do you wish to live as we do?

“It’d be nice not having to worry about money and stuff.” She thought of the Aberdale villagers, their enthusiasm for what they were building. “But we need concrete things to do. That’s the way we are.”

Your nature will guide you to your destiny. It is always so.

“I suppose.”

I sense we are kindred, Jay Hilton. You wish to see newness every day. That is why you are here on Rynine. Query.

“Yes.”

You should visit the Congressions. That is the best place for a view of the physical achievement which you value so.

She looked at Haile. “Can we?”

It will have much enjoyment, Haile said.

“Thanks, Vyano.”

The aquatic Kiint began to sink back below the water. **Your visit is a newness which has enriched me. I am honoured, Jay Hilton.**

When Haile had told Jay that Riynine was a capital world, the little girl had imagined a cosmopolitan metropolis playing host to a multitude of Kiint and thousands of exciting xenocs. The Corpus locus was certainly grandiose, but hardly kicking.

Her impression changed when she popped out of the black teleport bubble onto one of Riynine’s Congressions. Although the physical concept was hardly extravagant for a race which had such extraordinary resources, there was something both anachronistic and prideful in the gigantic cities which floated serenely through the planet’s atmosphere. Splendidly intricate colossi of crystal and shining metal that proclaimed the true nature of the Kiint to any visitor; more so than the ring of manufactured planets. No race which had the slightest doubt about its own abilities would dare to construct such a marvel.

The one in which Jay found herself was over twenty kilometres broad. Its nucleus was a dense aggregation of towers and circuitous columns of light like warped rainbows; from that, eight solid crenated peninsulas radiated outwards, themselves bristling with short flat spines. The bloated tufts of cloud it encountered parted smoothly to flow around its extremities, leaving it at the centre of a doldrum zone whose clarity seemed to magnify the landscape ten kilometres

below. Shoals of flying craft spun around it, their geometries and technologies as varied as the species they carried; starships equipped with atmospheric drives cavorted along the same flightpaths as tiny ground-to-orbit planes. All of them were landing or taking off from the spines on the peninsulas.

Jay had arrived at one end of an avenue which ran along the upper reaches of a peninsula. It was made from a smooth sheet of some burgundy mineral, host to a web of glowing opalescent threads that flowed just below the surface. Every junction in the web sprouted a tall jade triangle, like the sculpture of a pine tree. A roof of crystal arched overhead, heartbreakingly similar to an arcology dome.

Jay held on to Haile's arm with a tight grip. The avenue thronged with xenocs, hundreds of species walking, sliding, and in several cases flying along together in a huge multi-coloured river of life.

All her pent up breath was exhaled in a single overwhelmed "Wow!" They hurried off the teleport circle, allowing a family of tall, feathered octopeds to use it. Globes similar to providers, but in many different colours, glided sedately overhead. She sniffed at the air, which contained so many shifting scents all she could really smell was something like dry spice. Slow bass grumbles, quick chittering, whistles, and human(ish) speech gurgled loudly about her, blurring together into a single background clamour.

"Where do they all come from? Are they all your observers?"

None of them are observers. These are the species who live in this galaxy, and some others. All are friends of Kiint.

"Oh. Right." Jay walked over to the edge of the avenue. It was guarded by a tall rail, as if it were nothing more than an exceptionally big balcony. She stood on her toes and peeked over. They were above a compact city, or possibly a district of industrial structures. There didn't appear to be any move-

ment in the lanes between the buildings. Right in front of her, spacecraft swished along parallel to the peninsula's crystal roof as they vectored in on their landing sites.

The Congression was high enough above the land to lose fine details amid the broader colour swathes of mountains and savannahs. But as though to compensate, the curvature of the horizon could be seen, a splinter of purple neon separating the land and the sky. A coastline was visible far ahead. Or behind. Jay wasn't sure which way they were travelling. If they were.

She contented herself with watching the spacecraft flying past. "So what are they all doing here, then?"

Different species come here to perform exchanges. Some have ideas to give, some require knowledge to make ideas work. Corpus facilitates this. The Congressions act as junctions for those who seek and those who wish to give. Here they can find each other.

"That all sounds terribly noble."

We have opened our worlds to this act for a long time. Some races we have known since the beginning of our history, others are new. All are welcome.

"Apart from humans."

You are free to visit.

"But nobody knows about Riynine. The Confederation thinks Jobis is your homeworld."

I have sadness. If you can come here, you are welcome.

Jay eyed a quartet of adult Kiint walking along the avenue. They were accompanied by what looked suspiciously like spectres of some slender reptilians dressed in one-piece coveralls. They were certainly translucent, she could see things through them. "I get it. It's sort of like a qualifying test. If you're smart enough to get here, you're smart enough to take part."

Confirm.

“That’d be really helpful for us, learning new stuff. But I still don’t think people want to spend their life philosophising. Well . . . one or two like Father Horst, but not many.”

Some come to the Congressions asking for our aid, and to improve their technology.

“You give them that, machines and things?”

Corpus responds to everyone at a relative level.

“That’s why the provider wouldn’t give me a starship.”

You are lonely. I brought you here. I have sorrow.

“Hey,” she put her arm round the baby Kiint’s neck, and stroked her breathing vents. “I’m not sorry you brought me here. This is something not even Joshua has seen, and he’s been everywhere in the Confederation. I’ll be able to impress him when I get back. Won’t that be something?” She gazed out at the fanciful craft again. “Come on, let’s find a provider. I could do with some ice cream.”

17

Rocio waited a day after the Organization's convoy returned from the antimatter station before he abandoned his routine high orbit patrol above New California and swallowed out to Almaden. Radar pulses from the asteroid's proximity radar washed across *Mindori*, returning an odd fuzzy blob on the display screens. It fluctuated in time with the human heart. The visual-spectrum sensors showed the huge dark harpy with its wings folded, hovering two kilometres out from the counter-rotating spaceport. A glitter of red light could just been seen through eyelids that weren't completely shut.

In turn, Rocio focused his own senses on Almaden's docking ledge. Each of the pedestals had been struck by laser fire, spilling a sludge of metal and plastic out across the rock where it had solidified into a grey clinker-like puddle with a surface badly pocked by burst gas bubble craters. The nutrient fluid refinery and its three storage tanks had also been targeted.

Rocio shared his view with Pran Soo who was back at Monterey. **What do you think?** he asked his fellow hellhawk.

The refinery isn't as badly damaged as it looks. It's only the outer layers of machinery which have been struck. Etchells just ripped his laser backwards and forwards over it, which no doubt looked spectacular. Lots of molten metal spraying everywhere, and tubes detonating under the pressure. But the core remains intact, and that's where the actual chemical synthesis mechanism is.

Typical.

Yes. Fortunately. There's no practical reason why this can't be returned to operational status. Providing you can get the natives to agree.

They'll agree, Rocio said. We have something they want: ourselves.

Good luck.

Rocio shifted his senses to the counter-rotating spaceport, a small disk whose appearance suggested it was still under construction. It was mostly naked girders containing tanks and fat tubes, with none of the protective plating that spaceports usually boasted. Three ships were docked: a pair of cargo tugs and the *Lucky Logorn*. The inter-orbit craft had returned ten hours earlier. If the Organization lieutenants in the asteroid were going to discipline the crew, they would have done it by now.

Rocio opened a short range channel. "Deebank?"

"Good to see you."

"Likewise. I'm glad you haven't been thrown out of your new body."

"Let's just say, there are more people sympathetic to my cause than there are to the Organization."

"What happened to the lieutenants?"

"Complaining to Capone direct from the beyond."

"That was risky. He doesn't take rebellion kindly. You may find several frigates arriving to make the point."

"We figure he's got enough problems with the antimatter

right now. In any case, the only real option he's got left against this asteroid is to nuke us. If that looks likely, we'll shift out of this universe and take our chances. We don't want to do that."

"I understand perfectly. I don't want you to do that, either."

"Fair enough, you and I both have our own problems. How can we help each other?"

"If we're going to break free from the Organization we require an independent source of nutrient fluid. In return for you repairing your refinery, we are prepared to transport your entire population to a planet."

"New California won't take us."

"We can use one which the Organization has already infiltrated. Myself and my friends have enough spaceplanes to make the transfer work. But it will have to be soon. Without the antimatter station there will be no new infiltrations, and those that have been seeded will not remain in this universe for much longer."

"We can start repairing the refinery right away. But if we all leave, how are you going to maintain it?"

"Spare parts must be manufactured in sufficient quantity to keep the refinery functional for a decade. You will also have to adapt your mechanoids for remote waldo operation."

"You're not asking for much."

"I believe it's an equal trade."

"Okay, cards on the table. My people here say the components shouldn't be any problem, our industrial stations can handle that. But we can't produce the kind of electronics which the refinery needs. Can you get hold of them for us?"

"Datavise a list over. I will make enquiries."

Jed and Beth had listened to the exchange in the stateroom cabin they'd moved into. They were spending a lot of time in the neatly furnished compartment by themselves. In bed.

There wasn't a lot else to do since Jed's mission to resupply their food stocks. And despite Rocio's assurances that his plans were progressing smoothly, they couldn't shake off their sense of impending disaster. Such conditions had completely suppressed their inhibitions.

They were lying together on top of the bunk in post-coital languor, stroking each other in cozy admiration. Sunlight streaming in through the wooden slats that covered the port-hole was painting warm stripes across them, helping to dry damp skin.

"Hey, Rocio, you really think you can make this deal swing?" she asked.

The mirror above the teak dresser shimmered to reveal Rocio's face. "I think so. Both of us want something from the other. That is the usual basis for trade."

"How many hellhawks want in?"

"A sufficient number."

"Oh yeah? If a whole load of you bugger off, Kiera's gonna do her best to cripple you. You'll have to defend Almaden for a start. You'll need combat wasps for that."

"Good heavens, do you really think so?"

Beth glared at him.

"There are no suitable asteroid settlements available in other star systems," Rocio continued. "This is our one chance to secure an independent future for ourselves, despite its proximity to the Organization. We will make quite sure we're capable of defending that future, never fear."

Jed sat up, making sure the blanket was covering his groin when he faced the mirror (Beth never did understand that brand of shyness). "So where do we fit in?"

"I don't know yet. I may not need you, after all."

"You gonna turn us in to Capone?" Beth asked, hoping her voice didn't waver.

"That would be difficult. How would I explain your presence on board?"

“So you just let Deebank and his mates in here to take care of us, huh?”

“Please, we are not all like Kiera. I had hoped you’d realize that by now. I have no desire to see the children possessed.”

“So where are you going to let us off?” Beth asked.

“I have no idea. Although I’m sure the Edenists will be happy enough to retrieve you from my corrupt clutches. Details can be worked out when we have locked down our own position. And I have to say that I’m disappointed by your attitude, given what I saved you from.”

“Sorry, Rocio,” Jed said immediately.

“Yeah, didn’t mean no offence for sure,” Beth said, one degree above sarcasm.

The image faded, and they looked at each other. “You shouldn’t annoy him so much,” Jed protested. “Jeeze, babe, we’re like totally dependent on him. Air, water, heat, even bloody gravity. Stop pushing!”

“I was just asking.”

“Well don’t!”

“Yes, sir. Forgot for a moment that you were in charge of everything.”

“Don’t,” Jed said remorsefully. He reached out and stroked her cheek tenderly. “I never said I was in charge, I’m just worried.”

Beth knew full well that when he looked at her body the way he was doing now, what he actually saw was the memory of Kiera’s fabulous figure. It didn’t bother her any more, for reasons she didn’t question too closely. Need overcoming dignity, most likely. “I know. Me too. Good job we’ve found something to keep our minds off it the whole time, huh?”

His grin was sheepish. “Too right.”

“I’d better get going. The kids’ll be wanting their supper.”

Navar squealed and pointed when they walked into the galley. "You've been at it again!"

Jed tried to bat her hand away, but she dodged back, laughing and sneering. He could hardly rebuke her; he and Beth hadn't exactly been secretive about what they were doing.

"Can we eat now?" Gari asked plaintively. "I've got everything ready."

Beth gave the preparations a quick inspection. The girls and Webster had prepared six trays for the induction oven, mixing food packets together. Potato cakes with rehydrated egg mash and cubes of carrot. "Well done." She keyed in the quantity on the oven's control panel, and activated it. "Where's Gerald?"

"Going crazy in the main lounge. What else?"

Beth gave the girl a sharp glance.

Navar refused to give ground. "He is," she insisted.

"You dish the food out," Beth told Jed. "I'll go see what the problem is."

Gerald was standing in front of the lounge's large viewport, palms pressed against it, as though he was trying to push the glass out of its frame.

"Hey there, Gerald, mate. Supper's ready."

"Is that where she is?"

"Where, mate?"

"The asteroid."

Beth stood behind him, looking over his shoulder. Almaden was centred in the viewport. A dark lump of rock, rotating slowly against the starscape.

"No mate, sorry. That's Almaden, not Monterey. Marie isn't in there."

"I thought it was the other one. Monterey, where she is."

Beth gave his hands a close inspection. The knuckles were lightly grazed from pounding on something. Fortunately, they weren't bleeding. She gently put her hand on his

forearm. Every muscle was locked rigid beneath her fingers, trembling. His forehead was beaded in sweat.

“Come on, mate,” she said quietly. “Let’s get some tucker down you. Do you good.”

“You don’t understand!” He was near to tears. “I have to get back to her. I don’t even remember when I saw her last. My head is so full of darkness now. I hurt.”

“I know, mate.”

“Know!” he screamed. “What do you know? She’s my baby, my beautiful little Marie. And she makes her do things, all the time.” He shuddered violently, his eyelids fluttering. For a moment, Beth thought he was going to fall over. She tightened her grip as he swayed unsteadily.

“Gerald? Jeeze . . .”

His eyes abruptly sprang open, hunting frantically round the room. “Where are we?”

“This is the *Mindori*,” she said calmly. “We’re on board, and we’re trying to find a way to get back to Monterey.”

“Yes.” He nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s right. We have to go there. She’s there, you know. Marie’s there. I have to find her. I can free her, I know how to. Loren told me before she left. I can help her escape.”

“That’s good.”

“I’m going to talk to the captain. Explain. We have to fly back there right away. He’ll do it, he’ll understand. She’s my baby.”

Beth stood completely still as he turned round sharply, and hurried out. She let out a long despondent breath. “Oh shit.”

Jed and the three kids were sitting round the small bar in the galley, spooning up the pinkish mush from their trays. They all gave Beth an apprehensive glance as she came in. She tilted her head at Jed, and retreated back into the corridor. He followed her out.

"We've got to get him to a doctor, or something," she said in a low voice.

"Told you that the day we first saw him, doll. The fella's a genuine braincrash."

"No, it's not just that, not just in his head. He's really ill. His skin's all hot, burning, like he's got a fever, or a virus."

"Oh *Jeeze*, Beth." Jed pressed his forehead against the cool metal wall. "Think, will you. What the hell can we do? We're inside a bleeding hellhawk fifty trillion light-years from anyone who'd give a toss about us. There's nothing we can do. I'm real sorry about him catching some xenoc disease. But all I'm worried about now is that he doesn't infect us with it."

She hated him for being right. Being completely impotent, not to mention dependent on Rocio, was tough. "Come on." With a final check on the kids to make sure they were eating, she hauled Jed into the lounge. "Rocio."

A translucent image of his face materialized in the viewport. "Now what?"

"We've got a real problem with Gerald. Reckon he's sick with something. It's not good."

"He's here on your insistence. What do you want me to do about it?"

"I dunno for sure. Have you got a zero-tau pod? We could shove him in there until we leave. The Edenist doctors can give him a proper going over then."

"No. There's no working zero-tau pod anymore. The possessed are understandably nervous about such items; the first ones to come on board broke it up."

"Bugger! What do we do?"

"You'll have to nurse him along as best you can."

"Terrific," Jed muttered.

Almaden began to slide across the viewport.

"Hey, where are we going now?" Jed asked. The asteroid vanished below the rim, leaving only stars which were slic-

ing thin arcs across the blackness as the hellhawk accelerated in a tight curve.

“Back to my patrol route,” Rocio said, “and hope no one has noticed my absence. Deebank has datavised the list of electronic components they need to get the nutrient refinery functioning again. They’re all available at Monterey.”

“Well glad to hear it, mate,” Jed said automatically. A cold thought ran clean through his brain. “Wait a minute. How are you going to get the Organization to hand them over?”

Rocio’s translucent image winked, then vanished.

“Oh *Jeeze*. Not again!”

In peacetime, Avon’s starship emergence zones were positioned round the planet and its necklace of high-orbit asteroids at convenient distances to the stations and ports which they served. The one exception was Trafalgar, which, of necessity, was always on alert for suspicious arrivals. Following the official outbreak of war, or as the diplomats in Regina preferred: crisis situation, all the emergence zones were automatically shifted further away from their port. Every Confederation almanac carried the alternative coordinates, and the onus was on captains to ensure they were aware of any official declaration.

Emergence zone DR45Y was situated three hundred thousand kilometres away from Trafalgar, designated for use by civil starships flying with government authorization. The sensor satellites which scanned it were no less proficient than those covering the zones designated for various types of warships, there was after all no telling what vessels an enemy might employ. So when the gravitonic distortion scanners began to pick up the familiar signature of a ship starting to emerge, additional sensor batteries were brought on line within milliseconds. The rapidly expanding warp in space-time was the focus of five SD weapons platforms.

Trafalgar's SD control also vectored four patrol voidhawks towards it and put another ten on rapid-response alert status.

The event horizon expanded out to thirty-eight metres and vanished, revealing the starship's hull. Visual-spectrum sensors showed the SD controllers a standard globe coated with dull nulltherm foam. All perfectly normal, except for a single missing hexagonal hull plate. And the ship was impressively close to the centre of the zone; the captain must have taken a great deal of care aligning his last jump coordinate. Such a manoeuvre indicated someone anxious to please.

Radar pulses triggered the starship's transponder. Trafalgar's AI took under a millisecond to identify the response code as the *Villeneuve's Revenge*, captained by André Duchamp.

Following the standard transponder code, the *Villeneuve's Revenge* promptly transmitted its official flight authorization code issued by the Ethenthia government.

Both codes were linked to grade two security protocols. The CNIS duty officer in Trafalgar's SD command centre took immediate charge of the situation.

Another, altogether quieter, alert was initiated within the asteroid's secure communication net, of which the CNIS knew nothing. The televisions, radios, and holographic windows inside The Village's clubhouse abandoned their nostalgiafest to warn the observers of this latest development.

Tracy sat up to stare at the screen. The large lounge had fallen very quiet. Colourful SD sensor imagery was scrolling down the big Sony television set as various weapons locked on to the starship's fuselage. She backed up that somewhat poor supply of data with a more comprehensive summary from Corpus as it gathered information from a variety of sources in and around Trafalgar.

"They won't let the ship get near them," Saska said in a hopeful voice. "They're far too paranoid right now, thank the saints."

“I hope you’re right,” Tracy muttered. A quick check with Corpus showed her Jay was still in the Congression with Haile. Best place for her right now; Tracy definitely didn’t want her to pick up on all their doubts and worries. “Hell alone knows how Pryor managed to worm his way off Ethenthia.”

“Ethenthia’s possessed could probably be cowed with Capone’s name,” Galic said. “Bluffing your way into the headquarters of the Confederation Navy is a very different matter.”

The CNIS duty officer appeared to share the thought. She immediately declared a C4 condition, prohibiting the suspected hostile starship from moving, and requesting the patrol voidhawks to interdict. Warnings were datavisised directly to the *Villeneuve’s Revenge*, making very clear what action would be taken if SD Command’s orders were not obeyed. They were then prohibited from using any propulsion system, not even the RCS thrusters to lock attitude, nor were they permitted to extend their thermo-dump panels, no more sensor booms were to be extended, or any other fuselage hatch activated. Non-propulsive vapour dumps were allowed, but prior warning should be given. Once a grudging Captain Duchamp had confirmed his compliance, the four patrol voidhawks accelerated in towards the inert ship at a respectable five gees.

Kingsley Pryor datavisised his personal code to the CNIS duty officer, identifying himself as a Confederation Navy officer. “I’ve managed to elude New California to get here,” he told her. “I secured a lot of tactical data on the Organization fleet before I left. It should be delivered to Admiral Lalwani as soon as possible.”

“We are already aware of your period with Capone,” the duty officer said. “Our undercover operative Erick Thakara’s report of his time crewing with the *Villeneuve’s Revenge* was very thorough.”

“Erick is here? That’s good, we thought he’d been caught.”

“He’s filed charges of desertion and collaboration against you.”

“Well even if I have to undergo a Court Martial to prove my innocence, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m carrying a great deal of useful information. The admiral will want me debriefed properly.”

“You will be. The patrol voidhawks will escort you to a secure dock once we have confirmed your ship’s status.”

“I assure you, there are no possessed on board. Nor is this ship a military threat. I’m amazed we even managed to get here at all given the state some of our systems are in. Captain Duchamp is not the most proficient of officers.”

“We know that, too.”

“Very well. You should also be aware there is a nuclear device embedded in hull plate 4-36-M. It has a decimal three kiloton yield. I have the control timer’s reset code, and it’s currently seven hours from detonation.”

“Yes, that’s Capone’s standard method of ensuring compliance. We’ll confirm its location with a remote probe from one of the voidhawks.”

“Fine; what do you want me to do?”

“Nothing at all. The hull plate will be removed before you can proceed to dock. Duchamp must open the flight computer to us, and remove all access restrictions. You will be given further instructions as we proceed with our analysis.”

On the bridge, Kingsley removed the straps securing him to his acceleration couch, and gave the seething captain a detached glance. “Do as she requests. Now.”

“But of course,” André growled. A thousand times during the flight he had considered simply refusing to go any further, calling Pryor’s bluff. Arriving at Trafalgar was going to put an end to his life, permanently. The *anglo* Navy knew too much about him now, thanks to Thakara. They would take his ship and probably his liberty away from him, no

matter how much money he spent on villainous lawyers. This was one port where he had no favours to call in at all. But each time the option popped up into his head, one nasty little aspect of cowardice prevented him from actually putting thoughts into deeds. Refusal meant certain death from the nuke in the hull plate, and André Duchamp could no longer face that fate as confidently as he once had. He had stared the possessed in the eye and defeated them (not that the Confederation navy had ever thanked him for that, oh no), and more than most he knew how real they were. With that came the cold knowledge of what awaited his soul. Any fate, however humiliating, had suddenly become more attractive than death.

André datavised a set of instructions into the flight computer, enabling the SD command centre to take control. The procedure was well established now. All internal sensors were activated, verifying the number of crew on board, establishing their identities. They were then required to datavise files and physiological data to SD Command; stage one in corroborating that they weren't possessed. Stage two would be an intensive sensor examination once they had docked.

Once SD Command had provisionally classified the five people on board as non-possessed, diagnostic routines were run through every processor in the starship. In the case of the *Villeneuve's Revenge* this procedure wasn't quite as smooth as it would be in a ship that adhered closer to CAB maintenance requirements. Several legally required systems remained stubbornly off-line. However, SD Command confirmed that there were no telltale glitches in those processors which were working. This, coupled with an analysis of the (admittedly incomplete) environmental system logs, allowed them to assign a ninety-five per cent probability that the starship wasn't smuggling any possessed.

André was allowed to deploy the thermo-dump panels, re-

lieving the heat sinks. Thrusters fired, stabilising their attitude. An MSV from one of the voidhawks slid out of its hangar and manoeuvred itself over hull plate 4-36-M. Waldo arms reached out, ready to detach the section.

Tracy watched the camera feed on the big Sony television screen as the anti-torque keys engaged around the panel's rim. "I don't believe this!" she exclaimed. "They think it's safe!"

"Be reasonable," Arnie said. "Those precautions are good enough to locate any possessed skulking on board."

"Except Quinn Dexter," Saska grumbled.

"Let's not complicate matters. The fact is, the navy is being very prudent."

"Rubbish," Tracy snapped. "That CNIS officer is criminally incompetent. She must know Capone had exerted some kind of coercive hold over Pryor, yet she's not taken that into account. They'll let that bloody ship dock once they've unscrewed the hull plate."

"We can't stop them," Saska warned. "You know the rules."

"Capone and his influence are waning," Tracy said. "No matter what delusory victory he inflicts he cannot regain what he's lost, not now. I say we cannot permit him this gesture. The overall psychological dynamic of the situation has to be taken into account. The Confederation must survive, not only that it must be the entity which brings this crisis to a successful resolution. And the Navy is the embodiment of the Confederation, especially now. It must not be damaged. Not to the extent Pryor's mission is capable of."

"You're being as arrogant as Capone," Galic said. "Your thoughts, your opinions, are the ones which must prevail."

"We all know very well what has to prevail," she replied. "There has to be a valid species-wide government mechanism to implement the kind of policies which are going to be needed afterwards, and oversee the transition phase. For all

its faults, the Confederation can be made to work properly. If it fails the human race will fragment, socially, politically, economically, religiously, and ideologically. We'll be right back where we were in the pre-starflight age. It'll take centuries to recover, to get us back to where we are today. By that time we should have joined the transcendent-active population of this universe."

"We?"

"Yes. We. We privileged few. Just because we were engineered here doesn't mean we're not human. Two thousand years spent walking amongst our own people makes this the alien world."

"Now you're being melodramatic."

"Call it what you like. But I know what I am."

The internal sensors on the *Villeneuve's Revenge* revealed Kingsley Pryor to be alone in his own small cabin. He'd adopted the same unnerving posture which André and his three crew had witnessed throughout the tortuous flight. He hung centimetres from the decking, legs folded in Lotus position, with eyes granted a vision of some terribly personal hell. Even over the link from the starship, the CNIS duty officer could see he was suffering.

With the remote electronic survey complete, and hull plate 4-36-M now detached and held in the MSV's waldo, André was given a vector taking them in towards Trafalgar at a tenth of a gee. SD Command observed the flight computer responding to the crew's instructions, coaxing the fusion tube to life. They were following the security protocols to the last byte.

Kingsley drifted the last few centimetres down onto the decking, and suppressed a whimper at what that meant. During the flight he'd elevated his dilemma to a near physical pain, every thought he had concerning his destination burned from within. There simply was no way out of the

box Capone and his whore had trapped him in. Death surrounded him, making him more compliant than any set of sequestration nanonics could ever achieve. Death and love. He couldn't allow little Webster and Clarissa to vanish into the beyond. Not now. Nor could he let them be possessed. And the only way to prevent that from happening also could not be permitted.

Like men in his position throughout history, Kingsley Pryor did nothing as events swept him to their conclusion; simply waiting and praying that a magical third option would spring from nowhere. Now with the fusion drive pushing the starship towards Trafalgar, hope had cast him aside. The power he had been given to inflict suffering was insane in its size, yet he could *feel* Webster and Clarissa. The two balanced, as Capone knew they would. And now Kingsley Pryor had to make that impossible choice between the intimate and the abstract.

The cabin sensor had enough resolution to observe his lips contracting into a bitter smile. It looked as though a scream was about to burst loose. The CNIS duty officer shook her head at the way he was acting. Looks as though his brain's cracked, she thought. Though he was keeping passive enough.

What the sensor never showed her was a patch of air beside Kingsley's bunk thicken silently into the shape of Richard Keaton. He smiled sadly down at the stricken Navy officer.

"Who are you?" Kingsley asked hoarsely. "How did you hide on board?"

"I didn't," Richard Keaton said. "I'm not a possessed here to check up on you. I'm an observer, that's all. Please don't ask for who, or why. I won't tell you that. But I will tell you that Webster has escaped from Capone, he's no longer on Monterey."

"Webster?" Kingsley cried. "Where is he?"

"As safe as anyone can be right now. He's on a rogue ship that takes orders from no one."

"How do you know this?"

"I'm not the only person observing the Confederation."

"I don't understand. Why tell me this?"

"You know exactly why, Kingsley. Because you have a decision to make. You are in a unique position to affect the course of human events. It's not often an individual is put in this position, even though you don't appreciate all the implications stretching out ahead of you. Now, I can't make that decision for you, much as I'd like to. Even I can't break the restrictions I work under. But I can at least bend them enough to make sure you have all the facts before you pass your judgement. You must choose when and where you die, and who dies with you."

"I can't."

"I know. It's not easy. You just want the status quo to carry on for so long that you become irrelevant. I don't blame you for that, but it isn't going to happen. You must choose."

"Do you know what Capone did to me, what I'm carrying?"

"I know."

"So what would you do?"

"I know too much to tell you that."

"Then you haven't told me everything I need to know. Please!"

"Now you're just looking for absolution. I don't provide that, either. Consider this, I have told you what I believe you should know. Your son will not suffer directly from any action you take. Not now, nor in the time which follows."

"How do I know you're telling the truth? *Who are you?*"

"I am telling you the truth, because I know exactly what to tell you. If I wasn't what I say I am, how would I know about you and Webster?"

“What should I do? Tell me.”

“I just did.” Richard Keaton started to raise his hand in what could have been a gesture of sympathetic compassion. Kingsley Pryor never found out, his visitor faded away as beguilingly as he’d arrived.

He managed a small high-pitched snigger. People (or xenocs, or maybe even angels) were watching the human race; and were very good at it. It wouldn’t take much to see what was going on among the Confederation: a few carefully placed scanners could pick up the appropriate datavises, the CNIS and its counterparts did that as a matter of routine. But to secrete observers among the possessed cultures was an ability far beyond any ordinary intelligence agency. That kind of ability was unnerving. Despite that, he felt a small amount of relief. Whoever they were, they cared. Enough to intervene. Not by much, but just enough.

They knew the devastation he would cause. And they’d given him an excuse not to.

Kingsley looked straight at the cabin sensor. “I’m sorry. Really. I’ve been very weak to come this far. I’m ending it now.” He datavised an instruction into the flight computer.

On the bridge, André twitched in reaction as red neuroiconic symbols shrilled their warnings inside his skull. One by one, the starship’s primary functions were withdrawn from his control.

“Duchamp, what are you doing?” SD Command queried. “Return our access to the flight computer immediately or we will open fire.”

“I can’t,” the terrified captain datavised back. “The command authority codes have been nullified. Madeleine! Can you stop them?”

“Not a chance. Someone’s installing their own control routines through the Management Operations Program.”

“Don’t shoot,” André begged. “It’s not us.”

“It must be someone who had direct MOP access. That’s your crew, Duchamp.”

André gave Madeleine, Desmond, and Shane a frightened glance. “But we’re not . . . *merde*, Pryor! It’s Pryor. He’s doing this. He was the one who wanted to come here.”

“We’re powering down,” Desmond shouted. “Fusion drive off. Tokamak plasma cooling. Damn, he’s opened the emergency vent valves. All of them. What’s he doing?”

“Get down there and stop him. Use the hand weapons if you have to,” André shouted. “We’re cooperating,” he datavised at SD Command. “We’ll regain control. Just give us a few minutes.”

“Captain!” Shane pointed. The hatch in the decking was sliding shut. Orange strobes started to flash with near-blinding pulses in time to a piercing whistle.

“*Mon dieu, non!*”

SD sensors relayed a perfectly clear image of the *Vileneuve’s Revenge* to the CNIS duty officer. The ship was well into its deceleration phase when the emergency started. It was less than two hundred kilometres away from Trafalgar’s counter-rotating spaceport, which was grave cause for concern. The crew’s apparent dismay could just be one massive diversion. If a salvo of combat wasps were fired at the asteroid from this distance it would be almost impossible to intercept all of them.

Had it just been Duchamp and his crew on board, she would have vaporised the starship there and then. But Pryor’s actions and enigmatic statement just before his cabin sensor had gone off line stayed her hand. She was sure he was doing this; and the one routine which the starship had left open to Trafalgar’s scrutiny was fire control to the combat wasps. Pryor must be trying to reassure SD Command. None of the lethal drones had been armed.

“Keep tracking it with a full weapons lock,” she datavised

to her fellow officers in the SD Command centre. "Tell the voidhawk escort to stand by."

Long jets of snowy vapour were squirting out from the *Villeneuve's Revenge* as the emergency vent emptied every tank on board. Hydrogen, helium, oxygen, coolant fluid, water, reaction mass; they all emerged under high pressure to shake the ship about as if a dozen thrusters were firing in conflicting directions. None of them were powerful enough to affect its orbital trajectory. With its deceleration burn interrupted, it continued to fly towards Trafalgar at nearly two kilometres per second.

"They're not going to have any fuel even if they do regain control of the propulsion systems," the SD guidance officer said. "The ship will impact in another two minutes."

"If it gets within ten kilometres of Trafalgar, destroy it," the CNIS duty officer ordered.

The multiple vent continued unabated for another fifteen seconds, giving the ship a highly erratic tumble. Explosive bolts detonated across the fuselage, punching out dry plumes of grey dust as they severed the outer stress structure. Huge segments of the hull peeled free like dusky silver petals opening wide, exposing the tight-packed metallic viscera. Sharp bursts of blue light flashed beneath the surface, visible only through the slimmest of fissures; more explosive bolts, detaching equipment from the internal stress grid. The starship began to break apart, its tanks, drive tubes, tokamak toroids, energy patterning nodes, heat exchangers, and a swarm of subsidiary mechanisms forming a slowly expanding clump.

Three high-thrust solid rocket motors were clustered around the base of the life support capsule which contained the bridge; they ignited with only the briefest warning, thrusting the sphere clear of the cloud of technological detritus. Duchamp and the others were flung back into their ac-

celeration couches, bodies straining against the fifteen-gee acceleration.

“My ship!” André screamed against the punishing force. The *Villeneuve's Revenge*, the one last minuscule glint of hope for a post-crisis existence he had left, was unravelling around him, its million-fuseodollar components spinning off into the depths of the galaxy, transforming themselves into unsalvageable junk. Loving the ship more deeply than he did any woman, Duchamp forgave the eternal demands which it made for his money, its temperamental functions, its thirst for fuel and consumables; for in return it gave him a life above the ordinary. But it wasn't quite fully paid for, and years ago he'd forsaken a comprehensive insurance policy with those legalized thieving *anglo* insurance companies in favour of trusting his own skill and financial acumen. His scream ended in a wretched juddering sob. This universe had just become worse than anything which the beyond promised.

Kingsley Pryor didn't ignite the rockets on his own life support capsule. There was nowhere for him to escape to. The debris of the *Villeneuve's Revenge* was churning heatedly now, agitated by the bridge's life support capsule erupting from its centre. But it was still all sweeping towards Trafalgar, and carrying Kingsley along with it. He didn't know exactly where he was; he couldn't be bothered to access the rudimentary sensors surmounting the capsule. All he knew was that he'd done his best by the crew, and he wasn't in Trafalgar where Capone wanted him to be. Nothing else mattered any more. The decision had been taken.

Floating alone in a cabin illuminated only by tiny yellow emergency lights, Kingsley datavised the off code to an implant in his abdomen. The little containment field generator represented the peak of Confederation technology; even so it pushed way beyond the kind of safety specifications normally used for handling antimatter. The ultra-specialist mil-

itary lab in New California which manufactured it had neglected to include the standard failsafe capacity which even the most cheapskate black syndicates employed. Capone had simply decreed that he wanted a container defined by size alone. That's what he got.

When the confinement field shut down, the globe of frozen anti-hydrogen touched the side of the container. Protons, electrons, anti-protons, and anti-electrons annihilated each other in a reaction that very, very briefly recreated the energy density conditions which used to exist inside the Big Bang. This time, it didn't result in creation.

SD platform lasers were already picking off the gyrating chunks of equipment around the fringe of the debris cloud that had once been the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. The bulk of the swarm was less than twenty-five kilometres from Trafalgar, on a course that would collide with one of the spherical counter-rotating spaceports. Ionized vapour from the disintegrating components fluoresced a pale blue from the energy beams stabbing through them, forming a seething bow-wave around the remaining pieces. It was as if a particularly insubstantial comet was shooting across space.

Kingsley Pryor's life support capsule was twenty-three kilometres and eight seconds away from the spaceport when it happened. Another three seconds and the SD lasers would have targeted it, not that it would have made much difference. Capone had intended to do to Trafalgar what Quinn Dexter had done to Jesus; with the antimatter detonating in one of the biosphere caverns the asteroid would have been blown apart. Even if Kingsley didn't cheat his way past the inevitable security checks and had to kamikaze in the spaceport, the damage would have been considerable, destroying the counter-rotating sphere, any ships docked, and possibly dislodging the asteroid from its orbit.

By switching off the confinement chamber outside Trafalgar, Kingsley would be reducing the damage considerably.

Enough to salvage his conscience and allow him to return to New California claiming a successful mission. However, in physical terms, he wasn't doing the Confederation Navy much of a favour. Unlike a fusion bomb, the antimatter explosion produced no relativistic plasma sphere, no particle blast wave; but the energy point which sprang into life had the strength to illuminate the planet's nightside a hundred thousand kilometres below. The visible and infrared spectrum it emitted contained only a small percentage of the overall energy output. Its real power was concentrated in the gamma and X-ray spectrums.

The surrounding shoal of metal trash which had been the *Villeneuve's Revenge* twinkled for a picosecond before evaporating into its sub-atomic constituents. Trafalgar proved somewhat more resilient. Its mottled grey and black rock gleamed brighter than the sun as the energy tsunami hammered against it. As the white light faded, the surface facing the blast continued to glow a deep crimson. Centrifugal force stirred the sluggish molten rock, sending it flowing out along the humps and crater ridges where it swelled into bulbous fast-growing stalactites. Town-sized heat exchangers and their ancillary equipment anchored to the rock crumpled, their composite components shattering like antique glass while the metal structures turned to liquid and dribbled away, scattering scarlet droplets across the stars.

Hundreds of starships were caught by the micro-nova burst. Adamist vessels were luckier, in that their bulky structure shielded the crews from the worst of the radiation. Their mechanical systems underwent catastrophic failure as the X-rays penetrated them, instantly turning them into flying wrecks, coughing out vapour like the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. Scores of life support capsules hurtled clear of the dangerously radioactive hulks.

Exposed voidhawks suffered badly. The ships themselves died wretchedly as their cells' integrity was decimated. The

further they were from the detonation, the longer their misery was dragged out. Their crews in the thin-walled, exposed toroids were killed almost instantly.

Trafalgar's spherical counter-rotating spaceport buckled like a beachside shack in a hurricane. The nulltherm foam coating its girders and tanks crisped to black and moulted away. Air in the pressurized sections was superheated by the radiation, expanding with explosive force, ripping every habitable section to shreds. Tanks ruptured. Fusion generators destabilised and flash vaporised.

The concussion was totally outside the load capacity of the spindle. With fusion generator plasma roaring out of the collapsing sphere, the slender gridwork started to bend. It snapped off just above the bearing and took flight, deflating into a flaccid carcass beneath the short-lived fireballs puffing open across its superficies.

A dozen datavised emergency situation alerts vibrated urgently inside Samual Aleksandrovich's skull. He looked up at the staff officers conducting the daily strategy review. More worrying than the initial crop of alerts was three of them immediately failing as their processors crashed. Then the lights flickered.

Samual stared at the ceiling. "Bloody hell." Information pouring into his mind confirmed there'd been an explosion outside the asteroid. But big enough to affect internal systems? Outside his panoramic window, the central biosphere's axial light gantry was darkening as the civil generators powered down in response to losing their cooling conduits. Whole sections of the asteroid's ultra-hardened communications net had gone off-line. Not a single external sensor remained active.

The office lighting and environmental systems switched to their back-up power cells. High-pitched whines, the daily background sound pervading the entire asteroid, began to deepen as pumps and fans shut down.

Seven marines in full body armour rushed into the office, a detachment of the First Admiral's bodyguard. The captain in charge didn't even bother to salute. "Sir, we are now in a C10 situation, please egress your secure command facility."

A circular section of floor beside the desk was sinking down to reveal a chute that curved away out of sight. Flashing lights and sirens had begun to echo the datavised alarms. Thick metal shields were closing across the window. More marines were running along the corridor just outside the office, shouting instructions. Samual almost laughed at how close such dramatics came to being counter-productive. People needed to remain calm in such events, not have their fears accentuated. He considered refusing the earnest young captain's directive; gut instinct, acting out the role of gruff lead-from-the-front commander. Trouble was, that kind of gesture was so totally impractical at his level. Preserving the authority of the command structure was essential in a crisis of this magnitude. Threats had to be countered swiftly, which only an uninterrupted chain of command could achieve.

Even as he hesitated, the floor trembled. They really were under attack! The concept was incredible. He stared at the cups on the table in astonishment as they started to jitter about, spilling tea.

"Of course," he told the equally apprehensive marine captain.

Two of the marines jumped down the chute first, their magpulse rifles drawn ready. Samual followed them. As he skidded his way down along the broad spiral an assessment and correlation program went primary in his neural nanonics, sorting through the incoming datastreams to discover exactly what had happened. SD Command confirmed the *Villeneuve's Revenge* had detonated a quantity of antimatter. The damage to Trafalgar was considerable. But it was the thought of what had happened to the ships of the 1st Fleet

which chilled him. Twenty had been docked at the time of the explosion, three further squadrons had been holding station a hundred kilometres away. Two dozen voidhawks were on their docking ledge pedestals. Over fifty civil utility and government craft were in close proximity.

The secure command facility was a series of chambers dug deep into Trafalgar's rock. Self sufficient and self-powered, they were designed to hold the First Admiral's staff officers during an attack. Any weapon powerful enough to damage them would split the asteroid into fragments.

In view of what had just happened, it wasn't the most comforting thought Samuel had with him as he came off the end of the chute. He strode into the coordination centre, drawing nervous glances from the skeleton crew on duty. The long rectangular room with its complex curving consoles and inset holographic windows always put him in mind of a warship's bridge; with the one advantage that he'd never have to endure high-gee manoeuvres in here.

"Status please," he asked the lieutenant commander in charge.

"Only one explosion so far, sir," she reported. "SD command is trying to re-establish contact with its sensor satellites. But there were no other unauthorised ships within the planetary defence perimeter when we lost contact."

"Don't we have *any* linkages?"

"There are some sensors functional on the remaining spaceport, sir. But they're not showing us much. The anti-matter's EM pulse crashed a lot of our electronics, even the hardened processors are susceptible to that power level. None of the working antennas can acquire an SD platform signal. It could be processor failure, or actual physical destruction. We don't know which yet."

"Get me a GDOS satellite, then. Link us to a starship. I want to talk to somebody who can see what's going on outside."

“Yes sir. Combat back-up systems are deploying now.”

More of the coordination centre crew were hurrying in and taking their places. His own staff officers were coming in to stand behind him. He caught sight of Lalwani and beckoned urgently.

“Can you talk to any voidhawks?” he asked in a low voice when she reached him.

“Several.” Deep pain was woven across her face. “I feel them dying still. We’ve lost over fifty already.”

“Jesus Christ,” he hissed. “I’m sorry. What the hell’s happening out there?”

“Nothing else. There are no Organization ships emerging as far as the survivors are aware.”

“Sir!” the lieutenant commander called. “We’re re-establishing communications with the SD network. Three GDOS satellites are out, they must have been irradiated by the explosion. Five are still functional.”

One of the holographic windows flickered with orange and green streaks, then stabilized. The image was coming from an SD sensor satellite; it was positioned on the perimeter of Trafalgar’s defence network, ten thousand kilometres away. None of the inner cordon of satellites had survived.

“Hell,” the First Admiral muttered. The rest of the coordination centre was silent.

Half of Trafalgar’s lengthy peanut-shape glimmered a deep claret against the starscape. They could see sluggish waves of rock crawling across the ridges, boulder-sized globules sprinkling from the crests, cast away by the asteroid’s rotation. The ruined spaceport was retreating from its fractured spindle, turning slowly and scattering blistered fragments in its wake. Igneous spheres drifted without purpose around the stricken rock, squirting out sooty vapour like cold comets: the ships too close to the antimatter blast for their crews to survive the radiation blaze.

“All right, we’re intact and functional,” the First Admiral

said sombrely. "Our first priority has to be re-establishing the SD network. If they have any sense of tactics, the Organization will try to hit us while our weapons platforms are disabled. Commander, bring in two squadrons of 1st Fleet ships to substitute for the SD platforms, and reassign the planetary network to provide us with as much cover as it can. Tell them to watch for an infiltration mission, as well; I wouldn't put that past Capone at this point. Once that's done, we can start initiating rescue flights for the survivors."

The coordination centre crew spent an hour orchestrating the surviving 1st Fleet squadrons into a shield around Trafalgar. With more and more back-up communication links coming on line, information began pouring in. Three quarters of the asteroid's SD network had been wiped out in the blast. Over a hundred and fifty ships had been completely destroyed, with a further eighty so radioactive they were beyond rescue. Of the spaceport facing the *Villeneuve's Revenge* nothing had survived; once the bodies had been retrieved it would have to be nudged into a sun-intercept orbit. Initial casualty figures were estimated at eight thousand, though the coordination centre crew felt that was optimistic.

Once his orders were being implemented, the First Admiral reviewed the SD command centre files on the *Villeneuve's Revenge*. He convened a preliminary enquiry team of six from his staff officers, briefing them to assemble a probable chain of events. The last moments of the angst-laden Kingsley Pryor replayed a dozen times through his neural nanonics. "We'll need a full psychological profile," he told Lieutenant Keaton. "I want to know what they did to him. I don't like the idea that they can turn my officers against the Navy."

"The possessed are only limited by their imagination, Admiral," the medical liaison officer said politely. "They could apply a great deal of pressure to individuals. And

Lieutenant-commander Pryor had his family stationed with him on New California, a wife and son.”

“I pledge to place myself and my actions above all personal considerations,” Samuel quoted quietly. “Do you have family, Lieutenant?”

“No sir, no direct family. Though there is a second cousin I’m quite fond of; she’s about the same age as Webster Pryor.”

“I suppose academy oaths and good intentions don’t always survive the kind of horror real life throws at us. But it looks like Pryor was having second thoughts at the end. We should be grateful for that. God alone knows what kind of carnage he would have unleashed if he’d got inside Trafalgar.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sure he did his best.”

“All right, Lieutenant, carry on.” Samuel Aleksandrovich returned to the situation display swarming through his mind. With the Strategic Defence redeployment under way and ships assigned to rescue duties, he could concentrate on Trafalgar itself. The asteroid was in bad shape. Essentially all of its surface equipment had been vaporized; and that was ninety per cent heat dump mechanisms. The asteroid was generating almost no power, its environmental systems were operating on their reserve supplies alone. None of the biosphere caverns or habitation sections could get rid of their heat into space, the emergency thermal stores had ten days’ capacity at most. When the habitat was designed no one had envisaged this kind of absolute damage; it had been assumed that the heat dump panels wrecked by a combat wasp could be replaced in the ten-day time scale. Now though, even if Avon’s industrial stations could manufacture enough hardware fast enough, it couldn’t be attached. Half of the rock surface was so radioactive it would have to be cut off to a depth of several metres. And that same half was also extremely hot. Most of that heat would radiate outwards

over the next couple of months, but a considerable fraction would also seep inwards. Left unchecked, the temperature in the biosphere caverns would rise high enough to sterilise them. The only way to prevent that from happening was with heat dump mechanisms, which couldn't be replaced because of the heat and radiation.

Samual cursed as the civil engineering teams datavised their various assessments and recommendations. Cost aside, he couldn't possibly begin a program like that in the middle of this crisis.

He was going to have to evacuate the asteroid. There were contingency plans for dispersing the Navy institutions and forces around Avon's moons and asteroid settlements. That wasn't the problem. Capone had won a profound propaganda victory. The headquarters of the Confederation Navy bombed into extinction, whole squadrons lost, voidhawks dead. It would completely negate the entire Mortonridge Liberation campaign in the opinion of the general public.

Samual Aleksandrovich sank back into his chair. The only reason he didn't bury his head in his hands was because of all the eyes watching him, needing him to remain confident.

"Sir?"

He looked up to see Captain Amr al-Sahhaf's normally calm face contaminated with apprehension. Now what? "Yes, Captain."

"Sir, Dr Gilmore reported that Jacqueline Couteur has escaped."

A cold fury that Samual hadn't experienced for a long time pushed its way through his rational thoughts. The damned woman was becoming his *bête noir*, a ghoulish feeding off the Navy's misfortune. Lethal, and contemptuously smug . . . "Has she broken out of the laboratory?"

"No sir. The demon trap's integrity has been maintained throughout the assault."

"Very well, assign a squad of marines, and whatever else

Dr Gilmore says he needs to find her. Full priority.” He ran a search program through several files. “I want lieutenant Hewlett placed in charge of the search mission. My orders to him are very simple. Once she has been recaptured, she is to be put directly into zero-tau. And I do mean: directly. In future, Dr Gilmore can use someone less troublesome for his research.”

By the third doorway, it was noticeably warmer than usual in the broad corridor leading towards the CNIS secure weapons laboratory. The heat given off by the armour of thirty-five marines was accumulating in the air. Conditioning vents running along the ceiling were operating on reduced cycle mode; only a third of the light panels were on.

Murphy Hewlett took point duty himself, leading his squad along. They were each armed with static-bullet machine pistols modelled on Ombey’s design, with five of the team carrying Bradfields just in case. Murphy had taken time to brief them personally while they suited up; laying down simple procedures for engaging the possessed, hoping he was coming on confident.

As they arrived at the third door he signalled their technical sergeant forward. The man walked over to the door’s control processor, and studied his own block.

“I can’t find any time log discrepancies, sir,” he reported. “It hasn’t been opened.”

“Okay. Front line ready,” Murphy ordered.

Eight marines spread out across the corridor, lining their machine guns up on the door. Murphy datavised Dr Gilmore that they were in position and ready. The door swung up, hissing from the pressure difference. Tendrils of pale white vapour licked around the edges as hot and cold air intermingled. Dr Gilmore, five other researchers, and three armed marines were standing just inside. No one else was visible.

Murphy switched on his suit's audio circuit. "In!" he ordered.

The marine squad surged forward, forcing the scientists to bunch together as they bustled past. Murphy datavised a close order at the door's processor, and entered his own codelock. The big slab of metal swung down again, sealing into place.

"Jacqueline isn't in this section," Dr Gilmore said, bemused by their military professionalism.

In answer, Murphy beckoned him forwards and touched a static sensor against his arm. The result was negative. He told his squad to check the others. "If you say so, Doctor. What exactly happened?"

"We think the EMP interrupted the electricity supply we were using to neutralize her energistic power. It shouldn't have done; we're exceptionally well shielded in here, and our systems are all independent apart from the heat exchange mechanisms. But somehow she was able to overcome the marine guards and break out of the isolation laboratory."

"Overcame, how, exactly?"

Pierce Gilmore gave a humourless smile. "She killed them, and two of my staff. This escapade is a futile gesture of defiance. Not even Jacqueline can walk through two kilometres of solid rock. She knows this, of course. But causing us the maximum amount of disruption is part of her tiresome little game."

"The whistle has just been blown, Doctor. My orders are that upon capture she is to be placed in zero-tau. They came right from the First Admiral, so please don't query them."

"We are on the same side, Lieutenant Hewlett."

"Sure thing, Doc. I was in the courtroom. Remember that."

"I am on record as objecting to that adventure. Couteur is

extremely duplicitous, and intelligent. It is a bad combination.”

“We’ll bear that in mind. Now how many of the lab staff have you accounted for?”

Gilmore glanced along the main corridor running round the laboratory complex. Several of the silvery doors were open, with people peering out nervously. “Nine have not responded to my general datavise.”

“Shit!” Murphy accessed the floor plan file in his neural nanonics. The laboratory complex covered two levels; essentially a ring of research labs on top of the environmental and power systems, with storage and engineering facilities included. “Okay, everyone is to return to their office or lab, wherever they are now. The existing marine detail is to stay with them and guard against intrusion. I don’t want anyone moving round except for my squad, and that includes you, Doctor. Then I want an AI brought on-line to monitor the complex’s processors for glitches.”

“We’re doing that already,” Gilmore said.

“And it can’t find her?”

“Not yet. Jacqueline knows how we track possessed, of course. She will be concealing her power. Which means she will be vulnerable during the first few seconds after you locate her.”

“Yeah. Tell you, it’s all good news, this assignment, Doc.”

The procedure Murphy initiated was a simple enough one; five marines were left behind to cover the door in case Couteur made a break for it. Unlikely, Murphy admitted to himself, but with her there was always the prospect of double bluff. The remainder of the squad he split into two groups, going in opposite directions to work their way round the ring. Each laboratory was examined in turn, using electronic warfare blocks and infrared (in case Couteur was disguising herself as a piece of equipment). All the staff were tested and verified; they then had to leave their neural

nanonics open to the CNIS office overseeing the mission, to confirm they weren't being possessed after the marines left. One room at a time, and even scanning the corridor walls as they progressed. Murphy was leaving absolutely nothing to chance.

He led the group going counterclockwise from the door. The laboratory corridor might have been a much simpler geometry than Lalonde's jungle, denying her any real ambush opportunity, but he couldn't get rid of the old feeling that the enemy was right behind him. Several times he caught himself turning to stare past the marines following along behind. That wasn't good, because it made them jumpy, distracted. He concentrated hard on the curving space ahead, securing each empty room. Taking it a stage at a time, setting a proper example.

Despite the jumble of equipment in most labs, it was a simple enough task to scan their sensors round. The scientists and technicians inside were profoundly relieved to see them, although each welcome was subdued. Every time, they were checked out then sealed in.

The biological isolation facility, where Couteur had been held, was the ninth room Murphy visited. Its door had been forced half-way open, buckled metal runners preventing it from moving further. Murphy signalled the technical sergeant forward. He flattened himself against the wall, and gingerly extended a sensor block around the edge of the door.

"Clean sweep," the sergeant reported. "If she's in there, she's not in range."

It was a perfect double cover advance into the room. The marines deployed inside, scanning every centimetre as they went. A glass wall divided the room in half, with a large oval hole smashed through it. That, Murphy was expecting, along with the bodies torn by unpleasantly familiar deep char marks. There was a surgical table on the other side of the

glass, surrounded by equipment stacks. Tubes and wires were strewn around it, a complement to the limb restraint straps which hung limply over the edges where they'd been severed.

Who could really blame the occupant for breaking free? Murphy didn't appreciate being made to ask that question.

They left two sensor blocks behind to cover the broken door as they filed out, in case she returned. The next room, an office, had one of Couteur's other victims sprawled on the carpet. They scanned the corpse first, and applied the static sensor. Murphy wasn't going to be caught out that way.

But it was a genuine corpse, with a large number of small burns and several broken bones. A characteristics scan confirmed it was Eithne Cramley, one of the physics department technicians. Murphy was sure Couteur had tried to make Cramley submit to possession, but wouldn't have had enough time to make a success of the process. The rest of the room was empty. They sealed it and moved on.

It took ninety minutes for the two marine groups to meet up. All they'd found was six of the staff who didn't respond to Gilmore's datavise.

"Looks like she's lurking in the basement," he told them. He ordered ten marines to stand guard at the top of the stairs, and took the remainder down with him. This, he thought, was more her territory. The construction crew hadn't lavished the same kind of care down here as they had up in the ring of laboratories. They'd made it spacious enough, and well lit; but in the end it was just six caverns drilled in a line to house utility systems.

Again the marines deployed in perfect formation when they reached the bottom of the stairs. Murphy supervised them with growing unease. His heart rate now had to be regulated by his neural nanonics he was wired so tight, even the regenerated flesh on the fingers of his left hand was tingling

with phantom sensation. He just wished it was a reliable way of warning him a possessed was coming close. With each meter they advanced he was expecting Couteur to launch some vicious attack. He just couldn't understand what she was doing. Most likely scenario was that the three staff they hadn't located yet were now possessed. But she would know he'd be working on that assumption. There was nothing in this for her. Except being free of her bondage for a few hours. A reasonable enough impetus for most people. Murphy couldn't forget that voyage back to Trafalgar on the *Ilex*, the wearisome power struggle she'd waged against her captors the whole time. It hadn't taken him long to realize she'd allowed herself to be captured, making a mockery of poor old Regehr's terrible burns.

Advantage, that was her sole ambition, gaining the upper hand. This escape couldn't provide that for her. Not unless there was some enormity he'd overlooked. He felt as though his brain was being fossilised by the pressure of worry.

"Sir," the marine on point duty shouted. "Infrared signature."

They'd reached the environmental processing machinery. A hall of naked rock with seven big, boxy, air filter/regenerator units in a row down the centre. Pipes and ducts rose out from them in conical webs, leading away into glare of the overhead lighting panels. The marines were advancing along both sides of the bulky grey casings.

Someone was crouching down on top of the third, secreted amid a twist of metre-wide pipes. When Murphy switched his retinas to infrared, a distinctive thermal emission hazed around the edge of the pipes like a pink mist. Neural nanonics computed the output as consistent with a single person.

"Wrong," he muttered. His suit audio speaker boosted the word, sending it rumbling round the hall. Okay, she'd made

an effort to hide, but it was a pitiful one. Going through the motions. *Why?*

“Dr Gilmore?” Murphy datavised. “Is there any kind of super weapon she could have stolen from one of your laboratories?”

“Absolutely not,” Gilmore datavised back. “Only three portable weapons are undergoing examination in the laboratory. I verified their locations as soon as we knew Couteur had escaped.”

Another explanation gone, Murphy acknowledged miserably. “Encirclement,” he datavised to the squad. They began to fan out along the hall, keeping behind the pipes and machinery. When they had her surrounded he cranked the volume up further. “Come along, Jacqueline. You know we’re here, and we know where you are. Game over.” There was no visible response.

“Sir,” the technical sergeant said. “I’m picking up activity on the electronic warfare block. She’s increasing her energetic power.”

“Jacqueline, stop that right now. I have full shoot to kill authorization on this mission. You really have pissed off our top brass with these stunts of yours. Now take a good look at what you’re sitting on. That casing is all metal. We don’t even have to use our machine guns, I’ll just order someone to lob an EE grenade in your direction. You ought to know what electricity does to you by now.”

He waited a few seconds, then fired three rounds at the pipes just above the thermal emission. The bullets sliced a dim violet streak across his vision that vanished as soon as it began.

Jacqueline Couteur slowly stood up, hands raised high. She glanced round with supreme disdain at the marines crouched beneath her, their weapons gripped purposefully.

“Down on the ground, now,” Murphy ordered.

She did as she was told with insultingly measured slow-

ness; descending the rungs welded on to the side of the conditioner. When she reached the ground five marines advanced on her.

“On the ground,” Murphy repeated.

Sighing at how she’d been wronged she lowered herself to her knees, and slowly bent forward. “I trust this makes you feel safe?” she enquired archly.

The first marine to reach her shouldered his machine gun and took a holding stick from his belt. It telescoped out to two metres, and he closed the pincer clamp around Coureur’s neck.

“Scan and secure the rest of the hall,” Murphy instructed. “We’re still missing three bodies.”

He walked over to where Jacqueline Coureur was being held fast. The pincer was riding high on her neck, tilting her jaw back. It was an uncomfortable position, but she never showed any ire.

“What are you doing?” Murphy asked.

“I believe you’re in charge.” The tone was calculated to annoy, superior and amused. “You tell me.”

“You mean this is all you’ve achieved? Two hours’ liberty and you’re sulking about down here? That’s pathetic, Coureur.”

“Two hours tying up your resources, frightening your squad. And you, I can see the fear clouding your mind. Then I also eliminated several key CNIS science personnel. Possibly I engendered some more possessed to run loose in your precious asteroid. You’ll have to find that out for yourself. Do you really regard that as insignificant, lieutenant?”

“No, but it’s beneath you.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be. I’ll find out whatever scam you’re pulling, and I’ll blow it out the fucking airlock. You don’t fool me, Coureur.” Murphy pushed up his visor, and shoved his face centimetres from hers. “Zero-tau for you. You’ve abused our

decency for way too long. I should have shot you back on Lalonde.”

“No you wouldn’t,” she sneered. “As you said, you’re too decent.”

“Get her up to the lab,” Murphy snarled.

Gilmore was waiting for them at the top of the stairs; he directed them to professor Nowak’s laboratory where a couple of technicians had prepared a zero-tau pod. Jacqueline Couteur hesitated slightly when she saw it. Two machine guns prodded into the small of her back, urging her forwards.

“I ought to say sorry for any suffering you’ve undergone,” Gilmore said awkwardly. “But after the courtroom, I feel completely vindicated.”

“You would,” Jacqueline said. “I shall be watching you from the beyond. When your time comes to join us, I’ll be there.”

Gilmore gestured at the zero-tau pod, as if getting in was voluntary. “Empty threats, I’m afraid. By that time, we shall have solved the problem of the beyond.”

Couteur gave him a final withering glance, and climbed into the pod.

“Any final message?” Murphy asked. “Children or grandchildren you want to say something to? I’ll see it’s passed on.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

He grunted and nodded to the technician operating the pod. Couteur was immediately smothered beneath the jet-black field.

“How long?” Murphy asked tensely. He still couldn’t believe this was all there was to it.

“Leave her in for at least an hour,” Gilmore said with bitter respect. “She’s tough.”

“Very well.” Murphy refused to allow the door connecting the secure laboratory with the rest of the asteroid to be

re-opened, not with three people still unaccounted for. The marines continued their sweep of the utility caverns. As well as people, Murphy had them examine the fusion generators. Since the loss of the external heat exchangers, they'd been operating in breakeven mode, shunting their small thermal output into the emergency heat storage silo. Couteur couldn't rig them to explode, but the plasma could do a lot of damage if the confinement field had been tampered with.

The technicians reported back that they were untouched. After another forty minutes one of the missing bodies was found, dead, and stuffed behind an air conditioning vent. Murphy ordered the squad to go back through the rooms they'd covered and open all the remaining grilles, no matter what size. A possessed could easily hollow out a small nest for themselves in the rock.

He waited seventy minutes before ordering the zero-tau pod to be switched off. The woman inside was wearing a tattered and burnt laboratory tunic with the CNIS insignia on her shoulder. She was weeping fervently as she tottered out, clutching at a bloody wound across her abdomen. Murphy's characteristics recognition program identified her as Toshi Numour, one of the weapons section's biophysics researchers.

"Shit," Murphy groaned. "Dr Gilmore," he datavisd. There was no reply. "Doctor?" The communications processors in the secure laboratory complex reported they couldn't acquire Dr Gilmore's neural nanonics.

Murphy burst out into the main corridor, and shouted at his squad to follow. With ten suited figures clattering along at his heels, he sprinted for Gilmore's office.

As soon as the black shell of the zero-tau field had snapped up around Jacqueline Couteur, Pierce Gilmore headed back for his office. He didn't protest at Hewlett's continuing restrictions in preventing them from leaving the secure labora-

tory complex. In fact, he rather approved. He'd received a nasty shock when Couteur escaped, on top of the asteroid physically shaking in the wake of the antimatter blast. Under the circumstances, such precautions were both logical and sensible.

The office door slid shut behind him, and some of the lighting came on. Current power rationing permitted him only four of the ceiling panels, the kind of light provided by a cold winter afternoon. None of the holographic windows were active.

He walked over to the percolator jug, which was still bubbling away contentedly, and poured himself a cup. After a moment of regret, he switched it off. There probably wouldn't be enough space in his evacuation allocation to take it or any of the bone china cups with him. Assuming there would be any allocation for personal effects. With over three hundred thousand people to evacuate in a week, the amount of baggage they could take with them would be minimal to zero.

The small solaris tube running above his orchids was also off. Several of the rare pure-genotype plants were due to flower, their fleshy buds had almost burst. They never would now. There would be no light and fresh air, and the heat would arrive soon. The secure laboratory was closer to the surface than most of the asteroid's habitable sections, it would receive the worst of the inward seepage. Furniture, equipment, it would all be lost. The only thing to survive would be their files.

Pierce sat behind his desk. In fact, he really ought to be drawing up procedures to safeguard the information ready for when they transferred to their secondary facility. He put his cup down on the leather surface, next to an empty cup. That hadn't been there before.

"Hello, Doctor," Jacqueline Couteur said.

He did flinch, but at least he didn't jump or yelp. She

didn't have the satisfaction of witnessing any disconcertion, which in the game they played was a big points winner. His eyes locked on an empty section of wall directly ahead, refusing to turn round and look for her. "Jacqueline. You have no feelings. Poor Lieutenant Hewlett really won't enjoy being outsmarted in this manner."

"You can stop trying to datavise for help now, Doctor. I disabled the room's net processors. Not with my energistic power, either, there was no glitch to alert the AI. Kate Morley had some knowledge of electronics, a couple of old didactic courses."

Pierce Gilmore datavised the comprehensive processor array installed in his desk. It reported that its link with Trafalgar's communication's net had been removed.

Jacqueline chuckled softly as she walked round the desk into his line of sight. She was carrying a processor block, its small screen alive with graphics that monitored his datavises. "Anything else you'd like to try?" she enquired lightly.

"The AI will notice the processors have gone off line. Even if it isn't caused by a glitch, a marine squad will be sent to investigate."

"Really, Doctor? A lot of systems were damaged by the EM pulse. I've apparently been caught and shoved into zero-tau, and the marines have already cleared this level. I think that gives us time enough."

"For what?"

"Oh dear me. Is that finally a spike of fear I sense in your mind, Doctor? That has got to be the first arousal of any kind you've had for many a year. Perhaps it's even a hint of remorse? Remorse for what you put me through."

"You put yourself through it, Jacqueline. We asked you to cooperate; you were the one who chose to refuse. Very bluntly, as I recall."

"Not guilty. You tortured me."

“Kate Morley. Maynard Khanna. Should I go on?”

She stood directly in front of the desk, staring at him. “Ah. Two wrongs making a right? Is that what I’ve reduced you to, Doctor? Fear does things to the most brilliant of minds. It makes them desperate. It makes them pitiful. Is there any other excuse you’d like to offer?”

“If I was facing a jury, good and true, I could offer several justifications. Such arguments would be wasted on a bigot.”

“Petty, even for you.”

“Cooperate with us. It’s not too late.”

“Not even clichés change in five hundred years. That says quite a lot about the human race, don’t you think? Certainly everything I need to know.”

“You’re transferring onto an abstract concept. Self-hatred is a common aspect of a diseased mind.”

“If I’m the one that’s ill and incapable, how come you’re the one in terminal trouble?”

“Then stop being the problem, and help us with a solution.”

“We are not *problems*.” Her hand slammed down on the front of the desk, making the two coffee cups jump. “We are people. If that simple fact could ever register in that fascist bitek brain of yours then you might be able to look in a different direction, one that would help bring an end to our suffering. But that is beyond you. To think along those lines you have to be human. And after all these weeks of study, the one definite conclusion I have come to, is that you are not human. Nor can you ever become human. You have nothing, no moral foundation from which to grow out of. Laton and Hitler were saints compared to you.”

“You’re taking your situation far too personally. Understandably, after all, you can hardly retreat from it. You lack the courage for that.”

“No.” She straightened up. “But I can make my last noble stand. And depriving the Confederation Navy of your so-

called talent will be a satisfactory achievement for me. Nothing personal, you understand.”

“I can put an end to this, Jacqueline. We’re so very close to an answer now.”

“Let’s see how your rationality endures the reality of the beyond. You will now experience every facet of it. Being possessed by one of its inhabitants; living within it, and if you’re really fortunate, as a possessor, forever terrified that some lucky living bastard is going to rip you out of your precious new prize and send you back screaming. What will your answer be then, I wonder?”

“Unchanged.” He gave her a sad defeated smile. “It’s called resolution, the ability and determination to see things through to the end. However unexpected or disappointing that end turns out to be. Not that anyone will ever know now. But I held true to myself.”

Alarmed by his mind tone, Jacqueline started to point her right arm. Slivers of white fire licked up from her wrist.

In Gilmore’s mind the alternatives were stark. That she would torture him was inevitable. He would be possessed, or more likely damaged so badly that his body died, banishing his soul to the beyond. That was where logic broke down. He believed, or thought he did, that there was a way out of the beyond. Doubt undermined him, though. Factious, unclean human emotion, the type he hated so. If a way through the beyond existed, why did the souls remain trapped? There was no certainty any more. Not for him, not there. And he couldn’t stand that. Facts and rationality were more than the building blocks of his mind, they were his existence. If the beyond was truly a place without logic, then Pierce Gilmore had no wish to exist there. And his own sacrifice would advance human understanding by a fraction. Such knowledge was a fitting last thought.

He datavised the processor array for the latest version of the anti-memory. Jacqueline’s hand was already lining up

desperately on him when the desktop AV projection pillar silently pumped a blindingly pervasive red light across the office.

Sixty minutes later Murphy Hewlett and his squad blew the office door out with an EE charge, and rushed in to the rescue. They found Gilmore slumped over his desk, and Kate Morley lying on the floor in front of it. Both of them were alive, but completely unresponsive to any kind of stimulus the squad medic could apply. As Murphy said later during his debriefing, they were nothing but a pair of wide awake corpses.

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From the safety of the little plateau, a quarter of the way up the northern endcap, Tolton trained his telescope on the lobby of the Djerba starscraper. Another swirl of darkness was pushing up through the dome of white archways. Pieces of the structure tumbled across the crumpled lawn circling the forlorn building. He kept expecting to hear the sound of breaking glass reach across the distance. The telescope provided a good, sharp image, as if he was just a few metres away. He shivered at that errant thought, still able to feel the wave of coldness that had swept through him every time the flying monster passed overhead.

“This one’s a walker.” He moved aside and let Erentz use the telescope’s eyepiece.

She studied it for a minute. “You’re right. It’s picking up speed, too.” The visitor had shoved its way through the smouldering ruins of the shanties, leaving a deep furrow in its wake. Now it was traversing the meadows beyond. The wispy pink grass stalks around it turned black, as if they’d been singed. “Moving smoothly enough; fast, too. It should reach the southern endcap in five or six hours at that rate.”

Just what we need, the personality grouched. Another of the buggers leeching off us. We'll just have to reduce nutrient fluid production to survival minimum, keep the neural strata alive. That'll play hell with our main mitosis layer. It'll take us years to regenerate the damage.

Eight of the dire visitors had now emerged from the Djerba, three of them taking flight. Without fail, they had headed for the southern endcap, just as the first and largest had done. Those that moved over the land had left a contrail of dead vegetation behind them. When they reached the endcap, they bored their way through the polyp and into the arteries which fed the giant organs, suckling the nutrient fluid.

"We should be able to burn them out soon," she said. "The flame throwers and incendiary torpedoes are coming on fine. You'll be okay."

The look Tolton gave her made his lack of affinity irrelevant. He bent over the telescope again. The visitor was crunching its way through a small forest. Trees swayed and toppled, broken off at the base. It seemed incapable of going round anything. "That thing is goddamn strong."

"Yeah." Her worry was pronounced.

"How's the signal project coming?" He asked the question several times every day, frightened he might miss out on some amazing breakthrough.

"Most of us are working on developing and producing our weapons right now."

"You can't give up on that. You can't!" He said it loud for the benefit of the personality.

"Nobody's giving up. The physics core team is still active." She didn't tell him it was down to five theorists who spent most of their time arguing about how to proceed.

"Okay then."

Two more are approaching, the personality warned.

Erentz gave the street poet a swift glance. He was engrossed with the telescope again, tracking the movements of the visitors still loose on the grass plains. **No need to panic the others.**

Quite.

The creatures had been arriving at the rate of nearly one every half hour ever since Erentz's disastrous foray into the Djerba. The personality was now worried about its ability to maintain the habitat's environmental integrity. Each new arrival invariably smashed its way into a starscraper, then proceeded to hammer the tower's internal structure. So far the emergency inter-floor pressure seals had held. But if the invasion continued at this rate a breach was inevitable.

We believe some of the incumbents are now starting to move, the personality said. **It's slow, which makes it hard to tell, but they could start to emerge into the parkland within in the next day or so.**

Do you think they're multiplying like the first one did?

Impossible to tell. Our perception routines close to them are almost completely inviolable now. We suspect a great deal of the polyp is dead. However, if one did, then it is logical to assume the others will follow that pattern.

Oh great. Oh shit. We're going to have to tackle each one separately. I'm not even sure we can win. The numbers are starting to stack up against us.

We will have to review our tactics after the first few encounters. If the expenditure is too great then we may adopt Tolton's wishes and deploy everyone on the signal project.

Right. She let out a beaten sigh. **You know, I don't even consider that defeatist. Anything which gets us out of this is fine by me.**

A healthy attitude.

Tolton straightened up. "What next?"

"We'd better get back down to the others. The visitors aren't immediately threatening."

"That can change."

"If it does, I'm sure we'll know about it real soon."

They walked into the small cave at the back of the plateau. It housed a tunnel which spiralled down through several chambers to the caverns at the base of the endcap. Wave escalators and stairs were arranged in parallel down each level. Most of the wave escalators had stopped, so the descent took them quite a while.

The caverns had taken on the aspect of a fort under siege. Tens of thousands of people lay ill on whatever scraps of bedding were available. There was no order to the way they were arranged. Nursing the bedridden was left entirely to those slightly less ill, and consisted mainly of taking care of their sanitary needs. Those qualified (or with basic how-to didactic memories) to operate medical packages circulated constantly, perpetually exhausted.

Erentz's relatives had formed an inner coterie in the deepest caverns, where the light manufacturing tools and research equipment were concentrated. They'd also taken care to stockpile their own food supply, which could last them for well over a month. Here at least, a semblance of normality remained. Electrophorescent strips shone brightly in the corridors. Mechanical doors whirred open and shut. The clatter of industrial cybernetics vibrated along the polyp. Even Tolton's processor block let out a few modest bleeps as basic functions returned to life.

Erentz let him into a chamber serving as an armoury. Her relatives had been busy since the reconnaissance in the Djerba, designing and producing a personal flame thrower. The basic principal hadn't changed much in six hundred years: a chemical tank carried on the user's back, with a

flexible hose leading to a slim rifle-like nozzle. Modern materials and fabrication techniques allowed for a high pressure system, giving a narrow flame that could reach over twenty metres, or be switched to a wide short-range cone. Scalpel or blunderbuss, Erentz commented. There were also incendiary torpedo launchers; essentially scaled-up versions of an emergency flare.

She started into discussions with several of her relatives, mostly using affinity. Only a few exclamations were actually voiced. Tolton felt like a child left out of abstruse adult conversation. His attention wandered off. Surely the personality wouldn't expect him to join the combatants fighting the dark creatures? He lacked the kind of driven intensity Erentz and her relatives flaunted, their birthright. He was afraid to ask in case they said yes. Worse, they could say no and kick him out of their caverns to rejoin the rest of the population.

There must be some important non-combatant post he could fill. He raised his processor block to type an unobtrusive question for the personality. The Rubra of old would sympathise with that, and the Dariat section was his friend. Then he realized Erentz and her cousins had stopped talking.

"What?" he asked nervously.

"We can sense something in the rail tube approaching one of the endcap stations," the block said. It was essentially the same voice Rubra had used to speak with him the whole time he was in hiding; though something about it had changed. A stiffness in the inflexion? Minor yet significant.

"One of them's coming here?"

"We don't believe so. They rampage about without any attempt to disguise themselves. This is more like a mouse sneaking along. None of the surrounding polyp is suffering the usual heat-loss death. But our perceptive cells are unable to obtain a clear image."

"The bastards have changed tactics," Erentz snarled. She

snatched one of the flame throwers from a rack. "They know we're here!"

"We are uncertain on that point," the personality said. "However, this new incursion will have to be investigated."

Several more people ran into the armoury, and began picking up weapons. Tolton watched the abrupt whir of activity with bewildered alarm.

"Here." Erentz thrust an incendiary torpedo launcher at him.

He grabbed it in reflex. "I don't know how to use this."

"Aim it and shoot. Effective range two hundred metres. Any questions?"

She didn't sound in a forgiving mood.

"Oh crap," he grunted. He rocked his head from side to side, attempting to force the stiffness out of his neck muscles, then joined them in the hurried exodus.

There were nine of them in the group which marched down the stairs to the endcap tube station. Eight of Rubra's heavily armed, grim-faced descendants; and Tolton hanging as close to the back of the pack as possible while trying not to make it too obvious.

The main lighting strips were dark and cold. Emergency panels flickered with sapphire phosphorescence as if stirred into guilty life by the clumping footsteps. Not that they were of much use. Helmet projectors encased each member of the group in a sphere of bright white light. So far their power cells were unaffected.

"Any change?" Tolton whispered.

"No," the block whispered back. "The creature is still moving along the tube tunnel."

Rubra hadn't damaged this particular station during the brief active phase of his conflict with the possessed. Tolton kept expecting everything to return to life in a blast of light and noise and motion. It was *Marie Celeste* territory. A car-

riage was standing abandoned at one of the twin platforms, its door open. A couple of fast food packets lay abandoned on the marble floor outside, their contents dissolved into a pellicle of grey mould.

Erentz and her cousins fanned out along the platform, and edged cautiously towards the blank circle of the tunnel mouth behind the carriage. Three of them dropped down onto the rail, and crossed swiftly to the far wall. They slunk back into various crannies, crouched down, and aimed their weapons forward.

Along with those remaining on the platform, Tolton secured himself behind one of the central pillars, and brought his launcher up. Nine helmet projectors focused their illumination on the tunnel entrance, banishing the shadows for several metres along its length.

“This isn’t exactly an ambush,” he observed. “It can see we’re here.”

“Then we find out just how determined they are to get at us,” Erentz said. “I tried the subtle approach back in the Djerba. Believe me, it’s a bunch of shit.”

Wondering just how much their definitions of subtle were at variance, Tolton tightened his grip on the launcher. Once again, he checked the safety catch.

“Getting close now,” the personality cautioned.

A speck of grey materialized at the furthest extreme of the tunnel’s shadows. It rippled as it moved steadily forwards towards the station.

“Different,” Erentz muttered. “It’s not concealing itself this time.” Then she gasped as the habitat’s sensitive cells finally managed to focus.

Tolton squinted at the slowly resolving shape, pointing his launcher to the vertical so he could strain ahead. “Holy shit,” he said quietly.

Dariat emerged from the tunnel mouth, and smiled softly at the semicircle of lethal nozzles pointing at him

out of the blazing light. "Something I said?" he asked innocently.

You should have identified yourself to us, the personality said in censure.

I have been busy thinking, discovering what I am.

And that is?

I'm not quite sure yet.

Tolton whooped happily, and emerged from behind his pillar.

"Careful!" Erentz warned.

"Dariat? Hey, is that you?" Tolton hurried along the platform, grinning madly.

"It's me." There was only a slightly sardonic tone colouring his voice.

Tolton frowned. He'd heard his friend's voice loud and clear, never even needing to concentrate on the lip movement. He came to a confused halt. "Dariat?"

Dariat put his hands flat on the platform edge, and heaved himself up like a swimmer emerging from a pool. It looked like a lot of effort to lift so much weight. His toga stretched tight over his shoulders. "What's up, Tolton? You look like you've seen a ghost." He chuckled as he walked forward. The frayed hem of his toga brushed against one of the fast-food packets, and sent it spinning.

Tolton stared at the rectangle of plastic as it skidded to a halt. The others were bringing their weapons to bear again.

"You're real," Tolton stammered. "Solid!" The obese grinning man standing in front of him was no longer translucent.

"Damn right. The Lady Chi-Ri smiled on me. A warped kind of smile, I guess, but definitely a smile."

Tolton reached out gingerly and touched Dariat's arm. Cold bit into his questing fingers like razor fangs. He snatched his hand back. But there had definitely been a

physical surface; he'd even felt the crude weave of the toga cloth. "Shit! What happened to you, man?"

"Ah, now there's a story."

"I fell," Dariat told them. "Ten bloody stories down that lift shaft, screaming all the way. Thoale alone knows why suicides are so fond of jumping off cliffs and bridges; they wouldn't if they knew what that trip's like. I'm not even sure I did it on purpose. The personality was bullying me to do it, but that thing was getting closer, which made me weaker. I probably lost control of my legs I was so debilitated. Whatever . . . I went over the edge and landed smack on top of the lift. I even penetrated it a few centimetres I was falling so hard. Shit, I hate that. You've no idea how bad solid matter feels to a ghost. Anyway, I was just forcing my legs through the lift's roof to get out of there when the bloody bogeyman lands right bang beside me. I could even feel it coming, like a gust of liquid helium blowing down the shaft. But the thing is, it didn't break when it hit. It splashed."

"Splashed?" Tolton queried.

"Absolutely. It was like a goo bomb detonated on top of the lift. The whole shaft was splattered in this thick fluid. Everything got coated, including me. But the fluid reacted to me, I could feel the droplets. It was like getting caught in a spray of ice."

"How do you mean, reacted?"

"They changed while they were going through me. Their shape and colour tried to match the section of my body they were in. I figured it's like my thoughts have a big influence over them. I'm imagining my shape, right. So that imagination interacts with the fluid and formats it."

"Mind over matter," Erentz said sceptically.

"You got it. Those creatures are no different from any human ghost, except they're made up of this fluid; a solid visualization. They're souls, just like us."

“So how come you became solid?” Tolton asked.

“We fought for it, me and the other entity’s soul. The impact made it lose concentration for a moment, that’s why the stuff went flying off. Both of us started scrambling round to suck up as much as we could. And I was a hell of a lot stronger than it was. I won. Must have got seventy per cent of what was there before I made a run for it. Then I hid in the bottom floors until the rest of them had gone.” He looked round the circle of faintly suspicious faces. “That’s why they’ve come here. Valisk is saturated with energy that they can use. It’s the kind of energy that makes up our souls, life-energy. The attraction is like a bee for pollen. This is what they crave; they’re sentient just like us, they’ve come from the same universe as us, but blind instinct rules them now. They’ve been here so long they’re severely diminished, not to mention totally irrational. All they know is that they have to feed on life-energy, and Valisk is the biggest single source to emerge here that they can remember.”

“That’s what they were doing to the nutrient fluid,” the personality said. “Absorbing the life-energy from it.”

“Yeah. Which is what trashes it. And once it’s gone, you’ll never be able to produce any more. This dark continuum is like a bedamned version of the beyond.”

Tolton slumped onto the bottom stair. “Just fucking great. This is worse than the beyond?”

“I’m afraid so. This must be the sixth realm, the nameless void. Entropy is the only lord here. We will all bow down before him in the end.”

“This is not a Starbridge realm,” the personality retorted sharply. “It’s an aspect of physical reality, and once we understand and tabulate its properties we will know how to open a wormhole interstice and escape. We’ve already put a stop to these creatures consuming any more of us.”

Dariat glanced suspiciously round the empty station. “How?”

“The habitat’s nutrient fluid arteries have been shut down.”

“Uh oh,” Dariat said. “Bad move.”

With their nourishment denied them, the Orgathé began to search round for further sources of raw life-energy, crying out in their own strange intangible voices. Their kith who had infested the southern endcap organs shrilled in reply. Even there, the rich fluids were drying up, but the organs themselves were suffused with a furnace glow of life-energy. Enough for thousands.

The Orgathé pummelled their way up through the starscrapers one by one, and took flight.

Dariat, Tolton, Erentz, and several others stood outside one of the endcap caverns they were using as a garage for the rentcop trucks. They shielded their eyes from the bruised tangerine nimbus of the light-tube to watch one of the dark colossi soar upwards from a collapsing lobby. With its tattered wing sails extended, it was bigger than a cargo spaceplane. A small pearl-white twister of hail and snow fell from its warty underbelly.

Erentz puffed a relieved breath out through her teeth. “At least they’re still heading for the southern endcap.”

There are over thirty of them gnawing their way through our organs now, the personality said. The damage they are inflicting is reaching dangerous levels. And there’s only a single pressure door in the Igan starscraper preventing an atmosphere breach. You will have to go on the offensive. Dariat, will the flame throwers kill them?

No. Souls cannot be killed, even here. They just fade away to wraiths, maybe shadows not even that strong.

You know what we mean, boy!

Yeah, sure. Okay, the fire will fuck with their constituent fluid. They’re taking a long time to acclimatize

to the heat levels in the habitat. We're Thoale alone knows how many thousands of degrees above the continuum's ambient.

You mean hundreds.

I don't think so. Anyway, they can't take a direct blast of physical heat. Lasers and masers they can simply deflect, but flame should dissipate the fluid and leave their souls naked. It'll turn them into another just bunch of ghosts skulking round the parkland.

Excellent.

"If they can't die, what do they want with all that life-energy?" Erentz asked.

"It boosts them above the rest," Dariat said. "Once they're strong, they'll stay free for a long time before the life-energy leaks away again."

"Free of what?" Tolton asked uneasily. He had to stand several paces away from his friend. Not out of rudeness; Dariat was *cold*. Moisture condensed across his toga as it would on a beer bottle fresh from the fridge. None of the droplets stained the cloth, though, Tolton noticed. And that was only one of the oddities this reincarnation displayed. There were differences in behaviour, too, little quirks which had come to the fore. He'd watched Dariat quietly as they'd all walked up out of the tube station. There was a confidence about him that had been missing before; as if he was merely indulging his relatives rather than helping them. That deep anger had been expelled, too, replaced by sadness. Tolton wondered about that combination, sadness and confidence was a strange driving force. Probably quite volatile, too. But then given what poor old Dariat had been through in the last few weeks, that was eminently forgivable. Worthy of a verse or two, in fact. It had been a long time since Tolton had composed anything.

"We didn't have a real long conversation on top of the lift," Dariat said. "It was the kind of pressurized memory ex-

change I experienced in the beyond. The creature's thoughts weren't very stable."

"You mean it knows about us?"

"I expect so. But don't confuse knowing with being interested. Absorbing life-energy is all they exist for now."

Erentz squinted after the receding Orgathé as it headed over the circumfluous sea. "We'd better get organized, I suppose." She couldn't have sounded less enthusiastic.

Dariat gave up on the dark invader, and looked around. A crowd of ghosts was hanging back from the cavern entrance, keeping among the larger boulders littering the desert. They regarded the little band of tenacious corporeal humans with grudging respect, avoiding direct eye contact like a shoplifter eluding the store detective.

"You!" Dariat barked suddenly. He started to march over the powdery sand. "Yes, you, shithead. Remember me, huh?"

Tolton and Erentz trailed after him, curious at this latest behaviour.

Dariat was closing on a ghost dressed in baggy overalls. It was the mechanic he'd encountered when he went searching for Tolton just after the habitat arrived in the dark continuum.

Recognition was mutual. The mechanic turned and ran. Ghosts parted to let him through their midst. Dariat chased after him, surprisingly fast for his bulk. As he passed through the huddle of ghosts they shivered and shuffled further away, gasping in shock at the cold he exuded.

Dariat caught hold of the mechanic's arm, dragging him to a halt. The man screeched in pain and fear, flailing about, unable to escape Dariat's grip. He started to grow more transparent.

"Dariat," Tolton called. "Hey, come on, man, you're hurting him."

The mechanic had fallen to his knees, shaking violently as

his colouring bled away. Dariat by contrast was almost glowing. He glowered down at his victim. "Remember? Remember what you did, shithead?"

Tolton drew up short, unwilling to touch his erstwhile friend. The memory of the cold he'd experienced back in the station was too strong.

"Dariat!" he shouted.

Dariat looked down at the mechanic's withering face. Remorse opened his fingers, allowing the incorporeal arm to slip away. What would Anastasia say about such behaviour? "Sorry," he muttered shamefully.

"What did you do to him?" Tolton demanded. The mechanic was barely visible. He'd curled up into a foetal position, half of his body sunk into the sand.

"Nothing," Dariat blurted, ashamed of his action. The fluid which brought him solidity apparently came with an ugly price. He'd known it all along, simply refused to acknowledge it. Hatred had been an excuse, not a motivator. As with the Orgathé instinct was supplanting rationality.

"Oh, come on." Tolton bent down and moved his hand through the whimpering ghost. The air felt slightly cooler, otherwise there was no trace that he existed. "What have you done?"

"It's the fluid," Dariat said. "It takes a lot to maintain myself now."

"A lot of what?" Rhetorical question: Tolton knew without needing an answer.

"Life-energy. Just keeping going uses it up. I need to replenish. I don't have a biology, I can't breathe or eat a meal; I have to take it neat. And souls are a strong concentration."

"What about him?" A tiny patina of silver frost was forming on the ground within the ghost's vague outline. "What about this particular *concentration*?"

"He'll recover. There's plants and stuff he can recoup the loss from. He did a lot worse to me, once." No matter how

much Dariat wanted, he couldn't look away from the drained ghost. This is what we're all going to end up like, he acknowledged. Pathetic emancipated remnants of what we are, clinging to our identity while the dark continuum depletes us until we're a single silent voice weeping in the night. There's no way out. Entropy is too strong here, drowning us away from the light.

And I was instrumental in bringing us here.

"Let's get back inside," Erentz said. "It's about time we put you under the microscope, see if the physics gang can make any sense of you."

Dariat thought about protesting. Eventually he just nodded meekly. "Sure."

They walked back towards the cavern entrance, through the clutter of subdued ghosts. Two more Orgathé hatched from the Gonchraov starscraper lobby, tumbling up into the wan twilight sky.

There were vigilantes at Kings Cross station, hard young gang members drafted in from the low-cost residential estates scattered around the outer districts of Westminster Dome. Their uniforms went from pseudo-military to expensive business suits, denoting their differing membership. Ordinarily such a mixture was hypergolic. See/kill. And if civilians got caught in the line of fire, tough. In some cases, feuds between boroughs and individual gangs went back centuries. Today, they all wore a simple white ribbon prominently on their various lapels. It stood for Pure Soul, and united them in commitment. They were here to make sure all of London stayed pure.

Louise stepped off the vac-train carriage, yawning heavily. Gen leaned against her side, nearly sleepwalking as they moved away from the big airlock door. It was almost three in the morning, local time. She didn't like to think how long she'd been up for now.

“What are you creeps doing getting off here?”

She hadn't even noticed them until they stood in front of her. Two dark-skinned girls with shaved heads; the taller one had replaced her eyeballs with blank silver globes. Both of them wore identical plain black two-piece suits of some satin fabric. They didn't have blouses; the jackets were fastened by a single button, exposing stomachs as muscular as any Norfolk field labourer. Their cleavage was the only way to tell they were female. Even then Louise wasn't entirely sure, they might just be butched-up pectorals.

“Uh?” she managed.

“That train's from Edmonton, babe. That's where the possessed are. Is that why you left? Or are you here for some other reason, some kind of freako nightclub?”

Louise began to wake up fast. There were a lot of young people on the platform; some dressed in suits identical to the girls' (the voice finally convinced her about gender), others in less formal clothes. None of them showed any inclination to embark on the newly arrived train. Several armour-suited police were clumped round the exit archway, with their shell—helmet visors raised. They were looking in her direction with some interest.

Ivanov Robson moved smoothly to stand at Louise's side, his movement hinting at the same kind of inertia carried by an iceberg. He smiled with refined politeness. The gang girls didn't flinch, exactly, but they were smaller now, somehow, less menacing.

“Is there a problem?” he asked quietly.

“Not for us,” the one with the silver eyes said.

“Good, then please stop hassling these young ladies.”

“Yeah? So what are you, their dad? Or maybe just their great big friend out for some fun tonight.”

“If that's the best you can do, stop trying.”

“You didn't answer my question, bigfoot man.”

"I'm a London resident. We all are. Not that it's any of your concern."

"Like fuck it isn't, brother."

"I'm not your brother."

"Is your soul pure?"

"What are you all of a sudden, my confessor?"

"We're guardians, not priests. Religion is fucked; it doesn't know how to fight the possessed. We do." She patted her white ribbon. "We keep the arcology pure. No shitty little demon gets in past us."

Louise glanced across at the police. There were a couple more of them now, but they showed no sign of intervening. "I'm not possessed," she said indignantly. "None of us are."

"Prove it, babe."

"How?"

The gang girls both took small sensors from their pockets. "Show us you contain only one soul, that you're pure."

Ivanov turned to Louise. "Humour them," he said in a clear voice. "I can't be bothered to shoot them; I'd have to pay the judge far too much to bounce us out of jail before breakfast."

"Fuck you," the second gang girl shouted.

"Just get on with it," Louise said wearily. She held out her left arm, the right was curled protectively round Gen. The gang girl slapped the sensor on the top of her hand.

"No static," she barked. "This is a pure babe." Her follow-up grin was weird, showing teeth that were too long to be natural.

"Check the sprog."

"Come on, Gen," Louise coaxed. "Hold out your hand." A scowling Genevieve did as she was told.

"Clean," the gang girl reported.

"Then you must be what I can smell," Genevieve scoffed. The gang girl drew her hand back for a slap.

"Don't even dream it," Ivanov purred.

Genevieve's face slowly broke into a wide smirk. She looked straight at the girl with the silver eyes. "Are they lesbians, Louise?"

The gang girl had trouble controlling her temper. "Come with us, little girl. Find out what we do to freshmeat like you."

"That's enough." Ivanov stepped forward and proffered his hand. "Genevieve, behave, or I'll smack you." The gang girl put her sensor to his skin, taking care to do it softly.

"I've met a possessed," Genevieve said. "The nastiest one there's ever been."

Both gang girls gave her an uncertain look.

"If a possessed does ever comes out of a train, you know what you should do? Just run. Nothing you can do will stop them."

"Wrong, titchy bitch." The gang girl patted a pocket; there was something heavy bulging the fabric. "We just pump them with ten thousand volts and watch the firework display. I've heard it's real pretty. Be good to me, I'll let you watch, too."

"Seen it already."

"Huh!" The girl turned her silver eyes on Banneth. "You too. I want to know you're pure."

Banneth laughed gently. "Let's hope your sensor can't probe my heart."

"What the hell are you all doing here?" Ivanov asked. "The only time I've seen the Blairs and the Bennis in the same place before was a morgue. And I can see a couple of MoHawks over there as well."

"Looking after our turf, brother. These possessed, they're part of the sect. You don't see none of those bastards down here, do you? We're not going to let them crunch us like they done New York and Edmonton."

"I think the police will do that, don't you?"

"No fucking way. They're Govcentral. And those shits let

the possessed down here in the first place. This planet's got the greatest defences in the galaxy, and the possessed just breezed through them like they weren't even there. You want to tell me how come that happened?"

"Good point," Banneth drawled. "I'm still waiting to hear on that one myself."

"And why haven't they shut down the vac-trains properly?" the girl continued. "They're still running to Edmonton where we know the possessed are. I accessed that sensewise of the fight, it was only a couple of hours ago for Christ's sake."

"Criminal," Banneth agreed. "They were probably bribed by big business."

"You taking the piss, bitch?"

"Who, me?"

The gang girl gave her a disgusted stare, not knowing what to make of her attitude. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Go on, get the fuck out of here, all of you. I hate you rich kinks." She watched them walk through the exit archway with a vague sense of unease scratching away at her mind. There was something badly wrong about the group, the four of them were a complete mismatch. But screw that, as long as they weren't possessed who cared what kind of orgy they were heading off to. She shivered suddenly as a cold breeze swept along the platform. It must have been caused by the carriage airlocks swinging shut.

"That was awful," Genevieve exclaimed when they reached the big sub-level hall above the station's platforms. "Why didn't the police stop them doing that to people?"

"Because it's way too much trouble at three o'clock in the morning," Ivanov said. "Besides, I expect most of the officers down there are quite happy to let the vigilantes take the

heat if a possessed did step out of a train. They act as a buffer.”

“Is Govcentral being stupid allowing the vac-trains to continue?” Louise asked.

“Not stupid, just slow. It is the universe’s largest bureaucracy, after all.” He waved a hand at the informationals flittering overhead. “See? They’ve shut a few routes down already. And public pressure will close a lot more before long. It’ll snowball once everyone’s had time to access the Edmonton fight. This time tomorrow you’ll have trouble getting a taxi to take you further than a couple of streets.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to leave London again?”

“Probably not.”

The way he said it sounded so final: a pronouncement rather than an opinion. As always, an authority in knowledge he had no business knowing.

“All right,” Louise said. “I suppose we’d better go back to the hotel, then.”

“I’ll come with you,” Ivanov said. “There might be a few more of these nutters around. It wouldn’t do for the natives to learn you’re from Norfolk right now. These are paranoid times.”

For some reason, Andy Behoo popped into Louise’s mind; his offer to sponsor her for Govcentral citizenship. “Thank you.”

“What about you?” Ivanov asked Banneth. “Do you need to share a cab?”

“No thank you. I know where I’m going.” She walked off towards the lifts around the rim of the hemispherical cavern.

“Don’t mention it,” Louise muttered grumpily at her back.

“I expect she’s grateful, really,” Ivanov said. “Probably just doesn’t know how to express it.”

“She could try harder.”

“Come along, let’s get you two home to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Quinn watched the lift doors close on Banneth. He didn’t bother to rush after her. Finding her again would be relatively simple. Bait was never hidden. Oh, it wouldn’t be obvious. He would need time, and resources, and have to make an effort. But her location would be filtered through the arcology’s downtowners, the sect covens and gangs would be informed. That was why he’d been lured here, after all. London was the largest, most elaborate trap ever assembled for one man. In a strange way, he felt rather flattered. That the supercops were prepared to sacrifice the whole arcology just to nail him was a mark of extreme respect. They feared God’s Brother exactly as He should be feared.

He trailed after Louise as she walked over to the lifts with her brat sister and the huge private eye. She was very drowsy, which relaxed her face. It left her delicate features unguarded and natural; a state which served only to amplify her beauty. He wanted to put out a hand and stroke her exquisite cheeks, to see her smile gently at his touch. Welcome him.

She frowned, and rubbed her arms. “It’s cold down here.” The moment broke.

Quinn rode up to the surface with the trio, then left them as they went off to the taxi garage. He took a subwalk under the busy road and hurried along one of the main streets radiating out from the station. There would only be a limited amount of time until the supercops closed down the vac-trains.

The second alley leading off from the main street contained what he wanted. The Black Bull, a small, cheap pub, filled with hard-drinking men. He moved among them, unseen as his expanded senses examined their clothing and

skulls. None of them were fitted with neural nanonics, but several were carrying processor blocks.

He followed one into the toilets, where the only electrical circuit was for the light panel.

Jack McGovern was peeing blissfully into the cracked urinal when an icy hand clamped round the back of his neck and slammed his face into the wall. His nose broke from the impact, sending a torrent of blood to splash into the porcelain.

“You will take your processor block from your coat pocket,” a voice said. “Use your activation code, and make a call for me. Do it now, or die, dickhead.”

Rat-arsed he might have been, but overdosing on self-preservation allowed Jack’s mind to focus with remarkable clarity on his options. “Okay,” he mumbled, a lip movement which sent more blood dribbling down the wall. He fumbled for his processor block. There was an emergency police-hail program which was activated by feeding in the wrong code.

The terrible pressure on his neck eased off, allowing him to turn. When he saw who his assailant was, the thought of deviously calling for help withered faster than hell’s solitary snowflake.

Quinn returned to Kings Cross, sharing a lift down to the underground chamber with a cluster of vigilantes. He wandered through the vaulting hall, ambling round the closed kiosks and steering clear of industrious cleaning mechanoids. The lifts kept on disgorging gang members, who immediately took the wave escalators down to the platforms. He kept watching the informationals, paying particular attention to the arrivals screens. In the two hours which followed, five vac-trains arrived from Edmonton. All departures slowed down to zero.

The Frankfurt train pulled in at five minutes past five. Quinn went and stood at the top of its platform’s wave esca-

lator. They were the last to come up, Courtney and Billy-Joe gently guiding the drugged woman between them. The two acolytes had smartened up, looking closer to a pair of grungy university students than downtown barbarians now. Their snatch victim—a middle-aged woman wearing a crumpled dress with an unbuttoned cardigan—had the vacant eyes typical of a triathozine dose; her body fully functional, brain in an advanced hypnoreception state. There and them, if she'd been told to jump off the top of an arcology dome, she'd do it.

They moved at a brisk pace across the floor and hopped into a lift. Quinn wanted to materialize, just so he could cheer at the top of his voice. The tide was turning now. God's Brother had given His chosen messiah another sign that he remained on the path.

At five-thirty, the sixth train from Edmonton arrived. A notice slithered over the holograms announcing that the routes to North America had now been shut by order of Gov-central. Five minutes later, all departures were cancelled. Vac-trains already en route to the arcology were being diverted to Birmingham and Glasgow. London was now physically isolated from the rest of the planet.

It was just a little scary how his prediction had come so true. But then he was bound to be right, with God's Brother gifting him understanding.

People were coming up from the platforms: the last straggle of passengers, the vigilante gangs (already eyeing each other now the reason for their truce was over), the police duty teams, station crews. Informationals floating overhead vanished like pricked bubbles. Display boards blanked out. The twenty-four hour stalls closed up, their staff gossiping hotly together as they rode the lifts up to the surface. The wave escalators halted. All the solaris lights overhead dimmed down, sinking the cavern into a gloomy dusk. Even

the conditioning fans slowed, their whine dropping several octaves.

It was the paranoiac moment every solipsist fears. The world was a stage constructed around him, and this chunk of it was shutting down as it was no longer part of the act. For a second, Quinn worried that if he went to the dome wall and looked out there would be nothing there to see.

“Not yet,” he said. “Soon though.”

He took a last look round, then went over to one of the emergency fire stairs and started the long trek to the surface and the rendezvous point.

Louise was surprised at how much she associated the hotel room with *home*. But it was reassuring to be back after the ordeal of Edmonton. Partly it was because she now considered her obligation over: she'd done what she promised dear Fletcher and warned Banneth. A small blow struck against that monster Dexter (even though he'd never know). The fact that the Ritz was so comfortable helped a lot, too.

After Ivanov Robson dropped them off, both girls slept well into the morning. When they finally went downstairs for breakfast, reception informed Louise there was a small package for her. It was a single dark-red rose in a white box, with a silver bow tied round. The card that came with it was signed from Andy Behoo.

“Let me see,” Gen said, bouncing on her bed in excitement.

Louise smelt the rose, which to be honest was rather a weak scent. “No,” she said, and held the card aloft. “It’s private. You can put this in water, though.”

Gen regarded the rose suspiciously, sniffing it cautiously. “Okay. But at least tell me what he says.”

“Just: thank you for last night. That’s all.” She didn’t mention the second half of the message, where he said how lovely she was, and how he’d do anything to see her again.

The card was put into her new snakeskin bag, and the little pocket codelocked against small prying fingers.

Gen took one of the vases from the ancient oak dresser, and went off to the bathroom for some water. Louise datavisited her net connection server and inquired if there were any messages for her. The six-hourly ritual. Pointless, as the server would automatically deliver any communiqué as soon as it received one.

There were no messages. Specifically, no messages from Tranquillity. Louise flopped back on the bed, staring at the ceiling as she tried to puzzle it out. She knew she'd got the message protocol right; that was part of the NAS2600 communication program. Something had to be wrong at the other end. But when she put the news hound into primary mode, there was no report of anything untoward happening to Tranquillity. Perhaps Joshua simply wasn't there, and her messages were piling up in his net server memory.

She thought about it for a while, then composed a brief message to Ione Saldana herself. Joshua said he knew her, they'd grown up together. If anybody knew where he was, she would.

After that, she launched a quick directory search and datavisited detective Brent Roi.

"Kavanagh?" he replied. "God, you mean you bought yourself a set of neural nanonics?"

"Yes, you didn't say I couldn't."

"No, but I thought your planet didn't allow you that kind of technology."

"I'm not on Norfolk now."

"Yeah, right. So what the hell do you want?" he asked.

"I'd like to go to Tranquillity, please. I don't know who I have to get permission from."

"From me, I'm your case officer. And you can't."

"Why not? I thought you wanted us to leave Earth. If we

got to Tranquillity, you wouldn't have to worry about us any more."

"Frankly, I don't worry about you now, Miss Kavanagh. You seem to be behaving yourself—at least, you haven't tripped any of our monitor programs."

Louise wondered if he knew about the bugs Andy had removed at Jude's Eworld. She wasn't going to volunteer the information. "So why can't I go?"

"I gather you haven't got the hang of your news hound program yet."

"I have."

"Really. Then you ought know that as of oh-five-seventeen hours GMT, the global vac-train network was shut down by an emergency Presidential executive decree. Every arcology is on its own. The President's office says they want to prevent the possessed in Paris and Edmonton from sneaking into more arcologies. Myself, I think it's a load of crap, but the President is scared of public opinion more than he is of the possessed. So like I told you before, you're on Earth for the duration."

"Already?" she whispered aloud. So much for Govcentral moving slowly. But Robson had been right again. "There must be a way out of London to the tower," she datavised.

"Only the vac-trains."

"But how long will this go on for?"

"Ask the President. He forgot to tell me."

"I see. Well, thank you."

"Don't mention it. You want some advice? You have finite funds, right? You might consider shunting along to a different hotel. And if this goes on for much longer, which I suspect it will, you'll need a job."

"A job?"

"Yeah, that's one of those nasty little things ordinary people do, and in return they get given money by their employer."

“There’s no need to be rude.”

“Eat it. When you apply to the local Burrow Burger as a waitress, or whatever, they’ll want your citizenship number. Refer them to me, I’ll grant you temporary immigrant status.”

“Thank you.” That much sarcasm couldn’t be carried along a datavise, but he’d know.

“Hey, if you don’t fancy that, at least you’ve got an alternative. A girl like you won’t have any trouble finding a man to look after her.”

“Detective Roi, can I ask what happened to Fletcher?”

“No, you can’t.” The link ended.

Louise looked out of the window across Green Park. Dark clouds swirled over the dome, hiding the sun. She wondered who’d sent them.

It was a forty-storey octagonal tower in the Dalston district, one of eight similar structures that made up the Parsonage Heights development. They were supposed to raise the general tone of the neighbourhood, encumbered as it was by low-cost housing, bargain centre market halls, and a benefits-reliant population. The towers were supposed to rest on a huge underground warren of factory and light manufacturing units. Above that buzzing industrial core, the first seven floors would be given over to retail outlets, followed by five floors of leisure industry premises, three more floors of professional and commercial offices, and the remaining floors taken up by residential apartments. The whole entity would be an economic heart transplant for Dalston, creating opportunity and invigorating the maze of shabby ancient streets outside with rivers of commerce and new money.

But Dalston’s underlying clay had a water-table problem which would have tripled the cost of the underground factory warren in order to prevent it from flooding, so it was downgraded to a couple of levels of storage warehousing.

The local market halls cut their rock bottom prices still further, leaving half of the retail units unrented; franchise chains took over a meagre eight per cent of the designated leisure floorspace. In order to recoup their investment, Voynow Finance hurriedly converted the thirty upper floors into comfortable apartments with a reasonable view across the Westminster Dome, which market research indicated they could sell to junior and middle management executive types.

The rushed compromise worked, after a fashion. Certainly, sixty years after its construction, Parsonage Heights was home to a slightly more affluent class than Dalston's average. There were even some reasonable shops and cafés established on the lower floors—though what activities went on in the dilapidated, damp, and crumbling warehouses hidden beneath was something the top-floor residents declined to investigate.

The local police station knew there was a Light Bringer coven down there; but for whatever reason, the chief constable had never instituted a raid. So when Banneth's tube train pulled in at Dalston Kingsland station, the magus and a fifteen-strong bodyguard was waiting with impunity on the platform to greet her. She took one look at the blank-faced young toughs carrying their pathetic assortment of inferior weapons, and had trouble preventing a laugh.

Did you arrange this? she asked Western Europe.

I simply told the magus how important you are to God's Brother. He reacted appropriately, don't you think?

Too appropriately. This is becoming a farce.

The Dalston coven magus stepped forwards, and bowed slightly. "High Magus, it's an honour to have you here. We have your safe house ready."

"It better be a good one, or I'll have you strapped down

on your own altar and demonstrate how we deal with people who fail God's Brother in Edmonton."

The magus's vaguely hopeful air wafted away, leaving behind a belligerent expression. "You won't be able to fault us. *Our* position hasn't been compromised."

She ignored the crude reference. "Lead on."

The bodyguard clumped their way noisily up the carbon-concrete stairs and out onto Kingston High Street. The first four out of the station's automatic door levelled their TIP carbines along the road, which startled the few late-night pedestrians heading home from the district's grotty clubs. They swept their muzzles round in what they thought was a professional scanning manoeuvre.

"Clear!" the leader barked.

Banneth rolled her eyes as the rest of the bodyguard hurried out around her. Cars had been halted in the street to let them cross. They hurried into the ground floor mall of the Parsonage Heights tower opposite the station. Three more sect members were waiting inside, standing guard beside an open lift. The magus and eight bodyguards crowded in around Banneth. They rode it to the top floor, where it opened out directly into the penthouse vestibule. More sect members were inside, toting their weapons and finishing off the new security sensor array.

"No fucker's going to sneak up on you while you're here," the magus said confidently. "We've got every approach covered. There'll be guards outside, and in all the stairwells. Nobody gets in or out without a secure access code, which you have command authority over."

Banneth walked into the penthouse, which occupied the whole fortieth floor. The absent owner had chosen its decor straight out of a thirty-year-old catalogue file specialising in unashamed chintz: green leather furniture, Turkish rugs over polished marble tiles, glowing primary-colour sketches hanging on the walls, and a red marble fireplace complete

with holographic flames. A glass wall had swing-up slab doors which led out to a roof garden with a swimming pool and hot tub; the sun loungers were sculpted blue plastic frogs.

“The fridge is full,” the magus said. “If you take a fancy to anything, just let us know and we’ll have it sent up. I can get anything you need. My grip on this town is total.”

“I’m sure,” Banneth said. “You, you, and you,” her finger singled out two attractive girls and a teenage boy. “Stay. The rest of you, fuck off. Now.”

The magus blushed heavily. Treating him like a piece of street shit in front of his acolytes would be a serious blow to his authority. She stared right at him, a silent direct challenge.

He snapped his fingers, gesturing everyone out, then stomped through the big blackwood doors without looking back.

“Dump the guns,” Banneth told the three remaining acolytes. “You won’t be needing them in here.”

After a moment’s hesitation they left them beside the kitchen bar. Banneth walked out into the small paved garden. Night fuchsias spilled their sweetness into the air. It had a balcony of high, one-way glass, allowing her to look over the glimmering crater of lights which defined the city. Nobody could see in. A reasonable protection against snipers, she acknowledged.

Did I cause a big enough splash? she asked Western Europe.

Oh yes. The dear magus is currently screaming at London’s High Magus about how big a shit you are. All the covens will be talking about your arrival by this evening.

Evening. She shook her head irritably. **I hate train lag.**

Not relevant. I’ll have the little traffic-stopping scene downstairs logged on the police intelligence bulletin

as well. The patrol constables will ask their informants for further information about the coven's new activities. We'll have the whole arcology covered. Dexter will find you.

"Shit," Banneth mumbled. She beckoned the nervous acolytes out onto the roof garden. "One, find me a decent glass of Crown whisky; then take your clothes off. I want to watch you swimming."

"Um, High Magus," one of the girls said anxiously. "I can't swim."

"Then you'd better learn fast. Hadn't you?"

Banneth ignored their whispering behind her, and looked upwards. Long strips of faintly luminescent cloud curved round the dome, breaking into agitated foam as they hit the surface flow boundary. Patches of night sky were visible through the choppy fringes. Stars and spacecraft shone bright against the blackness. There was the hint of a hazy ark above the northern horizon.

This penthouse is difficult to reach from the ground, but wide open to the sky, she observed. That means an SD strike.

Correct. I have no intention of using a nuke inside the dome. But an X-ray laser can penetrate the crystal with minimal damage. If he can survive that, then frankly there is no hope for us.

There certainly isn't for me.

You created him.

B7 created me.

We permitted you, there's a difference. You were convenient for us. Under our patronage you fulfilled most of your ambitions. Without us, you would now either be dead or an Ivet.

If I can take him out . . .

No. I don't want you fighting back. He must not be made to turn invisible again. I only have one chance at

this. It's quite poetic really: the whole world's future depending on an individual.

Poetic. Fuck, what the hell are you people?

I believe our original agreement was that B7's patronage would be provided on a no-questions-asked basis. Despite your predicament, you still don't qualify to ask that question, and I have no intention of indulging you. When you are dead, then you can observe me from the beyond.

Some people make it past the beyond. That's what the Edenists claim.

Then I wish you bon voyage.

Banneth glanced out over the preserved city again. The first pale grey photons of dawn were slipping up from the eastern horizon to lap against the bottom of the giant crystal dome. She wondered how many more dawns she was going to see.

Truthful estimate, knowing the way she'd put Dexter together, no more than a week.

The acolytes were splashing about in the pool now, including the non-swimming girl clinging resolutely to the shallow end. Banneth didn't care, the whole point was just to see their great young bodies glistening wet. Indulging herself with them was definitely one-up on the customary last meal. However, there were files stored in her neural nanonics which had to be edited and prepared. Her lifetime's work. She could hardly allow it to go to waste, though finding an institution that would accept it might prove difficult. It wasn't just that she wanted it preserved, she wanted it studied, utilized. An important body of knowledge: human behaviour under the kind of extreme conditions that would forever remain closed to academic medical circles. It was unique, which made it all the more valuable. Perhaps some day it might become a classic reference for psychology students.

She went back into the lounge and settled into one of the dreadful green leather couches, ready to start indexing the files. It would be amusing to see how long the acolytes stayed in the water.

The Lancini had been built at the start of the Twenty-first Century, a huge department store intended to rival London's best: set on Millbank overlooking the Thames, it had a *très chic* view which along with its retro-thirties decor was calculated to bring in the affluent and curious alike. As with all outsize endeavours, its decline was never going to be swift. It had limped along for decades with falling customer numbers and negative profits. The image it attempted to foster right from the start was dignity without snobbishness. According to the market survey programs worshiped by its executives, such a policy would attract older shoppers, with their correspondingly larger credit funds. Floor managers, left with no margin for innovation, kept ordering established, unhip, brands to serve their loyal, ageing shoppers. Every year, fewer of them returned.

The execs really should have known that; if they'd just cross-linked their market surveys with the store's own funeral service department, they would have seen just how far their customer loyalty extended. Unfortunately, it didn't quite extend to after-burial purchasing. So 2589 saw the very last traditional January sale ending with an undignified auction to dispose of the store's fittings. Now only the shell of the building remained.

Nothing changed, because nothing was allowed to change. The London historical buildings continuity council made quite sure of that in its rigorous defence of heritage. Anyone was free to purchase the Lancini and start a commercial business up in it, providing it was refurbished to match the original interior plans, and that business was retail

shopping. Another setback to refurbishment was the price the receivers were demanding to satisfy the store's creditors.

Then news of possession and the beyond reached Earth. And, quite paradoxically, age suddenly became a highly motivating factor in change. It was old people who sat on the historical buildings continuity council. London's most venerated (and richest) banks and financial institutions were mostly governed by centenarians. These were the people who were going to be the first generation of humans who would enter the horror of the beyond knowing it was waiting for them. Unless, of course, a method of salvation was found. So far the Church (any/every denomination), Gov-central's science councils, and the Confederation Navy had been unable to provide that salvation.

That just left one possible refuge: zero-tau.

Several companies were quickly formed to supply demand. Obviously, long-term facilities would ultimately be needed to carry these customers of oblivion through the millennia; mausolea more enduring than the pyramids. But they'd take time to design and build; meanwhile the hospital chaplains remained in business. Temporary storage facilities were urgently required.

By a near unanimous vote, the historical buildings continuity council quickly approved a change of use of premises certificate for the Lancini. Zero-tau pods were shipped in from the Halo and taken in via delivery gates more used to household furnishings and haute couture. The ancient cage lifts had the load capacity to take them up to every floor. Oak floorboards, seasoned by five centuries of dehumidified conditioning, were strong enough to hold the new weight distribution pattern. Heavy-duty cabling laid in for the floor displays carried sufficient electricity to feed the pods' power-hungry systems. In fact, if it hadn't been for the building's projected three hundred year lifespan, the Lancini would have made a good eternity crypt.

Certainly Paul Jerrold thought it appropriate enough when he was shown to his pod. It was on the fourth floor, one of a long row in the old Horticultural section, lined up opposite the windows. Over half of the big sarcophagi were active, their black surfaces absorbing the dust-choked sunbeams as if they were spatial chasms. The two nurses helped him in over the rim, then fussed round, smoothing down his loose fitting track-suit. He kept quiet through the nannying; at a hundred and twelve he was becoming used to the attitude of medical staff. Always exaggerating the attention they gave their patients, as if the care would go unnoticed if they didn't.

"Are you ready?" one asked.

Paul smiled. "Oh yes." The last couple of weeks had been busy ones, itself a blessing at his age. First the devastating news of possession. Then the slow response, the determination by himself and the others at his elite West End club that they should not become victims of the beyond. The web of discreet contacts put out, offering an alternative for those who could pay for it. His solicitors and accountants had been tasked with shifting his substantial holdings into a long-term trust that would pay for maintaining his stasis. It didn't cost much: maintenance, rent, and power. Even if the trust was badly bungled, he had enough money in the bank to keep himself secure for ten thousand years. Then once it had been arranged, there had been the arguments with his children and their swarm of offspring, all of whom had adopted a quiet waiting policy to obtain his wealth. A brief legal battle (he could afford much better lawyers than they), and that was it, and here he was: a new breed of chrononaut.

His habitual dread of the future had faded, replaced by a keen interest in what awaited. When the zero-tau field switched off, there would be a full solution to the beyond, society would have evolved radically to take knowledge of the afterlife into account. There might even be a decent re-

juvenation treatment available. Possibly, humans would have finally achieved physical immortality. He would become as a god.

A flicker of greyness, shorter than an eyeblink . . .

The pod cover lifted, and Paul Jerrold was slightly surprised to see he was still in the Lancini. He'd expected to be in some huge technological vault, or perhaps a tasteful recovery room. Not right back where his voyage through eternity had started. Unless these new, magnificently advanced humans had re-created the Lancini to provide their ancestors with the psychological comfort of familiar territory, a considerate way to ease their introduction to this fabulous new civilization built in his absence.

He glanced eagerly through the big, dirty window opposite. Dusk had fallen across the Westminster Dome. The thriving lights of the south bank glimmered brightly in front of the steel grey clouds smothering the vast arc of the dome. A projection of some kind?

The pair of medical staff attending him were somewhat unconventional. A girl leaned over the pod, very young, with amazingly large breasts squeezed up by a tight leather waistcoat. The adolescent boy standing beside her wore an expensive pure-wool sweater that was somehow wrong on him; his face was stubbly, with animal-mad eyes. He held a loop of power cable in one hand, plug dangling loosely.

Paul took one look at the plug, and datavised an emergency code. He couldn't get a response from any net processor; then his neural nanonics crashed. A third figure clad in a jet-black robe slipped out of the gloom to stand at the foot of the pod.

"Who are you?" Paul croaked in fright. He levered himself up into a sitting position, skinny hands with their bulging veins gripping the edge of the pod.

"You know exactly who we are," Quinn said.

"Have you won? Did you defeat us?"

“We’re going to, yes.”

“Oww shit, Quinn,” Billy-Joe protested. “Look at these old farts, they ain’t good for nothing. No soul’s gonna make them last, not even with your kind of black magic.”

“They’ll last long enough. That’s all that matters.”

“I told you, you want decent possessed you gotta go to the sects for bodies. Fuck, they worship you. All you’ve gotta do it tell them to bend over, they ain’t gonna put up no fight.”

“God’s Brother,” Quinn growled. “Don’t you ever think, shithead? The sects are a lie. I’ve told you, they’re controlled by the supercops. I can’t go to them for anything, we’d just give ourselves away. This place is fucking perfect. Nobody’s going to notice people going missing from here, as far as this world’s concerned they stopped existing as soon as they walked through the door.” His face jutted out of the hood to grin down at Paul. “Right?”

“I have money.” It was Paul’s last gambit, the one thing everyone desired.

“That’s good,” Quinn said. “You’re almost one of us already. You don’t have far to go.” He pointed a finger, and Paul’s world howled into pain.

Western Europe had hooked eight AIs in to London’s communication net, which gave him enough processing capacity to review each chunk of electronic circuitry in the arcology on a ten second cycle, providing it had a net connection. All processor blocks, no matter what their function, were datavised on a fifteen-second rota and examined for suspect glitches.

He wasn’t the only worried citizen. Several commercial software houses had gripped the marketing opportunity and offered possession monitoring packages. It consisted of a neural nanonics program which sent a continual capacity diagnostic and location datavise to the company security cen-

tre, who would alert the police if the user suffered an unexplained glitch or drop out. Bracelets were also spilling into the shops which did the same thing for kids too young for neural nanonics.

Communication bandwidth was becoming a serious problem. Western Europe had used GSDI authority to prioritize the AI scanning programs, leaving them unimpeded while civil data traffic suffered unheard of capacity reductions and switching delays.

The visualization of the arcology's electronic structure was a theatrical gesture, impressing no one. It stood on the table of the sensenviron secure conference chamber like an elaborate glass model of the ten domes. Fans of coloured light rotated through the miniature translucent structures with strobe-like repetition.

South Pacific studied their movement as the other B7 supervisor representations came on line around the oval table. When all sixteen were there, she asked: "So where is he, then?"

"Not in Edmonton," North America said. "We kicked their asses out of the universe. The whole goddamn nest of them. There's none of the bastards left."

"Really?" Asian Pacific said. "So you've accounted for the friend of Carter McBride as well, have you?"

"He's not a threat to the arcology, he only wants Dexter."

"Crap. You can't find him, and he's just an ordinary possessed." Asian Pacific waved an arm at the simulacrum of London. "All they have to do is steer clear of electronics, and they're safe."

"Got to eat sometime," Southern Africa said. "It's not like they've got friends to take care of them."

"The Light Bringer sect loves them," East Asia grumbled.

"The sects are ours," Western Europe said. "We have no worries in that direction."

"Okay," South Pacific said. "So tell us how you're doing

in New York? We all thought the police had got them that time as well.”

“Ah yes,” Military Intelligence said. “What’s the phrase the news anchors keep using? Hydra Syndrome. Shove one possessed into zero-tau, and while you’re doing that five more come forth. Emotive figures, but true.”

“New York got out of hand,” North America said. “I wasn’t prepared for that.”

“Obviously. How many domes have been taken over now?”

“Figures of that magnitude are unnecessarily emotive,” Western Europe said. “Once the possessed base population climbs above two thousand, there’s nothing anyone can do. The exponential curve takes over and the arcology is lost. New York is going to be this planet’s Mortonridge. It’s not our concern.”

“Not our concern!” North Pacific said. “This is bullshit. Of course it’s our concern. If they spread through the arcologies this whole planet will be lost.”

“Large numbers are not our concern. The military will have to deal with New York later.”

“If it’s still here, and if they don’t turn cannibal. The food vats won’t work around possessed, you know, and the weather shields won’t hold, either.”

“They’re reinforcing the domes they’ve captured with their energistic power,” North America said. “The arcology caught the tail end of an armada storm last night. The domes all held.”

“Only until they complete their takeover,” South Pacific said. “The remaining domes can’t barricade themselves in forever.”

“New York’s inevitable fall is regrettable, I’m sure,” Western Europe said. “But not relevant. We have to accept it as a defeat and move forward. B7 is about prevention, not

cure. And in order to prevent Earth itself from falling, we have to eliminate Quinn Dexter.”

“So like I asked, where is he?”

“Undetermined at this moment.”

“You lost him, didn’t you? You blew it. He was a sitting duck in Edmonton, but you thought you were smarter. You thought your dandy little psychology game would triumph. Your arrogance could have enslaved us all.”

“Interesting tense, there,” Western Europe snapped. “Could have. You mean, until you saved the day by closing down the vac-trains, after we agreed not to screw each other over.”

“The President had a very strong public mandate for closing them down. After Edmonton’s High Noon firefight, the whole world was clamouring for a shutdown.”

“Led by your news companies,” Southern Africa said.

Western Europe leaned over the table towards a smiling South Pacific, his head centimetres short of the simulacrum. “I got them back, you moronic bitch. Banneth and Louise Kavanagh returned to London safely. Dexter will do everything in his power to follow them there. But he can’t bloody well do that if he’s trapped in Edmonton. Six trains, that’s all that got out before your stupid shut down order. Six! It’s not enough to be certain.”

“If he’s as good as you seem to think, he would have got on one of them.”

“You’d better hope he has, because if he was left behind you can kiss goodbye to Edmonton. We have nothing in place there which could confirm his existence.”

“So we lose two arcologies. The rest are now guaranteed safe.”

“I lose two arcologies,” North America said. “Thanks to you. Do you realize how much territory that is for me?”

“Paris,” South Pacific said. “Bombay, Johannesburg. Everyone’s taking losses today.”

"You're not. And the possessed are on the run in those arcologies. We have them locked down, thanks to the sects. None of those will escalate into a repetition of New York."

"We hope," said India. "I'm managing parity at the moment, that's all. But panic is going to be a factor in the very near future. And that works to their advantage."

"You're quibbling over details," South Pacific said. "The point is, there are methods of solving this problem other than obsessing over Dexter. My policy is the correct one. Confine them while we engineer a permanent solution. If that had been adopted at the start, we would have lost the Brazilian tower ground station at most."

"We didn't know what we were dealing with when Dexter arrived," South America said. "We were always going to lose one arcology to him."

"Dear me, I had no idea this was a policy forum," Western Europe said. "I thought we were conducting a progress review."

"Well, as you've made no progress . . ." South Pacific said sweetly.

"If he's in London, he won't be found by conventional means. I thought we'd established that. And for your information, total inactivity isn't a policy, it's just the wishful thinking of small minds."

"I've stopped the spread of possession. Remind us what you've achieved?"

"You're fiddling while Rome burns. The cause of the fire is our paramount concern."

"Eliminating Dexter will not remove the possessed in New York or anywhere else. I vote we devote a higher percentage of our scientific resources to finding a permanent solution."

"I find it hard to credit that even you are playing politics with this. Percentages aren't going to make the slightest difference to the beyond at this stage. Anyone who can provide

a relevant input to the problem had been doing just that since the very beginning. We don't need to call in the auditors to verify our compassion credentials, they're hardly quantifiable in any case."

"If you don't want to be a part of the project, fine. Be sure you don't endanger us any further by your irresponsibility."

Western Europe cancelled his representation, withdrawing from the conference. The simulacrum of London vanished with him.

The cave was at the lowest level of the endcap caverns, protected on all sides by hundreds of metres of solid polyp. Tolton felt quite secure inside it; first time in a long time.

Originally a servitor veterinary centre, it had been pressed into use as a physics lab. Dr Patan headed up the team which the Valisk personality had charged with making sense of the dark continuum. He'd greeted Dariat's arrival with the joy of a long-lost son. There had been dozens of experiments, starting with simple measurements: temperature (Dariat's ersatz body was eight degrees warmer than liquid nitrogen, and almost perfectly heat resistant) electrical resistivity (abandoned quickly when Dariat protested at the pain). Then came energy spectrum and quantum signature analysis. The most interesting part for a layman observer like Tolton was when Dariat gave a sample of himself. Patan's team quickly decided an in-depth study was impossible when the fluid was being animated by Dariat's thoughts. Attempts to stick a needle into him and draw some away proved impossible, the tip wouldn't penetrate his skin. In the end it was down to Dariat himself, holding his hand over a glass dish and pricking himself with a pin which he'd conjured into existence by imagination. Red blood dripped out, changing as it fell away from him. Slightly sticky grey-white fluid splattered into the bowl. It was carried away triumphantly by the physicists.

Dariat and Tolton exchanged a bemused look, and went to sit at the back of the lab.

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to tear off a bit of cloth from your toga?” Tolton asked. “I mean, it’s all the same stuff, right?”

Dariat gave him a flabbergasted look. “Bugger. I never thought of that.”

They spent the next couple of hours talking quietly, with Dariat filling in the details of his ordeal. The conversation stopped a couple of hours later when he fell silent, and gave the physicists a cheerless glance. They’d been quiet for several minutes, five of them and Erentz studying the results of a gamma spike microscope. Their expressions were even more worried than Dariat’s.

“What have you found?” Tolton asked.

“Dariat might be right,” Erentz said. “Entropy here in the dark continuum appears to be stronger than in our universe.”

“For once I wish I hadn’t said I told you so,” Dariat said.

“How do you know?” Tolton asked.

“We have contended this state for some time,” Dr Patan said. “This substance seems to confirm that. Although I can’t give you an absolute yet.”

“What the hell is it, then?”

“Best description?” Dr Patan smiled thinly. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? But he’s solid.”

“Yes. The fluid is a perfect neutral substance, the end product of total decay. That’s the best definition I can give you based on our results. A gamma spike microscope allows us to probe sub-atomic particles. A most useful device for us physicists. Unfortunately, this fluid has no sub-atomic particles. There are no atoms as such; it appears to be made up from a single particle, one with a neutral charge.”

Tolton summoned up his first grade physics didactic memories. “You mean neutrons?”

“No. This particle’s rest mass is much lower than that. It

has a small attractive force, which gives it its fluidic structure. But that's its only quantifiable property. I doubt it would ever form a solid, not even if you were to assemble a supergiant star mass of the stuff. In our own universe, that much cold matter will collapse under its own gravity to form neutronium. Here, we believe there's another stage of decay before that happens. Energy is constantly evaporating out of electrons and protons, breaking down their elementary particle cohesion. In the dark continuum dissipation rather than contraction would appear to be the norm."

"Is evaporating? You mean we're leaking energy out of our atoms right now?"

"Yes. It would certainly explain why our electronic systems are suffering so much degradation."

"How long till we dissolve into that stuff?" Tolton yelled.

"We haven't determined that yet. Now we know what we're looking for, we will begin calibrating the loss rate."

"Oh shit." He whirled round to face Dariat. "The lobster pot, that's what you called this place. We're not going to get out, are we."

"With a little help from the Confederation, we can still make it back, atoms intact."

Tolton's mind was racing ahead with the concept now. "If I just fall apart into that fluid, my soul will be able to pull it back together. I'll be like you."

"If your soul contains enough life-energy, yes."

"But that fades away as well. . . . Yours does, you had to steal more from that ghost. And those entities outside, they're all battling for life-energy. That's all they do. Ever."

Dariat smiled with sad sympathy. "That's the way it goes here." He broke off and stared at a high corner of the cave. The physicists did the same, their expressions all showing concern.

"Now what?" Tolton demanded. He couldn't see anything up there.

“Looks like our visitors have got tired with the southern endcap,” Dariat told him. “They’re coming here.”

The first of three Confederation Navy Marine flyers soared across Regina just as twilight fell. Sitting in the mid-fuselage passenger lounge, Samuel Aleksandrovich accessed the craft’s sensor suite to see the city below. Street lighting, adverts, and skyscrapers were responding to the vanishing sun by throwing their own iridescent corona across the urban landscape. He’d seen the sight many times before, but tonight the traffic along the freeways was thinner than usual.

It corresponded to the mood reported by the few news shows he’d grazed over the last couple of days. The Organization’s attack had left the population badly shaken. Of all the Confederation worlds, they had supposed Avon to be second only to Earth in terms of safety. But now Earth’s arcologies had been infested, and Trafalgar was so badly damaged it was being evacuated. There wasn’t a countryside hotel room to be had anywhere on the planet as people claimed their outstanding vacation days or called in sick.

The flyer shot over the lake bordering the eastern side of the city and swiftly curved back, losing height as it approached the Navy barracks in the shadow of the Assembly Building. It touched down on a circular metal pad, which immediately sank down into the underground hangar. Blast-proof doors rumbled shut above it.

Jeeta Anwar was waiting to greet the First Admiral as he emerged from the flyer. He exchanged a couple of perfunctory words with her, then beckoned the captain of the Marine guard detail.

“Aren’t you supposed to check new arrivals, Captain?” he asked.

The captain’s face remained blank, though he was strangely incapable of focusing on the First Admiral. “Yes, sir.”

“Then kindly do so. There are to be no exceptions. Understood?” A sensor was applied to the First Admiral’s bare hand; he was also asked to datavise his physiological file into a block.

“Clear, sir,” the captain reported, and snapped a salute.

“Good. Admirals Kolhammer and Lalwani will be arriving shortly. Pass the word.”

The Marine guard squad emerging from the flyer, and the two staff officers, Amr al-Sahhaf and Keaton, were also quickly vetted for signs of possession. Once they were cleared, they fell in around the First Admiral.

The incident put Samuel Aleksandrovich in a bad frame of mind. On the one hand the captain’s behaviour was excusable; that the First Admiral would be a possessed infiltrator was inconceivable. Yet possession was still spreading precisely because no one believed their friend/spouse/child could have been taken over. That was why the Navy was leading by example, the three most senior admirals all taking different flyers to the same destination in case one of them was targeted by a rogue weapon. Enforced routine procedures might just succeed where personal familiarity invited disaster.

He met President Haaker in the barracks commander’s conference room. This was one discussion both of them had agreed shouldn’t be taken to the Polity Council just yet.

The President had Mae Ortlieb with him, which gave them two aides each. All very balanced and neutral, Samuel thought as he shook hands with the President. Judging by Haaker’s unconstrained welcome, he must have thought the same.

“So the anti-memory does actually work,” Haaker said as they sat round the table.

“Yes and no, sir,” Captain Keaton said. “It eradicated Jacqueline Couteur and her host along with Dr Gilmore.

However, it didn't propagate through the beyond. The souls are still there."

"Can it be made to work?"

"The principal is sound. How long it will take, I don't know. Estimates from the development team range from a couple of days to years."

"You are still giving it priority, aren't you?" Jeeta Anwar asked.

"Work will be resumed as soon as our research team is established in its back-up facility," Captain Amr al-Sahhaf said. "We're hoping that will be inside a week."

Mae turned to the President. "One team," she said pointedly.

"That doesn't seem to be much of a priority," the President said. "And Dr Gilmore is dead. I understand he was providing a lot of input."

"He was," the First Admiral said. "But he's hardly irreplaceable. The basic concept of anti-memory has been established; developing it furthers a multidisciplinary operation."

"Exactly," Mae said. "Once a concept has been proved, the quickest way to develop it is give the results to several teams; the more people, the more fresh ideas focused on this, the faster we will have a useable weapon."

"You'd have to assemble the teams, then bring them up to date on our results," Captain Keaton said. "By the time you've done that, we will have moved on."

"You hope," she retorted.

"Do you have some reason to think the Navy researchers are incompetent?"

"None at all. I'm simply pointing out a method which insures our chances of success are significantly multiplied. A standard approach to R&D, in fact."

"Who would you suggest assists us? I doubt astroengi-

neering company weapons divisions have the necessary specialists.”

“The larger industrialized star systems would be able to assemble the requisite professionals. Kulu, New Washington, Oshanko, Nanjing, Petersburg, for starters, and I’m sure the Edenists would be able to provide considerable assistance; they know more about thought routines than any Adamist culture. Earth’s GISD has already offered to help.”

“I’ll bet they have,” Samual Aleksandrovich grunted. By virtue of his position he had an idea of just how widespread Earth’s security agency was across the Confederation stars. They had at least three times the assets of the ESA, though even Lalwani was uncertain just how far their networks actually reached. One of the reasons it was so difficult to discover their size was the network’s essentially passive nature. In the last ten years there had only been three active operations that CNIS had discovered, and all of those were mounted against black syndicates. Quite what they did with all the information their operatives gathered was a mystery, which made him cautious about trusting them. But they always cooperated with Lalwani’s official requests for information.

“It’s a reasonable suggestion,” the President said.

“It would also remove exclusivity from the Polity Council,” the First Admiral said. “If sovereign states acquire a viable anti-memory weapon they could well use it without consultation, especially if one of them was facing an incursion. After all, that kind of supra-racial genocide would not leave any bodies as evidence. Anti-memory is a doomsday weapon, our primary negotiating tactic. As I have always maintained, it is not a solution to this problem. We must face this collectively.”

The President gave a reluctant sigh. “Very well, Samual. Keep it confined to the Navy for now. But I shall review the situation in a fortnight. If your team isn’t making the kind of

progress we need, I'll act on Mae's suggestion and bring in outside help."

"Of course, Mr President."

"That's good then. Let's go face the Polity Council and hear the real bad news, shall we." Olton Haaker rose with a pleasant smile in place, content another problem had been smoothly dealt with in the traditional consensus compromise. Mae Ortlieb appeared equally sanguine. Her professional expression didn't fool Samuel Aleksandrovich for a second.

For its private sessions the Confederation's Polity Council eschewed secure sensenvirons, and met in person in a discrete annex of the Assembly building. Given that this was where the most crucial decisions affecting the human race would be taken, the designers had seen fit to spend a great deal of taxpayer's money on the interior. It was the amalgam of all government Cabinet rooms, infected with a quiet classicism. Twelve native granite pillars supported a domed roof painted in Renaissance style, with a gold and platinum chandelier hanging from the centre, while swan-white frescos of woodland mythology roamed across powder blue walls. The central round table was a single slice of ancient sequoia wood, taken from the last of the giant trees to fall before the Armada Storms. Its fifteen chairs were made from oak and leather to a Nineteenth-Century Plymouth design, and new (each delegate was allowed to take theirs home with them after their term was over). Glass-fronted marbled alcoves displayed exactly 862 sculptures and statuettes; one donated by each planet in the Confederation. The Tyrathca had contributed a crude hexagonal slab of slate with faint green scratches on the surface, a plaque of some kind from Tanjuntic-RI (worthless to them, but they knew how much humans valued antiquity). The Kiint had presented an enigmatic kinetic sculpture of silvery foil, composed of

twenty-five concentric circular strips that rotated around each other without any bearings between them, each strip was suspended in air and apparently powered by perpetual motion (it was suspected they were pieces of metallic hydrogen).

Lalwani and Kolhammer joined the First Admiral outside the council chamber, and the three of them followed the President in. Twelve chairs were already filled by the ambassadors currently appointed to the Polity Council. Haaker and Samuel took their places, leaving the fifteenth empty. Although Ambassador Roulor was entitled to take the seat vacated by Rittagu-FUH, the Assembly had delayed formally voting to confirm his appointment. The Kiint hadn't complained.

Samuel sat down with minimum fuss, acknowledging the other ambassadors. He didn't enjoy the irony of being called here in the same way he'd called them to request the starflight quarantine. It indicated events were now controlling him.

The President called the meeting to order. "Admiral, if you could brief us on the Trafalgar situation, please."

"The evacuation will be complete in another three days," Samuel told them. "Active Navy personnel were given priority and are being flown to their secondary locations. We should be back up to full operational capability in another two days. The civilian workers are being ferried down to Avon. All decisions about refurbishing the asteroid will be postponed until the crisis is over. We'll have to wait until it's physically cooled down anyway."

"What about the ships?" the President enquired. "How many were damaged?"

"One hundred and seventy three Adamist ships were destroyed, a further eighty-six are damaged beyond repair. Fifty-two voidhawks were killed. Human deaths so far stand at nine thousand two hundred and thirty-two. Seven hundred and

eighty-seven people have been hospitalised, most of them with radiation burns. We haven't released those figures to the media yet. They just know it's bad."

The ambassadors were silent for a long moment.

"How many starships belonged to the First Fleet?" Earth's ambassador asked.

"Ninety-seven front-line warships were lost."

"Dear God." Samual didn't see who muttered that.

"Capone cannot be allowed to get away with an atrocity of this magnitude," the President said. "He simply cannot."

"It was an unusual set of circumstances," Samual said. "Our new security procedures should prevent it happening again." Even as he spoke the words, he knew how pathetic it sounded.

"Those circumstances, possibly," Abeche's ambassador said bitterly. "What if he dreams up some new course of action? We'll be left with another bloody great disaster on our hands."

"We'll stop him."

"You should have expected this, made some provision. We know Capone had antimatter, and he has nothing to lose. That combination was bound to result in a reckless strike of some kind. Jesus Christ, don't your strategy planners consider these scenarios?"

"We're aware of them, Mr Ambassador. And we do take them seriously."

"Mortonridge hasn't delivered anything like the victory we were expecting," Miyag's ambassador said. "Capone's infiltration flights have got everybody petrified. Now this."

"We have eliminated Capone's source of antimatter," the First Admiral said levelly. "The infiltration flights have stopped because of that. He does not have the resources to conquer another planet. Capone is a public relations problem, not the true threat."

"Don't tell me we should just ignore him," Earth's am-

bassador said. "There's a difference between confining your enemy and not doing anything in the hope he'll go away, and the Navy has done precious little to convince me it's got Capone under control."

The President held a hand up to prevent the First Admiral from replying. "What we're saying, Samual, is that we have decided to change our current policy. We can no longer afford the holding tactics of the starflight quarantine."

Samual looked around the hard, determined faces. It was almost a vote of no confidence in his leadership. Not quite, though. It would take another setback before that happened. "What do you propose to replace it with?"

"An active policy," Abeche's ambassador said hotly. "Something that will show people we're using our military resources to protect them. Something positive."

"Trafalgar should not be used as a *casus belli*," the First Admiral insisted.

"It won't be," the President said. "I want the Navy to eliminate Capone's fleet. A tactical mission, not a war. Wipe him out, Samual. Eliminate the antimatter threat completely. As long as he still has some, he can send one Pryor after another sneaking through our defences."

"Capone's fleet is all that keeps him in charge of the Organization. If you take that away, we'll loose Arnstat and New California. The possessed will take them out of the universe."

"We know. That's the decision. We have to get rid of the possessed before we can start to deal with them properly."

"An attack on the scale necessary to destroy his fleet, and New California's SD network will also kill thousands of people. And I'd remind you that the majority of crews in the Organization ships are non-possessed."

"Traitors, you mean," Mendina's ambassador said.

"No," the First Admiral said steadily. "They are blackmail victims, working under the threat of torture to themselves

and their families. Capone is quite ruthless in his application of terror.”

“This is exactly the problem we must address head on,” the President said. “We are in a war situation. We must retaliate, and swiftly or we will lose what little initiative we have. Capone must be shown we are not paralysed by this diabolical hostage scenario. We can still implement our decisions with force and resolution when required.”

“Killing people will not help us.”

“On the contrary, First Admiral,” Miyag’s ambassador said. “Although we must deeply regret the sacrifice, eradicating the Organization will give us a much needed breathing space. No other group of possessed has managed to command ships with the same proficiency as Capone. We will have returned to the small risk of the possessed spreading through quarantine-busting flights, which the Navy should be able to contain as you originally envisaged. Eventually, the possessed will simply remove themselves from this universe entirely. That is when we can begin our true fight back. And do so under a great deal less stress than our current conditions.”

“Is that the decision of this Council?” Samuel asked formally.

“It is,” the President said. “With one abstention.” He glanced at Cayeaux. The Edenist ambassador returned the look unflinchingly. Edenism and Earth held the two other permanent seats on the Polity Council, awarded because of their population size and formed a powerful voting bloc; they were rarely in disagreement over general policy. Ethics, of course, nearly always set the Edenists apart.

“They’re inflicting too much damage on us,” Earth’s ambassador said, adopting a measured tone. “Physically and economically. Not to mention the disintegration of morale propagated by events like Trafalgar, and unfortunately our

arcologies. It has to be stopped. We cannot show any weakness in dealing with this.”

“I understand,” the First Admiral said. “We still have the bulk of Admiral Kolhammer’s task force available in the Avon system. Motela, how long would it take to deploy them?”

“We can rendezvous the Adamist warships above Kotcho in eight hours,” Kolhammer replied. “It will take a little longer for affiliated voidhawk squadrons to gather. Most could join us en route.”

“That will mean we can hit Capone in three days’ time,” Samual said. “I would like some extra time to augment those forces. The tactical simulations we’ve run indicate we need at least a thousand warships to challenge Capone successfully in a direct confrontation. We’ll need to call in reserve squadrons from national navies.”

“You have one week,” the President said.

19

The news of Trafalgar was whispered through the beyond until it reached Monterey, whereupon it sparked jubilation in some quarters.

“We beat the bastards,” Al whooped. He and Jez were fooling around in the Hilton’s swimming pool when Patricia rushed in with the news.

“Sure did, boss,” Patricia said. “There was thousands of the Navy ship crews joined the beyond.” She was smiling brightly. Al couldn’t remember seeing her do that before.

Jezzibella flung herself at Al’s back, wrapping her arms round his neck and her legs round his hips. “Told you Kingsley would make it!” she laughed. She was in her carefree adolescent persona, clad in a gold micro-bikini.

“Okay, yeah.”

She splashed him. “Told you so.”

He tipped her under the water. She shot up again laughing gleefully, a mermaid Venus.

“What about the asteroid?” Al asked. “Did we get the First Admiral?”

“Don’t think so,” Patricia said. “Seems like the antimatter

went off outside. The asteroid is still intact, but it's completely screwed."

Al cocked his head to one side, listening to the multitude of voices murmuring at him, each one suffused with a plea. Rummaging through the nonsense which made up most of it took a while, but eventually he built up a picture of the disaster.

"So what happened?" Jezzibella asked.

"Kingsley didn't get inside. Guess the security nazis were on to him. But he came through all right, Jee-ze did he ever. Wiped out a whole spaceport full of their warships, and a shitload of hardware got busted up with it."

Jezzibella circled round in front of him, and embraced him passionately. "That's good. Smart propaganda."

"How do you figure that?"

"Blew up all their machines, but didn't kill too many people. Looks like you're the good guy."

"Yeah." He rubbed his nose against hers, hands moving round to cup her ass. "Guess I am."

Jezzibella shot Patricia a sly look. "Has anyone broken the good news to Kiera, yet?"

"No. I don't think so." Patricia was smiling again. "You know, I think I'll go tell her."

"She won't let you in her little ghetto," Al said. "Just invite her to the celebrations."

"We're having a celebration?" Jezzibella asked.

"Hey, girl, if this ain't worth one, I don't know what the fuck is. Give Leroy a call, tell him to break out the good booze in the ballroom. Tonight, we are gonna party!"

Kiera stood in front of the lounge's window, staring down at the hellhawks on their docking pedestals. The yammering, pitiful voices of the beyond were intent on explaining the magnitude of the Trafalgar disaster to her. The Organization's triumph infuriated her. Capone was turning out to be a

lot harder to crack than she'd envisioned at the start of her little rebellion. It wasn't just the mystique of his name, or his cleverly insidious hold on the Organization's power structure. Those two facets she could have worn down eventually. He was getting far more than his fair share of luck. For a while the elimination of the antimatter station had tilted events in her favour. With the cancellation of the seeding flights, the fleet had been getting edgy again. Now this. And Capone was well aware of her less-than-loyal actions, even though nothing was out in the open. Yet.

She couldn't see it from this window, but a third of the way round the docking ledge, that little nerd Emmet Morden was trying to rebuild one of the nutrient fluid refineries that she'd disabled. If he succeeded, then she was going to lose, and lose badly. One voice, pathetically eager to please, told her that at least one squadron of voidhawks had perished in the awesome explosion.

"Fuck it!" Kiera stormed. She refused to acknowledge any more of the insidious incorporeal babble. "I didn't know he was cooking this up."

Her two senior co-conspirators, Luigi Balsamo and Hudson Proctor, gave each other a look. They knew how dangerous life became when she was in this kind of mood.

"Me neither," Luigi said. He was sitting on one of the long settees, drinking some excellent coffee and watching her carefully. "Al used a quantity of antimatter for a secret project a while back. I never guessed it was for anything like this. Gotta give him credit, this is going to skyrocket his credibility among the crews."

"That barbarian wouldn't have the intelligence to plan this out by himself," she snapped. "I bet I know who put the idea in his head. Little whore!"

"Smart for a whore," Hudson Proctor said.

"Too smart," Kiera said. "For her own good. I shall enjoy telling her that some day soon."

“It’s going to make life difficult for us though,” Luigi said. “We’ve been getting through to a lot of people recently. There was plenty of support for all of us heading down to the planet.”

“There still is,” Kiera said. “How long is this triumph going to last for him? A week? Two? Ultimately, it changes nothing. He has nothing else to offer. I’ll take the Organization with me to New California, and Capone and his whore can freeze their asses off up here until the remainder of the Confederation Navy comes knocking. See how he likes that.”

“We’ll keep plugging away,” Luigi promised.

“I might be able to turn this to our favour,” Kiera said thoughtfully. “If the crews can be made to see that it’s mainly a propaganda stroke, one that’s got the remaining ninety-nine per cent of the Confederation Navy badly pissed off with us.”

“And are likely to come and settle the score,” Hudson finished excitedly.

“Exactly. And there’s only one place we’ll be truly safe from that retaliation.”

A bleep escaped from an AV pillar on the glass table in front of the settee. Kiera walked over to it in annoyance and keyed an acknowledgement. It was Patricia Mangano, calling to tell them, if they hadn’t already heard, the fabulous news about Trafalgar. And they were all invited to the victory party Al was throwing that evening.

“We’ll be there,” Kiera replied sweetly, and switched off.

“We’re going?” a startled Hudson Proctor asked.

“Oh yes,” Kiera said. Her smile upgraded to pure malice. “This is the perfect alibi.”

Mindori swooped in round the counter-rotating spindle and dropped on the pedestal which Hudson Proctor had assigned it. Rocio didn’t fold in the hellhawk’s distortion field imme-

diately; there was some activity farther up around the rocky ledge that he found interesting. Several non-possessed were in spacesuits, concentrated round a section of machinery that was pinned to the vertical cliff.

How long has that been going on for? He asked Pran Soo in singular engagement mode.

Two days now.

Anyone know what they're doing?

No. But it's nothing to do with Kiera.

Really? The only systems on the ledge are connected with voidhawk and blackhawk maintenance and service.

Gaining the ability to provide us with nutrients is an obvious move for Capone, Pran Soo said. **It would appear our options are finally starting to open up.**

Not for me, Rocio said. **Capone only wants us to compliment the Organization fleet. No doubt he will offer better terms than Kiera's ever done, but we will still be drawn into the conflict. My goal remains achieving complete autonomy for all of us.**

There are now fifteen of us who will provide whatever covert assistance we can. If the Almaden equipment can be made to function, we believe most of the others will join us. With a few noticeable exceptions.

Ah yes, where is Etchells?

I don't know. He still hasn't returned.

We can't have gotten that lucky. Did you check with Monterey's net to see if the electronics we require are in stock?

Yes. Everything is there. But I don't understand how we can get them out. We'll have to ask the Organization direct. Are you going to negotiate with the Organization? The fleet still needs us to patrol local space around the planet; it is not a combat duty.

No. Capone won't take kindly to my deal with Al-

maden; we'll be depriving him of their industrial capability. I believe I can obtain the electronics without the assistance of outside groups.

Rocio used the bitek processors in *Mindori's* life support cabin to establish a link with Monterey's communication net. Last time he had just accessed visual sensors to locate the food storage facilities for Jed. That had been simple enough; this task had an altogether different level of complexity. With Pran Soo's help he gained access to the maintenance files, and tracked down the physical location of the components they wanted. That information wasn't restricted, although they used a false log-on code to make sure there were no incriminating bytes that could ever link them to the components in question. After that, Rocio loaded in a requisition for the items. The spares allocation procedure which Emmet Mordden had erected around Monterey's stock of components had several integral security protocols. Rocio had to bring the hellhawk's on-board processor array into the loop to circumvent the safeguards with a powerful codebuster program. Once they were in the system, he ordered the electronics to be delivered to a maintenance shop outside the section of the spaceport which was under Kiera's physical jurisdiction.

Very good, Pran Soo said. Now what?

Simple. Just walk in and collect them.

Jed studied the route Rocio had devised, trying to spot any flaws. So far, he'd found the depressing number of zero. The hellhawk's possessor was using the big screen in the lounge to display it, though it would also be loaded into the spacesuit's processor. Jed could call it up on the visor's graphics overlay so that this time he wouldn't be reliant on Rocio calling out a stream of directions. He would have to walk about a kilometre along the ledge to reach the designated airlock. No complaints about that, despite having to wear a ballcrusher again. The possessed couldn't use space-

suits, so as long as he was outside there wouldn't be any of the buggers near him. It was inside when his troubles would begin. Again!

"There is a large celebration party due to begin in another fifty minutes," Rocio said, his face taking up a small square on the top right corner of the screen. "That is when you should perform this mission. Most of the possessed will be there, it will minimize the chance of discovery."

"Fine," Jed mumbled. It was hard to concentrate: as well as sitting next to Beth on the couch, he had Gerald pacing up and down behind him, muttering gibberish to himself.

"Half of the components have been delivered to the maintenance shop already," Rocio said. "That's the beauty of a heavily automated system like Monterey. The freight mechanoids don't start asking questions when there's no one there in the shop to receive them. They just dump them and go back for the next batch."

"Yeah, we know," Beth said. "You're a bloody genius."

"Not everyone could pull this off so stylishly."

Jed and Beth shared a look; her hand went across his thigh and squeezed. "Fifty minutes," she murmured.

Gerald walked round the settee and up to the big screen. He held a hand out and traced green dotted route from *Mindori* to the asteroid's airlock, fingers stroking the glass gently. "Show her," he asked quietly. "Show me Marie."

"I can't, I'm sorry," Rocio said. "There's no general net access to the section of the asteroid where Kiera has barricaded herself in."

"Barricaded?" Gerald's face flashed with alarm. "Is she all right? Is Capone shooting at her?"

"No no. Nothing like that. It's all politics. There's a big tussle going on for control of the Organization right now. Kiera's making sure she's safe from any kind of digital prying, that's all."

“Okay. All right.” Gerald nodded slowly. He gripped his hands together, kneading them until his knuckles cracked.

Jed and Beth waited anxiously. This kind of behaviour usually preceded an announcement.

“I’ll go with Jed,” Gerald said. “He’ll need help.”

Rocio gave a deep chuckle. “No way. Sorry, Gerald, but if I let you out, we’ll never see you again. And that just won’t do, now will it?”

“I’ll help him, really I will. I won’t cause any trouble.”

Beth hunched down small in the couch, not meeting anyone’s eye. The pitiful way Gerald kept beseeching them was acutely embarrassing. And physically he was in a bad way, with sweaty skin and dark baggy skin accumulating under his eyes.

“You don’t understand,” Gerald backed away from the screen. “This is my last chance. I’ve heard what you’re saying. You’re not coming back. Marie is here! I have to go to her. She’s only a baby. My little baby. I have to help, have to.” His whole body was shaking, as if he was about to cry.

“I will help you, Gerald,” Rocio said. “Truly I will. But not now. This is critical to us. Jed has to get those components. Just be patient.”

“Patient?” It came out as a strangled gasp. Gerald turned round, his hands ready to claw at the air. “No! No more.” He drew a laser pistol from his pocket.

“Christ,” Jed groaned. His hands went automatically to pat at his jacket. Pointless, he knew it was his pistol all right.

Beth was struggling to her feet, hampered by her arms being caught up with Jed’s panicked movements. “Gerald, mate, don’t,” she cried.

“She’s asking, I’m telling you,” Rocio said sternly.

“Take me to Marie! I’m not kidding.” Gerald aimed the laser at the two entangled youngsters, walking fast towards the couch until the muzzle lens was centimetres from Jed’s forehead. “Don’t use your energistic power on me. It won’t

work.” His free hand tugged at the hem of his sweatshirt, revealing several power cells and a processor block taped to his stomach. They were connected together by various wires. The block’s small screen had an emerald spiral cone that turned slowly. “If this glitches, we all go up. I know how to bypass the cells’ safety locks. I learned that a long time ago. When I was on Earth. Before all this happened. This life I brought them all to. It was supposed to be good. But it isn’t. It isn’t! I want my baby back. I want to make things right again. You’re going to help me. All of you.”

Jed looked directly at Gerald, seeing the way he kept blinking as if in pain. Very slowly, he started to push Beth away from him. “Go on,” he urged when she started to protest. “Gerald isn’t going to shoot you, are you Gerald? I’m your hostage.”

The hand holding the laser pistol wobbled alarmingly. But not by enough for Jed to dodge free. Not that he would, he decided; the power cells saw to that.

“I’ll kill you,” Gerald hissed.

“Sure you will. But not Beth.” Jed kept on pushing at her, until she started to stand.

“I want Marie.”

“We’ll give you Marie, if you let Beth go.”

“Jed!” Beth protested.

“Go on, doll, walk out now.”

“Not bloody likely. Gerald, put that bloody gun down. Switch off the block.”

“*Give me Marie!*” Gerald screamed. Beth and Jed both flinched.

Gerald pressed the pistol against Jed’s skin. “Now! You’ll have to help. I know you’re frightened of the beyond. See, I know what I’m doing.”

“Gerald, mate, with all respect, you haven’t got a fucking clue w—”

“Shut up!” He started panting, as if there wasn’t enough

oxygen in the compartment. "Captain, are you hurting my head? I warned you not to use your power on me."

"I'm not, Gerald," Rocio said hurriedly. "Check the block: there's no glitch, is there?"

"Oh Jesus, Gerald!" Beth wanted to sit down again; the strength was flowing out of her legs.

"There's enough power in the cells to blow a hole in the capsule hull if they detonate."

"I'm sure there is, Gerald," Rocio said. "You've been very clever. You outsmarted me. I'm not going to fight you."

"You think if I go in there that they'll catch me, don't you?"

"It's a pretty good probability, yes."

"But you're flying away after this is all over, aren't you? So it doesn't matter if they catch me, does it?"

"Not if we get the components."

"There you go then." Gerald gave a semi-hysterical giggle. "I'll help Jed load up the components, and then I'll go and look for her. It's easy. You should have thought of it first."

"Rocio?" Beth said desperately. She looked imploringly at the little portion of the screen containing his face.

Rocio considered his options. It was unlikely he could negotiate with the madman. And stalling was useless. Time was the critical factor. He only had another four hours at the most before he finished ingesting his nutrient fluid; he'd been feeding slowly as it was. This opportunity would never be repeated.

"All right, Gerald, you win; you leave with Jed," Rocio said. But remember, I will not let you back on board, under any circumstances. Do you understand that, Gerald? You are absolutely on your own."

"Yes." It was as if the laser pistol's weight had abruptly increased twentyfold; Gerald's arm drooped to hang at his

side. "But you'll let me go? To Marie?" his voice became an incredulous squeak. "Really?"

Beth said nothing while Jed and Gerald suited up. She helped them with their helmet seals, and checked the backpack systems. Their suits contracted around them; Gerald's outlined the power cells around his torso. She'd had a couple of opportunities to snatch the laser pistol from him while he was struggling into the bulky fabric sack. It was the thought of what he might do which had restrained her. This wasn't the bewildered, hurt eccentric she'd been looking out for since Koblat. Gerald's illness had elevated itself to a level that was potentially lethal. She honestly thought he would blow himself up if anyone got in his way now.

Just before Jed closed his visor she kissed him. "Come back," she whispered.

He gave an anxious, brave smile.

The airlock closed and started cycling.

"Rocio!" she yelled at the nearest AV lens. "What the hell are you doing? They'll be caught for sure. Oh Jeeze, you should have stopped him!"

"Name an alternative. Gerald might be dangerously unbalanced, but that trick with the power cells was clever."

"How come you never saw him putting them together? I mean, why aren't you watching us?"

"You want me to watch everything you do?"

Beth blushed. "No, but I thought at least you'd keep an eye on us, make sure we're not messing with you."

"You and Jed can't mess with me. I admit I made a mistake with Gerald. A bad one. However, if Jed does manage to obtain the components, it won't matter."

"It will to Gerald! They'll catch him. You know they will. He won't be able to take that again, not what they'll do to him."

“Yes. I know that. There is nothing I can do. Nor can you. Accept it. Learn how to deal with it. This won’t be the last time you experience tragedy in your life. We all do. I’m sorry. But at least with Gerald out of the way we can get back on track. I am grateful to you for your efforts, and your physical assistance. And I will turn you over to the Edenists. You have my word, for what it’s worth. I can give you nothing else, after all.”

Beth made her way into the bridge. Sensor and camera images filled most of the console screens. She didn’t touch any of the controls, just sat in one of the big acceleration chairs and tried to scope as much as she could all at once. One screen was centred on a pair of spacesuited figures waddling across the smooth rock of the docking ledge. Others were focused on various airlock doors, windows, and walls of machinery. A group of five were relaying pictures from inside the asteroid: a couple of deserted corridors, the maintenance shop with Rocio’s precious stack of pilfered components, and two views of the Hilton lobby where Capone’s guests were arriving for the party.

One girl, barely older than Beth, swept in through the lobby, escorted by two handsome young men. Most people turned to look, nudging each other.

The girl’s exquisite face made Beth scowl. “That’s her, isn’t it? That’s Kiera?”

“Yes,” Rocio said. “The man on her right is Hudson Proctor, I don’t know who the other is. Some poor stud she’s wearing out in bed. The bitch is a complete whore.”

“Well don’t tell Gerald, for Christ’s sake.”

“I wasn’t planning on it. Mind you, most of the possessed go sex-mad to begin with. Kiera’s behaviour is nothing exceptional.”

Beth shuddered. “How much farther has Jed got to go?”

“He’s only just started. Look, don’t worry, he’s got a clear

route, the components are waiting. He'll be in and out in less than ten minutes."

"If Gerald doesn't foul it up."

Bernhard Allsop didn't mind missing the big party. He didn't get on with too many of Al's bigshots. They all sneered and laughed at him behind his back. The possessed ones, that is; the non-posessed treated him with respect, the kind of respect you gave a pissed rattler. It didn't bother him none. Here he was, at the centre of things. And Al trusted him. He hadn't been demoted or sent down to the planet like a lot of lieutenants who didn't measure up. Al's trust meant a hell of a lot more than everyone else's sniggering.

So Bernhard didn't complain when he drew this duty. He wasn't afraid of hard work to get ahead. No sir. And this was one of Al's top projects. Emmet Mordden himself had said so. Second only to the hit against Trafalgar. That was why work wasn't stopping even during the party. Al wanted a whole bunch of machinery fixing. It was stuff connected with the hellhawks. Bernhard wasn't so hot on the technical details. He'd tuned and overhauled auto engines when he was back home in Tennessee, but anything more complex than a turbine was best left to rocket scientists.

He didn't even mind that. It meant he didn't have to get his hands dirty, all he had to do was supervise the guys Emmet had assigned to this detail. Watch for any treachery in the minds of the non-posessed and make sure they pulled the whole shift. Easy. And when it was over, Al would know that Bernhard Allsop had come through with the goods again.

It was a long way through the corridors from Monterey's main habitation quarters to the section of the docking ledge where the refurbishment was being carried out. He didn't have a clue what went on behind all the doors he walked past. This part of the rock was principally engineering shops

and storage rooms. Most of it had fallen into disuse since the Organization had taken over from the New California navy. Which just left miles of well lit, warm corridors all laid out in a three dimensional grid, unused except for the occasional mechanoid and maintenance crew. There were big emergency pressure seal doors every couple of hundred yards, which was how Bernhard got to learn his way around. They all had a number and a letter which told you where you were. Once you'd done it a couple of times, it was kind of like Manhattan, obvious.

Pressure door 78D4, another ten minutes' walk from the nutrient refinery chamber. He stepped over the thick metal rim and started walking along the corridor. It ran parallel to the docking ledge, though he could never make out a curve along the floor, even though he knew it had to be there. The doors on his left led to a couple of maintenance offices with long windows overlooking the ledge, a lounge, an airlock chamber, and two EVA prep rooms. There were only two doors on his right: a mechanoid service department and an electronics repair shop.

A quiet metallic whine made him look up. Pressure door 78D5, sixty yards ahead of him, was sliding across the corridor. Bernhard felt his borrowed heart thump. They only closed if there was a pressure loss. He whirled round to see 78D4 sliding into place behind him.

"Hey," he called. "What's happening?" There were no flashing red lights and shrill alarms like there had been in all the drills. Just unnerving silence. He realized the conditioning fans had stopped; the ducts must have sealed up as well.

Bernhard hurried along towards 78D5, pulling his processor block from his pocket. When he pressed the keys to call the control centre, the screen printed NO NET ACCESS AVAILABLE. He gave it a puzzled, annoyed look. Then he heard a hissing sound start up, growing very loud very quickly. He stood still and looked round again. Halfway

down the corridor, an airlock door was sliding open. It was the one leading out onto the docking ledge. One thing Emmet had emphasised time and again to reassure Organization members from earlier centuries: it was impossible for both airlock doors to open at once.

Bernhard howled in terrified anger, and started sprinting for 78D5. He shoved a hand out, and fired a bolt of white fire. It struck the stolid pressure door and evaporated into violet twinkles. Someone was on the other side, deflecting his energistic power.

Air was surging past him, building to hurricane force and producing short-lived streamers of white mist that curved sinuously round his body. He hammered another bolt of white fire at the pressure door. This time it didn't even reach the dull metal surface before it was negated.

They were trying to murder him!

He reached the slab-like pressure door and pounded against the small transparent port in the centre while the wind clawed at his clothes. Its roar was growing fainter. Someone was moving on the other side of the port. He could sense two minds; one he thought he recognized. Their gratification was horribly conspicuous.

Bernhard opened his mouth and found there was hardly anything left to inhale. He concentrated his energistic power around himself, making his body strong, fighting the sharp tingling sensation sweeping over his skin. His heart was yammering loudly in his chest.

He punched the pressure door, making a tiny dint in the surface rim. Another punch. The first dint straightened out amid a shimmer of red light.

"Help me!" he shrilled. The puff of air was ripped from his throat, but the cry had been directed at the infinity of souls surrounding him. Tell Capone, he implored them silently. It's Kiera!

He was having trouble focusing on the stubborn pressure

door. He punched it again. The metal was smeared with red. It was a fluid this time, not the backspill from energetic power warping physical reality. Bernhard dropped to his knees, fingers scraping down the metal, desperate for a grip. The souls all around him were becoming a lot clearer.

“What’s that?” Jed asked. He hadn’t spoken to Gerald since they walked down the *Mindori*’s stairs, and even then it had only been to tell him the direction they were to take. They’d walked along together ever since, trudging past the feeding hellhawks. Now they were on a section of ledge unused by either Kiera or Capone. No man’s land. The purple physiology icons projected against his visor told their usual sorry tale: his heart-rate was too high, and his body was hotter than it should be. This time he’d steered clear of snorting an infusion to calm his jabbering thoughts. So far.

“Is there a problem?” Rocio asked.

“You tell me, mate.” Jed pointed at the cliff wall, fifty metres ahead. A horizontal fountain of white vapour was gushing out of an open airlock hatch. “Looks like some kind of blow out.”

“Marie,” Gerald wheezed. “Is she there? Is she in danger?”

“No, Gerald,” Rocio said, an edge of exasperation in his voice. “She’s nowhere near you. She’s at Capone’s party, drinking and making merry.”

“That’s a lot of air escaping,” Jed said. “The chamber must have breached. Rocio, can you see what’s going on in there?”

“I can’t access any of the sensors in the corridor behind the airlock. That section of the net has been isolated. There isn’t even a pressure drop alert getting out to the asteroid’s environmental control centre. The corridor has been sealed. Someone’s gone to a lot of trouble concealing whatever the hell they’re up to.”

Jed watched the spurt of gas die away. "Shall we keep going?"

"Absolutely," Rocio said. "Don't get involved. Don't draw attention to yourselves."

Jed glanced along the line of blank windows above the open airlock. They were all dim, unlit. "Sure thing."

"Why?" Gerald asked. "What's in there? Why don't you want us to see? It's Marie, isn't it? My baby's in there."

"No, Gerald."

Gerald took a few paces towards the open airlock.

"Gerald?" Beth's voice was high, strained and excitable. "Listen to me, Gerald, she's not in there. Okay? Marie's not there. I can see her, mate, there are cameras in the big hotel lobby. I'm looking at her right now. I swear it, mate. She's in a black and pink dress. I couldn't make that up, now could I?"

"No!" Gerald started to run, a laboured half-bouncing motion. "You're lying to me."

Jed stared after him in mounting dismay. Short of letting off a flare, there was nothing more he could do to attract attention to them.

"Jed," Rocio said. "I'm using your private suit band, Gerald can't hear this. You have to stop him. Whoever opened that airlock isn't going to want him blundering in. And they have to be a major faction player. This could ruin our whole scheme."

"Stop him how? He'll either shoot me or blow both of us into the bloody beyond."

"If Gerald triggers an alarm, none of us will ever get off this rock."

"Oh *Jeeze*." He shook his fist helplessly at Gerald's crazy lurching run. The loon was fifteen metres from the open airlock.

"Take a hit," Beth said. "Chill down before you go after him."

“Fuck off.” Jed started to run after Gerald, convinced the whole world was now watching. And worse, laughing.

Gerald reached the open airlock, and ducked inside. By the time Jed arrived half a minute later, he was nowhere to be seen. The chamber was standard, like the one Jed had come though last time he’d gone inside this bloody awful maggot nest of rock. He moved along it cautiously. “Gerald?”

The inner door was open. Which was deeply wrong. Jed knew all about asteroid airlocks, and one thing you could positively not ever do was open an internal corridor to the vacuum. Not by accident. He glanced at the rectangular hatch as he passed, seeing how the swing rods had been sheered, the melted cables around the rim seal interlock control.

“Gerald?”

“I’m losing your signal.” Rocio said. “I still can’t access the net around you. Whoever did it is still there.”

Gerald was slumped against the corridor wall, legs splayed wide in front of him. Not moving. Jed approached him cautiously. “Gerald?”

The suit band transmitted a shallow, frightened whimper.

“Gerald, come on. We’ve got to get out of here. And no more of this crazy shit. I can’t take it any more, okay. I mean really can’t. You’re cracking my head apart.”

One of Gerald’s gauntleted hands waved limply. Jed stared past him, down to the end of the corridor. A dangerous geyser of vomit threatened to surge up his throat.

Bernhard Allsop’s stolen body had ruptured in a spectacular fashion as the energistic power reinforcing his flesh had vanished. Lungs, the softest and most vulnerable tissue, had burst immediately, sending litres of blood pouring out of his mouth. Thousands of heavily pressurized capillaries just beneath his skin had split, weeping beads of blood into the fabric of his clothes. It looked as though his double breasted

suit was made from brilliant scarlet cloth—cloth that seethed as if alive. The fluid was boiling away into the vacuum, surrounding him with a hazy pink mist.

Jed attacked his suit wrist pad as if it was burning him. Dry air scented with peppermint and pine blew into his face. He clamped his jaw shut against the rising vomit, turning bands of muscle to hot steel as he forced himself not to throw up. This spacesuit wasn't sophisticated enough to cope with him spewing.

Something loosened inside him. He coughed and spluttered, sending disgustingly tacky white bile spraying over the inside of his visor. But his nausea was subsiding. "Oh God, oh Jeeze, he's just pulped."

The pine scent was strong now, thick in his helmet, draining feeling away from his limbs. His arms moved sluggishly, yet they were as light as hydrogen. Good sensation.

Jed let out a snicker. "Guess the guy couldn't hold it together, you know?"

"That's not Marie."

The processor governing Jed's spacesuit cancelled the emergency medical suppresser infusion. The dosage had exceeded CAB limits by a considerable margin. It automatically administered the antidote. Winter fell across Jed, chilling him so badly he held a gauntlet up to his visor, expecting to see frost glittering on the rubbery fabric. The coloured lights flashing annoyingly into his eyes gradually resolved into icons and digits. Someone kept chanting: "Marie, Marie, Marie."

Jed looked at the corpse again. It was pretty hideous but it didn't make him feel sick this time. The infusion seemed to have switched off his internal organs. It also implanted a strong sensation of confidence, he could tackle the rest of the mission without any trouble now.

He shook Gerald's shoulder, which at least put an end to

the dreary chanting. Gerald squirmed from the touch. "Come on, mate, we're leaving," Jed said. "Got a job to do."

A motion caught Jed's attention. There was a face pressed up against the port in the pressure door. As he watched, the blood smearing the little circle of glass began to flow apart. The man on the other side stared straight at Jed.

"Oh bloody hell," Jed choked. The balmy feeling imparted by the infusion was gusting away fast. He turned frantically to see the airlock's inner hatch starting to close.

"That's it, mate, we're outta here." He pulled Gerald up, propping him against the wall. Their visors pressed together, allowing Jed to look into the old loon's helmet past the winking icons. Gerald was oblivious to anything, lost in a dream-state trance. The laser pistol slid from lifeless fingers to fall onto the floor. Jed glanced longingly at it, but decided against. If it came to a shootout with the possessed, he wasn't going to win. And it would only piss them off. Not a good idea.

The face at the port had vanished. "Come on." He tugged at Gerald, forcing him to take some steps along the corridor. Thin jets of grey gas started to shoot out of the conditioning vents overhead. Green and yellow icons appeared on his visor, reporting oxygen and nitrogen thickening around him. One thing Jed clung to was that the possessed were no good in a vacuum; suits didn't work, and their power couldn't protect them. As soon as he got back out on the ledge he was safe. Relatively.

They reached the airlock hatch, and Jed slapped the cycle control. The control panel remained dark. Digits were flickering fast across his visor; the pressure was already twenty-five per cent standard. Jed let go of Gerald and pulled the manual lever out. It seemed to move effortlessly as he spun it round and round. Then it jarred his arms. He frowned at it, cross that something as simple as a lock should try to hurt him. But at least the hatch swung open when he pulled on it.

Gerald stumbled into the chamber, as obedient as a mechanoid. Jed laughed and cheered as he pulled the hatch shut behind him.

“Are you all right?” Rocio asked. “What happened?”

“Jed?” Beth cried. “Jed, can you hear me?”

“No sweat, doll. The bad guys haven’t got what it takes to spin me.”

“He’s still high,” Rocio said. “But he’s coming down. Jed, why did you use the infuser?”

“Just quit bugging me, man. Jeeze, I came through for you, didn’t I?” He pressed the outer hatch’s cycle control. Amazingly, a line of green lights on the panel turned amber. “You’d have snorted a megawatt floater too if you saw what I did.”

“What was that?” Rocio’s voice had softened down to the kind of tone Mrs Yandell used when she talked to the day-club juniors. “What did you see, Jed?”

“Body.” His irritation at the insulting tone was lost under a memory of wriggling scarlet cloth. “Some bloke got caught in the vacuum.”

“Do you know who he was?”

“No!” Now he was sobering up, Jed desperately wanted to avoid thinking about it. He checked the control panel, relieved to see the atmosphere cycle was proceeding normally. The electronics at this end of the airlock were undamaged. Not sabotaged, he corrected himself.

“Jed, I’m getting some strange readings from Gerald’s suit telemetry,” Rocio said. “Is he okay?”

Jed felt like saying: was he ever? “I think the body upset him. Once he realized it wasn’t Marie, he just shut up.” And who’s complaining about that?

The control panel lights turned red, and the hatch swung open.

“You’d better get out of there,” Rocio said. “There’s no

alert in the net yet, but someone will discover the murder eventually.”

“Sure.” He took Gerald’s hand in his and pulled gently. Gerald followed obediently.

Rocio told them to stop outside a series of horseshoe-shaped garage bays at the base of the rock cliff, a hundred metres from the entrance they were supposed to use to get into the asteroid. Three trucks were parked in the bays, simple four wheel drive vehicles with seating for six and a flatbed rear.

“Check their systems,” Rocio said. “You’ll need one to drive the components back to me.”

Jed went along them, activating their management processors and initiating basic diagnostic routines. The first one was suffering from some kind of power cell drop out, but the second was clean and fully charged. He sat Gerald in one of the passenger seats, and drove it round to the airlock.

When the chamber’s inner hatch swung open, Jed checked his sensor reading before he cracked his visor up. A lifetime of emergency procedure drills back on Koblat made him perpetually cautious about his environment.

“There’s nobody even close to you,” Rocio said. “Go get them.”

Jed hurried along the corridor, took a right turn, and saw the broad door to the maintenance shop, three down on the right. It opened for him as he touched the lock panel. The lights sprang up to full intensity, revealing a basic rectangular room with pale-blue wall panelling. Cybernetic tool modules stood in a row down the centre, encased in crystal cylinders to protect their delicate waldos. A grid of shelving covered the rear wall, intended to hold a stock of spares used regularly by the shop. Now there were just a few cartons and packages left scattered around—apart from the large pile in the middle which the mechanoid had delivered.

“Oh Jeeze, Rocio,” Jed complained. “There’s got to be a

hundred here. I'm never going to muscle that lot out, it'll take forever." The components were all packed in plastic boxes.

"I'm getting a sense of déjà vu here," Rocio said smoothly. "Just pile them onto the freight trolley and dump them in the airlock chamber. It'll be three trips at the most. Ten minutes."

"Oh brother." Jed grabbed a trolley and shoved it over to the shelving. He started to throw the boxes on. "Why didn't you get the mechanoids to dump them at the airlock for me?"

"It's not a designated storage area. I would have had to re-program the management routines. Not difficult, but it might have been detected. This method reduces the risk."

"For some," Jed muttered.

Gerald walked in. Jed had almost forgotten him. "Gerald, you can take your helmet off, mate." There was no response.

Jed went up to him and flipped the helmet seals. Gerald blinked as the visor was raised.

"Can't stay in that spacesuit here, mate, you'll get noticed. And you'll suffocate eventually."

He thought Gerald was about to start crying, the bloke looked so wretched. To cover his own guilt, Jed went back to loading the boxes. When he had as many as the trolley could handle, he said: "I'm going to get rid of this bundle. Do me a favour, mate, start loading the next lot."

Gerald nodded. Even though he wasn't convinced, Jed hurried out back to the airlock. When he got back, Gerald had put two boxes on the second trolley.

"Ignore him," Rocio said. "Just do it yourself."

It took a further three trips to carry all the boxes to the airlock. Jed finished loading the trolley for the last time, and paused. "Gerald, mate, look, you've got to get a grip, okay?"

"Leave him," Rocio said curtly.

"He's gone," Jed said sadly. "Total brainwipe this time. That corpse did for him. We can't leave him here."

"I will not permit him back on board. You know what a danger he has become. We cannot treat him."

"You think this gang are going to help him?"

"Jed, he did not come here looking for their help. Don't forget he has a homemade bomb strapped to his waist. If Capone does become unpleasant with Gerald, he's going to be in for a nasty surprise himself. Now get back to the airlock. Beth and your sister are the people you should be concentrating on now."

More than anything, Jed wanted another dose out of the suit's medical kit. Something to take away the hurt of abandoning the crazy old man. "I'm real sorry, mate. I hope you find Marie. I wish she wasn't, well . . . what she is now. She gave a lot of us hope, you know. I guess I owe both of you."

"Jed, leave now," Rocio ordered.

"Screw you." Jed steered the trolley at the wide door. "Good luck," he called back.

He forced himself not to go fast on the drive back to the *Mindori*. There was too much at stake now to risk drawing attention to himself by a last minute error. So he resisted twisting the throttle as he passed the fateful airlock with the corpse behind it. Rocio said the net in that section had returned to full operation and the corridor's emergency doors had opened, but no one had found the body yet.

Jed drove under the big hellhawk and parked directly below one of its barnacle-like cargo holds. Rocio opened the clamshell doors, and Jed set about transferring the boxes over onto the loading platform which telescoped down. At the back of his mind he knew that when the last box was on board, then he and Beth and the kids were no longer necessary. And probably a liability to boot.

He was quite surprised to be allowed back up the ladder into *Mindori's* airlock. Shame finally overwhelmed him

when he took his helmet off. Beth was standing in front of him, ready to help with his suit; face composed so she didn't show any weakness. The enormity of everything he'd done snatched the strength from his legs. He slid down the bulkhead, and burst into tears.

Beth's arms went round him. "You couldn't help him," she crooned. "You couldn't."

"I never tried. I just left him there."

"He couldn't come back on board. Not now. He was going to blow us up."

"He didn't know what the hell he was doing. He's mad."

"Not really. Just very sick. But he's where he wanted to be, near Marie."

Jack McGovern drifted back into consciousness aware of a sharp, deep stinging coming from his nose. His eyes fluttered open to see dark-brown wood crushed against his cheek. He was lying on floorboards in near darkness in the most uncomfortable position possible, with his legs bent so his feet were pressing into his arse and his arms twisted behind his back. Blood was pounding painfully in his forearms. His hangover was the greatest yet. When he tried to stir, he couldn't. His wrists and ankles were all bound up together by what felt like a ball of red hot insulating tape. An attempt to groan revealed his mouth was also covered with tape. One nostril was clogged with dry blood.

That frightened him badly, sending pulse and breathing wild. Air hissed and thrummed through his one small vulnerable air passage. It was like reinforcement feedback, making him even more aware of how dependant he was. Attempting to hyperventilate and half-suffocating because of it made his head pound worse than ever. His vision vanished under a red sparkle.

Insensate panic dragged on for an indeterminable time. All he knew was that when his sight finally returned along

with his sluggish thoughts, his breathing was slowing. His attempted thrashing had shifted him several centimetres across the floorboards. He calmed a lot then, still wishing his hangover would fuck off and leave him alone. The memory of what had happened in the Black Bull's toilet trickled back into his mind. He found that the tape across his mouth didn't stop him from whimpering at the back of his throat.

A possessed! He'd been mugged by a possessed. Yet . . . he wasn't possessed himself, which is what they always did to people—everyone knew that. Unless this was the beyond?

Jack managed to roll round onto his side and take a look round. Definitely not the beyond. He was in some kind of ancient cube of a room, a half-moon window set high up on one wall. Old store display placards were stacked opposite him, fading holophorescent print advertising brands of bathroom accessories he could dimly remember from his childhood. A heavy chain led from his ankles to a set of metal pipes that ran straight up from the floor to the ceiling.

He shuffled along the floor for all of half a metre, until the chain was tight. Nothing he did after that even scratched the pipes, let alone weakened them or made them bend away from the wall. He was still three metres from the door. Bracing and clenching his arm and shoulder muscles had the solitary effect of making his wrists hurt more. That was it then. No escape.

His hangover had long abated when the door finally opened. He didn't know when; only that hours and hours had passed. Cold arcology night light slithered in through the high window, painting the bare plaster walls a grubby sodium yellow. It was the possessed man who came in first, moving without sound, his black monk robe swirling round him like orderly mist. Two others followed him in, a young teenage girl and a sulky, adolescent boy. They were hauling a woman along between them; middle-aged, her shoulders

slumped in defeat. Her chestnut hair was arranged in a pleated crown, as if she'd put it up ready for a shower; wisps had escaped to dangle in front of her eyes. It hid most of her face, though Jack could make out the broken, lonely expression.

The boy bent down and yanked the tape over Jack's mouth as hard as he could. Jack grunted at the pulse of pain as it ripped free. He gulped down air.

"Please," he panted. "Please don't torture me. I'll surrender, okay. Just fucking don't."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Quinn said. "I want you to help me."

"I'm yours. Hundred per cent! Anything."

"How old are you Jack?"

"Hu . . . uh, twenty-eight."

"I'd have put you older, myself. But that's fine. And you're about the right height."

"What for?"

"Well, see, Jack, you got lucky. We're gonna smarten you up a bit, give you a makeover. You're gonna be a whole new man by the time we're finished. And I won't even charge you for it. How about that?"

"You mean different clothes and stuff?" Jack asked cautiously.

"Not exactly. You see, I found out that Greta here is a fully qualified nurse. Course, some assholes would call that synchronicity. But you and I know that's total bullshit, don't we Jack."

Jack grinned round wildly. "Yeah! Absolutely. No fucking way."

"Right. It's all part of His plan. God's Brother makes sure everything comes together for me. I am the chosen one, after all. Both of you are His gifts to me."

"You tell him, Quinn," Courtney said.

Jack's grin had been frozen into place by the aching real-

ization of how deep into their shared insanity he'd fallen. "A nurse?"

"Yep." Quinn signalled Greta forwards.

Jack saw she held a medical nanonic package. "Oh Jesus fuck, what are you going to do?"

"Hey, asshole, Jesus is dead," Courtney shouted. "Don't you go calling his name around us, he can't help you. He's the false lord. Quinn is Earth's new messiah."

"Help me!" Jack yelled. "Somebody help."

"Mouthy little turd, ain't he," Billy-Joe said. "Ain't no body gonna hear you, boy. They didn't hear any of the others, and Quinn hurt them a fuck of a lot more."

"Look, I said I'd help you," Jack said desperately. "I will. Really. I'm not bullshitting. But you gotta keep your end of the bargain. You said no torture."

Quinn walked back to the door, putting as much distance as he could between himself and Jack in the small room. "Is it working now?" he asked Greta.

She looked at the small display on her processor block. "Yes."

"Okay. Start by getting rid of his vocal cords. Billy-Joe's right, he talks too much. And I need him to be quiet when I use him. That's important."

"No!" Jack yelled. He started to squirm round on the floor.

Billy-Joe laughed and sat down hard on his chest, forcing the air out of his lungs. It fluted weakly as it escaped through his nostril.

"The package can't remove his vocal cords," Greta said in a disinterested monotone. "I'll have to disengage the nerves."

"Fine," Quinn said. "Whatever."

Jack stared right at her as she leaned over and applied the glossy green package to his throat. Direct eye to eye contact, the most personal human communication there was. Plead-

ing, imploring. *Don't do this.* He could have been looking into a mechanoid's sensor lens for the effect it had on her. The package adhered to his skin, soft and warm. He clenched his throat muscles against the invasion. But after a minute or so they began to relax as he lost all feeling between his jaw and his shoulders.

Silencing him was just the beginning. He was left alone as the package did its work, then the four of them returned. This time Greta was carrying a different type of nanonic package, a face-mask with several sac-like blisters on the outer surface, inflated by some glutinous fluid. There were no slits for him to see out through when she placed it over his face.

That was when the routine started. Every few hours they would return and remove the mask. Greta would refill the sacs. His face would be examined, and Quinn would issue a few instructions before the mask was replaced. Occasionally they'd give him cold soup and a cup of water.

He was left alone in a darkness that was frightening in its totality. His face was numbed by the package, and whatever it was doing prevented even the red blotches that usually appeared behind closed eyelids. That just left him with hearing. He learned how to tell the difference between night and day. The half-moon window let in a variety of sounds, mostly traffic flowing along the big elevated motorway running down the middle of the Thames. There was also the sound of boats, swans and ducks squabbling. He began to get a feel for the building, too. Big and old, he was sure of that; the floorboards and pipes conducted faint vibrations. In the day there was some activity. Whirring sounds that must be lifts, clumping as heavy objects were moved around. None of it close to his room.

At night there was screaming. A woman, starting with a pitiful wail which was eventually reduced to miserable sobbing. Each time the same, and not far away. It took a while

for him to realize it was Greta. Obviously, there were worse things than having your features modified by a nanonics package. The knowledge didn't act as much of a comfort.

The ghosts knew the Orgathé were approaching Valisk's northern endcap, their new awareness perceiving black knots of menacing hunger sliding through the air. It was enough to overcome their apprehension towards the humans that hated them, sending them fleeing into the caverns harbouring their ex-hosts.

Their presence was one more complication for the defenders. Although the personality could watch the Orgathé flying along the habitat, it certainly didn't know where they'd land. That left Erentz and her relatives with the entire circumference to guard. They'd already decided that it would be impossible to move the thousands of sick and emaciated humans from the front line of the outer caverns. Flight time down the length of the habitat was barely fifteen minutes, and the Orgathé emerging from the southern end cap were joined by several new arrivals who had just entered through the starscrapers. There simply wasn't time to prepare, all they could do was snatch up their weapons and assemble in teams ready to respond to the nearest incursion; even the way they were spaced round the endcap was less than ideal.

Wait until they get inside, the personality said. **If you fire while they're still in the air, they'll just swoop away. Once they're in the caverns they can't escape.**

The Orgathé hesitated as they glided down towards the scrub desert, in turn sensing the hatred and fear of the entities below. For several minutes they circled above the cavern entrances as the last ghosts fled inside, then the flock descended.

Thirty-eight of the buggers. Stand by.

Tolton shifted his grip on the incendiary torpedo launcher

as Erentz told him to get ready. His sweat was making its casing slippery. He was standing behind Dariat, who in turn was at the tail end of a group of his relatives waiting in a passage at the back of one of the hospital caverns. What he thought of as his special status hadn't exempted him from this brand of lethal madness.

He heard a lot of groaning start up in the cavern. It quickly degenerated into weak screams and shouted curses. The ghosts were flooding in, ignoring the bedridden humans to plunge deeper into the cavern network. They started to run past him, mouths open to yell silent warnings. Their movements sketched short-lived smears of washed-out colour through the air.

Then one of the Orgathé hit the entrance outside. Its body elongated, the front section pressing forward eagerly through the curving passageway, while the bulbous rear quarter squirmed violently, adding to its impetus. Those ghosts that had only just made it inside were engulfed by writhing appendages as the huge creature surged along. Their savage cries of suffering penetrated the entire endcap as their life-energy was torn away from them. The other ghosts and Dariat could actually hear them, while the humans experienced their torment as a wave of profound unease. Tolton looked down at the launcher for reassurance, only to find his hands were trembling badly.

"We're on!" Erentz barked.

The Orgathé charged into the cavern, preceded by a hail of freezing polyp pebbles and a technicolor ripple of terrified ghosts. Ahead of it, three rows of grubby bedding were laid out across the polyp floor, home to over 300 lethargic patients, already disturbed by the ghosts. They did their best to retreat, staggering or crawling back against the wall; some of the nurses managed to lug their charges towards the passageways. The Orgathé lunged forwards greedily, turning the cavern into a riot of hysterical bodies and slashing

appendages. Each time it coiled a tentacle around someone their body turned to solid ice and shattered, releasing a ghost that sank to its knees and waited for the devastating follow-up blow.

Through it all, Erentz and her relatives attempted to spread out and encircle the Orgathé. Every metre of ground had to be fought over, elbowing through the throng of terrified people. Blankets, plastic cartons, and chunks of rock-hard frosted flesh were kicked about underfoot, making every step treacherous. The pincer movement was never going to work properly; the best they could hope for was positioning themselves close to the passageways, blocking the Orgathé's escape.

When they had five of the possible seven exit routes covered, they opened fire. A cowering Tolton saw slivers of dazzling light pulse through the air to be absorbed by the Orgathé's nebulous form, and assumed that was the signal to start firing. He pushed a couple of elderly, enfeebled men aside and brought his own launcher up. His mind was so battered by the sight of panic and devastation across the cavern floor he barely aimed it. He just pulled the trigger and watched numbly as the incendiary torpedoes pummelled the dark mass.

The flame throwers opened fire with a raucous howl, adding their particular brand of carnage to the onslaught. Eight lines of bright yellow fire jetted over the heads of the cowering crowd to flower open against the Orgathé. The beast jerked frenziedly, buffeted from all sides by the terrible flame. Its constituent fluid boiled furiously, sending clouds of choking mist to saturate the beleaguered cavern.

Tolton clamped a hand over his mouth as his eyes smarted. The vapour was colder than ice, condensing over his skin and clothes to form a slick mucus-like film. He had trouble standing as it built up underfoot. All around him people were falling over and skating across the floor. He

couldn't aim the launcher with any accuracy now, the recoil from each shot sent him slithering back wildly. In any case, he wasn't entirely sure where the creature was any more. The mist was fluorescing strongly as the jets of flame continued to seer through it, turning the whole cavern into a uniform topaz haze.

Without any visible target, Tolton stopped firing. People were everywhere, shrieking and crying as they skidded about, a racket which fused with the roar of the flame throwers to create total sonic bedlam. Any random shot would probably hit someone. He dropped to all fours and tried to find the cavern wall, a way out.

Erentz and the others kept on firing. The personality's perception of the cavern through its sensitive cells was less than perfect, but it could keep them informed of the Orgathé's approximate location. Erentz twisted about continually, keeping the flame playing on the creature's flanks. With the billowing mist, running figures, and the target continually shrinking, she had a lot of trouble keeping aligned. But it was working: that mattered above all else, helping to blank the knowledge of what a misapplied jet would strike.

Dariat finally perceived the Orgathé's denuded ghost flying back out into the habitat. He shared his enhanced cognition with his relatives and the personality, showing them the wraith flashing past. The light and sound of the flame throwers swiftly died away.

As the disgustingly clammy mist descended out of the air to congeal over people and polyp alike, it revealed a floor littered with bodies. Those who hadn't been too badly burnt or had escaped the Orgathé's slashing appendages were wriggling mutely beneath the slick membranous muck. Nearly a third remained motionless; whether they were too exhausted or wounded to make an effort was impossible to tell. The grungy fluid concealed details.

Tolton watched with numb incredulity as ghosts started to

rise up out of the floor like humanoid mushrooms, stretching elastic fronds of the fluid with them. They were harvesting the material as Dariat had done, cloaking their form with substance.

Erentz and her team were striding through the slaughter and misery as if it didn't exist, whooping out greetings to each other as they congregated by one of the side passageways. Dr Patan was among them, wiping sloppy goo from his face and grinning with the same vivacity as the others as he checked his launcher.

Tolton stared after them as they hurried off down the passageway, totally immune to the suffering throughout the cavern. The personality had informed them of another visitor raising hell in a cavern close by, and they were eager to resume the fight. It wasn't just entropy which was stronger in this continuum, he reflected; inhumanity was equally pervasive.

Eventually he stirred himself, though he was uncertain what to do next. Dariat came over to stand at his side, and they surveyed the cavern with its dead, its wounded, and its enervated ghosts. Together they moved out to offer what comfort they could.

The mask came away cleanly from Jack McGovern's face. He blinked against the gentle light coming through the storeroom's high window. Without the package, his bare skin was host to a peculiar sensation, somewhere between numb and sore. What he wanted to do was dab at it with his hands, trace his fingertips over his cheeks and jaw to find out what they'd done to him. But he was still bound up with the tape and chain.

"Not bad," Courtney said. She gave Greta an affectionate slap on the arm. The woman flinched badly; muscles on her neck and limbs twitched in a cascade reaction.

"Even got the eye colour right."

“Show him,” Quinn said.

A giggling Courtney bent down and thrust a small mirror at Jack. He stared at the image. It was the last thing he expected; they’d given him Quinn’s face. He frowned the question.

“You’ll see,” Quinn said. “Get him ready.” A single gesture, and the chain fell from Jack’s ankles. The tape wasn’t so simple. Billy-Joe produced a vicious-looking combat knife, and started sawing.

Returning blood brought pain roaring into Jack’s feet and hands as the tape was prised away. He couldn’t stand. Courtney and Billy-Joe had to drag him out between them. First stop was a staff washroom. They dumped him in a shower cubicle, and turned the nozzle on full. Cold water sluiced down, making him gag, batting feebly at the spray. Dark stains seeped out of his trousers. Never once had they let him use a toilet.

“Take your clothes off,” Quinn ordered. He chucked a tube of soap gel down onto the cracked tiles. “Wash thoroughly. That stink is a giveaway.”

They stood round, watching as he slowly opened the seals on his shirt and trousers. Feeling and movement was slow to return to his extremities. He had a lot of trouble keeping hold of the tube as he applied the gel. Standing was also very painful, it felt like he was tearing tendons as his knees straightened out. But it was Quinn who’d told him to stand, and he didn’t dare not.

Quinn snapped his fingers, and Jack was abruptly dry. Courtney handed him a black robe. Its cut was identical to Quinn’s, voluminous arms and deep hood, but it was just ordinary cloth, not the patch of empty space which clung to the dark messiah.

Courtney and Billy-Joe inspected them as they stood side by side. Height was almost the same, within three centimetres. A slight weight difference was obscured by the robe.

“God’s Brother must be laughing His ass off,” Billy-Joe said. “Shit, it’s like you’s twins.”

“It’ll do,” Quinn decided. “Any updates on her position?”

“No way, man,” Billy-Joe said, suddenly serious. “Those dudes from the Lambeth coven swore on it. It’s a big fucking deal for them having another High Magus visiting the arcology, especially now. They’s all talking about how this is His time. But she’s staying put in her tower, won’t move, won’t see anyone, not even London’s High Magus. And she’s a real pain in the ass, they all say that. Who else is it gonna be?”

“You’ve done good, Billy-Joe,” Quinn said. “I won’t forget that, and neither will He. When I bring Night to this arcology I’ll let you loose inside a model agency. You can keep yourself a harem of the hottest babes there are.”

“All right!” Billy-Joe punched the air. “Rich bitches, Quinn. I want me some rich bitches, all dressed up real fine in silk and stuff. They always wear that for their own kind, don’t even look at the likes of me. But I’m gonna show them what its like to fuck with a real man.”

Quinn laughed. “Shit, you don’t ever change.” He took another look at Jack, and nodded in satisfaction. The man was eerily similar to himself. It ought to be enough. “Do it,” he told Courtney.

She pushed Jack’s hood aside, and pressed a medical spray to his neck.

“Just to keep you calm,” Quinn said. “You’ve handled this all right so far, I’d hate for you to blow it now.”

Jack didn’t know what the drug was, only that it buzzed warmly in his ears. The fear of what was going to happen to him set sail and drifted away. Just standing still and admiring the glistening droplets form around the shower nozzle was fascinating entertainment. Their fall was an epic voyage.

“Come here,” Quinn said.

It was a very loud voice, Jack thought. But he had nothing else to do, so he slowly walked over to where Quinn was

standing. Then his skin grew cold, as if a winter breeze was flowing through his robe. The room began to change, its drab colours melting away. The walls and floor became simple planes of thick shadow. Billy-Joe, Courtney, and Greta were blank statues, frothing with iridescence. Other people became visible, everything about them was clearly defined, their features, clothes (odd, ancient styles), hair. Yet they lacked colour to the point of translucency. And they were all so sad, mournful faces with anguished eyes.

“Ignore them,” Quinn said. “Bunch of assholes.” By contrast to the others, Quinn was vibrant with life and power.

“Yes.”

Quinn gave him a sharp look, then shrugged. “Yeah well, I suppose we’re not really talking. After all, you’re not actually alive in here.”

Jack contemplated that. His thoughts were losing their sluggishness. “What do you mean?” He realized he couldn’t hear his heart beating any more. Nor was his mouth moving when he spoke.

“Shit.” Quinn’s exasperation manifested itself as a tide of warmth flooding from his shining body. “The hypnogenic doesn’t work here, either. Should have figured that. Okay, let’s put it real simple for you. Do as I say, or I’ll hurt you real bad; and in this realm that can be very bad indeed. Understand?”

They started to slide through the room. Jack didn’t know how; his legs weren’t moving. The wall came at him, and passed by with a stinging sensation that made his thoughts quake.

“It’ll get worse,” Quinn said. “Going through thick chunks of matter is painful. Ignore it, just you sit back and enjoy the view.” They started to pick up speed.

Banneth had tired of the acolytes. Even watching them fuck-
ing each other senseless was a bore. It was all so ordinary.

She kept thinking of the improvements and modifications she could make to their thrashing bodies to spice up the sex and make it potentially a great deal more interesting. There were definitely attributes she could bestow upon the boy to make him more ruthless, both in bed and in life, the first arena acting as a training ground for the second. After critical deliberation, she concluded the girls would probably both benefit from a more feline nature.

Not that any of it mattered now. She'd acquired the same kind of fatalism as the rest of the planet's population. Since the vac-train shutdown, absenteeism and petty crime had increased considerably in every arcology. After an initial flurry of concern, the authorities had decided such actions were not in fact precursors to wholesale possession. Basically, it was people taking the news badly. Apathy had risen to rule with all the intangible force of a dominant star sign.

Banneth pulled on her robe and walked out of the penthouse's master bedroom, not even glancing back at the fresh outburst of moaning from the tangle of bodies on the mattress behind her. She went over to the lounge area's cocktail bar and poured herself a decent measure of Crown whisky. Four days' inactivity floating round the apartment had reduced the bottle's contents down to the last couple of centimetres.

She settled back into one of the atrocious leather chairs and datavised the room's management processor. Tasselled curtains swished shut across the glass wall, cutting off the sight of the night-time arcology. A holographic screen above the fireplace bar flared with colour, giving her a feed from the local news station.

Another two of New York's domes had succumbed to the possessed. Rover reporters relayed the images from the vantage point of a megatower, revealing a faint red glow emanating from the buildings inside the geodesic crystal roof. Police in Paris claimed they had captured nineteen more

possessed and thrown them into zero-tau pods. There were interviews with dazed ex-hosts; one claiming to have been taken over by Napoleon; another swore she'd been used by Eva Perón. From Bombay a terse official statement assured residents that local disturbances were under control.

Several times the station switched back to that morning's address by the President, who had asserted that there were no new incidents of suspected possession. He said his decision to shut down the vac-trains was now fully justified. Local law enforcement agencies were successfully keeping the possessed confined in the regrettable cases where they'd managed to establish themselves in arcologies. He called on all people to pray for New York.

Banneth took another sip of the Crown, enjoying the all-too-rare sensation of alcohol seeping through her synapses. **No mention of London, then.**

None at all, Western Europe confirmed. I'm not even suppressing any. He's being remarkably restrained.

If he's here.

He is.

You shut down the vac-trains awful quick.

I didn't.

Really? Banneth perked up at that. Any information she could gather on B7 always fascinated her. In all the years she'd been working for them, she'd learned so little about how they operated. **Who did?**

A flash of pique escaped along the affinity link. **An idiotic colleague panicked. Sadly, not all of us are completely focused on the problem.**

How many are there?

No. Old habits die hard, and the habit of secrecy is very old indeed in my case. You should appreciate that, with your obsession in behavioural psychology.

Come on. You can indulge me. I can't even fart without your consent. And I am about to be vaporized.

A pat on the head for a faithful old servant?

Whatever you want to call it.

Very well, I suppose I do have some small obligation. You have behaved yourself admirably. I will reveal one aspect of myself, on the condition that you don't pester me any further.

Done deal.

The habit. It has formed over six hundred years.

Shit! You're six hundred years old?

Six hundred and fifty-two, actually.

What the fuck are you?

Done deal, remember.

Xenoc, is that it?

The affinity link carried a mental chuckle. I'm fully human, thank you. Now stop asking questions.

"Six hundred years old," Banneth muttered in awe. It was an astonishing disclosure. If it was true. But the supervisor had no reason to lie. You keep going into zero-tau; stay in for fifty years, come out for a couple every century. I've heard of people doing that.

Dear me, I'm disappointed. It must be all that whisky you're guzzling down, it's fogging your brain. I don't consider myself to be that mundane. Zero-tau indeed.

What then?

Work it out. You should be grateful. I've given you something to keep your mind active in your last days. You were becoming morbid and withdrawn. Now your files are all edited and catalogued, you need a fresh mental challenge.

What's going to happen to my files? You will publish them, won't you?

Ah, sweet vanity. It's been the downfall of egomaniacs greater than you.

Won't you? she repeated, annoyed.

It will make an excellent archive resource for my people.

Your people? What do they want with . . . The holo-screen image wobbled; a story from Edmonton, a reporter touring round a sabotaged power plant, detailing the repairs. **Did you see that?**

The AI is picking up microfluctuations in the penthouse's electrical circuits. He's there. Western Europe's excitement was crackling down the affinity link like a static slap to the brain.

"Shit!" Banneth downed the whisky in one swift gulp. Nothing I can do. The phrase was locked in her mind, repeating and repeating. Now the moment was swooping down on her, bitter resentment surged up. She struggled to her feet. Quinn was never going to see her slumped in defeat. He was also damn well going to know she was the principal factor in outsmarting him.

She datavised the lights up to full strength, and turned a circle, scanning the penthouse. Moisture was smearing her vision. The holoscreen wobbled again, its sound jolting.

Slowly, and with a taunting smile on her face, she said: "Where are you, Quinn?"

It was like a poorly focused AV projection coming to life. A dark shadow wavering in front of the door to the bedroom, blocking out the motion of the oblivious acolytes. It was translucent at first, but thickened quickly. The overhead lights flickered and the holoscreen image imploded into a soiled rainbow. Banneth's neural nanonics crashed.

Quinn Dexter stood on the marble tiles, clad in his ebony robe, looking right at her. Fully materialized.

Gotcha, you bastard!

The supervisor's victorious cry rang out in Banneth's skull. For a whole second she stared at her beautiful creation, every gorgeous feature; remembering the angry power locked up beneath the smooth pale skin. He stared right

back. Rather, his eyes were unmoving. Wrong. Wrong! **WRONG. Wait, it's not—**

The SD X-ray laser fired. Kilometres above Banneth, the beam penetrated the arcology's crystal dome. It struck the top of the Parsonage Heights tower, transmuting the carbon-concrete structure and dubious decor into a blast of ions. A twister of near-solid blue light flared up towards the dome from the skyscraper's ruined crown.

Quinn floated down lightly through the heart of the explosion, intrigued by the level of violence storming through the physical universe outside. He'd been wondering exactly what weapon they'd use once they found him. Only an SD platform could produce such spectacular savagery.

He observed Banneth's soul disconnect from the dispersing atoms of her body. She howled in rage as she became aware of him; the real him. Jack McGovern's desolated soul was already slithering into the beyond.

"Nice try," Quinn mocked. "So what are you going to do for an encore?" He extended his perception as she dwindled away, savouring her anguish and useless fury. And also . . . Out there, trembling weakly on the furthest edge of awareness, was a ragged chorus of more tenuous cries. Resonant with misery and terrible pain. Far, far away.

That was interesting.

20

The uniform sheet of light which appeared above Norfolk to signify daytime wasn't quite as glaring now. Although still several weeks away, the onset of autumn was plain to see for those who knew their weather lore.

Luca Comar stood at his bedroom window, looking out over the wolds as he'd done every morning at daybreak since . . . Well, every morning. There was a particularly thick mist covering the estate today. Beyond the lawns (unknown for weeks now, damn it), all he could see were the old cedars, great grey shadows guarding Cricklade's orchards and pastures. Gravely reassuring in their size and familiarity.

It was completely still outside. A morning so insipid it couldn't even coax native animals out of their burrows. Dewdrops cloaked every leaf, their weight bending branches out of alignment, making it seem as though every bush and tree was sagging from apathy.

"For heaven's sake come back to bed," Susannah grunted. "I'm cold."

She was lying in the middle of their huge four poster bed, eyes closed, sleepily trawling the duvet back around her

shoulders. Her dark hair fanned out across the rumpled pillows like a broken bird's nest. Not as long as it used to be, he thought wistfully. The two of them getting together had been inevitable. Back together, in one respect. However you wanted to look at it, they were suited for each other. And there had been one argument too many with Lucy.

Luca went back and sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at his love. Her hand crept out from under the duvet, feeling round for him. He held it gently, and bent over to kiss her knuckles. A gesture that had carried over from their courting days. She smiled lazily.

"That's better," she purred. "I hate it when you leap out of bed every bloody morning."

"I have to. The estate doesn't run itself. Especially not now. Honestly, some of the buggers are more idle and stupid now than they were before."

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. We still have a crop to get in. Who knows how long this winter is going to last."

She lifted her head and peered up at him in modest confusion. "It'll last the same time as it always does. That's what's right for this world, and that's what we all feel. So that's the way it will be. Stop worrying."

"Yeah." He looked back at the window again. Tempted.

She sat up and gave him a proper look. "What is it? I can sense how troubled you are. It's not just the crops."

"It is, partly. You and I both know that I have to be here to make sure it's done right. Not just because they're a bunch of slackers. They need the kind of guidance Grant can give them. Which silos are used for what, how much drying the grain should be given first."

"Mr Butterworth can tell them that."

"Johan, you mean."

They managed to avoid each other's eye. But the mild

guilt was the same in both of them. Identity was a taboo topic on Norfolk these days.

“He can tell them,” Luca said. “Whether they’ll listen and actually do the work is another matter. We’ve still got a way to go before we’re one big harmonious family working for the common good.”

She grinned. “Arses need to be kicked.”

“Damn right!”

“So what’s with all the angst?”

“Days like this give me time to think. They’re so slow. There’s no urgent farmwork to do at the moment, only the pruning. And Johan can supervise that okay.”

“Ah.” She drew her knees up under her chin, and hugged them. “The girls.”

“Yeah,” he admitted sheepishly. “The girls. I hate it, you know. It means I’m more of Grant than I am of me. That I’m losing control. That can’t be right. I’m Luca; and they’re nothing to me, they’re nothing to do with me.”

“Me neither,” she said miserably. “But I think we’re fighting an instinct we can never beat. They’re the daughters of this body, Luca. And the more I settle into this body, the more it belongs to me, then the more I have to accept what comes with it. What Marjorie Kavanagh is. If I don’t, she’ll haunt me forever; and rightly so. This is supposed to be our haven. How can it be if we reject them? We will never be given peace.”

“Grant hates me. If he could put a gun to my head right now, he’d do it. Sometimes, when I’m more him than me, I think I’m going to do it. The only reason I’m still here is because he’s not ready to commit suicide yet. He desperately wants to know what’s happened to Louise and Genevieve. He wants that so bad that I do too, now. That’s why today is so tempting. I could take a horse and ride over to Knossington, there’s another aeroambulance stationed there. If it still works I could be in Norwich by evening.”

"I doubt any kind of plane would work, not here."

"I know. Getting to Norwich by boat is going to be a hell of a lot more difficult. And then winter will make it damn near impossible. So I ought to start now."

"But Cricklade won't let you."

"No. I don't think so. I'm not sure anymore. He's getting stronger, wearing me down." He gave a short bitter laugh. "Taste the irony in that. The person I possess, possessing me in return. No more than I deserve, I suppose. And you know what? I do want to see that the girls are okay. Me, my own thoughts. I don't know where that comes from. If it's the guilt from what I tried to do to Louise, or if it is him, his first victory. Carmitha says we're reverting. I think she could be right."

"No she's not, we will always be ourselves."

"Will we?"

"Yes," she said emphatically.

"I wish I could believe that. So much of this place isn't what we expected. All I ever truly wanted was to be free of the beyond. Now I am, and I'm still being persecuted. Dear God, why can't death be real? What kind of universe is this?"

"Luca, if you do go looking for the girls, I'm going with you."

He kissed her, searching to immerse himself in normality. "Good."

Her arms went round his neck. "Come here. Let's celebrate being us. I know quite a few things Marjorie never did for Grant."

Carmitha spent the morning working in the rose grove, one of a thirty-strong team gainfully employed to return Norfolk's legendary plants to order. Because of the delay, it was harder work than usual. The flower stems had toughened, and new late-summer shoots had flourished, tangling their

way through the neat wire trellises. It all had to be trimmed away, returning the plants to their original broad fan-shape. She started by deadheading each plant, then used a stepladder to reach the topmost shoots, snipping through them with a pair of heavy-duty secateurs. Long whip-like shoots fell from her snapping blades to form a considerable criss-cross pile around the foot of the steps.

She also considered that the grass between the rows had been allowed to grow too long, but held her tongue. It was enough that they were keeping the basics of her world ticking over. When the end came, and the Confederation descended out of the strange blank sky to banish the possessing souls, enough would remain for the genuine inhabitants to carry on. Never *as before*, but there would be a degree of continuity. The next generation would be able to build their lives over the ruins of the horror.

It was the thought she remained faithful to throughout every day. The prospect that this wouldn't end was a weakness she could not permit herself. Somewhere on the other side of this realm's boundary, the Confederation was still intact; its leadership pouring every ounce of effort into finding them, and with that an answer.

Her belief faltered at what that answer might be. Simply expelling the souls back into the dark emptiness of the hereafter solved nothing. Some place devoid of suffering must be found for them. They, of course, thought they'd already found it by coming here. Fools. Poor blighted, tragic fools.

Similarly, her imagination failed to embrace exactly what life on Norfolk, and the other possessed worlds, would be like afterwards. She'd always respected the mild culture of spirituality in which she'd been raised, just as the house-dwellers worshiped their Christian God. Neither gave the slightest clue how to live once you truly knew you had an immortal soul. How could anyone take physical existence seriously now they knew that? Why do anything, why

achieve anything when so much more awaited? She'd always resented this world's artificial restrictions, while admitting she could never have an alternative. "A butterfly without wings," her grandmother used to call her. Now the doorway into an awesome, infinite freedom had been flung wide open.

And what had she done at the sight of it? Clung to this small life with a tenacity and forcefulness few others on this world had contrived. Perhaps that was going to be the way of it. A future of perpetual schizophrenia as the inner struggle between yin and yang went nuclear.

Far easier not to think about it. Yet even that was unwelcome, implying she had no mastery over her destiny. Instead, being content to await whatever fate was generously awarded by the Confederation, a charity dependant. Something else contrary to her nature. These were not the easiest of times.

She finished levelling the top of the bush and pulled a couple of recalcitrant shoots out of the thick lower branches where they'd fallen. The secateurs moved down, slicing into some of the older branches. Apart from the five main forks, a bush should be encouraged with fresh outgrowth every six years. Judging by the wizened bark and bluish algae streaks starting to bubble out of the hairline cracks, this one had been left long enough. She quickly fastened the new shoots she'd left into place, using metal ties. Her wrist moved automatically, twisting them tight, not even having to look at what she was doing. Every Norfolk child could do this in her sleep. Others in the team were tending their bushes in the same way. Instinct and tradition were still the rulers here.

Carmitha went down four rungs on the stepladder, and started cutting at the next level of branches. A little knot of foreign anxiety registered in her mind. It was gliding towards her. She hung on to a sturdy trellis upright, and leaned out to look along the row to spot the source. Lucy was run-

ning along the grass, dodging the piles of shoots, waving her arms frantically. She stopped at the foot of Carmitha's ladder, panting heavily.

"Can you come, please," she gasped. "Johan's collapsed. God knows what's the matter with him."

"Collapsed? How?"

"I don't know. He was in the carpentry shop for something, and the lads said he just keeled over. They couldn't get him to stand, no matter what they did, so they made him comfortable and sent me to fetch you. Damn it, I've ridden the whole way out here on a bloody horse. What I wouldn't give for a decent mobile phone."

Carmitha climbed down the stepladder. "Did you see him?"

"Yes. He looks fine," Lucy said a shade too quickly. "Still conscious. Just a bit weak. Been overdoing it, I expect. That bloody Luca thinks we're all still his servants. We're going to have to do something about that, you know."

"Sure you are," Carmitha said. She hurried along the row towards the thatched barn where her own horse was tethered.

When Carmitha rode into the stable she dismounted and handed the reins over to one of the non-possessed boys Butterworth/Johan had promoted to stablehand. He smiled in welcome and quietly muttered: "This has got them all shook up."

She winked. "Too bad."

"You gonna help him?"

"Depends what it is." Since she'd arrived at Cricklade, a surprising number of its residents had popped over to her caravan to ask for her help with various ailments. Colds, headaches, aching limbs, sore throat, indigestion; little niggling things which their powers found hard to banish. Broken bones and cuts they could heal up, but anything internal,

less immediately physical, was more troublesome. So Carmitha started dispensing her grandmother's old herbal potions and teas. As a result, she'd taken over tending the manor's herb garden. Many evenings were spent pounding the dried leaves with her pestle, mixing them up and pouring the resulting powders into her ancient glass jars.

More than anything, it eased her acceptance into the manor's community. They'd rather turn to naturalistic Roman cures than consult the few qualified doctors available in the town. Properly prepared ginseng (sadly, geneered for Norfolk's unique climate, so probably with its original properties diluted) and its botanical cousins remained preferable to the kind of medicines which Norfolk's restricted pharmaceutical industry was licensed to produce. Not that their stocks were very large; and Luca had given up trying to negotiate more from Boston. The townies hadn't got the factory working.

She found it strange that the simple knowledge of plants and land which was her heritage, and which had hidden her from them, had earned her their respect and thanks.

The carpentry shop was a tall single-storey stone building at the back of the manor, in amid a nest of bewilderingly similar buildings. They all looked like oversized barns to her, with high wooden shutters and steep solar-cell roofs; but they housed a wheelwright's, a dairy, a smithy, a stonemason's, innumerable stores, even a mushroom house. The Kavanaghs had made sure they had every craft the manor needed to be virtually independent for its basic needs.

When she arrived, several people were milling around the entrance of the carpentry shop with the embarrassed air of someone who's been forced to endure a family row. Not wanting to be there, yet unwilling to miss out. She was greeted with relieved smiles and ushered through. The electric saws and lathes and tenoning machines were silent. The

carpenters had cleared their tools and lengths of wood from one of the benches and laid Johan out on top, head propped up on spongy cushions, body wrapped in a tartan blanket. Susannah was holding a glass of ice water to his lips prompting him to drink, while Luca stood at the end of the bench, frowning down in thoughtful concern.

There was a grimace on Johan's rounded adolescent face, turning his usual lines into deep creases. Sweat glistened on his skin, sticking his thin sandy hair to his forehead. Every few seconds a big shiver ran down his body. Carmitha put a hand on his brow. Even though she was prepared for it, she was surprised by how hot his skin was. His thoughts were a bundle of worry and determination. "Want to tell me what happened?" she asked.

"I just felt a bit faint, that's all. I'll be all right in a while. Just need to rest up. Food poisoning, I expect."

"You never eat any," Luca muttered.

Carmitha turned round to face the audience. "Okay, that's it. Take your lunch break or something. I want some clear air in here."

They backed out obediently. She motioned Susannah aside, then pulled the blanket off Johan. The flannel shirt under his tweed jacket was soaked with sweat, and his plus fours seemed to be adhering to his legs. He shuddered at the exposure to the air.

"Johan," she said firmly. "Show yourself to me."

His lips tweaked into a brave smile. "This is it."

"No it isn't. I want you to end this illusion right now. I have to see what's wrong with you." She wouldn't let him look away from her eyes, conducting a silent power struggle with his ego.

"Okay," Johan said eventually. His head dropped back onto the cushion in exhaustion after the small clash. It was as though a ripple of water swept down him from head to toe: a line of twisted magnification that left a wholly differ-

ent image in its wake. He expanded slightly in all directions. His flesh colour lightened, revealing the veins underneath. Patchy grey stubble sprouted from his chin and jowls as he aged forty years. Both eyes seemed to sink down into his skull.

Carmitha drew in a startled breath. It was the sagging jowls which clued her in. To confirm it, she unbuttoned his shirt. Johan wasn't quite a classic famine victim; their skin was stretched tight over the skeleton, with muscles reduced to thin strings wound round their limbs. He had plenty of loose flesh, so much it hung off him in drooping folds. It was as if his skeleton had shrunk, leaving a sack of skin that was three sizes too big.

There were big hints that this wasn't just caused by lack of eating. The folds of flesh were strangely stiff, arranged in patterns that mocked the muscle pattern belonging to an exceptionally toned twenty-five-year-old. Some of the ridges were pink, as if rubbed sore; in several places they were so red she suspected they were long blood blisters.

Shame welled up in Johan's mind, responding to the dismay and tinges of disgust in the three people surrounding him. The emotional oscillation was so powerful Carmitha had to sit on the edge of the bench beside him. What she wanted to do was turn and leave.

"You wanted to be young again," she said quietly. "Didn't you?"

"We're building paradise," he told her in desperation. "We can be whatever we want to be. It only takes a thought."

"No," Carmitha said. "It takes a lot more than that. You haven't even got a society that functions as well as Norfolk's old one."

"This is different," Johan insisted. "We're changing our lives and this world together."

Carmitha bent over the trembling man until her face was

a couple of inches from his. "You're changing nothing. You are killing yourself."

"There's no death here," Susannah said sharply.

"Really?" Carmitha asked. "How do you know?"

"We don't want death here, so there is none."

"We're in a different place. Not a different existence. This is a giant step back from reality. It won't last; it's built on a wish, not a fact."

"We're here for eternity," Susannah said gruffly. "Get used to it."

"You think Johan is going to survive eternity? I'm not even sure I can get him through another week. Look at him, take a bloody good look. This is what your ridiculous powers have reduced him to; this . . . wreck. You haven't been granted the power to work miracles, all you can do is corrupt nature."

"I'm not going to die," Johan wheezed. "Please." His hand gripped Carmitha's arm, a hot, damp pressure. "You have to stop this. Make me better."

Carmitha gently pulled herself free. She started to study his self-inflicted impairments properly, trying to work out what the hell she could realistically achieve. "Most of the healing will be up to you. Even so, this convalescence will stretch the concept of holistic medicine to its limit."

"I'll do anything. Anything!"

"Humm." She ran her hand over his chest, tracing the creases in the flesh, testing them for firmness as she would ripe fruit. "Okay. How old are you?"

"What?" he asked, bewildered.

"Tell me how old you are. You see, I know already. I've been coming to this estate for the rose season for over fifteen years now. My earliest recollection is of Mr Butterworth supervising the grove teams. He was the estate manager even back then. He was a good one, too; never shouted, always knew what to say to get people going, never treated the Ro-

manies different to anyone else. I always remember him dressed in his tweeds and yellow waistcoat; when I was five I thought he was king of the world he looked so fine and jolly. And he knew the way Cricklade worked better than anyone other than the Kavanaghs. None of that happens overnight. So now you tell me, Johan, I want to hear it from your own mouth; how old are you?"

"Sixty-eight," he whispered. "I'm sixty-eight Earth years old."

"And how much do you weigh when you're healthy?"

"Fifteen and a half stone." He was silent for a moment. "My hair's grey, too, not blond. I don't have much of it anyway." The confession relaxed him slightly.

"That's good. You're beginning to understand. You must accept what you are, and rejoice in it. You were a soul tormented by emptiness, now you have a body again. One that can provide you with every sensation that was taken from you in the beyond. What it looks like is a supreme irrelevance. Allow the flesh to be what it is. Hide from nothing. I know, it's tough. You thought this place was the solution to everything. Admitting it isn't to yourself will be difficult, coming to believe it even more so. But you must learn to accept your new self, and the limitations Butterworth's body imposes. He had a good life before, there's no reason why that can't continue."

Johan was trying to appear reasonable. "But how long for?" he asked.

"His ancestors were geneered, I expect. Most colonists were. So he'll last decades more at least, providing you don't pull a stunt like this again."

"Decades." His voice was bitter with defeat.

"Or days if you don't start to believe in yourself again. You have to help me help you, Johan. I'm not joking. I won't even waste my time with you if you don't stop dreaming that you're destined for immortality."

“I’ll do it,” he said. “I really will.”

She patted him comfortingly, and drew the blanket back up. “Very well, you lie here for now. Luca will arrange for some of the lads to carry you back to your room. I’m going to go over to the kitchen and have a word with cook about what sort of foods she’s got available. We’ll start off giving you plenty of small meals each day. I want to avoid putting any sudden stress on your digestive system. But it’s important we get some decent nutrition back into you.”

“Thank you.”

“There are some treatments I can use which will make this easier for you. They’ll need preparing. We’ll make a start this afternoon.”

She left the carpentry shop, and walked back to the manor’s rear courtyard. Cricklade’s kitchen was a long rectangular room, bridging the gap between the west wing’s storerooms and the main hall. Tiled with plain black and white marble, one wall was lined with a ten-oven Aga radiating a fierce heat that the open windows couldn’t eradicate. Two of Cook’s assistants were taking loaves from the baking ovens and knocking them out of their tins onto wire racks below a window. Three more assistants were busy by the row of Belfast sinks, chopping vegetables ready for the evening meal. Cook herself was supervising a butcher who was cutting up a sheep carcass on the central island. Copper-bottomed pots and pans of every size and shape dangled from a large suspended rack overhead like segments of a polished halo. Carmitha had hung bunches of her herbs between the pots along the side facing the Aga, helping them to dry faster.

She waved at Cook and went over to Véronique who was sitting at the last Belfast sink, scraping carrots on the wooden chopping board. “How’s it going?” Carmitha asked.

Véronique smiled, and put a hand worshipfully on her heavily pregnant stomach. “I can’t believe he hasn’t started

yet. I need to take a pee every ten minutes. Are you sure it wasn't twins?"

"You can sense him for yourself now." Carmitha slid her hand over the baby, experiencing only warm contentment. Véronique was possessing the body of Olive Fenchurch, a nineteen-year-old maid who had married her estate worker love about two hundred days ago. A short engagement, followed by an equally short, if biologically improbable, pregnancy. For here she was about to give birth with nearly seventy days' gestation misplaced. A common occurrence on Norfolk.

"I don't like to," Véronique said shyly. "It's like bad luck, or something."

"Well take it from me, he's just fine. When he wants to make a move, he'll let us all know."

"I hope it's soon." The girl shifted uncomfortably on the wooden chair. "My back's killing me, and my legs ache."

Carmitha smiled in sympathy. "I'll come and rub some peppermint oil into your feet this evening. That should perk you up."

"Ohooo thank you. You have the most cleverest hands."

It was almost as if the possession hadn't taken. Véronique had such a quiet, gentle nature, nervously trying to please, so very similar to Olive. She'd once confessed to Carmitha that she'd died in some kind of accident. She wouldn't say how old she'd been, but Carmitha suspected early to mid teens; there had been occasional mention of bullies at her day-club.

Now her French accent was blending with a raw Norfolk dialect. An unusual combination, although mellow enough to the ear. The rich Norfolk vowels became more pronounced each day; rising as the turmoil endemic to possessed minds shrank away inside her. Carmitha had a strong suspicion about that as well.

"Did you hear about Mr Butterworth?" she asked.

“Why yes,” Véronique said. “Is he all right?”

Interesting that she doesn't think of him as Johan, Carmitha thought; then felt shabby at such a feeble trick. “Just a bit wonky, that all. Mostly because he hasn't been eating properly. I'll fix him up all right, which is why I'm here. I need you to make up some oils for me.”

“I'd love to.”

“Thanks. I want some crab-apple; there are plenty of those in store so it shouldn't be a problem. Some bergamot, remember that's to be made mainly from the rind. And we'll need angelica, too; that can help to rouse his appetite; so I'll need a fresh batch each day. Then when he's recovering we can apply avocado to improve his skin tone, help his self-esteem that way.”

“I'll get right on to it.” Véronique glanced at the door and blushed.

Carmitha saw Luca standing in the doorway, watching them. “I'll be back for them in a little while,” she told the girl.

“You think all that's going to help?” Luca asked as she brushed past him into the utility corridor running the length of the west wing.

“Careful,” she said. “You nearly said: that rubbish.”

“But I didn't though, did I?”

“No. Not this time.”

“Three of the lads took him upstairs. Doesn't look very good, does it? I mean, the state of him!”

“Depends on your attitude.” She went out into the courtyard with Luca trailing behind. Her caravan was standing close to the gates, curtains drawn and door shut. Still her small fortress against this realm. It was more her world than the planet was now.

“All right, I'm sorry,” Luca called. “You should know by now what I'm like.”

She leant against the front wheel and grinned wickedly. "Which one of you, my lord, sir?"

"That's got to be quits."

"Maybe."

"So, please, what are the oils for?"

"Mainly aromatherapy massage, though I'll use some in his bath as well; probably a lavender."

"Massage?" The doubt was back.

"Look, even if we had Confederation medical technology, that's not the whole story, not in this case. There's more to curing people than slamming their biochemistry back into gear, you know. That's always been scientific medicine's problem, it's only interested in the physical. Johan must fight this affliction both within and without. That's not his original body, and the instinct to shape it into what he remembers as his own form must be broken. Powerful physical contact, exemplified by massage, can put him in touch with this body. I can make him acknowledge it, end this resentment and subconscious rejection. That's where the oils come in; a crab-apple base is an excellent relaxant. The two combined should ease his acceptance of his true existence."

"Amazing. You sound like an expert on the subject of possessed body rejection."

"I'm adapting several old methods. There are some strong precedents here. This is not too dissimilar from classic anorexia."

"Oh, come on!"

"I'm speaking the truth. In a lot of cases, young girls simply couldn't come to terms with their developing sexuality. They tried to regain the body they'd lost by slimming themselves back down to what they were, with disastrous consequences. Now here on this planet, you all firmly believe you've become angels or godlings or crap like that. You think this is a real garden of Eden, and you're the immortal youths frolicking around the fountain. Like a politician believing her own bullshit,

you've convinced yourselves your illusions are as strong as reality. They're not."

His smile was devoid of conviction. "We can create. You know that. You've done it yourself."

"I've carved matter, that's all. Taken a magic invisible blade held firmly in my mind, and whittled away until I'm left with the shape I want. The nature of that matter always remains the same." She glanced around the courtyard at the usual midday loungers taking their break in the small pools of shade close to the walls. Several sets of eyes were watching them idly. "Come inside," she said.

Even with all that time sitting quiet in the forest, and her new powers, she hadn't quite got round to tidying the caravan. Luca looked round politely as she cleared some clothes off her chair, and gestured him to sit. She took the bed. "I didn't say anything in front of Susannah, but I suppose I've got to tell someone."

"What?" he enquired charily.

"I don't think it was entirely malnutrition. I could feel hard lumps of flesh under his skin. If he wasn't so obviously wasting away, I'd say new muscle was growing. Except, it didn't feel like muscle tissue, either." She bit her lip. "That doesn't leave a lot of choices."

It took Luca a long time to link up what she was saying. Mostly because he was desperate to avoid the conclusion. "Tumours?" he said softly.

"I'll give him a proper examination when I give him his first massage. But I don't know what else it can be. And, Luca, there's a fuck of a lot of it."

"Oh Jesus H Christ. You can cure it, right? The Confederation doesn't have cancer like we did in my day."

"The Confederation can deal with it, yes. But there's no single solution, no Twenty-seventh Century pill I can whip up a formula for and crank out in a chemistry lab. It needs working medical nanonics, and people who know how to

use them. Norfolk never had any of that to start with. I think you'll have to start calling in qualified doctors. This is all way outside my league."

"Oh shit." He held his hands up in front of his face, fingers held wide. They were shaking. "We can't go back. We just can't."

"Luca, you've been changing your body as well. Nothing like as bad as Johan. But you've been doing it. Smoothing out the wrinkles, tucking in the old gut. If you'd like me to examine you, I'll do it now. No one has to know."

"No."

For the first time, she felt sorry for him. "Okay. If you change your mind . . ." She started opening the caravan's little wooden cupboards, preparing the items she wanted to take up to Johan's room.

"Carmitha?" Luca asked softly. "What the hell were you doing, going to bed with Grant for money?"

"What the fuck kind of question is that?"

"You know exactly what I mean. A girl like you. You're smart, young, you're bloody attractive. You could take your pick of any young man you wanted, even from landowner families. That's been known. Why that?"

Her arm shot out, and she caught his chin in a tight grip, making it impossible for him to look away from her furious expression. "This day's been a long time coming, Grant."

"I'm not—"

"Shut up. You are him, or at least you're listening. And this time you can't close your mind. You're too desperate for any sight of outside. Isn't that right?"

He could only grunt as her fingers squeezed tighter.

"He made you think, didn't he? That Luca. Made you stop and take a look around your precious world. Well he's right to ask, why did I have to whore myself with you? The reason I did it is easy enough. You admire my independence, my free spirit. Well that independence costs. It would take

me an entire season tending the groves to earn enough money to replace a single wheel on this caravan. One broken wheel, one half hidden rock in the mud, and my freedom is taken away from me. The rim is made from tythorn, I can saw and plane a new section for myself if I have a mishap. But the bearings and spring-spokes are made in your factories. And we need sprung wheels because there aren't any proper roads. You don't build them, do you, because you want everyone to use the trains. If people had cars, that would skew the whole economy away from you, your ideal. And I'm not even going to go into how much a horse like Olivier costs to buy and feed. So there's your answer, plain to see. I do it for the money, because I have no choice. I was born your whore. You've made everybody on this planet your whores. Your landowner freedoms are bought at our expense. I let you have me, because you would pay well, that *gratuity* you so kindly leave behind means I don't have to do it often. You're a commodity, Grant, you and the other landowners. You're valuable currency, nothing more." She shoved him away hard. The back of his head cracked into the curving planks of the caravan, making him yelp and wince. When he put his hand round to dab at his skull, it came away with a smear of blood. He gave her a frightened look.

"Heal yourself," she told him. "Then get out."

For a city which banned all commercial overflights, there were a surprising number of skywatchers in Nova Kong. Their attention was inevitably directed at the Apollo Palace, charting the movements of the ion flyers, planes, and spaceplanes which came and went from the building's landing pads and courtyards. The volume, arrival time, and marque of vehicles was a good indicator of the kind of diplomatic and crisis management activity being dealt with by the Saldana family staff. Kulu's communication net even had a

couple of very unofficial bulletin sites devoted to the topic; carefully monitored by the ISA to make sure no active sensors were being used.

With the onset of the possession crisis, the skywatch enthusiasts gave the palace airspace the kind of coverage matched only by the city's defence array sensors. Civilian craft such as those used by junior ministers and waggish royal cousins had vanished. Now it was only military vehicles darting in and out among the ornate rotundas and stone chimney stacks. Even so, their squadron insignias gave some clues away about their passengers and cargo. The gossip bulletins were well served by the skywatchers (with a few contributions of ISA disinformation).

This particular morning when the city was overcast with grey clouds sprinkling sleet across the boulevards and parks, they faithfully recorded the arrival of four flyers from the Royal Marine 585 Squadron in amongst the twenty other landings. 585's dedicated role was logistics, a description broad enough to cover many sins. As a consequence their presence went unremarked.

Also unremarked was the arrival over the previous thirty-hour period of warships from (among other planets) Oshanko, New Washington, Petersburg, and Nanjing, which were now parked in low equatorial orbit. They had brought respectively, Prince Tokama, Vice-President Jim Sanderson, Prime Minister Korzhenev, and deputy speaker Ku Rongi. Such was the secrecy surrounding the high-power guests that not even the Kulu Foreign Ministry had been notified; certainly the embassies of the planets concerned knew nothing.

It was left to the Prime Minister, Lady Phillipa Oshin, to greet them as their flyers touched down in an inner quadrangle one after the other. She smiled with polite firmness as a Royal Marine tested each guest for static, which they accepted with equal aplomb. The palace cloisters were unusu-

ally empty as she escorted them to the King's private study. Alastair II rose from the deep chair behind his desk to give them a more cordial welcome. There was a fierce log fire burning in the grate, repelling the chill which washed off the frozen quadrangle outside the French windows. The chestnut trees around the prim lawn were denuded of leaves, leaving the branches glinting under encrustations of ice like clustered quartz.

Lady Phillipa sat at the side of the desk next to the Duke of Salion; while the guests were in green leather chairs facing Alastair.

"Thank you all for coming," the King said.

"Your ambassador said it was important," Jim Sanderson said. "And our diplomatic relationship is old and valuable enough to get you my ass over here. Though I have to say I should be back home where I'm visible to the voters. This crisis is about appearing confident more than anything."

"I understand," Alastair said. "If I might make an observation, the crisis is now developing outside the arena of public confidence."

"Yeah, we heard Mortonridge is in trouble."

"The rate of advance has slowed down after Ketton," the Duke of Salion admitted. "But we are still gaining ground and de-possessing the inhabitants."

"Good for you. What's that got to do with us? You've already had as much help as we can reasonably provide."

"We believe the time has come to make some positive decisions on the policies we adopt to defeat the possessed."

Korzhenov grunted in amusement. "So you called us here in secret to discuss this action rather than take it to the Assembly? I feel as if I am a member of some old cabal plotting revolution."

"You are," the King said. Korzhenov's smile faded.

"The Confederation is failing," the Duke of Salion told the surprised guests. "The economies of the developed

worlds like ours are suffering badly from the civil starflight quarantine. Stage two planets are paralysed. Capone has acted with singular brilliance with his infiltration flights and the strike against Trafalgar. Our populations are in a state of physical and emotional siege. Quarantine-busting flights continue to spread possession slowly but surely. And now Earth, the industrial and military core of the entire Confederation, has been infected. Without Earth on our side, the whole equation is changed. We must take its loss into account if we are to survive.”

“Just hold on there a minute,” Jim Sanderson said. “The possessed have got a toehold in a couple of arcologies, is all. You can’t sign Earth off that easily. GISD is one tough mother of an agency, they’ll crack whatever heads they have to in order to clear the possessed out.”

Alaistair looked at the Duke, and nodded permission.

“According to our GISD contact, there are now at least five arcologies host to the possessed.”

Prince Tokama raised an eyebrow. “You are well informed, sir. I had not been told of this development before I left Oshanko.”

“Half of the Royal Navy auxiliary vessels are doing nothing but running round on courier duty for us,” the Duke said. “We’re keeping as current as we can, but even that information is a couple of days old now. According to the report, the worst situation is in New York, but the other four arcologies will fall within weeks at the most. Govcentral has been commendably quick in closing down the vac-train routes, but we believe that ultimately the possessed will spread to the remaining arcologies as well. If anyone is capable of surviving Earth’s climate without technological protection, it is a possessed.”

“And that isn’t even the big problem,” Alaistair said. “Lalonde’s population was roughly twenty million, of which we can assume a minimum of eighty-five per cent were pos-

sessed. Between them, they had enough energistic power to snatch the planet from this universe. New York's official population is three hundred million. By themselves they have more than enough power to remove Earth. They won't even have to wait until the other arcologies are taken over."

"A valid observation, however, the Halo will surely remain," Ku Rongi said. "That is the main source of commerce with the Confederation. Trade with the Sol system will be diminished, not erased."

"Hopefully, yes," the Duke said. "Our GISD contact says they don't yet understand how the possessed penetrated Earth's defences. So the possibility exists that they may be able to spread among the Halo asteroids as well. The other problem facing the Halo is that when the Earth is removed to some other realm, its gravity field will go with it. The Halo asteroids will physically disperse."

"Very well," Prince Tokama said. "I am sure your analysts have produced a definitive report on the outcome of these events. So assuming we are deprived of Earth, and at least some of the Halo's resources, what do you see as the most effective policy to proceed with?"

"Olton Haaker and the Polity Council have just ordered a full scale Confederation Navy attack against Capone's fleet," the Duke said. "It should close down the Organization's rule, and allow the possessed on New California to do what comes naturally. They'll shunt it away, thus eliminating the threat of any further infiltration flights and antimatter terrorism. What we propose is taking that policy to its conclusion."

"The industrialized star systems should align themselves into a core-Confederation," Lady Phillipa said. "At the moment we're dangerously overstretched trying to enforce the quarantine and supporting actions like Mortonridge. The cost simply cannot be sustained, not with the economic slowdown we're all suffering from. If we contract our

spheres of influence, the cost is considerably reduced, and the effectiveness of our military forces in maintaining security over a smaller volume of space is correspondingly improved. Given that increased security, we could begin trading among ourselves again.”

“You mean no one else would be allowed to fly in?”

“Essentially, yes. We would extend the government authorization process we have in place today to cover commercial starships. Any vessel registered in one of the secured star systems would be allowed to resume flying between systems, subject to a reasonable security inspection. Ships which came from unsecured systems would not be permitted to dock. In other words, we stake out our perimeter and guard it very well indeed.”

“And the other planets?” Korzhenev enquired. “The ones we leave out in the cold. What do you foresee for them?”

“They’re the principal source of our trouble in the first place,” the Duke said. “They do not police their asteroid settlements effectively, which encourages quarantine-busting flights and with them the prospect of possessed getting loose inside another star system.”

“So we just abandon them?”

“By withdrawing our present unconditional military support, they will be forced into taking the responsibility they’ve so far avoided. With the present quarantine in force, their marginal industrial asteroid settlements are inviolable anyway. In effect, we have been subsidising their suspended status for the owners. Once that situation is ended, the asteroids will be mothballed and their populations returned to the home star system’s terracompatible planet. In itself that will considerably reduce the number of routes by which the possessed can continue to spread. We may even rid ourselves of their incursion into this universe entirely. If they see they cannot reach fresh planets, then those who remain will take themselves away to this new realm of theirs.”

“Then what?” Jim Sanderson asked. “Okay, we regain most of what we’ve lost in financial terms. I’m in favour of that. But it doesn’t solve anything long term. Even if the possessed clear out and leave us alone, we still have to consider the bodies, the *people*, they’ve stolen and enslaved. There’s hundreds of millions of them depending on us to rescue them, billions probably by now. That’s a healthy percentage of our whole species. We can’t ignore that. The whole issue of souls and what happens to us after death has got to be thoroughly addressed. That’s what I was hoping for when I came here today, something new.”

“If there was an easy solution we would have found it by now,” the King said. “The amount of research and effort focused on this is like no other endeavour in our history. Every university, every company and military laboratory, every febrile mind in eight hundred inhabited star systems has been working on it. The best anybody has come up with is the possibility of a doomsday anti-memory for the souls in the beyond. One can hardly consider such mass slaughter as a valid answer, even if it can be made to work. We have to start looking at this from a different angle altogether. In order to do that, we must have stability and a reasonable degree of prosperity as an umbrella to work under. Society will have to change in many ways; most of which will be profoundly unsettling. One doesn’t even know if it will ultimately reinforce or obliterate our faith in God.”

“I can see the logic in what you’re saying,” Korzhenev said. “But what about the Assembly and the Confederation Navy itself? They exist to protect all planets equally.”

“Bottom line,” Lady Phillipa said, “is that he who pays the piper . . . and those of us in this room do pay a considerable amount. We’re not abandoning anybody, we’re restructuring policy to a more realistic response towards this crisis. If it could be solved quickly, then all we’d need is the quarantine and a few interdiction flights. As that quite obviously

hasn't happened, we are going to have to take the tough decision and settle in for the long haul. This is the only way we can offer those already possessed with any prospect of regaining their own identities one day."

"How many other star systems do you envisage joining this core-Confederation?" Prince Tokama asked.

"We believe ninety-three systems have the kind of fully developed technoindustrial infrastructure to qualify for admission. We don't envisage this as being a small elite. Our fiscal analysis shows that many stars would be able to sustain a modest but steady economic growth pattern between themselves."

"Do you envisage asking the Edenists to join?" Ku Rongi asked.

"Of course," the King replied. "In fact we took inspiration from them. After Pernik they have demonstrated an admirable resolution in safeguarding their habitats from infiltration. That's precisely the kind of determination we wish to institute among ourselves. If the stage two planets and developing asteroids had done the same right from the start, we wouldn't even be in this appalling position."

Jim Sanderson looked round the three other guests, then turned back to the King. "Okay, I'll brief the President and tell him it gets my vote. It ain't what I wanted, but at least it's something practical."

"My honourable father will be informed," Prince Tokama said. "He will need to bring your proposal to the attention of the Imperial Court, but I can see no problem if enough planets can be convinced."

Korzhenev and Ku Rongi gave their assent, promising to take the proposal to their governments. The King shook hands and had a few personal words of thanks with each as they were ushered out. He didn't hurry them, but time was important; the next four senior representatives were due in

an hour. Five Eighty-five Squadron had a busy three days scheduled.

A hundred and eighty-seven wormhole termini opened with impressive synchronization a quarter of a million kilometres away from Arnstat, directly between the planet and its sun. Voidhawks emerged from the gaps and immediately established a defence sphere formation five thousand kilometres in diameter, scanning space with their distortion fields and electronic sensors for any sign of nearby technological activity. They detected the planet's SD platforms, of course; a much-depleted network in the aftermath of the Organization's successful invasion. Nonetheless, local sensor satellites had already discovered them, and the remaining high-orbit platforms were locking on. The SD network was reinforced by Organization fleet warships, of which there were a hundred and eighteen currently in orbit, along with twenty-three hellhawks and a token half-dozen new low-orbit platforms ferried in from New California which were principally used to enforce Organization rule on the ground. Their presence, especially in conjunction with the antimatter combat wasps which some of them carried, had effectively upgraded the planetary defence shield to the same level as it had been with a full SD network.

Capone and Emmet Mordden were satisfied the Organization could defeat any task force of warships the Confederation sent in an attempt to reclaim space above the Arnstat. In any case, it was only the Organization's dominance of that space which prevented the planet from being taken out of the universe by the possessed on the surface, effectively stymieing the First Admiral.

True, there had been an considerable increase in lightning raids recently: voidhawks swallowing in to shoot off combat wasps and stealth munitions. But few of the missiles had ever hit a target; interception rate was over ninety-five per

cent. The state of constant alert had given the crews operating the sensor satellites a high proficiency rating. Complemented by the hellhawks' distortion fields, they were confident nothing could get close enough to the orbiting asteroid settlements or industrial stations to inflict any kind of serious damage.

Nothing happened for the first two minutes after the voidhawks emerged. Both sides were searching for clues to see what the other was going to do. The Organization chief didn't know what to make of it. A voidhawk force in this formation was normally a securement operation, enabling a larger fleet of Adamist warships to jump in with impunity. But a hundred and eighty-seven was a colossal number for a beachhead detachment, more likely to be the task force in its entirety. The distance was also puzzling: at the moment they were outside effective combat wasp engagement range. But antimatter combat wasps would give the Organization an advantage, allowing them to engage the attackers first as they flew in towards the planet.

The voidhawks confirmed the Organization was unable to reach them—unless the hellhawks chose to swallow up for a confrontation. None of them did. More wormhole termini started to open. Then the first Adamist ship emerged in the middle of the defence sphere formation.

Admiral Kolhammer was using the battleship *Illustrious* as his flagship. Its size permitted him to carry a full complement of tactical staff, and provided them with a fully fledged C&C compartment independent of the bridge. No ship in the Confederation Navy was better suited to coordinating an attacking force of this magnitude. Though even with the number of antenna which *Illustrious* boasted, the tactical staff were hard pressed to establish and maintain communication with all the thousand-plus ships under his command.

Emphasising the monumental strength they represented, it took the task force over thirty-five minutes to complete

their emergence manoeuvre. To the officers and crew of the Organization fleet it seemed as though the torrent of ships would never end.

Kolhammer's staff began datavisising ships with new vectors as soon as they established contact. Fusion drives blinked on, powering the task force into a giant disk formation. So many plasma exhausts concentrated in one place produced a blazing purple-white haze brighter than the sun. People on the surface of the planet could see the attackers as a coin-sized patch flowering open against the centre of the dazzling photosphere, an unnerving portent of what was to come.

Eight hundred Adamist warships formed the nucleus of the new attack formation, while five hundred voidhawks flocked around their periphery. Once their relative positions were locked, the main drives burst into life, accelerating the ships in towards the planet at eight gees. Voidhawks expanded their distortion fields and matched the acceleration of their technological comrades.

The gigantic neuroiconic display wheeled slowly inside Motela Kolhammer's mind, each ship a pinprick of golden light trailing a purple vector tag in a headlong rush to the solid bulk of the planet ahead, represented by a blank, ebony sphere. The strength of the planetary defence layers were illustrated by translucent coloured shells wrapped around the blackness. The ships still had some way to go before the outermost, yellow shell. And still neither side had fired a shot.

The simulation put him in mind of a hammer descending on an egg, rendered with impossibly delicate artistry for what it actually portrayed. Even he was dismayed at the level of violence to be unleashed when those two forces collided in the physical world. Something he never expected. But the tradition of the Confederation Navy was to prevent exactly this kind of monstrosity from happening, not to instigate it. He couldn't help the guilt which came from know-

ing this was happening because politicians considered the Navy had failed in their principal duty.

Stranger than that, the knowledge and its burden was bearable because of those politicians. The very people who had declared the attack had made it possible to do so with minimal casualties—on the Navy's side. By insisting on total success, the Polity Council had given Kolhammer the one thing all military commanders crave before battle is joined: overwhelming firepower.

Kolhammer's task force accelerated towards Arnstat at a constant eight gees for thirty minutes. When he gave the order for the starships to switch off their drives, they were still 110,000 kilometres out, just on the fringes of the outer SD network, and travelling at over 150 kilometres per second. Frigates, battleships, and voidhawks fired a salvo of 25 combat wasps each. Every drone was pre-programmed to operate in an autonomous seek-and-destroy mode. A perfect engagement scenario: any chunk of matter above Arnstat, from pebble-sized interplanetary meteorites to kilometre-long industrial stations, MSVs to asteroids, was classified as hostile. The Confederation Navy ships didn't have to stay to supervise the attack over encrypted communications links, there would be no salvos of Organization antimatter combat wasps fired at their ships to counter, no 12-gees evasive manoeuvres. No risk.

Adamist warships began to jump away. Wormhole interstices were prised open, carrying some of the voidhawks to their rendezvous coordinates. Only the *Illustrious*, 10 escort frigates, and 300 accompanying voidhawks remained to observe the outcome. All of them now decelerating at 10 gees as the armada of 32,000 combat wasps swept on ahead, accelerating at a full 25 gees.

It was a clash which had one outcome from the moment it was instigated. Even with over 500 antimatter combat wasps available, the Organization could do nothing to stop the in-

coming weapons. Not only did the Confederation have an incredible weight of numbers on their side; the ever-increasing velocity at which they were approaching gave them an overwhelming kinetic advantage. Kills could only be achieved by a first-time direct hit; no defending submunition would have a second chance.

The hellhawks swallowed out en masse without even bothering to consult Arnstat's SD command. Organization frigates began to retract their sensor booms and communication dishes down into their hull recesses prior to jumping clear. Those assigned to low-orbit enforcement duty began to accelerate at high gees, striving for an altitude where they could use their patterning nodes successfully.

Voidhawk distortion fields examined the pressure which the Organization frigates applied against space-time in order to escape. Each combination of energy compression and trajectory was unique, allowing for only one possible emergence coordinate. Three voidhawks swallowed away in pursuit of each Organization ship, with orders to interdict and destroy. With the Adamist warships needing several seconds after emergence to extend their sensors, the voidhawks would have a small window when their target was utterly defenceless. Kolhammer was determined none of them should return to New California to bolster Capone's strength and add their antimatter to his stockpile.

The combat wasps in the attacking swarm began to dispense their submunitions, stretching a dense filigree of white fire across space for tens of thousands of kilometres. Brief, tiny pulses of glowing violet gas spewed out at random as the SD network's outer sensor satellites detonated. Then the explosions began to multiply as more and more of Arnstat's hardware was obliterated. The swarm swept across the first of the planet's four asteroid settlements circling above geosynchronous orbit, overwhelming its short-range defences. Kinetic spears and nuclear-tipped submunitions

pummelled the rock, biting out hundreds of irradiated craters. Vast cataracts of ions and magma flared away into space from each impact, the asteroid's rotation curving them sharply to wrap itself in a thick psychedelic chromosphere. Second-tier SD platforms and inter-orbit shuttles were caught next. They were followed by another of the asteroids. For a moment it looked as though the pure savagery of the weapons had somehow ignited a fission reaction within the rock's atomic structure. The lush stipple of explosions melded into a single radiative discharge of stellar intensity. Then the light's uniformity cracked. At its core the asteroid had shattered, releasing a deluge of molten debris, kicking off a wave of cascade explosions as each fresh target was intercepted by the submunitions.

Pressed deep into his acceleration couch by air molecules heavier than lead, Motela Kolhammer watched the results through a combination of optical sensor datavises and tactical graphic overlays. The two were becoming indistinguishable as reality began to imitate the electronic displays. Distinct shells of light were enveloping the planet as clouds of plasma cooled and expanded. It was low orbit, inevitably, where the largest number of vehicles, stations, and SD hardware was emplaced. Consequently, when the submunitions tore through them, the resultant blastwaves became a mantle of solid light that sealed the entire planet away from outside observation.

Beneath it, wreckage fell to earth in bewitchingly attractive pyrotechnic storms. Streaks of ionic flame tore through the upper atmosphere, a sleet of malignant shooting stars heating the stratosphere to furnace temperatures. A potent crimson glow rose up from the clouds to greet them.

Illustrious raced 80,000 kilometres over the south pole as the possessed on the ground chanted their spell. First warning came when the planetary gravity field quaked, warping the battleship's trajectory by several metres. The shroud of

light around Arnstat never faded; it merely changed colour, rippling through the spectrum towards resplendent violet as it contracted. Optical-spectrum sensors had to bring several shield filters on line during the last few minutes as the source shrank towards its vanishing point.

Motela Kolhammer kept one optical sensor aligned on the accusingly empty zone as the battleship's radar and gravitonic sensors scanned space for any sign of the planet's mass. Every result came in negative. "Tell our escort to jump to the task force rendezvous coordinate," he told the tactical staff. "Then plot a course for New California."

Sarha fell through the open hatchway into the captain's cabin, ignoring the dark composite ladder and allowing the half-gee acceleration to pull her down neatly onto the decking. She landed, flexing her knees gracefully.

"Ballet really missed out when you chose astroengineering at university," Joshua said. He was standing in the middle of the room, dressed in his shorts and towelling off a liberal smearing of lemon-scented gel.

She gave him a hoydenish grin. "I know how to exploit low-gee to my advantage."

"I hope Ashly appreciates it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Humm. So how are we doing?"

"Official end of duty watch report, sir. We're doing the same as yesterday." Her salute lacked efficiency.

"Which was the same as the day before."

"Damn right. Oh, I tracked down the leak in that reaction mass feed pipe. Somebody slacked off when the tanks were installed in the cargo holds, a junction was misaligned. Beaulieu says she'll get on it later today. In the meantime I isolated the pipe; we have enough redundancy to keep the flow at optimum."

"Yeah, right, fascinating." He balled the towel and

chucked it in a low arc across the cabin. It landed dead centre on the hopper's open throat and slithered down.

She watched it vanish. "I want to keep the fluid volume up. We might wind up needing it."

"Sure. How were Liol's jumps?" He already knew, of course; *Lady Mac's* log was the first thing he'd checked when he woke up. Liol had completed five jumps on the last watch, each essentially flawless according to the flight computer. That wasn't quite the point.

"Fine."

"Humm."

"All right, what's the matter? I thought the two of you were getting on okay these days. You can hardly fault his performance."

"I'm not." He fished a clean sweatshirt out of a locker. "It's just that I'm asking a lot of people for advice and opinions these days. Not a good development for a captain. I'm supposed to make perfect snap judgements."

"If you ask me a question about guiding *Lady Mac* I'll be worried. Anything else . . ." Her hand waved limply, wafting air about. "You and I bounced around in that zero-gee cage enough to start with. I know you don't connect the same way most people do. So if you want help with that, I'm your girl."

"What do you mean, don't connect?"

"Joshua, you were scavenging the Ruin Ring when you were eighteen. That's not natural. You should have been out partying."

"I partied."

"No, you screwed a lot of girls between flights."

"That's what eighteen-year-olds do."

"That's what eighteen-year-old boys dream of doing. Adamist ones, anyway. Everyone else is busy falling helter skelter into the adult world and desperately trying to find out how the hell it works, and why it's all so difficult and

painful. How you handle friendships, relationships, break-ups; that kind of thing.”

“You make it sound like we have to pass some kind of exam.”

“We do, though sitting it lasts for most of your life. You haven’t even started revising yet.”

“Jesus. This is all very profound, especially at this time of the morning. What are you trying to tell me?”

“Nothing. You’re the one that’s troubled. I damn well know it’ll be nothing to do with our mission. So I guess I’m trying to coax you into telling me what’s on your mind, and convince you it’s okay to talk about it. People do that when they’re close. It’s normal.”

“Ballet and psychology, huh?”

“You signed me up for my multi-tasking.”

“All right,” Joshua said. She was right, it was hard for him to talk about this. “It’s Louise.”

“Ah! The Norfolk babe. The very young one.”

“She’s not . . .” he began automatically. Sarha’s lack of expression stopped him. “Well, she is a bit young. I think I sort of took advantage.”

“Oh wow. I never thought the day would come when I heard you say that. Exactly why is it bothering you this time? You use your status like a stun gun.”

“I do not!”

“Please. When was the last time you went planetside or even into port without your little captain’s star bright on your shoulder?” She gave him a sympathetic smile. “You really fell for her, didn’t you?”

“No more than usual. It’s just that none of my other girlfriends wound up being possessed. Jesus, I had a hint of what that was like. I can’t stop thinking what it must have been like for her, how fucking ugly. She was so sweet, she didn’t belong in a world where those kind of things happen to people.”

“Do any of us?”

“You know what I mean. You’ve done stims you shouldn’t have, you’ve accessed real news sensevises. We know this is a badass universe. It helps, a bit. As much as anything can. But Louise—damn, her brat sister, too. We flew off and left them, just like we always do.”

“They spare children, you know. That Stephanie Ash woman on Ombey brought a whole bunch of kids out. I accessed the report.”

“Louise wasn’t a child. It happened to her.”

“You don’t know that for certain. If she was smart enough, she might have eluded them.”

“I doubt it. She doesn’t have that sort of ability.”

“She must have had some pretty amazing features to have this effect on you.”

He thought back to the carriage journey to Cricklade after they’d just met, her observations on Norfolk and its nature. He’d agreed with just about everything she’d said. “She wasn’t street-smart. And that’s the kind of dirty selfishness you need to elude the possessed.”

“You really don’t believe she made it, do you?”

“No.”

“Do you think you’re responsible for her?”

“Not responsible, exactly. But I think she was sort of looking at me as the person who was going to take her away from Cricklade Manor.”

“Dear me, whatever could have given her that impression, I wonder?”

Joshua didn’t hear. “I let her down, just by being me. It’s not a nice feeling, Sarha. She really was a lovely girl, even though she’d been brought up on Norfolk. If she’d been born anywhere else, I’d probably . . .” He fell silent, shifting his sweatshirt round, not meeting Sarha’s astonished stare.

“Say it,” she said.

“Say what?”

“Probably marry her.”

“I would not marry her. All I’m saying is that if she’d been given a proper childhood instead of growing up in that ridiculous medieval pageant there might’ve been a chance that we could have had something slightly longer-term than usual.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Sarha drawled.

“Now what have I done?” he exclaimed.

“You’ve been Joshua. For a moment there I thought you were actually evolving. Didn’t you hear yourself? She hasn’t had the education to become a crew member on *Lady Mac*, therefore it can’t possibly work between you. There was never a thought that you might give up your life to join her.”

“I can’t!”

“Because *Lady Mac* is far more important than Cricklade estate, which is her life. Right? So do you love her, Joshua? Or do you just feel guilty because one of the girls you shagged and dumped happened to get captured and possessed?”

“Jesus! What are you trying to do to me?”

“I’m trying to understand you, Joshua. And help if I can. This matters to you. It’s important. You have to know why.”

“I don’t know why. I just know I’m worried about her. Maybe I’m guilty. Maybe I’m angry at the way the universe has crapped all over us.”

“Fair enough. All of us are feeling that way right now. At least we’re doing something about it. You can’t fly *Lady Mac* to Norfolk and rescue her; not any more. As far as anyone knows, this is the next best thing.”

He gave her a sad grin. “Yeah. I guess that’s me being selfish, too. I have to be doing something. Me.”

“It’s the kind of selfishness the Confederation needs right now.”

“That still doesn’t make it fair what happened to her.

She's suffering through no fault of her own. If this Sleeping God is as powerful as the Tyrathca believe, then it's got some explaining to do."

"We've been saying that about our deities ever since we dreamt them up. It's a fallacy to assume it shares our morals and ethics. In fact it's quite obvious it doesn't. If it did, none of this would have happened. We'd all be living in paradise."

"You mean the argument against divine intervention is forever unbreakable?"

"Yep, free will means we have to make our own choices. Without that, life is meaningless; we'd be insects grubbing along the way our instincts tell us. Sentience has to count for something."

Joshua leant over and placed a grateful kiss on her forehead. "Getting us into trouble, usually. I mean, Jesus, look at me. I'm a wreck. Sentience hurts."

They went out into the bridge together. Liol and Dahybi were lying on their acceleration couches, looking bored. Samuel was emerging from the hatchway.

"That was a long handover," Liol remarked waspishly.

"Can't you manage those yourself?" Joshua asked.

"You might have a Calvert body, but don't forget which of us has more experience."

"Not in all the relevant fields, you don't."

"I'm off watch," Dahybi announced loudly. His couch webbing peeled back, allowing him to swing his feet down onto the decking. "Sarha, you coming?"

Joshua and Liol grinned at each other. Joshua made a polite gesture towards the floor hatch, which Liol acknowledged with a gracious bow. "Thank you, Captain."

"While you're in the galley I could do with some breakfast," Joshua shouted after them. There was no reply. He and Samuel settled down on their acceleration couches. The Edenist was becoming a proficient systems officer, helping

the crew with their shifts, as had the other science team specialists travelling on board. Even Monica was chipping in.

Joshua accessed the flight computer. Trajectory graphics and status schematics overlaid the external sensor images. Space had become awesome.

Three light-years ahead, Mastrit-PJ poured a strong crimson light across the dull foam which coated the starship's fuselage. The Orion nebula veiled half of the starscape to galactic north of *Lady Mac*, a glorious three-dimensional tapestry of luminescent gas with a furiously turbulent surface composed from scarlet, green, and turquoise clouds clashing as rival oceans, their million-year antagonism throwing out energetic, chaotic spumes in all directions. Inside, it was knotted with proplyds, the glowing protoplanetary disks condensing out of the maelstrom. At the heart lay the Trapezium, the four hottest, massive stars, whose phenomenal ultraviolet output illuminated and energized the whole colossal expanse of interstellar gas.

Joshua had come to adore the infinitely varied topology of the nebula as they'd slowly flown out of Confederation space to soar around it. It was alive in a way no physical biology could match, its currents and molecular shoals a trillion times as complex as anything found in a hydrocarbon-based cell. The young, frantic stars which cluttered the interior were venting tremendous storms of ultra-hot gas, propagating shockwaves that travelled over a hundred and fifty thousand kilometres an hour. They would take the form of loops which curled and twisted sinuously, their frayed ends shimmering brightly as they fanned away the wild energy surging along their length.

For the crews in both *Lady Mac* and *Oenone*, watching the nebula had replaced all forms of recorded entertainment. Its majesty had lightened their mood considerably; theirs was now a true flight into history, no matter what the outcome.

Joshua and Syrinx had decided on flying around the galactic south of the nebula, an approximation of Tanjunctic-RI's flightpath. During the first stages they'd utilized observations from Confederation observatories to navigate around the quirky folds of cloud and glimmering prominences visible from human space, even though the images were over 1,500 years out of date. But after the first few days they were traversing space never glimpsed by human telescopes. Their speed slowed as they had to start scanning ahead for stars and dust clouds and parsec-wide cyclones of iridescent gas.

Long before Mastrit-PJ itself was visible, its light coloured the cooler outer strands of the nebula. The ships flew onwards with its thick red glow deepening around them. As soon as the star rose into full view 700 light-years ahead, parallax measurements enabled *Oenone* to calculate its position, enabling them to plot an accurate trajectory straight for it.

Now Joshua was piloting *Lady Mac* to her penultimate jump coordinate. Radar showed him *Oenone* 1,000 kilometres away, matching their half-gee acceleration. The burn was stronger than Adamist ships usually employed, but they hadn't been altering their delta-V much during the flight round the nebula, choosing to wait until they got a fix on Mastrit-PJ before matching velocity with the red giant.

"Burn rate is holding constant," Samuel said, after they'd run their diagnostic programs. "You have some quality drive tubes here, Joshua. We should have just under sixty per cent of our fusion fuel left when we jump in."

"Good enough for me. Let's hope we don't soak up too much delta-V searching for the redoubt. I want to hold all the antimatter in reserve for the Sleeping God."

"You are positive about the outcome, then?"

Joshua thought about the answer for a moment, mildly surprised by his own confidence. It was a pleasant contrast

to the disquiet he felt over Louise. Intuition, a tonic against conscience. "Yeah. Guess I am. That part of it, anyway."

The orange vector plot which the flight computer was datavisising into his neural nanonics showed him the jump coordinate was approaching. He started reducing their acceleration, datavisising a warning to the crew. Samuel began retracting the sensor booms and thermo-dump panels.

Lady Mac jumped first, covering two and a half light years. *Oenone* shot out of its wormhole terminus six seconds later, a healthy hundred and fifty kilometres away. Mastrit-PJ wasn't quite a disk, though its brilliant glare would make it hard for the naked eye to tell. From a mere half light-year distance its red light was sufficient to wash out the nebula and most of the stars.

"I've been hit by lasers with less power," Joshua muttered as the sensor filters cut in to deflect the rush of photons.

"It's only recently ended its expansion phase," Samuel said. "In astrological terms, this has only just happened."

"Stellar explosions are fast events. This happened fifteen thousand years ago, at least."

"Once the initial expansion occurs, there is a long period of adjustment within the photosphere as it stabilises. Either way, the overall energy output is most impressive. As far as this side of the galaxy is concerned, it outshines the nebula."

Joshua checked the neuroiconic displays. "No heat, and precious little radiation. Particle density is up on the norm, but then it's been fluctuating the whole time we've chased round the nebula." He datavisised the flight computer to establish a communication link with *Oenone*. "How are we doing with the final coordinate?"

"I was pleasingly correct with my earlier estimates," the voidhawk replied. "I should have the final figure ready for you in another five minutes."

"Fine." After their first sighting of Mastrit-PJ, Joshua had checked the figures which *Oenone* had supplied a couple of

times, out of interest rather than distrust. Each time they'd been better than any reading *Lady Mac's* technological sensors could provide. He didn't bother after that.

"We should be able to measure the photosphere boundary to within a thousand kilometres," Syrinx datavised. "Defining exactly where it ends and space begins is problematical. Theory has an effervescence zone measuring up to anything between five hundred to half a million kilometres thick."

"We'll stick to plan-A, then," Joshua datavised back.

"I think so. Everything's checked out as we expected so far. Kempster has activated every sensor we're carrying, recording it like flek memories are infinite. I expect he'll let us know if he and Renato spot any anomalies."

"Okay. In the meantime I'll plot an initial vector to leave *Lady Mac* with a neutral relative velocity. I can refine it when you've finished working out the coordinate." He suspected *Oenone* could supply him with the appropriate vector within milliseconds. But damn it, he had some pride.

Lady Mac's star trackers locked on to the new constellations they'd mapped. He brought his navigation programs into primary mode and began feeding in the raw data.

Joshua and Syrinx had decided on an interval of several hours before making the final jump to Mastrit-PJ. Partly it was due to their lack of knowledge on its real position and size. Once that was determined, they intended to emerge in the ecliptic plane, a safe distance above the top of the photosphere, with their velocity matched perfectly to the star's. It meant the only force acting on them would be the star's gravity, a tiny tide-like pull inwards. From that vantage point they would be able to scan space for a considerable distance. Logically, the remnants of the Tyrathca's redoubt civilization should be orbiting the star's equator. Possibly on a Pluto-type planet that had survived the explosion, or a large Oort-ring asteroid. Although the volume

of space was admittedly huge, by jumping in steady increments round Mastrit-PJ's equator they should eventually be able to find it.

Oenone would also spend the time to completely recharge its energy patterning cells from cosmic radiation, saving its fusion fuel. Not only would that prepare the voidhawk to carry out the search, it would then have the ability to withdraw across a considerable distance, matching *Lady Mac's* sequential jump facility should they unwittingly enter a hostile armed xenoc environment. That was an imaginative worst-case scenario dreamt up by Joshua, Ashly, Monica, Samuel, and (surprisingly) Ruben; which everyone else cheerfully told them verged on outright paranoia. As it turned out, they'd done quite a good job.

A star is a perpetual battleground of primal forces, principally those of heat and gravity which manifest themselves as expansion and contraction. At its core, a main-sequence star is a giant hydrogen fusion reaction, heating the rest of the mass sufficiently to counter gravitational contraction. However, fusion is only as finite as its fuel supply, while gravity is eternal.

After billions of years of steady luminescence, Mastrit-PJ exhausted the hydrogen atoms of its core, burning them into inert helium. Fusion energy production continued within a small shell of hydrogen wrapped around the central region. Temperature, pressure, and density all began to change as the envelope took over from the core as the principal source of heat. As the transformation of its internal structure progressed, so Mastrit-PJ left its original stable luminous sequence behind at an ever increasing rate. Its outer layers began to expand, heated by convection currents surging up from the growing fusion envelope. While on the inside of the envelope, the core continued its gravitational contraction

as a snow of helium atoms drifted downwards adding to its mass.

Masrit-PJ divided into two distinct and very different entities: the centre burning with renewed vigour as it continued its contraction, and the outer layers bloating out and cooling through the spectrum from white through yellow and into red. That was the epoch of stellar evolution from which the Tyrathca had fled. The expanding star inflated out to over four hundred times its original radius, eventually settling down with a diameter of one thousand six hundred and seventy million kilometres. It swept across the three inner planets, including the Tyrathca homeworld, and quickly devoured the two outer gas-giants. There was no exact line to show where the star ended and space began, instead the inflamed hydrogen thinned out into a thick solar wind which blew steadily out into the galaxy. However, for catalogue and navigational purposes, *Oenone* had defined Masrit-PJ's periphery at seven hundred and eighty million kilometres from its invisible core.

Lady Macbeth was the first to emerge, a respectable fifty million kilometres above the wispy radiant sea of dissolving particles. Normal space had ceased to exist, leaving the starship coasting between two parallel universes of light. On one side, the spectral eddies of the nebula jewelled with young stars; on the other, a flat, featureless desert of golden-hot photons.

Oenone emerged twenty kilometres from the dark Adamist ship.

"Contact locked," Joshua datavised in confirmation to Syrinx as their dish acquired *Oenone*'s short-range beacon. *Lady Mac*'s full complement of survey sensors were rising out of their fuselage recesses, along with the new systems which Kempster had requested. He could actually see a similar suite deploying from the pods riding in the voidhawk's lower fuselage cargo cradles.

"I see you," she replied. "Confirming no rocks or dust clouds in our immediate vicinity. We're starting the sensor sweep."

"Us too."

"How's your thermal profile?"

"Holding fine," Sarha replied when he consulted her. "It's hot out there, but not as bad as the approach to the antimatter station. Our dump panels can radiate it away faster than we're absorbing it. Wouldn't want you to fly us too much closer, though. And if you can give us a slow continuing roll manoeuvre, I'd be happy. It'll avoid any hot-spots building on the fuselage."

"Do my best," he told her. "Syrinx, we can cope. How about you?"

"Not a problem at this distance. The foam insulation is intact."

"Okay." He fired the starship's equatorial ion thrusters, initiating the slow barbecue-mode roll Sarha wanted.

The crew were all at their bridge stations, ready to cope with any contingency the red giant threw at them. Samuel and Monica were down in the main lounge in capsule B, sharing it with Alkad, Peter, and Oski, who were accessing the sensor data. *Oenone's* results were being delivered directly to Parker, Kempster, and Renato. Both ships were exchanging their data in real time, allowing the experts to review it simultaneously.

The image of local space built up quickly, charting the strong riot of particles flowing past the hull. Outside didn't quite qualify as a vacuum.

"Calmer than Jupiter's environment," Syrinx commented. "But just as dangerous."

"Not as much hard radiation as we predicted," Alkad said.

"The hydrogen bulk must be absorbing it before it reaches the surface."

Their optical and infrared sensors were performing slow

scans of space away from the red giant's surface. Analysis programs searched for shifting light-points which would indicate asteroids or moonlet-sized bodies, even a planet. *Oenone's* distortion field could find little local mass bending space-time's uniformity. The brawny solar wind seemed to have blown everything away. Of course, they were looking at less than one per cent of the equatorial orbit track.

The first result came from a simple microwave frequency sensor that picked up an unidentified pulse lasting less than a second. It was coming from somewhere closer to the surface.

"Kempster?" Oski datavised. "Is there any way a red giant could emit microwaves?"

"Not with any of our current theories," the surprised astronomer replied.

"Captain, can we take a closer look at the source, please?"

On the bridge, Joshua gave Dahybi a warning look. Intuition fluttered his heart. "Node status?"

"We can jump clear, Captain," Dahybi said quietly.

"Liol, keep monitoring our electronic warfare detectors, please. I want to play this very safe indeed."

The flight computer reported the sensors had picked up another microwave pulse.

"That's very similar to radar," Beaulieu said. "But not a recognizable Confederation signature. It's nothing like the Tyrathca ships used, either."

"Oski, I'm switching our sensor focus area for you now," Joshua said.

Both passive and active sensor clusters rotated on the end of their booms to study the direction from which the pulse had come. The flight computer assembled their results into a generalized neuroiconic image in accordance with its governing graphic-generation programs, approximating the physical structure which the image enhancement subroutine

was delivering and combining it with a thermal and electromagnetic profile.

“Remind me again,” Sarha said in a subdued breath. “In our expert team’s professional opinion, we’re here for an aeons-dead civilization whose relics are going to be extremely difficult to find. That’s what you sold us, wasn’t it?”

The most powerful telescopes *Oenone* and *Lady Mac* carried were quickly aligned on the structure which the sensor clusters had located, amplifying and clarifying the first low-resolution image. Orbiting twenty million kilometres ahead of the starships, a city was flying unperturbably above the slow-churning blooms of the convection currents which contoured the red giant’s surface. Spectrography confirmed the presence of silicates, carbon compounds, light metals, and water. Microwaves buzzed across its turrets. Butterfly wing magnetic fields flapped in a steady heartbeat. A forest of rapier spines rose from its darkside, gleaming at the top of the infrared spectrum as they radiated away its colossal thermal load.

It was five thousand kilometres in diameter.

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Quinn used simple timing rather than risk sending his orders out through London's communication net. No matter how innocuous the message, there was always a chance the supercops would pick up the chain. Even though they thought they'd eliminated him in the Parsonage Heights strike, they would be watching for signs of other possessed in the arcology. Standard procedure. Quinn would have done the same in their place. However, their paranoia had been quenched amid the flames and death engulfing the tower's penthouse. With that came a slight relaxation of effort, falling back to established routine rather than determined proactive searches. It gave him the interlude he desired.

By necessity, London was now destined to be the capital of His empire on Earth. Such honour would be visited upon the ancient city and its outlying domes only by using possessed as disciples to deliver His doctrine. But there were inherent problems recruiting them. Even they were reluctant to follow the gospel of God's Brother to its exacting, painful letter. As he'd learned on Jesup, violent coercion was often required to obtain the wholehearted cooperation of non-sect members. Even Quinn was limited in the number of people

he could intimidate at once. And without that strict adherence to His cause, the possessed would do what they always did and snatch this world from the universe. Quinn couldn't allow that, so he'd adopted a more tactical strategy, borrowing heavily from Capone's example, exploiting the hostility and avarice most possessed exhibited on their return to the universe.

The possessed from the Lancini had been carefully and stealthily scattered throughout the arcology and provided with very detailed instructions. Speed was the key. Come the appointed hour, each one would enter a preselected building and open the night staff to possession. When the day workers arrived, they would be possessed one by one, jumping the numbers up considerably but stopping short of exponential expansion. Quinn wanted about 15,000 by ten o'clock in the morning.

After that had been achieved, they would surge out of their buildings and physically disperse across the arcology. By then, there would be little the authorities could do. It took an average of five to ten well-armed police officers to eliminate one possessed. Even if they could track them via electronic glitches, they simply didn't have the manpower available to deal with them. Quinn was gambling that Gov-central wouldn't use 15,000 SD strikes against London. The rest of the population would be his hostages.

While that was going on, Quinn himself would be establishing a core of loyalists who would venture forth to exert a little discipline: again, a hierarchy based on the Organization. The newly emerged possessed would be taught that they had to maintain the status quo, and encouraged to target the police and local government personnel—anyone who could organize resistance. A second stage would see them shutting down the transport routes, then going on to seize power, water, and food production centres. A hundred new

fiefdoms would emerge, whose only obligation was obedience and tribute to the new Messiah.

With his empire founded, Quinn intended to put the non-possessed technicians to work on secure methods of transport that would enable him to carry the crusade of God's Brother to fresh arcologies. Eventually, they would gain access to the O'Neill Halo. From there, it was only a matter of time until His Night fell across this whole section of the galaxy.

The night after the Parsonage Heights incident, patrol constables Appleton and Moyles were cruising their usual route in central Westminster. It was quiet at two o'clock in the morning when their car passed the old Houses of Parliament and turned down Victoria Street. There were few pedestrians to be seen walking along outside the blank glass facades of the government agency office buildings which transformed the start of the street into a deep canyon. The constables were used to that; this was a bureaucrat district after all, with few residents or nightlife to attract anyone after the shops and offices closed.

A body fell silently out of the black sky above the lighting arches to smash into the road thirty metres ahead of Appleton and Moyles. The patrol car's controlling processor automatically reversed power to the wheel hub motors, and turned the vehicle sharply to the right. They braked to a halt almost directly beside the battered body. Blood was flowing out of the jump-suit's sleeves and trouser legs to spread in big puddles across the carbon-concrete surface.

Appleton datavised a priority alert to his precinct station, requesting back-up; while Moyles ordered Victoria Street's route and flow processors to divert all traffic away from them. They emerged from the patrol car with their static-bullet carbines held ready, holding position behind the armoured doors. Retinal implants scanned round in all spec-

trums, motion detector programs in primary mode. There was nobody on the pavements within a hundred metres. No immediate ambush potential.

Cautiously, they started scanning the sheer cliffs of glass and concrete on either side, hunting for the open window from which the body had come. There wasn't one.

"The roof?" Appleton asked nervously. His carbine was swinging about in a wide arc as he tried to cover half the arcology.

The precinct station duty officers were already accessing the Westminster Dome's sensor grid, looking down from the geodesic structure to see the two officers crouched down beside their car. Nobody was on the roofs of the buildings flanking the road.

"Is he dead?" Moyles yelled.

Appleton licked his lips as he weighed up the risks of leaving the cover of the door to dash over to the body. "I think so." Assessing severely battered and bloody flesh it was an old bloke, really old. There was no movement, no breathing. His enhanced senses couldn't detect a heartbeat, either. Then he saw the deep scorch marks branding the corpse's chest. "Oh bloody hell!"

The civil engineering crew had repaired the hole in the Westminster Dome with commendable speed. A small fleet of crawler pods had traversed the vast crystal edifice, winching a replacement segment along with them. Removing the old hexagon and sealing the new segment into place had taken twelve hours. Molecular bonding generator tests were initiated, making sure it was now firmly integrated with the rest of the dome's powered weather defences.

Checking the superstrength carbon lattice girders and beefing up suspect strands of the geodesic structure was still going on as darkness fell; work continued under the pods' floodlights.

Far below them, the clearing up of Parsonage Heights tower was an altogether messier affair. Fire service mechanoids had extinguished the flames in the shattered stub of the octagonal tower. Paramedic crews hauled the injured out of the remaining seven towers of the development project that had been bombarded with a blizzard of shattered glass and lethal debris. Smaller fires had broken out on the two skyscrapers next to the one hit by the SD strike. Council surveyors had spent most of the day examining the damaged buildings to see if they could be salvaged.

There was no doubt that the remnants of the tower struck by the X-ray laser would have to be demolished. The remaining eight floors were dangerously weak; metal reinforcement rods had melted to run out of the carbon-concrete slabs like jam from a doughnut. It was the local coroner's staff who went in there after the fire mechanoids were pulled back and the walls had cooled down. The bodies they recovered were completely baked by the X-ray blast.

It was London's biggest spectator event, drawing huge crowds which spilled over into the open market and surrounding streets. Civilians mingled with rover reporters, gawping at the destruction and the knot of activity on the dome high above. It was the crawler pods which proved that some kind of SD weapon had been used, despite the original denials of the local police chief. By early morning a grudging admission had come from the mayor's office that the police had suspected a possessed to be holed up in the Parsonage Heights tower. When pressed how a possessed had infiltrated London, the aide pointed out that a sect chapel was established in the warehouse below the tower. The acolytes, she assured reporters, were now all under arrest. Those that had survived.

Londoners grew jittery as more facts were prised out of various Govcentral offices over the long morning and afternoon, a lot of the information contradictory. Several lawyers

acting for relatives of the tower's vaporized residents lodged writs against the police for the use of extremely excessive force and accused the Police Commissioner of negligence in not attempting an evacuation first. Absenteeism all over the arcology grew steadily worse during the day. Productivity and retail sales hit an all-time low, with the exception of food stores. Managers reported people were stocking up on sachets and frozen meat bricks.

All the while, images of the broken tower with its blackened, distended, mildly radioactive fangs of carbon-concrete were pushed out by the news companies. Bodybags being carried over the rubble remained the grim background for everybody's day, talked over by new anchors and their specialist comment guests.

A police forensic team was sent in with the coroner's staff. Their orders weren't terribly precise, just to search for anomalies. They were backed up by three experts from the local GISD office, who managed to remain anonymous amid everyone else poking round the restricted area.

The crowd went home before nightfall, leaving just a simple police cordon, patrolled by officers who fervently wished they'd drawn a different duty that evening.

A preliminary forensic report was compiled before midnight by the GISD experts, who had been following their police colleagues' tests and analyses. It contained nothing of the remotest relevance to Banneth or Quinn Dexter.

"One was just going through the motions anyway," Western Europe told Halo and North America after he'd accessed the report. "Although I'd dearly like to know how Dexter pulled that invisibility stunt."

"I think we should just count ourselves fortunate that none of the other possessed seem capable of it," Halo said.

"That SD strike has caused quite a stir," North America said. "The honourable senators are demanding to know who gave SD command the authority to fire on Earth. Trouble is,

this time the President's office is screaming for the same answer. They may try to launch a commission of inquiry. If the executive and the representatives both want it, we might have trouble blocking them."

"Then don't," Western Europe said. "I'm sure we can appoint someone appropriate to chair it. Come on, I shouldn't have to explain basic cover-your-arses procedure. That strike request is logged from the Mayor's civil defence bureau to SD command. It was a legitimate request. Senior Govcentral officers have the right to call for back up from Earth's military forces in emergency. It's in the constitution."

"SD Command should have requested fire authority from the President," Halo said bluntly. "The fact they can actually fire on Earth without the appropriate political authorization has raised a few eyebrows."

"South Pacific isn't stirring this, is she?" Western Europe asked sharply.

"No. Frankly, she has as much to lose as the rest of us. The current Presidential defence advisor is hers; he's doing a good job in damage limitation."

"Let's hope it's sufficient. I'd hate to pull the plug on the President right now. People are looking for leadership stability to get them through this."

"We'll ensure the news agencies will mute the story however loud the senators shout," Halo said. "Shouldn't be a problem."

"Jolly good," Western Europe said. "That just leaves us with the problem of the ordinary possessed."

"New York's a mess," North America admitted glumly. "The remaining non-possessed citizens are defending themselves, but I expect they'll lose eventually."

"We'll have to call another full B7 meeting," Western Europe concluded without enthusiasm. "Decide what we're going to do in that eventuality. I for one have no intention of

being carried off to this realm where the other planets have vanished to.”

“I’m not sure we’ll get a full turnout,” Halo said. “South Pacific and her allies are pretty pissed with you.”

“They’ll come round,” Western Europe said confidently.

He never did get a chance to find out if he was right. London’s deputy Police Commissioner datavised him at quarter past two with the news of the body in Victoria Street.

“There’s was no identification on the old boy,” the deputy commissioner reported. “So the constables took a DNA sample. According to our files, it’s Paul Jerrold.”

“I know the name,” Western Europe said. “He was quite wealthy. You’re sure the burn marks were caused by white fire?”

“They match the configuration. We’ll know for sure when the forensic team gets there.”

“Okay, thank you for informing me.”

“There’s something else. Paul Jerrold was a zero-tau refugee. He transferred his holdings to a long-term trust and went into stasis last week.”

“Shit.” Western Europe sent a fast inquiry into his AI, which ran an immediate search. Paul Jerrold had entrusted himself to Perpetuity Inc., one of many recently formed companies specialising in providing zero-tau for the elderly wealthy. The AI’s review of the company’s memory core established Jerrold had been sent to an old department store called Lancini which Perpetuity Inc. was renting until more suitable premises could be built.

Under Western Europe’s direction, the AI shifted its attention to the department store, reactivating ancient security sensors on every floor. Hall after hall filled with bulky zero-tau pods jumped into blue-haze focus. The AI switched to the only scene of activity. Perpetuity Inc. had set up a monitor centre in the manager’s old office; a couple of night-shift technicians were sitting by their desks, drinking tea and

keeping an eye on an AV projector squirting out a news show.

“Datavise them,” Western Europe ordered the deputy commissioner. “Tell them to switch off Paul Jerrold’s pod and see who’s in there.”

It took a short argument before the technicians agreed to do as they were asked. Western Europe waited impatiently as the ancient cage lift creaked it way up to the fourth floor and they walked over to the Horticulture section. One of them switched the pod off. There was no one inside.

Thoroughly unnerved, they now did exactly as they were told, and went along the row of zero-tau pods switching them off. All of them were empty.

“Clever,” Western Europe acknowledged bitterly. “Who’s going to notice they were missing?”

“What do you want to do?” the deputy commissioner asked.

“We have to assume the zero-tau refugees have been possessed. There are four hundred pods in the Lancini; so get some of your officers in there immediately, find out exactly how many people have been taken. Next, seal off London’s domes and shut down all the internal transport systems. I’ll have the Mayor’s office declare an official civil curfew has been enacted. We might have got lucky; it’s two-thirty, ninety-five per cent of the population will be at home, especially after today’s frights. If we can keep them there, then we can prevent the possessed from spreading.”

“Patrol cars are on their way.”

“I also want every duty forensic team in the arcology shifted over there now. You’ve got thirty minutes to get them inside. Have them examine every room which looks like someone’s been inside recently. Staff rooms, store rooms, the kind of locations where there aren’t any security sensors. They’re to search for human traces. Every piece they find is to be DNA tested.”

There were other orders. Tactical preparation. All police and security personnel were woken and called in, ready to be deployed against the possessed. Hospitals were put on amber status three, preparing for heavy casualties. The arcology's utility stations were put under guard, their technicians billeted in nearby police stations. GISD members were put on standby.

As soon as the administration was underway, orchestrated by the mayor's civil defence bureau but actually run by B7's AI, Western Europe called his colleagues. They appeared slowly and grudgingly in the sensenviron conference room. North and South Pacific were the last to show.

"Trouble," Western Europe told them. "It looks like Dexter managed to take over nearly four hundred people while he was here."

"Without you knowing?" an incredulous Central America asked. "What about the AI search programs?"

"He snatched them from zero-tau pods," Western Europe said. "You should check the companies offering people stasis in your own arcologies. It was a blind spot."

"Obvious with hindsight," North America said.

"Trust Dexter to find it," Asian Pacific said. "He does seem to have an unnervingly direct talent to find our weaknesses."

"Not any more," Halo said.

"I really hope so," Western Europe said. It was the first sign of hesitancy he'd ever shown. The others were actually shocked into silence.

"You hit him with a Strategic Defence X-ray laser!" Eastern Europe said. "He couldn't survive that."

"I'm hoping the forensic tests at the Lancini will confirm that. In the meantime, we've reactivated his psychological profile simulation to determine what he was hoping to achieve with these new possessed. The fact that they've been dispersed, indicates some kind of attempted coup. Let-

ting the possessed run wild doesn't help him. Remember, Dexter wants to conquer humanity on behalf of his Light Bringer. It's likely he wanted control over a functioning arcology, which he could then use as a base to further his ambitions."

"Question," Southern Africa said. "You said Paul Jerrold was a victim of white fire. That indicates he wasn't a possessed."

"This is where it gets interesting," Western Europe said. "Assume Jerrold was possessed, and Dexter sent him out with all the others from the Lancini. They spread out over London, and start possessing new recruits for the cause. One of those new arrivals is our ally from Edmonton, the friend of Carter McBride."

"Shit, you think so?"

"Absolutely. He overpowers Paul Jerrold's possessor, and gives us a warning impossible to ignore. Apparently those two constables nearly had a heart attack when the corpse landed in front of their patrol car. Do you see? He's telling us that the possessed are active, and letting us know where they came from. Dexter's entire operation was exposed by that single act."

"Can you stop them?"

"I think so. We were given enough advance notice. If we can prevent the arcology's population from congregating, then the possessed will have to move themselves. Movement exposes them, makes them vulnerable."

"I don't know," East Asia said. "Put one possessed into a residential block, and they don't have to move about much to possess everybody in there with them."

"We'll see it happening," Western Europe said. "If they bunch together in that kind of density they won't be able to disguise their glitch-effect from the AI."

"So you see it happening," South Pacific said. "So what? No police team will be able to pacify a block filled with two

or three thousand possessed. And it won't be just one block, you said there were hundreds of people missing from the Lancini. If you have a hundred residential blocks taken over, you will not be able to contain them. B7 certainly cannot independently order a hundred SD strikes, not after Parsonage Heights."

"We're right back to our original problem," Southern America said. "Do we exterminate an entire arcology to prevent the Earth being stolen from us?"

"No," Western Europe said. "We do not. That's not what we exist for. We are a police and security force, not megalomaniacs. If it looks like there is a runaway possession effect in one of the arcologies, then we have lost. We accept that loss with as much grace as we can muster and retreat from this world. I will not be a party to genocidal slaughter. I thought you all realized that by now."

"Dexter beat you," Southern Pacific said. "And the prize was our planet."

"I can contain four hundred possessed in London," Western Europe said. "I can contain four thousand. I might even manage fifteen thousand, though it will be bloody. Without Dexter they are just a rabble. If he's still alive, he will assume control, and Earth will not be lost. He will not permit that to happen. It's not London we have to worry about."

"You don't know anything," South Pacific said. "You can't do anything. All any of us can do now is watch. And pray that the Confederation Navy anti-memory can be made to work. That's what you've reduced us to. You think I'm stubborn and cold blooded. Well, I choose that over your monstrous arrogance every time." Her image vanished.

The other supervisors followed her until only North America and Halo were left.

"The bitch has a point," North America said. "There's not an awful lot left for us to do here. Even if you're successful with London, it'll be Paris, New York, and the others which

drag us down. They're a lot further along the road to total possession. God damn, I'm going to hate leaving."

"I didn't tell our fraternal colleagues everything," Western Europe said calmly. "Thirty-eight of the people missing from the Lancini only arrived there yesterday, after the Parsonage Heights strike. In other words, the plot to snatch and possess them was still operating up until about nine hours ago. And we know it's Dexter's operation; the friend of Carter McBride made that quite clear when he delivered Jarrold."

"Holy shit; he's still alive," Halo exclaimed. "Good God, you hit him with an SD weapon, absolute ground zero. And he survived. What the hell is he?"

"Smart and tough."

"Now what do we do?" Northern America asked.

"I play my ace," Western Europe said.

"You have one?"

"I always have one."

The terrible, tragic cries were still faint. Quinn pushed himself deeper into the ghost realm than he had ever done before, so much so he had reduced himself to little more than the existence-impooverished ghosts themselves. He flung his mind open, listening to the ephemeral wailing that came from somewhere still further away from the real universe. The first ones he'd sensed were human, but now he was closer he thought there were others. A kind he didn't recognize.

These were nothing like the woeful pleas that issued forth from the beyond. These were different. A torment more refined, so much graver.

Strange to think that somewhere could be worse than the beyond. But then the beyond was only purgatory. God's Brother lived in an altogether darker place. Quinn's heart lifted to think he might be hearing the first stirrings of the

true Lord as He rose to lead His army of the damned against the bright angels. A thousand times that long night, Quinn called out in welcome to the entities whose cries he experienced, flinging all his power behind the silent voice. Yearning for an answer.

None was granted.

It didn't matter. He had been shown what was. Dreams laid siege to the furthest limits of his mind while he floated within the ghost realm. Darkling shapes locked together in anguish, a war which had lasted since the time of creation. He couldn't see what they were, like all dreams they danced away from memory's focus. Not human. He was sure of that now.

Warriors of the Night. Demons.

Elusive. For this moment.

Quinn gathered his thoughts and returned to the real world. Courtney yawned and blinked rapidly as Quinn's toe nudged her awake. She smiled up at her dark master, uncurling off the cold flagstones.

"It's time," he said.

The possessed disciples he had chosen stood in a silent rank, waiting obediently for their instructions. All around them, the ghosts of this place howled their anger at Quinn's desecration, bolder than any he had encountered before, but still helpless before his might.

Billy-Joe came ambling along the aisle, scratching himself with primate proficiency. "It's fucking quiet outside, Quinn. Some kind of weird shit going down."

"Let's go and see, shall we?" Quinn went out into the hated dawn.

The curfew announcement was glowing on the desktop block's screen when Louise and Genevieve woke. Louise read it twice, then datavised the room's net processor for confirmation. A long file of restrictions was waiting for her,

officially informing her that the mayor had temporarily suspended her rights of travel and free association.

Gen pressed into her side. "Are they here, Louise?" she asked mournfully.

"I don't know." She cuddled her little sister. "That Parsonage Heights explosion was very suspicious. I suppose the authorities are worried some of them escaped."

"It's not Dexter, is it?"

"No, of course not. The police got him in Edmonton."

"You don't know that!"

"No, not for certain. But I do think it's very unlikely he's here."

Breakfast was one of the few things which the curfew didn't prohibit. When they arrived at the restaurant, the hotel's assistant manager greeted them in person at the door and apologised profusely for the reduction in service, but assured them that the remaining staff would do their utmost to carry on as normal. He also said that regretfully, the doors onto the street had been locked to comply with the curfew edict, and told them the police were being very strict with anyone they found outside.

Only a dozen tables were occupied. In fearful exaggeration of the curfew order, none of the residents were talking to each other. Louise and Genevieve ate their corn chips and scrambled eggs in a subdued silence, then went back upstairs. They put a news show on the holographic screen, listening to the anchor woman's sombre comments as they looked out over Green Park. Flocks of brightly coloured birds were walking along the paths, pecking at the stone slabs as if in puzzlement as to where all the humans had gone. Every now and then, the girls saw a police car flash silently along Piccadilly and travel up the ramp onto the raised expressway circling the heart of the old city.

Genevieve got bored very quickly. Louise sat on the bed watching the news show. Rover reporters were stationed at

various vantage-point windows across the arcology, relaying similar views of the deserted streets and squares. The Mayor's office, ever mindful of its public relations dependency, had granted some reporters a licence to accompany constables in patrol cars. They faithfully delivered scenes of constables chasing groups of shifty youths off the streets where they were hanging in spirited defiance of authority. An unending number of senior Govcentral spokespersons offered themselves up for interview, reassuring the audience that the curfew was a precaution indicative of the mayor's strong leadership and his determination London should not become another New York. So please, just cooperate and we'll have this all sorted out by the end of the week.

Louise turned it off in disgust. There was still no message from Joshua.

Genevieve laced on her slipstream boots and went down to the lobby to practice her slalom techniques. Louise went with her, helping to set up a line of Coke cartons along the polished marble.

The little girl was half way down her run, and pumping her legs hard, when the main revolving door started moving, allowing Ivanov Robson into the lobby. She squeaked in surprise, losing all concentration. Her legs shot from under her, sending her on another painful tumble against the marble. Momentum kept skidding her right up to Robson's shoes. She bumped up against him.

"Ouch." She rubbed her knee and her shoulder.

"If you're going to do that, you should at least wear the right protective sports kit," Robson said. He put a big hand down and pulled her upright.

Genevieve's feet began to slide apart; she hurriedly double clicked her right heel before she made another undignified tumble.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped.

He glanced at the receptionist. "I've been asked to collect the pair of you."

Louise glanced through the glass panes of the revolving door. There was a police car parked outside, its windows opaqued. Private detectives couldn't acquire official transport during a curfew, no matter how well placed the contacts they claimed to have. "By whom?" she enquired lightly.

"Someone in authority."

She didn't feel in the least bit perturbed by this development. Quite the contrary, this was probably the first time he was being completely honest with them. "Are we under arrest?"

"Absolutely not."

"And if we refuse?"

"Please don't."

Louise put an arm round Gen. "All right. Where are we going exactly?"

Ivanov Robson grinned spryly. "I have absolutely no idea. I'm rather looking forward to finding out myself." He accompanied them back up to their room, urging them to pack everything as quickly as possible. The doorman and a couple of night porters picked up all their bags and struggled downstairs with them.

Robson settled their account with the receptionist, brushing aside Louise's half-hearted protests. Then they were out through the revolving door and into the back of the police car, their bags being placed in the boot.

"This is very comfy," Louise said as Robson climbed in and took a seat opposite them. The interior was more like a luxury limousine, with thick leather seats, air conditioning, and one-way glass. She half-expected a cocktail bar.

"Not quite your standard arrest wagon, no," he agreed.

They accelerated along Piccadilly and curved smoothly up onto the circular express route. Louise could see all the

hologram adverts glimmering over the empty streets below, the only visible movement in the arcology.

The car shot along the web of elevated roads threaded round the skyscrapers, and she imagined millions of pairs of eyes behind the blank glass facades looking out to see them flash past. People would wonder what they were doing, if they were rushing to contain an outbreak of possession. There was no other reason for the police to be active. Not even the mayor himself was allowed out of 10 Downing Street, as his press office had been keen to point out a hundred times that morning.

Curiosity was becoming a very strong force in Louise's head. She was keen to meet the person who had summoned them. There had obviously been so much going on around her of which she was totally ignorant. It would be nice to have an explanation. Even so, she couldn't for the life of her work out why anyone so powerful would want to see her and Gen.

Her hope that all would be quickly revealed was doused as the police car took a ramp down to the base of the rim and drove straight into an eight-lane motorway tunnel. A huge set of doors rumbled shut behind the car, sealing them in. Then there was nothing but the carbon-concrete walls lit by glareless blue-white lights. More than the arcology, the broad deserted motorway gave her the greatest impression of the curfew and the sense of fear powering London's residents into obedience.

Some unknown distance later, they turned off the motorway into a smaller tunnel road, leading down to the subterranean industrial precincts. The car delivered them to a huge underground garage with the style of arching roof more suited to a train station in the age of steam. Long rows of grubby heavy-duty surface vehicles stood unattended in their parking bays. The police car drove along until they came to the end bay, containing a Volkswagen Trooperbus.

Two technicians and three mechanoids were fussing round the big vehicle, getting it ready for its trip.

The car door slid open, sending in a wave of hot humid air that reeked of fungal growth. Holding her nose in exaggerated disdain, Genevieve followed Robson and her sister out to look at the vehicle. The Trooperbus had six double wheels along each side, one and a half metres in diameter with tread cracks deep enough to hold Genevieve's hand. A heavy retractable track bogie was folded up against its rear, capable of pushing it out of quagmires which came up over the wheel axles. Its dirty olive-green body resembled a flat-bottomed boat hull, with small oblong windows set along the side, and two large angled windscreens at the front. All the thick glass was tinted a deep purple. With its steel and titanium armour bodywork it weighed thirty-six tonnes, making it virtually impossible for an Armada Storm to flip it over. Just to make sure, there were six ground securement cannons, which could fire long tethered harpoons into the earth for added stability in case it was ever caught outside in rough weather.

Genevieve slowly looked along the length of the brutish mud-splattered machine. "We're going outside?" she asked in surprise.

"Looks that way," Robson replied cheerfully.

One of the mechanoids was directed to unload the sisters' department-store bags, transferring them to a locker on the side of the Trooperbus. A technicians showed them the hatchway.

The main cabin of the Trooperbus was designed to hold forty passengers; this one was fitted with ten very comfortable leather upholstered swivel chairs. There was a toilet and small galley at the back, and a three-seat cab at the front. Their driver introduced himself as Yves Gaynes.

"No stewardess on this trip," he said, "So just have a rum-

mage round in the lockers if you need anything to eat or drink. We're well stocked."

"How long is this going to take?" Louise asked.

"Should be there for afternoon tea."

"Where exactly?"

He winked. "Classified."

"Can we watch out of the front?" Genevive asked. "I'd love to see what Earth's really like."

"Sure you can." He gestured her forward, and she scrambled up into the cab.

Louise glanced at Robson. "Go ahead," he told her. "I've been outside before." She joined Gen in the spare seat.

Yves Gaynes sat in front of his own console and initiated the startup routine. The hatch closed, and the air filters cycled up. Louise let out a sigh as the air cooled, draining out the moisture and smell. The Trooperbus rolled forwards. At the far end of the garage, a slab of wall began to slide upwards, revealing a long carbon-concrete ramp saturated in sunlight bright enough to make Louise squint despite the heavily shielded glass.

London didn't end along the perimeter of its nine outer domes. The arcology itself was principally devoted to residential and commercial zones; while the industries sited inside were focused chiefly towards software, design, and light manufacturing. Heavy industry was spread around outside the domes in underground shelters ten kilometres long, with their own foundries, chemical refineries, and recycling plants. Also infesting the dome walls like concrete molluscs were environmental stations, providing power, water, and cool filtered air to the inhabitants. But dominating the area directly outside were the food factories. Hundreds of square kilometres were given over to the synthesis machinery capable of producing proteins and carbohydrates and vitamins, blending them together in a million different textural combi-

nations that somehow never quite managed to taste the same as natural crops. They supplied the food for the entire arcolony, siphoning in the raw chemicals from the sea, and the sewage, and the air to manipulate and process into neat sachets and cartons. Rich people could afford imported delicacies, but even their staple diet was produced right alongside the burger paste and potato granules of the hoi polloi.

It took the Trooperbus forty minutes to clear the last of the vast, half-buried carbon-concrete buildings full of organic synthesisers and meat clone vats. Strictly rectangular mounds, sprouting fat heat exchange towers, gave way to the natural rolling topology of the land. The sisters stared out eagerly at the emerald expanse unfurling around them. Louise was struck by growing disappointment, she'd expected something more dynamic. Even Norfolk had more impressive scenery. The only activity here came from the long streaks of bruised cloud fleeing across the brilliant cobalt sky. Occasional large raindrops detonated across the windscreen with a dull *pap*.

They drove along a road made from some kind of dark mesh which blades of grass had risen through to weave together. The same vivid-green plant covered every square inch of land.

"Aren't there any trees?" Louise asked. It looked as though they were driving through a bright verdant desert. Even small irregular lumps she took to be boulders were covered by the plant.

"No, not any more," Yves Gaynes said. "This is just about the only vegetation left on the planet, the old green grass of home. It's tapegrass, kind of a cross between grass and moss, geneered with a root network that's the toughest, thickest tangle of fronds you'll ever see. I've broken a spade before now, trying to dig through the stuff. It goes down over sixty centimetres. But we've got to grow it. Nothing else can stop soil erosion on the same scale. You should see

the floods we get after a storm, every crease in the ground turns into a stream. If they'd had this on Mortonridge it would have been a different story, I'll tell you."

"Can you eat it?" Genevieve asked.

"No. The people who sequenced it were in too big a rush to produce something that would just do the job to build in refinements like that. They just concentrated on making it incredibly tough, biologically speaking. It can withstand as much ultraviolet as the sun can throw at it, and there's not a disease which can touch it. So now it's too late to change. You can't replace it with a new variety, because it's everywhere. Half a centimetre of soil is enough to support it. Only rock cliffs defeat it, and we've got limpet fungi for them."

Genevieve puckered her lips up and pressed herself up against the windscreen. "What about animals? Are there any left?"

"Nobody's really sure. I've seen things moving round out there, but not close, so it could just be knots of dead tapegrass blowing about. There's supposed to be families of rabbits living in big warrens along some of the flood-free valleys. Friends of mine say they've seen them, other drivers. I don't know how, the ultraviolet ought to burn out their eyes out and give them cancer. Maybe there's some species that developed resistance; they certainly breed fast enough for it to evolve, and they always were tough buggers. Then there's people say pumas and foxes are still about, feeding on the rabbits. And I'll bet rats survived outside the domes if anything has."

"Why do you come out here at all?" Louise asked.

"Maintenance crews do plenty of work on the vac-train tubes. Then there's the ecology teams, they come out to repair the worst aspects of erosion: replant tapegrass and restore river banks that get washed away, that kind of thing."

"Why bother?"

"The arcologies are still expanding, even with all the em-

igration. There's talk of building two more domes for London this century. And Birmingham and Glasgow are getting crowded again. We've got to look after our land, especially the soil; if we didn't, it would just wash away into the sea and we'd be left with continents that were nothing more than plateaus of rock. This world's suffered enough damage already, imagine what the oceans would be like if you allowed all that soil to pollute them. It's only the oceans which keep us alive now. So I suppose it boils down to self-interest, really. At least that means we'll never stop guarding the land. That's got to be a good result."

"You like it out here, don't you?" Louise asked.

Yves Gaynes gave her a happy smile. "I love it."

They drove on through the wrecked land, sealed under its precious, protective living cloak. Louise found it almost depressingly barren. The tapegrass, she imagined, was like a vast sheet of sterile packaging, preserving the pristine fields and spinnies which slept below. She longed for something to break its uniformity, some sign of the old foliage bursting out from hibernation and filling the land with colour and variety once more. What she wouldn't give for the sight of a single cedar standing proud; one sign of resistance offered against this passive surrender to the unnatural elements. Earth with all its miracles and its wealth ought to be able to do better than this.

They drove steadily northwards, rising out of the Thames valley. Yves Gaynes pointed out old towns and villages, the walls of their buildings now nothing more than stiff lumps drowned under tapegrass, names decaying to waypoints loaded into the Trooperbus's guidance block. The Trooperbus had left the simple mesh road behind a long time ago when Louise went back into the main cabin to heat some sachets for lunch. They were driving directly across the tapegrass now, big wheels crushing it to pulp, leaving two dark green tracks behind them. Outside, the land was becoming

progressively more rugged, with deepening valleys, and hills sporting bare rock crowns clawed by talons of grey-green lichen and ochre fungus. Gullies carried silver streams of gently steaming water, while lakes rested in every depression.

"Here we are," Yves Gaynes sang out, four hours after they left London.

Ivanov Robson squeezed his bulk into the cab behind the sisters, staring ahead with an eagerness to match theirs. A plain geodesic crystal dome rose out of the land, about five miles wide, Louise guessed; its rim contoured around the slopes and vales it straddled. The dome itself was grey, as if it was filled with thick fog.

"What's it called?" Genevieve asked.

"Agronomy research facility seven," Yves Gaynes replied, straightfaced.

Genevieve responded with a sharp look, but didn't challenge him.

A door swung open at the base of the dome to admit the Trooperbus. Once the door closed, a red fungicide spray shot out from all sides to wash away mud and possible spores from the vehicle's body and wheels. They rolled forward into a small garage, and the hatch popped open.

"Time to meet the boss," Ivanov Robson said. He led the two girls out into the garage. The air was cooler than inside the Trooperbus and the Westminster Dome, Louise thought. She was wearing only a simple navy-blue dress with short sleeves. Not that it was cold, more like a fresh spring day.

Ivanov beckoned them forwards. Genevieve double clicked her heel, and glided along at his side. There was a small four-seater jeep waiting, with a red and white striped awning and a steering wheel. The first one Louise had seen on this planet. It made her feel more comfortable when Ivanov sat behind it. She and Gen took the rear seats, and they started off.

“I thought you didn’t know this place,” Louise said.

“I don’t. I’m being guided.”

Louise datavisited a net processor access request, but got no response. Ivanov drove them into a curving concrete tunnel a couple of hundred yards long, then they were abruptly out in full sunlight. Gen gasped in delight. The agronomy research dome covered a patch of countryside which was the England they knew from history books: green meadows flecked with buttercups and daisies, rambling hawthorn hedges enclosing shaggy paddocks, small woods of ash, pine, and silver birch lying along gentle valleys, giant horse chestnuts and beeches dotted across acres of parkland. Horses were grazing contentedly in the paddocks, while ducks and pink flamingos amused themselves in a lake with a skirt of mauve and white water lilies. In the centre was a sprawling country house that made Cricklade seem gaudy and pretentious in comparison. Three-storey orange brick walls were held together by thick black oak beams in traditional Tudor diagonals, though they were hard to see under the mass of topaz and scarlet climbing roses. Windows of tiny leaded glass diamonds were thrown wide to let the lazy air circulate through the rooms. Stone paths wound through a trim lawn that was surrounded by borders of neatly pruned shrubs. A line of ancient yews marked the end of the formal garden. There was a tennis court on the other side, with two people swatting a ball between them in an impressively long volley.

The jeep took them along a rough track over the meadows round to the front of the house. They turned in through some wrought iron gates and trundled along a cobbled, mossy drive. Swallows swooped mischievously low over the grass on either side, before arrowing back up to the eaves where their ochre mud nests were hidden. A wooden porch around the front door was completely smothered by honeysuckle;

Louise could just see someone waiting amid the shadows underneath.

“We’ve come home,” Genevieve murmured in delight.

Ivanov stopped the jeep in front of the porch. “You’re on your own now,” he told them.

When Louise shot him a look, he was staring ahead, hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel. She was just about to tap him on the shoulder, when the person waiting in the porch stepped forwards. He was a young man, about the same age as Joshua, she thought. But where Joshua’s face was lean and flat, his was round. Quite handsome though, with chestnut hair and wide green eyes. Lips that were curved somewhere between a smile and a sneer. He was wearing a white cricket jumper and tennis shorts; his bare feet shoved into shabby sneakers with a broken lace.

He put a hand out, smiling warmly. “Louise, Genevieve. We meet at last, to coin a cliché yet again. Welcome to my home.” A black Labrador padded out from the house and snuffled round his feet.

“Who are you?” Louise asked.

“Charles Montgomery David Filton-Asquith at your service. But I’d really prefer you to call me Charlie. Everybody here does. As in right, one expects.”

Louise frowned, still not shaking his hand, though he hardly seemed threatening. Exactly the kind of young landowner she’d grown up with, though with a good deal more panache admittedly. “But, who are you? I don’t understand. Are you the one that summoned us here?”

“’Fraid so. Hope you’ll forgive me, but I thought this would be an improvement on London for you. Not very jolly there right now.”

“But how? How did you get us out through the curfew? Are you a policeman?”

“Not exactly.” He pulled a remorseful face. “Actually, I

suppose you could say I rule the world. Pity I'm not making a better job of it right now. Still, such is life."

There was a swimming pool on the other side of the ancient house, a long teardrop shape with walls of tiny white and green marble tiles. It had a mosaic of the Mona Lisa on the floor of the deep end. Louise recognized that, though she couldn't remember the woman flashing her left breast in the original painting. A group of young people were using the pool, splashing about enthusiastically as they played some private-rules version of water polo with a big pink beach ball.

She sat on the Yorkstone slab patio with Charlie and Gen, relaxing at a long oak table which gave her an excellent view out over the pool and the lawns. A butler in a white coat had brought her a glass of Pimms in a tall tumbler, with plenty of ice and fruit bobbing round. Gen was given an extravagant chocolate milk shake clotted with strawberries and ice cream, while Charlie sipped at a gin and tonic. It was, she had to admit, all beautifully civilized.

"So you're not the President, or anything," she enquired. Charlie had been telling them about the GISD, and its bureau hierarchy.

"Nothing like. I simply supervise serious security matters across Western Europe, and liaise with my colleagues to combat global threats. Nobody elected us; we had the ability to dictate the structure and nature of the GISD back when continental governments and the UN were merging into Govcentral. So we incorporated ourselves into it."

"That was a long time ago," Louise said.

"Start of the Twenty-second Century. Interesting times to live through. We were a lot more active in those days."

"You're not that old, though."

Charlie smiled, and pointed across at the rose garden. A neat, sunken square, divided up into segments, each

one planted with different coloured rose bushes. Several tortoise-like creatures were moving slowly among the tough plants, their long prehensile necks standing proud, allowing them to munch the dead flowers, nibbling the stem right back to the woody branch. "That's a bitek construct. I employ twelve separate species to take care of the estate's horticulture for me. There's a couple of thousand of them here altogether."

"But Adamists have banned bitek from all their worlds," Gen said. "And Earth was the first."

"The public can't use it," Charlie said. "But I can. Bitek and affinity are very powerful technologies; they give B7 quite an advantage over would-be enemies of the republic. It's a combination which also allows me to live for six hundred years in an unbroken lineage." He waved a hand over himself in a proud gesture. "This is the thirty-first body I've lived in. They're all clones, you see; parthenogenetic, so I retain the temperament for the job. I'm affinity capable, I had the ability long before Edenism began. I used neurone symbionts at first, then the affinity sequence was vectored into my DNA. In a way, the immortality method which B7 uses is a variant on Edenism's end-of-life memory transfer. They use it to transfer themselves into their habitat neural strata. I, on the other hand, use it to transfer myself into a new, vigorous young body. The clone is grown in sensory isolation for eighteen years, preventing any thought patterns from developing. In effect, it's an empty brain waiting to be filled. When the time comes, I simply edit the memories I wish to take with me, and move my personality over to the new body. The old one is immediately destroyed, giving the process a direct continuity. I even store the discarded memories in a bitek neural construct, so no aspect of my life is ever truly lost."

"Thirty-one bodies is a lot for only six hundred years," Louise said. "A Saldana lives for nearly two centuries these

days. And even us Kavanaghs will last for about a hundred and twenty.”

“Yes,” Charlie said with an apologetic shrug. “But you spend the last third of that time suffering from the restrictions and indignity of age. An illness which only ever gets worse. Whereas as soon as I reach forty I immediately transfer myself again. Immortality and perpetual youth. Not a bad little arrangement.”

“Until now,” Louise took a drink of Pimms, “those previous bodies all had their own souls. That’s quite different from memories. I saw it on a news show. The Kiint said they’re separate.”

“Quite. Something B7 has collectively ignored. Hardly surprising, given our level of conservatism. I suppose our past bodies will have to be stored in zero-tau from now on; at least until we’ve solved the overall problem of the beyond.”

“So you were really alive in the Twenty-first Century?” Gen asked.

“Yes. That’s what I remember, anyway. As your sister says, the definitions of life have changed a lot recently. But I’ve always considered myself to be the one person for all those centuries. That’s not a conviction you can break in a couple of weeks.”

“How did you get to be so powerful in the first place?” Louise asked.

“The usual reason: wealth. All of us owned or ran vast corporate empires during the Twenty-first Century. We weren’t merely multinationals, we were the first interplanetaries; and we made profits that outgrossed national incomes. It was a time when new frontiers were opening again, which always generates vast new revenues. It was also a time of great civil unrest; what we’d called the Third World was industrialising rapidly thanks to fusion power, and the ecology was destabilising at equal speed. National

and regional governments were committing vast resources into combating the biosphere breakdown. Social welfare, infrastructure administration, health care, and security—the fields government used to devote its efforts to—were all slowly being starved of tax money and sold off to private industry. It wasn't much of a jump for us. Private security forces had guarded company property ever since the Twentieth Century; jails were being built and run by private firms; private police forces patrolled closed housing estates, paid for out of their taxes. In some countries you actually had to take out insurance in order to pay the state police to investigate a crime if you were a victim. So you see, evolving to an all-private police force was an intrinsic progression for an industrialized society. Between the sixteen of us, we controlled ninety per cent of the world's security forces, so naturally we collaborated and cooperated on intelligence matters. We even began to invest in equipment and training at a level that would never bring us a fiscal return. It paid us, though; nobody else was going to protect our factories and institutions from crime lords and regional mafias. The crime rate actually started to fall for the first time in decades.

"After that, we made the decision to bring about Govcentral, along with its centralized tax laws, which were slanted in our favour. Our lawyers were parachuted into senior advisory positions to cabinet ministers and state executives, our lobbyists helped steer parliaments and congresses through controversial legislation. B7 was just the formalization and consolidation of our position."

"That's monstrous," Louise said. "You're dictators."

"As is the landowner class on Norfolk," Charlie replied. "Your family is the same as me, Louise, except you're not quite so honest about it."

"People came to Norfolk after the constitution was written, they didn't have it imposed on them."

"I might argue that with you, but I completely understand

your sense of outrage, probably better than you do yourself. I've encountered it enough times down the centuries. All I can ask is that you judge the means by what it achieved. Earth has a stable, comfortably middle-class population free to live their lives more or less as they want. We survived the climate collapse, and we've spread out to colonize the stars. None of that would have been accomplished without a degree of strong leadership, the lack of which is the curse of modern media-accountable democracy. I'd say that was a pretty impressive achievement."

"The Edenists are democratic, and they've prospered."

"Ah yes, the Edenists. Our greatest accidental triumph."

"What do you mean, accidental?" Louise couldn't help her interest. For the first time she was getting to know the truth about the way the world was structured, and its history. The kind of real history that was never filed and indexed. Everything she was denied at home.

"Because we wanted to keep bitek for ourselves we attempted to have the entire technology prohibited," Charlie said. "We knew we could never do it with a political declaration; our control over the legislative and legal establishment wasn't total at that time. So we went with a religious condemnation, building up to it with a decade of negative publicity. We were almost there. Pope Eleanor was ready to declare affinity an unholy desecration, and the ayatollahs were falling into line. We only needed a few more years of pressure, and the independent companies would be forced to abandon further development. Bitek and affinity would have withered away, another dead-end technology. History is littered with them. Then Wing-Tsit Chong went and transferred his personality into Eden's neural strata. Ironically, we hadn't realized the potential of the habitats, even though we were experimenting along similar lines to achieve our own immortality. It forced the Pope's hand; her declaration came just too early. There was still too much bitek and affin-

ity in general use on Earth for her to be obeyed unquestioningly. Its supporters emigrated to Eden, which by then had seceded from our control. We had absolutely nothing to do with shaping their society; after all, it's not one our operatives could infiltrate."

"But you laid down the law for everyone else."

"Absolutely. We control the principal policy aspects of Govcentral, our companies dominate Earth's industry, and in turn Earth's economic power dominates the Confederation. We're the ones who make the majority investment in every new colony world development company, because we live long enough to reap the rewards which come from share dividends that take two centuries to mature. Between us, our financial institutions own a healthy percentage of the human race."

"What for? Nobody can possibly want that much money."

"You'd be amazed. Proper policing and defence consumes trillions of fuseodollars. The Govcentral navy is like a financial event horizon. We still fund our own security, just as we always have. And in doing so, we safeguard everyone else. I own up to being a dictator, but plead that I am as benign as its possible to be."

Louise shook her head in sorrow. "And for all that power and strength, you still couldn't stop Quinn Dexter."

"No," Charlie admitted. "He is our greatest failure. We may well lose this planet, and all of its forty billion souls with it. All because I wasn't good enough to outsmart him. History will brand us as the ultimate sinners, after all. Rightly so."

"He really has won?" Louise asked in dismay.

"We hit him with an SD weapon at Parsonage Heights. Somehow he eluded that. Now he's free to do whatever he wants."

"So he followed us to London."

"Yes."

“You manipulated me and Gen the whole time, didn’t you? Ivanov Robson is one of your agents.”

“Yes, I manipulated you. And I have no regrets or remorse about that. Given what was at stake, it was wholly justified.”

“I suppose so,” she said meekly. “I quite liked Robson, though he was always a little too good to be true. He never made a mistake. People aren’t like that in real life.”

“Don’t concern yourself about him. He’s not an agent; I’m afraid I commandeered him after his trial. Such people are always useful to me. But dear old Ivanov is not a nice man. Not as unpleasant as Banneth, I admit. She was just a human-sized virus, even managed to spook me with her deranged obsessions, and that’s not easy after all the atrocity I’ve witnessed in my life.”

“And Andy? What about him? Was he one of yours as well?”

Charlie brightened. “Oh yes, the romantic sellrat. No. He’s a real person. I never expected you to go and buy a set of neural nanonics, Louise. You are a constant surprise and delight to me.”

She scowled at him over the Pimms. “What now? Why did you bring us here? I don’t believe it was just so you could explain all this to us first hand. It’s not like you’re going to apologize, is it.”

“You were my last throw of the dice, Louise. I had hoped Dexter might try and follow you here. I have one final weapon available which could work. It’s called anti-memory, and it destroys souls. The Confederation Navy developed it, although it’s only in the prototype stage. Which means it has to be used at very close range. If he’d come with you, we might have had a chance to deploy it against him. It would have been my last noble stand. I was quite prepared to face him.”

Louise looked round quickly, her eyes sweeping the garden for any sign of the devil whose face she could never forget. A foolish reaction. But the prospect of Quinn Dexter

doggedly pursuing her across the desolated countryside was chilling. "But he didn't follow us."

"Not this time, no. So I'll be happy to take the pair of you along with me when I leave. I'll make sure you get a flight to Jupiter now."

"You stopped all my messages to Joshua!"

"Yes."

"I want to talk to him. Now."

"That's another piece of unfortunate news, I'm afraid. He's no longer at Tranquillity. He left with a Confederation Navy squadron on some kind of strike against the possessed; even I wasn't able to discover exactly what their mission was. You're quite free to send a message to the Lord of Ruin for confirmation if you want."

"I will," Louise said crossly. She stood up, and put her hand out to Gen. "I want to go for a walk, unless that's against your rules, too. I need to think about everything you've said."

"Of course. You're my guests. Go wherever you wish, there's nothing that can harm you in the dome—oh, apart from some giant hogweed, there's a clump growing by one of the streams. It stings rather badly."

"Fine. Whatever."

"I hope you'll join me for supper. We normally meet for drinks on the terrace beforehand, around half past seven."

Louise didn't trust herself to say anything. With Gen's hand clasped tightly in her own, she walked off across the lawn, angling away from the swimming pool and its happy crowd.

"That was all ultra stupendously incredible," Gen gushed.

"Yes. Unless, of course, he's the biggest liar in the Confederation. I've been so stupid. I did everything he wanted me to, just like some dumb clockwork doll set in motion. How could I ever have thought you and I would be let off

with a police caution for trying to smuggle a possessed down to Earth? They execute people for less than that.”

Gen’s expression was puppyishly mournful. “You didn’t know, Louise. We’re from Norfolk, we’re never told *anything* about how things are on other worlds. And we escaped from Dexter twice, by ourselves. That’s more than Charlie ever managed to do.”

“Yes.” The trouble with her anger was that all its considerable heat was focused inwards, against herself. The B7 people had done everything they should have to protect Earth. Charlie was right, she was completely expendable. She hadn’t understood how big a danger Dexter was to the universe. Even so, not to have realized anything untoward was happening, other than a vague disquiet about Robson . . . Stupid!

They walked across the lawn and through one of the magnolia hedges, finding themselves in an apple orchard. The short trees were showing their considerable age through twisted trunks and gnarled grey bark. Great clumps of mistletoe hung from their boughs, the parasite’s roots swelling the wood in lopsided bulges. Bitek constructs like miniature sheep with a golden-brown fur were grazing round the trunks, trimming the grass to a neat level.

Gen watched their placid movements for a while, fascinated by how cute they looked. Not exactly the devil’s spawn that Colsterworth’s vicar had condemned every Sunday from his pulpit. “Do you think he will take us to Tranquillity? I’d like to see it. And Joshua,” she added hurriedly.

“I expect so. He’s finished using us now.”

“But how are we going to get up to the Halo? The vac-trains and the towers are shut down, and people aren’t allowed to use spacecraft in Earth’s atmosphere any more.”

“Didn’t you listen to anything? Charlie *is* the government. He can do whatever he wants to.” She grinned and pulled

Gen closer. "Knowing B7, this whole dome can probably blast off into orbit by itself."

"Really?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

They slowly circled the house, comforted by the familiarity of it all. On the other side of the orchard they came across a large dilapidated timber-framed greenhouse, whose shelves were packed with clay pots of cacti and pelargonium cuttings. A servitor chimp shuffled along the aisle, dragging a hose pipe and sprinkling the pots of small green shoots.

"Looks like they have winter in this dome," Louise said to Gen as they peered round the door.

There was an avenue of cherry trees after the greenhouse. A pair of big peacocks strutted around underneath them, their shrill cries ringing through the heavy air. The sisters stood to watch as one of them spread his green and gold tail wide, neck cranked back imperiously. The gaggle of diminutive peahens loose in the avenue continued to peck away at the wiry grass, ignoring the display.

When they crossed the driveway there was no sign of the four-seat jeep, nor Ivanov Robson. They emerged through a gap in a hedge of white fuchsia bushes to find themselves back at the swimming pool. Charlie had vanished from the patio.

One of the girls playing by the pool caught sight of them and waved, shouting as she jogged over. She was a couple of years older than Louise, wearing a purple string bikini.

Louise waited politely, a neutral expression masking a slight sense of discomfort. The bikini was very small. She tried to banish the thought that no Norfolk shop would ever stock it on grounds of decency. Gen seemed perfectly at ease.

"Hi!" the girl said brightly. "I'm Divinia, one of Charlie's friends. He told us you were coming." She pursed her lips at Genevieve. "Fancy a dip? You look hot and bored."

Gen glanced longingly at the group of laughing young

people sporting in the pool, some of them were close to her own age. "Can I?" she asked Louise.

"Well . . . we don't have costumes."

"No probs," Divinia said. "There's plenty spare in the changing room."

"Go on then," Louise smiled. Genevieve flashed a grin and bounded off towards the house.

"I don't want to be rude," Louise said. "But who are you?"

"I told you, darling, Charlie's friend. A very good friend." Divinia followed the line of Louise's gaze, and chortled. She pushed her breasts out further. "When you've got 'em, flaunt 'em, darling. They don't last forever, not even with geneering and cosmetic packages. Gravity always beats us in the end. Honestly, it's worse than taxes."

Louise blushed so hard she had to combat it with a program from her neural nanonics.

"Sorry," Divinia said, smilingly contrite. "Me and my big mouth. I'm not used to people with strong body taboos."

"I don't have taboos. I'm just getting used to things here, that's all."

"Pooie, you poor thing, this world must be dreadfully loud and brash for you. And I don't exactly help make it quiet." She took hold of Louise's fingers, and tugged her towards the pool. "Come on, let's introduce you to the gang. Don't be shy. You'll have fun, promise."

After a second of resistance, Louise allowed herself to be pulled along. You couldn't hold a grudge against someone with such a sunny nature.

"Do you know what Charlie does?" she inquired cautiously.

"Oh God, yes, darling. Lord of all he bloody surveys. That's why I'm with him."

"With . . . ?"

“We shag each other senseless. That kind of with. Mind you, I have to share him with half the girls here.”

“Oh.”

“I’m quite appalling, aren’t I. Dearie me. Not a lady at all.”

“Depends on whose terms,” Louise said pertly.

Divinia’s smile produced huge dimples among her mass of freckles. “Wowie, a genuine Norfolk rebel. Good for you. Give those macho medieval pillocks hell when you get back.”

Louise was introduced to everyone at the pool. There were over twenty of them, six children and the rest in their teens and twenties. Two thirds were girls. All of them quite gorgeous, she couldn’t help noticing. Afterwards, she wound up with her shoes off, sitting on the edge of the pool, dangling her bare feet in the shallow end. Divinia sat down beside her, handing her another glass of Pimms.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.” Louise took a sip. “How did you meet him?”

“Charlie? Oh, Daddy’s done business with him for simply decades. We’re not as rich as him, of course. Who is? But I’ve got the right pedigree, darling. Not to mention the body.” She swizzled her stick round the glass, her smile taunting. Louise smiled right back.

“It’s a class thing,” Divinia went on. “You don’t qualify for entry in this particular magic circle without a bankload of money, and even that’s not enough by itself. Outlook counts almost as much. You need the arrogance and contempt for the ordinary so that the whole notion of B7 doesn’t shock you. I’ve got that in bucketfuls, too. I was brought up utterly spoiled, tons more money than brains. And I’ve got plenty of brains, too, the best neurones money can sequence. That’s what saved me from the vacuous life of a trust fund babe. I’m too smart for it.”

“So what do you do?”

“At the moment, nothing at all, darling; I’m just here because I’m good company for Charlie. It means I can have fun, and lots of it. Plenty of sex, party with Charlie and Co., have some more sex, access stims, sex again, hit the London clubs, sex, do mountains of gratuitous shopping, sex, see shows and gigs, sex, tour the Halo—freefall sex! That’s where I am in life right now, and I’m doing it to the max. Like I said, everything sags badly and sadly as you get older, so enjoy youth while you’ve got it. That’s the way I turned out, you see, I know myself very well indeed. I know there’s no point living life like this for a hundred years solid. It’s a waste, a total, pitiful waste. I’ve seen the idle rich at sixty, they make me sick. I’ve got money, and I’ve got brains, and I’ve got no scruples; that adds up to a hell of a lot of potential. So when I hit thirty-five or forty, I strike out for myself. I don’t know what I’ll do yet: fly a starship to the core of the galaxy, build a business empire that rivals the Kulu Corporation, start a culture more beautiful than Edenism. Who knows? But I’m going to do it superbly.”

“I always wanted to travel,” Louise said. “Right back as far as I can remember.”

“Excellent.” Divinia knocked her glass to Louise’s with a loud *chink*. “See, you did it. You’ve seen more of the galaxy than I have. Congratulations, you’re one of us.”

“I had to leave home, the possessed were after me.”

“They were after everybody. But you were the one who escaped. That takes balls, especially for someone with your background.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry.” She stroked Louise’s long hair, directing the waving flexitives to slide it back gently over her shoulders. “Somebody will find a solution. We’ll get Norfolk back for you, and blast Dexter’s mind into oblivion along with his soul.”

“Nice,” Louise purred. Sunlight and Pimms were making her deliciously drowsy. She held up her glass for a refill.

Of all the strange days since she'd waved goodbye to her father, this one was undoubtedly the most mentally liberating. Conversing and mixing with Charlie's friends and children left her faintly envious of them. They weren't less moral than her, just different. Fewer cares and hangups for a start. She wondered if true aristocracy meant having the gene for guilt removed. A nice life.

When the appallingly energetic swimmers finally tired, and the sun was edging down the side of the dome, Divinia insisted on taking her for a massage, dismayed by the fact Louise had never had one before. A couple of the other girls joined them in one of the house's original stable blocks which had been converted to a sauna and health spa.

Lying face down on a bench with just a towel over her rump, Louise experienced the painful glory of the masseur's hands pummeling then kneading her muscles. Her shoulders became so loose she thought they'd fall off.

"Who are all the staff here?" she asked at one point. It was hard to believe that everyone in on the secret of B7 could be kept quiet.

"They're sequestered," Divinia said. "Criminals that got caught by GISD."

"Oh." Louise twisted to look at the burly woman who was digging stiff fingers into her calf muscles. She seemed completely unperturbed by having her enslavement discussed openly. The idea bothered Louise, although it wasn't that much different to turning them into Ivets. Either way saw them sentenced to work for others. This method was just more severe. But then she didn't know how bad the original crime had been. Don't think about it. It's not as if I can change anything.

Divinia and the other girls gossiped their way through the massage, twittering and laughing over boys, parties, games. Though it began to take on the tone of a farewell reminis-

cence, places they'd never visit again, friends left out of reach. They talked as though Earth had already been lost.

Louise left the spa tingling everywhere, feeling thoroughly energized. Divinia walked with her back to the house to show her the guest room she'd been given. It was on the first floor, overlooking the orchard. The oak-beamed ceiling was low, barely a foot above Louise's head, giving the room a snug atmosphere. A four-poster bed contributed generously to the theme, as did the rich gold and claret fabrics used for its canopies and the curtains.

All Louise's bags and cases were stacked neatly on the pine blanket box at the foot of the bed. Divinia spied them greedily and started to go through the dresses. The long blue gown was taken out and admired, as were a number of others. None of them were quite right, Divinia declared, but she had something which might just suit the evening.

It turned out to be a quite disgraceful little black cocktail dress that Louise balked at on first sight. Divinia spent a full ten minutes coaxing her into it, outrageously flattering and encouraging. When it was on, Louise suffered a whole new plague of misgivings; you needed supreme confidence to wear anything like this in front of other people.

Genevieve came in just before they were due to go downstairs. "Blimey, Louise," she said, wide-eyed at the dress.

"I'm treating myself," Louise told her. "It's just for tonight."

"That's what you said last time."

The admiration she received from Charlie and his friends when she emerged out onto the terrace was reward enough. Charlie and the men wore dinner jackets, while the girls were all in cocktail dresses, some even more alluring than Louise's borrowed number.

Outside the dome, the sun had finally reached the horizon. Light spilled out symmetrically from the brilliant orange disk to spread in waves along the crest of the verdant

land. Charlie guided Louise over to the end of the terrace so they could watch it. He handed her a slim crystal flute.

“A champagne sunset shared with a beautiful girl. Not a bad last memory of the old planet, if somewhat laboured. How very considerate of the weather to stay clear for us. Its first favour in five centuries.”

Louise sipped her champagne as she admired the clean elegance of the shimmering orange star. She could remember the air as clear as this above Bytham, how it had been infiltrated by insidious wisps of red cloud. Her last memory of home.

“It’s lovely,” she told him.

She sat next to Charlie for dinner. Inevitably, it was a sumptuous affair; the food exquisite, the wine over a century old. She remembered being enthralled by the topics of conversation, and laughing at stories of mistakes and social catastrophes that could only ever happen to an elite such as this. Even though they knew they would have to abandon their world within days, they had an assurance like no other. After an age exposed to depression and anxiety it was a wonderful to experience such unabashed optimism.

Charlie, of course, made her laugh most of the time. She knew why, and no longer cared. Her clever, persistent seduction, and the effort he put into it, gave her a strong sense of belonging. It was classically played, and hauntingly refined. For a planetary oppressor, he was terribly charming.

He even helped Divinia guide her upstairs at the end of the evening. Not that she was drunk and needed help, she just didn’t want to spoil the mood by putting that nasty little detox program into primary mode. Their hands let go of her just outside her door, allowing her to lean against the frame, happy at the support it offered.

“My bedroom is just down there,” Charlie murmured. His lips kissed Louise gently on her brow. “If you want to.” He put his arm round Divinia, and they moved off down the landing.

Louise closed her eyes, pressing her lips together. She rolled against the wall to face her own bedroom door, and stumbled inside.

Her breathing still wasn't under control, and her skin was flushed. She pushed the door shut firmly behind her. A white silk negligee had been laid out on the bed, it made the little black dress demure by comparison.

Oh sweet Jesus, now what the hell do I do?

She picked up the negligee.

It's not as if anybody here will think less of me for having sex with them. The fact that it was even an option actually made her smile in amazement. There was no order in the universe any more, nothing familiar.

So do I, or don't I? The only guilt I'll carry is what I manufacture for myself. And that's the product of heritage. So for all my bravado, just how independent from Norfolk have I become?

She stood in front of the mirror. Her hair was unbound, the flexitives inert, turning it back into a dark unruly cloak. The negligee clung to her body, showing it off provocatively. Just how aroused she'd become was blatantly obvious. A sultry grin was widening on her face as she acknowledged how sexually formidable she looked.

Joshua had always adored her naked body, almost delirious with praise as she gave herself up to him. Which was the answer, really.

Louise was woken by Genevieve bouncing onto her bed, and shaking her enthusiastically. Her head rose up, face curtained by wild hair. She had a headache and a revoltingly dry mouth.

For future reference, put the detox program into primary mode *before* you fall asleep. Please!

"What?" she croaked.

"Oh come on, Louise, I've been up simply hours."

“Oh God.” Sluggish thoughts designated too-bright neuroiconic symbols, and her neural nanonics datavised a string of instructions to her medical package. It began to adjust her blood chemistry, filtering out the residue of toxicants. “I need the loo,” she mumbled.

“When did you get that nightie?” Gen shouted after her as she tottered towards the en suite bathroom. Fortunately there was a big towelling robe hanging up on the inside of the door. She was able to cover up the first-night-of-the-honeymoon garment before she went back to confront Gen. Her head was a lot clearer thanks to the package’s ministrations, though her body hadn’t caught up yet.

“Divinia loaned it to me,” she said quickly, forestalling any more questions.

Gen’s smile was wretchedly smug; she fell back on the bed, hands behind her head. “You’ve got a hangover, haven’t you?”

“Devil child.”

The breakfast room had a long table of big silver warmers containing a considerable variety of food. Louise went along lifting up each lid. She didn’t recognize half of the items. In the end she settled for her usual of corn chips followed by scrambled eggs. One of the maids fetched her a pot of fresh tea.

Divinia and Charlie arrived just after Louise started to eat. He gave Louise a modest little smile, conveying a tinge of regret. That was the only reference ever made to the invitation.

He ruffled Genevieve’s hair as he sat with them, earning himself a disapproving look.

“So when do we leave?” Louise asked.

“I’m not sure,” Charlie said. “I’m keeping an eye on developments. New York and London are the critical places to watch right now. It looks like New York is going to fall

within a week. The inhabitants can only keep resisting the possessed for so long. And they're losing ground."

"What'll happen if the possessed take over?"

"That's when life becomes really unpleasant. I'm afraid our dear president has woken up to what that many possessed are capable of. He's scared they'll try to take the Earth out of this universe. That gives him two options. He can fire the SD electron beams in a circle around the arcology, and hope they'll do a Ketton and just take themselves and a big chunk of landscape out of here. If not, it's a very stark choice; we either go with them, or the SD weapons are focused on the arcology itself."

"Kill them?" Gen asked in fright.

"I'm afraid so."

"Will he really do that? A whole arcology?"

"I doubt he has the courage to make that kind of decision. He'll consult the senate in an attempt to get them to take the blame, but they'll just give him the authority and pass the buck right back at him without committing themselves. If he does give the order to hit the arcology, then obviously B7 will stop the SD network from actually firing. I'm of the opinion we should let the possessed remove Earth. It's a cold equation, but that outcome causes the least harm in the long term. One day we'll learn how to bring it back."

"You really think that's possible?" Louise asked.

"If a planet can be moved out of the universe, it can be returned. Don't ask me for a timetable."

"So what about London?"

"That's more difficult. As I told my colleagues, if Dexter gains control of enough possessed he'll be able to dictate his own agenda to everyone, possessed and non-possessed alike. If that becomes the case, we might have to use the SD weapons to kill the possessed he commands to take that power away from him."

Louise lost all interest in her food. "How many people?"

“SD weapons have a large target footprint. There’s going to be a lot of innocent bystanders caught. An awful lot,” he said significantly. “There are thousands of possessed that have to be targeted.”

“You can’t. Charlie, you can’t.”

“I know. B7 is actually considering if we should actively help the New York possessed to take over that arcology. If they do so before Quinn expands his power base, then Earth will be taken out of this universe before he can menace it.”

“Oh sweet Jesus. That’s just as bad.”

“Yeah,” he said bitterly. “Who wants to rule the world when it means making those kind of choices. And they do have to be made, unfortunately; we can’t jump ship now.”

After the mild euphoria of yesterday, when they’d finally reached a genuine safe haven, however unorthodox, Charlie’s news left the sisters despondent again. They spent the morning in the drawing room, watching a big AV projection pillar to find out what was happening.

At first they switched between London’s news shows, then Louise found the house’s processors allowed her to access the security sensors studding the Westminster Dome’s geodesic framework. She was also able to superimpose the police tactical display grid over their peerless view of the streets and parks. They could follow events in real time, without the intrusive commentary and speculation from reporters. Not that there was much to see. An occasional running figure. Pulses of bright white light flaring behind closed windows. Police cars converging on a building, heavily armed officers moving inside. Sometimes they came out, hauling possessed off to zero-tau pods. Sometimes they didn’t, leaving a circle of empty cars blocking off the surrounding streets, their strobe lights flashing red and blue in futile distress. Local council offices and precinct stations would burst into flames without warning. No fire appliances

came to their rescue. When the government facility concerned had been consumed, the flames mysteriously died away, leaving a blackened husk of crumbling masonry trapped between two unblemished buildings.

Reports from dwindling police patrols and the AI's monitor programs indicated that small bands of the possessed were moving round by using the tube lines and utility service tunnels. As they infiltrated themselves across the arcology, electrical supplies failed in several districts. Then corresponding sections of the communication net went dead. More and more street-level cameras were targeted, showing a snatched glance of impacting white fire before dying. Rover reporters began to go off-air in mid-senseise. Police datavises also fell, faster than possessed assaults against them could statistically account for. GISD estimated the desertion rate to be reaching forty per cent.

There was still a curfew operating across London, but Govcentral was no longer enforcing it.

Servitor chimps ambled into the drawing room around mid-morning and began packing away the ancient silverware and vases. Their preparations emphasised how desperate the situation was becoming, despite the physical distance between the house and London.

Louise caught sight of Charlie through one of the open patio doors; he was taking his two Labradors for a walk across the lawn. She and Gen hurried out after him.

He stopped at a gate in the row of yew trees, waiting for them to catch up. "I just wanted to give the dogs one last walk," he said. "We'll probably leave tomorrow morning. You'll have to start packing again, I'm afraid."

Gen knelt down and stroked the golden Labrador. "You're not leaving them here, are you?"

"No. They'll be put in zero-tau; I'm definitely taking them with me. And a great deal more, of course. I've spent centuries building up my little collection of knickknacks.

One does become dreadfully sentimental about the stupidest things. I own four domes like this in various parts of the world, each with a different climate. There's a lot of occupation invested in them. Still, look on the bright side, I can literally take the memories with me."

"Where are you going to go?" Louise asked.

"I'm not sure, to be honest," Charlie said. "I'll need a developed world as a base if I want to retain control of my industrial assets. Kulu is hardly going to welcome me, the Saldanas are very territorial. New Washington, possibly, I have influence there. Or I might germinate an independent habitat somewhere."

"But it's only going to be temporary, isn't it?" Louise urged. "Just until we find an answer to all this."

"Yes. Assuming Dexter doesn't come gunning for all of us. He's quite a remarkable person in his own repellent way, at least as competent as Capone. I didn't expect him to consolidate his hold over London quite so quickly. One more mistake added to a depressingly long list."

"What will you do? The President isn't going to order the SD strike, is he? The news said the senate has gone into closed session."

"No, he won't fire today. London's safe from him, at least. Unless he sees red clouds hovering over the domes, he doesn't consider the possessed capable of endangering the rest of the world."

"That's it then, we just leave?"

"I am doing my best, Louise. I'm still trying to locate Dexter's actual position. There's still a chance I can use the anti-memory against him. I'm convinced he's somewhere in the centre of the old city, that's where he's concentrated his blackout procedures. If I can just get someone close enough to him, he can be eliminated. We've built a projector that uses bitek processors, it should work long enough even with the possessed ability to glitch electronics."

“The possessed can sense the thoughts of anyone hostile to them. Nobody dangerous would get near to him.”

“Ordinarily, yes. But we do have one ally. Calls himself the friend of Carter McBride. A possessed who hates Dexter, and has the courage to oppose him. And I know he’s in London; he could probably get close enough. The problem is, he’s as elusive as Dexter.”

“Fletcher could have helped,” Gen said. “He really hated Dexter. And he wasn’t afraid of him, either.”

“I know,” Charlie said. “I’m considering if I should ask him.”

Louise gave him a blank look, sure she’d misheard. “You mean Fletcher is still here?”

“Well yes,” Charlie said, as if surprised at her surprise. “He’s been kept in GISD’s secure holding facility up in the Halo, helping our science team research the physics of possession. They haven’t made much progress, I’m afraid.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Louise asked weakly. It was the most wonderful news, even though it was accompanied by guilt for the man whose body Fletcher was possessing. There was also the knowledge she’d have to mourn all over again eventually. But . . . he was still with them. That made all the complications bearable.

“I thought it best not to. You’d both managed to put him behind you. I’m sorry.”

“Then why tell us now?” she asked, angry and suspicious.

“Desperate times,” Charlie replied levelly.

“Oh.” Louise slumped as understanding arrived. She began to wonder just how deep his manipulation went. “I’ll ask him for you.”

“Thank you, Louise.”

“On one condition. Genevieve is taken to Tranquillity. Today.”

“Louise!” Gen yelled.

“Not negotiable,” Louise said.

"Of course," Charlie said. "It will be done."

Gen put her hands on her hips. "I won't go."

"You have to, darling. You'll be safe there. Really safe, not like this planet."

"Good. Then you come, too."

"I can't."

"Why not?" The little girl was fighting tears. "Fletcher wants you to be safe. You know he does."

"I know. But I'm the guarantee that he'll do as he's asked."

"*Of course* he'll kill Dexter. He hates him, you know he does. How can you even think anything else. That's awful of you, Louise."

"I don't think badly of Fletcher. But other people do."

"Charlie doesn't. Do you, Charlie?"

"I certainly don't. But the other members of B7 will need assurances."

"I hate you!" Gen screamed. "I hate all of you. And I won't go to Tranquillity." She ran off back over the lawns towards the house.

"Dear me," Charlie said. "I do hope she'll be all right."

"Oh shut up," Louise snapped. "At least have the courage to acknowledge what you are. Or is that something else you've lost along with the rest of your humanity?"

Just for an instant, she caught sight of his true self in a flickering expression of annoyance. A centuries-old consciousness regarding her dispassionately through its youthful doll. His body was an illusion more skilful than any reality dysfunction the possessed had achieved. Everything he did, every emotion shown, was simply a mental state he switched on when it became appropriate. Five hundred years of life had reduced him to a bundle of near-automatic responses to his environment. Very clever responses, but they weren't rooted in anything she could

recognize as human. Wisdom had evolved him far beyond his origin.

She hurried off after Gen.

The link to the Halo was organized to go through a big holoscreen in one of the house's lounges. Louise sat on a sofa opposite, with Gen cuddled up at her side. The younger girl was all cried out, and the battle of wills had been won. After this, she'd be packed off to Tranquillity. That didn't make Louise feel much better.

Blue lines rippled away from the front of the holoscreen, then a picture swivelled into focus. Fletcher was sitting at some metallic desk, dressed in his full English Navy uniform. He blinked, peering forwards, then smiled.

"My dear ladies. I cannot tell you how gladdened I am to see you safe."

"Hello, Fletcher," Louise said. "Are you all right?" Gen was all sunny smiled, waving furiously at his image.

"It would appear so, my Lady Louise. The scholars of this age have kept me busy indeed, testing and prodding my poor bones with their machines. Much good it has done them. They freely admit Our Lord guards the mysteries of his universe jealously."

"I know," Louise said. "Nobody down here has a clue what to do."

"And you, Lady Louise. How are you and the little one faring?"

"I'm okay," Genevieve blurted spryly. "We've met a policeman called Charlie, who's a dictator. I don't like him much, but he did get us out of London before things got too bad."

Louise laid a hand on Gen's arm, silencing her. "Fletcher, Quinn Dexter is down here. He's running loose in London. I'm supposed to ask, will you help track him down?"

"My lady, that fiend has bested me before. We escaped by

God's grace and a fortuitous quantity of luck. I fear I would be of little use against him."

"Charlie has a weapon that might work if we can get it close enough to him. It has to be a possessed carrying it, no one else stands a chance. Fletcher, it's going to get really bad down here if he isn't stopped. The only alternative the authorities have is to kill lots of people. Millions possibly."

"Aye lady, I already hear the souls stirring in anticipation of what is to come. Many many bodies are being made available for their occupation, with promises of more. I fear the time of reckoning draws nigh. All men will soon have to choose where their hearts lie."

"Will you come down, then?"

"Of course, my dear lady. How could I ever refuse your request?"

"I'll meet you in London, then. Charlie has made all the arrangements. Genevieve won't be there, she's going to Tranquillity."

"Ah. I believe I understand. Treachery lurks under every stone along the path we tread."

"He's doing what he thinks he has to."

"The excuse of many a tyrant," he said sadly. "Little one? I want you to promise me you will cause your sister no distress as you leave for this magical flying castle. She loves you dearly and wishes no harm to befall you."

Genevieve clutched at Louise's arm, trying hard not to blub. "I won't. But I don't want to leave either of you. I don't want to be left alone."

"I know, little one, but Our Lord tells us that only the virtuous can be brave. Show courage for me, be safe even if it means forgoing those who love you. We will be reunited after victory."

22

Right from the start, Al knew it was going to be a bad day.

First it was the body. Al was hardly a stranger to blood, he'd seen and been responsible for enough slaughter in his time, but this was turning his stomach. It had been a while before anyone noticed poor old Bernhard Allsop was missing. Who was going to care that the little weasel wasn't getting underfoot like usual? It was only when he skipped a couple of duty details that Leroy finally got round to asking where he was. Even then, it wasn't an urgent request. Bernhard's processor block didn't respond to datavises, so everyone assumed he was goofing off. A couple of guys were asked to keep an eye out. After another day, Leroy was concerned enough to bring it up at a meeting of senior lieutenants. A search was organized.

The security cameras found him eventually. At least, they located the mess. Confirming first what, then who it was had to be done in person.

There was a quite extraordinary amount of blood smearing the floor, walls, and ceiling. So much so, Al figured that more than one person had been whacked. But Emmet Morden said the quantity was about right for a single adult male.

Al lit a cigar, puffing heavily. Not for pleasure; the smoke

covered the smell of decaying flesh. Patricia's face was creased up in dismay as they stood around the corpse. Emmet held a handkerchief over his nose as he examined the remains.

The face was recognisably Bernhard. Though even now Al remained slightly doubtful. It was as though the skin had been roughly rearranged into Bernhard's features. A caricature rather than a natural face. Al had seen doctored photos before, this was the body equivalent.

"You're sure?" Al asked Emmet, who was prodding the blood-drenched clothing with a long stylus.

"Pretty much, Al. These are his clothes. That's his processor block. And you can't expect his face to be a close match, we only see illusions of each other, remember. His body's face was becoming him, but it takes time."

Al grunted, and took another look. The skin had shrunk to wrap tightly round the skull and jaw; a lot of capillaries had ruptured, and the eyeballs had burst. He turned away. "Yeah, okay."

Emmet plucked the processor block from Bernhard's rigid, clawed fingers, and gestured a couple of non-posessed medical orderlies to take over. They manoeuvred the desiccated corpse into a body bag. Both of them were sweating badly, struggling against nausea.

"So what happened?" Al asked.

"He was trapped in here by the pressure doors, then someone opened the airlock."

"I thought that was impossible."

"This airlock's been tricked out," Patricia said. "I checked. The electronic safeties were blown to shit, and someone sliced through the swing rods."

"You mean it was a proper professional hit," Al said.

Emmet was keying commands into Bernhard's block. There were few coherent responses, small blue spirals of light drifted through the holographic screen, fracturing any

icons which did emerge from the management program. "I think somebody datavised a virus into this. I'll have to link it up to a desktop and run a diagnostic to be sure. But he wasn't able to call for help."

"Kiera," Al said. "She did this. Nothing tripped the alarms. They knew he'd be using this corridor, and when. It takes organization to set up a hit this smart. She's the only one up here who could pull it off."

Emmet scraped at the bloody wall with the tip of his stylus. By now, the blood had dried to a fragile black film. Tiny dark flakes snowed away from the composite instrument. "Several days old, even taking vacuum boiling into account," Emmet said. "Bernhard never turned up for his assignment during the victory party, so I guess that's when it was done."

"Gives Kiera an alibi," Patricia said, sullen with resentment.

"Hey!" Al spat. "There ain't no goddamn federal courts up here. She doesn't get no fancy lawyer to smartmouth her out of this by screwing the jury's mind. If I say she did it, then that's it. Period. The bitch is guilty."

"She won't give herself up easily," Patricia said. "The way she's been stirring things over Trafalgar, the fleet is starting to get jittery about the Navy retaliating. She's got a lot of support, Al."

"Shit!" Al glared at the body bag, cursing Bernhard. Why couldn't the little asshole be stronger? Fight back against the bastards who whacked him, at least take a couple of them back to the beyond with him. Save me all this grief.

He relented. Bernhard had been loyal right from the moment he swung by in his make-believe Oldsmobile and picked up Al back in San Angeles. In fact that loyalty was probably what got him whacked. Chew away at the middle ranks, the really valuable ones, and you erode the power base of the guy at the top.

That motherfucking *bitch*.

“This is interesting.” Emmet was bending down to examine part of the corridor floor at one end of the bloodstain. “These marks here. Could be footprints.”

Suddenly interested, Al went over to take a look. The splotches of dried blood were roughly the right shape and size of someone’s boot sole. There were eight of them, becoming progressively smaller as they led towards the airlock.

He laughed abruptly. Goddamn. I’m doing fucking detective work! Me, a cop.

“I get it,” he said. “If they made prints, then the blood was still wet, right? That means it happened around the time Bernhard was killed.”

Emmet grinned. “You don’t need me.”

“Sure I do.” Al clapped him on the shoulder. “Emmet, my boy, you just made chief of police for this whole crummy rock. I want to know who did this, Emmet. I really want to know.”

Emmet scratched the back of his head, looking round the grisly murder scene, thinking out what needed to be done. These days, getting put on the spot by Al hardly affected his bladder at all. “A forensic team would be useful. I’ll check with Avram, see if we’ve got any police lab people that I can use up here.”

“If there ain’t, get them sent up from the planet,” Al said.

“Right.” Emmet was looking at the pressure door. “The guys doing the hit must have been close; that’s the only way to stop him from getting out. Breaking through a door like this would be no problem to a possessed, even Bernhard.” His stylus tapped the glass port in the middle of the door. “See? There’s no blood on this, even though it’s sprayed across the rest of the surface. They probably took a look at him, make sure he was dead.”

“If they stayed on the other side of the door, where did the footprints come from?”

“Dunno.” Emmet shrugged.

“This corridor got any of those police spy cameras fitted?”

“Yeah. I’ll review all their memories, but it’s pretty doubtful, Al. These guys are pros.”

“See what you can find for me, my boy. And in the meantime, pass the word, I want you guys taking a few precautions. Bernhard’s only the start. She’s gunning for all of us. And I can’t afford to lose any more of you. Capeesh?”

“I hear you, Al.”

“That’s good. Patricia, I think maybe we should return the compliment.”

Patricia’s thoughts swelled with dark delight. “Sure thing, boss.”

“Hit the bitch hard, someone she relies on. What’s that rat-face SOB always following her round? Got the psychic shit with the hellhawks?”

“Hudson Proctor.”

“That’s the guy. Bust his ass back to the beyond. But make sure he suffers some first, okay?”

There was a bunch of people waiting for Al when he got back to the Nixon suite. Leroy and Silvano, talking in low tones with Jez; worry hovering round them like a persistent fog. One guy (possessed) that Al didn’t recognize, who was being covered by a couple of his soldiers. The stranger had a head filled with the strongest thoughts Al had ever come across. His mind burned on pure anger alone. It deepened a shade when Al came in.

“Je-zus, what is going down here? Silvano?”

“Don’t you remember me, Al?” the stranger asked. The tone was dangerously mocking. His clothes began to change, flowing into the full dress uniform for a lieutenant

commander in the Confederation Navy. His face changed as well, stirring Al's memory.

Jezzibella gave Al a nervous flicker of a smile. "Kingsley Pryor's back," she said.

"Hey, Kingsley!" Al smiled broadly. "Man, is it good to see you. Shit, you're a fucking hero around these parts. You did it, man, you actually fucking did it. You wiped out the whole Confederation Navy single-handed. Can you believe this shit?"

Kingsley Pryor produced the kind of wide-eyed smile that troubled even Al. He wondered if the two soldiers were enough to keep the Navy man down.

"You just go right ahead believing that shit," Kingsley said. "That's fine by me. In the meantime, I killed fifteen thousand people for you. Now it's time for you to keep your end of the bargain. I want my wife, my child, and I've decided I want a starship, too. That's a little bonus you're going to award me for completing my mission."

Al spread his arms wide, his thoughts the epitome of reasonableness. "Well, hell, Kingsley, the agreement was you blow up Trafalgar from the inside."

"GIVE ME CLARISSA AND WEBSTER."

Al swayed back a pace. Kingsley was actually glowing: a light deep inside his body had flicked on, illuminating his face and uniform. Except for the eyes, they sucked light down. Both soldiers nervously tightened their grip on the Thompson machine guns they were holding.

"All right," Al said, attempting to calm things down. "Jesus, Kingsley, we're all on the same side here." He conjured up a Havana and held it out, smiling.

"Wrong." Kingsley stuck a rigid finger in the air, preacher-style, and slowly levelled it at Al. "Don't talk to me about taking sides, you piece of shit. I have died because of you. I have slaughtered my comrades because of you. So don't you ever *ever* think you can tell me anything about

faith, or trust, or loyalty. Now you either give me my wife and my son, or we settle this right here and now.”

“Hey, I ain’t holding nothing back. What you want, you got. Al Capone don’t break his word. You understand that? We had an agreement. That’s like solid greenback currency around here these days. And I don’t never welsh. Never! You understand? All I got here is my name, that is all I am worth. So you don’t go questioning that. I appreciate how fucked off you are. Okay, you got that right after what’s happened. But you don’t ever say to no one I went back on my promise.”

“Give me my wife and son.”

Al couldn’t understand how Kingsley’s teeth didn’t shatter, the man was crunching his jaw so hard. “No problem. Silvano, take Lieutenant-commander Pryor here to his wife and kid.”

Silvano nodded, and gestured Pryor to the door.

“And nobody laid a finger on them while you were gone,” Al said. “You remember that.”

Pryor turned at the door. “Don’t worry, Mr Capone, I won’t forget anything that’s happened here.”

Al sank down into the nearest chair when he’d gone. His arm curved round Jez for comfort, only to find she was trembling. “Je-zus H Christ fucking wept,” Al wheezed.

“Al,” Jez said firmly. “You have got to get rid of him. He frightened the bejezus out of me. Maybe sending him to Trafalgar wasn’t one of my better ideas.”

“Too fucking true. Leroy, for Christ’s sake tell me you found that kid of his.”

Leroy was running a finger round his collar. He looked scared. “We didn’t, Al. I don’t know where the little brat’s gone. We looked everywhere. He just vanished.”

“Fuck-a-doodle. Kingsley’s going to blow when he finds out. It’ll be a bloodbath. Leroy, you’d better start calling in

some of the guys. And no fucking marshmallows, either. It's going to take a lot of us to pound him."

"And then he can come straight back into another body," Jez said. "It just starts over again."

"I'll start another search for Webster," Leroy said. "The kid's got to be somewhere, for heaven's sake."

"Kiera," Jezzibella said. "If you really did look everywhere for him before, then he's got to be with Kiera."

Al shook his head in amazed admiration. "Goddamn, I can't believe I was dumb enough to let that woman into this rock. She doesn't miss a single trick."

Etchells emerged from his wormhole terminus ten thousand kilometres out from Monterey. The asteroid was a small grey disk traversing one of New California's sunlit turquoise oceans. Drab, but enormously welcoming. He could almost hear his stomach growling from hunger.

New California's defence network locked on to his hull, and he identified himself to the control centre in Monterey. They cleared him for a five-gee approach. His energy patterning cells couldn't quite manage that.

Clear a pedestal for me, he told the hellhawks on the docking ledge. **I need nutrient fluid.**

We all do, Pran Soo replied tartly. **There's a rota, remember?**

Don't fuck with me, bitch. I've been away longer than I expected. I'm exhausted.

And I'm heartbroken.

Pran Soo's attitude surprised him. Sure, the hellhawks grumbled and quarrelled; and none of them liked him. But this casual superior taunting was something new. He'd have to get to the reason eventually. But that would have to wait. He was genuinely concerned for his condition.

Where the hell have you been? Hudson Proctor asked. **Hesper-LN, if you must know.**

Where? There was a good deal of puzzlement in Hudson's mind.

Never mind. Just get a pedestal ready for me. And tell Kiera I'm back. There's a lot she needs to hear.

One of the feeding hellhawks was ordered to disengage from the pedestal it was using, freeing the metal mushroom for Etchells. He swung in over the ledge with little grace as the affinity band filled with gibes and derision about his flight path. Service crews stood well back as the big bitek starship wobbled uncertainly over the docking pedestal. It settled after a laboured descent, and the feed tubules rose up to insert themselves into its reception orifices. He started to gulp down the nutrient fluid as fast as it could be pumped in.

His on-board bitek processors datavised the section of the habitat Kiera had claimed as her own. She was in a lounge overlooking the docking ledge, sitting on one of its long sofas. Her dress was bright scarlet with a tight bodice fastened by cloth buttons. The skirt was loose enough for her to fold her legs up on the sofa, presenting a feline posture to the camera.

Etchells hesitated for a second, enjoying the small sexual thrill that came from so much young, beautifully shaped female skin on show for his benefit. It was a rare thing for him to wish he hadn't possessed a blackhawk. Kiera could do that. Not many others.

"I was worried about you," she said. "You are my principal hellhawk, after all. So what happened at the antimatter station?"

"Something odd. I think we've got real trouble. This goes way beyond everyone's little power plays. We're going to need help."

Rocio accessed Almaden's net to watch the repair operation. Deebank had kept his part of the bargain, co-opting all the non-possessed technicians left in the asteroid to work on the

nutrient fluid refinery. They had replaced the damaged heat exchanger out on the ledge, resealed the chamber Etchells's laser had breached, stripped down the machinery and rebuilt it using new components manufactured in their own industrial stations. That just left the electronics.

As soon as the *Mindori*'s bulk had settled on one of the asteroid's three docking pedestals, a team had unloaded the packages from its cargo bay. Integrating the new processors and circuits into the refurbished refinery had taken over a day. Operating programs had to be modified. Then start-up proved an arduous task. There were synthesis tests, integral analysis calibration runs, mechanical inspections, performance examinations, fluid quality reviews. Eventually, the first batch was pumped along the pipes to *Mindori*'s pedestal. The hellhawk's internal bitek taste filters took a sample, evaluating the protein structures suspended within the fluid.

"Tastes good," Rocio told the asteroid's expectant population. Their cheers at his verdict reverberated out from the synthesis refinery chamber, spreading like a high-frequency quake throughout the lonely rock.

"Do we have a deal?" a smiling Deebank asked.

"Absolutely. My colleagues will start lifting your people off. Possessed to the nearest world which Capone has seeded; non-possessed to the Edenists."

The haggard non-possessed nearest to the AV pillar broadcasting the link up heaved a huge sigh of relief. The news was passed on back to their hostage families.

Deebank and Rocio carried on their negotiations. The evacuation would be staged. First the refinery had to be checked out thoroughly for long-term continuous operation, any modifications to be made before the crews left. Mechanoids had to be adapted for specialised maintenance work. Technicians would stay on to train the disappointingly few hellhawk possessors who laid claim to a scientific back-

ground. The asteroid's fusion generators were to be overhauled for similar long-term duties. Vast quantities of raw hydrocarbon chemicals for the refinery were to be prepared and stored in tanks which had yet to be fabricated. Fuel supply reserves of deuterium and He3 were to be established so they could feed the remaining generators (not a problem now the settlement's biosphere cavern was to be powered down).

We can begin, Rocio told Pran Soo. Get our core sympathisers on high orbit patrol out here. They've just pulled transport duties. We can start ferrying the population to a possessed world.

Do you want a general exodus to Almaden?

Not yet. We'll keep this development to our group alone for now. It would be nice if more of us received a full weapons load before the Organization realizes we're deserting. Kiera is bound to try some kind of attack when she finds out.

There aren't many of us who'll follow her.

I know, but we play it safe. There's no telling what that bitch is capable of.

Jed and Beth stood behind the lounge's curving window, watching the hellhawks arrive. The creatures swooped down out of the stars to land on the two remaining pedestals. Blunt cylindrical crew buses trundled over the ledge, airlock tubes extending eagerly to mate with the life support capsule hatches.

A small square in the corner of the window shimmered with grey light and turned into Rocio's smiling face. "Looks like we've done it," he said. "I want to thank you; especially you, Jed. I know this hasn't been easy."

"Are they coming on board?" Beth asked.

"No. I'm swallowing back to Monterey in a couple of hours. I'll be missed if I don't report back at the end of my patrol orbit."

Jed's arm went round Beth, instinctively protective. "You said you'd take us to one of the Edenist habitats," he said.

"I will. All the non-possessed from Almaden will be handed over to them once our preparations here are finished. You'll go with them."

"Why can't we go first? We're the ones who helped you. You just said."

"Because I haven't even spoken to the Edenists about this, yet. I don't want their voidhawks showing up here and wrecking everything. Just be patient. You have my word I'll get you out of this."

Rocio cancelled his link to the lounge and began to alter the shape of his distortion field. It pushed him up off the docking pedestal, and he slipped away from the ledge. One of the hellhawks that had just swallowed in from New California passed him as it swooped down towards the vacated pedestal. They exchanged excited smile images across the affinity band.

Rocio's mood lifted further as he accelerated away from the asteroid. It was all coming together beautifully. His next priority was gathering as many fully-armed hellhawks as possible and deploying them to guard Almaden. Then in another couple of days he and Pran Soo would inform the remaining hellhawks about Almaden. Everyone would have to make their choice. He didn't expect many to stay with Kiera; Etchells, of course, probably Lopex; others who hadn't come to terms with their new form, or didn't fully understand its potential. Not enough to ruin the plan.

He swallowed back to New California, resuming his high-altitude patrol orbit. The planet turned peacefully two million kilometres below him. His distortion field swept out, carefully propagated ripples testing and probing the fabric of space-time. No voidhawks within a hundred thousand kilometres. Nor was there any sign of stealthed weapons or

sensor globes heading in towards the Organization ships and stations. Nobody asked him where he'd been.

An internal sensor check showed him the young kids playing some kind of tag game along the main corridor. Jed and Beth were in their cabin, screwing again. Rocio sighed fondly. What it was to be a teenager.

Two hours later, Hudson Proctor ordered him to report to the docking ledge.

What for? Rocio asked. **I have enough nutrient fluid for now.** In fact, he had filled every fluid reserve bladder at Almaden. If they were calling him in ahead of schedule for a feed, he'd have to vent it all before he got to Monterey.

We're going to install some auxiliary fusion generators in your cargo bays, Hudson Proctor said. **You've got the connections to receive power directly from them, haven't you?**

Yes. But why?

There's a long-range mission being planned. You fit the parameters.

What mission?

Kiera will tell you when you've been prepped.

Will I be using combat wasps as well?

Yes, we'll give you a full complement. They'll be loaded at the same time as the fusion generators. Your lasers need checking, too.

I'm on my way.

Al stared at Kiera, not quite believing she had the balls to turn up in his suite like this. Jez was at his side, arm tucked through his; Mickey, Silvano, and Patricia were bunched up behind him, along with half a dozen soldiers. Kiera was backed up by Hudson Proctor and eight of her goons on bodyguard duty. Animosity seeped out from both groups, thickening the air.

"You said it was urgent," Al said.

Kiera nodded. "It is. Etchells has just returned."

"That's the hellhawk who ran from the antimatter station when things looked tough?"

"He didn't run. He found out the Navy was up to something strange there. He thinks one of their ships was loaded with antimatter before the station was destroyed. Afterwards, it rendezvoused with a voidhawk, and the two of them flew to Hesper-LN. That's the Tyrathca world."

"I heard of them. They're like Martians, or something."

"Xenocs, yes."

"So what's this got to do with us?"

"The voidhawk and the other ship were very interested in an old Tyrathca spaceship that's orbiting Hesper-LN. Etchells thinks they put a team on board. After that, they took off for the Orion Nebula. That's where the Tyrathca came from originally. And it's a long way away."

"One thousand six hundred light-years," Jezzibella said.

"So?" Al asked. He couldn't work out her angle. "So what's this got to do with us?"

"Think about it," Kiera said. "We're in the middle of the biggest crisis the human race has ever known. And the Confederation Navy breaks the one law it enforces above all others. It actually helps fill a starship up with antimatter. Then that ship and another fly somewhere no other human has ever been before. And they're looking for something. What?"

"Fuck's sake," Al muttered. "How do I know?"

"It has to be something very, very important to them. Something the Tyrathca have got and the Navy wants. Bad enough to risk a war. Etchells said they actually fired on the Tyrathca ships when they were orbiting Hesper-LN. Whatever it is, they are desperate to get their hands on it."

"You trying to jerk me around here?" Al asked Kiera. He was losing his cool about the whole phoney meeting. Then, he always did when the talk turned to that space and ma-

chines stuff he couldn't quite follow. "We've been through all this superweapon shit before. I sent Oscar Kern and some guys after that Mzu broad and an Alchemist bomb. Fuck lot of good that did me."

"This is different," Kiera insisted. "I don't know exactly what the Navy's after, but it has to be something they can use against us. If it is a weapon, then it must be an extremely powerful one. Ordinary weapons are useless against us. If the Navy does put together enough force to harm us, we just leave this universe behind. They know that, especially after Ketton. We automatically protect ourselves; nothing can reach us on the other side. Nothing human, that is."

"Ho boy; lady, have you ever changed your tune. Yesterday you were telling me how nothing the longhairs dream up could ever touch us if we take New California out of here."

"This is xenoc technology. We don't know what it's capable of."

"This is bullshit," Al said in exasperation. "Maybe. If. Perhaps. Might be. You got zip and you know it. Know what? I heard this speech once before. The prosecution lawyer at my last trial used it. Everyone knew it was a bunch of crap then, and there ain't nothing changed since. And let me tell you, dark sister, you ain't even as convincing as he was."

"If the Confederation has something that can reach the planets we've removed, then we've already lost."

"Yeah? What's the matter, Kiera, running scared?"

"I can see I'm wasting my time. I should have known this was going to fly straight over your head." She turned to go.

Al got a hold on his temper. "Okay. Hit me."

"We send some ships after them," Kiera said. "I'm already preparing three hellhawks for pursuit duty. Just forget about our beef for one hour, and assign some of your frigates to go with them."

“You mean frigates armed with antimatter,” Al said.

“Of course. We have to have superior firepower. If possible, we capture the Tyrathca weapon. If not, we destroy it along with the Navy ships.”

Al chewed the idea over for a minute, enjoying the way Kiera got all antsy at the delay. “You want to cut a deal?” he asked. “Okay, I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you, and this is only because you’ve come over all noble about our future. I’ll let you have a couple of frigates; I’ll even arm them with half a dozen antimatter combat wasps each for you. How’s that?”

Kiera gave a relieved smile. “That’s good for me.”

“Glad to hear it.” Al’s grin shrank to nothing. “In return, all you gotta do is give me Webster.”

“*What?*”

“Webster fucking Pryor. That’s what.”

Kiera gave Hudson Proctor a confused look. The general shrugged with equal bewilderment. “Never heard of him,” he said.

“Then until you remember, it’s no deal,” Al said.

Kiera glared at him. For a moment, Al thought she was going to go for it.

“Fuckhead!” Kiera yelled. She spun round and stormed out.

“She’s sure got a way with words,” Al chuckled. “Real lady.”

Jezibella couldn’t share his humour. She had a troubled expression on her face as she regarded the big doors that had closed behind Kiera. “Maybe we should have a talk with Etchells ourselves,” she said. “Find out what the hell is going on.”

Everyone around Kiera kept very quiet as they took the lift up to the Hilton’s lobby. Her fury at Capone’s stupidity gradually cooled to an iron-hard determination. Capone

would have to be disposed of, and quickly. No question about it.

After that, there were new questions.

Etchells's story bothered her badly. She simply couldn't believe the Navy would send ships to the Orion Nebula without a very good reason. It had to be connected to possession somehow. With a weapon as the obvious choice. Infuriatingly, if that was the case, then Capone had been right all along about staying here and making a stand.

If she stuck with the original plan, to transfer the Organization down to New California and leave the universe, then there'd be no way to counter any future developments which the Confederation might make. Always a factor, but now requiring more urgent consideration.

And of course, once she gained control of the Organization fleet, she could dispatch a whole squadron of antimatter-armed frigates to the Orion Nebula. But then, she'd have to go with them. A quick glance at Hudson Proctor confirmed that. He was loyal, but only because she was the ride he'd chosen to get him to the top. Give him the chance to intercept a Tyrathca superweapon by himself, and he'd do to her what she was about to do to Capone. It was a bad corner to be backed into.

The lift door opened and she strode out into the lobby. This section of the Hilton was actually embedded into the asteroid's rock, connecting the external tower structure with the rest of the habitation zone via a warren of corridors. Several Organization gangsters were lounging around in the couches, drinking and talking as they were served by a non-possessed barkeeper. Three more gangsters were leaning against the long reception desk as a team of non-possessed cleaners worked to clear up the last of the trash left over from the Trafalgar victory party.

Kiera took it all in with a quick scan, trying not to let her tension show. She knew Capone's people wouldn't hassle

her on the way in. Getting out was something different altogether. All the gangsters had fallen silent, staring at her.

One of the exits led to a station serving Monterey's small metro tube network. It would be the quickest way of returning to the docking ledge territory she'd marked out as her own. But the carriages could be tampered with. Especially likely now they'd found Bernhard Allsop.

"We'll walk," she announced to her entourage.

They pushed through the tall glass doors and went out into the wide public hall outside. Nobody tried to interfere or block them. The few pedestrians in the hall gave them a wide berth as they marched along determinedly.

"How long until the hellhawks are refitted?" Kiera asked.

"Another couple of hours," Hudson Proctor said. He frowned. "Jull von Holger says the SD sensors have lost track of the *Tamaran*. It was on high-orbit patrol."

"Did the voidhawks kill it?"

"I never heard a death cry; neither did any of the other hellhawks. And ambushing our ships would be a big change of policy for the Edenists."

"Run an SD sensor check on the other patrol hellhawks, make sure they're still with us." Kiera let out a disgusted breath. Another complication. She didn't like to think about the hellhawks defecting to the Edenists. Their offers of refuge were still pretty constant from what Hudson, Jull, and the other affinity-capable told her. The only other alternative—that Capone had finally repaired a nutrient fluid refinery—was even worse.

A few metres in front of her, a non-possessed shambling along behind a trolley loaded with food suddenly veered across the hall. Annoyed, she stepped sideways to avoid the wayward trolley. The man pushing it was a wreck, unshaven, his grey jump-suit crumpled and dirty, oily hair smeared across his brow. A haggard face was screwed up in an expression of total anguish. She'd paid him no attention,

just like all the other non-posessed she encountered in Monterey, because his mind was a standard jumble of misery and fear.

He opened his arms wide, and grabbed her in a fierce bear hug that turned into a rugby tackle. "Mine!" he howled. "You're mine." They crashed painfully to the floor, Kiera's knee cracking against the carbon-concrete. "Darling, baby, Marie, I'm here. I'm here."

"Daddy!" She didn't say it. The voice came from within, rising irresistibly from Marie Skibbow's imprisoned mind. Incredulity poured through Kiera's thoughts, smothering her own responses. Marie was sweeping back towards full control.

"I'm going to get her out of you, I promise," Gerald shouted. "I know how. Loren told me."

Hudson Proctor finally recovered from his shock, and leant over the squirming couple to grab Gerald's sleeve. He pulled hard, muscles reinforced by energistic strength, attempting to tear the deranged man free from Kiera. Gerald stabbed a small power cell against Hudson's hand, its naked electrodes digging deep. Hudson screamed as the excruciating bolt of electricity flowed across his skin. He lurched back in terror and pain, a bud of flame sizzling bright from his hand. Two of the bodyguards pounced on Gerald, trapping his legs and one arm. He bucked about frantically.

Kiera went skidding over the floor, barely aware of the disorderly scrum tumbling around her. Her limbs were starting to move in the way which Marie commanded, as the girl's thoughts expanded rapidly back along their old pathways. She concentrated on fighting the girl's re-emergence.

Gerald jabbed the power cell towards Marie's face, the electrodes halting millimetres from her eyes. "Get out of her," he raged. "Out! Out! She's mine. My baby!"

One of the bodyguards grabbed his wrist and twisted hard. Gerald's bone shattered. The power cell dropped to the

floor. Gerald screamed in fury. He slammed his elbow back with berserker strength. It caught the bodyguard in his stomach, doubling him up.

“Daddy!”

“Marie?” Gerald gasped, fearful with hope.

“Daddy.” Marie’s voice was dwindling. “Daddy, help.”

Gerald scabbled round desperately for the power cell. His cold fingers closed around it. Hudson Proctor landed on his back, and the two of them rolled over together.

“Marie!” He could see her beautiful face in front of him. Shaking like a dog coming out of deep water, hair fanning round.

“Not any more,” she snarled. Her fist smashed dead into Gerald’s nose.

Kiera slowly climbed to her feet, swaying slightly as long tremors clattered along her body. The bitch girl was back where she belonged, weeping at the centre of her brain. One of the bodyguards was curled up on the floor, clutching his abdomen, cheek resting in a small puddle of vomit. Hudson Proctor was hopping about, shaking his hand violently as if it was still on fire. A deep pock of blackened flesh above his knuckles was trailing smoke, filling the air with a disgusting smell. His eyes were shedding tears of pain. The remaining bodyguards were standing round Gerald, spoiling for trouble.

“I’m going to kill the bastard!” Hudson shouted. He kicked Gerald hard in the ribs.

“Enough,” Kiera said. She wiped a shaking hand across her forehead. Her tangle of hair stirred itself, straightening out and flowing back to its usual dark glossy arrangement. She looked down at Gerald. He was groaning faintly, fingers pawing weakly at his side where Hudson had kicked him. Blood was pumping out from his flattened nose. His thoughts and emotions were a discordant nonsense. “How the fuck did he get here?” she grumbled.

“You know him?” Hudson asked in surprise.

“Oh yes. This is Marie Skibbow’s father. Last seen on Lalonde. Which was last seen departing this universe.”

Hudson gave an uncomfortable flinch. “You don’t think they’re coming back, do you?”

“No.” Kiera glanced along the hall. Three of Al’s gangsters had emerged from the Hilton’s lobby to look at what was going on.

“We have to move. Get him up,” she told her bodyguards.

They grabbed Gerald under his shoulders and hauled him upright. His dazed eyes peered at Kiera. “Marie,” he pleaded.

“I don’t know how you got here, Gerald, but we’ll find that out eventually. You must really love your daughter to have attempted this.”

“Marie, baby, Daddy’s here. Can you hear me? I’m here. Please, Marie.”

Kiera bent her bruised knee, wincing at the lick of pain which the movement brought. She focused her energetic power around the joint, feeling it ease up. “Ordinarily, just working you over ready to receive a soul from the beyond would be punishment enough. But after all you’ve done, you deserve better.” She smiled, leaning in closer. Her voice became husky. “You’re going to be possessed, Gerald. And the lucky boy who wins your body is going to get me as well. I’m going to take him to bed, and let him fuck me any way he wants, as much as he wants. And you’re going to feel it happening the whole time, Gerald. You’re going to feel yourself fucking your darling daughter.”

“Noooo!” Gerald howled, shuddering in his captor’s grip. “No, you can’t. You can’t!”

Kiera slowly licked Gerald’s cheek, holding his head fast as he tried to squirm away. Her mouth arrived at his ear. “It won’t be Marie’s first perversion, Gerald,” she whispered smoothly. “I enjoy how hot this body gets when I use it to

perform my deviancies. And I have a lot of them, as you'll find out."

Gerald began a tormented wailing; his knees buckled. "It hurts again," he bumbled. "My head hurts. I can't see anything. Marie? Where are you, Marie?"

"You'll see her, Gerald, I promise I'll open your eyes for you." Kiera jerked her head at the bodyguards holding the wretched madman. "Bring him."

The office Emmet Mordden had claimed for himself was on the same corridor as the tactical operations centre. Its previous occupant, the Admiral commanding New California's SD network, had favoured striking colours for his furniture. The easy chairs were purple, scarlet, lemon, and emerald, while his curving desk was a perfect mirror. A continual holographic screen formed a narrow band circling the room half-way up the wall, showing a view out over a coral reef colonized by some xenoc species of aquatic termites. Emmet didn't mind, like all possessed he enjoyed the impact of strong colours, and found the ocean relaxing. Besides, there was a very powerful desktop processor which allowed him to track down most of the problems he was given, and he was close to the Organization's communication centre when a crisis hit—like five times a day. The admiral also had an excellent stash of booze.

When Al came in he gave the easy chairs a disapproving grunt. "I gotta sit in one of those? Je-zus, Emmet, don't you tell no one. I got an image around here." Al sat in the one nearest the desk and rested his fedora on its wide arm. He took a longer look round. Same as everywhere else in the asteroid. Trash piling up, food wrappers and cups, along with a pile of clothes in one corner waiting for the laundry. If anyone should have room service sorted, he expected it to be Emmet. Bad sign that he hadn't. But the brain boy had been busy in other ways. His desk was covered in those electric

calculation machines, all stitched together with glass wire. Picture screens lined the edge of the desk, standing on things like sheet music racks; the whole set up was hurried, just out of the workshop. “You been busy by the looks of things.”

“I have.” Emmet gave him a pensive look. “Al, I gotta tell you, I’ve wound up with more questions than when we started.”

“Figures.”

“First off, I checked the corridor cameras, and all the ones round about that area. They came to a big zero. I don’t know who killed Bernhard, but they definitely messed with the camera processors. The memories were deleted, someone used a codebuster against our protocols.”

“Emmet . . . come on, man, you know I don’t grab any of that shit.”

“Sorry, Al. Okay, it’s like the photos the cameras take are automatically locked inside a safe. Well, somebody cracked it, took the photos out, then locked it up again behind them.”

“Shit. So no pictures, huh?”

“Not in the corridor, no. So I widened the search and hunted through the cameras outside, the ones covering the ledge.” He tapped one of the makeshift screens. “Watch.”

A picture of the docking ledge sprang up. They were looking down on the airlock as it jetted air out to the stars. Two spacesuited figures stood watching it. One of them started bounding towards the open hatch. After a short interval, the other one followed him.

“Nothing happens for a couple of minutes,” Emmet said.

The image zipped with static, then the two spacesuits emerged from the airlock and carried on walking down the ledge.

“The footprint guys?” Al suggested.

“I think so. But I don’t think they’re part of Bernhard’s hit.”

“Sure they are. They didn’t holler about what happened.”

“They’re in spacesuits, so they’re not possessed. Look at it from their angle. They’ve just stumbled over the newly dead corpse of one of your senior lieutenants, and they’ve even got his blood on their boots. There’s no one else around they can point the finger at. What would you do?”

“Keep my mouth shut,” Al agreed. “Do you know who they are?”

“This is where it gets odd. I backtracked them; they came out of a hellhawk called *Mindori*.”

“Goddamn! Kiera’s people.”

“I don’t think so.” The camera memory played on, showing the two spacesuited figures getting into a small truck and driving it round to another airlock. “I couldn’t get a record off the cameras in this section either. So I don’t know what they got up to inside. But it was a different program which erased their memories, not the same one used in Bernhard’s hit.” One of the spacesuited figures re-emerged onto the docking ledge and loaded several trays of small packages onto the truck. It was then driven back to the *Mindori*. The figure eventually climbed back up into the hellhawk’s life support module.

“Kiera doesn’t use non-possessed to crew her hellhawks,” Emmet said. “And that guy was still on board when it took off. The other one must still be inside the habitat.”

“Je-zus. He’s walking around in here?”

“Looks that way. All we know for sure is that they’re nothing to do with Kiera.”

“But he could be the goddamn Confederation Navy. Some kind of assassin. Their version of Kingsley Pryor.”

“I’m not so sure, Al. Those boxes in the truck. I ran a search through our store’s inventory. It’s not exactly tight at the best of times, but there’s a lot of electronics I can’t account for. I can’t see the Confederation Navy breaking in here to steal a truck full of spare parts. That doesn’t make any sense.”

Al stared at the screen, which had frozen on the last image of the spacesuited guy stepping into *Mindori's* airlock. "All right, so we've got two separate things going on here. Kiera hits Bernhard, and a hellhawk helps someone steal our electrical stuff. The first one I can understand. But the hellhawk . . . Can you figure what it's doing?"

"No. But it's back here right now. We can just ask it straight out. *Mindori* docked on the ledge this morning. Kiera's got her engineering teams out there fitting it ready for a long-duration flight. Something else to consider: our defence network says another hellhawk has gone missing from its patrol. They're running a check on the rest to see how many are still there."

Al leaned back into the chair, and grinned happily. "They could be trying to break free. How long till that food factory they need is fixed?"

"Another week. Five days if we really hustle."

"Then hustle, Emmet. Meantime I'm going out to take a ride in Cameron. He can talk to the other hellhawks for me, without Kiera listening in."

Gerald's fractured thoughts slithered through a universe of darkness and pain. He didn't know where he was, what he was doing. He didn't really care. Flashes erupted from time to time as neurons made erratic connections, releasing bright images of Marie. His thoughts clustered round them like worshipful congregations. The reason for such adulation was slipping from him.

Voices began to impinge on his miserable existence. A chorus of whispers. Insistent. Relentless. Growing louder, stronger. They began to intrude on his vague consciousness.

A blast of white-hot pain put him in sudden, frightening contact with his body again.

Let us in. End the torment. We can help.

The pain changed position and texture. Burning.

We can stop it.

I can stop it. Let me in. I want to help.

No, me. I'm the one you need.

Me.

I'm have the secret to end their torture.

There was sound. Real sound, rattling through the air. His own thin screams. And laughter. Cruel cruel laughter.

Gerald.

No, he told them. No, I won't. Not again. I'd rather die.

Gerald, let me in. Don't fight.

I'll die for Marie. Rather that . . .

Gerald, it's me. Feel me. Know me. Taste my memories.

She said . . . She said she'd . . . Oh no. Not that. Don't make me, not with her. No.

I know. I was there. Now let me come through. It's difficult, I know. But we have to help her. We have to help Marie. This is the only way now.

Astonishment at the soul's identity crumbled his mental barriers. The soul roared through from the beyond, permeating his body; the energy it brought seething along his limbs, sparkling down his spinal column. Invigorating. New memories invaded his synapses, colliding with the emplaced recollections in cascades of sights, sounds, tastes, and sensation. It wasn't like before. Before, he'd been confined, shoved down to the very edge of awareness, knowing of the outside by the tiniest trickle of nerve impulses. A passive, near-insensate passenger/prisoner in his own body. This time it was a more equal partnership, though the newcomer was dominant.

Gerald's eyes opened, a flush of energistic power helping them to focus. Another application finally banished the terrible headache that had raged for so long.

Two of Kiera's bodyguards were smirking down at him.

“Who’s a lucky boy then,” one chortled. “Man, you are in for the shag of a lifetime tonight.”

Gerald raised a hand. Two searing spears of white fire flashed from his fingertips, drilling straight through the craniums of both bodyguards. Four souls gibbered their fury as they plunged back into the beyond.

“I have other plans for this evening, thank you,” said Loren Skibbow.

It had been a while since Al took a ride in his rocketship. Sitting in the fat green-leather couch on the hellhawk’s promenade deck made him realize just how long. He stretched out, putting his feet up.

“Where can I take you, Al?” Cameron’s voice asked from the silver tannoy grill on the wall.

“Just off Monterey, you know.” He needed a break, just a short time alone to get his head around what was happening. In the old days he would have just gone for a drive, maybe take a fishing rod with him. Golf, too, he’d played golf a few times; though not to any rules the Royal and Ancient had ever heard about. Just buddies fooling round on a fine day.

The view through the big forward window showed him the asteroid’s counter-rotating spaceport slipping away overhead as they leapt off the docking ledge. Gravity inside the cabin was rock steady. New California tracked in from the riveted steel rim around the window, a silvery half crescent, like the moon had looked on clear summer nights above Brooklyn. He never could get used to how much cloud planets had. It was amazing anyone on the surface ever saw the sun.

Cameron was curving out from the big asteroid, rolling continually like a playful dolphin. If Al looked back through the portholes down the side of the promenade deck, he could see brilliant sunlight sweeping over the yellow fins and scarlet fuselage.

“Hey, Cameron, can you show me the Orion Nebula?”

The hellhawk’s antics slowed. Its nose swung across the starscape, hunting like a compass needle. “There we go. Should be dead centre in the window now.”

Al saw it then, a delicate haze of light, like God had wet his thumb and smeared a star across the canvas of space. He sat back in the couch and drank cappuccino from a tiny cup as he looked at it. Weird little thing. A fog in space, Emmet said. Where stars are born. The Martians and their death rays lived on the other side.

There was no way he could get his head round that. The idea of the Navy ships going there had frightened Kiera, and even Jez was concerned. But it didn’t connect for him. He was going to have to ask for advice again. He sighed, acknowledging the inevitable. But there were some things he could still take care of by himself. Chicago had more territories, factions and gangs than the whole Confederation put together. He knew how to manipulate them. Make new friends, lose old ones. Apply some heat. Bribe, blackmail, extort. Nobody today, living or dead, had his kind of political experience. Prince of the city. Then, now, and always.

“Cameron, I want to talk to a hellhawk called *Mindori*, and I want it confidential.”

The sharply pointed scarlet nose began to turn, sending the nebula sliding from view. Monterey reappeared, a grubby ochre splodge with pinpricks of light shimmering around its spaceport.

“The guy’s name is Rocio, Al,” Cameron said.

A square in the corner of the window turned grey, then swirled into a face. “Mr Capone,” Rocio said politely. “I’m honoured. What can I do for you?”

“I don’t like Kiera,” Al told him.

“Who does? But we’re both stuck with her.”

“You’re hurting me, Rocio. You know that’s bullshit. She’s got you by the short and curlies because she blew up

all your food factories. What if I told you I might be able to rebuild one?"

"Okay, I'm interested."

"I know you are. You're trying to set one up yourself. That's why you grabbed those electric gadgets the other day, right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We got it all on film, Rocio; your guys breaking in to Monterey and driving a truckload of stuff back to you."

"I was docked for a routine maintenance overhaul, some replacement components were fitted, so what?"

"Want me to check on that with Kiera?"

"I thought you didn't like her."

"I don't, that's why I came to you first."

"What do you want, Mr Capone?"

"Two things. If your factory doesn't work out, come and talk to me, okay? We can arrange much better terms than Kiera's giving you. No rumbles, for a start. You hellhawks just keep a look out for us around New California. That long-range sight of yours is a valuable commodity. I respect that, and I'm prepared to pay you the top-dollar price for it."

"I'll consider the offer. What's the other thing?"

"I want to talk to the guy who saw the murder. That was a good friend of mine got whacked. I got some questions about it for your guy."

"Not in person. He's useful to me, I don't want him taken away."

"Hell no. I know he ain't a possessed. I just wanna talk, is all."

"Very well."

Al sat drinking the rest of his coffee for a minute, trying to display patience. When Jed's sullen suspicious face finally appeared he laughed softly. "I'll be goddamned. How old are you, kid?"

"What do you care?"

“I’m impressed, that’s why. You got balls, I’ll say that for you, kid. Waltzing straight into my headquarters and stinging me for a hundred grand’s worth of electrical garbage. That’s the kind of style I like. Ain’t many in this universe would have done that.”

“Didn’t have any choice,” Jed grunted.

“Hell, I know that. I grew up in a tough neighbourhood myself. I know how it works when you’re on the bottom of the pile. You gotta show the boss you can take the heat, right? If you can’t take it, you ain’t no use to him. You get kicked out, because there’s always some other wiseass who thinks he can do better.”

“Are you really Al Capone?”

Al ran his hands down his jacket lapel. “Check out the threads, sonny. Nobody else got my class.”

“So what do you want to talk to me for?”

“I need to know things. Now, I can’t offer you much in return. I mean, you ain’t too keen to come visit me in person. I can appreciate that, so I can’t give you no reward; dames, booze, that kind of thing. What I got plenty of is local currency. You heard about that?”

“Some kind of tokens?”

“Yeah. Tokens, backed up by my word. If I say you owe somebody something, then you have to pay. So I’ll owe you three favours. Me, Al Capone, I will personally go into debt to you. That’s bankable on any possessed planet. Now you can’t ask for stuff like world peace, or crap like that. But any service or help you need, it’s yours. Think of it as the ultimate insurance. I mean, us possessed, we’re spreading through this universe. So, you game?”

It wasn’t a smile, but the sullen scowl had gone. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“First off, that other guy with you, the one you left behind. Is he here to kill me?”

“Gerald? Christ, no. He’s ill, real bad.” Jed brightened.

“Hey, that’s my first favour. His name is Gerald Skibbow, and if you find him, I want you to bung him in a proper hospital with real doctors and stuff.”

“Okay. This is more like it, we got a dialogue here, you and me. Okay, Gerald Skibbow. If we find him, he gets good medical care. Now the other thing is, I want to know if you saw anyone else hanging around in that corridor when you found the corpse.”

“There was one bloke, yeah. I saw him through the glass in the door. Didn’t see much of him. Got a long nose. Oh, and really thick eyebrows. You know, the kind that meet over your nose.”

“Luigi,” Al growled. I should have known he’d side with Kiera. Disciplining people always sparks off a shitload of resentment. He’s going to have contacts among the fleet officers, too, a lot of contacts. She’ll love that. “Thanks kid, I still owe you a couple of favours.”

Jed gave an exaggerated nod. “Right.” His image faded out.

Al let out an infuriated breath. Partly angry at himself. He should have kept an eye on Luigi. It was this whole return setup. You couldn’t have a wiseguy whacked no more, because there was a good chance he’d come back somewhere on New California, and madder at you than when the beef started.

A wave of surprise and consternation flowed through the souls in the beyond, for once drawing Al’s attention. Something momentous was happening. Terror and awe at the event were the dominant sensations spiralling off from the relayed impression.

“What?” Al asked them. “What is it?”

Nothing like that first agonising blow against Mortonridge, thank Christ. When he concentrated on the slippery grey images fluttering from soul to soul he saw a sun with another sun erupting out of it. Space was filled with flame,

and death flooded inexorably across the sky like a storm-front.

Arnstat!

“Holy Christ,” Al gasped. “Cameron? You seeing this?”

“Loud and clear. I think the hellhawks swallowed out.”

“Don’t blame them.” Organization warships were vanishing inside blossoming shells of dazzling white light.

The Confederation Navy had answered Trafalgar in a way he had never dreamed they would. Brute force on an irresistible level. His warships were helpless. Their precious antimatter useless. “Don’t they understand?” he asked the desperate souls. “Arnstat will go.”

Already flashes of joy were cutting through the beyond as a multitude of bodies were proffered for possession. The reality dysfunction around Arnstat began to strengthen as more and more possessed added themselves to its gestalt. With the Organization’s orbital weapons falling to earth in a rain of smoke there was nothing left to prevent them.

“Cameron, get me home. Fast.”

He knew what would happen. The Confederation Navy would visit New California next, its imminent arrival presenting Kiera with her main chance. This time the lieutenants and soldiers would most likely listen when she told them they should return to the planet.

A bad day getting worse.

The hostage families of the starship crew members were held on several floors of a hotel overlooking Monterey’s biosphere. During the day, they gathered together in the building’s lounges and public areas to provide each other with whatever mutual comfort they could muster. It wasn’t much. They had become a weary crowd surviving each day on shattered nerves: barely fed, denied information, ignored and despised in equal measure by their Organization guards.

Silvano and the two gangsters ushered Kingsley into the

hotel's conference suite. He saw Clarissa immediately, helping serve the morning meal. She caught sight of him and cried out, dropping her serving spatula into the pan of beans. Everybody watched as they embraced.

She was overjoyed to see him. For the first minute. Then Kingsley could stand the dishonesty no longer, and confessed what he had become. She stiffened, backing away in anguish. Wanting to block out the words, for them never to have been spoken.

"How did it happen?" she asked. "How did you die?"

"I was in a starship. There was an antimatter explosion."

"Trafalgar?" she whispered. "Was it Trafalgar, Kingsley?"

"Yes."

"Oh dear God. Not you. Not that."

"I have to know something. I'm sorry I'm not asking about you—I should be, I guess—but this is the most important thing in the universe right now. Do you know where Webster is?"

She shook her head. "They keep us apart. He was assigned to the kitchen staff by that fat collaborator bastard Octavius. I used to see him every week. But it's been over a fortnight since they brought him last. None of them will tell me anything." She broke off at the strange smile rising on Kingsley's face. "What is it?"

"He was telling the truth."

"Who?"

"I was told that Webster had gotten away from the Organization, that he was on a starship. Now you tell me you haven't seen him, and Capone can't find him."

"He's free?" The knowledge overcame her reluctance, and she reached out to touch him again.

"It looks that way."

"Who told you?"

"I don't know. Someone very strange. Clarissa, believe

me, there's a lot more going on in this universe than we realised."

Her smile was tragic. "I can hardly doubt my dead husband."

"Time to go," he said abruptly.

"Go where?"

"For you, anywhere but here. Capone owes me that, but I suspect I might have trouble trying to collect. So we'll just take this one stage at a time."

He walked over to the conference suite's door, Clarissa following timidly behind him. The two gangsters lounging by the door straightened up as he approached; Silvano had disappeared, and they didn't know what they were supposed to do.

"I'm leaving now," Kingsley said in a smoothly reasonable tone. "Be sensible. Move aside."

"Silvano won't like this," one said.

"Then he should tell me in person. It's not your job." He concentrated on the door, visualising it swinging open.

They tried to prevent it, focusing their own power on keeping it shut. A black magic version of arm wrestling.

Kingsley laughed as the door crashed open. He looked from one gangster to the other, eyebrow arched in mocking challenge. Unopposed, he stepped through, and took Clarissa's hand.

Behind him, one of the gangsters picked up an ivory telephone and dialled furiously.

Gerald walked cautiously along the corridor, pausing by each door to discover if anyone was inside. It took a lot of Loren's attention just to make sure his legs moved in a regular motion. The state of his mind had horrified his wife; thoughts disjointed, personality retarded to a childlike confusion, memories becoming fainter and difficult to recall. Only his emotions remained at their adult strength, unmolli-

fied by reason and consideration. They pummelled what was left of his rationality with the sharp peaks of extreme states. He experienced fear, never mild anxiety; shame not embarrassment.

She was constantly having to calm and soothe, offering the kind of persistent encouragement longed for by every child. Her presence was a comfort to him, he kept talking to her, a stream of consciousness drivel she found highly distracting.

He was in bad physical shape, too. The crude injuries Kiera's goons had inflicted were easy enough to heal with energistic power. But his body remained perpetually cold, and there was a nasty sharp ache behind his temples which even energistic power couldn't banish entirely. What he needed was a week of proper sleep, a month of good meals, and a year on a psychiatrist's couch. It would have to wait.

They were somewhere inside the docking ledge spaceport which Kiera had taken over for herself and her fraternity. Cabal Centre. Except it was virtually deserted. Apart from the two goons she'd killed, she'd seen only three other possessed. None of them had paid her any attention, hurrying along with fraught minds to obey whatever orders they'd received. The lounges and halls were all empty.

Loren entered the main lounge, almost familiar with the bland decorations and subdued furniture. She'd seen this place often enough from the beyond. Kiera's haunt.

Gerald's hand ran over the woolly fabric of the couch. Marie had sat on it for hours, talking to her fellow conspirators. The coffee machine; she'd had that brought in along with fine china. It was bubbling away, filling the lounge with its aromatic scent. His eyes moved fast across the door to her bedroom. The men she'd taken in there.

Loren tried asking the souls of the beyond where she was. But the agitation and unrest created by Arnstat was snarling up their bitter cacophony even more than usual. There were

some glimpses of a female shape. Possibly her. Running with a group of people along an unknown corridor.

The face was less like Marie's than it used to be.

Loren swore viciously. To have come this far. She and Gerald enduring horrors greater than anyone knew existed. To have prevailed through all that. To be *so* close. Whatever omnipotent entity had designed the beyond must surely have come up with the concept of fate as well.

She could feel Gerald starting to crumple in utter dismay as the prospect of reclaiming their daughter started to recede once again. It will not happen, she promised him.

As she moved across the lounge she saw a hellhawk on its pedestal outside. Gerald's surprise halted her as he recognised the *Mindori's* naked form. Platforms and mobile gantries were ranged up against its cargo holds, each one surrounded by bright floodlights. Maintenance crews in sleek black SII spacesuits were installing bulky equipment modules, mating their power and coolant lines to the spacecraft's existing utility points. Though she couldn't understand any of the activity, Loren was confident they now had an escape route when the time came. Providing that time was soon.

She left the lounge and descended one level. This was the engineering section, though none of its workforce had spent much time on internal upkeep recently. Lightpanels along the corridor roof were a feeble yellow; a few of the air ducts buzzed irritably as they blew out erratic streams of air, but most were still. The only clue it wasn't entirely abandoned came from a near-subliminal humming thrown out by heavy machinery. Loren swivelled round trying to guess the direction, curious about what could be functioning at such a pace when nobody else was around.

When she finally located the guilty door and opened it, she emerged into a vast maintenance shop that had been converted into a cybernetic factory. Rows of industrial ma-

chinery were pounding away with furious intent, hammering, drilling, and cutting components out of raw metal. Crude conveyer belts had been set up between them, carrying the freshly minted chunks of metal to assembly tables at one end. Over two dozen non-possessed workers were employed building machine guns. They were stripped to the waist, their skin gleaming with sweat from the unfiltered heat given off by the machinery.

None of it really registered with Gerald, while Loren looked round in complete confusion. She walked over to one of the non-possessed workers.

“Hey! You. What the hell are these for?”

The man looked up in shock, then bowed his head. “They’re guns,” he grunted sullenly.

“I can see that, but what are they for?”

“Kiera.”

It was all the answer she was going to get from him. Loren picked up one of the guns, her hands slipping on the fine spray of protective oil. Neither she nor Gerald knew much about weapons outside of a didactic course they’d both taken to handle the laser hunting rifle they were allowed on the homestead. Even so, this looked strange. She watched one being put together. Its firing mechanism was too large, and the barrel was lined with some kind of composite.

Memories which belonged to neither of them foamed away behind Gerald’s eyes. Memories of mud and pain. Of dark humanoid monsters armed with blazing machine guns, advancing with deadly inexorability out of the grey rain.

Mortonridge. Kiera was building the kind of weapons the Confederation had used at Mortonridge. Against the possessed!

Loren looked round the factory again, thoroughly unnerved by what she was seeing. The production rate must run into hundreds a day. She was surrounded by non-possessed

churning out the one weapon that could blast her back to the beyond in a second. If they had any ammunition.

She checked over the gun she was holding, wiping off the surplus oil with a tissue. Satisfied it was fully functional, she left the factory and started hunting for the second one. It wouldn't be too far away.

Monterey was twenty kilometres away; Cameron's approach made it look as though the asteroid was moving to eclipse New California. Sliding across the crescent as it expanded in the promenade deck's big window. The flight path, coming in at ninety degrees to the rotation axis made it look as though the rock was sprouting a glittery metallic mushroom straight up. That changed as Cameron curved round above the counter-rotating spaceport, and started to slide in parallel to the spindle. The docking ledge was directly ahead, a deep circular gully chiselled into the rock, with tiny brilliant lights on one side producing wide circles of illumination on the other. Orientation shifted again as the hellhawk chased the asteroid's rotation, turning the gully sides to a floor and ceiling. And Al finally began to understand the way centrifugal force worked.

An explosion bloomed out of the cliff-face rear of the ledge, quarter of the way round from Cameron's position. It came from a section of rock that was clad in a big mosaic of metal and composite equipment. A broad fountain of brilliant white gas, moving sluggishly enough to be a liquid, spitting out from a jagged hole at the centre of the machinery. Tiny chunks of solid matter spun through the plume.

Al took the Havana from his mouth and crossed over to the window, pressing against it for a better look. "Holy shit. Cameron, what the hell was that? Is the Navy here already?"

"No, Al. There's been a breach in the rock. I'm monitoring the radio, nobody's quite sure what happened."

“Where did it happen?” Al was straining to see if there were any hellhawks or people on the ledge near the plume.

“It’s in an industrial sector, where you were repairing that nutrient fluid refinery.”

Al slammed the palm of his hand into the window. “That *bitch!*” His three small scars were snow-white against a burning cheek. He stared at the plume as it slowly died down, exposing the crumpled wreckage that was peeling away from the vertical rock. “Okay, a straight fight is what she wants, that what she gets.”

“Al, I’m picking up a broadband message to the fleet. It’s Kiera.”

One of the small circular ports along the side of the observation deck shimmered over and began showing Kiera’s face. “. . . after Arnstat there can be no alternative. The Confederation Navy is coming, and with the numbers to defeat us. Unless you want to be banished back to the beyond, we have to transfer ourselves down to the planet. I have the means to do this, and the ability to maintain our authority on the surface without relying on the SD platforms and anti-matter. Everything you have now, your status and position, can be continued under my patronage. And this time around you don’t have to risk yourselves on those dangerous war missions of Capone’s. His day is over. For those of you who choose to have a privileged future, get in touch with Luigi, he will be joining you in the *Swabia*. If you follow him to low orbit, I will provide the means to establish yourselves on the surface. Anyone who wants to stay and wait for the Navy, feel free.”

“Damnit.” Al picked up the black telephone. “Cameron, get me Silvano.”

“He’s there, boss.”

“Silvano?” Al yelled. “You hearing Kiera?”

“I hear her, boss,” the lieutenant’s voice crackled.

“Tell Emmet he’s to stop any ship that doesn’t stay where

it is any way he God damn can. I'll talk to the fleet myself later. And I want that fucking message closed down. Now! Send a bunch of our soldiers to surround her headquarters, don't let anybody out. I'm gonna come and deal with her personally. Tonight she starts sleeping with the fish."

"You got it."

"I'll be docking any minute. I want you and some of the guys there to meet me. Loyal ones, Silvano."

"We'll be waiting."

Luigi arrived at the base of the docking spindle feeling pretty damn good. The waiting and plotting had been getting to him, too much like sneaking around in the dark. He was an out-in-the-open kind of guy. Kiera had insisted he keep a low profile: he was still running round after that nobody Malone down in the gym, shovelling shit for non-possessed. The times when he got out to meet his old friends flying the Organization warships were few and far between, and at the meetings all he did was drop a few words of sedition, plant the seeds of doubt.

Every time he'd go back to Kiera and assure her the fleet was losing patience with Capone. Which was so. But he hyped the figures a little, carving himself a bigger slice.

Now that didn't matter any more. He'd walked out of Malone's cruddy basement as soon as Arnstat registered, not even waiting for Kiera's call. This was it, their chance. Once he was back out there with the fleet, all those numbers wouldn't mean shit. They'd follow him again, he knew it. He'd always been good with his lieutenants, they respected him.

The big transfer chamber at the axial hub was almost deserted when he came out of the tube. He air-swam over to the doors for the commuter cabs.

A man and a woman glided across to him. It annoyed Luigi, but this wasn't the place to make a scene. Ten min-

utes, *ten*, and he'd be back inside a starship again, in command.

"I remember you," Kingsley Pryor said. "You were one of Capone's lieutenants."

"What's it to you, pal?" Luigi snapped back. He'd never been able to live with the nudges and whispers which followed him everywhere, like he was some kind of child molester on the run.

"Nothing. Are you going out to a ship?"

"Yeah. That's right." Luigi looked away, maybe the dumbass would catch on.

"That's nice," said Kingsley. "So are we."

The doors opened, revealing the commuter cab's empty interior. Kingsley gestured politely. "Please, you first."

After she showered, Jezzibella marched along the side of the bed, inspecting each of the dresses Libby had laid out. The problem was, none of them were new. She'd gone through her whole wardrobe since she hooked up with Al. *I need new clothes*. It had never been a problem when she was touring. Clothes were such a minuscule part of the tour budget that the company never quibbled when she bought a new range on every planet—not that she had to. Each fresh star system was colonized by hot young designers who'd kill for her to be seen just looking at their labels.

She sighed and reviewed the lineup again. It would have to be the blue and green summer dress with its wide shoulder straps and micro-skirt. Worn over the girlishly sympathetic persona.

The tiny dermal scales began to contract and expand in response to the sequence she keyed in, performing their minute adjustments to her baseline facial expression so that she appeared perpetually intrigued and trusting. Skin texture softened to a young, healthy glow. Twenty-one all over again.

Jezzibella went over to the angled mirrors on the dressing table to check herself over. The eyes weren't right; they were too rigid, insufficiently awed and excited by the beautiful mysterious world they explored. A little piece of the tough executive persona hanging on past its sell-by date. She scowled at the offending patches; the dermal scales were degenerating again. It was always the areas around the eyes which wore out first. Her supply of replacements was none too high, either. Not even a planet could make up that shortfall; her stocks had always come straight from Tropicana, the one Adamist world with relaxed bitek laws.

"Libby," she shouted. "Libby, get in here and bring that package with you."

The old dear had worked wonders recently, patiently reapplying the scales with a true artisan's touch to gloss over the reduced coverage. But even her magic couldn't last forever without new scales. Jezzibella didn't want to consider that.

"Libby, get your arthritic ass in here right now!"

Kiera, Hudson Proctor, and three goons stepped into the bedroom, passing straight through the door without opening it as if the clanwood panels were nothing more than coloured air. All five of them were cradling static bullet machine guns.

"Showing our age, are we?" Kiera asked silkily.

Jezzibella clamped down on her shock and budding fear. Kiera would be able to see that, and she wouldn't give her the satisfaction. Her mind slipped directly into the cool empress persona without any help from her crashed neural nanonics. "Here for some beauty tips, Kiera?"

"This body doesn't need any. It's a natural. Unlike yours."

"Pity you don't know how to use it properly. With breasts like those I could have ruled the galaxy. All you have is twenty male morons whose hard-ons have drained the blood

from their brains. You can't inspire them, you're just their whore. What a force not to be reckoned with that makes."

Kiera took a step forward, her serenity cooling rapidly. "That mouth of yours has always been a problem for me."

"Wrong again, it's the smarter brain behind it which beats you every time."

"Kill the slut," Hudson Proctor barked. "We don't have the time for this. We've got to find him."

Kiera lifted her machine gun up and touched the tip of the barrel lightly against the base of Jezzibella's neck. Watching closely for a reaction, she slid the barrel down, teasing open the thick white robe. "Oh no," she murmured. "If we kill her, she'll just come back as our equal. Won't you?"

"I'd have to lower myself a long way before I reached that point."

Kiera had to put an arm out to restrain Hudson Proctor. "Now look what you've done," she chided Jezzibella. "These are my friends you're upsetting."

Jezzibella's expression was of complete amusement. She didn't even have to speak.

Kiera nodded a reluctant submission to the private sparring. She gently shifted the towelling robe back to its original state. "Where is he?"

"Oh, please. At least threaten me."

"Very well. I will not allow you to die. And I do have that power. How's that?"

"For fuck's sake," Hudson Proctor said. "Give her to me. I'll find out where he's gone."

Kiera gave him a pitying glance. "Really? Will you gang bang her into capitulation, or simply keep on hitting her until she tells you?"

"Whatever it takes."

"Tell him," Kiera said.

"If I thought you could win, I would have joined you at the start," Jezzibella said simply. "You can't, so I didn't."

“The game has changed,” Kiera said. “The Confederation Navy has destroyed our ships at Arnstat. They’re coming here. New California has to leave, with us on it. And the only thing stopping that is Capone.”

“Life’s a bitch, death’s a tragedy, then you meet me.”

“One of your better lyrics. Too bad you won’t be remembered for it.”

The processor block Jezzibella had left on the dressing table began to shrill an alarm.

“Right on time,” Kiera said. “That’ll be my team dealing with Capone’s refinery. I’m covering my back in case he subverts any of my hellhawks. Not that I actually have to blast him back into the beyond in person. One of my sympathisers has already been given that job. But I was so looking forward to being there. So once again, you’ve spoilt my fun.” She held a finger up. A long yellow flame flared from the tip, dancing in front of Jezzibella’s stoic face. “Let’s see if I was wrong about being unable to force you, shall we? After all this effort I think I deserve some kind of payoff.” The flame turned blue, shrinking until it was a small fiercely hot jet.

Life in Emmet Mordden’s office had suddenly become very hectic. One set of screens was covering the explosion in the nutrient fluid refinery, providing images from surviving cameras and sensors along with a general schematic of the section. Whoever placed the bomb knew what they were doing. It had taken out a huge segment of the outer wall, crumpling the internal machinery and cutting power and data cables. Depressurisation had damaged the refinery still further, rupturing pipes and synthesiser modules. At least there were no fires, the vacuum made sure of that.

Emmet was busy coordinating with the project manager, trying to ensure that everyone who’d withstood the blast was safe behind pressure doors or in emergency igloos, as

well as doing a body count. Medical teams were on their way.

The SD sensor grid was splashed across the largest screen, with a full tactical overlay. It showed the long range sensor focus sweeping the high-orbit vectors which the hellhawks were supposed to be patrolling. Six were missing. The scans had also revealed two voidhawks swallowing in to take advantage of the gaps.

His analysis of the virus in Bernhard's block was still running, filling one holographic screen with cubist alphanumeric. He didn't even have time to suspend that.

Several questors from his desktop block were running through the asteroid's memory cores, hunting down references on Tyrathca military history and the Orion Nebula. Al had wanted to read up on them. So far they'd produced very few files. All of them on the soldier caste. None of which he'd accessed.

Kiera's face was smiling complacently out of another, her refined voice booming round the room, telling the fleet that they should turn their backs on Capone and emigrate down to the planet with her. The screen next to her was flipping through the asteroid's communication circuits, running a program to track down which antenna she was using and where her input entered the network.

The SD sensor network flashed up a priority-one alert. The *Swabia* had disengaged from its docking bay cradle and initiated a jump immediately. The assholes hadn't even cleared the rim!

His desktop block beeped urgently. "What?" Emmet yelled.

"Emmet, this is Silvano. I've got a message from the boss."

"I'm a little busy right now." He squinted at the display of the communication circuits. Sections were dropping out. Viral warnings started to appear.

“Get in to the control centre and make sure the fleet stays on duty. Anyone starts heading for the surface, nuke the fuckers with the SD weapons. Got that?”

“But . . .”

“Now, you pissant little mother.” The block went dead. Emmet snarled at it, the closest he’d ever come to showing disrespect to Al’s chilling enforcer. He took the time to load a couple of orders in the desktop to run a virus scan through the office hardware, and went out at a run.

The thick door to the control centre slid open. Jagged lines of white fire ripped through the air centimetres in front of Emmet. Alarms were screaming as red strobes burned down his optic nerves. Layers of smoke lashed out down the corridor. He squealed in panic and dived behind one of the consoles as he hardened a bubble of air around himself. Two fireballs burst open against its boundary. Instinctively he sent white fire of his own back along the direction they’d come from. It sizzled sharply in the torrent of purple retardant foam spraying out of the ceiling nozzles.

“What the fuck is going on?” he yelled. He could sense two distinct groupings of minds in the control centre, clustered at opposite ends of the chamber. Most of the consoles between them were smothered with foam that seethed and writhed as it absorbed the flames licking up from smoking puncture holes.

“Emmet, that you? Kiera’s bastards tried to shut down the SD network. We stopped them. Snuffed one.”

Despite the lethal environment, Emmet lifted one arm away from his head to glance round again. Stopped what? he thought incredulously. The centre was a total wreck.

“Emmet!” Jull von Holger called. “Emmet, tell your guys to pack it in. We’ve won and you know it. The Navy’s coming and it’s not taking prisoners. We have to get down the planet.”

“Oh shit,” Emmet whispered.

“Emmet, help us,” Capone’s faction called. “We can whip their asses.”

“Put a stop to it, Emmet,” Jull called. “Come with us. Be safe.”

The white fire was slashing faster, its brightness building. Emmet curled up tighter, trying to shut it all out.

The gleaming scarlet rocketship edged slowly over the docking ledge, creeping up to the pedestal positioned only sixty metres from the vertical wall of rock. It settled smoothly, and a metallic airlock tube telescoped away from the cliff face to search out the hellhawk’s hatch. They engaged and sealed.

Al Capone stomped along the tube into the reception lounge, a baseball bat gripped firmly in his right hand. His lieutenants were waiting for him, Silvano and Patricia grimaced but obviously spoiling for a fight. Leroy at their side, anxious and desperate to prove his loyalty. A semicircle of over a dozen more behind them, equally committed, dressed in their best pinstripe suits, Thompson machine guns gleaming and ready.

Al nodded round, pleased with what he saw. He would have preferred old friends, but these would do. “Okay, we all know what Kiera wants. The dame’s running scared of the Navy and that Ruski admiral. Well, now we’ve seen what those bastards will do when their back’s to the wall, I say that makes it more important than ever to stay here and cover our asses. We’ve still got antimatter, and lots of it. That means we got clout where it hurts, we can make them the offer. Unless the Feds agree to stop dicking around with us, every planet they got’s gonna live in fear from now on. That’s the only way to be sure. I’ve lived with being wanted all my life, and I know how to deal with that kind of bullshit. You never, fucking ever, let your guard down. You gotta make like you’re the meanest SOB on the street to stop them

messing with you. If they don't respect you, they don't fear you." He slapped the top of the baseball bat against his left palm. "Kiera needs to be told that in person."

"We're with you, Al," someone called.

The semicircle of gangsters parted, and Al strode forward. "Silvano, we know where she is?"

"I think she went to the hotel, Al. We can't get them on the phone. Mickey's gone back there to take a look. He'll call if he finds her."

"What about Jez?"

Silvano shot Leroy a glance. "We think she's still there, Al. Couple of the guys are there with her. She'll be fine."

"Better be," Al muttered. He looked ahead to see Avram Harwood III standing in the lounge's doorway. The man was a total tow truck job. Breathing badly, his unhealed wounds leaking cheesy fluid down pale damp skin; he could barely stand.

"I am the mayor," Avram wheezed. "I am entitled to respect. That's your big thing, isn't it, respect." He giggled.

"Avvy, get the fuck out of my way," Al snapped.

"Kiera showed me respect." Avram raised his static bullet machine gun. "Now it's your turn." The weapon's fire rate control was set at maximum. He pulled the trigger.

Al was already jumping out of the way. Silvano was raising his own Thompson. Leroy brought his arms up, yelling a frantic: "*No!*" at the top of his lungs. The other gangsters were diving to the floor or aiming at Avram.

Electrically charged bullets tore across the lounge, a devastating line of throbbing blue-white light complementing the dragon's roar. Al hit the floor just as the first possessed body ignited in its unique spectacular fashion. The searing glare wiped out everyone's vision. A shockwave of heat washed over them, blistering exposed skin, singeing hair. Another body ignited.

Al screamed in raw fury, flinging a white firebolt as

strong as the internecine furnace of flesh. Eight identical streamers of white fire smashed into Avram Harwood's body, vaporizing his torso instantly amid a bloom of ash and blood steam. Arms that had been held outstretched dropped to the melting carpet next to his collapsing legs. Heat detonated every chemical bullet left in the machine gun's magazine as it fell, sending out a lethal volley of shrapnel to slash walls and flesh.

When the light, heat, and noise shrank away, Al swayed to his feet. All he could see at first was a giant purple after-image which his energistic power was incapable of banishing. His weird psychic sense couldn't track down Avram Harwood's thoughts anywhere. As he blinked the blotches away from his eyes, he realized how badly parts of him were hurting. His suit and hands were running with blood from half a dozen wounds where the shrapnel had sliced into him. One by one he made the slivers of hot metal slide up out of his body and closed the lips on each cut, bonding the skin back together. The pain dwindled away.

Leroy was lying on the floor at Al's feet. Bullets had torn their way across him, the last one removing half of his throat. Dead eyes stared upwards. Al switched his gaze to the two piles of charcoal scattered over the molten composite floor tiling. "Who?" he demanded.

The gangsters were picking themselves up, healing and sealing their shrapnel wounds. A head count told Al that Silvano had been among the victims of the static bullets. Nobody dared say anything as Al stood over the small black pile of cooling ash that used to be his chief enforcer. His head was bowed as if in prayer. After a minute he walked over to the four battered limbs that remained of Avram Harwood. "Bastard!" Al screamed. He brought his baseball bat crashing down on an arm. "Motherfucking!" The bat slammed into the arm again. "Shit eating!" This time he hit a leg. "Psycho bastard!" The other leg. "I'll kill your family.

I'll burn your house to the ground. I'll dig up your mother's coffin and shit on her. You wanted respect? That what you wanted? This is the kind of respect I got for a cornholing son of a bitch like you." The bat pounded and pounded on the limbs, pulping them to roadkill smears.

Patricia stepped forward from the rank of badly alarmed gangsters. "Al. Al, that's enough."

The bat was brought up, ready to fly at her head. Al met her level gaze, stood for a moment with the bat poised. A long breath shuddered out of him. "Okay," he said. "Let's go find Kiera."

The floor under Emmet was melting, transmuting into a puddle of cold liquid rock. It would soon be deep enough to swallow him whole. Somebody was becoming very anxious to turn him into a fossil. He strove hard to turn the rock solid again as the air above him raged with white fire and profanities. The two factions were evenly matched, and both of them kept shouting at him to throw his strength in on their side.

He wanted to help Al's guys. His own side. Really wanted to. Except the idea of going with New California into a place of safety was hugely appealing. No more of this shit, for a start.

A voracious spout of white fire hit the console he was crouched behind, and started chewing its way through the composite casing and tightly packed circuitry cubes inside. Kiera's people obviously had decided he wasn't joining them.

Retardant foam gushed downwards, only to be catalysed into boiling green treacle by the unnatural blaze. It poured off the top of the console and splattered over Emmet, stinging his exposed skin. He drew a deep breath, praying his bladder would hold out, and conjured up a spear of white fire. It flashed across the chamber towards Jull von Holger and his cohorts. The immediate result wasn't quite what he expected.

A thunderous roar swamped the control centre. A possessed body ignited, forcing Emmet to clamp his hand over his eyes. The mental and vocal shriek of the vanquished soul grated down his skin like needles of ice. A second body erupted, then another. The air was clogged with stifling heat and a vomitous stench of incinerated meat as they belched out thick fumes.

After a long time the bodies burnt out, returning the light level to normal. The awful fetor remained. The roaring had stopped.

A loud metallic *snik* sounded across the chamber. To Emmet's ears it sounded mechanical, and very weapons orientated. Footsteps squelched through the foam.

"You've pissed yourself," a voice told him.

Emmet twisted his head out of the foetal position. A gaunt man in a grubby one-piece suit was looking down at him, holding a peculiar machine gun, its warm barrel pointing directly at Emmet's forehead. A canvas satchel was slung over his shoulder, packed full of magazines.

"I was scared," Emmet said. "I'm not part of the Organization's muscle."

The man's features vanished for a second, replaced by a woman's. If anything, her expression was even more forbidding. Emmet could sense the energistic power circulating through the body. It rivalled Al's strength.

Survivors from the Organization faction were peering nervously over the top of their trashed consoles.

"Who are you?" Emmet stammered.

"We are the Skibbows."

"Uh, right. Are you on Kiera's side?"

"No. But we'd really like to know where she is." The machine gun's safety catch was released. "Now, please."

Mickey Pileggi had learned the hard way not to try and storm Kiera and her goons. Three of his soldiers had wound

up burning like miniature suns when they all charged into the Nixon suite. Mickey had entertained visions of lavish praise and unlimited privileges heaped upon him by Al for rescuing Jezzibella from Kiera's hands. That dream had quickly turned into a crock of shit. The guns she was armed with had caused havoc amongst the gangsters. Those screams would echo through the air around Mickey for eternity.

He'd ordered them to fall back to the hallway outside, taking up shielded positions in the twin stairwells and disabling the elevators with strategic blasts of white fire. They were at the bottom of the tower. She wasn't going anywhere. Now he just had to explain to Al how he'd fouled up.

Another spray of static bullets hammered out from the splintered doors of the Nixon suite. All the gangsters ducked, thickening the local air.

"We should seal this floor off," one of them said. "Blow the windows out and see how she likes eating vacuum."

"Great idea," Mickey grumbled. "Are you gonna tell Al we did to Jezzibella what they did to Brown-nose Bernhard?"

"Guess not."

"Okay. Now come on, guys. Let's concentrate on making those doors evaporate. Keep them occupied defending themselves while our reinforcements arrive."

"If any do."

Mickey shot the man a furious glare. "Nobody's deserting Al, not after what he's done for us."

"For you."

Mickey didn't see who said that, but let the sharp anger show amid his thoughts as a warning. He focused on the door, and punched it with the force of his mind. Bullets pulverised a line in the marble wall above his head. Tiny tendrils of electricity scabbled across the surface. Everyone flinched down fast.

His processor block beeped. He dusted hot marble chips from his hair and pulled it out of his pocket, amazed the thing was working with so much machismo energetic power buzzing about.

“Mickey?” Emmet implored. “Mickey, you got any idea where Kiera is?”

“Pretty sure, yeah. She’s like ten yards away from me.” Mickey gave the block an infuriated look as Emmet abruptly cut the call. “Okay guys, let’s hit the doors together this time. On three. One. Two—”

The office door shut behind Skibbow, and Emmet let out a *huge* gasp of relief. There was a real monster of a problem torturing that wacko possessed, and Emmet was enormously glad he didn’t share any part of it. He let his body calm for a few precious moments more, then called Al.

“Whatcha got for me, Emmet?”

“We had a problem in the SD control centre, Al. Kiera’s people tried to knock out the orbital platforms.”

“And?”

“They’re sleeping with the fish.” He held his breath, worried Al could sense half-truths along the communication circuit.

“I owe you one, Emmet. I won’t forget what you did.”

Emmet’s fingers were skidding fast over his desktop keyboard, re-routing the SD network’s main command channels. Symbols blinked up on the tactical display, showing him what he was in charge of. He smiled uneasily at the power he’d assumed. Lord of the sky, admiral of the fleet, enforcer of order across a whole planet. “The place is pretty much a bombsite, Al, but I’ve still got control of the major hardware.”

“What’s the fleet doing, Emmet? Are the guys staying put?”

“Pretty much. Eight frigates are heading down to low

orbit, I guess the rest are waiting to hear what you've got to say. But Al, I count seventeen hellhawks missing."

"Je-zus, Emmet, first chunk of good news I've had today. You keep watching everybody, make sure they don't move. I got some business to clear up, then I'll be right back with you."

"Sure thing, Al." He blinked, and squinted at the tactical display. It wasn't supposed to be shown on such a small scale; this was a format designed to showcase across a hundred metre screen in front of admirals and defence chiefs. From what he could make out, two miniaturised symbols were moving very close to Monterey itself.

The *Varrad* skimmed above the wrinkled rock, keeping a constant fifty-metre separation from the pumice-like terrain, lifting and sinking in perfect curving parallels with the craters and ridges beneath its metallic lower hull. Pran Soo was pursuing the Hilton tower as it slid across the stars, closing on it like an atmospheric fighter on a low-visibility strike run. Along with all the other hellhawks, she'd been monitoring what communications she could access since Kiera's revolt had started. And Mickey Pileggi had spent fifteen minutes yelling across the net at his fellow Organization lieutenants for help to deal with Kiera and her dangerous weapons.

Are you sure about this? Rocio asked.

Absolutely. We know a possessed body is incapable of defending itself against a starship weapon. The power level is simply too great, even if they know they're being targeted. I can eliminate Kiera with one shot, and this time there will be no comeback from the Organization. We will truly be free.

Capone's girlfriend is in that hotel suite.

He will find another. We will never have an opportunity like this again.

Very well, but try to keep the destruction to a minimum. We may yet have to cut a deal with the Organization.

Not if the Confederation Navy gets here first.

Let me see what's happening. The rock is blocking my distortion field.

Pran Soo opened her affinity, allowing him to borrow the sights revealed to her bitek sensor blisters, showing him the rock rushing past her hull. Her other principal sense, the *Varrad's* distortion field, was reduced to a hemispherical shape, its usual bloated coverage curtailed by the giant asteroid.

The Monterey Hilton swung towards her, sticking out proud from the rock. Visually, a pillar of tough carbon-reinforced titanium riddled with thick, multi-layered windows. Inside the distortion field it emerged as a coagulation of thin sheets of matter, threaded with a filigree of minute power cables whose electrons were imbued with a delicate spectral sheen.

She matched her vector with the asteroid's rotation. Electronic pods on her hull flowered, thrusting out sensors. They swept across the lower floors of the tower.

I can't distinguish individual people, she told Rocio. The window's radiation shielding is an effective block against precision scanning. I am aware of their emotions, but from this distance they've blurred together. All I know is, several people are definitely in there.

And Mickey Pileggi is still calling for assistance. Kiera must be one of those you sense.

Pran Soo activated a microwave laser, and aligned it on the base of the Hilton. The beam would slice along the side of the tower, filleting the structural girders so the entire bottom floor would tumble away into interplanetary space. Targeting systems designated the requisite cutting pattern.

A hellhawk rose above the asteroid's flat horizon behind

Pran Soo, its hull crawling with vivid lines of electrical energy feeding a comprehensive armament of beam weapons.

Etchells, Pran Soo exclaimed in surprise.

Two masers punctured her thick polyp hull, penetrating right into the central core of organs.

Emmet finally managed to shift the tactical display's magnification, enhancing the zone around Monterey itself. He was just in time to watch one of the symbols drift away from the Hilton tower. The other symbol moved in closer to the hotel. Its data tag identifying it as the *Stryla*, which he knew was possessed by Etchells. But he didn't have a clue whose side it was on, even if the hellhawks were taking sides.

He activated the close-range defence systems and ordered them to target the hellhawk. The only option, given SD's hellhawk liaison guy was now a mound of ash in the ruined control centre. Etchells was an unknown factor, capable of killing possessed humans. And AI was heading down into the Hilton.

Stryla's symbol sprouted a small batch of alphanumeric, telling Emmet it was datavising directly to the asteroid's SD command. He hunted round his program menus, desperately trying to route the message through to his office.

"Disengage your targeting lock," Etchells said.

"No way," Emmet told him. "I want you a thousand kilometres away from this asteroid; you have thirty seconds to begin accelerating or I'll fire."

"Listen, bollockbrain. I have fifty combat wasps in my launch cradles, all with innumerable submunitions, all fitted with fusion warheads. Right now, they are all armed, and activated by a deadman code. You cannot train enough beam weapons on me to vaporise me and the missiles instantaneously. If you fire, they will detonate. I'm not sure if that much megatonnage will crack Monterey open or not. Would you like to find out?"

Emmet's hands clamped round his head in an agony of frustration. I am not cut out for any of this shit. I want to go home.

What would Al do? It wasn't such a good question. He had the horrible feeling that if you put Al in a Mexican stand-off he would shoot.

"You know, I might just," he said stubbornly. "I've had a real shitty time today, and the Confederation Navy is on the way to make it worse."

"I know the feeling," Etchells said. "But I'm really not a threat to you."

"Then what the hell are you doing there?"

"I have to ask someone a question. Once I've done that, I'll leave. Give me five minutes, then you can start acting tough again. Deal?"

The expensive designer gloss had departed from the lounge in the Nixon suite. Mickey's ill-judged attempt to beachhead the place had resulted in streamers of white fire slashing round in chaotic violence, and Kiera's counter-attack had only made it worse. The lights were out, a tangle of broken pipes and cables hung down out of the ceiling, the furniture had burned enthusiastically and was now reduced to smoking embers. Torrents of energetic power poured upon the doors by both sides had turned them and the surrounding walls into a fantastic tract of heterogeneous crystal; long encrustations of quartz sprouted in jumbled antagonism, each branch fighting its neighbour like a forest of avaricious jewels. They writhed fluidly each time another burst of power doused them, growing slightly longer and more entwined.

Kiera worried that the continual assaults on the door were a diversion. She had two of her goons patrolling the other rooms, searching for the Organization gangsters grouping together on the other side of the suite's walls and especially the ceiling. So far they hadn't tried to break through, but it

would be only a matter of time. Nobody was stupid enough to keep on trying the same route in when they were so thoroughly blocked. There was also the ammunition question. She was going to run out eventually.

One thing she'd made quite sure of was keeping in contact with her deputies. Hudson Proctor could use his affinity to talk to the remaining Valisk survivors positioned through the asteroid, who in turn kept in touch with their recruits through the net. Communications remained the key to any revolution.

Unfortunately, it didn't guarantee success.

"Just how many people have declared for us?" Kiera asked.

Hudson Proctor took the figures he knew of, and added quite a few. No way was he about to deliver that much bad news by himself. "About a thousand in the asteroid."

"What about the fleet?" she demanded. "How many ships?"

"Jull reported several dozen were heading for low orbit before Emmet's crew wiped him out. But they wrecked the SD centre. Capone can't use the platforms to intimidate anybody, in space or on the planet."

"Where the hell is Luigi?"

"I don't know, he hasn't checked in."

"Damn it, didn't anyone listen to me? Luigi's part was crucial, the fleet must follow us down to the planet. Capone is going to get us all slung back into the beyond."

Hudson had heard the speech countless times already. He said nothing.

"I should have gone for the control centre, not Capone," Kiera said. She looked at the crystalline bulwark, which undulated rapidly, twinkling with emerald light. One of her goons fired his machine gun through a gap where the doors used to be. "Maybe we should try and get up to the defence section, there's bound to be an auxiliary control room."

“We’ll never get past Pileggi,” Hudson said. “There’s too many of them.”

“Only if we make a break for it through the front.” Kiera tilted her head up to stare at the ceiling. “I’ll bet we can . . .” She trailed off as a silver-white starship with glowing engine nacelles rose ponderously into view outside the big window wall.

“Oh shit,” Hudson murmured. “That’s the *Varrad*. And Pran Soo is not your biggest fan.”

“Talk to her, find out what she wants.”

He licked his lips and began a frown which never really had time to form. “I can’t—oh.”

The hellhawk’s fantasy image burst. It dropped out of sight, rolling as it went. Another one glided up to replace it, a dark bird-shape with red-flecked reptile scales. Hudson grinned in relief. “Etchells.”

“Ask him if he can hit Pileggi with his lasers.”

“Right.” Hudson concentrated. “Uh, he says he has a question for you.”

Kiera’s processor block bleeped. Not taking her eyes off Hudson, she slipped it out of her jacket pocket. “Yes?”

“I need to know something,” Etchells said. “Do you believe the Navy mission to the Orion Nebula is a danger to us?”

“Of course I do, that’s why you and the others have been refitted with auxiliary fusion generators. It has to be investigated.”

“We agree on that, then.”

“Good. Now target the Organization grunts holding me in here, and I’ll eliminate Capone. With him out of the way I can assign antimatter warships to the flight. The threat can be dealt with properly.”

“Twenty-seven voidhawks have swallowed away from their patrol orbits without clearance. That means they have

found an alternative source of nutrient fluid. Even if you gain control of the Organization, you will lose them.”

“But gain control of the antimatter.”

“The Confederation Navy is coming. Every orbital facility the planet has will be obliterated in their attack. Your strategy was to take New California out of the universe to a place of safety.”

“Yes?” she asked irritably. “So?”

“How do you propose to maintain the blackmail threat over the crews of the ships you dispatch to the nebula?”

Kiera turned from Hudson Proctor to look directly at the hellhawk on the other side of the window. “We’ll come up with something.”

“Your rebellion has failed. Capone is on his way with enough gangsters to overwhelm you.”

“Fuck you.”

“I sincerely believe the Navy mission is a threat to my continued existence in this form. That must be prevented. I intend to fly to Mastrit-PJ, and I’m offering you the chance to escape with me.”

“Why?”

“You have the arming codes for the combat wasps I have been loaded with. Admittedly they are only fusion warheads, but I will take you off the asteroid if you make those codes available to me.”

Kiera scanned round the ruined lounge. The machine guns opened fire again with a thunderclap tattoo. Sapphire light flexed hungrily within the crystals, causing them to expand further into the lounge. “Very well.”

The hellhawk surged forwards, its neck flattening out. Energistic power cloaked its hooked beak with a lambent red glow. The lounge’s window rippled as the tip pressed against it, then parted like water to allow the vast creature’s head into the lounge. A huge iris swivelled round to

fix on Kiera. The beak parted to reveal an airlock hatch inside.

“Welcome aboard,” Etchells said.

Al ran down the last flight of stairs to find Mickey standing at the bottom. The lieutenant took a terrified step backwards.

“Al, please, I did everything I could. I swear it.” He crossed himself elaborately. “On my mother’s life, we tried to get Jez out of there. Three of the guys got whacked just stepping through the door. Those bullets are too much. They kill you, Al, kill you dead.”

“Shut the fuck up, Mickey.”

“Sure, Al, sure thing. Absolutely. I’m dumb. From now on. Definitely.”

Al peered across the hallway. Bullets had shredded the composite wall panelling, even hacking their way into the metal behind. Opposite him, the Nixon suite’s doors glinted prismatically in the light emerging from the two surviving ceiling panels.

“Where’s Kiera, Mickey?”

“She was in there, Al. I swear.”

“Was?”

“They stopped firing a couple of minutes ago. We can sense some of them still.”

Al tapped his baseball bat on the floor, contemplating the Nixon suite. “Hey,” he shouted. “You in there. I brought a whole truckload of my guys with me, and any minute now we’re gonna march right in and beat seven types of crap out of you. Your shooters ain’t gonna be no good against this many of us. But if you come out right now, then you got my word that you don’t get your balls screwed into the nearest light socket. This is between me and Kiera now. Walk away.”

The baseball bat tapped out a metronome beat on the

ground. A figure moved behind the crystalline sheet with slow caution.

“Mickey?” Al asked. “Why didn’t you just jump the bastards through the ceiling?”

Mickey’s shoulders wriggled awkwardly under his double-breasted suit. “The ceiling?”

“Never mind.”

“I’m coming out,” Hudson Proctor called. He stepped through the gap in the crystal; his arm was outstretched, holding the machine gun by its strap.

Thirty Thompson sub-machine guns were lined up on him, most of them silver-plated. He closed his eyes and waited for the shots, Adam’s apple bobbing quickly.

Al couldn’t quite figure the spark of outrage glimmering in the man’s mind. Fear, yes, plenty of it. But Hudson Proctor was indignant about something.

“Where is she?” Al asked.

Hudson tilted over from his waist, allowing the machine gun to rest on the floor before letting go of the strap. “Gone,” he said. “A hellhawk took her off.” He paused, real anger heating his expression. “Just her. I was climbing in behind her and she shoved a fucking gun in my face. That bitch; there was room for all of us on board—she just left us behind. Didn’t give a fuck about us. I made everything happen for her, you know. Without me she would never have kept control of the hellhawks. I was the one who kept them in line.”

“Why did a hellhawk take her off?” Al asked. “She ain’t got nothing over them any more.”

“It’s Etchells, the *Stryla*, he’s obsessed about what kind of weapon the Tyrathca have on the other side of the Orion Nebula. He took her with him so she could fire the combat wasps. They’ll probably start the first inter-species war. Both of them are crazy enough.”

“Women, huh?” Al gave him a friendly grin.

Hudson's face twitched. "Yeah. Women. Fuck 'em."

"All they're good for." Al laughed.

"Yeah, right."

The baseball bat caught Hudson square on the crown of his head, smashing through the bone to cleave the brain in two. Blood splashed down the front of Al's sharply cut suit, splattering on his patent leather shoes. "And just look at the shit they get you into," he told the collapsing corpse.

Thirty streamers of white fire stabbed out in unison, vaporizing the crystal wall and decimating the possessed cowering behind it.

Libby's cries brought them to the bedroom. Everyone hung back as Al went through the door into the darkened room. Libby was kneeling on the floor, cradling a figure in a stained towelling robe. Her thin voice was a constant piteous wail, like some animal braying for its dead mate. She rocked softly backwards and forwards, dabbing at Jezzibella's face. Al moved forwards, fearing the worst. But Jezzibella's thoughts were still present, still flowing through her own brain.

Libby turned her head to face him, tears glinting down her cheeks. "Look what they did," she whimpered. "Look at my poppet, my beautiful beautiful poppet. Devils, devils all of you. That's why you were sent to the beyond. You're devils." Her shoulders trembled as she slowly curled herself around Jezzibella, cuddling her fiercely.

"It's okay," Al said. His mouth was dry and he bent down beside the stricken old woman. In his whole life he'd never been so scared for what he would see.

"Al?" Jezzibella gasped. "Al, is that you?"

Scorched, empty eye sockets searched round for him. He gripped her hand, feeling the black skin crack open under his fingers. "Sure, baby, I'm here," his faint voice faded as his throat closed up. He wanted to join Libby and put his head back and scream.

“I didn’t tell her,” Jezzibella said. “She wanted to know where you were, but I never said.”

Al was sobbing. Like it *mattered* if Kiera had found out, everyone who counted had stayed loyal in the end. But Jez hadn’t known that. Had done what she thought was needed. For him.

“You’re an angel,” he bawled. “A goddamn fucking angel sent down from heaven to show me what a worthless piece of shit I am.”

“No,” she cooed. “No, Al.”

He traced his fingers over the remnants of her precious face. “I’ll make you better,” he promised. “You’ll see. Every doctor on this crappy little world is gonna come up here and cure you. I’m gonna make them. And you’ll get well again. I’ll be here right beside you the whole time. And I’m gonna take care of you from now on. Good care. You’ll see. No more of this hurting and fighting. Never again. You’re all that matters to me. You’re everything, Jez. Everything.”

Mickey hung around at the back of the crowd shuffling about in the Nixon suite when the two terrified-looking non-possessed doctors arrived. He reckoned that was the smart thing. Be there, show off your loyalty like a medal, but don’t get into direct line of sight. Not at a time like this. He knew the boss well enough by now. Somebody was going to pay very hard for what was going down. Very hard indeed. The asteroid was rotten with rumours about how the Confederation had learned how to torture a possessed for months. If anybody could improve on that, it would be the Organization, with Patricia as chief researcher.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder. Mickey’s nerves were so shot they fired his leg muscles to jump. The hand prevented any actual movement, holding him fast with abnormal strength. “What is this?” he squawked with fake indignation. “Don’t you know who I am?”

"I don't care who you are," Gerald Skibbow said. "Tell me where Kiera is."

Mickey tried to size up his . . . well, not assailant, exactly—questioner. Unnervingly powerful, and zero sense of humour. Not a good combination. "The bitch showed us a clean pair of heels. A hellhawk took her off. Now let me have my shoulder back, man. Jesus!"

"Where did it take her?"

"Where did . . . Oh, like you're going after them?" Mickey sneered.

"Yes."

Mickey didn't like the way this was speedballing downhill. He dropped the sarcasm approach. "The Orion Nebula, okay. Can I go now, thank you."

"Why would she go there?"

"What is it to you, pal?" a voice asked.

Gerald let go of Mickey and turned to face Al Capone. "Kiera is possessing our daughter. We want her back."

Al nodded thoughtfully. "You and I need to talk."

Rocio watched the taxi roll across the docking ledge towards him. Its elephant trunk airlock tube lifted up and fastened onto his hatch.

"We've got a visitor," he announced to Beth and Jed.

Both of them hurried along the main corridor to the airlock. The hatch was already open, framing a familiar figure. "Bugger me," she grunted. "Gerald!"

He smiled wearily at her. "Hello. I brought some decent grub. Figured I owe you that much." There was a huge pile of boxes on the floor of the taxi behind him.

"What happened, mate?" Jed asked. He was peering round the old loon, trying to read the labels.

"I rescued my husband." Loren manifested her own face over Gerald's, and smiled at the two youngsters. "I must

thank you for taking care of him. God knows it's not easy at the best of times."

"Rocio!" Beth yelled.

A shocked Jed was stumbling backwards. "He's possessed! Run!"

Rocio's face appeared in one of the brass-rimmed portholes. "It's all right," he assured them. "I cut a deal with Al Capone. We're taking the Skibbows with us, and tracking down my murderous old friend Etchells. In return, the Organization supplies the hellhawks with every technical assistance they need securing Almaden, and then leaves them alone."

Beth gave Gerald a nervous glance, not at all trustful, no matter who was possessing him. "Where are we going?" she asked Rocio.

"The Orion Nebula. To start with."

23

The STNI-986M was a basic VTOL utility jet (unimaginatively nicknamed Stony); subsonic, with a blunt-tube fuselage which could carry either twenty tonnes of cargo or a hundred passengers. Seven New Washington Navy (NWN) Transport Command squadrons of the durable little vehicles had been flown to Ombey when the President answered their ally's call for military assistance to liberate Mortonridge. Ever since General Hiltch authorized aircraft to fly over secured areas of Mortonridge, they'd become a familiar sight to the occupation troops. After Ketton, they'd been invaluable in supporting the new frontline advance policy which had spread the serjeants dangerously thin over the ground as they divided the peninsula into confinement zones. Outbound from Fort Forward they would deliver food, equipment, and ammunition to the upcountry stations; on the return they invariably evacuated the most serious body-abuse cases of ex-possessed for medical treatment.

Even on airframes intended for rugged duty, full-time usage was producing maintenance problems. Spare parts were also scarce; Ombey's indigenous industries were already struggling to keep frontline equipment and the Royal Marine

engineering brigades going. All the Stony squadrons had experienced mid-flight emergency landings and unexplained powerdowns. The rover reporters covering the Liberation knew all about the STI-986M's recent shortcomings, though it was never mentioned in their official reports. Not good for civilian morale. There was no outright censorship, but they all knew they were part of the Liberation campaign, helping to convince people that the possessed could be beaten. Standard wartime compromise, reporting what was in the army's interest in order to get the maximum amount of information.

So Tim Beard cut back on his physiological input when the Stony carrying him and Hugh Rosler lifted from Fort Forward at dawn. He wanted to give the accessors back home a small feeling of excitement as the plane swept low across the endless steppes of dried mud, which meant toning down his body's instinctive unease. It helped that he was sitting so close to Hugh, the pair of them wedged in a gap between a couple of composite drums full of nutrient soup for the serjeants. Hugh always seemed perfectly at ease; even when Ketton ripped itself free of the planet he'd stood up squarely, regarding the spectacle with a kind of amused awe while the rest of the rovers were crouched down on the quaking ground, heads buried between their legs. He also had a neat eye for trouble. There were a couple of occasions when the rover corps had been clambering over ruins when he'd spotted booby traps missed by the serjeants and Marine engineers. Not the greatest conversationalist, but Tim felt safe around him.

It was one of the reasons he'd asked Hugh to come along. This wasn't a flight organized for them by the army, but the story was too good to wait for the liaison officer to get round to it. And good stories about the Liberation were becoming hard to find. But Tim had been covering military stories for twenty years now: he knew how to find his way round the archaic chain of command, which people to cultivate. Pilots were good material, and useful, almost as much as serjeants.

Finding a ride on the early flight among the crates and pods was easy enough.

The Stony curved away from Fort Forward and headed south, following the remnants of the M6. Once they'd settled into their two hundred metre operational altitude, Tim eased the buckle back on what was laughingly called his safety strap, and crouched down by the door port. Enhanced retinas zoomed in on the road below. He'd dispatched a hundred fleks back to the studio with the same view; by now the start of the M6 around the old firebreak was as familiar to the average Confederation citizen as the road outside their own home. But with each trip he progressed a little further along the road, deeper into the final enclaves of the possessed. In the first couple of weeks, it was astounding progress indeed. None of the rovers had to manufacture the optimistic buzz that pervaded their recordings. It was different today, there was progress, still, but it was difficult to capture the essence just by panning a shot from horizon to horizon.

The tactical maps urged on them by the army liaison officers had changed considerably from the original swathe of incriminating pink stretching across Mortonridge which delineated the possessed territory. At first the borders had contracted noose-style, then geographical contours showed up along the rim of pinkness, interfering with the rate of advance. After Ketton it had changed again. The serjeants had been deployed in spearhead thrusts, carving corridors through the possessed territories. Separation and isolation, General Hiltch's plan to prevent the possessed from collecting in the kind of density which would kick off another Ketton incident. The current tactical map showed Mortonridge covered in slowly shrinking pink blotches separating from each other like evaporating puddles. Of course, no one actually knew what that critical number was which had to be avoided at all costs. So the serjeants toiled on relentlessly, guided by numerical simulations based on someone's best

guess. And there were no more harpoon deluges to make the job easier, nor even SD laser fire to soften up a strongly defended position. The front line was back to clearing the land in the hardest way possible.

Tim's retinas tracked keenly along the carbon-concrete ribbon which the Stony was following. Royal Marine mecha-noids had bulldozed entire swamps of saturated soil from the road as the army swept down the spine of the peninsula. At times the single cleared carriageway was twenty metres below the tops of the new banks, as if it was some kind of cooled lava river confined to steep heat-erosion valleys. The sidewalls were solidified by chemical cement, bonding the slush together in artificial molecular clusters that traded their initial strength with a limited lifespan. Sunlight shimmered off them in vast sapphire and emerald defraction patterns as the Stony whisked by overhead. All the original bridges had been swept away, leaving destitute towers protruding from the mud at precarious angles. Of their replacements, no two were the same. Small gullies had simple scaffolding archways of monobonded silicon curving over their sluggish streams. Beautiful single-span suspension bridges leapt across gaps half a kilometre wide, their gossamer cables glinting like thin icicles in the clear dawn air. Programmable silicon pontoons carried the mesh-carpet road across broad valley floors in heroic relay.

"The financial cost of this recaptured motorway is roughly ten million Kulu pounds per kilometre," Tim said. "Thirty times the price of the original, and it hasn't even got electronic traffic control. It will probably be the Liberation's most enduring physical memorial, even though thirty-eight per cent of it is classed as a temporary structure. Ground troops know it as the road to the other side of hell."

"You could always take the optimistic view," Hugh Rosler said.

Tim put the narrative track memory on pause. "If I could

find one, I would. It's not as if I'm rooting for the possessed. Being positive after all this time is flat-out impossible. We have to tell the truth occasionally."

Hugh nodded through the rectangular port. "Gimmie convoy, look."

A long snake of trucks and buses was winding its way north along the reclaimed road. The buses meant it would be mostly civilians, ex-possessed being carried away to safety. "Gimmies" was the term which the rovers had privately evolved for them. Every interview when they came staggering out of the zero-tau pods was the same litany of demands: give me medical treatment, give me clothes, give me food, give me the rest of my family, give me somewhere safe to live, give me my life back. And why did it take you so long to save me?

They'd actually stopped recording interviews with the newly reprieved. Ombey's population was becoming increasingly antagonised by their fellow citizens' lack of gratitude.

Two hundred and fifty kilometres south of the old firebreak line, a big staging area had been laid out at the side of the M6, as if a batch of liquid carbon-concrete had squirted out from the edge of the motorway to stain the mud before solidifying. A single small road broke away from it to head out across the open country. There could have been an original feed road down below the hardening mires, but the Royal Marine engineering brigade had chosen to ignore it in favour of running their own route directly over newly surveyed ground, sticking to the most stable regions. Similar staging areas were strung along the whole length of the M6, flinging off side roads which mimicked the original branch roads. They were the supply lines for the army as it overran the towns; not so much for the benefit of the frontline serjeants, but the support teams and occupation forces which came in their wake.

This staging area was empty, though covered in mud-tracks showing just how many vehicles had been assembled

here at one time. The Stony banked sharply above it, and swept away to chase along the supply road. A couple of minutes later they were circling the remnants of Exnall.

The occupation station's landing field was a broad sheet of micro-mesh composite spread out across a flat patch of land on the (official) edge of town, with chemical concrete injected into the soil underneath. Mud still percolated through in patches where the chemicals hadn't reached.

None of the cargo crew were surprised when Tim and Hugh jumped down out of the Stony's open hatch. They just grinned as the two rovers strained to lift their feet from the sticky mud.

Tim opened a new memory cell file for his report, and quickly reduced his olfactory sensitivity. Most of the dead plant and animal life had been swallowed by the mud, but the peninsula's constant natural showers kept uncovering them. Fortunately, the smell wasn't anything like as bad as it had been to start with.

They hitched a lift on the back of a jeep into the occupation station which had been set up in the square at the end of Maingreen.

"Where was the DataAxis office?" Tim asked.

Hugh stared around, trying to make sense of the alien territory. "Not sure; I'd have to check with a guidance block. This is as bad as Pompeii the morning after."

Tim kept recording as they splashed along the deep ruts in the mire, preserving Hugh's comments about the few landmarks of his old town which he could recognize. The deluge had hit arboreal Exnall hard. Mud had toppled the big harandrid trees onto the buildings they'd once overhung so gracefully; crumpling the shops and houses even before the foundations were undermined. Sloping roofs constructed out of carbon hyperfilament beams had sheered off to twirl away across the currents of mud, momentum snapping them through the surviving pickets of tree stumps. A whole clus-

ter of them had come to rest at the end of Maingreen, making it look as though half of the town's buildings had been buried together up to their rafters. Facades had drifted about freely like architectural rafts until the gradually hardening mud began to anchor them fast. Where they lay across the roads, jeeps and trucks had driven straight over them, crunching parallel tyre tracks of bricks and planking deeper into the dehydrating march. Only the foundations and stubby, splintered remnants of ground-floor walls indicated the town's outline, along with slumbering humps of mud-smothered harandrid.

Programmable silicon halls and igloos had been set up in the central civic district to serve as the occupation station; neither the town hall nor the police station remained intact. Army traffic sped along the narrow lanes through the new structures, while squads of serjeants and occupation troops marched between them. Tim and Hugh left the jeep to look around.

Hugh eyed the various slopes rumpling the landscape and consulted his guidance block. "This is about where it happened," he said. "The crowd gathered here after Finnuala's blanket datavise."

Tim panned round the gloomy panorama. "What price victory?" he said softly. "This isn't even the eye of the storm." He zoomed in on several stagnant pools, examining the bent grass and weeds struggling at the edge. If vegetation was to return to this peninsula, it would spread out from fresh water, he reasoned. But these filthy, sodden blades served only to play host for a variety of brown fungal blooms which thrived in the humidity. He doubted they would last much longer.

They wandered through the occupation station, capturing random images of the army reorganising itself. Serjeant casualties lying in rows of cots in a field hospital. Engineers and mechanoids working on all types of equipment. The un-

ending flow of trucks that trundled past, their hub engines humming angrily as they fought for traction in the mud.

“Hey, you two!” Elana Duncan shouted from across the road. “What the hell are you doing?”

They crossed over to her, dodging a pair of jeeps. “We’re rovers,” Tim told her. “Just looking round.”

Claws closed around his upper arm, preventing him from moving. He was pretty sure that if she wanted to, she could have snipped clean through the bone. She touched a sensor block to his chest. Not gently, either.

“Okay, now you.” Hugh submitted to the procedure without complaint.

“There aren’t any rover reporters scheduled to come out here today,” Elana said. “The colonel hasn’t cleared Exnall yet.”

“I know,” Tim said. “I just wanted to get ahead of the pack.”

“Typical,” Elana grunted. She retreated back into the hall where twenty bulky zero-tau pods had been set up. All of them had active infinite-black surfaces.

Tim followed her. “This your department?”

“You got it, sonny. I get to perform the final act of liberation on these great people we’re here to rescue. That’s why I wanted to know who you were. You’re not army, and you’re too healthy to be ex-possessed. I got to recognize that, it’s like second nature now.”

“Glad someone’s alert.”

“Knock it off.” Her head rocked up and down as she examined them. “If you want to ask questions, ask. I’m bored enough that I’ll probably answer. You’re here because this is Exnall, right?”

Tim grinned. “Well, this is where it all started. That gives me a legitimate interest. Showing the accessors that it’s been retaken and sanitised makes for a good piece.”

“Typical rover, put the story before anything else, like

mundane security and common-sense safety. I should have just shot you.”

“But you didn’t. That means you’ve got confidence in the serjeants?”

“Could be. I know I couldn’t do what they’re doing. *Still* doing. Thought I could when I came here, but this whole Liberation is one big learning curve, for all of us, right? We just don’t do war like this any more, if we ever did. Even if a conflict goes on for a couple of years, individual battles are supposed to be brutal and fast. Soldiers take a break from the front, have some R & R, grab some stims and some ass before they go back. One side makes a few gains, the other knocks them back. That’s the way it goes, but this—it never stops, not for one second. Have you ever captured that in your sensevises? The real essence of what this is about? One serjeant loses concentration for one second, and one of those bastards will slip through. It’ll start up all over again on another continent. One mistake. *One*. This isn’t a human war. The weapon which is going to win this is perfection. The possessed? They have to commit to being a hundred per cent treacherous devious sons of bitches, never let up trying to sneak one of their kind past us. Our serjeants, now they have to be eternally vigilant, never ever walk along the wrong side of the road because the mud isn’t so deep and vile there. You’ve got no idea what that takes.”

“Determination,” Tim ventured.

“Not even close. That’s an emotion. That’s a way in to your heart, weakening you. That can’t be allowed here. Human motivations have to be abandoned. Machines are what we need.”

“I thought that’s what the serjeants are.”

“Oh yeah, they’re good. Not bad at all for a first generation weapon. But the Edenists have got to improve on them, build some real mean mothers for the next Liberation. Something like us boosted, and with even less personality

than the serjeants. I've got to know a few of them, and they're still too human for this."

"You think there's going to be another Liberation?"

"Sure. Nobody's come up with another method of kicking the bastards out of the bodies they've stolen. Until that happens, we've got to keep them on the run. I told you: show no weakness. Pick another planet, maybe one of those Capone infiltrated, and start rescuing it before they take it away. Let them know we'll never let up chasing their asses out of our universe."

"Would you join that next Liberation?"

"Not a chance. I've done my bit, and learned my lesson. This is too long. You wanted a story about what Exnall was like, you came a day too late. We still had some of the possessed around yesterday, waiting for zero-tau. They're the ones you should have talked to."

"What did they tell you?"

"That they hate the Liberation the same way we do. It's wearing them down, they haven't got enough food, the rain doesn't stop, the mud climbs into bed with them each night. And ever since Ketton took that Ekelund bitch away, their organized resistance folded in. Now it's just gone back to instinct, that's why they fight. They're losing it, because they're human. They came back here because they were determined to end their suffering, right? That's the ultimate human motivator. Anything to escape the beyond. But now they're here, where they thought they wanted to be, they've got all their old flaws back. As soon as they became human again, it becomes possible to beat them."

"Until they take their whole planet out of the universe," Tim protested.

"Fine by me. That removes them from interfering with us any more. A stalemate in this war means we have won. Our purpose is to prevent them from spreading."

“But even the war isn’t an end to this,” Hugh said. “Have you forgotten you have a soul? That you will die one day?”

Elana’s claws clacked irritably. “No, I haven’t forgotten. But right now I have a job to do. That’s what matters, that’s what’s important. When I die, I’ll confront the beyond fair and square. All this philosophising and moralising and agonising we’re doing, it’s all bullshit. When it comes down to it, you’re on your own.”

“Just like life,” Hugh said with a gentle smile.

Tim frowned at him. It was most unlike Hugh to offer any comment on death and the beyond; the one subject he (strangely) always avoided.

“You got it,” Elana boomed approvingly.

Tim said goodbye, and left her monitoring the zero-tau pods. “Live death like you live life, huh?” he chided Hugh when they were far enough away to be outside the range of the mercenary’s enhanced auditory senses.

“Something like that,” Hugh responded solemnly.

“Interesting person, our Elana,” Tim said. “The interview will need some tight editing, though. She’ll depress the hell out of anyone who hears her ranting on like that.”

“Perhaps you should let her speak. She’s been exposed to the possessed for a long time. Whether she admits it or not, that’s influenced her thinking. Don’t slant that.”

“I do not slant my reports.”

“I’ve accessed your pieces, you dumb everything down for your audience. They’re just a compilation of highlights.”

“Keeps them accessed, doesn’t it? Have you seen our ratings?”

“There’s more to news than marketing points. You have to include substance occasionally. It balances and emphasises those highlights you worship.”

“Shit, how did you ever wind up in this business?”

“I was made for it,” Hugh said, which he apparently found hilarious.

Tim gave him a bewildered glance. Then his neural nanonics reported his communications block was receiving a priority call from the Fort Forward studio chief. It was the news that the Confederation Navy had attacked Arnstat.

“Holy shit,” Tim muttered. All around him, marines and mercenaries were cheering and calling out to each other. Trucks and jeeps sounded their horns in continual blasts.

“That’s not good,” Hugh said. “They knew what the effect would be.”

“Damn it, yes,” Tim said. “We’ve lost the story.”

“An entire planet snatched away to another realm, and all that concerns you is the story?”

“Don’t you see?” Tim swept his arms round extravagantly, encompassing the occupation station in one gesture. “This was *the* story, the only one: we were on the front line against the possessed. What we saw and said mattered. Now it doesn’t. Just like that.” His neural nanonics astronomy program found him the section of dark azure sky where Avon’s star shone unseen. He glared at it in frustration. “Someone up there is changing Confederation policy, and I’m stuck down here. I can’t find out why.”

Cochrane saw it first. Naturally, he called it Tinkerbell.

Not quite limber enough to stay in a full lotus position for hours on end, the hippie was sprawled bonelessly on a leather beanbag, facing the direction Ketton island was flying in. With a Jack Daniels in one hand and his purple sunglasses in place he possibly wasn’t as alert as he should have been. But then, none of the other ten people sharing the top of the headland with him saw it.

They were, as McPhee complained later, looking out for something massive, a planet or a moon, or perhaps even Valisk. An object that would appear as a small dark patch amid the vanishing-point glare and slowly swell in size as the island drew closer.

The last thing anyone expected was a pebble-sized crystal with a splinter of sunlight entombed at its centre arrowing in out of the bright void ahead. But that's what they got.

"Holy mamma, hey you cats, look at this," Cochrane whooped. He tried to point, sending Jack Daniels sloshing across his flares.

The crystal was sliding over the cliff edge, its multifaceted surface stabbing out thin beams of pure white light in every direction. It swooped in towards Cochrane and his fellow watchers, keeping a level four metres off the ground. By then Cochrane was on his feet dancing and waving at it. "Over here, man. We're here. Here boy, come on, come to your big old buddy."

The crystal curved tightly, circling over their heads to their gasps and excited shouts.

"Yes!" Cochrane yelled. "It knows we're here. It's alive, gotta be, man; look at the way it's buzzing about, like some kind of inter-cosmic fairy." Slivers of light from the crystal flashed across his sunglasses. "Yoww, that's bright. Hey, Tinkerbell, tone it down, baby."

Delvan stared at their visitor in absolute awe, a hand held in front of his face to shield him from the dazzling light. "Is it an angel?"

"Naw," Cochrane chortled. "Too small. Angels are huge great mothers with flaming swords. Tinkerbell, that's who we've got here." He cupped his hands round his mouth. "Yo, Tinks, how's it hanging?"

Choma's dark, weighty hand tapped Cochrane's shoulder. The hippie flinched.

"I don't wish to be churlish," the serjeant said. "But I believe there are more appropriate methods with which to open communications with an unknown xenoc species."

"Oh yeah?" Cochrane sneered. "Then how come you're already boring her away?"

The crystal changed direction, speeding away to fly over

the main headland camp. Cochrane started running after it, yelling and waving.

Sinon, like every other serjeant on the island, had turned to look at the strange pursuit as soon as Choma informed them of the crystal's arrival. "We have an encounter situation," he announced to the humans around him.

Stephanie stared at the brilliant grain of crystal leading Cochrane on a merry chase and let out a small groan of dismay. They really shouldn't have let the old hippie join the forward watching group.

"What's happening?" Moyo asked.

"Some kind of flying xenoc," she explained.

"Or probe," Sinon said. "We are attempting to communicate with affinity."

The serjeants combined their mental voice into a collective hail. As well as clear ringing words of greeting, mathematical symbols, and pictographics, they produced a spectrum of pure emotional tones. None of it provoked any kind of discernible answer.

The crystal slowed again, drifting over the headland group. There were over sixty humans camping out together now; Stephanie's initial group had been joined by a steady stream of deserters from Ekelund's army. They'd broken away over the past week, sometimes in groups, sometimes individually; all of them rejecting her authority and growing intolerance. The word they brought from the old town wasn't good. Martial law was strictly enforced, turning the whole place into a virtual prison. At the moment, her efforts were focused on recovering as many rifles as possible from the ruins and mounds of loose soil. Apparently she still hadn't abandoned her plan to rid the island of serjeants and disloyal possessed.

Stephanie stood looking up at the twinkling crystal as it traced a meandering course overhead. Cochrane was still lumbering along thirty metres behind. His annoyed cries carried faintly through the air. "Any reply yet?" she asked.

“None,” the serjeant told them.

People had risen to their feet, gawping at the tiny point of light. It seemed oblivious to all of them. Stephanie concentrated on the folds of iridescent shadow which her mind’s senses were revealing. Human and serjeant minds glowed within it, easily recognizable; the crystal existed as a sharply defined teardrop-filigree of sapphire. It was almost like a computer graphic, a total contrast to everything else she could perceive this way. As it grew closer its composition jumped up to perfect clarity; in a dimension-defying twist the inner threads of sapphire were longer than its diameter.

She’d stopped being amazed by wonders since Ketton left Mortonridge. Now she was simply curious.

“That can’t be natural,” she insisted.

Sinon spoke for the mini-consensus of serjeants. “We concur. Its behaviour and structure is indicative of a high-order entity.”

“I can’t make out any kind of thoughts.”

“Not like ours. That is inevitable. It seems well adjusted to this realm. Commonality would therefore be unlikely.”

“You think it’s a native?”

“If not an actual aboriginal, then something equivalent to their AI. It does seem to be self-determining, a good indicator of independence.”

“Or good programming,” Moyo said. “Our reconnaissance drones would have this much awareness.”

“Another possibility,” Sinon agreed.

“None of that matters,” Stephanie said. “It proves there’s some kind of sentience here. We have to make contact and ask for help.”

“That’s if they understand the concept,” Franklin said.

This speculation is irrelevant, Choma said. What it is does not matter, what it is capable of does. Communication has to be established.

It will not respond to any of our attempts, Sinon said.

If it does not sense affinity or atmospheric compression then we have little chance of initiating contact.

Mimic it, Choma said. The mini-consensus queried him.

It can obviously sense us, he explained. **Therefore we must demonstrate we are equally aware of it. Once it knows this, it will logically begin seeking communication channels. The surest demonstration possible is to use our energistic power to assemble a simulacrum.**

They focused their minds on a stone lying at Sinon's feet, fourteen thousand serjeants conceiving it as a small clear diamond with a flame of cold light burning bright at its centre. It rose into the air, shedding crumbs of mud as it went.

The original crystal swerved round and approached the illusion, orbiting it slowly. In response, the serjeants moved their crystal in a similar motion, the two of them describing an elaborate spiral over Sinon's head.

That attracted its attention, Choma said confidently.

Cochrane arrived, panting heavily. "Hey, Tinks, slow down, babe." He rested his hands on his upper thighs, glancing up with a crooked expression. "What's going on here, man? Is she breeding?"

"We are attempting to open communications," Sinon said.

"Yeah?" Cochrane reached up, his hand open. "Easy, dude."

"Don't—" Sinon and Stephanie said it simultaneously.

Cochrane's hand closed round Tinkerbelle. And kept closing. His fingers and palm elongated as though the air had become a distorting mirror. They were drawn down into the crystal. He squawked in panicked astonishment as his wrist stretched out fluidly and began to follow his hand into the interior. "Ho shiiiiit—" His body was abruptly tugged along, feet leaving the ground.

Stephanie exerted her energistic power, trying to pull him back. *Insisting* he return. She felt the serjeants adding their ability to hers. None of them could attach their desperate

thoughts to the wailing hippie. His body's physical mass had become elusive, it was like trying to grip on a rope of water.

The frantic yelling cut off as his head was sucked within the crystal's boundary. The torso and legs followed quickly.

"Cochrane!" Franklin yelled.

A pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses with purple lenses fell to the ground.

Stephanie couldn't even sense the hippie's thoughts any more. She waited numbly to see who would be devoured next. It was only a couple of metres from her.

The crystal sparkled with red and gold light for a moment, then reverted to pure white. It shot off at high velocity across the rumpled mudlands towards the town.

"It killed him," she grunted in horror.

"Ate him," Rana said.

Alternatively, it took a sample, Sinon said to his fellow serjeants. The shocked humans probably wouldn't want to hear quite such a clinical analysis.

It didn't select Cochrane, Choma said. **He selected it. Or more likely, it was a simple defence mechanism.**

I hope not. That would imply we have come to a hostile environment. I would prefer to consider it a sampling process.

The method of capture was extraordinary, Choma said. **Is it some kind of crystalline neutronium, perhaps? Nothing else could suck him in like that.**

We don't even know if gravity or solid matter exist in this realm, Sinon said. **Besides, there was no energy emission. If his mass was being compressed by gravity, we would all have been obliterated by the radiation burst.**

Then let us hope it was a sampling method.

Yes. Sinon conveyed a slight uncertainty with his thought. **Shame it was Cochrane.**

It could have been Ekelund.

Sinon watched the crystal slicing freely across the land. It had become a cometary streak. **That may yet happen.**

Annette Ekelund had established her new headquarters on top of the steep mound which used to be Ketton's town hall. Rectangular sections of various buildings had been salvaged from the ruins all around and propped up against each other; energistic power modified them into heavy canvas tents printed with green and black jungle camouflage. Three of them contained the last remaining stocks of food. One served as an armoury and makeshift engineering shop where Milne and his team worked repairing the rifles which had been dug from the wet soil. The last, sitting right on the brow, was Annette's personal quarters and command post. She had the netting rolled up at both ends, giving her a good view out across the island's blotchy grey-brown land right to the scabrous edges. Maps and clipboards were strewn cross the trestle table in the centre. Coloured pencils had marked out the army's defensive fortifications around Ketton, along with possible lines of attack based on scout reports of the terrain outside. Serjeant positions and estimated strengths were all indicated.

The information had taken days to compile. Right now Annette was paying it no heed; she was glaring at the captain who stood to attention in front of her. Soi Hon lounged back in his canvas chair at the side of the table, watching the scene with no attempt to hide his amusement.

"Five of the patrol refused to come back," the captain said. "They just kept on walking, said they were going to pitch in with the serjeants."

"The enemy," Annette corrected.

"Yes. The enemy. There was only three of us left after that. We couldn't force them back."

"You are pathetic," Annette told him angrily. "How you were ever considered officer material I don't know. You

don't just go with your men on walks around the perimeter, you're their leader for Christ's sake. That means you know their vulnerabilities as well as their strengths. You should have seen this coming, especially now you can sense their raw emotional state. They should never have been allowed out to betray us like this. Your fault."

The captain gave her a look of incredulous dismay. "This is ridiculous. Everyone here is worried shitless. I could see that in them clear enough. There's no way of telling what they were going to do about it."

"You should have known. You're on null rations for thirty-six hours, and demoted to corporal. Now get back to your division, you're a disgrace."

"I dug up that food. I was in the shit up to my elbows for two days working for it. You can't do this. It's mine."

"It will be in thirty-six hours. Not before."

They stared at each other across the table. Sheets of paper stirred silently.

"Fine," the ex-captain snapped. He stormed out.

Annette glared after him, furious at how slack everyone was becoming. Didn't any of them understand how critical these times were?

"Well handled," Soi Hon said, his voice verging on a sneer.

"You think he should go unpunished? You wouldn't believe how fast things would unravel if I didn't enforce order."

"Your society would unravel. Not individual lives."

"You think another kind of society can survive here?"

"Let go, and see what evolves."

"That's major bullshit, even by your standards."

Soi Hon shrugged, unconcerned. "I'd love to know where you think we're actually heading if not oblivion."

"This realm offers us sanctuary."

"Will you cut my ration if I make an observation?"

“It wouldn’t make any difference. I know you. You have your own little stash somewhere, I’m sure.”

“I have learned prudence, I don’t deny. What I suggest you consider is the possibility that the serjeants might be correct. This realm might offer us sanctuary if we were on a planet. However, this island does appear to be terribly finite.”

“It is, but the realm is not. We came here *instinctively*; we knew this was the one place where we would be safe. It can be paradise, if we just believe in it. You’ve seen how our energetic power operates here. The effects take longer to form, but when they do the change is more profound.”

“Pity they can’t slowly grow us some food, or even air. I’d probably settle for a little more land.”

“If that’s what you think, why stay with me? Why not run away like all those weak fools?”

“You have the food secure, and there is no bush for me to hide in. Not even a single bush, in fact. Which pains me. This land is . . . not good. It has no spirit.”

“We can have what we want.” Annette was looking directly out of the open end of the tent at the sharp, close horizon. “We can give the land its spirit back.”

“How?”

“By finishing what we started. By escaping. They’re holding us back, you see.”

“The serjeants?”

“Yes.” She gave him a smile, content that he understood. “This is the realm where our dreams come true. But their dreams are of rationality and physics, the old order. They are machines, soulless, they cannot understand what we can become here. They hold our winged thoughts back in cages of steel. Imagine it, Soi, if we rid ourselves of their restraints. This island expanding, new land growing out from the cliff edges. Land that’s covered in rich green life. We are a seed here, we can germinate into something wonderful. Heaven is what you make it: that’s such a precious destiny, every

human's entitlement. And we can see it. Out there, waiting for us. We've come so far, they cannot be allowed to contaminate our minds with their dark yearning to remain in the past."

Soi Hon raised an eyebrow. "A seed? That's how you see this island?"

"Yes. One that can bloom into whatever kingdom we want."

"I doubt that. I really do. We are humans in stolen bodies, not embryonic godlings."

"And yet, we've already taken the first step." She lifted her hands up in a theatrical offering to the sky. "After all, we said there was to be light, didn't we?"

"I've read that book, but not many of my people did. How typically Euro-Christian, you think your origins and mythology populated the world. All you actually gave us was pollution, war, and disease."

Annette grinned wolfishly. "Come on, Soi, show a little levity. Get radical again. This place can be made to work. Once we eliminate the serjeants we'll have a chance." Her smile faded as she sensed the babble of confusion and surprise emanating from within the communal mind of the serjeants. Ever-present, it sat on the edge of her consciousness, a dawn refusing to rise. Now their cool thoughts were changing, coming as close to panic as she'd known. "What's upset them?"

She and Soi walked over to the end of the tent, and looked over at the dark mass of serjeants clustering in the foothills of Catmos Vale's lost walls.

"Well, they're not charging at us," Soi said. "That's gratifying."

"Something's wrong." She brought up her field binoculars, and searched the serjeants' encampment, trying to spot any abnormality amid the large dark bodies. They were sitting calmly together as always. Then she realized every head was turned to face her. The binoculars came down, allowing her to frown back at them. "I don't get this."

“There, look.” Soi was pointing at a bright spark rushing over the town’s perimeter fortifications. The soldiers below it were shouting and gesticulating wildly as it soared imperiously overhead.

It hurtled towards the mound at the centre of town.

“Mine,” Annette said warmly. With her feet apart, she brought her hands together in a pistol grip. A squat black maser carbine materialized, blunt barrel lining up on the approaching crystal.

“I don’t think that’s a weapon,” Soi said. He started to back away from Annette. “It didn’t come from the serjeants, they’re as puzzled as us.”

“It doesn’t have permission to enter my town.”

Soi started to run. A slim flare of intense white fire spewed out of Annette’s gun, darting towards the approaching crystal. It veered effortlessly aside, arcing over Soi. He stumbled as the spires of light pirouetted around him.

Smoothly and methodically, Annette turned to follow the invader. She pulled back on the trigger again, flinging the most potent bolt of white fire she could muster. It had no effect. The crystal whipped round in a tight parabola above Soi and accelerated back the way it came.

The serjeants watched it return. This time it never even slowed down as it tore through the air above them. Once it was over the cliff it began to curve downwards. Delvan rushed up to the very edge and flung himself flat on the crusted mud, head just peeping over. The last he saw of it was a glimmer of light descending parallel to the crinkled cliff-face before disappearing underneath the antagonistic planes of fractured rock.

The traders hooted and clanked their way along Cricklade’s drive in seven big lorries. Steam hissed energetically out of the iron stacks behind their cabs, while gleaming brass pistons spun the front wheels. They growled to a halt in front of

the manor's broad steps, dripping oil on the gravel and wheezing steam from leaky couplings.

Luca came forward to greet them. As far as he could tell, the thoughts of the people riding in the cabs were amicable enough. He wasn't expecting trouble; traders had visited Cricklade before, but never in a convoy this size. A group of ten estate workers were on close call, just in case.

The traders' leader climbed down out of the lead lorry and introduced himself as Lionel. He was a short man with flowing blond hair tied back with a leather lace, wearing worn blue denim jeans and a round-neck sweater: working clothes which were almost an extension of his forthright attitude. After a couple of minutes' conversation, sizing each other up, Luca invited him indoors.

Lionel settled appreciatively into the study's leather armchair, sipping at the Norfolk Tears Luca offered him. If he was concerned about the restrained, moody atmosphere grumbling around the manor, it never showed. "Our main commodity this trip is fish," he said. "Mostly smoked, but we have some on ice as well. Apart from that, we're carrying vegetable and fruit seeds, fertilised chicken eggs, some fancy perfumes, a few power tools. We're trying to build a reputation for reliability, so if there's something you want which we haven't got, we'll try to get hold of it for our next visit."

"What are you looking for?" Luca asked as he sat down behind the broad desk.

"Flour, meat, some new tractor bearings, a power socket to recharge the lorries." He raised his glass. "A decent drink." They grinned, and touched their glasses. Lionel's gaze lingered on Luca's hand for a moment. The contrast between their skin was subtle, but noticeable. Luca's was darker, thicker, a true guide to Grant's age; Lionel maintained an altogether more youthful sheen.

"What sort of exchange rate were you thinking of for the fish?" Luca asked.

“For flour, five to one, direct weight.”

“Don’t bugger about wasting my time.”

“I’m not. Fish is meat, valuable protein. There’s also carriage; Cricklade’s a long way inland.”

“That’s why we have sheep and cattle; we’re exporting meat. But I can pay your carriage costs in electricity, we have our own heat shaft.”

“Our power cells are seventy per cent charged.”

The haggling went on for a good forty minutes. When Suannah came in she found them on their third round of Norfolk Tears. She sat on the side of Luca’s chair, his arm around her waist. “How’s it going?” she asked.

“I hope you like fish,” Luca told her. “We’ve just bought three tons of it.”

“Oh bloody hell.” She plucked the glass of Tears from his hand, and sipped thoughtfully. “I suppose there’s room in the freezer room. I’ll have to have a word with Cook.”

“Lionel has some interesting news, as well.”

“Oh?” She gave the trader a pleasant, enquiring look.

Lionel smiled, covering a mild curiosity. Like Luca, Suannah was letting her host body’s age show. The first middle-aged people he’d seen since Norfolk came to this realm. “We got our fish from a ship in Holbeach, the *Cranborne*. They were docked there a week ago, trading their cargo for an engine repair. Should still be there.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“The *Cranborne* is a merchant multitramp,” Luca said. “She just sails between islands picking up cargo and passengers, whatever pays; she can fish, dredge, harvest mintweed, icebreak, you name it.”

“Her current crew have rigged her with nets,” Lionel said. “There’s not much charter work going at the moment, so trawling has become their livelihood. They’re also talking about trading between islands. Once things have settled

down, they'll have a better idea of who produces what and the kind of goods they can carry to exchange."

"I'm happy for them," Susannah said. "Why tell me?"

"It's a way of getting to Norwich," Luca said. "A start, anyway."

Susannah looked hard into his face, now falling back into Grant's familiar features. The relapse had been accelerating ever since he returned from his trip to Knossington with the news that the aeroambulance didn't work, its electronics simply couldn't operate in this realm. "A voyage that far would be expensive," she said quietly.

"Cricklade could afford it."

"Yes," she said carefully. "It could. But it's not ours any more. If we take that much food or Tears or horses the others will claim we stole it. We wouldn't be able to come back, not to Kesteven."

"We?"

"Yes, we. They're our children, and this is our home."

"One means nothing without the other."

"I don't know," she said, deeply troubled. "What's to make the *Cranborne* crew stick to the agreement once we cast off?"

"What's to stop us stealing their whole ship?" Luca replied wearily. "We have a civilization again, darling. It's not the best, I know that. But it's here, and it works. At least we can see treachery and dishonesty coming a long way off."

"All right. So do you want to go? It's not as if we haven't got enough troubles," she said guiltily, flicking a glance at the diplomatically quiet Lionel.

"I don't know. I want to fight this; going means Grant has won."

"It's not a battle, it's a matter of the heart."

"Whose heart?" he whispered painfully.

"Excuse me," Lionel said. "Have you considered that the people possessing your daughters might not be exactly wel-

coming? What were you planning on doing anyway? It's not as if you can exorcise them and go walking off into a sunset. They'll be as alien to you as you are to them."

"They're not alien to me," Luca said. He sprang up from the chair, his whole body twitchy. "*Damn it*, I cannot stop worrying about them."

"We're all succumbing to our hosts," Lionel said. "The easiest course is to acknowledge that, at least you'll have some peace then. Are you prepared to do that?"

"I don't know," Luca ground out. "I just don't."

Carmitha ran her fingers along the woman's arm, probing the structure of bone and muscle and tendon. Her eyes were closed as she performed the examination, her mind concentrated on the swirl of foggy radiance that was the flesh. It wasn't just tactile feeling she relied on, cells formed distinct bands of shade, as if she was viewing a very out-of-focus medical text of the human body. Fingertips moved on half an inch, she pushed each one in carefully, as if she were stroking piano keys. Searching an entire body this way took over an hour, and even then it was hardly a hundred per cent effective. Only the surface was inspected. There were a great many cancers which could affect the organs, glands, and marrow; subtle monsters that would go unnoticed until it was far, far too late.

Something moved sideways under her forefinger. She played with it, testing its motion. A hard node, as if a small stone was embedded below the skin. Her mind's vision perceived it as a white blur, sprouting a fringe of wispy tendrils that swam out into the surrounding tissue. "Another one," she said.

The woman's gasp was almost a sob. Carmitha had learned the hard way not to hide anything from her patients. Invariably, they knew of the spike of alarm in her own thoughts.

"I'm going to die," the woman whimpered. "All of us are dying, rotting away. It's our punishment for escaping the beyond."

"Nonsense, these bodies are geneered, which makes them highly resistant to cancer. Once you stop aggravating it with energistic power it should sink into remission." Her stock verbal placebo, repeated so many times in the days since Butterworth's collapse that she'd begun to believe it herself.

Carmitha continued the examination, moving past the elbow. It was just a formality now. The woman's thighs had been the worst; lumps like a cluster of walnuts where she'd driven away flab to give herself an adolescent glamour-queen's rump. Fear had broken the instinct and desire for sublime youthful splendour. The unnatural punishment of her cells would end. Maybe the tumours really would go into remission.

Luca came knocking on the side of the caravan just as Carmitha was finishing. She told him to stay outside, and waited until the woman had put her clothes back on.

"It'll be all right," she said, and hugged her. "You just have to be you now, and be strong."

"Yes," came the dismal answer.

It wasn't a time for lectures, Carmitha decided. Let her get over the shock first. Afterwards she could learn how to express her inner strength, fortifying herself. Carmitha's grandmother used to place a lot of emphasis on thinking yourself well. "A weak mind lets in the germs."

Luca carefully avoided meeting the woman's tearful eyes as she came down out of the caravan, standing sheepishly to one side.

"Another one?" he asked after she went into the manor.

"Yep," Carmitha said. "Mild case, this time."

"Jolly good."

"Not really. So far we've just seen the initial tumours develop. I'm just praying that your natural high resistance can

keep them in check. If not, the next stage is metastasis, when the cancer cells start spreading through the body. Once that happens, it's over." She just managed to keep her resentment in check; the landowners and town dwellers were descended from geneered colonists, the Romanies had shunned such things.

He shook his head, too stubborn to argue. "How's Johan?"

"His weight's creeping back up, which is good. I've got him walking again, and given him some muscle-building exercises—also good. And he's abandoned his body illusions completely. But the tumours are still there. At the moment his body is still too weak to fight them. I'm hoping that if we can get his general health level up, then his natural defences will kick in."

"Is he fit enough to help run the estate?"

"Don't even consider it. In a couple of weeks, I'll probably ask him to help in my herb garden. That's the most strenuous work therapy I'll allow."

Nothing he did could hide the disappointment in his mind.

"Why?" she asked in suspicion. "What did you want him to do that for? I thought the old estate was working smoothly. I can hardly notice the difference."

"Just an option I'm considering, that's all."

"An option? You're leaving?" The notion startled her.

"Thinking of it," he said gruffly. "Don't tell anyone."

"I won't. But I don't understand, where will you go?"

"To find the girls."

"Oh, Grant," she laid her hand on his arm, instantly sympathetic. "They'll be all right. Even if Louise got possessed, no soul is going to alter her appearance, she's too gorgeous."

"I'm not Grant." He glanced round the courtyard, twitchy and suspicious. "Talk about having an inner demon, though. God, you must be loving this."

"Oh yeah, having a ball, me."

“Sorry.”

“How many have you got?” she asked quietly.

There was a long pause before he answered. “Some down my chest. Arms. Feet, for Christ’s sake.” He grunted in disgust. “I never imagined my feet to be anything different. Why are they there?”

Carmitha hated his genuine puzzlement; Grant’s possessor was making her feel far too sympathetic towards him. “There’s no logic to these things.”

“Not many people know what’s happening, not outside Cricklade. That trader fellow, Lionel: hasn’t got a clue. I envy him that. But it won’t last, people like Johan must be dropping like flies all across the planet. When everyone realises, things are going to fall apart real fast. That’s why I wanted to start the voyage soon. If we have a second wave of anarchy, I might never find where the girls are.”

“We should get some real doctors in to take a look at you. That white fire could be used to burn the tumours away. We’ve all got X-ray sight now. No reason why it couldn’t. Maybe we don’t even need to be that drastic, you can just wish the cells dead.”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not like you, either of you. Don’t just sit around on your arse, find out. Get a doctor in. Massage and tea won’t help much in the long run, and that’s all I can provide. You can’t leave now, Luca, people accept you as the boss. Use what influence you’ve got to try and salvage this situation. Get them through this cancer scare.”

He let out a long reluctant sigh, then tilted his head, looking at her out of one eye. “You still think the Confederation’s coming to save you, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“They’ll never find us. They’ve got two universes to search through.”

“Believe what you have to. I know what’s going to happen.”

“Friendly enemies, huh? You and me?”

“Some things never change, no matter what.”

He was saved from trying to get in a cutting reply by a stable hand running out into the courtyard, yelling that a messenger was coming from the town. He and Carmitha went through the kitchen and out through the manor’s main entrance.

A woman was riding a white horse up the drive. The pattern of thoughts locked inside her skull was familiar enough to both of them: Marcella Rye. Her horse’s gallop was matched by the excitement and trepidation in her mind.

She came to a halt in front of the broad stone stairs leading up to the marble portico and dismounted. Luca took the reins, doing his best to soothe the agitated beast.

“We’ve just had word from the villages along the railway,” she said. “There’s a bunch of marauders heading this way. Colsterworth council respectfully requests, and all that bullshit. Luca, we need some help to see the bastards off. Apparently they’re armed. Raided an old militia depot on the outskirts of Boston, got away with rifles and a dozen machine guns.”

“Oh, this is fucking brilliant,” Luca said. “Life here just keeps getting better and better.”

Luca studied the train through his binoculars (genuine ones, handed down to Grant by his father). He was sure it was the same one as before, but there had been changes. Four extra carriages had been added, not that anyone travelled in comfort. This was an iron battle wagon whose armour plates (genuine, Luca thought) ran along its entire length, riveted crudely around ordinary carriages. It clanked along the rail track towards Colsterworth at an unrelenting thirty miles an hour. Bruce Spanton had finally managed to turn the concept of an irresistible force into a physical entity, putting it down

straight into Norfolk's Turneresque countryside where it didn't belong.

"There's more of them this time," Luca said. "I suppose we could roll the rails up again."

"That monstrosity isn't built for reversing," Marcella said grimly. "You have to turn the minds around, their tails will follow."

"Between their legs."

"You got it."

"Ten minutes till they get here. We'd better get people into position and dream up a strategy." He'd brought nearly seventy estate workers with him from Cricklade. The announcement by Colsterworth Council had resulted in over five hundred townsfolk volunteering to fight off the marauders. Another thirty or so had gathered from outlying farms, determined to protect the food they'd worked hard to gather. All of them had brought shotguns or hunting rifles from their adopted homes.

Luca and Marcella organized them into four groups. The largest, three hundred strong, were formed up in a horseshoe formation surrounding Colsterworth station. Two outlying parties were hanging back from the cusps, ready to swarm across the rail and encircle the marauders. The remainder, three dozen on horseback, made up a cavalry force ready to chase down anyone who escaped from the attack.

They spent the last few minutes walking along the ranks, getting them into order and making sure they had all hardened their clothes into bullet-proof armour. Real gunshots were harder to ward off in this realm. Carbosilicon-reinforced flak-jackets were the popular solution, making the front line take on the appearance of a police riot brigade from the mid-Twenty-first Century.

"It's our right to exist as we choose that we're standing for," Luca told them repeatedly as he walked along, inspecting his troops. "We're the ones who've made something of

these circumstances, built a decent life for ourselves. I'll be buggered if I'm going to let this rabble wreck that. They cannot be allowed to live off us, that makes us nothing more than chattel."

Everywhere he went, he received murmurs and nods of agreement. The defenders' resolution and confidence expanded, building into a physical aura which began to tint the air with a hearty red translucence. When he took up position with Marcella they simply grinned at each other, relishing the fight. The train was only a mile out of town now, coming round the last bend onto the straight leading to the station. It tooted its whistle in an angry defiant blast. The red haze over the station glowed brighter. A crack split open along the middle of the wooden sleepers, starting five yards from Luca's feet and extending out past the end of the platforms. It opened barely six inches, and halted, quivering in anticipation. Granite chippings trickled over the edges, to be swallowed silently by the abyssal darkness which had been uncovered.

Luca stared directly at the front of the train, facing down its protruding cannon barrels. "Just keep coming, arsehole," he said quietly.

Subtlety simply wasn't an option. Both sides knew the rough strengths and position of the other. It could never be anything other than a direct head-to-head confrontation. A contest of energistic strength and imagination, with the real guns an unwelcome sideshow.

Half a mile from the station, and the train slowed slightly. The rear two carriages detached and braked to a halt amid fantails of orange sparks from their locked wheels. Their sides hinged down to form ramps, and jeeps raced down onto the ground. They'd been configured into armour-plated dune buggies with thick roll bars; huge deep-tread tyres were powered from four-litre petrol engines that spurted filthy exhaust fumes out into the air with a brazen roar. Each one had a machine gun mounted above the driver, operated

by a gunner dressed in leather jacket with flying goggles and helmet.

They sped away from the carriages in an attempt to outflank the townie defenders. Luca gave a signal to his own cavalry. They charged out into the fields, heading to intercept the jeeps. The train kept thundering onwards.

“Get ready,” Marcella shouted.

Puffs of white smoke shot out from the train’s cannon. Luca ducked down in reflex, hardening the air around himself. Shells started to explode at the end of the station, thick plumes of earth smearing the blank skyline amid bursts of orange light. Two struck the fringe of red air, detonating harmlessly twenty yards above the ground. Shrapnel flew away from the protective boundary. A cheer rang out from the defenders.

“We got ’em,” Luca growled triumphantly.

Machine gun fire rattled across the fields as the jeeps raced round in tight curves, churning up furrows of mud. They drove straight through gates, bursting the timber bars apart with a flash of white light. Horses cantered after them, jumping the hedges and walls effortlessly. Their riders were shooting from the saddle, as well as flinging bolts of white fire. The jeep engines started to cough and stutter as fluxes of energetic power played hell with the power cells encased deep within the semisolid illusion.

The train was only a quarter of a mile away now. Its cannon were still firing continuously. The land beyond the end of the station was taking the full brunt of the impact: craters erupted continuously, sending soil, grass, trees, and stone walls ploughing through the air. Luca was surprised at the diminutive size of the craters, he’d expected the shells to be more powerful. They did produce a lot of smoke, though; thick grey-blue clouds churning frenetically against the sheltering bubble of redness. They almost obscured the train from view.

Luca frowned suspiciously at that. “They could be a

cover,” he shouted at Marcella above the bass thunder of exploding shells.

“No way,” she yelled back. “We can sense them, remember. Smoke screens don’t work here.”

Something was wrong, and Luca knew it. When he switched his attention back to the train, he could sense the note of triumph emanating from it, just as strong as his own. Yet nothing the marauders had done assured them of victory. Nothing he could perceive.

Layers of smoke from the shells were creeping sluggishly towards the station. As they slithered through the edge of the red light they gleamed with a dark claret phosphorescence. People in the reserve groups clustered outside the platforms were reacting strangely as the first wisps curled and flexed around them. Waving their hands in front of their faces as if warding off a mulish wasp, they began to stagger around. Ripples of panic raced out from their minds, impinging against those close by.

“What’s happening to them?” Marcella demanded.

“Not sure.” Luca watched the slow spread of the crimson smoke. Its behaviour was perfectly natural, fronds undulating and twisting about on the currents of air. Nothing directed it, no malicious energetic pressure, yet wherever it spread chaos ensued. He took time to make the appalling connection; even telling himself Spanton would delve as low as it was possible to go, he found it hard to credit such depravity.

“Gas,” he said, dumbfounded. “That’s not smoke. The bastard’s using gas!”

Machine guns and rifles opened fire from every slot cut into the train’s armoured sides. With the defenders distracted, bullets were able to slice nonchalantly through the rosy air. The front rank of townsfolk were punched backwards as bullets hammered into their flak jackets. Abruptly, there was no more pink air. The human survival instinct was too strong, everyone concentrated on saving themselves.

“Blow it back at them!” Luca bellowed across the commotion. The train was only a few hundred yards away now, pistons growling furiously as it slid remorselessly along the track towards him. He flung his hands out and shoved at the air.

Marcella followed suit. “Do it,” she shouted at the closest townsfolk. “Push!”

They began to imitate her, sending out a stream of energetic power to repel the air and with it the deadly gas. The idea spread fast among the defenders, becoming real as soon as it was thought of. They didn’t need to act, only to think.

Air began to move, groaning over the station walls as it sped above the rails, its speed increasing steadily. The pillars of smoke began to bend away from their craters, breaking into tufts which slid away towards the approaching train. Leaves and twigs from the macerated hedges were picked up and carried along by the wind. They broke harmlessly against the black iron prow of the train, fluffing round it in an agitated slipstream.

Luca yelled in wordless exultation, adding the air from his lungs to the torrent surging past his body. It had risen to gale force, pushing at him. He linked arms with his neighbours, and together they rooted themselves in the ground. Unity of purpose had returned, bringing them an unchallenged mastery of the air. Now the flow had begun, they started to shape it, narrowing its force to howl vengefully against the train. Hanging baskets along the platforms swung up parallel to the ground, tugging frantically at their brackets.

The train slowed, braked by the awesome force of the horizontal tornado hurled against it. Steam from its stack and leaky junctions was ripped away to join the hurtling streamers of lethal gas. The marauders couldn’t keep their rifles steady; the wind tore at them, twisting and shaking until they threatened to wrench free. Cannon barrels were pushed out of alignment. They’d already stopped firing.

All of the defenders were contributing their will to the

raging wind now; directing it square against the train and bringing it to a shuddering halt a hundred yards from the station. Then they upped the force; adrenaline glee providing further inspiration. The iron beast rocked, the weight of its thick cladding counting for nothing.

“We can do it,” Luca cried, his words ripped away by the supernatural wind. “Keep going.” It was a prospect shared by all, encouraged by the first creaking motion of the great engine’s frame.

The marauders inside turned their own energistic power to anchoring themselves. They didn’t have the numbers to win any trial of strength.

Lumps of granite from the rail track collided against the train. The rails themselves were torn up to smash against the engine, wrapping themselves around the boiler.

One set of wheels along the side of the engine left the ground. For a moment the machine hung poised on the remaining wheels as those inside strove to counter the toppling motion. But the defending townsfolk refused to release the maelstrom they’d created, and the metal bogies buckled. The engine crashed onto its side, twisting the carriage directly behind it through ninety degrees.

If it had been a natural derailment, that would have been the end of it. In this case, the townsfolk kept on pushing. The engine flipped again, pointing its crushed bogies directly into the sky. Vicious jets of steam poured out of the broken pistons, only to be dissolved by the gale. Again the engine turned as the hurricane clawed at its black flanks, trawling the remaining carriages along. Its momentum was picking up now, turning the motion into a continuous roll. The links between the carriages snapped apart. They scattered across the fields, bulldozing through any trees that got in their way and skidding down into ditches where they came to a jarring halt.

The engine just kept on rolling, impelled by the wind and thoughts of its intended victims. Eventually the boiler broke

open, severing the big machine's spine. A cloud of steam exploded out from the huge rent, vanishing quickly into the caterwauling sky to be replaced by an avalanche of debris. Fragments of very modern-looking machinery tumbled down over the ruined land. All illusion of the steam-powered colossi had expired, leaving one of the Norfolk Railway Company's ordinary eight-wheel tractor units buried in the soil.

With the wind stilled, Luca left Marcella to organize medic parties for the defenders who'd succumbed to the gas. Even now, a dangerous chemical stink prowled around the shell craters. Those who claimed knowledge of such matters said it could be a type of phosphor, or possibly chlorine, maybe something even worse. The names they gave it didn't bother Luca, only the intent behind it. He'd walked along the row of casualties, grimacing at the protruding eyes that wept tears of salty water and blood in equal quantities; tried to speak reassuring words over the terrible hacking coughs.

After that, there could be no doubt what had to be done.

He'd gathered a small band of estate workers to accompany him. Remembering his first encounter with Spanton, he headed over the fields to the wrecked engine.

Metal sheets of some kind had indeed been welded over the tractor unit's body. Not iron after all, just some lightweight construction material; a framework easily moulded into thick armour in the mind of the beholder. They'd suffered considerably from the sheer brutality of the wind. Some of the cannon barrels had broken off, while the remainder were mangled. The main body of the unit had bent itself into a lazy V, with the forward end wedged down into the ground.

Luca walked round to the cab. It had crumpled badly, sides bowing inwards and roof concave, reducing the space inside to less than that of a wardrobe. He crouched down and peered through the crooked window slit.

Bruce Spanton stared back at him. His body was trapped between various chunks of metal and warped piping that had sprung from the walls. Blood from his crushed legs and arm mingled with oil and muddy soil. His face was the pale grey of shock victims, with different features than before. The wraparound sunglasses had been discarded along with the swept-back hair; no illusion remained.

“Thank Christ,” he gasped. “Get me outta here, man. It’s all I can do to stop my fucking legs from dropping off.”

“I thought I’d find you in here,” Luca replied equitably.

“So you found me. So I’ll give you a fucking medal. Just get me out. These walls all got smashed to shit in the rumble. It hurts so bad I can’t even switch off the pain like usual.”

“A rumble? Is that what this was?”

“What are you trying to pull!” Spanton screamed. He stopped, grimacing wildly from the pain which his outburst triggered. “All right, okay. You won. You’re the king of the hill. Now bend some of this metal away.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s *what*?”

“We won, you lose. It’s over?”

“What do you fucking think, dickhead?”

“Ah. I get it. You walk off into the sunset and never come back. That’s it. The end. No hard feelings. Everything turned out okay, and you’ll just slaughter some other bunch of people with poison gas. Maybe a smaller town, who won’t be able to fight back. Well great. Absolutely fabulous. That’s why I came out to help this town. So you could have your rumble and turn your back on us.”

“What do you fucking want?”

“I want to live. I want to be able to look out at the end of the day and see what I’ve accomplished. I want my family to benefit from that. I want them to be safe. I don’t want to have them worry about insane megalomaniacs who think being tough entitles them to live off the backs of ordinary

decent working people.” He smiled down at Spanton’s stricken face. “Am I ringing any bells here? Do you see yourself in any of that?”

“I’ll go. Okay? We’ll get off this island. You can put us on a ship, make sure we really leave.”

“It’s not where you are that’s the problem. It’s *what* you are.” Luca straightened up.

“What? That’s it? Get me out of here, you shit.” He started thumping the walls with a fist.

“I don’t think so.”

“You think I’m a problem now, you don’t even know what a problem is, asshole. I’ll show you what a real goddamn motherfucking problem is.”

“That’s what I thought.” Luca swung his pump action shotgun round until the muzzle was six inches from Spanton’s forehead. He kept firing until the man’s head was blown off.

Bruce Spanton’s soul slithered up out of his bloody corpse along with the body’s true soul; an insubstantial wraith rising like lethargic smoke out of the train’s wreckage. Luca looked straight into translucent eyes that suddenly realized actual death was occurring after centuries of wasted half-existence. He held that gaze, acknowledging his own guilt as the writhing spectre slowly faded from sight and being. It took mere seconds, a period which compressed a lifetime of bitter fear and aching resentment into its length.

Luca stood shivering from the profound impact of knowledge and emotion. I did what I had to do, he told himself. Spanton had to be stopped. To do nothing would be to destroy myself.

The estate workers were watching him cautiously, their thoughts subdued as they waited to see what he did next.

“Let’s go round up the rest of them,” Luca said. “Especially that bastard chemist.” He started walking towards the

nearest carriage, thumbing new cartridges into the pump action's empty chamber.

The others began to trail after him, holding their weapons tighter than before.

Cricklade hadn't known screams like it since the day Quinn Dexter arrived. A high-pitched note of uniquely female agony coming from an open window overlooking the courtyard. The becalmed air of a bright early-autumn day helped carry the sound a long way over the manor's steep rooftops, agitating the stabled horses and causing men to flinch guiltily.

Véronique's waters had broken in the early hours the day after Luca had led his band of estate workers away to help fight the marauders. Carmitha had been with her since day-break, closeted away in one of the West Wing's fancy bedroom suites. She suspected the room might even have belonged to Louise; it was grand enough, with a large bed as the central feature (though not big enough to qualify as a double; that would never do for a single landowner girl). Not that Louise would want it now.

Véronique was propped up on the middle of the mattress, with Cook dabbing away at her straining face with a small towel. Other than that, it was all down to Véronique and Carmitha. And the baby, who was reluctant to put in a fast appearance.

At least Carmitha's new-found sense allowed her to see that it was the right way round for the birth, and the umbilical cord hadn't got wrapped round its neck. Nor were there any other obvious complications. Basically, that just left her to look, sound, and radiate assured confidence. She had after all assisted with a dozen natural childbirths, which was a great comfort to everyone else involved. Somehow, what with the way Véronique looked up to her as a cross between her long-lost mother and a fully qualified gynaecologist,

she'd never actually mentioned that assistance involved handing over towels when told and mopping up for the real midwife.

"I can see the head," Carmitha said excitedly. "Just trust me now."

Véronique screamed again, trailing off into an angry whimper. Carmitha placed her hands over the girl's swollen belly, and exerted her energistic power, pushing with the contractions. Véronique kept on screaming as the baby emerged. Then she broke into tears.

It happened a lot quicker than usual thanks to the energistic pressure. Carmitha caught hold of the infant and eased gently, making the last moments more bearable for the exhausted girl. Then it was the usual fast panic routine of getting the umbilical tied and cut. Véronique sobbing delightedly. People moving in with towels and smiles of congratulations. Having to wipe the baby off. Delivering the placenta. Endless mopping up.

New to this was applying some energistic power to repair the small tears in Véronique's vaginal walls. Not too much, Carmitha was still worried about the long-term effects which even mild healing might trigger. But it did abolish the need for stitches.

By the time Carmitha finally finished tidying up, Véronique was lying on clean sheets, cradling her baby daughter with a classic aura of exhausted happiness. And a smooth mind.

Carmitha studied her silently for a moment. There was none of the internal anguish caused by a possessing soul riding roughshod over the host. Sometime during the pain and blood and joy, two had become one, merging at every level in celebration of new life.

Véronique smiled shyly upwards at Carmitha. "Isn't she wonderful?" she entreated of the drowsy baby. "Thank you so much."

Carmitha sat on the edge of the bed. It was impossible not to smile down at the wrinkled-up face, so innocent of its brand-new surroundings. “She’s lovely. What are you going to call her?”

“Jeanette. Both our families have had that name in it.”

“I see. That’s good.” Carmitha kissed the baby’s brow. “You two get some rest now. I’ll pop by in an hour or so to check up on you.”

She walked through the manor out into the courtyard. Dozens of people stopped her on the way; asking how it had gone, were mother and child all right? She felt happy to be dispensing good news for once, helping to lift some of the worry and tension that was stifling Cricklade.

Luca found her sitting in the open doorway at the back of her caravan, taking long drags from a reefer. He leant against the rear wheel and folded his arms to look at her. She offered him the joint.

“No thanks,” he said. “I didn’t know you did that.”

“Just for the occasional celebration. There’s not much weed about on Norfolk. We have to be careful where we plant it. You landowners get very uptight about other people’s vices.”

“I’m not going to argue with you. I hear the baby arrived.”

“She did, yes, she’s gorgeous. And so is Véronique, now.”

“Now?”

“She and Olive kissed and made up. They’re one now. One person. I guess that’s the way the future’s going for all of you.”

“Ha!” Luca grunted bitterly. “You’re wrong there, girl. I killed people today. Butterworth’s right to fear his health. Once your body goes in this realm, you go with it. There’s no ghosts, no spirits, no immortality. Just death. We screwed up—lost our one chance to go where we wanted, and we didn’t go there.”

Carmitha exhaled a long stream of sweet smoke. "I think you did."

"Don't talk crap, my girl."

"You're back where we thought the human race started from. What exists here is all we had before people began inventing things and making electricity. It's the kind of finite world humans feel safe in. Magic exists here, though it's not good for much. Very few machines work, nothing complicated, and certainly no electronics. And death . . . death is real. Hell, we've even got gods on the other side of the sky again; gods with powers beyond anything possible here, made in our own image. In a couple of generations, we'll only have rumours of gods. Legends that tell how this world was made, racing out of the black emptiness in a blaze of red fire. What's that if it's not a new beginning in a land of innocence? This place isn't for you, it never was. You've reinvented the biological imperative, and made it mean something this time. All that you are must carry on through your children. Every moment has to be lived to the full, for you'll get no more." She took another drag, the end of the joint glowing bright tangerine. Small sparks were reflected in her gleeful eyes. "I rather like that, don't you?"

Stephanie's bullet wound had healed enough to let her walk round the headland camp; she and Moyo and Sinon made the circuit twice a day. Their small secluded refuge had grown in a chaotic manner as the deserters from Ekelund's army dribbled in. Now it sprawled like an avalanche of sleeping bags away from the cliff edge. The new people tended to stay in small groups, huddling together round the pile of whatever items they'd brought with them. The only rule the serjeants had about extending sanctuary from Ekelund was that they hand over their real weapons once they arrived. Nobody had objected enough to return.

As she circled round the knots of subdued people,

Stephanie picked up enough fragments of conversation to guess what awaited any deserter foolish enough to venture back. Ekelund's paranoia was growing at a worrying rate. And Tinkerbell's appearance hadn't helped. Apparently, the crystal entity had been shot at. That was the reason for it fleeing away into the empty glare.

As if they didn't have enough to worry about with their current predicament, there was now the prospect Ekelund had started a war.

"I miss him, too," Moyo said sympathetically. He squeezed Stephanie's hand in an attempt at reassurance.

She smiled faintly, thankful he'd picked up on her melancholic thoughts. "A couple of days without him, and we're all going to pieces." She paused to take a breath. Perhaps her recovery wasn't as advanced as she liked to imagine. "Let's go back," she said. These little walks had started out to give the newcomers some sense of identity, that they were all part of a big new family. She was the one they'd come to, and she wanted to show she was available to them if they needed it. Most of them recognized her as she walked past. But there were so many now that they had their own identity, and it was the serjeants who guaranteed their safety. Her role had diminished to nothing. And God forbid I should try to manufacture my own importance like Ekelund.

The three of them turned and headed back to the little encampment where their friends kept a vigil over Tina. A little way beyond it, the serjeants formed a line of watchers strung out along the top of the cliff, searching for any sign of Tinkerbell. They covered almost a fifth of the rim now, and Sinon told her their mini-consensus was considering stationing them all the way round the island. When she'd asked if Ekelund might consider that a threatening move, the big bitek construct merely shrugged. "Some things are considerably more important than placating her neuroses," he'd said.

“Quick inspection tour,” Franklin remarked as they returned.

Stephanie guided Moyo to a comfortable sitting position a couple of metres from Tina’s makeshift bed and sprawled on a blanket beside him. “I’m not exactly an inspiring sight any more.”

“Of course you are, darling,” Tina said.

Everyone had to strain to hear her. She was in a bad way now. The serjeants, Stephanie knew, had basically given up and were just making what they considered her last days as comfortable as possible. Even though Rana rarely even let go of her friend’s hand, she didn’t exert any energistic power other than a general wish for Tina to mend. Active interference with the woman’s crushed organs would probably only make things worse. Tina didn’t have the willpower to maintain any form of body illusion any more. Her dangerously pale skin was visible for anyone to see as she laboured for air. The stopgap intravenous tube was still feeding fluid into her arm, though her body seemed determined to sweat it out at a faster rate.

They all knew it wouldn’t be long now.

Stephanie was furious with herself for wondering what would happen. If Tina’s soul would migrate back to the beyond, or be trapped here; or if she’d simply and finally die. A legitimate enough interest given their situation. But Stephanie was sure Tina would pick up the pulse of guilt in her mind.

“We’re still attracting Ekelund’s discards,” she said. “At this rate everyone will be camping here with us in another week.”

“What week?” McPhee grumbled softly. “Can you no’ feel the air fouling?”

“The carbon dioxide level is not detectable at this moment,” Choma said.

“Oh? And what are you lot doing to help right now?”

McPhee indicated the line of stationary serjeants standing along the cliff. "Other than making that madwoman more paranoid."

"Our efforts continue," Sinon said. "We are still trying to formulate a method of opening a wormhole, and our observation role has been increased."

"Putting our hopes on a bloody fairy! This place must be making us all soft in the head."

"That term is a misnomer, though a perfectly understandable one for Cochrane to use."

"I guess that means you still haven't figured out what it was," Moyo said.

"Unfortunately not. Though the fact that some kind of intelligence exists here is an encouraging development."

"If you say so." He turned away.

Stephanie snuggled up closer to Moyo, enjoying the reflex way his arm went round her shoulders. Being together made the awful wait a tiny bit more tolerable. She just couldn't work out what she wanted to happen first. Though they'd not spoken of it, the serjeants would probably try to open a wormhole back to Mortonridge. As a possessed, it would hardly be a rescue for her. Perhaps staying here until the carbon dioxide built to a lethal level was preferable.

She flicked another guilty glance at Tina.

Three hours later, the wait ended. This time the serjeants saw it coming. A riot of tiny dazzling crystals swooped out around the base of the flying island to rush up vertically. They erupted over the top of the cliff like a silent white firestorm. Thousands of them curved in mid air and cascaded downwards to spread out above the headland camp, slowing to hover just over the heads of the astounded humans and serjeants.

The light level was quadrupled, forcing Stephanie to shield her hand with her eyes. Not that it did much to protect

her from the vivid scintillations. Even the drab ground was sparkling.

“Now what?” she asked Sinon.

The serjeant watched the swirl of crystals drifting idly, sharing what he saw with the others. There was no real pattern to their movement. “I have no idea.”

They are watching us as we watch them, Choma said. They have to be probes of some kind.

It is likely, Sinon said.

Something is coming, the serjeants along the cliff warned. A disc of raw light was expanding out from underneath the island. Not that it could have been hidden there, it was well over a hundred kilometres in diameter. The emergence effect was similar to an Adamist starship’s ZTT jump, but much much slower.

Once it had finished distending, it began to rise up parallel to the cliff. A cold, brilliant sun slid over the horizon to fill a third of the sky. It wasn’t a solid sphere, snowflake geometries fluctuated behind the overpowering glare.

The small crystals parted smoothly, racing away over the landscape, leaving nothing between the headland camp and the massive visitor. Fountains of iridescence erupted deep inside it, mushrooming open against the prismatic surface. Streaks and speckles shimmered and danced around each other, striving for order within the huge blemish.

It was the sheer size of the image they melded into which defeated Stephanie for some time. Her eyes simply couldn’t accept what she was seeing.

Cochrane’s face, thirty kilometres high, smiled down at them.

“Hi, guys,” he said, “Guess what I found.”

Stephanie started laughing. She used the back of her hand to smear tears across her cheeks.

The crystal sphere drifted in towards Ketton island, dimming slightly as it came. When it was a few metres from the

cliff, a tiny circular section darkened completely, and receded inside in a swift fluidic motion.

At Cochrane's urging, Stephanie and her friends, along with Sinon and Choma, stepped through the opening. The tubular tunnel had smooth walls of clear crystal, with thin green planes bisecting the bulk of the material around it. After a hundred metres it opened out into a broad lenticular cavern a kilometre wide. Here, the long fractures of light beneath their feet glimmered crimson, copper, and azure, intersecting in a continual filigree that melted away into the interior. There was no sign of the fearsome light emitted by the outer shell, yet they could see out. Ketton island was clearly visible behind them, distorted by the compacted facets of crystal.

One of the red sheets of light fissuring the cavern wall began to enlarge, the crystal conducting it withdrawing silently. Cochrane walked out of the opening, grinning wildly. He whooped and rushed over to his friends. Stephanie was crushed in his embrace.

"Man! It is good to see you again, babe."

"You, too," she whispered back.

He went round the rest of the group, greeting them exuberantly; even the serjeants got high fives.

"Cochrane, what the hell is this thing?" Moyo asked.

"Don't you recognize her?" the hippie asked in mock surprise. "This is Tinkerbelle, dude. Mind you, she inverted, or something like that, since you saw us last."

"Inverted?" Sinon asked. He was gazing round the chamber, sharing his sight with the serjeants outside.

"Her physical dimension, yeah. There's a whole load of real groovy aspects to her which I don't really dig. I think, if she wants, she can get a lot bigger than this. Cosmic thought, right?"

"But what is she?" Moyo asked impatiently.

"Ah." Cochrane gestured round uncertainly. "The infor-

mation has been kinda flowing mostly one way. But she can help us. I think.”

“Tina’s dying,” Stephanie said abruptly. “Can anything be done to heal her?”

Cochrane’s bells tinkled quietly as he shuffled about. “Well sure, man, no need to shout. I’m awake to what’s going down.”

“The smaller crystals are gathering around Tina,” Sinon reported, looking at what he could see through the serjeants tending the invalid. “They appear to be encasing her.”

“Can we talk to this Tinkerbell directly?” Choma asked.

“You may,” a clear directionless female voice said.

“Thank you,” the serjeant said sombrely. “What are you called?”

“I have been named Tinkerbell, in your language.”

Cochrane twisted under the stares directed at him. “What?”

“Very well,” Choma said. “Tinkerbell, we’d like to know what you are, please.”

“The closest analogy would be that I have a personality like an Edenist habitat multiplicity. I have many divisions; I am singular as I am manifold.”

“Are the small crystals outside segments of yourself?”

“No. They are other members of my race. Their physical dynamic is in a different phase from mine, as Cochrane explained.”

“Did Cochrane explain to you how we got here?”

“I assimilated his memories. It has been a long time since I encountered an organic being, but no damage was incurred to his neural structure during the reading procedure.”

“How could you tell?” Rana muttered. Cochrane gave her a thumbs up.

“Then you understand our predicament,” Stephanie said. “Is there a way back to our universe?”

“I can open a gateway back to it for you, yes.”

“Oh God.” She sagged against Moyo, overwhelmed with relief.

“However, I believe you should resolve your conflict first. Before we began our existence in this realm, we were biological. Our race began as yours; a commonality which permits me to appreciate the ethics and jurisprudence that you observe at your current level of evolution. The dominant consciousness has stolen these bodies. That is wrong.”

“So’s the beyond,” McPhee shouted. “You’ll no’ make me go back there without a fight.”

“That will not be necessary,” Tinkerbell said. “I can provide you with several options.”

“You said you used to be biological beings,” Sinon said. “Will we all evolve into your current form in this realm?”

“No. There is no evolution here. We chose to transfer ourselves here a long time ago. This form was specifically engineered to sustain our consciousness in conjunction with the energy pattern which is the soul. We are complete and essentially immortal now.”

“Then we were right,” Moyo said. “This realm is a kind of heaven.”

“Not in the human classical religious sense,” Tinkerbell said. “There are no city kingdoms with divine creatures tending them, nor even levels of ecstasy and awareness for your souls to rise through. In fact, this realm is quite hostile to naked souls. The energy pattern dissipates rapidly. You are capable of dying here.”

“But we wanted a refuge,” McPhee insisted. “That’s what we imagined when we forced the way open to come here.”

“A wish granted in essence if not substance. Had you arrived with an entire planet to live on, then its atmosphere and biosphere would sustain you for thousands of generations; at least as long as it would orbiting a star. This realm is about stability and longevity. That’s why we came here.

But we were prepared for our new life. Unfortunately, you came here on a barren lump of rock.”

“You speak of change,” Sinon said. “And you know of souls. Is your kind of existence the answer to our problem? Should our race learn how to transform itself into an entity like you?”

“It is an answer, certainly. Whether you would be ready to sacrifice what you have to achieve our actuality, I would doubt. You are a young species, with a great deal of potential ahead of you. We were not. We were old and stagnant; we still are. The universe of our birth holds no mysteries to us. We know its origin and its destination. That is why we came here. This realm is harmonious to us; it has our tempo. We will wait out our existence here, observing what comes our way. That is our nature. Other races and cultures would take the path to decadence or transcendence. I wonder which you will select when it is your time?”

“I like to think transcendence,” Sinon said. “But as you say, we are a younger, less mature race than you. Dreaming of such a destiny is inevitable for us, I suggest.”

“I concede the point.”

“Can you tell us of a valid answer to the problem of possession we currently face, how we can send our souls safely through the beyond?”

“Unfortunately, the Kiint were correct to tell you such a resolution must come from within.”

“Do all races who have resolved the question of souls apply this kind of moral superiority in their dealings with inferior species?”

“You are not inferior, merely different.”

“Then what are our options?” Stephanie asked.

“You can die,” Tinkerbelle said. “I know you have all expressed a wish for that. I can make it happen. I can remove your soul from the body it possesses, which will allow this

realm's nature to take its course. Your host will be restored, and can return to Mortonridge."

"Not too appealing," she said shakily. "Anything else?"

"Your soul would be welcome to join me in this vessel. You would become part of my multiplicity."

"If you can do that, then just give each of us our own vessel."

"While we are effectively omnipotent within this realm, that ability is beyond us. The instrument which brought us here, and assembled our current vessels, was left behind in your universe long ago. We had no further use for it, so we thought."

"Can't you go back?"

"Theoretically, yes. But intent is another thing. And we don't know if the instrument still exists. Moreover, you would probably be unable to adapt to such a vessel by yourself; our psychology is different."

"None of those are very attractive," she said.

"To you," Choma interjected quickly. "To most of the serjeants, transferring ourselves into a new style of multiplicity is very attractive."

"Which opens up a further option," Tinkerbelle said. "I can also transfer your souls into the empty serjeant bodies."

"That's better," Stephanie said. "But if we go back, even in serjeant bodies, we'll still wind up in the beyond at some later time."

"That depends. Your race may decide how to deal with souls that become trapped in the beyond before that happens."

"You're giving us a lot of credit. Judging by our current record, I'm not sure we deserve it. If you can't shoot it, people aren't interested."

"You are being unfair," Sinon said.

"But honest. The military mind has infiltrated government for centuries until they became one," Rana said.

“Don’t start,” Cochrane grunted. “This is like important, you dig?”

“I don’t pretend to predict what will come,” Tinkerbell said. “We abandoned that arrogance when we came here. You seem to be determined. That usually suffices.”

“Did you come here purely to circumvent the beyond?” Sinon asked. “Was this your racial solution?”

“Not at all. As I said, we are an old species. While we were still in our biological form we evolved into a collective of collectives. We gathered knowledge for millennia, explored galaxies, examined different dimensional realms co-existing with our own universe—everything a new race does as fresh insights and understanding open up. Eventually there was nothing original for us, only variations on a theme that had been played a million times before. Our technology was perfect, our intellects complete. We stopped reproducing, for there was no longer any reason to introduce new minds to the universe; they could only ever have heritage, never discovery. At such a point some races die out contentedly, releasing their souls to the beyond. We chose this transference, the final accomplishment for our technological mastery. An instrument capable of moving the consciousness from a biological seat to this state was a challenge even for us. You can only sense the physical aspects of this vessel, and even those can be at variance with what you understand. As I think you realize.”

“Why bother with an instrument? We came here by willpower alone.”

“The energistic power you have is extremely crude. Our vessels cannot even exist fully in the universe, the energy patterns they support have no analogue there. Their construction requires a great deal of finesse.”

“What about others? Have you discovered any life forms here?”

“Many. Some like us, who have abandoned the universe.

Some like you, thrown here by chance and accident. Others which are different again. There are visitors, too, entities more accomplished than we, who are charting many realms.”

“I think I would like to see them,” Choma said. “To know what you do. I will join you if I may.”

“You will be welcome,” Tinkerbelle said. “What of the rest?”

Stephanie glanced round her friends, trying to gauge their reaction to the offers Tinkerbelle had made. Apprehension persisted in all of them, they were waiting for her lead. Again.

“Are there any other humans here?” she asked. “Any planets?”

“It is possible,” Tinkerbelle said. “Though I have not encountered any yet. This realm is one of many which has the parameters you desired.”

“So we can’t seek refuge anywhere else?”

“No.”

Stephanie took Moyo’s hand in hers and pulled him close. “Very well, time to face the music, I suppose.”

“I love you,” he said. “I just want to be with you. That’s my paradise.”

“I won’t choose for you,” she told the others. “You must do that for yourselves. For myself, if a serjeant body is available I will take it and return to Mortonridge. If not, then I’ll accept death here in this realm. My host can have her body and freedom back.”

24

To a civilization innocent of regularised interstellar travel, the arrival of a single starship could never be viewed as a threat in itself. What it represents, the potential behind it, however, is another matter. A paranoid species could react very badly indeed to such an event.

It was a factor Joshua kept firmly in mind when *Lady Mac* emerged from her jump a hundred thousand kilometres above the diskcity. The crew did nothing for the first minute other than running a passive sensor sweep. No particle or artefact was drifting nearby, and no detectable xenoc sensor locked on to the hull.

“That original radar pulse is all I’m picking up,” Beaulieu reported. “They haven’t seen us.”

“We’re in clear,” Joshua told Syrinx. All communication between the two starships was now conducted via affinity, the bitek processor array installed in *Lady Mac*’s electronics suite relaying information to *Oenone* with an efficiency equal to a standard datavise. The bitek starship had searched through the affinity band, its sensitivity stretched to the maximum. It was completely silent. As far as they could tell, the diskcity Tyrathca didn’t have affinity technology.

“We’re ready to swallow in,” Syrinx replied. “Shout if you need us.”

“Okay, people,” Joshua announced. “Let’s go with the plan.”

The crew brought the ship up to normal operational status. Thermo dump panels deployed, radiating the starship’s accumulated heat away from the gleaming photosphere; sensor booms telescoped up. Joshua used the high-resolution systems to make an accurate fix on the diskcity, not using the active sensors yet. Once he’d confirmed their position to within a few metres, he transferred the navigational data over to a dozen stealthed ELINT satellites stored on board. They were fired out of a launch tube, travelling half a kilometre from the fuselage before their ion drives came on, pushing them in towards the diskcity on a pulse of thin blue flame. It would take them the better part of a day to fly within an operational distance when they could start returning useful data on the artefact’s darkside. Joshua and Syrinx considered it unlikely the diskcity could detect them in flight, even if their sensors were focused on space around *Lady Mac*. It was one of the mission’s more acceptable risks.

With the satellites launched, he brought the starship’s active sensors on-line and conducted a sweep of local space.

“We’re now officially here,” he told them.

“Aligning main dish,” Sarha said. She followed the grid image, waiting until the coordinates matched the diskcity.

Joshua datavised the flight computer to broadcast their message. It was a simple enough greeting, a text in the Tyrathca language, spread across a broad frequency range. It said who they were, where they came from, that humans had cordial relations with the Tyrathca from Tanjuntic-RI, and asked the diskcity to return the hail. No mention was made of the *Oenone* being present.

There were bets on how long a reply would take, even of

what it would say, if all they'd get back was a salvo of missiles. Nobody had put money on getting eight completely separate responses beamed at them from different sections of the diskcity.

"Understandable, though," Dahybi said. "The Tyrathca are a clan species, after all."

"They must have a single administration structure to run an artefact like that," Ashly protested. "It wouldn't work any other way."

"Depends what's tying them together," Sarha said. "Something that size can hardly be the most efficient arrangement."

"Then why build it?" Ashly wondered.

Oski ran the messages through their translator program. "Some deviation in vocabulary, syntax and symbology from our Tyrathca," she said. "It has been fifteen thousand years after all. But we have a recognizable baseline we can proceed from."

"Glad to see some sort of change," Liol muttered. "The way everything stays the same with these guys was getting kind of spooky."

"That's drift, not change," Oski told him. "And take a good look at the diskcity. We could build something like that easily; in fact we could probably do a much better job of it like Sarha says. All it demonstrates is expansion, not development. There's been no real technological progress here, just like their colonies and arkships."

"What do the messages say?" Joshua asked.

"One is almost completely unintelligible, some kind of image, I think. The computer's running pattern analysis now. The rest are text only. Two have returned our greeting, and want to know what we're doing here. Two are asking for proof that we're xenocs. Three say welcome, and please rendezvous with the diskcity. Uh, they call it Tojolt-HI."

“Give me a position on the three major friendlies,” Joshua said.

Three blue stars blinked over his neuroiconic image of Tojolt-HI. Two were located in the bulk of the disk, while the other was at the edge. “That settles it,” he said. “We concentrate on the rim source. I don’t want to try and manoeuvre *Lady Mac* anywhere near the interior until we know for sure what’s there. Do we know what that section’s called?”

“The dominion of Anthi-CL,” Oski said.

“Sarha, focus our com beam on them, please, narrow band.”

Joshua ran through the message from the rim to get a feel for the format, and composed a reply.

STARSHIP LADY MACBETH
COMMUNICATION DIRECTED AT
TOJOLT-HI, DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL.

MESSAGE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. WE
HAVE TRAVELLED HERE IN THE ANTICIPATION OF
EXCHANGE OF MATERIALS AND KNOWLEDGE
BENEFICIAL TO BOTH SPECIES. WE REQUEST
PERMISSION TO DOCK AND BEGIN THIS
PROCESS. IF THIS IS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU,
PLEASE PROVIDE AN APPROACH VECTOR.

CAPTAIN JOSHUA CALVERT

DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL
COMMUNICATION TO
STARSHIP LADY MACBETH

MESSAGE

YOU ARE WELCOME TO MASTRIT-PJ. IGNORE ALL
MESSAGES FROM OTHER TOJOLT-HI DOMINIONS.
WE RETAIN THE LARGEST DEPOSITS OF
MATERIAL AND KNOWLEDGE WITHIN OUR
BOUNDARIES. YOU WILL GAIN THE MOST

BENEFIT BY EXCHANGING WITH US. CONFIRM
THIS REQUEST.

QUANTOOK-LOU
DISTRIBUTOR OF DOMINION RESOURCES

“What do you think?” Joshua asked.

“Not quite the kind of response you’d get from our Tyrathca,” Samuel said. “It could be their attitude has changed to adapt to their circumstances. They seem to be tinged with avarice.”

“Resources would be scarce here,” Kempster said. “There can be no new sources of solid matter for them to exploit. A kilo of your waste may well be more valuable to them than a thousand fuseodollars.”

“We’ll bear it in mind when we start negotiating,” Joshua said. “For now, we have an invitation. I think we’ll accept.”

STARSHIP LADY MACBETH
COMMUNICATION DIRECTED AT
DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL
MESSAGE

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR INVITATION, AND
CONFIRM THAT WE WISH TO EXCHANGE
EXCLUSIVELY WITH YOU. PLEASE SEND
APPROACH FLIGHT VECTOR.

CAPTAIN JOSHUA CALVERT.

DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL
COMMUNICATION TO
STARSHIP LADY MACBETH
MESSAGE

ARE YOU UNABLE TO COMPUTE APPROACH
VECTOR? ARE YOU DAMAGED?

QUANTOOK-LOU
DISTRIBUTOR OF DOMINION RESOURCES

“Could be they don’t have traffic control here,” Joshua said. He ran a search through his neural nanonics encyclopaedia file on Hesper-LN. “The Hesper-LN Tyrathca didn’t have any formal control system before they started receiving Confederation ships.”

“You also need to have a lot of ships flying before that kind of arrangement becomes essential,” Ashly said. “We haven’t even detected one ship around Tojolt-HI yet. I’ve been running a constant scan.”

“They’re certainly scanning us in return,” Beaulieu said. “I’m registering seventeen different radar beams focused on us now. And I think there’s some laser radar directed our way, too.”

“No ships at all?” Joshua asked.

“I can’t find any drive emissions down there,” Sarha said. “With our optical sensor resolution, we ought to be able to see even a chemical reaction thruster flame inside that umbra.”

“Maybe they’ve used something like the voidhawk distortion field,” Dahybi suggested. “After all, Kempster said mass was precious to them. Maybe they can’t afford reaction drives.”

“Gravitonic detectors say you’re wrong,” Liol said. “I’m not picking up any kind of distortion pattern in this neck of the woods.”

“They’re not going to tip their hand this early in the game,” Monica said. “They won’t show us what they’ve got, especially if it’s combat capable.”

Sarha shifted under her restraint webbing to frown at the ESA agent. “That’s absurd. You can’t suddenly shut down all your spacecraft traffic the instant you detect a xenoc. You’d leave ships in transit. Besides, they don’t know how long we’ve been watching them.”

“You hope.”

Sarha gave an exasperated sigh. “They don’t have ZTT technology, so the only interstellar ships they can conceive are arkships. And if one of those used its fusion drive to decelerate into this system, they’d be able to track it from half a light-year out. They must be curious about us and how the hell we got here, that’s all.”

“Never mind,” Joshua grumbled.

STARSHIP LADY MACBETH
COMMUNICATION DIRECTED AT
DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL
MESSAGE

WE ARE NOT DAMAGED. WE HAVE CAPABILITY TO COMPUTE AN APPROACH VECTOR TO YOUR LOCATION ON TOJOLT-HI. WE DID NOT WANT TO BREAK ANY LAW YOU HAVE CONCERNING APPROACHING VEHICLES. ARE THERE ANY RESTRICTIONS COVERING APPROACH SPEED AND SEPARATION DISTANCE FROM YOUR PHYSICAL STRUCTURE?

CAPTAIN JOSHUA CALVERT

DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL
COMMUNICATION TO
STARSHIP LADY MACBETH
MESSAGE

NO RESTRICTIONS CONCERNING YOUR APPROACH. WE WILL PROVIDE FINAL HOLDING POSITION COORDINATE WHEN YOU ARE WITHIN ONE THOUSAND KILOMETRES OF DOMINION TERRITORY.

QUANTOOK-LOU
DISTRIBUTOR OF DOMINION RESOURCES

STARSHIP LADY MACBETH

COMMUNICATION DIRECTED TO
DOMINION OF ANTHI-CL
MESSAGE
UNDERSTOOD. EXPECTED RENDEZVOUS TIME 45
MINUTES.
CAPTAIN JOSHUA CALVERT

Joshua datavisised the flight computer to ignite the fusion drives. *Lady Mac* headed in towards the diskcity at a half-gee acceleration. He refined the vector so they'd finish the main burn a hundred kilometres out from the rim. If fusion drives weren't in common use in this system, *Lady Mac*'s exhaust might prove disconcerting. A smile touched his lips at what they'd think of the antimatter drive.

"Joshua," Syrinx called. "We've found another diskcity."

"Where?" he asked. Everyone on *Lady Mac*'s bridge perked up with interest.

"It's trailing Tojolt-HI by forty five million kilometres, inclined two degrees to the ecliptic. Kempster and Renato were right. The odds of us emerging so close to the only inhabited structure are non-existent."

"Jesus, you mean this redoubt civilization is strung out all around the star's equatorial orbit?"

"Looks that way. We're scanning probable locations for more of them. Assuming the separation distance is constant, and they're not in wildly high inclination orbits, that would mean there's well over a hundred of the things."

"Acknowledged."

"Over a hundred," Ashly said. "That makes quite a civilization all told. How many Tyrathca do you think one of those diskcities could support?"

"With a surface area of twenty million square kilometres, I should think anything up to a hundred billion," Sarha said. "Even with their level of technology, that's a lot of area. Think how many people we cram into an arcology."

“Look at it from the population perspective, and no wonder the Anthi-CL dominion wanted exclusivity,” Liol said. “The demand on resources must be phenomenal. I’m astonished they managed to survive this long. By rights they should have drowned in their own waste products a long time ago.”

“Societies only have waste products while acquiring fresh raw material remains a cheaper option than recycling,” Samuel said. “This close to the star, the diskcities are extremely rich in energy. There can be few waste molecules that cannot be reprocessed into something useful.”

“Even so, they must have strong prohibitions on reproducing. I see a circle of life like this, and all I can think about is a culture growing in a dish.”

“That analogy doesn’t hold for sentient life. The Tyrathca nature is inclined to logically empowered restrictive behaviour. After all, they regulated themselves perfectly on a ten thousand year arkship voyage. This situation is no different for them.”

“Don’t assume their dominions are uniform,” Sarha said. “I’m detecting some areas on the disk with a much higher temperature than the others, their thermal regulation has completely broken down. Heat from the star is flowing straight through. They’re dead.”

“Maybe so,” Beaulieu said. “But there’s still a lot of activity down there. We’re being bombarded with radar signals from every section. A lot of dominions are very interested in us.”

“Still no ship launch,” Joshua said. “No one’s trying to intercept us before we reach Anthi-CL.” He accessed the sensors to watch Tojolt-HI growing against the radiant crimson expanse of the giant star. Apart from the scale involved, it was similar to their approach to the antimatter station. A jet-black, two-dimensional circle cutting right into the photosphere. The cold light of the nebula behind them was unable

to illuminate a single feature on the back of the diskcity. Only *Lady Mac*'s sensors could reveal the topography of mountainous towers pointing blindly away from the disk's median level. The flight computer's cartography program was having trouble compiling an accurate chart; the glare of electromagnetic emissions aimed at them was interfering with their radar return.

"What are they all saying?" he asked Oski.

"I'm running a keyword discrimination program on the datatrafic. From the samples so far, it's all pretty much the same. They all want us to dock at their own section of the diskcity, and each claims to have the greatest resources, as well as unique information."

"Any threats?"

"Not yet."

"Keep reviewing it."

Lady Mac flipped over and began decelerating.

Sensor data on Tojolt-HI built up slowly during the approach phase, giving the crews on *Lady Mac* and *Oenone* a good idea how the massive diskcity was constructed. The median sheet which formed the actual disk itself was an amalgamation of dense webs made up out of tubular structures, varying from twenty to three hundred metres in diameter. Though closely packed, they didn't touch except at end junctions; the gaps between them were sealed over with foil sheets, preventing any of the red giant's light from penetrating and diluting the umbra. Individual web patterns were principally circular, also varying enormously in size, and overlapping in contorted tangles. Spectrographic analysis found the constituent tubes were mostly metallic, with some silicon and carbon composites stretching across large areas; over five per cent were crystalline, radiating a wan phosphorescence out towards the nebula. There were regions, spread at random over the darkside, where the tangle of pipes swelled out into complex abstract knots several kilo-

metres wide. It was as if the tubes had been subjected to severe lateral buckling, though the radar image couldn't determine any fractures.

The dense shade of the darkside was inevitably dominated by the thermal transfer machinery. Radiator panels stacked in kilometre-high cones stood next to circular fan towers of faint-glowing fins, minarets of spiralling glass tubes with hot gases rushing through them competed for root space with encrustations of black pillars like a spiky crystal growth, whose sheer ends fluoresced coral pink. Their meandering ranks formed mountain ranges to rival anything thrown up by planetary geology, running for hundreds of kilometres along the webs. Straddling the valleys between them on long stilt-like gantries were giant industrial modules. Dark metal ovoids and trapezohedrons of machinery, their exterior surfaces a solid lacework of pipes and conduits, rising to a crown of heat-dissipation fins or panels (a direct ancestry could be traced to the machinery on Tanjuntic-RI). Although the diskcity had an overall uniformity bestowed by its basic web design, no region or structure was the same, technologies were as heterogeneous as shapes. The standardisation and compatibility synonymous with the Tyrathca had clearly broken down between the dominions millennia ago.

As they drew closer, more movement became visible across the darkside. Trains, made up from hundreds of tanker carriages and kilometres in length, slid slowly along the valleys and embankments between the thermal transfer systems. Their rails were an open framework of girders; suspended above the tubes and foil sheets of the disk, undulating like a roller coaster track, dipping down to merge with the larger tubes, allowing the trains to run inside them, then rising up the stilt legs of industrial modules to pass straight through the middle.

"Who the hell built this place?" Ashly asked in bemuse-

ment as the grey pixels built up into a comprehensive image in this neural nanonics. "Isombard Kingdom Brunel?"

"If it works, don't try and fix it," Joshua said.

"There is more to it than that," Samuel said. "Tojolt-HI is not a declining technology. They have selected the simplest engineering technology which can sustain them. Whilst humans would no doubt progress to developing a full Dyson sphere over fifteen thousand years, the Tyrathca have refined something that requires the minimum of effort to maintain. It does have a kind of elegance."

"But it still fails repeatedly," Beaulieu said. "There are dozens of dead sections across the disk. And each failure would cost them millions of lives. Any sentient creature should try to refine its living environment to something less prone to accident, surely?" Samuel shrugged.

The Anthi-CL dominion began issuing instructions for *Lady Mac's* final rendezvous coordinate. A blueprint they transmitted identified a specific section of the rim, which the flight computer matched up to the sensor image. The Anthi-CL dominion wanted them to keep station two kilometres out from a pier-like structure protruding from the edge.

"How is the translation program update coming on?" Joshua asked Oski. "Do we know enough to communicate directly now?"

"It's integrated all the new terms we've encountered so far; the analysis comparison subroutine response time is down to an acceptable level. I'd say it's okay to try and talk to them."

Lady Mac's drive thrust was reducing steadily as she drew level with the plane of the disk. In comparison to the desolate solidity of the darkside, the rim appeared to be unfinished. It bristled with slender spires and protruding gantry platforms wrapped in cables. Clumps of tanks and pods were attached to various open frame grids.

"At last," Sarha said. "That's got to be a ship."

The vessel was docked to the rim a hundred kilometres along from their rendezvous coordinate. It had a simple profile, a pentagon of five huge globes scintillating with a soft gold and scarlet iridescence under the gas-giant's illumination, each one at least two kilometres in diameter. They surrounded the throat of an elongated funnel made from a broad mesh of jet-black material; its open mouth was eight kilometres across. There was no recognizable life support section visible from *Lady Mac*'s current position.

"Picking up a lot of very complex magnetic fluctuations from that thing," Liol said. "Whatever it does, there's a lot of energy involved."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say it was a Bussard ram-scoop," Joshua said. "It was a neat idea, pre-ZTT era interstellar propulsion. Use a magnetic scoop to collect interstellar hydrogen, and feed it direct into a fusion drive. A cheap and easy way to travel between stars, you haven't got to worry about carrying any on-board fuel. Unfortunately it turns out the hydrogen density isn't high enough to make it work."

"In our part of the galaxy, maybe," Liol said. "What's the hydrogen density in space between a red giant and a nebula?"

"Good point. That could mean they're in contact with the closest colony stars." He didn't believe it; there was some missing factor here. What would be the reason to travel to a nearby star? You couldn't trade over interstellar distances, not with slower-than-light ships. And given your destination would have the same technology and society as your departure point, what could be traded anyway? Any differences or technological improvements that sprung up over the millennia could be shared by communication laser. "Hey," he exclaimed. "Parker?"

"Yes, Joshua?" the old director responded.

"We thought the reason for Tanjuntic-RI losing contact

with Mastrit-PJ was because civilization failed here. It hasn't. So why did they go off-air?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps one of the colony worlds relaying the messages round the nebula collapsed."

"A Tyrathca society failed? Isn't that a bit unlikely?"

"Or it was killed off," Monica said. "I'd like to think the enslaved xenocs finally rebelled and wiped them out."

"Possible." Joshua wasn't convinced. *I'm missing something obvious.*

Lady Mac fell through the plane of the disk. It was a deliberate overshoot, allowing them to see Tojolt-HI's sunside. Here, at last, they found the invariable conformity they'd grown to expect from the Tyrathca.

On this half of the disk, every tube section was made from glass; a trillion corrugations held together by black reinforcement hoops like the roof of God's greenhouse. Light evaporating from the photosphere below was thick enough to qualify as a crimson haze; it gusted against the diskcity, only to be rebuffed by the burnished surface in copper ripples longer than planetary crescents. This was a hint of how sunset over eternity's ocean would appear.

"Jesus," Joshua crooned. "I guess this makes up for Tanjuntic-RI."

They held position for several minutes with every sensor boom extended to gather in the scene, then Joshua reluctantly fired the secondary drive rockets to bring them back into the disk plane and back towards the rim. He locked *Lady Mac's* position in the coordinate Anthi-CL had given them, and initiated a barbecue roll. The starship's thermodump panels were spread out to their full extent, glimmering cherry red whenever they turned into shadow.

As soon as Sarha confirmed their on-board heat exchangers could handle the sun's heat, Joshua opened a direct communication channel to the Anthi-CL dominion.

"I would like to speak with Quantook-LOU," he said.

The reply came back almost immediately. "I speak."

"Again, I thank the Anthi-CL dominion for receiving us. We look forward to beginning a prosperous exchange, and hope that it will be the first of many between our respective species." Make them believe that others will be coming, he thought; that implies any forceful action on their part would ultimately have to be accounted for. Pretty unlikely given the scale of things around here, but they don't know that.

"We too have that anticipation," Quantook-LOU said. "That is an interesting ship you fly, Captain Calvert. We have not seen its like before. Those of us who disputed your claimed origin no longer do so. Is it a subsidiary vessel of your starship, or did you cross interstellar space in it?"

Joshua gave his brother a disconcerted look. "Even if this translation program is getting creative on me, they're not responding like any Tyrathca I know about."

"That's a leading question, too," Samuel cautioned. "If you confirm we travelled round the nebula in *Lady Macbeth* they'll know we have faster-than-light travel."

"And they'll want it," Beaulieu said. "If we're right about the pressure on local resources, it's their escape route out past the surrounding colony worlds."

"No it's not," Ashly said. "I lived through the Great Dispersal, remember. We couldn't even shift five per cent of Earth's population when we really needed to. ZTT isn't an escape route, not even with the industrial capacity of a diskcity. Everything is relative. They could build enough ships in a year to transport billions of breeder pairs away from Mastrit-PJ, but they'd still be left with thousands of billions living in the diskcities. All of whom would be busy laying more eggs."

"It might not solve their problem, but it would certainly give star systems where they propose to settle one hell of a headache," Liol said. "We've seen what they'll do to aboriginal species occupying real estate they want."

Joshua held up a hand. "I get the picture, thank you. Though I think we have to consider ZTT technology as our ultimate purchasing power to get the Sleeping God's location. The Hespero-LN Tyrathca already have ZTT. It might take decades to reach Mastrit-PJ, but it will spread here eventually."

"Try not to," Monica said forcefully. "Try very hard."

Joshua held her stare as he reopened the channel to Quantook-LOU. "The nature of our ship is one of the items of knowledge we can discuss as part of the exchange. Perhaps you would like to list the areas of science and technology you have the most interest in acquiring."

"What areas do you excel in?"

Joshua frowned. "Wrong," he mouthed to his crew. "This is not a Tyrathca."

"I agree, this is not a response I would expect from one," Samuel said.

"Then what?" Sarha asked.

"Let's find out," Joshua said. "Quantook-LOU, I think we should start slowly. As a gesture of good faith, I would like to give you a gift. We might then start to exchange our histories. Once we understand each other's background we should have a better idea where useful exchanges can be made. Are you agreeable to this?"

"In principle, yes. What is your gift?"

"An electronic processor. It is a standard work tool among humans; the design and composition may be of interest to you. If so, duplication would be a simple matter."

"I accept your gift."

"I will bring it to you. I am eager to see the inside of Tojolt-HI. It is an astonishing achievement."

"Thank you. Can you dock your starship to one of our ports? We do not have a suitable ship to collect you from your present position."

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Liol said. “They can build habitats the size of continents, but not commuter taxis.”

“We have a small shuttle craft we can use to reach the port,” Joshua said. “We will remain in spacesuits while we are inside Anthi-CL to avoid biological contamination.”

“Is a direct physical encounter between our species dangerous?”

“Not if adequate precautions are taken. Our species is very experienced in this field. Please don’t be alarmed.”

Joshua piloted the MSV himself, ignoring Ashly’s snide remarks about union rules. It was cramped in the little cabin; Samuel and Oski came with him, as well as a serjeant (just in case). He had to promise the others a rota for visiting the diskcity, everyone had wanted to come.

The port which Quantook-LOU had designated was a fat bulb of grey-white metal four hundred metres across, which flared out from the end of a web tube. Its apex was taken up by a circular hatch seventy-five metres in diameter, open to show a dimly-lit interior.

“Looks like one big empty chamber in there,” Joshua said. He fired the thrusters carefully, edging the little craft inside. Gentle red light shone from long strips that curved round the walls like fluorescent ribs. Between them were rows of almost-human machinery. It put him in mind of the docking craters in Tranquillity’s spaceport.

Directly opposite the main outer hatch was a stubby cylindrical grid, with much smaller airlock hatches at the far end. Joshua steered the MSV towards it.

“Your datavise carrier is starting to break up,” Sarha reported.

“That’s to be expected, though a good host would offer us a constant link. We’ll start to worry if they actually shut that hatch.”

The MSV reached the top of the cylindrical grid. Joshua

extended one of the vehicle's waldo arms to grip it in the clamp. "We're secure," he reported, using the band to Quantook-LOU.

"Please proceed to the airlock ahead of you. I await on the other side."

Joshua and the others fastened their space armour helmets into place. They assumed the Tyrathca didn't have programmable silicon, so they wouldn't know about SII suits. The armour would appear to be their actual spacesuit, reducing the risk of offending their hosts at the same time providing a degree of protection. The MSV's cabin atmosphere cycled and the four of them slid out.

There were three airlock hatches at the end of the grid. Only one of them, the largest, was open. The chamber behind was a sphere six metres across.

"Those other hatches were too small for the breeders," Samuel said. "I wonder if one of the vassal caste has been bred for a higher IQ; they certainly weren't capable of useful engineering work before."

Joshua didn't reply. He stuck his boots to what could have been the chamber floor just as the atmospheric gas started to hiss in. Suit sensors told him was a composition of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, argon, and various hydrocarbon compounds, the humidity level was very high, and there were several classes of organic particulate in circulation. He made a strong effort to keep his hand away from the innocuous-looking cylinder on his belt which was actually a laser.

Strangely, he felt no excitement at this moment. It was almost as if there was too much riding on it for him to take anything other than an objective view. A good thing, he supposed.

The inner hatch opened, revealing one of Tojolt-HI's wider habitation tubes dwindling away to a flat metal bulkhead a kilometre away. Two colours dominated the interior: red and brown. Joshua smiled round his suit's respirator tube

as he saw the cluster of xenocs waiting for him. They weren't Tyrathca.

First impression was a shoal of human-size seahorses floating cautiously in the air. They had that same kind of flowing twitch along the length of their body, as if forever poised at the start of a race. Their colouring was almost black, though Joshua suspected that was due to the unvarying red light; sensor spectral analysis showed their scales were actually a shade of dark grey-brown very close to the Tyrathca, suggesting a common Mastrit-PJ ancestry. The head was pointed, dragon-like, with a long beak-mouth and two small semi-recessed eyes. It was held almost at a right angle to the body by a heavily wrinkled neck, suggesting considerable flexibility. The rest of the body had an ovoid cross section that gradually tapered away towards the base, though there was no sign of any tail. It curved slightly, producing an overall S-shape. Three pairs of limbs were spaced equidistantly along it, all sharing the same basic profile: a long first section extending away from a shoulder-analogue socket and ending in a wrist joint. The hand appendage was elongated with nine twin-knuckle digits. On the highest set of limbs they were thin and highly dextrous; the middle set were smaller and thicker; while the hindset were stumpy, toes rather than fingers. On most of the xenocs the hind feet appeared to be withered; becoming simple paddles of flesh, as though they were borrowed from aquatic creatures.

It was an appropriate classification. Every surface inside the tube sprouted lengthy ribbon fronds of rubbery vegetation, all of them reaching up for the geometric centre. Even those planted in the glass were growing directly away from the light, something Joshua had never seen on any terracompatible world he'd visited, no matter how bizarre some of its aboriginal botany and biochemistry.

The constant tangle of vegetation along the inside of the

tube did however make movement very easy for the xenocs. They seemed to glide along effortlessly through the topmost fringe, with the lower half of their bodies immersed in the brown fronds, their limbs wriggling gently to control their motion. It was a wonderfully graceful action resulting from what was essentially a mad combination of the smooth flick of a dolphin flipper and a human hand slapping at grab hoops.

Joshua admired it with mild envy, at the same time wondering just how long evolution would take to produce that kind of arrangement. It was almost a case of symbiosis, which meant the fronds of vegetation would have to be *very* prevalent.

He couldn't doubt these xenocs were intelligent beyond any Tyrathca vassal class the Confederation had encountered. They wore electronic systems like clothes. The upper half of their bodies were covered in a garment that combined a string vest with bandolier straps to which various modules were clipped, interspersed with tools and small canisters. They also went in for exoaugmentation; lenses jutted out of eye sockets, while plenty of them had replaced upper-limb hands with cybernetic claws.

Joshua switched his sensor focus around them until he found one whose electronics seemed slightly better quality than the others. Their styling was more slimline, with elegant key pads and displays. Some of the modules were actually embossed with marmoreal patterns. A fast spectrographic scan said the metal was iron. Curious choice, he thought.

"I am Captain Joshua Calvert, and I apologize to Quantook-LOU," he said. The communication block relayed his words into the hooting whistles of Tyrathca-style speech, which he could just make out through the muffling of the SII suit's silicon. "We assumed the Tyrathca occupied this place."

The creature his sensors were focused on opened its

gnarled beak and chittered loudly. "Do you wish to leave now you have found it is otherwise?"

"Not at all. We are delighted to have gained the knowledge of your existence. Could you tell me what you call yourselves?"

"My race is the Mosdva. For all of Tyrathca history we were their subjects. Their history has ended. Mastrit-PJ is our star now."

"Way to go," Monica said over the general communication band.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Syrinx admonished. "They're clearly from the same evolutionary chain."

"Relevant observations only," Joshua told them. "I mean, do we even need to carry on? We can be diplomatic here for a couple of hours, then fly off to the nearest probable Tyrathca colony star to get what we need."

"They have the same language and origin planet," Parker said. "It's highly probable they share the same stellar almanac. We need to know a lot more before we even consider moving on."

"Okay." Joshua datavised his communication block back to its translation function. "You have achieved much here. My race has never built any structure on such a scale as Tojolt-HI."

"But you have built a most interesting ship."

"Thank you." He took a processor block from his belt slowly and carefully. It was one that he'd found in *Lady Mac's* engineering workshop, a quarter of a century out of date and loaded with obsolete maintenance programs (they'd erased any reference to starflight). The general management routine might be of some interest to the xenocs, especially from what he could see of their own electronics. In fact, it might be a slightly too generous gift; half of their modules would have been archaic back in the Twenty-third Century. "For you," he told Quantook-LOU.

One of the other Mosdva slithered forwards through the foliage and gingerly took the block before hurrying back to Quantook-LOU. The distributor of resources examined it before putting it in a pouch near the bottom of his torso garment.

“I thank you, Captain Joshua Calvert. In return, I would show you this section of Anthi-CL, of which you have expressed such interest.”

“Was that cynicism?” Joshua asked his people.

“I don’t think so,” Oski said. “The Tyrathca language as we know it doesn’t have the carrier mechanism for that kind of nuance. It can’t, because they don’t have cynicism.”

“Might be a good idea to keep the analysis program watching for those kind of patterns emerging.”

“I’ll second that,” Samuel said. “They’ve been bombarding us with sensor probes from the second that hatch opened. They’re clearly looking for an advantage. This kind of mercantile behaviour is thankfully easy to appreciate. It almost makes them human.”

“Wonderful. Sixteen thousand light years, and all we get to meet is the local equivalent of the Kulu Traders Association.”

“Joshua, your first priority is to understand exactly what position Quantook-LOU has within their social structure,” Parker said. “Once that is known, we’ll be able to proceed quickly to a resolution. Their culture is plainly developed along different lines from the Tyrathca, though I’m happy to say the basics of trade apparently remain a fundamental.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr Director.” And I wonder if *he* understands cynicism. “I would be honoured to see your dominion,” Joshua told the Mosdva.

“Accompany us, then. I will enlighten you.”

The whole Mosdva group turned, virtually in unison, and began their sliding glide along the vegetation. Joshua, who considered himself highly proficient in freefall conditions,

was fascinated by the manoeuvre. There was a lot of torque and inertia involved with such a move; their mid-limbs must apply a lot of pressure to the fronds. And the fronds themselves must be stronger than they looked; try tugging a terrestrial palm like that and you'd rip it in half.

He cancelled the tak pad application on his boot soles and kicked off after them. Ultimately, he cheated, using the cold gas jets of his armour's manoeuvring pack as well as climbing a frond like a rope. When he reached the upper fringes, the fronds now did their best to impede his progress; where they parted for any Mosdva, they formed elastic nets for him. The best method, he found, was to stay above their tips altogether, and reach down as necessary to swing yourself along. Gauntlet tactile sensors reported the vegetation was spongy, but with a solid spine.

Out of the four of them, he was the most agile, though he struggled to keep up with Quantook-LOU. And the serjeant's motions were plain painful to watch; Ione had not ventured into Tranquillity's zero-gee sections very often.

The Mosdva had slowed to observe the progress of the humans, allowing them to catch up.

"You do not fly as fast as your ship, Captain Joshua Calvert," Quantook-LOU said.

"Our species lives on planets. We're accustomed to high-gravity environments."

"We know of planets. The Mosdva have many stories of Mastrit-PJ's worlds before the expansion devoured them all. But there are no pictures on file in Tojolt-HI, not after such a time. They are as legend, now."

"I have many pictures of planets in my ship. I would welcome exchanging them for any pictures you do have of Mastrit-PJ's history."

"A good first exchange. We are fortunate to have made contact with you, Captain Joshua Calvert."

Joshua had been hanging on to a frond tip as he waited for

the serjeant to catch up; now he realized the plant was wriggling slightly. There certainly wasn't enough of a breeze to do that.

"The fronds stir the air for us," Quantook-LOU explained when he mentioned it. All plants on Tojolt-HI flexed gently; that was why they'd originally been selected, and careful breeding had enhanced the trait. Air had to be moved in freefall, or stagnant pockets of gas would build up, unpleasant and potentially lethal for animals and plants alike. The Mosdva still had mechanical fans and ducts, but they were very much secondary systems.

"Not quite up to Edenist levels," Sarha said.

"They're edging towards biological solutions," Ruben replied. "Leaving the mechanical behind."

"You can't use wholly biological systems here, not in this environment, it's too hostile."

"And there is precious little sign of genetic engineering techniques being employed," Samuel said. "Quantook-LOU told us the plants were bred. Cross-pollination is almost a lost art in human society, Adamist and Edenist alike. We shall have to be more careful here than we originally expected, both in what we say and what we exchange with them. This society is static, and it survives perfectly by being so. To introduce change, even in the form of concepts, could be disastrous to it."

"Or save it," Sarha said.

"From what? We are the only conceivable threat it faces."

They progressed further along the tube, gradually encountering more Mosdva as they went. All of the xenocs stopped to watch as the humans went past, slow and clumsy in comparison to their entourage. Mosdva children flashed about through the fronds, incredibly agile. They burrowed deep below the tips in smooth dives and popped out everywhere, making sure they got a look at the humans from all angles. Like the adults, they wore torso harnesses that con-

tained a multitude of electronic modules—but none of them had cybernetic implants.

Looking down past his gauntlets, Joshua could see straight through the corkscrew fronds. They weren't as dense as he'd first thought—a plantation rather than a jungle—which allowed him to piece together how the tube was constructed. There was an outer casing, the ribbed section with glass on the sunside, and an opaque composite or metal on the darkside. Lining that on the inside was a tightly packed spiral of transparent piping, studded with small copper-coloured annular apertures from which the plants grew. Their roots were visible inside the pipe, just. The spiral was filled with an opaque and somewhat glutinous fluid which cut down the sun's intense red glare. It was also flecked with dark granules and a swirl of tiny bubbles, which showed him how fast it was being pumped along.

The spirals contained either water or hydrocarbon compounds, Quantook-LOU said when Joshua asked what it was; its circulation formed the basis for their whole recycling philosophy. Heat from the red giant was swiftly carried round to the darkside, where it was disposed of via the thermal exchange mechanisms, generating electricity in the process. A range of algal species flourished inside the various fluid types, absorbing Mosdva faecal waste and transforming it into nutrients for the plants, which in turn maintained the atmosphere. The thickness of the spiral pipe (none under two and a half metres in diameter) meant the fluid bulk also acted as an excellent protection from stellar radiation.

They were shown web tubes which specialised in high-yield arable plants. Living tubes, which were sectioned off by thin sheets of silvery-white fabric. Industrial tubes, whose manufacturing machinery was strung out along the axis, just above the plant tips. (“Condensation must be hell

for them," Oski said at that.) Huge public tubes thronging with Mosdva.

After two hours, they were in a section dedicated to what the translator program termed the Anthi-CL dominion's *administrative class*. Joshua began to suspect a society structured along strictly aristocratic hierarchy lines. The vegetation was lusher here, the technology less obtrusive. Personal tubes radiated away from the main branches, far more substantial than the living sections they'd seen earlier and with a lower population density. Two thirds of their entourage dropped away once they entered. Those that were left were heavily augmented with cybernetic prosthetics. No overt weapons, but the humans agreed they were police/military.

Quantook-LOU stopped in a large bubble of transparent material, the junction for three small tubes. The surface was still a spiral of pipe dotted with chunks of hardware, but there were no plants; and apart from the bubbles, the fluid was almost clear. It gave a peerless view out over both dark-side and sunside.

"My personal space," Quantook-LOU said.

Joshua could just make out the misty smears of the nebula through the curving walls. Sharp-edged dissipater cones formed a strange, close horizon. Sunside was a simple uniform mantle of red light. "It is matched with everything else we have seen here," he said.

"What of your world, Captain Joshua Calvert? Does it have sights to match this?"

The exchange of history began. Under the Mosdva's urging, Joshua, Samuel, and Oski started off describing continents and oceans (concepts which had to be clearly defined for the Mosdva—they'd even lost the words for them in their language), and moved on to explain how humans had emerged from Africa to spread across Earth after the Ice Age glaciers retreated. How a technoindustrial society had devel-

oped. The rampant pollution which had altered the planetary ecology for the worse, creating an era where ships flew between the stars to found new colonies. How the Confederation now embraced hundreds of star systems, and traders prospered among them. A colourful generalised summary, devoid of any real detail and timescale.

In return, the Mosdva told them of Mastrit-PJ's long story; how neither they nor the Tyrathca were the original sentient species on the one planet which supported biological life. The Ridbat were the first, with a society that had flourished over a million years ago. Little was known of them now, Quantook-LOU said, other than whispers that trickled from generation to generation becoming wilder with each telling. They were Mastrit-PJ's true monsters, ravenous beasts with evil minds. Wars had been constant while they were alive, two of which escalated into the exchange of nuclear weapons on the planetary surface. Their civilization was knocked back from an advanced technological culture to primitive barbarian on at least three separate occasions. It wasn't known if they ever had spaceflight; there was no evidence of off-planet activity. The fourth and last Ridbat industrial era was brought to an end by thermonuclear conflict, concurrent with the release of biological weapons which wiped them out along with seventy per cent of the planet's animal life.

The Mosdva had risen to a rudimentary state of intelligence while the Ridbat ruled the planet. That made them useful slave creatures, who were bred for dexterity and strength and passivity while any traits such as curiosity or stubbornness were ruthlessly culled. By the time the Ridbat exterminated themselves, the Mosdva had become fully sentient. Although their population was severely reduced by the diseases raging across the land, they did at least survive as a species.

With the Ridbat gone, Mosdva evolution reverted to more

traditional lines—as normal as life could become on such a ruined planet. Their own civilization was extremely slow to emerge as a coherent whole. Mastrit-PJ, with its exhausted mineral resources, devastated biosphere, and extensive radioactive deadlands, was not an environment conducive to sophisticated or high-technology-based cultures, and the cautious Mosdva psychology fitted this well. They became nomadic during the period of nuclear winter which followed the demise of the Ridbat, roaming between habitable areas. It was only after the glaciers withdrew, half a million years later, that the Mosdva began to advance again.

They achieved a modest level of industrialisation. Because there were no underground petrochemical deposits left, nor coal or natural gas, their technology was based around the concept of sustainability, benign and in harmony with the ecosystem. Although not opposed to change, change generated from within was extremely slow to manifest itself. Steady advances in the theoretical fields of science such as physics, astronomy and mathematics were not grasped upon for technological extrapolation. They already lived in what they considered to be a golden age. After their terrible heritage, stability was the one icon they craved above all else. Such a desire could have led to a society whose timescale rivalled geological epochs.

Fate dealt that prospect two bitter blows. Once the glaciers were gone, the Tyrathca, until then simple bovine herd animals, began to share in Mastrit-PJ's evolutionary renaissance. Their sentience was a long time emerging, but their progress towards it reflected their physical stamina, plodding forwards imperturbably. On any other world, their total lack of imagination would have been a serious flaw, but not here. Sharing the planet with a species as benevolent and (by now) advanced as the Mosdva meant that they had access to machinery and concepts they themselves could never originate.

Unfortunately for the Mosdva, the Tyrathca were more aggressive, a trait which came from their herd ancestry and its consequent territorial disputes, which in turn led to the breeding of the vassal castes, especially the soldiers. With their copied technology, greater size and larger numbers, they swiftly became the dominant of the two species.

This situation could well have spelt extinction for the Mosdva. Their settlements were being put under considerable pressure by the Tyrathca expansion. Then Mosdva astronomers discovered their star was about to expand into a red giant.

For a race whose thoughts operated on an abstract level, the knowledge of certain extinction in 1,300 years' time would be devastating enough; for the Tyrathca, to whom a fact was immediate, it was intolerable. Racial survival provided a unifying motivator which enabled them to swiftly consolidate their domination of the planet. For the second time in their existence, the Mosdva were effectively enslaved. First they were used to devise a scheme whereby some if not all the Tyrathca could survive the star's expansion. They came up with the arkship concept which would guarantee ultimate racial survival, with habitable asteroids sheltering the remainder of the population which couldn't be evacuated. Secondly, they were made to implement it.

With their smaller bodies, greater dexterity, and higher intelligence, they made excellent astronauts—unlike the Tyrathca themselves. Mosdva technical expertise was adapted and utilized to capture asteroids and shunt them into orbit around Mastrit-PJ, where they were hollowed out and converted into arkships. The arkship building phase lasted for seven centuries, in which time 1,037 were built and launched.

After this, with the star's growing instability wrecking the planet's fragile ecology, Mastrit-PJ's massive space manufacturing capability was switched to adapting asteroids into

habitats. The asteroids chosen were orbiting more than a quarter of a billion kilometres from the star, putting them outside the predicted expansion photosphere. As this operation was far simpler than changing asteroids into giant starships, over seven thousand were created in just two centuries. Unlike the arkships which were immediately lost to the Tyrathca upon completion, building the asteroid habitats was a near exponential growth process, as new habitats used their industrial capacity to prepare further asteroids.

A thousand years after the project began, the planet had become uninhabitable, and was completely abandoned.

No Mosdva were ever carried on an arkship, the vessels were used exclusively by the Tyrathca. As soon as they had finished building one, the Mosdva were moved on to the next.

However, they couldn't be excluded from the asteroid habitats without a policy of complete genocide. The Tyrathca tolerated them, knowing that their own numbers were constantly rising, necessitating an ongoing construction programme. And with the exact conditions of the star's expansion unknowable, they would need Mosdva technical ability to adapt the asteroid habitats to the environment of the swollen photosphere.

When Mastrit-PJ's star expanded, its diameter was larger than predicted, as was its radiant heat output. New, larger thermal dissipation systems had to be constructed for the asteroid habitats, and quickly. As a consequence, the habitats became even more engineering-dependent, which began the gradual shift of political power. Only Tyrathca breeders were capable of any meaningful technological activity, making all but the builder, housekeeper, and farmer vassal castes redundant. Their soldier caste was now bred purely to keep the Mosdva in line.

The revolution didn't happen all at once, but rather over a thousand year period, starting ten thousand years earlier.

The asteroid habitats initially formed a cohesive one-nation grouping after the expansion. But the scarcity of mass in the form of unused asteroids to mine forced the Tyrathca to revert to their original clannish state of competition. As the number of unused asteroids declined, wars were fought over the remainder. Each asteroid habitat reverted to complete autonomy.

After that, the rise of the Mosdva to supremacy was inevitable. They controlled the habitat machinery, and industrial facilities, a power they discovered which enabled them to dictate their terms to the Tyrathca.

Under this new order, the asteroid habitats gradually banded together politically and physically. As they did, new design concepts were enacted, bringing the old Mosdva dictum of sustainability to the fore, enabling them to maximise their use of dwindling mass resources. Life support sections outside the spun-gravity biospheres were constructed. First they were little more than adjuncts to the gridwork which held the clustered asteroid habitats together; transport and transfer tubes, eliminating the wasteful need for airlocks and vessels. But the Mosdva, with their climbing-adept limb arrangement and natural agility, found they adapted well to the freefall environment inside them. Only the Tyrathca needed gravity and the associated complex engineering to maintain the rotating biospheres. More freefall segments were constructed and added to the clusters, hydroponics and industrial sections first; which led to their technicians spending more and more time in freefall. Living sections followed quickly. The era of the diskcities began.

“And the Tyrathca?” Joshua asked. “Are they still here?”

“We do not keep them any more,” Quantook-LOU said. “They are no longer our masters.”

“I congratulate you on ridding yourselves of them. The Confederation has always found them difficult to deal with.”

“But we are not difficult, I hope. And the dominion of

Anthi-CL is on the edge of Tojolt-HI. That makes us rich in mass, more than any other. We are good trading partners for you, Captain Joshua Calvert.”

“How does being on the edge of Tojolt-HI make you richer than other dominions?”

“Is that not obvious? All ships have to dock at the edge. All mass flows through us.”

“Oh, classic,” Ruben said. “The rim dominions are the diskcity harbourmasters, they can charge what they like to allow cargo through. They’ve probably got some kind of political alliance between themselves to put the squeeze on the central dominions.”

“A minimum fee?” Joshua asked.

“Most likely. It puts us in a good position. Everything travels through them; QED, they must have good communications with all the other dominions. They should be able to find us a copy of the almanac file if it still exists.”

“Okay.” Joshua checked his neural nanonics time function. They’d been in the diskcity for nine hours. “I thank you for your hospitality, Quantook-LOU. My crew and I would like to return to our ship now. We have gathered enough information to see where our respective interests lie, so we’ll start reviewing what items and information we’ve brought with us which will bring about the most beneficial exchange for both of us.”

“As you wish. How long will this review process take?”

“Only a few hours. I look forward to returning, and the start of true negotiations between us.”

“As do I. Our resources will be marshalled to cope with your demands. Perhaps then I could visit your ship?”

“You would be an honoured guest, Quantook-LOU.”

Ten Mosdva formed the entourage to see them back to the MSV. It had been left untouched, though Ashly and Sarha who’d been monitoring its status, reported it had been bombarded by every conceivable active sensor sweep.

As soon as they were back through *Lady Mac*'s decontam procedure, Joshua ordered the SII suit to withdraw, giving a huge sigh as his skin was exposed to air again. "Jesus, I thought that Quantook character would go on forever about how wonderful his people are. Don't they ever sleep?"

"Probably not," Parker said. "As a general rule, sleep evolves from a planetary day-night cycle; they don't have that here any more. I suspect they have slow periods, but no actual sleep."

"Ah well, that's one weakness we'll have to concede to them. I need a meal, a gel wipe, and some time in the cocoon. It's been a long day."

"I concur," Syrinx said. "The ELINT satellites are approaching operational range, which may or may not give us useful information on the dominions. We also need to evaluate what we've heard today, and I'd like us all fresh for that. We'll reconvene in six hours to see what the satellites have found and discuss the next stage."

Joshua managed three hours in the cocoon before he woke. He stared at the cabin wall for fifteen minutes before acknowledging he'd need to put a somnolence program into primary if he wanted to sleep again. He hated doing that.

Liol, Monica, Alkad, and Dahybi were already in the small galley when he air-swam through the hatch. They gave him varying sympathetic looks which he acknowledged ruefully.

"We've been talking to Syrinx and Cacus," Monica said. She shrugged at Joshua; he'd paused in the act of filling his tea sachet from the water nozzle to raise an eyebrow. "Not just us that's restless. Anyway, they've located another seven diskcities."

Joshua datavised the flight computer for a general communication link and said good morning to the *Oenone*'s crew.

"The Mosdva empire appears to be quite extensive," Sy-

rinx told him. "Judging by the distribution of diskcities we've seen so far, that early estimate needs to be revised upwards. Fair enough if we believe there were seven thousand asteroid habitats to begin with. Kempster and Renato have also been scanning further out from the photosphere. So far they haven't located a single lump of rock within twenty degrees of the ecliptic. Quantook-LOU was telling the truth when he said there was a desperate struggle for mass after the stellar expansion. Every spare gram must have been incorporated into the diskcities."

"Quantook-LOU didn't say struggle," Joshua said. "He said wars, plural."

"Which he blamed squarely on the Tyrathca," Alkad said.

Joshua gave the physicist a bleak look. She didn't say much, but her comments were normally pretty valid. "You think the Mosdva took control earlier than that?"

"We can never know exactly what this star system's history is, but I would think it likely that the Mosdva started their revolt right after the star's expansion phase. That would be when the Tyrathca were most dependant on them. Everything else we've been told does tend to paint them in an unusually generous light. An oppressed people struggle to regain their long-lost freedom. Please. History is always written by the good guys."

"I did gloss over some of our less endearing traits," Joshua said. "That's human nature."

"You should have stung Quantook-LOU's office space with some nanonic bugs," Liol said. "I'd love to hear what's being said in there right now."

"Too big a risk," Monica said. "If they found them, at worst they could interpret it as a hostile act; and even if they were diplomatic about it, we would have handed them a whole new technology."

"I don't think that leaves us much to worry about," Liol

said. "The Confederation isn't about to be invaded by Mosdva, it's the Tyrathca we have to worry about."

"Enough," Joshua said. He shifted round to make room for a sleepy unshaven Ashly who was drifting into the galley. "Look, we've just about got everyone up now anyway, we'd best convene and thrash out what we're going to do next."

There was one more discovery before the meeting started. Joshua was finishing his breakfast when Beaulieu datavised a curt message requesting him to access *Lady Mac's* sensor suite. "I've located a Mosdva ship," the cosmonik said.

"At last," Liol said eagerly. He closed his eyes and accessed the image.

Beaulieu hadn't activated any visual enhancement programs to counter the redness. All Joshua could make out was a big brilliant-white shape gliding up towards a rendezvous with Tojolt-II—the same configuration as the ship already docked to the rim: five huge globes clumped round a drive unit and scoop. Except these globes were glowing a vivid purple-white, brighter than the photosphere.

"It surfaced twenty minutes ago," Beaulieu datavised.

The cosmonik replayed the recording. *Lady Mac's* sensors had detected a magnetic anomaly within the photosphere, hundreds of kilometres wide, the flux lines twisting into a dense wood-knot pattern. But it was moving faster than orbital velocity, and growing larger. Visual sensors started tracking it, showing the endless scarlet haze. At first it was as unruffled as a sea mist at dawn, then the impossible happened and long streaks of shadow rippled across the picture. They were actually folds in the gas. Something underneath was stirring the igneous hydrogen atoms, creating swirling currents in the calm envelope. A bright patch of white light started to shine up through the red plasma. The ship rose up smooth and clean through the outer layers of the photosphere, scoop first, pushing a vast bow wave of glow-

ing ions ahead of it. Each of its five globes was shining as bright as a white dwarf star, radiating away enormous quantities of electromagnetic and thermal energy. Thick scarlet coronas avalanched from the lip of the scoop, purling gently all the way back down into the body of the red giant. The remainder of the nimbus was sucked down into the ship's funnel, growing steadily brighter as it progressed, until it was consumed by a dazzling white flame burning brightly at the throat.

"The globes have been dimming since it surfaced," Beaulieu said. "Their external temperature is dropping in concert."

"Looks like you were right about it being a ramscoop, Josh," Liol said cheerfully. "It's got to be where they get their mass from now the asteroids have been consumed. Fancy that, mining the sun."

"That thermal dump technology is damn impressive," Sarha said. "It's got to be superior to anything we have. Shedding heat while you're *inside* a star. God!"

"Simply compressing and condensing photosphere hydrogen into a stable gaseous state wouldn't generate that much heat," Alkad said. "They must be fusing it, burning it down into helium, perhaps even all the way to carbon."

"Christ, they must be desperate for mass."

"The iron limit," Joshua mused. "You can't fuse atoms past iron without having to input energy. Every other reaction until that element generates energy."

"Is that relevant?" Liol asked.

"Not sure. But it makes iron their gold equivalent. It can't hurt knowing what they value most. It's the trans-iron elements that they'll be running out of."

"The fact that they've resorted to this extraordinary method gives us some considerable leverage," Samuel said. "We've seen little evidence of molecular engineering compounds in the diskcity structure. Our materials science will

allow them to exploit mass far more efficiently than they do currently. Every innovation we bring has the potential for inflicting vast change upon them.”

“This is what we have to decide,” Syrinx said. “Liol, have the ELINT satellites revealed anything that might help us?”

“Not really. They’re holding station a thousand kilometres above the darkside now, which gives us excellent coverage. It’s pretty much what we observed as we flew in: trains moving about and very little else. Oh, we picked up a couple of nasty-looking atmospheric vents. The tubes must have ruptured. There were bodies in the gas stream.”

“They must fight a constant maintenance battle against structural fatigue,” Oxley said. “That’s a lot of surface area to cover.”

“Everything’s relative,” Sarha said. “There’s a lot of Mosdva to cover it.”

“I wonder how inter-dependant the dominions are,” Parker said. “For all Quantook-LOU says about driving a hard bargain on the cargo and mass which Anthi-CL sends to the inner dominions, they have to ensure supplies are preserved. Without fresh material, the tubes would decay. The inner dominions would react strongly to such a threat, I imagine.”

“We’ve confirmed eighty dead areas across Tojolt-HI,” Beaulieu said. “They amount to just under thirteen per cent of the total.”

“So much? That would tend to indicate a society in decline, possibly even a decadent one.”

“Individual dominions might fall,” Ruben said. “But overall their society remains intact. Face it, the Confederation has inhabited worlds that don’t exactly thrive, yet some of our cultures are positively vibrant. And I find it significant that none of the rim sections are dead.”

“The other major source of external activity is based around those dead sections,” Liol said. “It looks like major repair and reconstruction work. Those dominions certainly

aren't decadent, they're busy expanding into their old neighbours' territory."

"I can accept they're socially comparable to us," Syrinx said. "So based on that assumption, do we offer them ZTT technology?"

"In exchange for a ten-thousand-year-old almanac?" Joshua said. "You've got to be kidding. Quantook-LOU is smart, he'll know there's something very wrong about that. I'd suggest we build in an exchange of astronomical data and records along with whatever commercial trade deal we can put together. After all, they've never seen what lies on the other side of the nebula. If we offer them the ability to break free of Tyrathca-dominated space they'll need to know what's out there."

"I've told you," Ashly said. "ZTT isn't a way out."

"Not for the proles," Liol said. "But the leadership might take it for their families, or clans, or members of whatever cause they rally round. And it's the leadership we have to deal with."

"Is that the kind of legacy we really want to leave behind us?" Peter Adul asked quietly. "The opportunity for interstellar conflict and internal strife?"

"Don't get all moral on me," Liol said. "Not you. We can't afford those kind of ethics. It's *our* goddamn species on the brink here. I'm prepared to do whatever it takes."

"If, as intended, we're going to ask a God for its help, perhaps you should consider how worthy we're going to appear before it should you follow that course."

"What if it considers obliterating your foes to be a worthy act? You're assigning it very human traits. The Tyrathca never did that."

"That's a point," Dahybi said. "Now we know why the Tyrathca managed to get where they are with zero imagination, how does that reflect on our analysis of the Sleeping God?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," Kempster said. "From what

we've learned about them, I'd say that unless the Sleeping God explained itself to the Tyrathca of Swantic-LI, they simply wouldn't know what the hell it was. By calling it a God, they were being as truthful as only they can be. The simplest translation equates to our own: something so powerful we do not comprehend it."

"Just how much will ZTT change the diskcity society?" Syrinx asked.

"Considerably," Parker said. "As Samuel points out, just by being here we have changed it. We have shown Tojolt-HI that it is possible to circumvent Tyrathca space. As this is a species with an intellect not dissimilar to our own, we must assume they will ultimately pursue that method. In effect, that gives us control over the timing, nothing more. And allowing them access to ZTT now may generate a portion of goodwill among at least one faction of a very long lived and versatile race. I say we should pursue every effort to make the Mosdva our friends. After all, we now know that ZTT or the voidhawk distortion field ability are hardly the last word in interstellar travel, the Kiint teleport ability has taught us that lesson."

"Any other options?" Syrinx asked.

"As I see it, we have four in total," Samuel said. "We can try and get the almanac through a trade exchange. We can use force." He paused to smile apologetically as his fellow Edenists registered their disapproval. "I'm sorry," he said. "But we have that ability, therefore it should be examined. Our weaponry is likely to be superior, and our electronic and software capability would definitely be able to extract information from their memory cores."

"That's an absolute last resort," Syrinx said.

"Totally," Joshua agreed firmly. "This is a culture which wages war over any spare mass on a scale we've never seen before. They might not have sophisticated weapons compared to ours, but they'll have one hell of a lot of them; and *Lady Mac* is in the front line. What are the other two?"

“If Quantook-LOU proves uncooperative, we simply find a dominion which will help us. We’re not exactly short of choice. The last option is a variant of that: we leave straight away and find a Tyrathca colony.”

“We’ve established a reasonable level of contact with Quantook-LOU and the Anthi-CL dominion,” Sarha said. “I think we should build on that. Don’t forget time is a factor as well, and we came here so we wouldn’t have to deal with the Tyrathca.”

“Very well,” Syrinx said. “We’ll follow Joshua’s tactic for now. Set up a major commercial trade, and tack on the almanac data as a subsidiary deal.”

Joshua kept the same team with him when he returned to the diskcity. This time they were shown directly to Quantook-LOU’s private glass bubble.

“Have you found trade items within your ship, Captain Joshua Calvert?” the Mosdva asked.

“I believe so,” Joshua said. He glanced round the translucent chamber with its barnacles of alien machinery, vaguely disquieted. Something had changed. His neural nanonics ran a comparison check with his visual memory file. “I’m not sure if it’s relevant,” he told his crew through the affinity link, “But several chunks of hardware bolted onto the piping are different now.”

“We see them, Josh,” Liol answered.

“Anybody got any ideas what they could be?”

“I’m not picking up any sensor emissions,” Oski said. “But they’ve got strong magnetic fields, definitely active electronics inside.”

“Beam weapons?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t see anything that equates to a nozzle on any of them, and the magnetic field doesn’t correspond to a power cell. My best guess is that they’ve rebuilt this whole chamber as a magnetic resonance scanner: if they’ve got

quantum interface detectors sensitive enough they probably think it will allow them to look inside our armour.”

“Will it?”

“No. Our suit shielding will block that. Nice try though.”

“Did you examine the processor I gave you?” Joshua asked Quantook-LOU.

“It has been tested. Your design is a radical one. We believe we can duplicate it.”

“I can offer more advanced processors than that. As well, we have power storage cells that operate at very high density levels. We offer the formula for superstrength molecular chains; which should be very useful to you, given your shortage of mass.”

“Interesting. And what would you like in return?”

“We saw your ship returning from the sun. Your thermal dissipation technology would be extremely useful to us.”

The negotiation took off well, Joshua and Quantook-LOU reeling out lists of technology and fabrication methods. The trick was in trying to balance them: was optical memory crystal worth more or less than a membrane layer that could guard metal surfaces against vacuum ablation? Did a low-energy carbon filtration process have parity with ultrastrong magnets?

As they talked, Oski kept monitoring the new hardware modules. The magnetic fields they put out were constantly changing, sweeping across the translucent bubble in waves. None of them were able to penetrate their suits. In return, her own sensors could pick up the resonance patterns they generated inside the Mosdva. She slowly built up a three-dimensional image of their internal structure, the triangular plates of bone and mysterious organs. It was an enjoyable irony, she felt. After forty minutes, the magnetic fields were abruptly switched off.

Liol was paying scant attention to the negotiations. He and Beaulieu were occupied reviewing the data coming in from

their ELINT satellites. Now they had the observation subroutines customized properly, there was a lot of activity to see on the darkside. Trains moved everywhere, following a simple generalized pattern. Large full tankers made their way inwards from the rim, offloading cargo at the industrial modules, then once they were empty, they turned and went directly back to the rim. Goods trains, those loaded with items produced inside industrial modules, ran in every direction. Liol and Beaulieu were beginning to think they might even be independent trading caravans, forever touring round the dominions. Something Joshua hadn't asked was if the Mosdva had currency, or if everything was bartered.

"Another vent," Beaulieu commented. "It's only seventy kilometres from the captain's location."

"Christ, that's the third this morning." Liol ordered the closest satellite to focus on the plume. Bobbles of liquid were oscillating amid the gas squirting out towards the nebula. Ebony shapes, radiating brightly in the infrared, thrashed around inside it, their motions grinding down the further away they got from the darkside. "You'd think they'd have better structural integrity after all this time. Everything else they do seems to work pretty well. I know I wouldn't like to live with that kind of threat looming over me, it's worse than building a house on the side of a volcano." His subconscious wouldn't leave the notion alone; there was something wrong about the frequency of the tube breeches. He ran a quick projection through his neural nanonics. "Uh, guys, if they suffer structural failure at this rate, the whole diskcity will fail inside of seven years. And I've included some pretty generous rebuilding allowances in that."

"Then you must have got it wrong," Kempster said.

"Either that, or this isn't a normal event we're witnessing."

"Venting again," Beaulieu called out. "Same web as the last, barely a hundred metres apart."

In the *Oenone's* bridge, Syrinx gave Ruben an alarmed look. "Access all the visual records from the ELINT satellites," she said. "See what kind of activity there is in the vent areas prior to the actual event."

Ruben, Oxley, and Serina nodded in unison. Their minds merged with the bitek memory processors governing the satellites.

"Do we tell Joshua?" Ashly asked.

"Not yet," Syrinx said. "I don't want him alarmed. Let's see if we can confirm the cause first."

An hour after they began negotiating, Joshua and Quantook-LOU had finalized a list of twenty items to exchange. It was to be mainly information, formatted to the digital standard used by the Mosdva, with one physical sample of each item to prove the concept wasn't merely a boastful lie.

"I'd like to move on to pure data now," Joshua said. "We're interested in as much of your history as you're prepared to release; astronomical observations, particularly those dealing with the sun's expansion; any significant cultural works; mathematics; the biochemical structure of your plant life. More if you're willing."

"Is this why you have come?" Quantook-LOU asked.

"I don't understand."

"You have ventured around the nebula, sixteen thousand light-years by your own telling. You believed the Tyrathca were all that lived here. You say you came purely to trade, which I do not believe. There can be no meaningful trade between us, the distance is too great. At most it would take two or three visits by ships such as yours to level all differences between us. Your technology is so superior we cannot even scan through your spacesuits to verify you are what you say you are; which means that any machinery you see here you will be able to understand and duplicate without our assistance. In effect, you are giving us a multitude of gifts. Yet you are not driven by altruism, you pretend you are

here to trade. You persevere in the task of gaining information from us. Therefore, we ask, what is your true reason for coming to this star?"

"Oh Jesus," Joshua moaned over their secure communication link. "I'm not half as smart as I thought I was."

"None of us are, it would seem," Syrinx said. "Damn, he saw right though our strategy."

"In itself a useful piece of information," Ruben said.

"How so?"

"Everything in Anthi-CL is valued in terms of resources. Quantook-LOU controls their distribution, which makes him leader of the dominion, and he's also a tough negotiator and diplomat. If those are the traits which make him a good leader, then that confirms the level of competition which exists among the dominions. We may still have leverage. I would suggest that now the cat's out of the bag you play it straight, Joshua. Tell him what we want. Frankly, what have we got to lose at this point?"

Joshua took a breath. Even with Ruben's unarguable summary, he couldn't bring himself to gamble the outcome of their mission on a xenoc's generosity. Especially when they had confirmed virtually nothing the Mosdva had told them about Mastrit-PJ's history, nor even their own nature. "I congratulate you, Quantook-LOU," he said. "That is an admirable deduction from such a small amount of information. Although not entirely correct. I will profit considerably from introducing some of your technology to the Confederation."

"Why are you here?"

"Because of the Tyrathca. We want to know where they are, how far their influence extends, how many there are of them."

"Why?"

"At the moment our Confederation co-exists alongside them. Our leadership believes this situation cannot last forever. We know they have conquered entire sentient species

as they spread from star to star, either enslaving them as they did you, or exterminating them. We were fortunate that our technology is superior, they did not threaten us when we first encountered them. But they already have our propulsion systems. Conflict is inevitable if they continue to expand. And any further expansion must be outward, through our worlds. If we know their extent while our starships remain superior, we may be able to terminate that threat.”

“What is your propulsion system? How fast do your ships travel?”

“They can jump instantaneously between star systems.”

Quantook-LOU’s reaction was enough for Joshua to class him as human, or as near as made no difference. The xenoc emitted a piping squeal, the fore and mid limbs clapping urgently against his front torso.

“I am glad I have no eggs in my pouch,” Quantook-LOU said when he had quietened. “I would surely have cracked them.” Marsupial? Joshua wondered idly.

“Do you realize what you have in your ship, Captain Joshua Calvert? You are our salvation. We considered ourselves trapped here orbiting this dying star, encircled by our enemies, never to escape as they did. No more.”

“I take it you’d like to acquire our propulsion technology?”

“Yes. Above all things. We will join your Confederation. You have seen our numbers, our ability. Even with our limited resources, we are vast and powerful. We can build a million warships, a hundred million, and equip them with your propulsion system. The Tyrathca are slow and stupid, they will never match us in time. Together we can embark on a crusade to rid the galaxy of their evil.”

“Oh Jesus wept,” Joshua exclaimed over the communication link. “It just keeps getting better. We’re going to let loose a cosmic genocide if the Mosdva ever get ZTT technology. And I’ve a feeling the four of us might not be al-

lowed back to *Lady Mac* until Quantook-LOU has the relevant data.”

“We can shoot our way through the bubble,” Samuel said. “Get outside and wait in the structure until *Lady Mac* can pick us up.”

“It’s not that stressful,” Liol said. “We can give Quantook-LOU any old file full of shit. Hand over the schematics for a deluxe, ten-flavour ice cream maker if you want. He’s not going to know the difference until we’re long gone.”

“That’s my brother.”

“Right now, you’ve got more immediate troubles. We think the dominions are having some kind of armed conflict. The number of tube breeches is reaching epidemic proportions out here.”

“Fucking wonderful.” Joshua scanned round the bubble again. It wouldn’t be too much trouble to break out. And he hadn’t seen a Mosdva in a spacesuit. Yet. “I am prepared to offer you our propulsion system,” he told Quantook-LOU. “In return, I must have all your information concerning the Tyrathca flightships and the stars they colonized. This is not negotiable. They were sending messages back to this star for thousands of years. I want them, and the stellar coordinate system they used. Provide that for me, and you can have your freedom to roam the galaxy.”

“Obtaining that information will be difficult. The dominion of Anthi-CL does not keep many Tyrathca files of such antiquity.”

“Perhaps other dominions will have what I require.”

Joshua’s suit sensors picked up the agitated movements of the seven other Mosdva in the bubble with them.

“You will not deal with another dominion,” Quantook-LOU said.

“Then find out where that information is kept, and trade for it.”

“I will examine the possibility.” Quantook-LOU used a

mid-limb to grasp a pipe rim on the surface of the bubble. Five of the electronic modules worn on his harness sprouted slim silver cables. Their ends swung round blindly, and they began to wind through the air with a serpentine wriggle, heading for one of the electronic units bolted to the piping. They plugged themselves into various sockets, and the pattern of lights on the unit's surface changed rapidly.

"Crude, but effective," Ruben commented. "I wonder how far their neural interface technology extends."

"Captain," Beaulieu called. "We're seeing what looks like troop movements around the Anthi-CL dominion."

"You've got to be shitting me."

"Mosdva in spacesuits are crawling along the darkside structure. There is no fabrication or maintenance equipment accompanying them. They are most agile."

Joshua didn't even want to ask what kind of numbers were involved. "Sarha, go to flight readiness status, please. If we need you, we'll need you fast."

"Acknowledged."

"How long do we wait?" Oski asked.

"Give Quantook-LOU another fifteen minutes. After that, we're out of here."

But the Mosdva stirred after only a couple of minutes. Three of his five cables unplugged themselves, and wound back into their harness modules. "The dominion of Anthi-CL has five files relating to the information you want."

Joshua held up a communication block. "Transmit them over, we'll see if that's enough."

"I will release the index only. If this is what you require, we must discuss how to complete the exchange."

"Agreed." His neural nanonics monitored the short dataflow from the bubble's electronics into his block. Syrinx and *Oenone* examined the data eagerly.

"Sorry, Joshua," she said. "These are just records of messages transmitted by the arkships. Standard updates on how

the voyages are progressing. There's nothing of any relevance here."

"Any messages sent from Swantic-LI?"

"No, we didn't even get that lucky."

"This information is no good," Joshua told Quantook-LOU.

"There is no more."

"Five files, in the whole of Tojolt-HI? There must be more."

"No."

"Perhaps the other dominions won't allow you access to their databases. Is that why you're all at war?"

"You have brought this upon us. It is for you we die. Give me the propulsion system. End all our suffering. Does your species have no compassion?"

"I have got to have the information."

"Where the Tyrathca live, what planets they have colonized, is irrelevant now. If we have your propulsion system, they will never threaten you again. You will have accomplished your aim."

"I will not give you the propulsion system without receiving the information in exchange. If you cannot provide it, I will find a dominion that will."

"You may not deal with another dominion."

"I do not wish our association to end in threats, Quantook-LOU. Please find the information for me. Surely an alliance with another dominion is a small price to pay for the freedom of all Mosdva."

"There is a place on Tojolt-HI," Quantook-LOU said. "The information you want might still be stored there."

"Excellent. Then plug in, and make the deal. Anthi-CL has obtained enough new technology from us to buy another dominion."

"This place has no link to the dominions any more. We expelled it long ago."

“All right, time to say hello again. We’ll go there and access the files direct.”

“I cannot take you beyond our borders. I no longer know which of our allies remain trustworthy. Our train may not be allowed to pass.”

“You forget. I’ve already invited you to visit my starship. We’ll fly. It’s quicker.”

Valisk continued to fall through the dark continuum. The ebony nebula outside flickered with faint bolts of phosphorescence, illuminating the giant habitat’s exterior with a feeble glimmer of luminescence as it passed through. Had there been anyone out there who cared, they would have been saddened by how dilapidated it had become. The girders and panels of the counter-rotating spaceport appeared to be fraying with age; around the port’s periphery solid matter was decaying into sluggish liquids. Large dank droplets dripped away from the eroded, tapering ends of titanium support struts, gusting away into the depths of the nebula.

Intense cold was punishing the polyp shell badly, devouring the internal heat faster than it could be replenished. Slim cracks were opening up everywhere across the surface, some of them deep enough to reach the outer mitosis layer. Thick tar-like liquids bubbled up through them in places, staining the outer surface an insalubrious sable. Occasionally a chip of polyp would flake away from the edge of a new fissure, drifting away listlessly, as though velocity too was subject to increased entropy. Worst of all, twelve jets of air were fountaining undiminished out of broken starscraper windows, spraying the icy gas in long wavering arcs. They’d been there for days, acting like a beacon for any new Or-gathé who glided out of the nebula’s labyrinthine nucleus. The big creatures would squirm their way through to the interior, blocking the blast for a few seconds as they crammed in through the empty rim.

Erentz and her relatives all knew about the shrinking atmosphere, but there was nothing they could do to halt it. The darkling habitat cavern belonged to the Orgathé and all the other creatures they'd brought with them. In theory the humans could have made their way to the starscrapers via the tube lines and water ducts. But even if they managed to seal up some of the breaches, the arriving Orgathé would simply smash through new windows.

Five caverns deep in the northern endcap had become the last refuge of the surviving humans, chosen because each one had only a couple of entrances. The defenders had adopted a Horatius strategy. A few people armed with flame throwers and incendiary torpedo launchers stood shoulder to shoulder and saturated the passageway with fire whenever one of the creatures tried to get through. Human ghosts hung back during each battle, waiting until the creature retreated before they scampered forward to absorb the sticky fluid it had shed, giving themselves substance again. They formed a strange alliance with the living humans, warning them when one of the dark-continuum creatures was approaching. Though none of them could be persuaded to do anything else.

"Can't say I blame them," Dariat told Tolton. "We're as much a target to the creatures as anybody else." He was one of the very few solid ghosts allowed in the refuge caverns. And even he preferred to skulk about in the small chamber Dr Patan and his team used rather than face the ailing, strung-out bulk of the population.

The habitat personality along with Rubra's remaining relatives had consolidated their survival policy around the single goal of protecting the physics team. A cry for help to the Confederation was their only hope now. And given the state of the habitat, time was short.

Tolton had become afraid to ask for progress reports. The answer was always the same. So he hung around with Dariat, unrolling his sleeping bag in the corridor outside the

physicists' chamber, as close to their last chance as he could be without actually getting in the way. The personality or Erentz would give him the odd task to do, where he had to go out into the big cavern again. Usually it was moving some bulky piece of equipment about, or assisting with their small stock of rations. He also stripped and cleaned torpedo launchers ready for the defenders, surprised by how good he was at something so mechanical. At the same time, it meant he knew how low their ammunition was.

"Not that it matters," he complained to Dariat as he flopped down on his sleeping bag after a session cleaning the weaponry. "We'll suffocate long before then."

"The pressure is down by nearly twenty per cent now. If we could just find some way of sealing the starscrapers, we'd stand a better chance."

Tolton took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I don't know if I can tell yet, or if I'm just imagining the air's thinner because I know that's what I should be feeling. Mind you, with that smell coming from next door, who knows."

"Smell is one sense I haven't regained."

"Take my word for it, in this case that's a blessing. Ten thousand sick people who haven't had a bath for a month. I'm amazed the Orgathé don't turn tail and run screaming."

"They won't."

"Is there any way we can fight back?"

Dariat squatted down. "The personality has considered pumping the light tube."

"Pumping?"

"Divert every last watt of electricity into heating the plasma, then switch off the confinement field. We did it before on a small scale. In theory, it should vaporise every fluid-formed creature in the habitat cavern."

"Then do it," Tolton hissed back.

"Firstly, there's not much power left. Secondly, we're worried about the cold."

“Cold?”

“Valisk has been radiating heat out into this Thoale-cursed realm ever since we got here. The shell is becoming very brittle. Pumping the light tube is like letting off a bomb inside; it might shatter.”

“Great,” Tolton griped. “Just fucking great.” He had to pull his feet in as three people staggered past, carrying a not-so-small microfusion generator between them. “Is that for the pumping?” he asked once they’d passed.

Dariat was frowning, watching the trio. **What are they doing?** he asked the personality.

They’re going to install the generator back in the Hainan Thunder.

Why?

I’d thought that was obvious. Thirty of them are going to fly it the hell away from here.

Which thirty? he asked angrily.

Does it matter?

To the others it will. And me.

Survival of the fittest. You shouldn’t complain, you’ve had a damn good run.

What’s the point? The starships are damn near wrecks. And even if they do get a drive tube running, where are they going to go?

As far as they can. The *Hainan Thunder*’s hull is still intact, it’s only the protective foam which is peeling off.

So far. Entropy will eat through it. The whole ship will rot away around them. You know that.

We also know it has functional patterning nodes. Maybe the pattern can be formatted to get a signal out to the Confederation. Some kind of energy burst that can punch through.

Holy Anstid, is that what we’re reduced to?

Yes. Happy now?

“They need the generator over in the armoury,” Dariat said. “Their power supply packed in.” He couldn’t look the street poet in the eyes.

Tolton grunted indifferently, and pulled the sleeping bag round his shoulders. When he breathed out, he could see his breath as a white mist. “Damn, you were right about the cold.”

Can Tolton go with them? Dariat asked.

We’re sorry.

Come on, you are me. Part of you, anyway. You owe me that much out of sentiment. And he was the one who got our relatives out of zero-tau.

Do you imagine he will want to go? There are thousands of children cowering in the caverns. Would he walk past them to the airlock without offering to exchange places?

Oh shit!

If there is to be a token civilian on board, it won’t be him.

All right, all right. You win. Happy now?

Lady Chi-Ri wouldn’t approve of bitterness.

Dariat scowled, but didn’t answer. He went into the neural strata’s administrative thought routines to examine the ships which were still docked at the spaceport. Most of the spaceport’s net had failed, leaving only seven visual sensors operational. He used them to scan round, locating four starships and seven inter-orbit vessels. Of all of them, *Hainan Thunder* was the most flightworthy.

Wait now, the personality said.

The sheer surprise in the thought was so unusual that all the affinity-capable stopped what they were doing to find out what had happened. They shared the image collected by the few external sensitive cells that were still alive.

Valisk had reached the end of the nebula and was slowly sliding out. Its boundary was as clearly defined as an atmo-

spheric cloud bank. A plane of slow-shifting grainy swirls stretching away in every direction as far as the sensitive cells could discern. Slivers of pale light trickled among the dull gibbous braids, an infestation of torpid static.

There was a gap of perfectly clear space extending for about a hundred kilometres from the end of the nebula.

What is that? a badly subdued personality asked.

Another flat plane surface ended the gap, running parallel to the nebula, and extending just as far. This one was hoary-grey and looked very solid.

Visual interpretation subroutines concentrated on the sight. The entire surface appeared to be moving, seething with tiny persistent undulations.

The mélange, Dariat said. Dread made his counterfeit body tremble as memory fragments from the creature in the lift shaft surfaced to torment him. **This is where everything finishes in this realm. The end. Forever . . .**

Get the *Hainan Thunder* launched, the personality ordered frantically. **Patan, you and your people evacuate now. Send a message to the Confederation.**

“What’s happening?” a puzzled Tolton asked. He looked along the corridor as semi-hysterical shouting broke out in the physicists’ chamber. A stack of glass tubing crashed to the ground.

“We’re in trouble,” Dariat said.

“As opposed to what we’re in now?” Tolton was trying to make light of it, but the ghost’s conspicuous fear was a strong inhibitor.

“So far our time here has been paradise. This is when the dark continuum becomes personal and eternal.”

The street poet shuddered. **Help us,** Dariat pleaded. **For pity’s sake. I am you. If there’s a single chance to survive, make it happen.**

A fast surge of information came pouring through the affinity bond, running through his mind with painful inten-

sity. He felt as if his own thoughts were being forced to examine every cubic centimetre of the giant habitat, stretching out to such a thinness they would surely tear. The flow stopped as fast as it began, and his attention was twinned with the personality's. They looked at the spindle which connected the habitat to the counter-rotating spaceport. Like most of the composite and metal components of the habitat, it was decaying badly. But near the base, just above the huge magnetic bearing buried in the polyp, five emergency escape pods were nesting in their covered berths.

Go, the personality said.

"Follow me," Dariat barked at Tolton. He began to jog along the passage towards the main cavern, moving as fast as his bulk would allow. Tolton never hesitated, he jumped to his feet and ran after the solid ghost.

The main cavern was in turmoil. The refugees knew something was wrong, but not what. Assuming another attack from the Orgathé, they were shuffling back as far as they could get from the two entrances. Electrophorescent strips on the ceiling were dimming rapidly.

Dariat headed for the alcove which served as an armoury. "Get a weapon," he said. "We might need it."

Tolton snatched up an incendiary torpedo launcher and a belt of ammunition for it. The pair of them headed for the nearest entrance. None of the nervous defenders questioned them as they raced past. Behind them, they could hear Dr Patan's team shouting and cursing as they ran across the cavern.

"Where are we going?" Tolton asked.

"The spindle. There's some emergency escape pods left that didn't get launched last time I left in a hurry."

"The spindle? That's in freefall. I always throw up in freefall."

"Listen—"

“Yes yes, I know. Freefall is a paradise compared with what’s about to happen.”

Dariat ran straight into a group of ghosts waiting at a large oval junction in the passage. They couldn’t see the mélange, none of them were affinity capable, but they could sense it. The aether was filling with the misery and torment of the diminished souls it had claimed.

“Out of my way!” Dariat bellowed. He clamped his hand over the face of the first ghost, pulling energy out of her. She screamed and stumbled away from him. Her outline rippled, sagging downwards with a soft squelching sound. The others backed off fast, staring in wounded accusation with pale forlorn faces.

Dariat turned off down one of the junction’s side passages. Light from the overhead strips was fading rapidly now. “You got a torch?” he asked.

“Sure.” Tolton patted the lightstick hanging from his belt.

“Save it till you really need it. I should be able to help.” He held up a hand and concentrated. The palm lit up with a cold blue radiance.

They came out into a wider section of the passage. There’d been some kind of firefight here; the polyp walls were charred, the electrophorescent strip shattered and blackened with soot. Tolton felt his world constricting, and took the safety off the launcher. Dariat stood in front of a closed muscle membrane, barely his own height, that was set into the wall. He focused his thoughts and the rubbery stone parted with great reluctance, the lips puckering with trembling motions. Air whistled out, turning into a strong gust as the membrane opened further.

There was no light at all inside.

“What is this?” Dariat asked.

“Secondary air duct. It should take us right up to the hub.”

Tolton shuddered reluctantly, and stepped inside.

Valisk had cleared the nebula, its great length taking sev-

eral minutes to complete the transfer into clear space. The spaceport was the last section to leave it behind. Four lights gleamed brightly around the rim of the docking bay which held the *Hainan Thunder*, four in a ring of at least a hundred. Nonetheless, they were extraordinarily bright in this dour environment. Their tight beams fell on the hull, revealing patches of bright silver-grey metal shining through the scabby mush of thermal protection foam that was moulting away in a glutinous drizzle.

The windows looking out onto the bay flickered with light as the desperate crew hauled themselves past the maintenance team offices; oxygen masks clamped to their face, torches shining ahead of them. A couple of minutes later, the starship began to show some signs of activity. Thin gases flooded out of nozzles around the lower quarter of the hull. One of the thermo dump panels slid out of its recess and started to glow a faint pink at the centre. The airlock tube disengaged, withdrawing several metres before lurching to a halt. Clamps around the docking cradle flicked back, releasing the hull.

Chemical thrusters around the starship's equator fired, sending out shimmering plumes of hot yellow gas. They tore straight through the bay's structural panels, creating a vicious blowback of atmospheric gas from the life-support sections. The *Hainan Thunder* rose out of the bay atop a thick geyser of churning white vapour.

More powerful chemical rockets ignited, propelling the starship away from the spaceport. One of them exploded, its combustion chamber weakened by exposure to the dark continuum. The starship pitched to one side, then recovered. It began to climb steadily towards the nebula.

An Orgathé swooped out from the percolating gunge and descended on the starship. Its talons tore through the hull plates, shredding the equipment underneath. The rockets

died amid a shower of sapphire sparks. Fluids and vapour streamed out from deep clefts.

A second Orgathé joined the first, the huge creatures tugging the starship violently between them. Big chunks of metal and composite were ripped free, twirling off into the void. The creatures were eagerly clawing their way through the tanks and machinery to reach the life support capsules and the kernels of life-energy cowering inside.

There was a final spew of gas as the capsules were punctured, then the Orgathé were still as they consumed their ephemeral meal.

The habitat personality had little time for remorse, or even anger. It was watching the surface of the mélange as it grew closer. The incessant motion was becoming clearer, an agitated ocean of thick fluid. Closer, and a billion different species of xenocs were drowning in that ocean, their appendages, tentacles, and limbs writhing against each other as they strove to keep afloat. Closer still, and the bodies were actually forming themselves from the fluid and clawing madly to lift themselves into the void above, a brief existence of useless strife and wasted energy before they collapsed and dissipated back into the mélange. If they were lucky, peaks would arise as souls merged together, combining their strength as they sacrificed identity. Those at the pinnacle stretched themselves further and further, quivering to break free. Only once did the personality see an Orgathé, or something similar, sweep upwards, newborn and victorious.

When we hit that, the amount of energy we contain is going to blow a hole clean through to the other side, the personality said shakily.

There is no other side, Dariat said. **Just as there is no hope.** Every part of his body ached from the climb up through the air duct. He had forced himself to keep going, at first hiking up the slope, then as the gravity fell off, pulling himself along a near-vertical shaft with his arms.

Then why do you keep going?

Instinct and stupidity, I suppose. If I can delay entry into the mélange by a day, then that's a day less suffering.

A day out of eternity? Does that matter?

To me, now. Yes. It matters. I'm human enough to be terrified.

Then you'd better hurry.

The southern endcap was within twenty kilometres of the mélange. Ahead of it, the surface was churning with activity. Huge peaks were jabbing up as melting bodies climbed on top of each other so they could be the first to touch the shell and feast on the life-energy within.

Dariat reached the end of the duct and commanded the muscle membrane to open. They air-swam out into one of the main corridors leading to the hub chamber.

Tolton had fastened his lightstick to the launcher, as he'd seen Erentz do. He swept the beam round the black corridor in an alert fashion. "Any bad guys around here?"

"No. In any case, they're all waiting for the impact. Nothing's moving in the habitat."

"I'm not surprised. I can taste the horror; it's physical, like I've overloaded on downer activants. Shit." He smiled brokenly at Dariat. "I'm frightened, man. Really frightened. Is there any way a soul can die here, die completely? I don't want to join the mélange. Not that."

"I'm sorry. It can't be done. You have to live."

"Fuck! What kind of a universe is this anyway?"

Dariat led Tolton into the darkened hub chamber and held his hand high, letting the energy pulse recklessly. The resulting burst of light revealed the geometry: silent doors leading to the spindle commuter cabs, hoop avenues down to the tube train stations. He aimed himself at a door leading to the engineering section and kicked off.

The corridors on the other side were metal, lined with

grab hoops. They slithered along them quickly, using the manual controls to get past airlock hatches. The air was freezing but breathable. Tolton's teeth started chattering.

"Here we go," Dariat said. The escape pod's circular hatch was open. He somersaulted in, vaguely unnerved by the familiar layout. Twelve acceleration couches were laid out around him. He chose the one under the solitary instrument panel and started flicking switches. Same sequence as last time. The hatch hinged shut automatically. Lights came on with reluctance, and the environment pumps started to whine.

Tolton held his hands up in front of the grille, catching the warm air. "God, it was *cold* out there."

"Strap in, we're about to leave."

The personality watched the tip of the southern endcap touch the surface of the melange. **I am proud of all of you**, it told Rubra's descendants.

Fluid cratered away from the impact, then rushed back to slam against the shell. Hundreds of thousands of berserk souls surfed it inwards and penetrated the polyp to immerse themselves in the magnificent tide of life-energy coursing within, absorbing it directly. The temperature difference between fluid and polyp was too great for the habitat's weakened shell to withstand. The existing fissures flexed wildly as thermal stresses tightened their grip.

Dariat activated the pod's jettison sequence. Explosive bolts cut away the berth's outer shielding, and five of the solid rockets fired. They were flung clear of the spindle, racing out level with the surface of the melange.

Goodbye, the personality said. The accompanying sorrow brought tears to Dariat's eyes.

Valisk burst apart as if a fusion bomb had detonated inside. Thousands of human souls came fluttering out of the billowing core of hot gas and crumbling polyp slabs, indestructible phantoms naked in the darkness. As with all life in

the dark continuum, they sank into the *mélange* and began their suffering.

The solid rocket burn ended, leaving the escape pod in freefall. Dariat looked out of the small port, seeing very little. He twisted the joystick, firing the cold gas thrusters to roll the pod. Grey smears slashed past outside.

“I can see the *mélange*, I think,” he reported faithfully. In his mind he was aware of the wailing and torment gushing from the awesome conglomeration of pitiful souls. It chilled his own resolution. There could be only one fate here.

Amid the misery were several steely strands of more purposeful and malignant thought. One of them was growing stronger. Nearer, Dariat realized. “Something’s out there.” He tilted the joystick again, spinning the pod quickly. Pale blooms of light emerged deep inside the nebula, silhouetting a speck that whirled and shook as it arrowed towards them.

“Shit, it’s one of the *Orgathé*.” He and Tolton stared mutely at each other.

The street poet twitched feebly. “I can’t even say it’s been fun.”

“There are five solid rockets left. We can fire them and fly back into the nebula.”

“Won’t we just wind up here again?”

“Yes. Eventually. But it’ll be another day or two out of the *mélange*.”

“I’m not sure it makes that much difference to me now.”

“Then again, we could fire them when the *Orgathé* reaches us, fry the bastard.”

“It’s only doing what we’d do.”

“Last choice, we can fire the rockets to take us into the *mélange*.”

“Into! What use will that be?”

“None whatsoever. Even if we don’t break apart on impact we’ll melt away into the fluid over a few days.”

“Or fly straight through to the other side.”

“There isn’t one.”

“You never know unless you try. Besides, this way has the most style.”

“Style, huh.”

They both grinned.

Dariat rolled the pod again, getting a rough alignment on the *mélange*. He fired two of the solid rockets. Any more, and they really would crack open when they reached it.

The cold will probably do it anyway, he thought.

There was three seconds of five-gee acceleration, then they hit. The deceleration jolt was fearsome, flinging Tolton against the couch’s straps. He groaned at the pain, bracing himself for the worst.

But the pod’s thermal coating held, defying the devastating subcryonic temperature of the *mélange*. The pod juddered sluggishly as its rocket motors continued to fire, thrusting them deeper and deeper below the surface. Both of them could hear the cacophony of souls outside, their shock and dismay as the rocket exhaust vaporized the fluid in which they were suspended. The cries grew fainter the further in they went. After fifteen seconds the rockets burnt out.

Tolton’s laugh had an unstable timbre. “We made it.”

The port had frosted over as soon as they struck the fluid. He reached over and tried to wipe the beads of ice clear. His hand stuck to the glass. “Bugger!” He lost some skin pulling it free. “Now what do we do?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

25

The Volkswagen Trooperbus carried Louise and Ivanov Robson back to London. During most of the four-hour trip she'd sat curled up on one of the big leather chairs in the cabin, accessing news reports from the arcology. The landscape held little interest for her now.

There were few rover reporters left in the Westminster dome to provide an impression of what was happening. Those who insisted on toughing it out were releasing their senseises on a long delay, allowing them to get well clear of the area where they'd been recording. The possessed didn't take kindly to having their activities exposed to the planet's accessing public. Rovers who'd been caught on the first day had never accessed the net again.

What was shown by reporters still on the ground—and more comprehensively, by the dome sensors—was a rough kind of order establishing itself among the ancient buildings. The possessed were organized in small bands, walking quite openly along the main roads. It was a defiant gesture up at Govcentral. They could have been targeted easily by SD weapons, had the political will existed to do so. But as there were only ever a couple of hundred exposed at any one time,

the remainder would be free to extract an atrocious retribution on the rest of the non-possessed population. Government forces within the arcology had been effectively eliminated. Highly specific fires had continued to rage throughout the night, disposing of all the dome's police stations and eighty per cent of the local council offices. Significantly, although power grids and the communication net had also been targeted, the possessed hadn't damaged any of the primary civic utility stations. There was still water, and fresh air; and the dome remained capable of warding off an armada storm. Somebody was controlling the possessed, ordering their activities with a great deal of precision.

The media speculated on who.

Charlie was only interested in why. If anything, the possessed were now enforcing the original curfew with a greater efficiency than the police ever had. The AI's analysis of their movements indicated there were between seven and ten thousand of them, each with their own area to control. Enough to make sure everyone stayed indoors. Very few new possessed were being created, and there were barely a few hundred in the nine outer domes.

The only significant excursion they'd attempted was to a garage of surface vehicles. Each time they'd driven one of the lumbering machines up onto the ramp, it had been targeted by SD fire. The President himself had ordered the strikes without any urging from the B7 staff among his advisors and cabinet. The possessed had made eight attempts to leave London before giving up.

"Dexter's preparing for something," Charlie told Louise just before she left his dome. "There's no way he'll be satisfied with just London. That's why he's holding back on possessing the rest of the population. The way he's put things together in there, he could do it in less than a week if he wanted. He's far better organized than New York."

Louise didn't understand why Dexter was holding back

any more than Charlie did. The devilsome man she'd encountered back on Norfolk didn't seem capable of any restraint.

The only other information she received on the trip was progress reports on Genevieve. Her sister was being driven to Birmingham in another Volkswagen, along with Divinia and the first batch of Charlie's family. From there Charlie had arranged a vac-train to take them to Kenya Station. Gen had been quite disappointed when it turned out that Charlie's dome couldn't fly.

It was a much shorter drive to Birmingham. Genevieve was on the African Tower ascending to Skyhigh Kijabe while Louise was still making her way across the Thames valley.

"Coming into view now if you want to see it," Yves Gaynes called out from the cab.

Louise stirred herself and went forward to sit next to him. When they'd left London, she'd had a poor view of the domes; the direction they were travelling in was all wrong. Now the Trooperbus was pointing straight at them as it lumbered over the last few miles.

She stared at the domes that sliced up out of the rolling horizon. Only the outer nine were visible, gathered protectively around the ancient city at the centre. The sinking sun reflected vivid pillars of copper light off the vast arcades of geodesic crystal; other than that, they were completely black. For the first time, she could appreciate just how artificial they were. How alien.

Yves was looking at her. "Didn't expect to be coming back this way quite so soon, myself."

"No."

"The boss does look after his people, you know."

"I'm sure he does." Not that she was convinced she really qualified as a B7 staff member. Then again, it could just be Charlie remote-controlling the driver, trying to reassure her,

to make her more compliant. She wasn't certain of anything anymore.

The Trooperbus drove steadily past the half-buried factory halls surrounding the arcology and dipped down a ramp into one of the huge underground garages. There were few lights on, and no activity at all among the ranks of parked vehicles. They drew up in a bay near the ramp. As the external door slid down, a navy blue car sped towards them out of the gloom. Ivanov Robson stood up and popped the cabin's hatch.

"Are you ready?" he asked politely.

"Yes." Louise made her voice cool. She hadn't spoken to him since the journey started. It was an issue dominated by anger; although she wasn't sure who she was directing it against. Him for being what he was, or her for liking him at the start. Maybe he was just too strong a reminder that she'd been so thoroughly manipulated.

She climbed down the short ladder. It was humid in the garage, but colder than she expected. She was dressed for the arcology in a short skirt over black leggings, with a long sleeved emerald T-shirt to cover the medical nanonic bracelet and thin leather waistcoat. Her hair had been batted down into a single ponytail.

Ivanov followed as she hurried over to the car, carrying the slim alligator-skin weapons case Charlie had given him. A policewoman ushered them into the car, her face devoid of curiosity. How many people have B7 sequestered? Louise wondered. This time the car's interior was quite ordinary. She settled back in the rear seat with Ivanov beside her, the fateful case resting on his knees.

"I am me most of the time, you know," he said quietly. "B7 can't control my every waking second."

"Oh." Louise didn't want to talk about it.

"I regard it as a penance, not a punishment. And I get to see some interesting things. I also know how the world

works, a rare privilege for anyone these days. As you now know.”

“What did you do?”

“Something very foolish, and unpleasant. Not that I had a lot of choice at the time. It was them or me. I think that’s why B7 gave me this deal. I’m not what you’d call a standard career criminal. I even had a family. Haven’t seen them for a couple of decades, but I’m allowed to know how they’re getting on.”

“But you were still told how to treat me.”

“I was ordered what information to supply to you, and when. Everything else I ever said or did was the real me.”

“Including coming back to London now?”

Ivanov chuckled quietly. “Oh no. Natural altruism doesn’t run to this insanity. I’m here under orders.” He paused. “But now I’m here, I will do my best to protect you if the need arises.”

“You think coming back was stupid?”

“Completely idiotic. B7 should toughen up and nuke London. It’s the only way we’ll ever be rid of these possessed.”

“That kind of weapon won’t work against Quinn Dexter.”

“Is that so?” A long finger stroked the alligator-skin case slowly. “Do you trust this Fletcher guy we’re going to meet?”

“Of course. Fletcher is a decent and kind man. He looked after Gen and I all the way from Norfolk.”

“Should be interesting,” Ivanov mumbled. He turned to watch the concrete wall of the tunnel slip past outside the car.

They arrived at a small vac-train freight station somewhere in one of the arcology’s underground industrial zones. Charlie had selected it because there was a direct road from the garage, and the net was still functioning in that sector.

The platform was a lot narrower than those at Kings

Cross, with large units of heavy-duty cargo handling machinery standing by every airlock. When Louise and Ivanov emerged out of a service lift, eight GISD field agents were waiting for them, each equipped with a static bullet machine gun.

The train arrived five minutes later. Only one airlock door opened. Detective Brent Roi stepped out first, looking round suspiciously. When his gaze found Louise, his expression told her he was officially the unhappiest person on the planet.

“Out,” he snapped over his shoulder.

Fletcher Christian emerged from the airlock, dressed in his immaculate naval uniform. Two guards were right behind him, and there was a thick metal collar clamped round his throat. Louise didn’t care, under the stiff gaze of the field agents she ran over and flung her arms round him.

“Oh God, I missed you,” she blurted. “Are you all right?”

“Hardy enough, my dearest Lady Louise. And you? How have you fared since we parted last? More unsuitable adventures, I’ll warrant.”

She was wiping tears off against his lapels, the buttons on his jacket pressing into her skin. “Something like that.” She clutched him tighter, amazed by how glad she was to see him, the one person she really trusted on the whole planet. His hand stroked the back of her head.

“Jesus wept,” Brent Roi exclaimed in disgust.

Louise let go and took a timid step back. Fletcher’s mournful eyes showed he understood.

“You two finished?”

Ivanov stepped forwards. “Try picking on me,” he said to the Halo detective.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Put it this way, we share the same supervisor. And if you had a high enough security rating to be told what Louise has done for us, you’d display some respect there as well.”

Fletcher was looking at the hulking private detective with some interest. Ivanov thrust his hand out. "Pleased to meet you, Fletcher. I'm the guy who's been looking out for Louise down here." He winked at her. "When circumstances allow me to."

Fletcher bowed. "Then you do us all a service, sir. I would be sorely grieved if any harm befell such a treasured flower."

Brent Roi sighed in disbelief. "You want to get on with this?"

"Sure," Ivanov said. "We'll take over from you. I doubt I have to sign for him, right?"

"Take over? As in my part's finished? It's not that goddamn easy. I haven't got any way of getting back to the Halo. I'm fucking stuck here escorting this jerk."

Louise was about to tell him B7 could get him back up the orbital tower, then she saw Ivanov's face go blank momentarily. Charlie must be telling him something.

"Okay," Ivanov said sadly. "But just so you know, it wasn't my idea."

"That makes me feel a whole lot better."

Louise sat next to Fletcher when they got back to the car. Ivanov and Brent took the jump seats opposite.

"It's your show," Ivanov told Fletcher. "How do you want to play this?"

"Wait a minute," Louise said. "Fletcher, what's that collar?"

"Pacifier," Brent grunted. "If he gets fruity, I can slam a thousand-volt charge through him. Believe me, that makes these possessed bastards sit up and take notice."

"Take it off," she demanded.

"Lady Louise—"

"No. Take it off. I wouldn't treat an animal like that. It's monstrous."

“While I’m near him, it stays on,” Brent said. “You can’t trust them.”

“Charlie,” Louise datavised. “Tell them to take it off. I’m not joking. I won’t cooperate any further until you stop treating Fletcher like this.”

“Sorry, Louise,” Charlie replied. “The Halo police were jumpy. It was only supposed to be while he was in transit.”

She watched Brent’s expression darken as he received a datavise from Charlie. “Fuck it all,” he spat. There was a click from Fletcher’s collar, and the locking mechanism rotated ninety degrees. Fletcher reached up and tugged at it experimentally. It came away in his hands.

“Hey.” Brent slid the front of his jacket to one side, revealing a shoulder holster containing a very large automatic pistol. Three reserve clips had small red lightning emblems on them. He stared at Fletcher. “I’m watching you.”

Fletcher placed the collar disdainfully on the floor between them. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Ivanov said. “We want you comfortable.”

“You mentioned a weapon, Lady Louise.”

“Yes, the Confederation Navy have designed something that destroys souls. They want you to try and get close enough to Dexter to shoot him with it.”

“True death,” Fletcher said in wonder. “There are many who would welcome that right now. Are you certain such a device works?”

“That’s confirmed,” Ivanov said. “It’s been tested.”

“If I might be so bold as to ask, upon whom?”

“The project director used it on himself and a possessed who was threatening him.”

“I am uncertain if that is heroism or tragedy. Did they suffer?”

“Not a thing. It’s completely painless.”

“Another example of your much-vaunted progress. May I see this fearsome instrument?”

Ivanov put the alligator-skin case on his knees and datavised the entry code. The lock bleeped, and he opened it. Five matt-black cylinders, thirty centimetres long, were nesting on the grey foam inside. He picked one out. One end had a glass lens, and there was a single flat red button on the side.

“The majority of its components are bitek, so it should be able to resist a possessed glitching it for a while. Simple operation. Push the button forward, so”— he worked it with his thumb—“to activate. Then press to fire. It will shine a narrow beam of red light, which has to strike your target’s eyes to work. Estimated effective range is fifty metres.”

“Yards,” Louise murmured with a smile.

Fletcher inclined his head in thanks.

“Whatever,” Ivanov said. He handed the weapon to Fletcher. Brent tensed up. But Fletcher simply examined the gadget with mild curiosity.

“It seems naught but a harmless stick,” he said.

“There’s plenty goes on inside that you can’t see.”

“Nor understand, I’ll warrant. However, its use is plain enough to me. Tell me, what happens to the original soul of a body when this is fired at a possessing soul?”

Ivanov cleared his throat carefully. “It does as well.”

“That is murder.”

“One death is a small price to pay for ridding the universe of Quinn Dexter.”

“Aye, the affairs of kings are not to be questioned by their subjects. For that is what makes them kings. Judged only by Our Lord.”

“Can I have one as well, please?” Louise asked.

Ivanov handed her one of the tubes without comment. She checked the trigger button briefly, then put it in an inside pocket on her waistcoat.

Ivanov took one for himself and offered Brent Roi one. The Halo detective shook his head.

“Now all we have to do is find Quinn Dexter,” Ivanov said. He looked at Fletcher. “Any ideas?”

“Do you have any notion where he might be?”

“Only a general assumption that he’s in the Westminster dome; that’s where he seems to have consolidated his grip on the other possessed. Logically he can’t be too far away from them.”

“I know of Westminster, but not of its dome.”

“Basically, the whole of the London you knew got put under a protective glass bubble. That’s the dome. He could be anywhere inside the city.”

“Then I would suggest you take me to a suitable vantage point. I may be able to determine where large groups of the possessed fester. It would be a start.”

It was the sign of a good leader that he could adapt quickly to changing circumstances. After the last couple of days, Quinn now considered himself to be ranked among history’s greatest. The curfew had come as a considerable shock, not least because it meant the supercops were on to him once more. He had a good idea who’d told them—a knowledge which was almost pleasing.

Of course, the curfew had completely screwed up his earlier plans. The possessed from the Lancini had done as they were ordered, and used the night to take over a quantity of people in the designated buildings. But then the day workers hadn’t arrived, and the game changed.

Quinn had sent runners out through the maze of tunnels and service shafts below the arcology, contacting the groups and telling them what to do next. They were to take out the police as he’d originally intended, luring them into ambushes and incinerating the precinct stations. Given their smaller numbers, it would take longer, but with the curfew conveniently shutting down the rest of the arcology the police would have little back-up or support available. He also

told his followers to target the net and power substations, further isolating the beleaguered police.

By late afternoon, deprived of police or emergency services, power and communications, the arcology's population had effectively been imprisoned in their own homes. Quinn had achieved his goal without any need to smash the transport network, utilities, and food factories.

It was almost what he'd originally intended, and achieved with fewer possessed than he'd originally estimated. That weighed heavily in his favour; it was easier to exert discipline over a smaller number. And the arcology, with all its prized resources, remained intact for him to use as he wished. His tightest control was imposed over the Westminster dome, with fear paralysing the nine outer domes, rendering them useless as possible sources of resistance.

With London secure, Quinn had made one attempt to send disciples to Birmingham in overland vehicles. The venture had resulted in SD strikes and the total destruction of the commandeered vehicles.

He knew it was never going to be that easy.

As the first night wore on, and his possessed battalions continued their mopping-up operation against the civic authorities, he had several technical and engineering experts brought to his headquarters. They were put to work on methods of travel unsusceptible to the SD platforms. A token gesture. He knew the coming war of Night would not be fought with science and machines. It would be personal and glorious, as war was meant to be.

As darkness fell, the bedlam of the demons had grown louder. Quinn supplicated himself across the desecrated altar of St Paul's cathedral and delved deep into the ghost realm once more. This time he was rewarded with the greatest knowledge there could be, so beautiful he whimpered at its impact. God's Brother Himself was awaking from His banishment at some unimaginable distance past the end of

the universe. Cries of glory and rapture rose from the demons as they welcomed their vast Lord among them, his ominous presence bringing a vigour and strength they had never known before.

Their cold dreaming thoughts infiltrated Quinn's mind. He could know them in all their astounding multitude, bound together in an enchanted torment. God's Brother arose before them, hot and dark, radiant with malevolence. They reached out for Him, to be gifted with His power. And He freed them, His energy banishing their chains so they could soar again, as they once had so long ago. An entire army of apocalyptic angels, enraptured by their new state, and hungry. Hungry for so many things they had been denied for all this terrible time. They swirled in adulation around the Light Bringer in a cyclone larger than the world, screaming their malignant pleasure at His coming.

Quinn left his ghostdreaming behind, his body solidifying to wake upon the altar just as dawn brought a grey light to the stained glass windows around him. There were tears in his eyes as he started to laugh. "Oh Banneth, you piece of shit, where are you now, unbeliever. This truth is when you'd finally despair."

"Quinn?" Courtney asked anxiously. "Quinn, you okay?"
"He's coming."

Courtney cast a glance towards the huge blackened oak doors at the far end of the cathedral. "Who?"

"God's Brother, you dumb bitch." Quinn stood on the altar and held his arms wide as he looked down on the congregation of possessed milling across the nave. "I have seen Our Lord. Seen Him! He lives. He has risen to lead us to the final victory. He brings an army that will tear down the bright metal angels guarding the sky. Night will fall!" He was shaking with conviction. Courtney watched in a kind of dread awe as he slowly looked down at her. "Don't you believe me?"

“I believe, Quinn. I always believe you.”

“Yeah. You really do, don’t you.” He jumped lightly to the stone and marble floor, a wild grin visible before the blackness exuded by his robe eclipsed his flesh. His hood swung round to face the subdued congregation. Over five hundred of them had been mustered now, waiting obediently for the dark Messiah to tell them what he wanted from them. Their numbers were added to slowly, as further non-possessed captives were brought to the cathedral via underground service tunnels. The immediate vicinity around St Paul’s had been cleared of commercial and office buildings several centuries ago, extending its gardens and moating them with a pedestrian plaza. Quinn knew damn well that if too many people crossed all that open space to enter by any of the regular doors the satellites and dome sensors would see them. The pattern would be recorded, and the supercops would become curious at why none of them ever left. So the accumulation of his power base had to proceed slowly and cautiously.

Those who were brought to him were taken down into the crypt and broken open for possession by a handful of committed followers loyal to His gospel. Quinn no longer cared whether those who struggled out from the beyond into the waiting bodies believed in the word of God’s Brother or not. As long as he was physically close by, they could be coerced.

Studying the assembled possessed, Quinn thought he might have about a third of the numbers he actually wanted for the summoning ceremony. Just reaching the ghost realm took so much energistic strength. He would never be able to smash open the gates into hell by himself.

“Where’s Billy-Joe?” he asked.

Courtney gave a sullen shrug. “Downstairs again. He likes to watch.”

“Go and fetch him for me. What I’ve seen makes it fuck-

ing important that we get more warm bodies in here for possession. I want him to get word out to the shitheads on the street, make sure they keep sending them. Nobody can afford to screw up today. This is His time now.”

“Right.” Courtney started to walk towards the door at the base of the central dome which had stairs down to the crypt. She stopped and turned back. “Quinn, what happens after?”

“After what?”

“After the Light Bringer comes and, you know, we kill everyone that doesn’t do as we say.”

“We’ll live in His Kingdom, under His light, and our serpent beasts will run free and wild for the rest of time. He will have saved us from enslavement inside the false lord’s prison city; that *heaven* the dumb-ass religions keep singing about.”

“Oh. Okay, that sounds pretty cool.”

Quinn watched her go, sensing the dull acceptance of her thoughts. Strange how her unquestioning compliance had begun to annoy him lately.

He spent the rest of the morning supervising the groups he had out on the streets, directing them to new targets. It consisted mainly of intimidating the shit out of their representatives when they turned up at the cathedral. A couple of times he slipped into the ghost realm and travelled through the arcology himself. The original Lancini possessed tried to keep the newer ones in line, sticking to their orders, but nothing they could say about him and what would happen if they didn’t play ball was as effective as when he actually materialized without warning in the middle of them. Three times he had to make examples out of dissenters. He couldn’t visit every group, but word spread fast enough, even without the benefit of the net.

When he returned to St Paul’s after midday, a couple of orgies had broken out on the nave floor: freshly arrived possessed, desperate for strong sensation. He didn’t stop them,

the defilement of such a sacrosanct place was enjoyable; it was one of the reasons he'd chosen it for the summoning. But he did limit future numbers of participants. When the possessed got carried away, they were apt to give off their glitching effect over quite a distance, and there were still some power circuits operating around the cathedral. He couldn't risk a giveaway impulse being tracked by an AI. Souls that'd possessed the bodies of police officers had reported how the net was exploited by Govcentral to hunt down possessed.

Until he had enough people to perform the summoning, he was going to practice restraint.

Quinn was watching the ghosts when Billy-Joe hurried up with a possessed called Frenkel. There were many tombs in St Paul's, dating back well over a millennia, including those lost when the original cathedral building burnt down in the great fire of AD 1666. All the incumbents were supposedly men of distinction or nobility, the old nation's finest. Or at least they might have been considered so while they were alive; Quinn thought they were just a total pain in the ass now. Oh, they had their pride, which came over in the form of resentment and hatred; but basically they were no better than all the other pathetic desolates inhabiting their insipid realm. The warriors who had fallen in defence of their king and country seemed to be in the majority of those who had lingered after death to haunt the land. They despised Quinn with a passion, knowing enough of his power to fear him. To start with they had done their best to disconcert his cohorts, especially Billy-Joe and Courtney, exerting themselves to their limit. Their chill presence made the walls bead with condensation; while the corner-of-the-eye visibility as they swooped around made the chancel's rich gold-braided fabrics flutter with anaemic life. They keened as well, like dogs

tormented by a full moon, spilling their morbid depression into the air for all to perceive.

Twice Quinn had to shunt himself into the ghost realm to deal with them. His touch alone burnt them, sending them reeling away, weakened and cowed from the contact.

Their antics had withered away, leaving them slinking round to view the gathering of possessed with mute disapproval, emitting a sullen rancour which percolated through the cathedral. Then they had began to stir, as if they themselves were the victims of an unnatural incursion. They gathered together under the central dome, twittering fearfully.

The demons were growing louder.

“Something you should hear, Quinn,” Billy-Joe said. He froze at the look of displeasure Quinn gave him for interrupting. Even Billy-Joe could see the ghosts in the nave’s energetically charged environment, shivering flames of colour that skidded uncertainly over the tiled floor. “It’s important, I swear.”

“Go on,” Quinn sighed.

Frenkel was breathing hard, and trying hard not to peer into the black gulf that was Quinn’s hood. “I’m from the Hampstead group. We saw something we thought you should know about. I got here as fast as I could, rode a maintenance cab through the tube.”

“Shit,” Quinn murmured. “Yeah yeah, very good. Get on with it.”

“There was this bunch of people sneaking round the road tunnel interchange at Dartmouth Park. They’d driven a car there, which is weird, because we haven’t got round to crapping over the route and flow processors yet. Their car must have some kind of police override code, because the curfew restrictions are still in primary mode. They got up onto the street through an inspection accessway, then they started moving through the buildings. We figured they must be lo-

cals, they know the building layouts pretty good. No one can scope them from outside; our guys were having a hard time keeping up with them when I left. We didn't take them out, because the thing is, there's six of them; and two are really like the people you told us all to look out for."

"Which two?" Quinn asked sharply.

"There's the chick with long hair, and that humping great black dude. The others are just soldiers, real hard nuts. Except one, which is where things get strange. He's possessed. And he's not from our group, we've never seen him before."

"Is he controlling the others?"

"No. They're like a team."

"Where were they going? What direction?"

"They were creeping along Junction Road when I left. Our guys are keeping tabs on them."

"Take me there." Quinn snarled. He started to glide swiftly towards the door leading to the connecting subways. "Billy-Joe, bring your hardware."

Louise was thankful that the two GSDI field agents accompanying them were equipped with communications blocks. They provided her neural nanonics a direct, secure satellite circuit to Charlie and GSDI's civil databank, circumventing the patchy net coverage in this section of the arcology. The only other reliable link they had was Ivanov's affinity bond. This way she got to see the route to Archway Tower which the B7 AI had mapped out for them.

It had been scary coming up through the accessway from the underground road tunnel, especially the thirty seconds out in the open when she had to scurry to the cover of the first building. After that, she could see not only where they were but where they were going. It was surprising how reassuring that knowledge was.

Most of the buildings had some kind of route through them, interconnecting doors—all locked—or basement ser-

vice corridors. Those that didn't, the GSDI agents were planning on simply cutting through walls with their fission blades. Even that wasn't necessary; Fletcher conjured a door into existence each time. It didn't seem to matter what the wall was, ancient brick or modern reinforced carbon-concrete, nor how thick it was. The trick made Brent Roi very uncomfortable, but it saved a lot of time. Fletcher could tell if there were people ahead of them, as well.

They wormed their way from building to building, staying away from the front rooms overlooking the road whenever possible. Going through pub lounges, shop store rooms, offices, even kitchens and one-room flats. Those people they did intrude upon greeted them with astonishment and fear. Then when they found out the little party was official in nature, they just wanted to know what the hell was going on outside. And rescue. Everybody wanted out.

That part was the worst, Louise found. The tension from being caught was survivable; tension was a state she was growing increasingly used to. But the pitiful pleas of the residents were relentless, their eyes accusing as they clutched small children to them.

"Isn't there another route?" she datavised Charlie after they left a woman and her three-year-old boy sobbing miserably. "It's awful having to refuse these people."

Brent Roi waved her through a small triangular door into a narrow disused hallway. The only light was coming through a filthy smoked-glass window above a bricked-up door.

"Sorry, Louise," Charlie datavised back. "The AI says this way is the most likely to get you there undetected by the possessed. It didn't take emotional stresses into account. Just try and tough it out. Not much further."

"Where's Genevieve?"

"They reached Skyhigh Kijabe seven minutes ago. I've

chartered a blackhawk to take her to Tranquillity. She'll be there within the hour."

Louise tapped Fletcher on the shoulder. "Genevieve's safe. She's about to depart for Tranquillity."

"I'm gladdened to hear that, my lady. Hope survives."

Ivanov reached the end of the hallway and held his hand up. "Outside road."

The two GSDI field agents moved forward to the metal door. One glanced at Fletcher.

"No one is near," he said.

The agent pressed a small block to the damp wall beside the door. It fired a narrow electron beam through the plaster and brick, then extended a microfilament with a sensor on the end. The image it relayed showed them a narrow street, deserted except for a couple of cats. With the sensor switched to infrared, the agent focused it on each visible window along the street in turn, searching for hot silhouettes. The AI had been using the overhead dome sensors to scan their immediate area the whole way, but the angle was all wrong to examine windows.

Their caution every time they had to cross a side street was adding considerably to the journey time.

"Two possibles," the agent reported, datavisaging the coordinates to his colleague. The door was opened and he ran fast across the street to the building directly opposite. Their entry point was a window covered by a security grille. Cutting the restraint bolts with a fission blade took fifteen seconds; the window catch was a mere two. The agent vanished inside with a neat roll. Brent Roi was next. Louise followed, sprinting hard across the street. According to her neural nanonics it was Vorley Road, the last open space they had to cross.

Getting in, she reminded herself. It was a long long way back to any vac-train station.

This conglomeration of buildings was gathered around

the base of the Archway skyscraper itself: a monolithic twenty-five storey tower that stood halfway up a sloping ridge of land that was topped by Highgate Hill. If it hadn't been for the buildings along the street blocking the view, they would already be able to look out over the rooftops of the old city.

Once they were inside, a service corridor took them straight to the tower's lobby. A lift was already waiting for them, door open.

"The tower's net and power are still connected," Charlie datavised. "The AI is hooked into every circuit in there. I can give you plenty of early warning if there are any glitches."

They all crammed into the lift, which rose smoothly to the upper utility level. It opened out onto a world of artificial lighting, thick metal pipes, black storage tanks, and big primitive air-conditioning machines. Ivanov led them along a metal walkway to a spiral stair. The door at the top let them out on the flat roof. A flock of scarlet parakeets took flight as they emerged, startlingly loud in the warm air.

Louise glanced round cautiously. The first rank of tall, modern skyscrapers encircling the old city were only a mile or so away to the north, their glassy faces shimmering rose-gold in the last of the twilight sun. To the south, the embargoed city swept away down the slope towards the distant Thames, a dusky mass of rooftops and intersecting walls. Patches of twinkling silvery light clung to some of the larger roads where the power hadn't yet been cut to the hologram adverts. Not a single window was illuminated, the residents preferring to stay in the dark, fearful of drawing attention to themselves.

Louise heard Fletcher laughing. He was leaning on the crumbling concrete parapet that ran round the edge of the roof, looking out towards the south.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I laugh at my own humility, lady. I look at this city which is supposed to be the closest to home I will ever come, only to find that it is the strangest vista I have encountered since my return. The word 'city' no longer encompasses the meaning it had in my time. You have the power and artifice to build such a colossus, yet it is I who has been asked to perform this scant task of finding one man."

"He's not a man. He's a monster."

"Aye, Lady Louise." The humour faded from his handsome face, and he faced the ancient city. "They're here, but of course you knew that."

"Are there many?"

"Fewer than I had supposed, but enough. I feel their presence everywhere." He closed his eyes and leant out a little further, sniffing the air. His hands gripped the top of the parapet. "There is a gathering. I feel them. Their thoughts are quietened, deliberately so. They wait for something."

"Waiting?" Ivanov asked quickly. "How do you know?"

"There is an aura of anticipation about them. And unease. They are troubled, yet unable to walk away from their predicament."

"It's him! It has to be. No one else could make a whole bunch of possessed do as they're told. Where are they?"

Fletcher took one of his hands off the parapet, leaving behind a dark sweat-stain print. He pointed along the Holloway Road. "Over yonder. I am uncertain as to how many leagues. Though they remain inside the dome. On that I would wager my hat."

Ivanov moved over to stand behind Fletcher, squinting along the direction he was pointing. "You're sure?"

"I am, sir. There."

"Okay. I've got a fix. We just need to triangulate."

"A splendid notion."

"I'll take you over to Crouch Hill. That ought to be far

enough. Then once we get a rough idea where the bastard's hiding out, we can work out a route to get you close."

"If I may suggest, I simply walk. No man would accost me in this guise, and fewer will suspect my intent."

"Walk off into the goddamn sunset," Brent said. "No fucking way."

"We can talk about it," Ivanov said. "Fletcher, you got any idea how many there are in this group?"

"I would suggest several hundred. Possibly even a thousand."

"What the hell does he want with that many in one place?"

"I can advance no rationale to elucidate Quinn Dexter's behaviour. He is, sir, quite mad."

"All right." Ivanov took a final look across the city, fixing the line Fletcher had indicated. "Let's move out."

They had just got into the lift when the AI reported an electronics glitch close to the Archway Tower. It immediately datavisaged a search update to Charlie. The glitch was occurring beside the electricity substation which distributed power to the Archway Tower among other consumers. A security camera revealed two people approaching the substation along a dark corridor.

Trouble, he warned Ivanov.

The substation door crumpled from a blast of white fire. Three more glitches appeared around the base of the Archway Tower. Sensors showed possessed moving purposefully through the subway, freight tunnel, and utilities passageway. The substation transformers exploded as a barrage of white fire pummelled into their casings.

Ivanov saw the lights in the lift flicker as the Tower's emergency power cells took over. They were just passing the nineteenth floor.

Down in the basement, the possessed were smashing every communications conduit they could find, tearing the

cables out of the wall. The AI watched the Tower's net connections fail one after the other. Independent power cells kept the internal processors running, but it could now only access them through the communications blocks carried by the GSDI field agents, cutting down on the bandwidth available for surveillance and initiating possible counter-moves.

Security sensors on the ground floor showed fifteen possessed running up the stairs into the lobby. They immediately started slinging small bolts of white fire at the sensors and any other electronic system. Just before the last camera failed, Charlie saw a lift door being broken down with considerable force.

Out, he ordered. Get out of the lift.

The AI had already established a link to the lift's controlling processor. It applied the failsafe brakes and slammed it to a halt on the thirteenth floor.

Louise yelped in shock as the lift floor abruptly tried to shunt its way upwards, accompanied by a strident alarm siren. She grasped at the handrail as she lurched against the wall.

The doors flashed open. Charlie was datavising orders to her as Ivanov was shouting: "Move it! The possessed are coming." Everyone charged out into the corridor. Black apartment doors lined both walls. Smoked-glass windows at either end let in a murky glow from the setting sun. Emergency lights shone brightly above both of the stairwell doors.

Charlie told one of the GSDI agents to leave his communication block in the corridor, tucking it away unobtrusively in a doorway, enabling the AI to maintain contact with the tower's net. "The possessed are now heading up both stairwells," Charlie datavised. "Five in one, four in the other. The remainder are waiting downstairs. You'll have to shoot your way through them. I suggest you use the anti-memory where possible."

“Gets my vote,” Ivanov said. He drew the small weapon, holding it in his left hand. His right held a compact automatic pistol.

Fletcher and Louise drew their own weapons. The agents and Brent were checking their machine guns.

Ivanov opened the stairwell door cautiously. Concrete steps with metal rails wound down the shaft in a rectangular corkscrew. The sound of running boots echoed upwards.

“They know we’re here,” Fletcher said curtly.

The AI tracked glitches rising up the stairwell and computed the approximate distance. Both GISD field agents entered the time into the trigger mechanism on their grenades and dropped them down the shaft.

Louise hunched down next to the wall, her hands pressed against her ears. Explosions roared below as the chemical shrapnel grenades detonated. Then the agents tossed their gas incendiaries over the rail. Billows of flame scoured the battered stairs, searing against the groggy possessed. Screams trilled along the length of the stairwell.

“Let’s go,” Ivanov said. He took off down the stairs.

Louise was third in line, behind one of the agents, with Brent pounding along behind her. She’d put a host of programs in primary mode, an auto-locomotion so she could tear round the stairwell corners without slipping, adrenaline suppresser working through the medical nanonic to keep her calm, weapons control so she’d be able to aim the anti-memory tube properly, peripheral motion analysis, heart-rate control as a counter to the adrenaline suppresser, making sure her straining muscles received enough blood, tactical analysis, which was synchronized with the AI. It informed her that possessed from the lobby were starting to invade the bottom of the stairwell in support of their injured comrades. After descending another two floors, the agents would drop more grenades, and they’d all switch stairwells.

A thick streamer of white fire plunged up the centre of the stairwell, its tip swelling rapidly.

Louise flung herself back from the rail. Brent and one of the agents stuck their machine guns over the edge, shooting off a suppressing deluge of static bullets.

The plume of white fire burst open, spitting out a shower of incandescent sparks. Several of them landed on Louise's legs, stinging hard as they burnt their way through her leggings. She batted at them with her free hand, putting an axon block in primary to dull the pain. Her tactical program was urging her up. Neuroiconic icons began to flash warnings about capacity reduction in her neural nanonics.

A bolt of white fire flashed like lightning. It hit the GSDI field agent who was covering the rear of the group, penetrating straight through the back of his skull to char the brain. He crumpled instantly.

Ivanov and the remaining agent whirled round, their weapons trying to find a target.

"Where the fuck did that come from?" Brent yelled.

Charlie knew there was only one answer. Instinctively, his affinity bond made Ivanov turn to face Fletcher. "Well?" the detective demanded.

"He is here," Fletcher said with trepidation. "I feel him even though he hides beyond sight."

The possessed were clattering up the stairwell again. Neural nanonics and blocks were beginning to glitch.

Charlie tightened Ivanov's grip around the anti-memory weapon. "Through here," he ordered. Ivanov went through the door to the tenth floor, arm swinging in wide arcs to cover the corridor. It was deserted, a copy of the thirteenth floor. Louise and Brent followed him while the last agent dropped a couple of grenades over the rail. They all started to run for the second stairwell. The grenades didn't go off.

"Is he still here?" Ivanov asked.

“Close,” Fletcher said. Fury and frustration boiled into his voice. “I cannot see him. The devil!”

“Shoot it where you think he is. It might work anyway.”

Fletcher stopped running and lifted the anti-memory weapon, his thumb pushing the trigger button forwards. He glanced about the sombre corridor as though trying to make his mind up. The trigger was suddenly pressed, sending a cone of bright ruby laser light stabbing out.

“It is useless,” Fletcher cried. “Useless.”

The energetic glitch had crashed just about all of Ivanov’s neural nanonics. He certainly couldn’t receive any datavises. That meant the possessed were very close now.

The AI has lost all contact with the communication blocks, Charlie said. I can’t track the possessed for you any more.

Up is no good, Ivanov said. He looked round wildly. We’ll have to make a stand.

Very well. There’s a chance Dexter will become visible during the fight. If that happens, you must fire the anti-memory no matter what the cost.

You won’t even have to compel me. Finishing the shit will be my pleasure.

Fletcher had put his arm protectively around a trembling Louise. He suddenly fired the anti-memory again, sending the beam over Brent’s head.

“Careful with that thing,” Brent shouted.

Fletcher ignored him. “The others are almost here.”

Three machine guns lined up on the stairwell door.

“Get away,” Ivanov told Louise, waving her towards the window at the end of the corridor. Then he saw what was behind her, and let out a fast yell of delight. “Yes! Oldest trick in the book. Fletcher, cover for me. We can get her out.” **You should have thought of this,** he accused Charlie.

There was a fire evacuation chute beside the window, a big doughnut of composite on thick swivel pinions. Ivanov

grabbed Louise and hurried her along. He pulled the release lever at the side of the chute, shoving it through a hundred and eighty degrees. The window fell out, an alarm sounded, and water rained down out of the ceiling sprinklers all along the corridor. The doughnut swung round to lock into place in front of the open window. A fabric stocking concertinaed out, the pressure it had been stored under making it pour outwards like a liquid. It fluttered away from the side of the tower as it kept on expanding, the free end sinking towards the black ground far below.

It's a manual system, Charlie protested. **The AI has no control over it.**

Louise was staring at the top of the chute in bewilderment as the cold water soaked her to the skin.

"In you go," Ivanov shouted above the alarm. "Feet first." His laugh was manic.

"No," Louise stammered. She took a frightened step backward.

A twin of the stairwell door materialized in the wall next to the original. Brent fired his machine gun straight at it. Skeletal hands with long red nails slithered up through the solid floor at his feet and clamped around his ankles. He got out one panicked shout before they tugged him down. Then all he could manage was a grunt of disbelief as his shins sank into the carpeting as though it was nothing more than quicksand.

Fletcher grabbed hold of the flailing Halo detective and exerted his own energetic power to counter the destabilising floor. Two possessed walked out of the stairwell at the far end of the corridor. They were dressed as Roman legionaries, but armed with stainless steel crossbows. The GISD agent crouched down and opened fire with his machine gun. Bursts of lightning followed the bullets through the down-pour of water. The legionaries stumbled as the bullets struck them, twanging against their bronze breastplates. But they

managed to stay upright, limbs moving in jerking motions. One raised his crossbow and fired. The bolt struck the agent on his knee, severing his lower leg. Blood foamed out of the severed limb, and he topped to one side, stunned into stupor by the pain.

Ivanov turned to Louise. “Go!” he bellowed. “Get out of here.” He shoved her roughly with one hand, and pointed the anti-memory weapon down the corridor with the other. The beam flared brightly at the advancing legionaries.

Louise gripped the rim of the doughnut, looking directly at the funnel of slippery fabric around its throat. The whole idea of jumping into it was terrifying. Another scream rang out behind her. She took hold of the handle at the top of the doughnut, and swung her legs up, pushing them through the gap. And let go.

Fletcher had got one of Brent’s legs free when three possessed rushed him out of the duplicate stairwell door. He instinctively flung his arms towards them, white fire streaming from his fingertips. They thrashed about in the slithering flame, focusing their own power to send it skidding harmlessly over their own skin.

A streamer coiled round Fletcher’s torso. He had to drop his own attack to counter it. The red slash of the anti-memory beam fluoresced the water droplets barely an inch from his nose as Ivanov tried to provide covering fire. One of the possessed collapsed.

Ivanov was switching targets when a crossbow bolt ripped into his forearm, tearing out a chillingly long strip of flesh, exposing the bone. Without muscles or tendons, the elbow joint flopped uselessly, hand opening to drop his compact machine gun. Blood gushed down to splatter the weapon’s dull metal.

When he glanced upwards, shaking the water and pain out of his eyes, he saw Fletcher writhing at the centre of five lightning forks being hurled at him by several possessed. At

his feet, a badly scorched Brent heaved down a painful breath and raised his machine gun, firing round wildly, heedless of who the bullets struck. There was no sign of Dexter. None.

He might just try and follow Louise, Charlie decided.

Ivanov was never certain who was in charge of his body at that moment. But he took two faltering steps backwards until the doughnut rim hit him just below his kidneys. Then he performed a fabulously well-coordinated back flip, and vanished head first down the chute.

Fletcher staggered to one side as Brent started shooting again. The possessed scrambled for cover, two diving through walls. Out of nowhere, a skilfully aimed ball of white fire plunged into Brent's left eye socket, and the gun fell silent. Two spears of white fire immediately resumed their strike against Fletcher. He twisted painfully under the impact, waving his hand in the general direction one of them was coming from, about to retaliate with his own fire. A thin metal band clamped tight around his throat, and an electric current punched into him. It took every reserve of strength to prevent the excruciating energy from pouring like hot acid into his brain. Thought was impossible, instinct was all he had left. He slumped to his knees, the smell of frying skin thick in his nostrils. The anti-memory weapon fell from numb fingers.

"Enough."

The current was switched off. Fletcher's muscles lost their rigor, dropping him into a twitching heap. Breath was hard to find with the unyielding circle of metal digging against his Adam's apple. His fingers scrabbled weakly against the collar.

"You just leave that alone motherfucker or I'll zap you again."

Fletcher blinked against the shower of water still gushing from the sprinklers, focusing a long pole that extended away

from the collar. At the other end was a young man, not possessed, whose tongue lolled out of the corner of his mouth. "Hands down, come on boy, down they go."

Fletcher removed his hands from the collar.

"*Gooooo* boy," the young man sneered. "Hey, Quinn, I got him for you. He been whapped but good."

Quinn Dexter materialized next to Billy-Joe. The deluge of water never even touched his robe. "Well done. I owe you at least a countess and a classical actress for this one."

Billy-Joe put his head back and howled in joy. "Yes sir. Gonna die from too much fucking."

"Shame my old friend Louise got away."

"No she ain't," Billy-Joe shouted excitably. He shoved the restraint collar's pole into the hands of a startled Frenkel, who gripped it in reflex. "I'll get her for you, Quinn. You see."

"No," Quinn said.

But Billy-Joe was already running for the evacuation chute.

"Billy-Joe!" the tone was ominous. Billy-Joe responded with a doltish grin, and dived clean through the doughnut.

"Shit!" Quinn exclaimed. He'd emphasised how much he wanted Louise Kavanagh as he led the possessed into the tower. And for all his loyalty, Billy-Joe was far too dumb to appreciate simple strategy.

Quinn couldn't chase after the girl himself. Fletcher was regarding him with calculating ferocity. Captured, but hardly subdued. And there were too many questions he had concerning the soul-less bodies now sprawled inertly along the corridor. He snapped his fingers at a couple of the possessed from the Hampstead group. "You two, get down there and help him out."

If she'd just had the time to read the instructions and pictographs on the side of the doughnut, Louise might not have been so frightened. The chute was an old idea, improved by

the use of modern flextailed fabric so it could be used from almost any height. She slid down the first four stories with little resistance; then the fabric began to constrict around her, gently braking her fall. It was designed to be elastic in one direction only, making sure its length remained constant. The end would continue to dangle one metre above the pavement no matter how many people were inside the chute.

Louise was deposited gently from the end, not even having to bend her knees when her feet touched the ground. Her neural nanonics were back on line, with the adrenaline suppression program quickly damping down her shakes. She took a few unsteady steps from the tower, then looked up. Faint sounds of conflict were drifting out of the open window far above. A bulge was descending down the chute, putting her in mind of a guinea pig swallowed by a snake.

There was no time for her to reach cover before the person in the chute arrived. Louise gave the anti-memory weapon she was holding a blank look, then aimed it at the end of the chute.

A head cleared the rim, which surprised her. She'd been expecting feet.

Ivanov had gritted his teeth against the shocking pain from his arm while his neural nanonics slowly recovered on the ride down. When he slid out of the chute the axon block was established, cutting off all the impulses from the mangled wound. Physiological shock was more difficult to counter.

With only one arm to flail around with, he tumbled awkwardly from the chute as the hem released him. Louise rushed forward to help, only to gasp when she saw the state of his bloody arm.

"No," Ivanov groaned. He rolled onto his knees, gripping the long wound tightly, trying to staunch the blood. "Go," he said earnestly.

“But you’re hurt.”

“Doesn’t matter. You go. Now.”

“I . . .” she stared round in despair at the dark deserted streets. “There’s nowhere *to go*.”

Ivanov’s expression altered, a subtle but definite change. “This is Charlie. Run, Louise. Run now. And keep on running. Go down the Holloway Road to start, there aren’t many of them in that direction. Shoot anyone you see. I mean it, don’t ask questions, just shoot. Once you’re clear, find somewhere deserted to hole up. I promise I’ll do what I can to save London. You know that, Louise.” He looked up. A bulge was sliding down the chute, already halfway down. “Now go! Please. Go on, leave. I’ll take care of them here. They won’t be following you for quite a while.”

Ivanov winked. Louise knew that was him, not Charlie. She nodded and backed off. “Thank you.” Then she was gone, running hard down the Holloway Road.

Behind her, Ivanov swung round to face the chute. He let go of his injured arm, allowing the blood to flow freely again. His good arm brought the anti-memory weapon up to point at the chute hem, just as Billy-Joe’s head popped out.

The fluorescent yellow frisbee soared high above the white sand. Haile had to formshift her tractamorphic flesh into a long tentacle to catch it. Jay clapped excitedly, hopping about. “Throw it back, throw it back,” she squealed.

Haile’s tentacle curled round the rim, and released the frisbee with a fast flick. It flew back, travelling twice as quickly as when Jay threw it, tracing a perfectly flat trajectory.

The little girl had to jump to have any chance of making a catch. It hit her hand with a sharp smack, and she tumbled over onto the sand.

“Ouch!”

You feel painfulness?

“Not half.” Jay scrambled up, shaking the tingling out of her hand. She gave the clubhouse along the beach a guilty glance. Tracy had started to warn her about the amount of times she was using the provider for medical aid when she went surfing, threatening to confiscate the board. Asking for something to ease her stinging palm would probably result in more scolding.

“Rest time,” she announced, and flopped on her towel.

Haile lumbered over and used her tractamorphic flesh to scoop out a shallow depression in the warm dry sand. She settled into it, emitting strong thoughts of grateful satisfaction.

Jay eyed the cooler box again, then looked back to the clubhouse. “What are they watching now?”

Corpus is displaying pictures from sensors on Earth for them.

“Really? Where from?”

London. Fletcher Christian has arrived to help the police locate Quinn Dexter. Tracy is concerned that the security services have acquired the life-pattern disrupter weapon.

Jay sighed with impatience. Tracy kept telling her how momentous events were back in the Confederation. Privately Jay thought the way the old observers got into such a tizz over all the political shenanigans was stupid. All she really wanted to know was when it was all going to be over and she could see her mother again. Loads of politicians arguing about who they should ally their planets with wasn't going to bring any sort of end to the crisis.

Friend Jay, what is wrong?

“I want to go home.” She hated how miserable and whiny she sounded.

Corpus asks that you be patient.

“Huh!” Suffering quickly turned to a spike of anger. “As if it cares.”

It does care, a distressed Haile said. **All Kiint care.**

“Right.” She wasn’t going to argue with Haile, it always upset both of them.

Tracy comes, Haile said with a note of hope.

Jay saw the old woman riding a chrome-blue air scooter towards them. Several of the Village residents used the little vehicles to get about on, each one as individual as its owner. Tracy’s was a fat ellipsoid shape with a recessed saddle in the middle. Stubby triangular fins with red tail lights protruded from the rear third; for show Jay assumed. There were also some positively anachronistic circular headlights on the front, like glass jewels. Tracy called it her T-bird.

Another thing Jay was banned from using by herself. She was convinced the sleek-looking vehicle could go a lot faster than Tracy’s maximum speed.

It glided silently through the air at about twenty kilometres an hour, keeping a good two metres above the ground.

Jay stood up, brushing sand from her swimsuit as the T-bird landed beside her.

“Sorry I’m late, poppet,” Tracy said. “Haile, my dear, you’ll have to look after yourself this afternoon. I’m going to take Jay to Agarn.”

“What’s Agarn?”

Tracy explained as they walked back to the chalet, the T-bird following faithfully behind. Agarn was another planet in the Arc, inhabited by a small number of Kiint. They didn’t involve themselves in the kind of life practised by the majority of the Arc, preferring more philosophical pursuits. “So mind your manners,” Tracy warned. “They’re a very dignified group.”

“Why are we going there?”

“The Agarn Kiint are slightly different from the others. I’m hoping they’ll intervene in our favour. It’s a bit of a last resort, but things are turning ugly in the Confederation. I’m worried the situation will result in a squalid kind of stale-

mate. Nothing will be resolved, which is one of the worst outcomes there can be.”

She inspected Jay’s clothes, a pair of khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt, with sturdy hiking boots. “You’ll do, quite the little explorer.”

“Why am I going with you?”

“So they can get a look at a true human.”

“Oh.” Jay didn’t like that idea at all. “Can’t they look at the pictures from the Confederation like you do?”

“In a way they already have. They haven’t turned their back on Corpus. If they had there wouldn’t be any point to visiting them.”

Jay just smiled. She still really didn’t understand Corpus.

Agarn didn’t have any buildings within sight of the teleport circle they arrived on. They were on the rolling foothills of a wide valley. It was kind of like the parkland of Riynine, but left untended for a couple of centuries. Lush emerald grass-analogue swamped the ground. Trees were twisting towers of clustered magenta bubbles. A dozen waterfalls poured over tall rock cliffs lining the valley, while every crevice was home to a stream, emptying into crater lakes that were stepped down the slopes.

Tracy looked round, dabbing at her forehead with a lace hanky. “I’d forgotten how hot it is here,” she murmured.

Jay put her sunglasses on, and they walked down to one of the crater lakes. Two Kiint were bathing just off the shore.

Hello, Fowin, Tracy said.

The Kiint raised a blunt length of tractamorphic flesh, and began to wade ashore. **Greetings to you, Tracy Dean. You are Jay Hilton? Query.**

“Yes, thank you very much. Hello.” Jay pushed her sunglasses up as the Kiint reached the shore and walked out onto the thick grass-analogue. It was very similar to Haile’s parents, though she thought the breathing vents were angled steeper, and the legs were flatter.

I thank you for this visit, Tracy said. I wish to ask you to consider intervention.

I know this. Why else do observers visit me? Following the Gebal stabilisation, every time a new species encounters a problem I am asked to be favourable towards them.

Your enlightenment is renown among Corpus.

Corpus is a constant reminder of the Gebal, so much so that I doubt my wisdom in agreeing to help. Such a notion features heavily in my contemplation. It distracts me from higher thought.

The Gebal faced a unique situation. So do humans.

Humans face an unfortunate situation.

Nonetheless, we can reach full transcendence amity. The inverse population is negligible. Our progress towards social maturity, though admittedly slow, is constant. She gestured at Jay. Please consider our potential.

Jay put on her best bright smile for the Kiint.

Your attempt to influence is crude, Tracy Dean. The child of every species is a reservoir for great potential, good and bad. I cannot judge the individual path, thus logically providing a neutral witness. However, children are inherently innocent. A positive bias.

Jay is the only human available.

Very well. The Kiint turned its big violet eyes to the little girl. What do you desire above all else, Jay Hilton?

“I want my mummy back, of course. I keep telling your Corpus that.”

So you do. I grieve with you for the loss you suffer.

“But you won’t help, will you. None of your kind will. I think that’s horrible of you. Everyone keeps saying how we’re not perfect. But do you know what Father Horst told me once?”

I do not.

“It’s very simple and very smart. If you want to know if

something is fair, then turn it round. So if you know us as well as you claim, and we were the ones with a thousand planets and providers and stuff, do you think we'd help you if we could?"

A healthy argument, presented with integrity. I know this is hard, but there are more issues involved than are apparent.

"Very clever," Jay said. She folded her arms in a huff. "I know it's possible to take possessors out of the bodies they've stolen. I saw it done. So why don't you at least help us to do that? Then we could work out what to do afterwards by ourselves. That's what you really want, isn't it? For us to stand up for ourselves."

The weapon your military is constructing requires no assistance from us.

"Not that. Father Horst exorcised Freya. He threw the possessing soul out of her."

I am interested in your claim, Jay Hilton. Corpus is unaware of the incident. Could you tell me what the circumstances were?

Jay launched into a description of the events that had taken place that fateful day in a small homestead on Lalonde's savannah. Just retelling it made her realize how much had happened since, how much she'd seen and done. It also pushed her mother further into the past, making her even more remote. She finished the story, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Tracy's arm immediately went round her shoulders. "Hush hush, poppet. The possessed can't reach you here."

"It's not that," Jay wailed. "I can't remember what mummy looks like anymore. I'm trying, but I can't."

This at least I can remedy, Fowin said. A provider globe appeared in the air beside Jay. It extruded a square of glossy paper. Jay took it cautiously. A picture of her mother was printed on one side. Jay smiled, tears forgotten.

“That’s her passport flek image,” she said. “I remember when we went to the registry office together. How did you get this?”

It is stored in your Govcentral memory cores. We retain access.

“Thank you very much,” Jay said contritely. She looked at her mother again, warmed by the sight. “I thought you didn’t use stuff like providers on this planet, that you’d gone back to nature or something?”

Quite the opposite, Fowin said. We have rejected everything but our technology. Permanent physical structures are unessential. We are free to pursue thought alone.

“Humans are never going to evolve into anything like you,” Jay said sadly. “We’d just get too bored.”

I am glad. Your appetites are unique. Treasure them. Be yourselves.

“So will you help us expelling souls?”

I believe the circumstances that allowed Father Horst his exorcism will not be repeated on many occasions.

“How come?”

As you have demonstrated this day, human children have very strong beliefs. Freya was brought up to believe in her ethnic Christian religion. When Father Horst began the ceremony of expulsion, she believed that it would work, that the soul possessing her would be cast out. At that same time, the soul experienced doubt. It had endured a form of purgatory, implying the priests of its era enjoyed some kind of fundamental truth when they discussed spiritual matters. Now it was confronted by a priest who believed he had God’s aid to perform the exorcism. Three different, extremely strong beliefs were acting upon the soul, exerting considerable pressure not only from outside, but within its

own thoughts. The soul convinced itself of the validity of the ceremony. Its own faith turned against it, and it withdrew as it believed it had to.

“Then Father Horst can’t do it for entire planets?”

No.

“Okay,” Jay said reluctantly. She was right out of arguments and hope.

Your evaluation? Tracy asked respectfully.

I acknowledge that the breakthrough event on Lalonde was extraneous. Even so, that cannot justify total intervention.

I see.

However. Your race’s potential should be safeguarded. You may initiate a separate origin.

“Thank you,” Tracy said weakly.

“I don’t understand,” Jay complained when they returned to the chalet. “What are you so happy about? Corpus won’t intervene.”

Tracy sat in one of the deck chairs on the veranda, for once breaking her own rule and ordering a cup of tea from the provider. “You worked an absolute miracle, poppet. Fowin’s evaluation immediately becomes Corpus policy. It’s going to allow us to start a brand-new human colony if the Confederation falls apart.”

“Why is that good? The possessed won’t spread to every colony, you said that yourself.”

“I know. But it’s knowledge, you see. Humans found out about souls before they were socially advanced enough to deal with such a revelation. Now that knowledge is going to act like a mental contaminate among every culture. It’ll split humanity into a thousand squabbling factions—that’s already started with Kulu and its idea for a core-Confederation of wealthy worlds. Recovering from such a catastrophe will take generations, and even then the resolution will be influ-

enced by what's gone before. What Corpus will do is begin a colony of, say, a million people from scratch. Observers will be authorized to purchase or acquire ova and sperm stored in zero-tau from medical and biological institutes all across the Confederation. The new colony's start-up population will be gestated in exowombs and cared for by AIs during their childhood. That way, the information they're given can be carefully edited. We can start with a high-technology society equivalent to the Confederation's level of scientific knowledge and let it develop naturally."

"Fowin can do all that?"

"Any Kiint can do that. Too many of them have conformist thought routines if you ask me. At least the Agarn Kiint make an effort to push the envelope. Not that it's helped them with the Sleeping God."

"What's that?" Jay asked eagerly.

Tracy gave her a solemn smile. "Something an old race left behind a very long time ago. It's created quite a dilemma for this civilization of so-called philosophy gurus. Not that there's anything they can do to affect the situation. I think that's what upset them the most. They've been the undisputed masters of this section of the universe for so long, finding something infinitely superior to themselves is rather shocking. Perhaps that's why Fowin was so accommodating today." She stopped as Galic appeared at the foot of the veranda's steps.

"You did it," he said.

"Certainly did." Tracy grinned back.

He came up and sat in the deckchair beside her. Before long, other retired observers had dropped by to discuss the new colony. They had an enthusiasm Jay hadn't seen in them before, making them younger. Not once that whole evening did they discuss the past.

After dark, the party moved into Tracy's lounge and started calling up star charts and planetary surveys. Arguments about the merits of possible locations raged good-naturedly. Most

wanted to see the colony in the same galaxy as the Confederation, even if it had to be on the other side of the core.

Some time around midnight, Tracy realized Jay had fallen asleep on the settee. Galic picked her up and carried her into her bedroom. She never woke as he covered her with a blanket and put Prince Dell on the pillow beside her. He tiptoed out and closed the door before returning to the debate.

Louise had fled for half a mile down the Holloway Road. It was narrow at the top end, the pavements lined by tall brick buildings with crumbling windowsills and gutters. Their ground floors were small shops and cafes whose drab and grimy fronts were firmly shuttered. Her footsteps rattled off the stern walls, an auditory beacon signalling to everyone where she was.

Further down, the road began to widen out. The buildings along this section were better maintained, with clean bricks, glossy paintwork, and more prosperous businesses. Narrow side roads branched off every hundred yards or so, consisting of attractive, compact terrace houses converted into flats. Silver birches and cherry trees in their front gardens overhung the pavements, to give them the semblance of a quiet rural town.

The slope began to flatten out, revealing at least a mile of straight deserted road ahead of her. The larger commercial premises had taken over on either side, their hologram adverts swirling over the broad pavements, forming a skittering iridescent rainbow. Traffic control informationals hung in the air above road lanes at the main junctions, flashing their colour sequences down onto the empty carbon-concrete.

Louise slowed to a halt, panting heavily from the exertion. She couldn't see anything move behind her, but it was so dark behind her she'd hardly see any pursuers until they were almost on top of her. Travelling on under the illumination of the holograms would be a mistake.

Tollington Way was fifty yards ahead of her, a side road leading into the backstreet maze that proliferated behind every major London thoroughfare. Holding her sides against the ache of breathing, Louise jogged for a hundred yards down it, then stopped and hunched down in the deep shadows of a doorway.

Her soaking leggings were chafing her thighs, the T-shirt was disgustingly cold and clammy, and her feet felt as though they were shrivelling up. She was shuddering all over now from the cold. High above, small green lights flashed on the dome's geodesic structure.

"Now what?" she gasped up at it. Charlie would be watching her through the sensors, seeing her infrared image constricted into a small ball. She datavised a general net access request. There was no response.

Escape and hide, Charlie had told her. Easy to say. But where? No one was going to open their door to a stranger on this night. She'd probably be shot just for knocking and asking.

A cat yowled and jumped off a nearby wall to run along the street. Louise was rolling to the ground and bringing the anti-memory weapon smoothly to bear before the noise had even registered properly. The cat, a furry tabby, loped past, giving her a disdainful look.

She let out a brief sob as her muscles went limp. The weapons control program was still in primary mode. She took it off line as she climbed painfully to her feet, swatting dirt from her knees and the front of her waistcoat.

The cat was still visible, silhouetted against the hologram haze curtaining the end of Tollington Way, its tail swishing about arrogantly. It was obvious she was still too close to Holloway Road; her pursuers would come down it, searching every side road. Fletcher said they could sense people without even having to see them.

Louise accessed the map of central London she'd stored

in a neural nanonics memory cell, and began to walk away from the light. The anti-memory weapon was slipped back into her waistcoat pocket. She couldn't work out which was the better way of avoiding search parties; staying in one place (assuming she could find a disused room or warehouse) or constantly moving round. The odds were uncomputable, principally because she didn't know what she was facing. An organized systematic hunt, or a couple of possessed ambling round in a disinterested fashion.

Studying the map was almost meaningless, it didn't relate to anything. Without any goal, any destination, one street was the same as any other. Its only use was in preventing her from crossing any of the main roads.

Maybe I should just find somewhere to hide. That's what Charlie suggested.

On an impulse she called up the Ritz's address. The map had to switch magnification factors the hotel was so far away from her.

That was out, then. Pity, no one would think to hunt for her there.

"Andy," she whispered in shock. The one person she knew in London. And who would never turn her away.

She retrieved his address and ran it through the London directory she'd loaded along with all the other junk data recommended as essential personal survival tools for the arcology. Some people didn't include their physical address with their net code. But Andy had. He lived in Islington, somewhere on Halton Road. A tiny blue star burned on the map.

Two miles away.

"Sweet Jesus, please let him be there."

They chained Fletcher to the altar with manacles that had an electric current running through them, nullifying his energetic power. They ripped his clothes off, and cut obscene runes into his flesh. They shaved him. They burned a pile of

Bibles and prayer books at his feet, and used the ash to smear a pentagon around his body. They hung an inverted cross above his skull, dangling by a rope that was fraying and rotting.

Ghosts slithered past, offering their desolate expressions in sympathy.

“Sorry,” was their only whisper. “So sorry.” Past heroes, humbled and degraded by their emasculation. The possessed spat at them, jeering them out of the way.

St Paul’s was illuminated with the mealy light from smoking iron braziers and racks of candles, leaving the vaulting ceiling invisible. Its new incense was the smell of sweaty bodies and fried burgerbap onions. Prayers had been supplanted by rock music coming from a ghetto blaster, with the sounds of copulation heard between tracks. With his head forced back awkwardly against the stone, Fletcher could see several young possessed scrambling monkey-fashion over the stained glass windows, painting them over with sticky black fluid. A dark shape moved into his limited field of view.

Quinn bent over him. “Nice to see you again.”

“Enjoy your taunts while you can, you inhuman monster. You will issue them no longer once this day is through.”

“You’re good. I admire that. You got off Norfolk in time, which wasn’t easy. And you got down to Earth, which is fucking impossible. Very good. What did you do? Make a deal with the supercops?”

“I know naught of what you speak.”

“Shit. Okay, I’ll put it in real slow retard-speak for you. Who brought you down to Earth?”

When Fletcher didn’t answer, Quinn ran his hand over the iron band securing the man’s forehead. “I can have them increase the voltage you know. It can get a lot lot worse.”

“Only while I remain in this body.”

“Not such a dumb asshole after all.” Quinn crawled sinu-

ously onto the altar beside Fletcher and moved his hooded head right up close. "Before we go any further," he whispered, "what's she like to fuck? Come on, you can tell me. Is she hot stuff? Or does she just lie there and take it like a corpse? Just between us. I won't tell anyone. Does she give good head? Does she like it up the ass?"

"You are unfit to live, sir. I shall relish your fall, for it will be a great one from the height of your arrogance."

"Don't tell me you never tried her out? That Louise? She was with you for weeks and weeks. All that time. You must have." Quinn withdrew a fraction, vaguely puzzled. "Shit, you're the one that's not human."

"Your judgements have neither value nor relevance to me."

"Oh yeah? There's one judgement I might interest you in. I'm gonna find out what she's like. My people will bring her here for me, and then you can watch me and Courtney go to work on her. I'll make you watch. See how long you can keep that *assholing* superiority going then. Motherfucker!"

"You will have to find her first."

"Oh I will. Believe it. Even if the morons I've got out there now don't do it, His army will bring her to me. And then that last little thread of defiance you treasure will snap. You'll scream and plead and cry, and curse your shitty false Lord for his divine inaction."

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. The age of miracles may be past, but His messengers still walk amongst us. You *will* fail. It is written."

"Bollocks. There are no messengers. And I'm busy burning the book it's written in. It's my Lord who comes, not yours. And He doesn't move mysteriously. God's Brother is very blunt, as you're going to find out. Unless I spare you."

"I would never be sullied by your mercy, sir."

"No? Then how about sparing Louise? Join us. Get on the

winning side. I'll give her straight back to you. Won't touch a hair on her head. Promise. And that's a lot of hair."

Fletcher gave a short, bitter laugh.

"I mean it," Quinn said smoothly. "You're smart, tough. I could use people like you. You were some sort of officer, right? Half these shitbrains I've got working for me can't find their own ass with both hands. I could put you in charge of a whole bunch of them. You can make out any way you like, then. Marry Louise. Live in a palace. It can't get any better."

"I apologize, for I am mistaken. I had thought you dangerous. I see now you are merely small. Our Lord Jesus was offered the kingdoms of the world, and refused. I believe I can resist coveting another man's wife and some fine living. Have you not yet learned that in this wretched state we can create anything we desire for ourselves? You can offer nothing of any value; you may only rain down empty threats."

"Empty!" Quinn shouted in rage. "He *is* coming. *My* Lord, not yours. If you don't believe me, ask the ghosts. They can hear the dark angels draw near. His Night will fall. That is the new miracle."

"Day follows night, as it is now and always will be. Amen."

Quinn backed off the altar and stood up. He held an anti-memory weapon in front of Fletcher's face. "Okay, fun-time's over, dickhead; tell me what this is."

"I do not know, sir."

"You were shooting it about pretty freely before. Was it meant for me? Is that why the supercops let you down here? Were you trying to find me for them?" Quinn beckoned.

Frenkel stepped forwards and dumped Billy-Joe's body on the altar next to Fletcher. The young man's head flopped about. His eyes were open, unfocused, and he was still breathing.

"We found him like this down at the bottom of the Arch-

way tower. The big black dude managed to shoot him with one of these gadgets before my troops took him out. Now, I can understand a weapon that forces possessors out of their host body. Every fucking scientist in the Confederation must be working on that right now. But this is a little more powerful, isn't it? Billy-Joe wasn't a possessed, but it still kicked his soul's ass out of there." Quinn smiled, fangs pressing up into white lips as he sensed the worry trickle into Fletcher's thoughts. "Or did it do more than that? Huh? Those supercops play for the highest stakes there are. They know I can just come back in another body and start the whole crusade up again. Because I can't die, now can I? We're all immortal now."

Fletcher's face became a mask of stubborn determination.

"Ah," Quinn said softly. He held the weapon up, regarding it with a new respect. "Let's try a little experiment, shall we?" His hand made a pass over Billy-Joe, applying energetic force to open a pathway to the beyond. A soul struggled its way up into Billy-Joe's body. He sat up, wheezing for breath, looking round avidly.

"How about that?" Quinn marvelled. "No strain, no pain. We can speed up the whole resurrection game." He grinned down at Fletcher. "You know what, in the wrong hands this little toy you brought me could be really dangerous."

The tenement on Halton Road consisted of three low-cost apartment towers intended for the poor and the elderly. A third of the residents still fell into that category, the rest worked in the black cash economy or lived off the dole, spending their days stizzed out on cheap activant programs and home-synthesised drugs. There were no other amenities for them. The ground between the twenty-storey towers was a concrete yard walled in by rows of small garages. Fading white lines marked out baseball and football pitches, though the baskets and goal posts had been

torn out of the ground decades ago. Despite its classical urban erosion demeanour, it was a perfect site for The Disco At The End Of The World.

Andy had been dancing on the worn concrete since sundown, embracing the communal madness. Out of all London's residents, the type that lived in the tenement had the least to lose when the possessed came marching out of the darkness. So . . . sod it. If you are absolutely going to get captured by the evil dead/tortured/your body consumed by ghouls/live the rest of eternity as a zombie slave, you might as well have one last decent party before it happens.

The underground trax jammers had set up their ageing speaker stacks as twilight fell. When the sun left the sky, out came the pounding rhythm to rattle the windows and sneer an utterly worthless defiance at the arcology's new overlords. Everyone had dressed for it. That's what Andy loved. Disco divas in their sequined micro dresses, hot funk dancers in leather and infra-white shirts, jive masters in sharp suits. All grooving and swaying in one huge dense mass of hot bodies, doing the stupid moves to stupid old songs.

Andy wriggled his hips, and waved his hands, and generally boogied on down like he'd never done before. No need to be self-conscious now, there wouldn't be a tomorrow morning for people to laugh at him and his coordination. He swigged from the bottles passed round. He snogged a couple of girls. He sang along at the top of his voice. He made up his own cool moves. He cheered and laughed and wanted to know why the hell he'd wasted his life.

And then there she was. Louise, standing in front of him. Clothes wet and dishevelled. Her beautiful face deathly serious.

She'd generated her own space among the exuberant dancers. People instinctively avoided her, knowing that whatever private hell she was in they didn't want any part of it.

Her lips parted, shouting something at him.

“What?” he yelled back. The music was incredibly loud. She mouthed: Help.

He took her hand and led her across the yard. Through the ring of elderly people around the edge of the dancing throng, happily clapping along and doing a small shuffle. Into the brick-wall lobby, and up the stone stairs to his flat.

When the door shut behind them, Andy thought he was dreaming, because Louise was in his flat. Louise! On the last night of existence, they were together.

His window looked out over the street not the yard, so the music was muted down to a constant bass drumming. He reached for a lightstick; the grid power supply had failed early that morning.

“Don’t,” Louise said.

Without air conditioning, condensation had settled thickly on the glass panes, but there was enough coloured light from the disco creeping in to reveal the outline of the small room. A bed at one end, sheets unwashed for a while now. Apart from one vinyl-top table littered with electronic tools, the furniture was cardboard boxes. The kitchen fitted into an arched alcove with a plastic curtain drawn across it.

Andy hoped she wouldn’t look at it all too closely. Even in this light it was seedy. His delight at seeing her was fading as his real life began to seep back to claim him.

“Is this the bathroom?” she asked, indicating the one other door. “I got drenched. I’m still cold.”

“Um, sorry, it’s supposed to be the bedroom. I just use it to keep stuff in. Bathroom’s down the hall. I’ll show you.”

“No.” Louise stepped up to him and put her arms round him, nestling her head against his. He was so startled he didn’t respond for a couple of seconds, then he gingerly returned the hug.

“There’s been so much horror in my life today,” she said. “So many vile things. I’ve been so frightened. I came here to

you because I have to. There's no one else left for me now. But I want to be with you as well. Do you understand that?"

"Not really. What's happened to you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm still me. For now." She kissed him, urgency arousing her in a way she hadn't experienced before. The desperate need to be held, and adored, to be promised that the whole world was a fine and good place after all.

She demanded all that from Andy on his small disorderly bed. Spending the night being worshiped, listening to his ecstatic cries twist away into the disco music while the hazy dapple of iridescent light played across the ceiling. Air in the small confined room grew stifling from the heat and sweat evaporating off their skin. It made them oblivious to the Westminster dome's giant air circulation systems shutting down.

By the time the first tendrils of thin mist were rising from the Thames to squat listlessly above the riverside buildings, their bursts of orgasmic pleasure had become close to pain as program abuse forced already overdriven flesh to continue. Finally, with the exquisite narcotic of desperation spent, they clung to each other, too senseless to know that a thin layer of cloud had started glowing red above the heart of the ancient city outside.

26

Liol piloted *Lady Mac* right up to the big spacedock globe on the diskcity rim where the MSV was parked, locking position twenty metres outside the yawning hatch. Joshua was very insistent they didn't come inside.

Working out a procedure for bringing Quantook-LOU and five of his entourage inside the starship had taken up the entire trip from the transparent bubble to the rim airlock hatch. They eventually agreed that two of Joshua's crew, Quantook-LOU, and another Mosdva would ride the MSV out to the starship first. There would be three shuttle flights in all, and Joshua would be the last over. That way the distributor of resources would be satisfied that the starship wouldn't fly away as soon as its captain was on board, leaving him behind. The idea that Joshua, as commander, wouldn't desert any crew was obviously foreign to him. An interesting outlook, the humans agreed, and a good marker for future behaviour.

The xenocs were assigned the lower lounge in capsule D, which had its own bio-isolation environmental circuit. Sarha modified it to provide a mix of gas to match Tojolt-HI's at-

mosphere, not that they carried a great deal of argon, and she had to omit the hydrocarbons altogether.

Once Quantook-LOU was inside and Joshua was back on the bridge, the Mosdva would provide the coordinates of their destination.

Mosdva spacesuits were made from a tight-fitting fabric and woven with heat regulator ducts. Only the upper two sets of limbs were given sleeves, the lower legs were tucked up next to the body, making the lower section look as if it was the end of a giant stocking. The helmet was chunky, with internal mechanisms bulging up like warts and a forward glass visor that had several protective slide-down shields. Their life-support backpack was a cone whose tip flared out into a fringe of small jet-black fins. A single, thick armoured cable linked it to the helmet. An oversuit web carried electronic modules and canisters the same way as their torso jackets.

Beaulieu and Ashly watched the xenocs through a ceiling sensor as they came through the connecting airlock into the lounge. They didn't move with quite the same ease as they did back in the diskcity, lacking the fronds to give them stability. But they were adapting fast to grab hoops and the inter-deck ladders.

When the last one was inside, Ashly closed the hatch and let the new atmosphere in. Quantook-LOU waited in the middle of the lounge, while the others conducted a detailed examination. Most of the fittings had been stripped out for this flight anyway, leaving a spartan cabin. It didn't leave them much technology to probe, and there was certainly nothing critical they could damage. The Mosdva satisfied themselves that the lounge wasn't actively hostile, and confirmed the atmosphere was compatible before removing their suits. They quickly transferred the electronic modules from their oversuits to their usual jackets.

Beaulieu had used a neutrino-scattering detector when they were in *Lady Mac's* airlock to scan the hardware they'd

brought with them. Alkad and Peter joined her in analysing the function of various components. They were carrying small cylinders of chemical explosive, lasers, spooled diamond wire, and a gadget which Alkad and Peter thought would give off a powerful EM pulse. The internal molecular binding force generators could maintain the lounge decking's integrity against any of their weapons should they get hostile.

More interesting were the number of implants each of them was loaded with. The central nervous column, running through the centre of the body, had a number of attachments spliced into it, artificial fibres spread out through the tissue to form a secondary nervous system. Biochemical devices were grafted on to glands and circulatory networks, supplementing organ functions. Compact weapons cylinders were buried in limb muscles.

"The weapons I can understand," Ruben said when Beaulieu displayed the images over the general communication link. "But the rest seem redundant. Perhaps their organs still haven't fully evolved to freefall conditions."

"I disagree," Cacus said. "Quantook-LOU doesn't have the same degree of enhancements as the other five. I'd say his escort are the Mosdva equivalent of our boosted mercenaries. They'll be able to keep functioning even when they're badly damaged."

"It's probably significant that Quantook-LOU's physiological condition is generally superior to the others'," Parker said. "His bone structure is certainly thicker, and from what we can understand of his internal organs their biochemical functions have a higher degree of efficiency. That suggests to me that he was actually bred. Fifteen thousand years isn't long enough for a full genetic evolutionary adaptation to freefall, there are just too many changes from a gravity environment to incorporate."

"If you're right, that would confirm an aristocracy-based

social structure,” Cacus said. “Their whole administration class would be an elite.”

“He does have a large amount of processors hardwired into what passes for his cortex,” Oski said. “A lot more than the soldiers. They augment his memory and analytical abilities to a similar level as neural nanonics.”

“Physical and mental superiority,” Liol said. “That’s very fascist.”

“Only in human terms,” Ruben chided. “Imposing our values on xenocs and then going on to judge them is the height of conceit.”

“Pardon me,” Liol mumbled. He checked round the bridge to find Ashly and Dahybi grinning at the Edenist’s snobbery; Sarha gave him a thumbs up.

“An aristocracy is historically arrogant,” Syrinx said. “If all the dominions are structured the same way, it would explain why they are so quick to escalate their disagreements into war. The administration class would regard the soldiers as expendable. Like everything else here, they are resources to be exploited to the advantage of the dominion.”

“Then where exactly do we fit into their neat little hierarchy?” Sarha asked.

“What we have is valuable to them,” Parker said. “What we are, is not. They will deal with us on that level only.”

Joshua slid through the lower deck hatch into the bridge, and settled onto his acceleration couch. He datavised the flight computer for a systems review, and took over the command functions from Liol. “We’re ready,” he told Quantook-LOU. “Please give us the location.”

One of the Mosdva’s electronic modules transmitted a stream of data.

“That’s one of the tangles in the web, nine hundred kilometres away,” Beaulieu said. She datavised a string of instructions to the ELINT satellites, using the closest one to give the section a close scan. “The knot itself is approxi-

mately four kilometres across, rising seventeen hundred metres above the disk's median level. A lot of infrared seepage in the surrounding area. Most of the knot's web tubes are dead. The thermal exchange mechanisms around it are still functioning, but with a reduced output."

"Somebody's still alive there," Sarha said.

"Looks that way."

"We have the position," Joshua told Quantook-LOU. "What kind of acceleration can you withstand?"

There was a slight pause. "Thirty per cent of the acceleration you used when you approached Anthi-CL would be acceptable to us," Quantook-LOU said.

"Understood. Secure yourselves, please." Joshua extended *Lady Mac's* combat sensors and ordered the standard booms to retract. The crew went to combat alert status. A quick check of the lounge sensors showed the six Mosdva prone on the cushion padding which Beaulieu and Dahybi had laid out for them on the decking.

It wasn't worth igniting the fusion tubes. Joshua used the secondary drive to accelerate the starship at a tenth of a gee. The vector he'd plotted took them out a hundred kilometres from the sunside, then curved across towards the knot.

"Gas plumes on this side as well," Beaulieu warned. "They're still fighting down there."

Joshua called Quantook-LOU. "We can see there's still a lot of conflict on Tojolt-HI. It would help to know if we are likely to be attacked, and by what."

"No Tojolt-HI dominion will attack this ship unless it appears you are leaving. If I have not secured your drive technology, then our desperation will increase."

"What form will an attack against us take? Do you have ships that can intercept us?"

"We have no ships other than the sunscoops which you have already seen. Energy-beam weapons will be used to damage you. I would speculate that many dominions will be construct-

ing fast automated vehicles. The speed which the *Lady Macbeth* can travel at has been studied. They will be swifter."

Joshua looked round the bridge. "I'd say we don't need to worry about missiles. It's the lasers that trouble me. The dominions have the kind of power generation capacity which makes our SD platforms look feeble."

"But not on this side of the diskcity," Beaulieu said. "Sensor scans have dropped considerably since we moved across the rim. Ninety per cent of their systems are mounted on the darkside."

"They can poke a laser through the foil quick enough," Liol said.

"We'll be watching for it," Sarha told him.

"I'd still like to understand the circumstances," Joshua said. "Quantook-LOU, can you tell me which dominions are allied with Anthi-CL?"

"Outside our main alliance quartet, there is no longer any way of knowing. Your arrival has disrupted the dominions at every level. The rim dominions search for allies among the centre. The centre dominions struggle among themselves as the old alliances fall to be replaced by lies and unkeepable promises."

"And we did all that?"

"For all our history, resources have been finite, and our society reflects this. Now you have come, and every resource has suddenly become infinite. There can only be one dominion now."

"How so?"

"We are in balance. The central dominions have larger areas than those of the rim, but the rim is where the new mass gathered by the sunscoop ships is distributed from. Our value is therefore equal. Each rim dominion supplies its centrist allies with mass, and the amount of mass which can be delivered is obviously dependant on the number of sunscoops. The number of sunscoop ships which can be built is

dependant on the size of the alliance. Their construction absorbs a fearsome quantity of our resources. When a sunscoop fails to return, the quantity of mass available to the alliance is reduced, causing shortages and hardship among the dominions. Then the alliance grows weak as dominions struggle against each other to obtain the level of mass they require. That is when the distributors in each dominion move to forge new alliances that will allow them to regain their old level of supply.”

“I understand,” Joshua said. “With our technology allowing you to bring new mass in from other star systems, the sunscoops will not be able to compete. Every central Tojolt-HI dominion will turn to Anthi-CL to supply them with mass, becoming your allies. Without a market, the other rim dominions will fail, and also be incorporated into the alliance.”

“And I will be the distributor of resources for all of Tojolt-HI.”

“Then why are the other dominions fighting you?”

Quantook-LOU raised his mid limbs a small distance against the gee force, slapping his torso feebly. “Because I do not yet have your drive technology. As always they search for advantage. By reducing Anthi-CL to ruin, they will deprive me of the resources to build starships. You will be forced to make the exchange with them.”

“But you said the alliances between the central dominions are unstable.”

“They are. The other distributors are greedy fools. They would destroy us all. The damage they have already caused to Tojolt-HI is on a scale we have never endured before. It will take decades to repair everything.”

“So just tell them you have our drive. I’ll back you up. We can work out the details of the exchange later. That will stop the destruction.”

“Anthi-CL’s allies know I have not yet acquired your starship drive. I maintain our primary alliance with the quartet

by assuring them that this venture to acquire astronomical data will result in triumph. In turn, they barter this information to gain advantage should I fail. All of Tojolt-HI knows you have not yet exchanged the data with me. They watch to see the outcome of this flight. Once I can signal Anthi-CL that I have the data to build your drive, our quartet alliance will solidify once more. The other dominions will have no choice but to join with us. Faster-than-light travel has made our unification inevitable. All of us know this. All that remains is the question of who shall become distributor of resources for Tojolt-HI. If it is not me, then it will be another dominion's distributor. That is why they will attack should you attempt to fly away."

Joshua switched off the link to the lounge. "Opinions?"

"He's very good," Samuel said. "I think he's realized you have a conscience, or at least some kind of ethical code. That's why our arrival is blamed as the cause of the diskcity war. We're also under threat not to try and leave, otherwise we'll be shot. Everything he says is to his advantage."

"The economic structure of Tojolt-HI certainly made sense," Parker said. "That lends credence to the rest of the situation."

"It's certainly favourable for us," Liol said. "Even if Quantook-LOU is exaggerating the political instability, everyone here wants to be the one who gets ZTT from us. They're prepared to go to war in order to give us what we want."

"Pity we can't use that to negotiate some kind of peace settlement," Syrinx said. "I can't help but feel very uncomfortable about this."

"We could simply beam the information across Tojolt-HI after we get a copy of the Tyrathca almanac," Beaulieu suggested. "Even if Quantook-LOU does get us the almanac data, and we give him ZTT technology, the physical aspect of their conflict will probably continue as the consolidation into one dominion moves forward."

“The irony of all this astounds me,” Ruben said.

“I fail to see how,” Syrinx replied quickly. “You must have a very black sense of humour to find this remotely funny.”

“I never said funny. But don’t you see what this discussion mirrors? This is how the Kiint must have debated our species when we asked them for the solution to the beyond. To the Mosdva, faster-than-light travel is obviously the answer to all their problems; they can have an infinite supply of mass, they can begin fresh colonies, and they can exterminate their old oppressors. To them it is essential we supply it, and they are willing to risk everything to gain what we have. Yet for us, with our complete understanding of ZTT, giving them the technology means releasing a genocidal crusade across this whole section of the galaxy, as well as the possibility of the Confederation going to war against them at some time in the future. Which we would probably lose, given their numbers.”

“If the Tyrathca don’t get us first,” Monica muttered out loud.

“Are you saying we shouldn’t give them ZTT?” Joshua asked.

“Think what will happen if we do.”

“We’ve been through this already. The Mosdva will probably get faster-than-light travel anyway, now they know it’s possible.”

“Just as the Kiint keep saying we have to find our own solution to the souls in the beyond now we know it exists.”

“Jesus! What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing now. We were right before: the question is one of timing. I think we got the answer wrong.”

“Maybe we did,” Syrinx said. “Though I’m not convinced. But this has made our future actions very clear cut. We have got to solve the problem of possession and the beyond first. Only then will we be in a position to deal with the

whole Tyrathca/Mosdva issue. And the only way we can do that now is get to the Sleeping God.”

The ELINT satellites continued to show the war across Tojolt-HI’s darkside. Blowouts were occurring with increasing frequency, sending long spumes of vapour and fluid racing out into space, propelling bodies along with them. Mosdva troops in armoured spacesuits continued to scurry across the valleys and ridges of the darkside structure. Almost all train movement had ceased.

The heaviest fighting was conducted around the boundary of Anthi-CL and its neighbouring allies. As well as the blowouts decompressing entire tubes, suited Mosdva shot at each other with beam and projectile weapons as they struggled to penetrate their enemy’s territory and disable critical systems. The satellites were also picking up powerful flashes of energy among the tall thermal dissipation towers as emplaced defensive lasers and masers swept across the ranks of advancing soldiers.

“But no nukes,” Beaulieu said. “At least not yet. I have picked up some small short-range missiles, but they use chemical rockets and warheads. They’re not very successful; the lasers usually pick them off. Hardly surprising, the maximum acceleration so far has been seven gees.”

“I wonder why they use chemical systems?” Monica asked. “One well-placed nuke would take out a whole dominion. They must have the ability to build them. Quantook-LOU said they used to move asteroids around with them, just like we do.”

“We can ask Quantook-LOU if you like,” Joshua said.

“I’d rather not,” Samuel said. “I’d hate to put ideas in his head. In any case, you’re misrepresenting the nature of conflict here. Everything is resource-based, even war. The aim must always be to kill an enemy’s population, but keep their web tubes intact. Explosive decompression will have exactly that result every time, giving the victorious dominion

room to expand. A nuclear strike would obliterate a vast amount of the diskcity structure, while the shockwave would weaken even more.”

“Okay, so they use neutron bombs,” Liol said. “Kill the population and leave the structural mass intact.”

“I definitely wouldn’t mention that to Quantook-LOU.”

Etchells expanded his distortion field to scan around as soon as he slipped out of the wormhole terminus seventy-five million kilometres above the surface of Mastrit-PJ’s photosphere. Thermo dump panels slid out to their full length from every life-support capsule and subsidiary system to get rid of the heat. Electronic sensor pods opened their petal segments, extending antenna.

Red light flooded across the utilitarian bridge compartment, cutting through the heavy shielding of the main port. Kiera blinked away the rush of liquid it brought to her eyes as she sat on the acceleration couch facing it. She was content just to admire the genuine panorama, ignoring the various graphic displays that oscillated and scrolled across the consoles as they tabulated the results of the sensor sweeps.

“Nice view, if a little characterless,” she said. A pair of sunglasses appeared in her hands, and she placed them carefully on her nose. “Can you sense anything nearby?”

“Nothing,” Etchells said. “Which means nothing. Searching an entire star system is impossible for a single craft. Assuming they even came here.”

“Nonsense. They’re here. It’s the only place they could be. This damn star has been glaring at us ever since we rounded the nebula. This is where the Tyrathca came from, and it’s where that arkship came from. They have to be here, along with whatever it is they’re looking for.”

“Yes, but where, exactly?”

“That’s your department. Keep your sensors extended. Find them. When you do, I’ll keep my part of the bargain.”

“The odds are not in our favour.”

“The fact that any odds exist at all is in our favour. If there is anything left of the Tyrathca here, it must be on a planet or asteroid. You should start a survey.”

“Thank you. I’d never have thought of that.”

Kiera didn’t even bother sighing a reprimand. He could perceive her mental tone as well as she could feel his. It wasn’t that they’d been getting on each other’s nerves during the voyage, just that they weren’t natural allies. “Can you withstand the temperature?”

“Provisionally, yes,” Etchells said. “Though the particle density will have to be monitored as closely as the thermal input. The technological systems can cope with the heat; as can my hull. I estimate we can endure this environment for three days, then we will have to swallow away and cool off.”

“Okay.” She stood up and stretched elaborately. There had been too many hours spent sitting uselessly on the bridge during the flight. It gave her too much time to brood over what had gone wrong back on Monterey, when what she ought to be doing was planning how to use the weapon which the Confederation was chasing. “I’m going for a shower. Let me know when you find something.”

Beaulieu used a full-spectrum sweep against the sunside surface as *Lady Mac* decelerated into the coordinate Quantook-LOU had provided. The web tubes and their foil sheets matched the rest of Tojolt-HI’s sunside in composition, but here they had risen out of the median in a small hemispherical mound, which matched the bulge on the darkside.

“The knot is about three kilometres across, nine hundred metres high, and I can’t even begin to tell you what’s inside,” Beaulieu said. “Nearly eighty per cent of the knot and its surrounding webs are dead. Surface glass is cracked, and some structural ridges snapped. But that still leaves enough mass to shield the internal structure from all our sensors.”

“Don’t like it,” Liol said. “That’s over ten cubic kilometres we don’t know a damn thing about. They could be hiding anything in there.”

“Nothing that’s used very regularly,” Ashly said.

“Yeah, like their biggest-ever weapon.”

“Electrical and magnetic fields are normal,” Beaulieu said. “I’m not registering any large power sources on either side of the disk.”

“Not active ones. The energy for a blast would be stored ready.”

“Ready for what?” Sarha asked.

“I don’t know. We haven’t explored one per cent of this star system, we don’t know what else is lurking around here. Fleets of refugees from other diskcities. Xenocs that live inside the Orion Nebula. Mosdva possessed.”

“Oh, come *on*.”

“Point taken,” Joshua said. “We need to be cautious.”

“The *Oenone* can swallow in,” Syrinx said. “Our distortion field will be able to probe the interior of the knot.”

“No,” Joshua said. “I still don’t think we’re ready to give away our biggest advantage yet. Beaulieu, I want constant monitoring of the knot. Any change in its energy state and we jump clear. In the meantime, let’s see what Quantook-LOU’s prepared to tell us.” Before he asked, Joshua cleared the overlay of ship schematics from the sensor image. Tojolt-HI had been bothering him, niggling away for a while now. It wasn’t worry about what they were heading into, he acknowledged, it was the size of the diskcity. He’d been appropriately amazed and impressed with it ever since the sensors had delivered their first image to him. This was different, because their little flight had suddenly put it into perspective for him. They were flying over it, an artefact which was so densely populated it made an arcology appear vacant. Human bitek habitats were fabulous huge entities, but you

didn't fly *across* them in a spaceship, not for minutes at a time. And they weren't even halfway to the centre yet.

The visual spectrum sensors showed him a tiny black spot trawling over the burnished sparkle of the glass and foil which made up sunside. *Lady Mac*'s shadow, smaller than the width of most web tubes. Many times he'd seen Ganymede's shadow racing over Jupiter's dayside clouds, a black blemish smaller than the planet's cyclone swirls. A moon big enough to qualify as a planet, reduced to its true insignificance by the magnificent gas giant. This was exactly the same.

"We're going to be at your designated location in a couple of minutes," Joshua told Quantook-LOU. "I'd like to discuss the terms of the data exchange. After all, neither of us wants this deal to fall apart now."

"I agree," Quantook-LOU said. "I will take my escort into this section of Tojolt-HI and secure the information you require. As before, you will be given the indices of the files. If you are agreeable that it is what you want, we will perform a synchronized exchange of our respective information. You will then leave Mastrit-PJ immediately."

"Fine by me, but won't you be in danger? This is a long way from Anthi-CL, we can return you."

"After the exchange I will be the only member of my race to have the information. That makes me more valuable than the sun's mass in iron. Nobody will harm me. If I was to return to the *Lady Macbeth*, what guarantee could you give me that you would not simply fly off back to your Confederation, thus removing the knowledge from my race?"

"I would not be able to offer a guarantee that would satisfy you, Quantook-LOU. However, I know nothing of Tojolt-HI. I do not know what is contained within this section behind the web tubes. How do I know that it is not some powerful weapon that can destroy my ship as soon as you have the information you want?"

“This is an old section, its dominion has almost collapsed. Do your sensors not show you that it poses no threat?”

“There is nothing we can see on the surface, but I must know what is inside. I propose to send two of my crew members with you. They will only observe, they will not interfere with your activities.”

“I accept.”

Joshua ended the link. “Ione, you’re on.”

Lady Mac closed slowly on the sunside surface, using ion thrusters to manoeuvre in towards the approximate boundary of the knot. The web tubes below the starship were dead, as Quantook-LOU had requested. He had also asked that Joshua provide a method of crossing the gulf. As a result, the two suited and armoured serjeants were waiting in the open EVA airlock, ready to jet across and secure a tether to the tube surface.

Ione watched the long arched segments of glass grow larger; nothing was visible below the tarnished and pitted surface. Her armour suit sensors could just make out the faint lines of the inner spiral of piping. *Lady Mac*’s shadow was expanding and darkening over the glass and foil sheeting as the starship slid inwards. She saw a flickering motion sweep across the darkened glass. A multitude of anfractuous cracks spread out from the rim of the segment as though tendrils of frost were gripping the tube.

“It’s rupturing,” she told the crew.

“Thermal stress,” Liol replied. “It’s our shadow that’s causing it. Don’t forget, that material has never had its heat input interrupted before.”

“Ione,” Joshua said. “I’m locking our attitude . . . mark. You can go over whenever you’re ready.”

The curving glass was seventy metres away from the airlock hatch. The first serjeant disconnected its safety line from the chamber socket and activated the manoeuvring pack.

Attaching the end of the tether was no problem. The

cracked glass had come out of the rim of the metal reinforcement hoop, leaving a gap she could loop it through. Once it was done, she moved aside. Joshua wanted the Mosdva to cut their own way in.

The xenocs hauled themselves along the tether using the powered gauntlets they wore on their midlimb hands. There was no subtlety in their entry. One of them simply used a laser to slice a circle through the glass and the piping underneath.

Ione was last in, both serjeants following one of the bodyguard Mosdva. She thought it must have been a long time since the tube was inhabited. The fronds had petrified, then ablated away in the vacuum, leaving a cloud of granular dust clogging the tube. Even with that, it was a lot brighter than the sections they'd toured in Anthi-CL. Without the fluid to shield the interior, the light from the sun was fearsome.

The Mosdva made their way purposefully along to the end of the tube. They used the tarnished plant apertures as grips, which afforded them almost the same degree of mobility as the fronds in a pressurized tube. Ione simply used the manoeuvring packs.

When they reached the end of the tube, one of the bodyguards cut through the airlock hatch with a laser. They moved through the junction and into another tube on the other side, heading into the knot.

As soon as the last serjeant was inside, Joshua used the chemical vernier thrusters to back them away from the sun-side surface. Beaulieu reported that nine small satellites had taken off from across Tojolt-HI. All of them were emitting low-power radar pulses, tracking *Lady Mac*.

"It looks like Quantook-LOU is heading for the apex of the knot," Samuel said. "So far he's staying with the surface tubes."

"I'm analysing the signals the serjeants' electronic warfare blocks are picking up," Oski said. "The Mosdva are trans-

mitting a lot of pulses, most of it's coming from Quantook-LOU. Fairly high-order encryption, as well."

"Who's he talking to?" Joshua asked.

"I don't think he is. It's short-range stuff, and there's no electronic activity in any of the tube systems. I think it's all being received by his bodyguard. I'm correlating their movements and his signals, and it looks like he's virtually remote-controlling them. The stuff they're sending back is completely different, probably sensor feeds so he can see what they're seeing."

"A regular little squad of drones," Ashly said. "I wonder if he doesn't trust them?"

"It's a bit late for us to start worrying about his status now," Joshua said. "Osiki, see if you can work out how to freeze up those bodyguards if the need arises."

"I'll try."

Joshua fixed their position twenty-five kilometres away from the sunside surface. Waiting was difficult for him. He really wanted to be down there with Quantook-LOU, seeing what was happening. That would put him in control and ready to respond immediately to whatever the situation threw at them. Just like he'd done at Ayacucho and Nyvan. The front line was the only place he could be sure things would be done right.

Yet if Ayacucho and Nyvan had taught him anything, it was that there was more to command than good piloting. He trusted his crew to handle the starship's systems well enough. Deploying the experts he had with him was an extension of that principal. That second time in Anthi-CL, when Quantook-LOU had become insistent, he'd known right away he shouldn't have been there in person. So now it was guilt rather than professionalism behind the decision to send the serjeants into the knot.

At least no one had protested that they should have been

sent as well. He rather suspected that the diskcity was getting to the others in the same way as it did to him.

They'd been holding station for fifteen minutes when Beaulieu's sensor monitoring programs alerted her that the sunscoop ship had altered its orbit. The massive fusion engines were firing, propelling it at a steady fiftieth of a gee. "It is now on an interception trajectory with us," Beaulieu told the bridge crew.

"Jesus, how long have we got?"

"Approximately seventy minutes."

Ione listened to Joshua's news about the sunscoop ship and told him: "All right, I'll ask Quantook-LOU."

They were in another of the dead tubes, the fifth so far, still churning up the dust as they swept through. Apart from the lack of air and fluid, they'd all seemed in reasonable condition. She could see no physical reason for their abandonment. Although at some point they'd certainly been stripped of all their ancillary equipment. Even a couple of the tube-end bulkheads had been salvaged, leaving gaping openings into the junctions.

She switched her communication block to the frequency the Mosdva were using. "Quantook-LOU, the captain has been in touch with me. He wants you to know that the sunscoop ship has changed direction and is now heading for the *Lady Macbeth*. Do you know anything of this?"

"I do not. The sunscoop belongs to the dominion of Danversi-YV. They are not allied to us on any level."

"Is it likely to pose a threat to our ship?"

"It does not carry any weapons. Their strategy will be to intimidate the *Lady Macbeth* into dealing with them, and to place their own group in this location in an attempt to block my progress. Do you have weapons capable of destroying it?"

"We are not sure of the effect our weapons would have. Captain Calvert does not wish to fire upon an unarmed ship."

“His views will change when the sunscoop’s fusion drive is pointing at the *Lady Macbeth*. Tell him that the dominion of Danversi-YV has suffered the loss of two sunscoops in the last fifteen years. They have been much weakened by this: their alliance has shrunk, diminishing their influence. They will be the first rim dominion to fail once I have the faster-than-light drive. That makes them the most desperate to obtain it for themselves.”

“Understood.”

The Mosdva glided out into a large junction chamber that had seven tubes radiating away from it.

“This could be interesting,” Ione told the others. “Judging by the position of two of these airlock hatches, the tubes behind them lead up into the knot. If they are tubes.”

“We have your location,” Liol replied. “You’re only a hundred and fifty metres from an inhabited surface tube.”

The Mosdva launched themselves from the bulkhead rim one after the other, heading unwaveringly for the first airlock hatch that led into the knot. They cut an oval of carbon-based composite out of the centre and went through.

“Looks like we’re avoiding the locals,” Ione said.

It was completely dark inside the tube. When the first serjeant squirmed through the hole its helmet sensors picked out six broad beams of ultraviolet light coming from the Mosdva up ahead. They were moving fast along the wall of the tube.

“I recognise this surface,” Ione said with as much excitement as her bitek neurones allowed her to generate.

The walls of the tube were made up from the same baked-sponge material that the Tyrathca had used in Tanjuntic-RI’s zero-gee sections. The serjeant’s armoured gauntlets could fit into the regular indentations, allowing them both to swarm up the tube after the Mosdva.

“No such thing as coincidence,” Joshua said.

“The airlock ahead is a different design,” Ione said. “Not like

those on Tanjuntic-RI, but not like the ones we've just come through, either."

The hatch at the centre of the bulkhead was a thick titanium square, with fat rim seals and piston-like hinges. It was three metres in diameter. Her infrared sensors showed it was a lot warmer than the tube walls.

The Mosdva had stopped at the bulkhead to apply small sensor patches to the metal. "The next section is in use," Quantook-LOU said. "I wish to avoid contact for now. We will go outside."

A patch of the ossified sponge was scraped off the wall with a power tool, revealing the glossy inner casing. They cut through it with a laser and slid out.

Ione switched her helmet sensors to infrared. They were deep inside the convoluted knot. She could see no order or pattern; tubes criss-crossed through space leaving small irregular gaps which were caged by thick struts, forming a bird's-nest filigree around her. Brilliant red threads revealed heat conduits running outside the tubes, while magnetic sensor imagery overlaid the translucent emerald lines of power cables.

"Plenty of activity here," Ione said. "But every tube is solid and opaque. Can't see in yet."

"What about where you're going?" Joshua asked. "Any ideas?"

"Not a chance. This is just too big a tangle to see more than a hundred metres in any direction."

Thick strips of the sponge material had been laid lengthways along each tube, allowing them to move about easily. The Mosdva started off with little fuss. Ione's guidance blocks told her they were moving still deeper into the knot.

After two hundred metres the clutter of tubes came to an abrupt end. The centre of the knot was a cavity over two kilometres broad. A cylinder eight hundred metres in diameter filled the centre, its hubs fixed to the surrounding tubes with heavy magnetic bearings, allowing it to rotate slowly. A band

of regular triangular ridges covered twenty per cent of the outer surface up at one end. Ione's infrared sensors showed the band glowing a soft uniform pink, much warmer than the rest of the shell. A radiator disposing of the cylinder's internal heat. Which meant the systems inside were functional.

"Well, well," she said. "Look at this. Somebody still enjoys a gravity field to live in." She scanned her sensors round. The cavity around the cylinder resembled a spaceport maintenance bay, gantry arms and support girders stuck out of the surrounding bulwark of tubing, threaded with conduits and hoses. They ended in sturdy clamp rings that sprouted long drill bits, inert and folded inwards like defunct sea anemones. Most were empty, though some of the clamps were gripping lumps of jet black rock. They'd been cut like diamonds, with hundreds of small sheer facets. There was no standard shape or size. One piece was so large it needed ten gantry arms to hold it in place, its contoured surface following the curve of the central cylinder. Most required only two or three clamps, while there were scraps that had been skewered by just a single drill bit. Units of machinery were clinging to the rock, so dark and cold they could have been complicated freak outcrops. Except for one, in the middle of the largest chunk, which glowed salmon pink with internal heat.

"A refinery of some kind," Ione guessed. "I think most of this rock is carbonaceous chondrite." As her sensor sweep continued, she picked out several dense magnetic fields. The equipment producing them was mounted on bulky platforms that encircled the cylinder. They looked like fusion drive tubes.

"Who lives here?" she asked Quantook-LOU. "It's the Tyrathca, isn't it?"

"This is Lalarin-MG. It is their designated location. I am displeased to find that they are still alive."

"But you hate them, they're your old slave masters. I thought you'd killed them off. That's what you implied."

"Those that remained at the end of the time of change

grouped together in their enclaves. They became difficult to dislodge. It was not worth challenging their defences. We excluded them from contact with the newformed dominions, and allowed them to decline in isolation. Only those that were the largest still exist.”

“That’s incredible,” Samuel said. “They’re like the grain of sand in an oyster; the Mosdva simply grew around them.”

“A very big grain,” Sarha said. “Take a close look at that cavity. I’ll bet you it was all asteroid rock when the diskcity was built, probably with a biosphere cavern hollowed out in the centre. They’ve had to refine it away over the millennia to supply themselves with fresh minerals, and the cylinder is most likely what the biosphere evolved into. They couldn’t expand like the Mosdva, so they just kept to the same size. We know they can keep that kind of society running indefinitely. Tanjuntic-RI was fully operational for the same length of time as this enclave. Except that one day they’re going to run out of rock to consume.”

“That fits what I can see, except for the rocket engines,” Ione said. “Why keep them functional when you need to expend every effort to maintain a highly artificial environment in adverse circumstances?”

“They might have been spaceship rockets originally,” Liol said. “Not any more. I think they were adapted into the defence system Quantook-LOU mentioned. Don’t forget, the Mosdva revolution happened when the diskcities were in their embryonic stage. The enclave asteroid would already be attached to the rest of the cluster at that time. If you use a fusion plume like a flame thrower, it would have caused havoc, completely broken apart the asteroids, destroyed the new inhabited tubes and thermal exchange mechanisms. The Tyrathca didn’t have anything to lose, but the Mosdva sure did. So both sides agreed to the isolation.”

“And the Tyrathca being unimaginative SOBs, kept their end of the threat in full working order all this time,” Ashly

said. "Fusion plumes could still do a lot of damage to a diskcity, even today."

"Except they're not all in full working order," Ione said. "I can see ten, of which only three have magnetic fields."

"Yes, but the Mosdva don't know that."

"They do now."

Quantook-LOU and the Mosdva bodyguard were on the move again, crawling along the tubes around the circumference of the cavity. Ione set off after them. "Looks like we're heading for the hub of the cylinder," she said. "He must be planning on going in to meet them."

"I'm beginning to respect old Quantook-LOU," Joshua said. "He's been pretty linear with us. Coming straight to a Tyrathca civilization is a good indication he genuinely wants to get the almanac for us."

"I wouldn't attribute his behaviour entirely to fair play," Syrinx said. "Our appearance gave him a simple choice. Go for the number one position, or see Anthi-CL be absorbed by someone else's unifying alliance. He doesn't want the almanac data, he needs it desperately."

"You never used to be this cynical."

"Not before I met you, no."

Joshua chuckled, wishing for the first time ever that he had an affinity bond. Not that he needed to check his own crew. Liol would be covering a grin, while Sarha would be casting a sly look his way and Dahybi would pretend it was all going way over his head.

"Trains are moving again," Beaulieu said. "The ELINTs are tracking five; they all started in the last ten minutes."

"So tell us why that's bad."

"They are all within a hundred and fifty kilometres of the Tyrathca enclave, and are heading towards it."

"Jesus! Wonderful. Ione, did you get that?"

"Confirmed. I'll tell Quantook-LOU, not that we can speed things along much at this point."

The serjeants were now climbing along a tube directly underneath the end of the cylinder, an uncomfortable position. The gap was gradually narrowing as they approached the hub, and the cylinder's monstrous inertia had become terribly apparent. Ione knew if she was fully human she'd be having constant memory recall of the day when she got her hand caught in her bicycle wheel (six years old, and she'd reached down to try and move a jammed brake block before Tranquillity could stop her). As it was, she could just appreciate the associative link.

"We will enter here," Quantook-LOU announced. The Mosdva stopped around an airlock hatch in a web junction. One of them placed an electronic module over the rosette keypad on the rim. After a moment, the module's green LEDs displayed a string of figures. They were tapped into the keypad, and the hatch locks disengaged, allowing it to swing down into the airlock chamber.

"We will go first," Quantook-LOU said.

Ione waited until the cycle had run, then both serjeants pushed down into the chamber. The inner hatch opened into the junction. Her suit sensors had to disengage filter programs to adapt to the light inside. It was white. She wondered how the Mosdva would cope with that—if they could actually see colour. Not that the question was high on her agenda.

The junction was a sphere thirty metres across, with seven hatchways set into it. Ten soldier-caste Tyrathca were standing around it at conflicting angles, their hoofs wedged deep into the sponge indentations, holding them perfectly still. They were pointing thick maser rifles at the Mosdva group.

Chittering and loud agitated whistles rang through the air as Quantook-LOU talked insistently to the single Tyrathca breeder who was standing among the soldiers. The distributor of resources had taken his suit helmet off.

"What are they?" the breeder asked, its hazel eyes had locked on the serjeants.

“Proof of what I say,” Quantook-LOU replied. “They are the creatures who have come from the other side of the nebula.”

“What Quantook-LOU says is true,” Ione said. “We are happy to meet you. I am Ione Saldana, one of the crew from the starship *Lady Macbeth*.”

Several of the soldiers rustled their antennae when she spoke. The breeder was silent for a moment.

“You speak as us, yet your shape is wrong,” it said. “You are not a caste we know. You are not a Mosdva either.”

“No, we are humans. We learned your language from the Tyrathca who came to our domain on the flightship Tanjuntic-RI. Do you know of it?”

“I do not. The memories of that age are no longer passed on.”

“Bloody hell!” Ione exclaimed over the general communication band. “They’ve junked their records.”

“It doesn’t mean that at all,” Parker said. “The Tyrathca pass useful memories down the generations via their chemical program glands. The details from fifteen thousand years ago are hardly likely to be relevant enough to be maintained in that fashion.”

“He’s right,” Joshua said. “We’re after their electronic files, not family legends.”

“I would like to mediate with the family that governs the electronics of Lalarin-MG,” Quantook-LOU said. “That is why we are here.”

“Tyrathca and Mosdva do not mediate,” the breeder said. “It is the separation agreement. You should not have come here. We do not come to your dominions. We maintain the separation agreement.”

“What about the humans?” Quantook-LOU said. “Should they be here? They are not a part of the separation agreement. The universe outside Tojolt-HI has changed for Mosdva and Tyrathca. A new agreement must be mediated. I can

do this. Allow me to mediate. All will benefit, Mosdva, Humans and Tyrathca.”

“You may mediate with Baulona-PWM,” the breeder said. “Two of your escort may accompany you, and the humans. Follow me.”

The tube which the breeder led them down was six metres in diameter, with a cable stretched along the centre supporting clusters of lights at regular intervals. All the Tyrathca walked along the walls as though they were in a gravity field. Their whip-like antennae were waving about with vigorous sweeping motions, like undersized wings. Ione realized the breeder’s antennae were much longer than those of the Tyrathca she was familiar with.

“We always believed them to be balance aids,” Parker said. “It would appear low gravity has encouraged their reuse.”

Her sensors swept over the breeder. It was about ten per cent smaller than Confederation breeders, although it appeared fatter. A smattering of the scales on its sienna-coloured hide had turned pale grey, and there were small lumps on its leg muscles. Its breathing seemed to be mildly erratic, almost as if it was wheezing. When she checked the soldiers, they had similar blemishes. Two of them were also running a temperature.

“They haven’t come through the isolation as well as the Mosdva,” she said.

“Small population base,” Ashly said. “They’ll be running into inbreeding problems. Couple that with the kind of medical difficulties which you get from exposure to freefall, and they’ll probably have a high number of invalid eggs. Considering they don’t have a research base to examine and counter the problems, they’ve done well to survive this long.”

The last tube opened out into the rotating airlock. It was a layout remarkably similar to the one in Tanjuntic-RI, a long cylindrical chamber with three large airlock hatches at the far end leading into Lalarin-MG and a pressure seal halfway

along. A low rumbling sound vibrated through the atmosphere as the giant cylinder revolved.

The flightship design was carried over on the other side of the airlock. A waiting freight lift was flanked by archways leading directly onto spiral ramps.

Everyone crowded into the lift together, and it started to descend. Gravity built slowly, causing trouble for the three Mosdva. They had to remove their spacesuits entirely to free their hindlimbs, allowing them to stand on them and their midlimbs. It wasn't easy; their club-like hind feet were evolving away from dexterity, while their midhands were almost too delicate to carry half of their body weight. When the lift reached the base of the cylinder, gravity was fifteen per cent Earth standard. The Tyrathca were perfectly comfortable with it; Ione reprogrammed her suit actuators to take it into account, making sure the serjeants didn't go power leaping and compensating for the coriolis factor. Quantook-LOU staggered slowly, moving his limbs with painful unfamiliarity. His two bodyguards were a little better off; they had prosthetic midlimbs to take the weight. Servo mechanisms whined loudly with their every movement. Ione wondered what kind of strain weight was putting on their organs and heart.

The lift doors opened, revealing the interior of the cylinder. Ione had to bring more filters on line to compensate for the glare.

Lalarin-MG was a single open space enclosed by a cyclorama of aluminium alloy. The floors were fully occupied by rank after rank of buildings, the standard tapering towers of all Tyrathca settlements. Here, though, they were built out of some jet-black composite; thick pipes and knobbly segments of equipment protruded from the walls, as if they were machines rather than residences. Countering that impression were lush vines with broad, droopy emerald and lavender leaves that scaled the walls, sprouting rings of

large hemispherical turquoise and gold flowers. Thin strata of mist drifted up from the grid of streets, merging together into an unwavering pearl-grey haze as they curved their way towards the axis. Every rooftop supported a battery of brilliant lights which shone directly upwards, their broad beams intersecting within the haze and diffusing slightly before they illuminated the section of floor directly overhead.

The cylinder's sheer endwalls were simple circles of moss, broken into an elaborate tessellation pattern by structural reinforcement ribs and interconnecting spars. A slender axial gantry ran the length of the cylinder. With one interruption.

"Oh my God," Ione said. "Can everybody see that?"

"We see it," Syrinx said.

In the absolute centre of the cylinder, suspended from its tips by the axial gantry, was an effigy of the Sleeping God. From tip to tip it measured two hundred metres, giving it a diameter of a hundred and fifty at the flared central disk. Originally the surface had been given a polished metallic sheen, now it was streaked by thick runnels of algae, with tufts of sickly brown fungi sprouting from pocks and cracks. Both spires were mottled by encrustations of lichen.

The Mosdva paid it no attention as they walked painfully along the narrow streets between the towers. Humidity was high. Every surface was beaded with condensation, horizontal ledges and pipes dripped constantly. The eternal background pattering sounded like a gentle rainfall.

Tyrathca breeders (always in pairs, Ione noticed) crowded every intersection along the street, chattering among themselves as the procession made their way into the cylinder. There were few vassal castes in evidence, and most of those were soldiers. Farmers tended the curtains of vines with slow arthritic movements, training new shoots up the trellis and picking the ripe clusters of dark purple fruit.

As they walked slowly through the buildings, her impres-

sions of Lalarin-MG clarified. The interior of the cylinder had the same pattern of lethargic decay that was present across all of Tojolt-HI. Some buildings were in good repair; one or two were actually new, their siege of vines barely reaching up to the first floor windows. But for every new one, four were disused. Even the equipment on the walls of the occupied towers was allowed to fail; magnetic and infrared sensors revealed the casings were inert, sharing the ambient temperature.

“They’re on the border between stability and stagnation,” she said. “And edging over the wrong way.”

“It’s the biological aspect,” Ashly said. “It has to be. It’s the one negative factor at work here. They need to interbreed, inject some vitality back into the family bloodlines. They’ll die out for sure otherwise.”

They finally came out on an annular plaza directly underneath the Sleeping God effigy. It was paved with slabs of aluminium coated with a rough layer of quartz for traction. Overhead, long ribbons of algae dangled from the effigy’s rim, as if it had been given a raggedy skirt. Water showered down from the fringes, falling in a wide curve to sprinkle the whole plaza.

Tyrathca breeders were lined up along the edge of the aluminium slabs, sheltered from the drizzle. They were sitting on their hindquarters, antennae rising high from the shaggy manes running down their spines.

The soldier caste guard all halted at a single piping command from the breeder. Quantook-LOU immediately sank down so his lower belly was resting on the slabs. His breathing was coming very fast.

A breeder rose from the row of Tyrathca and came over to stand in front of the serjeants. An old one, Ione guessed. Its hide was covered in white and grey patches, rheumy fluid leaked from its eyes, and it seemed to have some trouble focusing.

“I am Baulona-PWM, my family regulates electronics throughout Lalarin-MG. The Mosdva I know of. You I do not.”

“We are humans.”

“The Mosdva distributor of resources claims you have travelled from the other side of the nebula to visit Mastrit-PJ.”

“We have.”

“Did the Sleeping God send you?”

“It did not.”

Baulona-PWM tilted its head back against the soft warm rain, and let out a soft keening. The other Tyrathca around the plaza followed suit. A mournful chorus of dismay.

“Do humans know of the Sleeping God?”

“We do.”

“Have you seen it?”

“No.”

“We have called to the Sleeping God for its aid since before the separation agreement. We called when the Mosdva began the slaughter of our clans. We called when we were herded into our enclaves. We have called to it continuously for every moment since. There is always one of us here to call. The clan riding in Swantic-LI said it sees the universe. They said it is our ally. Why then does it not answer?”

“The Sleeping God is a long way from Mastrit-PJ. It might take a considerable time for it to arrive to help.”

“You bring us nothing new.”

Quantook-LOU straightened his midlimbs, rising off his belly to look from the serjeants to Baulona-PWM. “What is this Sleeping God?”

The old breeder hooted loudly. “One day you will know. The Sleeping God is our ally, not yours.”

“I am here to make new allies. Humans have changed our agreements. They have come here in a ship that travels faster than light.”

Baulona-PWM’s head pushed forward to within ten cen-

timetres of the first serjeant. “The Sleeping God knows how to travel faster than light. How can you do this without its help?”

Ione used the general communication band to say: “I think we should avoid anything that sounds like blasphemy at this point. Suggestions?”

“Tell them it was a gift from our God,” Syrinx said. “They can hardly argue with that.”

“I don’t want to put any pressure on,” Joshua said, “but we haven’t got much time until that sunscoop ship rendezvous. And those trains are still closing on you. If it looks like Quantook-LOU can’t swing a deal, then we’ll just have to deal with the Tyrathca directly.”

“Understood,” Ione said. “The faster-than-light drive was given to us by our God,” she told the old Tyrathca breeder.

“You have a God?”

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“We don’t know. It visited our world a long time ago, and hasn’t yet returned.”

“The humans will give me the faster-than-light drive,” Quantook-LOU said. “It will provide the Mosdva dominions with fresh resources. We will build new diskcities. We will be able to leave Mastrit-PJ as the Tyrathca did.”

“Give us the drive,” Baulona-PWM said.

“The drive is mine,” Quantook-LOU said. “If you want it, you will mediate with me. That is why I have come to you.”

“What do you want from Lalarin-MG?”

“All data and records on the Tyrathca flightships.”

Baulona-PWM hooted sharply. The soldiers shuffled round, agitated.

“You would know where our new worlds are,” Baulona-PWM said. “You would destroy all Tyrathca. We know the Mosdva. We never forget.”

“Neither do we,” Quantook-LOU hooted back. “That is

why we must mediate now. If not, then Mosdva and Tyrathca will wage war again. You know this. Humans say they will help neither of us unless we have a new arrangement that will prevent war.”

“Smart argument,” Ione said to the others. “I think I can see where he’s taking it.”

“What is the new arrangement?” Baulona-PWM asked.

“The humans do not want war in this part of the galaxy. If we are to have the faster-than-light drive, then Mosdva must not use it to fly to stars with Tyrathca worlds. We must know where they are to avoid this.”

“That’s the condition we make for giving you the drive,” Ione said. “We know of your history, and the conflict between you. We will not permit that conflict to begin again and engulf other species. There is room in this galaxy for the Mosdva and Tyrathca to exist peacefully. It will be like the separation agreement you have here, but on a much larger scale.”

“We have our weapons to make the Mosdva obey the separation agreement here,” responded Baulona-PWM. “What will make them obey after you give them the faster-than-light drive, and they know where our new planets are? With this drive they will leave Tojolt-HI. Our weapons will mean nothing. They will destroy all Tyrathca at Mastrit-PJ. They will destroy all Tyrathca new worlds.”

“You destroy,” Quantook-LOU said. “We build.”

“Mosdva do not keep agreements. You send your soldiers against Lalarin-MG. They are here now. We will use our weapons against all of Tojolt-HI.”

“Can you confirm this?” Ione asked the *Lady Mac*’s crew.

“We’re picking up some Mosdva movement on the dark-side,” Joshua said. “Looks like they’re infiltrating the tubes around the edge of the knot.”

“How many?”

“Several hundred. It’s a large infrared signature.”

“Are these the ones from the trains?”

“No. The first train won’t be there for another fifteen to twenty minutes.”

“They are not Anthi-CL soldiers,” Quantook-LOU said. “They are from the dominions who would use the human’s drive for themselves. I will mediate with Tyrathca, I will make agreements with Tyrathca. They will not. Give me the information. Once I have the drive, they will have to retreat from Lalarin-MG.”

“Make them retreat now,” Baulona-PWM said. “When they are gone, I will mediate with you.”

“I cannot mediate with the other dominions until I have the information.”

“I will not give you the information until you mediate.”

On the *Lady Mac*’s bridge Joshua banged a fist into his couch cushioning. “Jesus! What is wrong with these people.”

“Twenty thousand years of hatred and strife has become hereditary in both of them,” Samuel said. “They can’t trust each other, not any more.”

“Then we’re going to have to break the deadlock.”

“We’re about out of time on that front,” Liol said. “The sunscoop has just reduced its deceleration thrust.”

“Oh shit,” Joshua mumbled. He knew what that meant. The flight computer datavised the huge ship’s new trajectory into his neural nanonics. With a reduced thrust the sunscoop wouldn’t have nullified its velocity in time to stop beside the *Lady Mac*, twenty kilometres above Tojolt-HI’s sunside. According to the new vector, it would end up one kilometre above the darkside of the knot which contained Lalarin-MG. And as it was approaching the knot drive first, its fusion plume would slice clean through the Tyrathca enclave, vaporizing the entire structure. It was also due to pass uncomfortably close to *Lady Mac*.

“I think we’re going to have to take a more active interest,” Joshua told the bridge crew. He aligned *Lady Mac*’s

main dish on the sunscoop. "Attention sunscoop ship. Your present course will result in the destruction of Lalarin-MG. Members of my crew are currently inside this dominion. Increase your deceleration thrust immediately."

"Josh, it's over four kilometres across," Liol said. "That's not a ship, it's a mountain. Even if you nuke it, the debris will still rip this section of Tojolt-HI to pieces. In fact you'll probably do more damage that way."

"I thought I'd told you how I dealt with Neeves and Sipika in the Ruin Ring."

"Oh," Ashly said dryly. "You mean that was a true story?"

Joshua gave the pilot a wounded look.

"No response from the sunscoop," Liol said. "And no change in thrust. They're still going to burn through the knot in eight minutes."

"Okay, if that's how they want it. Combat stations, please."

Lady Mac's thermo dump panels folded down into their hull recesses. Joshua ignited the main fusion tubes, and closed on the sunscoop at one and a half gees.

"This is going to be one very fast flyby," he said. "Sarha, you have primary fire control."

"Aye, Captain," she acknowledged. Her neuroiconic display was already showing her the sunscoop: a cluster of incandescent globes sitting on top of an even brighter flame of plasma that stretched out over thirty kilometres before dissolving into a hazy tip of blue ions. It descended relentlessly towards the vivid copper sunside like some gigantic insect stinger.

The flight computer datavised a stream of targeting data, overlaying her image with a bright purple grid. Under her guidance, it split into five segments and wrapped each piece around one of the incandescent globes. She upped the power level from the main tokamak generators and activated the maser cannon.

Lady Mac swept past the sunscoop in a shallow curving

trajectory, keeping a constant twenty kilometres away from the fusion plume. Her masers fired at the five storage globes, each beam piercing clean through the radiant thermal dissipation material. Fissures of darkness streaked out from the impact points. The beams began to chew round in a tight spiral, widening the holes. Whatever the casing material was, its physical resistance to the microwaves was minimal. Ninety per cent of their energy went directly into the massive reservoir of hydrocarbon fluid stored inside. It started boiling immediately, belching out clouds of hot vapour. Pressure began to build up inside the globes, sending vast jets of blue-grey gas roaring out through the gashes.

"Delta-V change," Liol reported. "The punctures are creating thrust. Christ, Josh, it works."

"Thank you. Sarha, keep those lasers centred, I want to heat as much fluid as we can. Stand by, reducing thrust. Let's try and avoid coming back for a second pass."

"Captain," Beaulieu called. "The sunscoop drive is switching off."

Lady Mac's combat sensor clusters tracked the sunscoop, showing Joshua the fusion plume dwindling away. "Shit, did we do that?"

"Negative," Sarha said. "My shooting's not that bad. Drive systems are intact."

"Liol, give me a trajectory update please."

"They've got a smart captain. Without the fusion drive, the gas plumes aren't enough to kill their velocity. They're going to hit the knot. Impact in four minutes."

"Damn it." Joshua immediately began plotting a new vector, taking *Lady Mac* round for another pass. The starship began accelerating at four gees. He had to be careful their own plume didn't wash across the sunside webs.

"Sunscoop gas vents are reducing," Ashly said. "The fluid must be cooling again. That thermal dissipation mechanism

of theirs is bloody good, Joshua. It's worth giving them the ZTT drive in exchange for that."

Lady Mac was racing back towards the sunscoop. Sarha fired the masers again, to be rewarded by the sight of the gas jets thickening. The glare of the storage globes fluoresced them a blazing silver-white as they emerged from the holes; then they shaded down along their length until their diffuse tails shimmered cerise.

Two lasers struck *Lady Macbeth*, fired from somewhere on the diskcity's sunside. Joshua rolled the ship fast as their thermal protection foam flash-evaporated, scoring long black lines across the fuselage.

"No penetration," Beaulieu called. "We can handle this energy level for eight minutes. Thermal reservoirs will be saturated after that."

"Acknowledged." Joshua accelerated the starship at eight gees, heading back down to the sunside surface. Everyone tensed against the crushing gravity as the sensors showed them the red and gold corrugations hurtling towards them. *Lady Mac* flattened out, flying parallel to the diskcity, sixty metres from the tops of the web tubes. Her fusion drive cut out, leaving them in freefall.

"Lasers lost us," Beaulieu said. "They can't track us at this altitude."

Behind them the sunscoop continued on its approach towards the knot. The five storage globes were glaring furiously as they tried to throw off the energy imparted by *Lady Mac*'s masers during the second pass. Success was measured by the way the gas jets were slowly shrinking.

"It's going to be close," Liol said. "But I think we've done it."

Joshua followed the flight computer's plot. Watching the sunscoop's relative velocity winding down, comparing the rate against the declining gas vents. Flakes of grey slush had started to clot the ever-reducing gas jets. But it was going to

work, he told himself. The figures were tight, but the ship would reach zero relative velocity sixty kilometres above the diskcity.

Datavised alarms suddenly glared across his neuroiconic display. *Lady Mac* was under attack again. Energy impacts bloomed against the fuselage, ablating patches of foam in spurts of soot.

“Lasers again,” Beaulieu said. “They can’t stay on us for more than two or three seconds at a time, but there’s a lot of them. They’re going for a coordinated saturation. Strikes are almost constant.”

“Quantook-LOU warned us the dominions would try to stop us leaving before we handed over the data,” Samuel said. “They must think that’s what we’re doing.”

Joshua checked their vector. At their current velocity they’d fly over the rim in another hundred seconds. The course was taking them a long way round from Anthi-CL. He datavised the flight computer for a tactical analysis. “The old girl can handle this level of fire. We don’t need to jump clean yet.”

Lady Mac’s sensors were still tracking the sunscoop ship. It was sixty-five kilometres away from the sunside, with its approach velocity down to ten metres per second. The five jets from its storage globes were still active, though the rents weren’t squirting gas any more. It was mainly liquid and slush pouring out now. At sixty-three kilometres, its velocity was two metres a second.

The vector reversed at sixty-one kilometres. For a moment the sunscoop was stationary, then it began to creep away from the diskcity again at an almost unmeasurable velocity. By now the flow from the storage globes was reduced to a splutter of mushy fluid dribbling away into space.

Its fusion drive ignited.

Joshua groaned in dismay as *Lady Mac*’s flight computer translated the sensor image into pure data, providing him with the figures for the plasma’s temperature, luminosity,

and flow rate. This time the sunscoop was using its full thrust. The tip of the plume seared its way downwards as the giant ship began to accelerate away. There was never going to be time for the separation distance to increase beyond the range of the plasma spear.

The drive flame hammered against the crown of the knot, instantly vaporizing every tube and foil sheet it touched. A blast wave of superheated gas roared out through the tangle of tubes inside the knot, rupturing web junctions and sending shredded tube fragments whirling deeper into the tangle. Slow structural ripples flexed their way across the sunside, radiating sinuously out from the knot. Tubes cracked open around junctions and reinforcement ribs. Hundreds of fan-shaped fountains of circulation fluid and atmospheric gas howled out into space across an area fifty kilometres across, producing a stormy pellicle of crimson mist which hung over the surface. Its centre was energized to azure blue by the fusion plume from the retreating sunscoop, expanding in a perfectly symmetrical ring, swelling and fading as it raced away across the sunside.

The devastated Mosdva dominions around the knot retaliated. Every laser that remained functional was fired at the sunscoop. Small petals of darkness opened across the glaring storage globes, distending. Sprays of molten metal drifted out from the drive nozzle, followed by boiling globules of fluid. The plasma flame began to waver as it was contaminated by streaks of impurity burning emerald and turquoise.

The thick shadows slithering over the storage globes merged together into funereal blemishes until the light was completely extinguished. They shattered in unison, belching out thick wobbling rivers of hydrocarbon fluid. It began to evaporate under the red giant's unrelenting radiance, producing a surge of oily fog. A huge patch of shade crept over the sunside, defacing its usual gleaming hue to a dusky claret.

"Christ," Liol gasped. "Did we do that?"

“No,” Dahybi said. “But they’ll blame us anyway.”

“Ione?” Joshua asked. “Are you all right?” He concentrated on the general communication link. The view through the serjeants’ sensors was shaking badly. The effect of the sunscoop’s plasma strike against Lalarin-MG was the same as an earthquake. Tyrathca breeders were scattered across the plaza, struggling to regain their footing. The soldiers had closed in on the three Mosdva, prodding them with their big maser rifles.

“We’re okay,” she said. The serjeants began to scan round. “No sign of structural breakdown. The cylinder is still intact and rotating.”

“That’s something.”

Above the serjeants, the Sleeping God’s effigy was moving in a circular bouncing motion, completely out of phase with the cylinder’s rotation. The axial gantry securing it bent and stretched with frighteningly loud stress creaks.

Baulona-PWM walked unsteadily over to Quantook-LOU. The distributor of resources was suffering in the aftermath of the attack, unable to lift himself up from the juddering plaza.

“Mosdva break their separation agreement,” Baulona-PWM said. “You damage Lalarin-MG. You kill our vassal castes. We will fire our weapons at Tojolt-HI. You will be exterminated.”

“Wait,” Ione said. “You cannot exterminate Quantook-LOU. He is the only Mosdva willing to deal with you. Without him there will be war. Billions of Tyrathca will die because you exterminated him. Their deaths will be your fault.”

“They will not die if you leave Mastrit-PJ. Do not give the Mosdva your faster-than-light drive. The Tyrathca here will survive. The Sleeping God will come to aid us.”

“The Mosdva will be given our drive. That is why we have come, to bring balance to the galaxy. The Tyrathca from Tanjuntic-RI were given the drive.”

“Tyrathca have faster-than-light drive?” Baulona-PWM demanded.

“Some of your worlds have it, yes. The technology is spreading slowly. Outside Mastrit-PJ your race is becoming powerful. Humans and our xenoc allies will not permit that to happen. There must be balance and harmony between races, only then can there be peace.”

Quantook-LOU heaved down a breath, but still made no effort to rise. “Humans are stupid,” he said. “Why did you give Tyrathca the drive? Can you not see what they are?”

“We know what both of you are. That is why we are here. Now you must choose. Will you mediate a new agreement? Will you pursue peace?”

“What will you do if we do not mediate an agreement?” Quantook-LOU asked.

“The balance will be enforced by us,” Ione said. “We will not tolerate war.”

“The Mosdva will mediate an agreement for peace,” Quantook-LOU said. “If the Tyrathca of Lalarin-MG do not wish to mediate with me, I will find an enclave that will.”

“Baulona-PWM, what is your answer?” Ione asked.

“I will mediate,” the breeder said. “But the Mosdva still attack Lalarin-MG. They must stop. There can be no agreement if we are dead.”

“Quantook-LOU, can you get the other dominions to withdraw?”

“I cannot. I must have the drive first, and the *Lady Macbeth* must leave. Only then will they be forced to ally with me.”

“You can’t have the drive until we have the Tyrathca information,” Ione said. “Baulona-PWM, how long will it take you to recover the information necessary for the agreement?”

“I am uncertain where it is stored. Our old memory centres are no longer enabled. We would have to reactivate them.”

“Wonderful,” Joshua exclaimed. “Not even total catastro-

phe can loosen these bollockheads up. Beaulieu, what's happened to the trains?"

"Three of them are still en route, Captain. And the surviving Mosdva in spacesuits are still infiltrating the knot on the darkside."

"Jesus, we have to buy Ione some time."

"We could go back to the knot and use our firepower to defend Lalarin-MG from the Mosdva troops," Liol suggested.

"No." Joshua rejected it automatically. It would be messy, he knew. *Lady Mac* might be the most powerful ship in the system, but she wasn't invincible. They needed some way of isolating Lalarin-MG while the Tyrathca breeders found the almanac. And maybe Quantook-LOU really could negotiate some kind of peace settlement. Nice bonus.

He let the factors stream through his mind. With that arrogant Calvert certainty that they had to act on Lalarin-MG, it was just a matter of running through options. Thinking what he had available to work with.

Joshua started chuckling wickedly.

Ashly closed his eyes in prayer. "Oh shit."

"Syrinx," Joshua called. "I need *Oenone* down here."

One of the serjeants bent down beside Quantook-LOU. The distributor of resources had rolled partially on his side, which was why he couldn't right himself. His bodyweight was trapping his midlimb. Ione pushed his flank as hard as she dared; too much pressure would snap his bones.

"I thank you," Quantook-LOU said as his midlimb wriggled free. "You would make an excellent Mosdva. Even I am adrift among your mediating strategies."

"A compliment indeed. My prime requirement, however, remains unchanged."

"I understand. I will play my part."

"Good."

"In the expectation of reward."

“You will collect the drive. Humans keep their word.”

“A welcome assurance at this point.”

The other serjeant had gone to talk to Baulona-PWM. They stood in the middle of the plaza, with the dirty rain from the effigy falling around them. The drops were less frequent, but larger, as the effigy continued its slow gyrations. “My ship tells me that the Mosdva troops are invading the area around this cylinder,” Ione said. “Can your soldiers hold them off long enough for you to retrieve the information?”

“How do you know this? We can detect no communication with your ship.”

“It is a method you are not familiar with. Now, can you hold them off?”

“We have no soldiers left outside Lalarin-MG. All is wrecked. Our food is grown in the tubes. There is no air, no fluid. Our communication links are failing. Our fusion weapons are disabled. Does your ship have weapons which can help us?”

“Not weapons, but we can certainly help. I will need your agreement to act as the mediator between you and Quantook-LOU.”

“Why?”

“If you supply me with the information which makes the agreement between Tyrathca and Mosdva possible, I may be able to offer all the Tyrathca of Lalarin-MG passage to one of the new Tyrathca worlds. It will not be today, but after we return to our home we can send larger ships to collect you. They could be here in three to four weeks.”

“We will be dead within one hour. Mosdva will come to break open Lalarin-MG’s shell.”

“My ship can move Lalarin-MG away from Tojolt-HI. The Mosdva will no longer be able to reach it. This will give you time to retrieve the information and mediate an agreement with Quantook-LOU.”

“You can move Lalarin-MG?”

“Yes.”

“Once we leave the shadow of Tojolt-III, we will be unable to get rid of the sun’s heat. Our radiator bands are only sufficient to rid us of the heat we produce inside.”

“Mediating the agreement won’t take that long. You will find and supply the astronomical information to me. When I am satisfied it is correct, I will release the drive to Quantook-LOU and leave. All hostilities will then cease and the agreement will become active. You can travel back to another enclave to wait for our ships to collect you.”

“I agree to this.”

Joshua varied *Lady Mac*’s acceleration at random as they flew back to the wrecked knot, making targeting difficult.

“Nobody’s shooting at us,” Liol said. It was almost a complaint. Heavy fire might have made Joshua rethink this whole idea. Then again, part of him was looking forward to this with disgraceful childish glee. As he suspected his younger brother was, as well. The rest of the crew treated the notion with an air of tolerant amusement. And Ione was doing a good job talking rings around the xenocs.

He had to admit, everything was falling into place.

“That’s because we’re going the wrong way to be shot at,” Monica said. “We’re coming back to them. It’s leaving they object to.”

“I wonder what they’ll make of this, then,” Joshua said.

Lady Mac glided over the edge of the knot. Virtually all of the foil sheets had been torn away from its sunside slopes, letting the red sunlight illuminate the snarl of dark tubes which made up the interior. Space around the knot was heavy with particles, crystals and scraps of foil reflecting the sunlight in a blossom of crimson scintillations. The sun-scoop’s plasma torch had blown out a huge crater at the crest of the knot. Three hundred metres in diameter, its walls were

a stipple of fractured tubes with melted ends. They were still glowing coral red from the immense thermal barrage.

"I'm taking us in," Joshua said. "Beaulieu, start saturating the knot."

"Aye, Captain."

The cosmonik switched the maser cannons to wide-angle dispersal and began hosing the microwave energy around inside the crater. It wasn't powerful enough to damage the structure any further, but it would be lethal to any of the Mosdva creeping round inside the knot.

Joshua rolled *Lady Mac* and started to edge her down into the crater. He used the forward lasers to slice through the tubes and wreckage at the bottom. Sections began to drift free, vapour from their molten ends blowing them away gently. Chemical verniers fired around the starship's equator, moving it deeper into the crater.

Oenone slipped out of its wormhole terminus thirty kilometres above the knot's darkside. The Edenists in the life-support toroid were all borrowing its sensor blisters, looking out in admiration at the monumental diskcity. Syrinx shared a smile with Ruben, their minds cherishing the vista together. Little bursts of excitement wafted around the mental embrace which pervaded the bridge as new facets of the xenoc construction were noticed and cherished. None of the ELINT coverage compared to actually being here.

The tall pinnacles of thermal radiators glowed a steady orange in the voidhawk's senses. It could feel the broad fans of heat they gave off, slucing away through space towards the distant nebula. In the visual spectrum, Tojolt-HI was almost black. The exception came from the area where the sunscoop had attacked. Foil sheets had either been torn free or disintegrated, allowing sharp beams of intense red light to steal through the cluttered webs.

If Wing-Tsit Chong and the therapists could see me now, Syrinx said contentedly.

They don't need to, Ruben said. They know they did their job properly.

Yes, but it still galled when they said it. Just a timid tourist, indeed!

I am glad we came, *Oenone* said. Everything here is fresh, but old at the same time. I feel Tojolt-HI has a dependability about it.

I know what you mean, she told the enchanted void-hawk. Anything that has such a long past must surely have an equally long future ahead of it.

It did have until we arrived, Ruben said.

You're wrong. The Mosdva can't abandon it, nor any of the others. Ashly is right, ZTT won't give them that option. But maybe we'll see change. Progress will begin again. I prefer to think of that as being our legacy. And who knows what they will achieve with fresh resources and new technologies.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

You're right. The briefest glimmer of regret appeared amid her thoughts.

I'm picking up considerable radar activity above this side of the diskcity, Edwin said. I think our countermeasures are deflecting them.

Thank you, Syrinx said. Nothing we can do about visual acquisition, I'm afraid. And we're silhouetted against the nebula for all Tojolt-HI to see. Serina, have you acquired the trains?

Got them.

Cut the rails.

Five lasers stabbed out from the weapons pods clamped in *Oenone's* lower hull groove. They slashed through the rail tracks meandering across the darkside's huge thermal radia-

tors. Serina waited until the trains had halted, then used the lasers to chop the rail behind them.

Immobilised, she said. **They can't invade Lalarin-MG now.**

They'd be pretty stupid to try, Edwin said. **Our electronic sensors are picking up the *Lady Macbeth's* microwave emissions from here. They're powerful enough to leak through the knot.**

Let's go give him a hand, Syrinx told *Oenone*.

The voidhawk darted in towards the diskcity. They came to rest directly over the knot. *Oenone's* distortion field undulated through the damaged tubes and struts, allowing the Edenists to examine its anatomy. The remaining scraps of asteroid rock in the knot's central cavern were dark zones, their mass exerting a minuscule gravity field against space time. Next to them, the cylinder rotated slowly, its thin shell nothing more than a murky shadow to the voidhawk's perception. Power circuits formed a grid of fuzzy violet lines permeating the whole edifice as the electron flows emitted their unique signature. The greatest concentration of energy was swirling around the magnetic bearings at each hub. Small instabilities flickered within the translucent folds, tarnishing the emissions. Barely fifty metres past the far end of the cylinder, *Lady Macbeth* appeared as a bright, dense twist in space-time.

"Got it, Joshua," Syrinx said over the general communication link. "The cylinder masses approximately one-point-one-three million tonnes."

"Excellent. That's no problem. With the antimatter drive, *Lady Mac* can hit forty gees, and we mass just over five thousand tonnes. That should give us nearly a fifth of a gee thrust."

"All right, we'll start cutting."

Ruben, Oxley, and Serina all issued instructions to the bitek processors governing the weapons pods. Eighteen

lasers fired from the voidhawk's lower fuselage, and under the crew's directions began cutting through the tubes at the top of the knot.

Lady Mac's sensors could now focus on Lalarin-MG itself. Her lasers had scythed their way through the tangle of tubes and struts, clearing a broad passage which Joshua had steered the starship along. Hot segments of tube twirled away into the main cavity, bouncing against the metallic cylinder shell and the black lumps of rock. Light was filtering in for the first time in a hundred centuries. Trickle of red sunlight slipped past *Lady Mac*'s fuselage, complemented by sizzling scarlet flashes of the lasers.

"How's it going in there, Ione?" Joshua asked.

"We're ready. Rotating airlocks are closed and sealed. I even got Baulona-PWM to find some padding for the Mosdva to lie on."

"Okay, stand by." The sensors were showing him the cylinder's hub with its big circular bearing dead ahead. He cut the last tube free, exposing the airlock chamber, and fired the ion thrusters to spin *Lady Mac*, matching her rotation to the cylinder. The starship's forward fuselage section moved into the bearing, crushing the jagged remnants of the tube. "Sarha?"

"I've got the molecular binding force generators on maximum."

"Take the CAB safety limiters off line. Pump them higher. I want all the strength we've got in the stress structure."

"You've got it."

"We've cut this end free," Syrinx said. "You're clear."

"Okay everyone, stand by." Joshua fired the fusion drives, keeping their thrust to an easy one gee. *Lady Mac* pressed forward, compressing the remnants of the airlock chamber in towards the cylinder shell. The rim of the bearing pierced

the starship's protective foam until it was touching the fuselage.

"We're solid," Liol declared.

Joshua increased the fusion drive thrust. Three strands of blue-white plasma stabbed back out through the crater, twining together. Tubes and struts facing the ultraheated torrent of ions began to boil furiously, sending out twisters of gas.

"Stress structure's holding," Sarha said. The sound of the drive tubes was vibrating through the life support capsules, a muffled drone. She'd never heard that before.

"It's moving," Beaulieu called out. "Accelerating at four per cent of a gee."

"Okay, here we go," Joshua said. He activated the anti-matter drive.

Hydrogen and anti-hydrogen collided and obliterated each other within the engine's complex focusing field. A shaft of pure energy burst into existence behind the starship, as if a flaw in space-time had cracked open. Two hundred thousand tonnes of thrust started to push Lalarin-MG out of its rapidly dissolving chrysalis.

"I think we might have something," Etchells said.

Kiera looked up from the pizza slice she was munching through. A couple of the console displays were showing elongated stars being lassoed by turquoise nets, columns of scarlet figures scrolling past too fast to be read. So far all the hellhawk had found was some radar-type pulses coming from (presumably) stations orbiting the huge star. They gave nothing away, other than the fact they weren't Confederation. Kiera and Etchells both wanted to see if anything else existed before they started investigating.

"What have you seen?" she asked.

"Take a look for yourself."

The gauzy iridescent clouds of the nebula slid across the

bridge's main port as the hellhawk swung round. Bright crimson light shone in as it faced the red giant again.

Kiera dropped her pizza back into the therm box and squinted against the glare. Right in the middle of the port was a dazzling white spark. As she watched, it grew longer and longer.

"What is that?"

"An antimatter drive."

She smiled grimly "It must be the Confederation Navy ship."

"Possibly. If it is, there's something wrong. An antimatter drive should accelerate a ship at over thirty-five gees. Whatever's producing that drive flare is barely moving."

"We'd better take a look then. How far away are they?"

"Roughly a hundred million kilometres."

"But it's so bright."

"Nobody really appreciates how powerful antimatter actually is until they encounter it first hand. Ask the ex-residents of Trafalgar."

Kiera gave the apparition a respectful look, then went over to the weapons console. She started arming the combat wasps. "Let's go."

Joshua switched all the starship's drives off as soon as Lalarin-MG cleared the crest of the knot. The flight computer had to tell him where that was. Tojolt-HI's structure had simply melted away from the antimatter drive, leaving a hole over eight kilometres wide where the knot had been. The fringes glowed cerise, extending bent tendrils of molten metal. Only the largest lump of asteroid rock had survived intact, although it was down to a quarter of its original size. It tumbled in towards the photosphere, its surface baked to a cauldron of bubbling tar, spewing out a guttering tail of petrochemical fog.

The red giant shone through the huge circular rent in the

diskcity, illuminating the end of the cylinder and a tapering slice of the shell as if a flame was playing up the side. *Lady Mac*'s ion thrusters fired, backing her out of the crushed bearing ring. The hub had bowed inward under the enormous force she'd exerted, but the rib spars had held. Now they were retreating from the diskcity at a leisurely thirty metres per second.

"And they're still not shooting at us," Liol said.

"I should hope not," Dahybi retorted. "After that little display of power they'll think twice about antagonising us again."

"Look how much damage we've done," Ashly said. "I'm sorry, but this is one accomplishment which doesn't make me very proud."

"This section of Tojolt-HI was mostly dead," Liol said. "And the sunscoop had already destroyed the tubes which still had viable life support functions."

"Ashly's right," Joshua said. "All we've done is react to events. We're in control of very little."

"I thought that's what life was," Liol said. "The honour of witnessing events. You need to be a God to control them."

"That drops us into a neat little paradox, then," Sarha said. "We have to control events if we want to find a God. But if we can control them, then ipso facto we're already gods."

"I think you'll find it's a question of scale," Joshua said. "Gods determine the outcome of large events."

"What happened here was pretty big."

"Not compared to the destiny of an entire species."

"You're taking this very seriously," Liol said.

Joshua didn't even smile. "Somebody has to. Think of the consequences."

"I'm not a total asshole, Josh. I do appreciate just how bad it's going to get if no one can find an answer to all of this."

"I was thinking what happens if we succeed, actually."

Liol's laugh was more a bark of surprise. "How can that be bad?"

"Everything changes. People don't like that. There's going to have to be sacrifices, and I don't mean just physical or financial. It's inevitable. Surely you can see that coming?"

"Maybe," Liol said gruffly.

Joshua looked over to his brother and put on his wickedest grin. "In the meantime, you've got to admit, it's a wild ride."

One of the serjeants stayed with Baulona-PWM and Quantook-LOU to act as an arbitrator as they tried to sort out the parameters of a new agreement. A triumph of optimism, she thought: that both of them believed the ZTT drive would bring about a new era among the diskcities orbiting Mastrit-PJ. It was clear that they were both conceding the remaining Tyrathca population would be evacuated to the flightship colony worlds. Their enclaves among the diskcities would not be expanded. Such a premise made it even more important that the two species didn't clash over who had claim on new star systems. Retrieving the flightship information really had become essential to the agreement. An intriguing irony. Now all she had to worry about was Quantook-LOU's sincerity. It made her suggest several safeguards to Baulona-PWM, such as ensuring communications were opened up to all the remaining enclaves. Not that either of them knew how many there were scattered among the diskcities. Quantook-LOU admitted even he didn't know how many diskcities there were.

The other serjeant accompanied a team of six breeders that Baulona-PWM had designated to reactivate their electronics. They escorted her to the band of fat towers around the end of the cylinder. It was Lalarin-MG's utilities district, with the towers housing water treatment plants, air filtration, fusion generators (appallingly crude, she thought), and the heat exchangers. Fortunately each service was provided by

parallel stations, giving it a failsoft capability. A third of the systems were inoperable, the machinery inert and tarnished, testifying as to how long it had been since Lalarin-MG had a full population.

She was taken to a tower which the breeders said was an electrical and communications station. The ground floor was occupied by three tokamaks, only one of which was working. A ramp spiralled up to the first floor. There were no windows, and the ceiling lights didn't work. Her infrared sensors showed her the silent ranks of electronic consoles, very reminiscent of those in Tanjuntic-RI. The Tyrathca had brought portable lights with them, which they set up revealing the true state of the consoles. Humidity had succoured a fur of algae over the rosette keyboards and display screens. Access panel catches had to be drilled through to release them, exposing rubbery fungal growths over the circuitry inside. The breeders had to run cables down to the generator below to power up the consoles.

One console actually burst into flames when they switched it on. Oski's curses echoed through the general communication link.

"Ask them if we can integrate our processor blocks with their network," she told Ione. "If I've got access, I'll be able to load some questors in. That should speed the process up. And while we're about it, let's see if they'll accept a little advice on reactivation procedures."

The wormhole terminus opened six hundred kilometres above Tojolt-HI's darkside, deep in the umbra. The *Stryla* flew out; Etchells was in his harpy form, red eyes blazing as he looked round in surprise. From his position the huge disk eclipsed most of the sun's surface, with a tide of crimson light appearing to sweep up over the rim, as if it was sinking into an ooze of photons.

His distortion field billowed out, probing the xenoc structure. It also clashed with another distortion field.

What are you doing here? *Oenone* asked.

Same thing as you. He found the voidhawk, three thousand kilometres away. It was next to a large hollow cylinder, a habitation station of some kind. There was another Confederation ship close by. When he focused his optical senses in their direction he saw a small glimmer of sunlight erupting through the disk directly behind them.

He quickly altered his distortion field, opening another wormhole interstice. This time he came out a hundred kilometres from the voidhawk. Red sunlight washed over his leathery scale-like feathers, and he looked down curiously at the tear in the disk. Its melted edges were radiating strongly in the infrared. The mountainous heat exchangers surrounding it were operating at their upper limit, trying to radiate away the immense thermal load imposed by overheated tubes.

“I’d say the Adamist ship used its antimatter drive to push the cylinder clear of the disk,” he told Kiera. “Nothing else could cause that kind of damage.”

“Which means they consider it important,” she said.

“I don’t see why. It’s inhabited, and very fragile. It can’t be a weapon.” His distortion field caught flocks of small chemically fuelled missiles flitting among the sharp, hot cones bristling out of the darkside. Lasers shot at them, blowing them apart in mid-flight. Over thirty radar beams from all sections of the disk were sweeping across him. One of the missiles plunged down among the heat exchange mountains, exploding. Atmospheric gas puffed out into space from the tube it shattered. “And there’s some kind of war being fought down there. Widespread by the look of it.”

“They flew all the way round the Orion Nebula, and when they get here they rip that cylinder out of a war zone,” Kiera said.

“All right, it’s important.”

“Which means it’s bad for us. Minimize your energetic effect, please.”

The hellhawk's shape rippled back to its natural profile.

Kiera's fingers typed quickly over the weapons console.

Targeting sensors locked on to the cylinder.

Disengage your weapons, now, *Oenone* ordered.

Etchells let Kiera hear the affinity voice, routing it through one of the AV pillars on the bridge.

"Why?" she asked. "What's in there?"

Several thousand unarmed Tyrathca. You would be committing butchery.

"What do you care? In fact, why are you here?"

To help.

"Very noble. And total bollocks."

Do not fire, *Oenone* appealed to Etchells. **We will defend the cylinder.**

That cylinder contains the means to destroy me, Etchells replied. **I'm quite sure of that.**

We are not barbarians. Physical destruction solves nothing.

Kiera fired four combat wasps at the cylinder.

The response from *Oenone* and *Lady Macbeth* was instant. Fifteen combat wasps launched on interception trajectories, scattering submunitions. *Lady Macbeth's* defence masers speared the incoming drones as their submunitions ejected. Two hundred and fifty fusion bombs detonated in the space of three seconds. Some pumped gamma lasers, but most were missile warheads.

Joshua absorbed the burst of sensor data disgorged by the tactical program, desperate for an overview. Visual sensors were useless against the blaze of destruction, but none of the attacking combat wasps electronic warfare submunitions had targeted *Lady Mac*—strangely negligent programming. The starship's sensors stared into the heart of the mayhem, filtering out the atomic and electromagnetic interference. Three small kinetic impacts registered against the cylinder,

along with several beam strikes. But the structure remained intact.

“Sarha, kill the bastard,” he ordered.

Five masers fired at the hellhawk. It rolled quickly and accelerated at seven gees, trying to break free from the energy strike.

Joshua fired another five combat wasps, programming them for defence minefield deployment. Their drives flared briefly, and submunitions swarmed out, forming a wide protective cluster around Lalarin-MG. If the hellhawk was serious about attacking a target outside a gravity field, its strategy would be to swallow in as close as possible, under a kilometre usually, and fire off a combat wasp salvo. Unless the target had an extensive array of SD lasers, some submunitions were bound to get through. The minefield ought to act as a temporary deterrence.

The hellhawk swallowed away.

“Syrinx, where the hell did it go?” Joshua asked.

“Standing off, two thousand kilometres.”

Oenone used the link with *Lady Mac*’s flight computer to datavise the coordinate over. Sensors locked on, showing the hellhawk holding station.

“They’ve got very strange ideas about tactics,” Joshua said. “Oski, how much longer?”

“Half an hour at least, Captain. I’ve identified probable storage areas for the almanac; none of them are active.”

“Joshua, I’m not sure the cylinder can take another attack like that,” Ione said. The serjeant mediating with Baulona-PWM and Quantook-LOU had been flung to its knees when the first chunk of shrapnel punctured the cylinder shell. A small fireball had erupted out of a tower barely a hundred yards away. The plaza shook violently as the tower disintegrated, showering the area with smoking fragments of metal and burning vegetation. When she scanned round, she saw a dozen violet contrails crisscrossing through the air, molecules

fluorescing from the gamma laser shots. Two had burned holes through the Sleeping God effigy. Her sensors hurriedly tracked along the axial gantry, but it hadn't been hit.

An automated truck trundled across the plaza, heading for the wrecked tower. Air was wailing as it was sucked down through the puncture hole. Hydraulic arms unfolded from the rear of the truck, carrying a thick metal plate. It was lowered over the hole, clanging into place. Thick brown sludge was sprayed out of a nozzle, smothering the plate. It solidified quickly, completing the seal.

"The Mosdva attack again," Baulona-PWM said.

Ione thought the breeder was going to strike Quantook-LOU.

"They didn't," she said quickly. "That was a human ship. It's from a dominion we are not allied with. The *Lady Macbeth* has fought it off."

"Do humans have dominions?" Quantook-LOU asked. "You did not tell us this."

"We didn't expect them to be here."

"Why are they here? Why have they attacked us?"

"They do not agree that Tyrathca and Mosdva should be given the faster-than-light drive. We must complete this agreement and recover the data. Then they will be unable to prevent the exchange."

"My family is working hard," Baulona-PWM said. "We keep our agreement with you, allowing you to mediate."

"And we will keep the agreement that you will be unharmed. Come now, we were deciding the message that is to be sent to other diskcity dominions." She switched back to the general communication link. "You have to get us more time."

"We'll see to it," Syrinx assured her. "Joshua, hold the fort here."

"Acknowledged." *Lady Mac's* gravitonic distortion detectors showed him the voidhawk opening a wormhole interstice.

Oenone emerged fifty kilometres from the *Stryla*. Syrinx was expecting the hellhawk to fire its lasers at them straight away. That it didn't, she took as an encouraging sign.

I'm here to talk, she said.

And I'm here to survive, Etchells replied. **We know you're here to find something you can use against us. I won't let that happen.**

Nothing will be used against you. We are trying to resolve this to everyone's benefit.

I lack your optimism.

The hellhawk launched two combat wasps.

Oenone immediately swallowed out, emerging from a terminus on the opposite side of the hellhawk from the combat wasps, twenty kilometres away. It fired ten lasers at the other's polyp hull.

Etchells swallowed away. He emerged a hundred metres above one of the diskcity's heat radiator cones. *Oenone* emerged just behind him. He'd expected that. His maser cannon fired on the voidhawk. It darted down behind the silvery cone, then curved round to shoot at Etchells.

The hellhawk accelerated at eight gees, tearing along a valley of cylindrical radiator towers. Kiera let out a muted yell of surprise and pain as she was squashed back into her acceleration couch.

"Give me fire control," Etchells told her. "You can't program the combat wasps for this scenario. I can."

"That would make me nothing," she said. "No deal. Fly us out of this."

"Fuck you." He abandoned the secondary manipulation of the distortion field, which countered the acceleration. Kiera groaned as the full eight gees rammed her down into the couch. She began channelling her energistic power to strengthen her body. Lasers raked across his hull, and Etchells looped round a glass spiral turret, pulling twelve gees. The radiator mechanisms were a constant leaden smear

to his optical senses, he was navigating by distortion field sense alone. And going too fast: the valley end was a sharp turn, almost a right angle. He swooped up above the peaks, decelerating madly as he turned. For a moment the two starships were in direct line of sight. Lasers and masers slashed across the gulf. Then Etchells dived back down into a deep gully of vertical mirror-surface dissipaters.

Oenone matched the manoeuvre and fired again. Etchells flicked from side to side, accelerating and decelerating in wild bursts. His own masers fired back. The energy beams ripped long gashes across the cliffs of dissipaters as both starships twirled and rolled. Magenta effluvium percolated out, clotting the whole valley.

Etchells shot out of the smog blizzard with cyclonic eddies rolling away from his hull. He swung round a splayed clump of black pentangular pillars, then used a mushroom-like industrial refinery to slalom again.

The way Syrinx's hands dug into the acceleration couch padding was nothing to do with the appalling gee forces washing across the bridge. The image of the craggy diskcity surface hurtling past mere metres away was shining directly into her brain. Her eyes were tight shut from reflex, and it wasn't the slightest use. There was no escape. *Oenone's* steady determination as it pursued the hellhawk prevented any censure. To doubt her love now would be selfish betrayal. She fought her own fear to bestow trust and pride.

On the other side of the bridge, Oxley was emitting a constant low moan of dismay without ever needing to draw breath.

Its resolve weakens, *Oenone* claimed buoyantly. It is slowing to turn now. We will catch it soon.

Yes. There was absolutely nothing in the tactical programs she could use to help this situation. If they rose above the artificial valleys, the hellhawk would be able to fire combat wasps straight at them. They couldn't fire back

down, one errant submunition would slaughter thousands of Mosdva. So the chase continued, which was ultimately to their advantage. It prevented the hellhawk from firing on Lalarin-MG. At a terrible cost to her nerves.

Another wormhole terminus opened a hundred kilometres above them.

Hello Etchells, Rocio said.

You? Etchells exclaimed in shock. **Shoot the shit chasing me, they've found something here that'll wipe us out.**

The *Mindori* fired three lasers at a glass cone heat exchanger a couple of kilometres ahead of Etchells. The mechanism detonated, shattering into crystalline splinters spinning inside a writhing gas cloud. Etchells screamed his fury into the affinity band and accelerated at seventeen gees, desperately trying to rise above the lethal kinetic debris. Irradiated gas streaked over the hellhawk's polyp. Energistic power flared, warding off the crystals with a ragged shield of white fire. Etchells's barrel rolled up away from the bloating indigo nimbus.

Oenone had a few extra seconds before collision. It pulled up fast, skirting the boundary of the whirling crystals. The *Stryla* was only thirty kilometres ahead of it. *Oenone*'s targeting radar locked on to the hellhawk. Then the electronic sensors warned Syrinx that the *Mindori* was targeting their hull.

Don't shoot, Rocio warned.

Kill them, Etchells demanded.

Syrinx aimed five lasers at the *Mindori*.

Etchells also targeted the other hellhawk with three masers. **Kill them now,** he said.

I won't shoot if you don't, Rocio said to Syrinx. Two of his lasers were aligned on the *Stryla*. **At least find out why we've come here first.**

So tell us, Syrinx said.

Jed and Beth were pressed against the port in the bridge, gazing in veneration at the xenoc artefact spread out below the hellhawk. There weren't many details, it was so dark, but the rim was close enough to see a silhouette of enticing geometries in the backscatter of red light. Gerald Skibbow was sitting on the acceleration couch behind the weapons console, Loren Skibbow studying the tactical displays keenly, watching the voidhawk and hellhawk rising fast from the darkside.

Traitor, Etchells spat, pushing his shaky anger behind the word.

To what, exactly? Rocio asked. **What's your crusade, Etchells? What do you care about other than yourself?**

I'm trying to stop these people from flinging us all back into the beyond. Maybe you're all for that.

Don't be absurd.

Then for fuck's sake help us wipe out that cylinder. Whatever they've come here for, it's in there.

There's no weapon in there, Syrinx said. **I've already told you that.**

Maybe I'll take a look later, Rocio said.

Shithead, Etchells raged. **I'll blow you to fucking pieces if you don't help wipe out that voidhawk.**

And that's why I'm here.

What? What are you fucking talking about?

Rocio enjoyed the irritation and confusion Etchells was emitting. **Death**, he said. **You're very keen to see others die, aren't you. You never gave Pran Soo a chance.**

You've got to be shitting me. You came after me because of her?

And Kiera. I've got someone on board who would like to see our ex-leader.

Kiera is on board? Syrinx asked.

Yes, Rocio said.

Listen you half-wit dickbrain, we're on the same

side, Etchells said. **I know the hellhawks have found another supply of nutrient fluid. That's brilliant. We're free of doing any fighting for people like Capone and Kiera. That's what I want.**

You were Kiera's number-one cheerleader. You're still doing what she wants even with the blackmail removed.

I was looking out for me. Just like you were doing for yourself. We had different methods, but we want the same thing for ourselves. That's why you've got to help us. Together we can beat those Confederation ships and destroy the cylinder.

Then what?

Then whatever we want, of course.

You don't really think we'd let you share our nutrient supply, do you? After what you've done.

You're starting to piss me off.

Jed and Beth saw the monstrous bird rise into view through the port, a jet-black shadow against the ruddy darkness of the umbra. Malevolent eyes gleamed scarlet, looking straight in at them. They backed away from the port together. To one side of the bird was another shadow, an elongated oval.

"Gerald," Jed said nervously. "Mate, there's *things* out there."

"Yes," he said. "The *Oenone* and the *Mindori*. Isn't it wonderful?" He sniffed, wiping moisture from his sunken bloodshot eyes. His voice became high again: Loren's. "She's there. And there's nowhere for the bitch to run anymore."

Jed and Beth gave each other a defeated look. Gerald was activating a lot of systems on the console.

"What are you doing?" Rocio asked.

"Bringing the remaining generators on line," Gerald an-

swered. "You can route their power into the lasers. Kill it with one shot."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"YES IT IS!" Gerald cried. "Don't you try to back out now." He clutched the edge of the console, blinking in confusion.

"Gerald?" Beth pleaded tremulously. "Please, Gerald, don't do anything rash."

Loren's face flicked up over Gerald's tortured expression. "Gerald's fine. Just fine. Don't you worry."

Beth started sobbing, clutching at Jed. His arms went round her as he stared miserably at the mad figure hunched over the console. When Skibbow had just been bonkers it'd been bad enough. This new demented combination was hell's own gatekeeper.

Loren ignored the two kids. "Rocio. Ask the voidhawk to help. It's to their advantage. We don't want any mistakes now."

"Very well." There was an edge of worry in the voice. **I have a proposition**, he said to Syrinx, on singular engagement.

Go ahead.

I have no quarrel with you, nor do I care about your mission. Etchells and Kiera threaten both of us.

Then why did you stop us from firing at them?

Because I need to capture Kiera alive. The father and mother of the body she possesses are on board. Unfortunately, they have fire authority over my combat wasps. My energistic power can disable the missiles, but the Skibbows would be able to detect my intent. There is no way of telling how they'd react; they are not a stable combination. They could choose to kamikaze; in which case I'm not sure if I could block their commands to the warheads in time.

I see. What do you suggest?

From this range, my lasers are quite capable of killing the *Stryla*'s central organ cluster in one shot. Etchells will be flung back into the beyond, and Kiera will be left intact. I will dock, and the Skibbows can deal with her.

So what do you want us to do?

Nothing. Do not interfere when I shoot. That's all I ask.

What about Kiera's control over the *Stryla*'s combat wasps?

A second laser strike will eliminate the combat wasps in their launch cradles. I can be fast. She will not have time to launch or detonate them.

You hope.

Can you provide an alternative?

Etchells spoke into the general affinity band: **Rocio, I can see you've powered up your weapon pod generators. Know this, Kiera and I have rigged my combat wasps. Any energy beam strike against me or my life-support module will result in every warhead blowing simultaneously. Both of you are well inside the lethal blast radius.**

All right, Rocio said. **We've all been real smart and blocked each other. Nobody can win now, so why don't we all just back off?**

No, Syrinx said. **If either of you accelerate away or attempt to open a wormhole interstice, I will fire. I will not give you the freedom to return to the cylinder.**

So just what the hell are we supposed to do now? Rocio demanded.

We are negotiating for the cylinder to be evacuated, Syrinx said. When all the Tyrathca have left, I will permit the three of us to retreat simultaneously. Not before. You will not slaughter innocent entities to appease your paranoia.

For fuck's sake, Etchells said. Rocio, join me, we'll blow this voidhawk to shit and stop them getting the weapon.

There is no weapon, Syrinx insisted.

I'll tell you something, Etchells, Rocio said. If it comes to a choice, I'm with Captain Syrinx.

Shithead traitor! You'd better pray their weapon works and pray real hard, because if it doesn't I will personally track you down past the end of the universe.

You won't have to chase me anywhere.

Syrinx looked over at Ruben and pouted her lips. "Maybe we should just let them go at it."

"Nice thought. I wonder what the Mosdva dominions are making of all this."

"As long as they don't start shooting at us, I don't care."

"We're getting something," Oski announced. "It's not the full almanac, but I'm accessing files with colony planet locations; they're linked to star map references."

"Can you access their star map files?" Syrinx asked.

"Loading a questor now," Oski said. "Stand by."

Syrinx and *Oenone* waited eagerly as the information began to trickle across the communication link. The first maps the questors accessed showed unknown starfields, but the third has a portion of the Orion Nebula covering a quarter of the picture. *Oenone* matched the image to the navigational plot of the nebula it had made on the voyage to Mastrit-PJ, instinctively correlating the Tyrathca coordinate formula into its own astronomical reference frame. More star maps followed, allowing the voidhawk to expand and refine the coordinate grid, correlating with recognizable star patterns. After eight minutes it could visualize a globe of space five thousand light-years across, centred on Mastrit-PJ. Tyrathca designations tagged the constellations.

Syrinx's thoughts flowed through the mental construct,

filled with quiet pride as she absorbed the detailed configuration.

It was easy, *Oenone* said modestly.

You handled it superbly, she said. **That needs to be said.**

Thank you.

Syrinx made an effort to compress her sadness. **But you do realize we probably won't get to go there.**

I understand. We need to keep the hellhawks at bay.

I'm so sorry. I know how much you wanted to go.

So did you. We must not be selfish, though. There is more at stake than our feelings. And we have explored further than anyone else.

Oh yes!

Joshua will do well.

I know. Amusement lifted her spirits. **A year ago I wouldn't have been saying that.**

It is not just you who has changed.

You always did like him, didn't you?

He was what you feared to become. Your envy became disdain. You should never be scared of what you are, Syrxinx. I will always love you.

And I you. She sighed contentedly. "Joshua, Swantic-LI found the Sleeping God at an F-class star three hundred and twenty light years from here. Coordinates coming over." She ordered the bridge processors to datavise the file over to *Lady Mac's* flight computer.

"Hey, good work, *Oenone*."

"Thank you, Joshua."

"Okay, how do you want to break up the stand-off? If I launch a combat wasp salvo from here, they'll be forced to swallow out. We can combine to protect the cylinder. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll wipe each other out before they come back for it."

“No, Joshua. We can handle the stand-off. You take off now.”

“Jesus, you’re kidding.”

“We can’t waste the time which protecting the cylinder is going to take; it’ll be days most likely. And we certainly can’t take the risk that we might both get damaged or killed in a fight with the hellhawks. You have to leave. Once the stand-off’s over, we’ll follow.”

“That’s very cold and logical.”

“It’s very rational, Joshua. I am an Edenist after all.”

“All right. If you’re sure?”

“Who better?” She relaxed serenely on her acceleration couch, sharing *Oenone*’s perception of local space. Waiting. *Lady Macbeth*’s jump registered as a sharp twist in space-time, gone in a nanosecond.

Syrinx looked round at her crew, reaching out to them so their thoughts and regrets could mingle with hers. Sharing herself to achieve that cherished equipoise of their culture. It must have worked; for eventually she asked: “Anyone bring a pack of cards?”

27

The two friends walked together along the top of Ketton island's cliff, taking a few minutes alone together to say good-bye. Their parting would be permanent. Choma had chosen to join with Tinkerbelle, sharing that entity's voyage across eternity; while Sinon, almost uniquely among the serjeants, had decided to go back to Mortonridge.

I promised my wife I would return, that I would rejoin the multiplicity once more, he said. I will keep my word to her, for we believed in Edenism together. By doing this I will strengthen our culture. Not by much, I will be the first to admit, but my conviction in us and the path we have chosen will contribute to the overall conviction of the multiplicity and Consensus. We must believe in ourselves. To doubt now would be admitting we should never have existed.

And yet what we are doing is the pinnacle of Edenism, Choma said. By transferring ourselves into Tinkerbelle's version of the multiplicity we are evolving the human condition, moving on from our origin with confidence and wonder. This is evolution, a constant

learning curve, there is no limit to what we can find in this realm.

But you will be alone, isolated from the rest of us. What is the point of knowledge if you cannot share it? If it cannot be used to help everyone? The beyond is something the human race must face in union, we must know and accept our answer as one. If Mortonridge taught us nothing else, it was that. Towards the end I had nothing but sympathy for the possessed.

We are both right. The universe is big enough to allow us that.

It is. Though I regret what you are doing. An unusual development. I think I have become more than I was supposed to in this body. I believed such emotions would be impossible when I volunteered to join the Liberation.

Their development was inevitable, Choma said. We carry the seeds of humanity with us no matter what vessel our minds travel in. They were bound to flourish, to find their own route forward.

Then I am no longer the Sinon who emerged from the multiplicity.

No. Any sentient entity who has lived, has changed.

I will have a soul then. A new soul, one that is different to the Sinon I remember.

You do. All of us do.

Then once again I will have to die before I transfer myself back to the multiplicity. What I bring to the habitat is only such wisdom as I can muster. My soul doesn't follow my memories, so the Kiint say.

Do you fear that day?

I don't believe so. The beyond is not for everyone, knowing there is a way through, or round, as Laton claims, is enough to give me confidence. Though there is some trepidation stirring within me.

You will overcome, I am sure. Never forget it is possible to succeed. That thought alone should guide you.

I will remember.

They stopped on the crest of a mound and looked out over the island. Long lines of people were picking their way over the cracked earth, the last refugees from the buried town heading towards the cliff top where Tinkerbelle was pressed against the rock. The giant crystal's opalescent light sent ripples of gentle colour slithering over the drab ground. Air had coiled into a topaz nimbus all around it.

How apt, Sinon said. It looks as though they are walking off into the sunset.

If I have a regret, it is that I won't know how their lives finish. They will make a strange group, these souls who are going to occupy serjeant bodies, their complete humanity always beyond their grasp.

When they came out of the beyond, they claimed all they wanted was sensation again. They have that now.

But they are genderless. Not to mention sexless. They can never know love.

Physical love, perhaps. But that certainly isn't all the love there is. As with you and I, they will become whole in their own way.

I feel their disquiet already, and they haven't even reached Mortonridge yet.

They can learn to adapt to what lies ahead. The habitats will welcome them.

Nobody has ever become an Edenist against their will before. Now you have twelve thousand bewildered, angry strangers grumbling away into the general affinity band. Most of them with a cultural background that will act against easy acceptance.

With patience and kindness they will find themselves again. Think what they have been through.

At last we come to the true difference between our-

selves. I am restless and eager for the future, a voyager. You are ruled by compassion, a healer of souls. Now you see why we have to part.

Of course, and I wish you well on your splendid voyage.

Likewise. I hope you find the peace you search for.

They turned, and walked back slowly along the rocky line of the cliff. Tiny crystalline entities whisked about overhead, never pausing in one place for more than a moment. They had covered the whole island, making sure that every possessed knew there was now a way back, and what staying here meant. It was the end of Ekelund's rule. Her troops had abandoned her, banding together defiantly to walk out of Ketton. Her threats and fury only hastened their departure.

Five long queues waited before Tinkerbell's looming surface, winding through the scattered remnants of the headland camp. Two of them made up from serjeants. The remainder (and keeping their distance) were the possessed. They waited in a strange subdued mood, their anticipation and relief that the nightmare was about to end tempered by the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

Stephanie was waiting right at the tail end of the longest queue of possessed, along with Moyo, McPhee, Franklin, and Cochrane. Tina and Rana had been amongst the first through. The crystalline entities had stabilized Tina, apparently repairing the damage to her internal organs. But they all agreed the woman's body ought to be seen by human specialists as soon as possible. For herself, Stephanie decided she should be amongst the last. It was the responsibility thing again, she wanted to know everyone else was okay.

"But you're no' responsible for them," McPhee had said. "They all flocked to Ekelund's banner. It's their own bloody stupid fault they're here."

"I know, but we're the ones who tried to get Ekelund to

stop, and failed miserably.” She shrugged, knowing how feeble she sounded.

“I’ll wait with you,” Moyo said. “We’ll go through together.”

“Thank you.”

McPhee, Franklin, and Cochrane looked at each other, and said what the hell. They all joined the queue, standing behind Soi Hon. The old eco-guerrilla was in his trademark dark jungle fatigues, with his felt bush-ranger hat tilted back as if he’d just finished an arduous job. He eyed them with wry amusement and bowed to Stephanie. “I congratulate you on remaining true to your principles.”

“I don’t think it really matters, but thank you anyway.” She sat on one of the many boulders, resting her wounded hip.

“Out of all of us, it was you who achieved the most.”

“You held off the serjeants.”

“Not for long, and only to further an ideal.”

“I thought you valued ideals.”

“I do. Or I used to. That is the problem with this situation. The old ideals don’t have any relevance here. I applied them as did the political forces behind the Liberation. Both of us were very wrong. Look what we did to people, how many lives and homes we ruined. All that effort poured into conflict and destruction. I used to say I belonged to the land.”

“I’m sure you thought you did what was the right thing.”

“Indeed I did, Stephanie Ash. Unfortunately, I didn’t think enough, for it was not the right thing to do. Not at all.”

“Well hey, it don’t matter no more, man,” Cochrane said. “The fat babe’s been singing out loud for a while now. We’re like going home.” He offered Soi Hon his joint.

“No thank you. I do not wish to introduce poisons to this body. I am simply its custodian. I may soon even be held accountable for any ills I have inflicted. After all, past the end

of this queue we shall be facing them again, will we not? And we will only be equals.”

Cochrane gave him a sour look and dropped his joint, grinding it into the mud under his heel. “Yeah, right, man,” he grunted.

“What about Ekelund?” Stephanie asked. “Where’s she?”

“Back at her command post. She refused the offer to return.”

“What? She’s crazy.”

“Undoubtedly, yes. But she sincerely believes that once the serjeants have gone, then this land will be free. She intends to found her paradise here.”

Stephanie looked back at the patch of scabrous land that was Ketton.

“No,” Moyo said firmly. “She has made her own decision. And she certainly isn’t going to listen to you of all people.”

“I suppose not.”

Even at the rate of one possessed every few seconds, it took over seven hours for everyone to be repatriated. The procedure was simple enough. Where Tinkerbelle touched the cliff face, several oval tunnels had opened up, leading deep into her interior. Their walls shone with a soft aquamarine light that grew progressively brighter until it eventually filled the cleft. You just walked through, vanishing into the light.

Stephanie wasn’t the very last in. Moyo and McPhee had quietly and insistently stood behind her. She smiled in good-natured surrender and passed over the threshold. The air thickened in conjunction with the light, slowing the movement of her limbs. Eventually it felt as though she was trying to walk through the crystal itself. There was an insistent pressure exerted against every part of her. She felt the force move through her flesh, enabling her to speed up again. The aquamarine glow faded away, showing that her body had become transparent, a pattern of light conducted by crystal.

When she looked round she saw the body she'd possessed standing behind her. The woman was holding her hands up, an expression of revulsion and satisfaction straining her face.

"Choma?" Stephanie asked. "Choma, can you hear me? There's something I need to do."

"Hello, Stephanie. I thought this might happen."

Occupying a serjeant's body was the simplest thing. One waited for her, immured in crystal, completely passive with its big head bowed. It didn't matter which direction she walked in, she was always walking towards it. They merged, and it thickened around her, returning the opaque aquamarine light. The sensations were peculiar; the exoskeleton had no tactile nerves, yet it was somehow rigged to provide proof of contact. Her soles were definitely pressing down on a surface, air drifted over her as she moved forwards. The aquamarine light cleared from her eyes, allowing her to focus with remarkable clarity.

She walked out of the oval tunnel, back onto the crusty trampled-down mud of Ketton Island. The rivers of coloured light which emanated from Tinkerbelle's internal coruscations meandered over the ground. Nothing else moved.

It was a long slog back across the island to its central town. Even in the serjeant's robust body it took her an hour and a quarter. Tinkerbelle departed when she was a third of the way there, arching away above her in a opalescent blaze, then shrinking at an improbable speed. Stephanie began to pick up her pace. The air was stirring, slowly expanding again now the serjeants had gone, a gentle breeze gusting out over the edge of the cliff. Their wishes remained for a while, of course, impregnated on the fabric of this realm. But without their active presence to reinforce them, what was normality here began to return.

It was a lot brighter when Stephanie trotted up to the boundary of the town. The air had thinned considerably

now, allowing the continuum's persistent blue-white glare to shine down with unrestrained power. Every step sent her gliding a couple of metres above the ground. Gravity had reduced by about twenty per cent, she guessed.

Ekelund's headquarters were prominent at the very centre of the razed town, the big tent perched atop a mound, faintly luminous. She came out as Stephanie bounced her way up the slope, lounging against the tentpole, smiling softly.

"It's a different body, but I'd know those thoughts anywhere. I believe we've had our last goodbye, Stephanie Ash."

"You have to leave. Please. You'll destroy Angeline Gallagher's body and her soul if you stay here."

"Finally! It's not my well being you're concerned about. A small victory for me, but I consider it significant."

"Come back to Mortonridge. There are still some serjeant bodies available to host your soul. You can live a life again, a real life."

"As what? Trite little housewife and mother? Even you can't live your old life again, Stephanie."

"I never believe that a baby's future is preordained. After birth, you're on your own to make what you can from life. And we are being born again in these serjeant bodies. Make what you can of it, Ekelund. Don't kill yourself and Gallagher out of misplaced pride. Look around! The air's all but gone, the gravity's failing. There's nothing here anymore."

"I am here. This island will bloom again once it's free of your influences. We came here to this realm because it offered us the sanctuary we needed."

"For God's sake, admit you are wrong. There's no shame in it. What do you think I'm going to do, stalk you and gloat?"

"Now you get to it. Which of us was right. That's what it's always been between you and I."

"There is no right. An entire army flocked to your banner.

I had a lover and five mismatched friends. You win. Now, please, come back.”

“No.”

“Why not? At least tell me that.”

Annette Ekelund’s stubborn smile flickered. “For the first time ever, I have been me. I haven’t had to defer to anybody, to ask permission, to conform to what society expects. And I’ve lost that.” Her voice shrivelled to a hoarse whisper. “I led them here, and not one stayed. They didn’t want to stay, and I didn’t have the strength to force them.” A tear emerged from her left eye. “I was wrong. I got it *wrong*, God damn you!”

“You didn’t bring anybody here. You didn’t order us. We came because we desperately wanted to. I was a part of it, Annette. When we lay there on the mud after the harpoon strike, and the serjeants were going to throw us into zero-tau, I helped. I was so frightened that I poured every drop of my power into leaving Mortonridge behind. And I was glad when we got here. We are all to blame. All of us.”

“I organized Mortonridge’s defence. I brought about the Liberation.”

“Yes, you did, and if it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else. It could even have been me. We’re not responsible for the way to the beyond being opened up. Ever since that began, the outcome was inevitable. You’re not to blame for fate, for the way the universe is put together. You’re not that important.”

Annette had to suck hard to fill her lungs with air. The sky had become very bright. “I was.”

“So was I. The day we took the children over the fire-break, I’d accomplished more than Richard Saldana ever had. That was how I felt. I loved it, and I wanted more of it, the way my group looked up and respected me. Typical human failing. You’re nothing special, not in that way.”

“Smug, smug, smug, God I hate you.”

Stephanie watched the dry flakes of mud lift gently from the ground, flicked up by the last wisps of air. They floated around in a lazy cloud, rebounding off each other, slowly moving higher. There was no gravity left, the only thing keeping her feet on the ground was sheer willpower. "Come with me." She had to shout, the air was all but gone. "Hate me some more."

"Would you die with me?" Annette yelled back. "Are you that fucking worthy?"

"No."

Annette yelled again. Stephanie couldn't hear her, the air had gone. **Choma, Tinkerbelle, come and get us. Quickly please.**

Annette was clawing at her throat, gulping wildly as her skin turned dark red. Her desperate motions pushed her away from the ground. Stephanie kicked off after her and grabbed a thrashing ankle. Together they tumbled away from the top of the mound. The universal white light had turned the mud fields a glaring silver; crinkled cliff tops ignited into magnesium splendour. Ketton island melted away into the glaring void.

Stephanie and Annette soared ever onwards, drowning in light.

"Are they really worth it?" someone asked.

"Are we?"

Cold aquamarine light clamped around them.

Luca didn't have to guide the horse; it simply followed the route he'd taken so many times before, plodding along without hesitation. A great circle round the middle of Cricklade estate: through the upper ford in Wryde stream, around the east side of Berrybut spinney, over Withcote ridge, taking the narrow humpback bridge below Saxby farm, the fire track through Coston wood. It gave him a good overview of his land's progress. On the surface it was as good as any pre-

vious year; the crops were later by a few weeks, but there was no harm in that. Everyone had pulled together and made up for the lost weeks following the possession.

As they bloody well ought to, by damn. I sweated blood getting Cricklade back on its feet.

And now there was enough food for everybody, the coming harvest would enable them to see the winter months out without undue hardship. Stoke County had emerged from the transition exceptionally well. There certainly wouldn't be any more marauders, not since the battle of Colsterworth station. Good news, considering the reports and rumours trickling out of Boston these days. The island's capital hadn't been so fast to embrace the old ways. Food there was becoming scarce; the farms immediately round the outskirts it were being abandoned as citizens roamed across the countryside in search of supplies.

The idiots weren't capitalising on their existing industrial infrastructure by producing goods to trade with the farming communities for food. There was so much the city could provide, basic stuff like cloth and tools. That needed to happen again, and soon. But the indications he'd got from Lionel and the other traders weren't good. Some factories were up and running, but there was no real social order in the city.

It's actually worse than when the Democratic Land Union was out on the streets, agitating for their clap-trap reforms.

Luca shook his head irritably. There were a lot of *his* thoughts roaming free these days. Some of them obvious, the ones he relied on to keep Cricklade going; others were more subtle, the comparisons, the regrets, odd mannerisms creeping back, so comfortable he could never drive them out again. Worst was that eternal junkie ache to see Louise and Genevieve again, just to know they were all right.

Are you such a monster, an anti-human, you would

deny a father that? A single glimpse of my beloved girls.

Luca put his head back and yelled: "You never loved them!" The piebald horse came to a startled halt as his voice carried across the verdant land. Anger was his last refuge of self, the one defence which Grant could never penetrate. "You treated them like cattle. They weren't even people to you, they were commodities, part of your medieval family empire, assets ready to marry off in exchange for money and power. You bastard. You don't deserve them." He shivered, crumpling down into the saddle. "Then why do I care?" he heard himself ask. "My children are the most important part of me; they carry on everything I am. And you tried to rape them. A pair of little children. Love? Do you think you know anything about it? A degenerate parasite like you."

"Leave me alone," Luca screamed out.

Shouldn't it be me asking you that?

Luca gritted his teeth, thinking about the gas Spanton used, the way Dexter had tried to make them worship the Light Bringer. Building up a fortress of anger, so his thoughts could be his again.

He tugged on the reins, wheeling the horse round so he faced Cricklade. There was little practical point to this inspection tour. He knew the condition the estate was in.

Materially they were fine. Mentally . . . the veil of contentment furled around Norfolk was souring. He recognized the particular strain of forlorn resentment accumulating over the mind's horizon. Cricklade had known it first. All across Norfolk, people were discovering what lay beneath their external perfection. The slow-maturing plague of vanity had begun to reap its victims. Hope was withering from their lives. This winter would be more than the physical cold.

Luca crossed the boundary of giant cedars and urged the horse up over the greensward towards the manor house. Just seeing its timeless grey stone façade, inset with white-

painted windows, brought a peaceful reassurance to his aching thoughts. Its history belonged to him, and so assured his future.

The girls will carry on here, will keep our home and family alive.

He bowed his head, embittered by his deteriorating will. Anger was hard to maintain over hours, let alone days. Weary, weepy dismay was no defence, and those emotions were his constant companion these days.

There was the usual scattering of activity around the manor. A circular brush ejecting a puff of soot as it rose out from the central chimney stack. Stable boys leading the horses down to graze in the east meadow. Women hanging sheets out to dry on the clothes lines. Ned Coldham—Luca couldn't remember the name of the handyman's possessor—painting the windows on the west wing, making sure the wood was protected from the coming frosts. The sound of sawing drifting out through the chapel's empty windows. Two men (claiming to be monks, though neither Luca nor Grant had ever heard of their order) were slowly repairing the damage Dexter had wrought inside.

There were more people bustling about in the walled kitchen garden at the side of the manor. Cook had brought a team of her kitchen helpers out to cut the shoots of asparagus ready for freezing. It was the fifth batch they'd collected from the geneered plant this year.

Johan was sitting beside the stone arched gateway, a blanket over his knees as he soaked up the warmth of the omnidirectional sunlight. Véronique was on a chair beside him, with baby Jeanette sleeping in a cradle, a parasol protecting her from the light.

Luca dismounted and went over to see his erstwhile deputy. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Not so bad, thank you, sir." Johan smiled weakly, and nodded.

“You look a lot better.” He was putting on weight again, though the loose skin around his face remained pallid.

“Soon as they gets the glass finished, I’m going to start getting some seeds set,” Johan said. “I always like a bit o’ fresh lettuce and cucumber in me sarnies during the winter. Wouldn’t mind trying to grow some avocado as well, though it’ll be next year before they fruit.”

“Jolly good, man. And how’s this little one, then?” Luca peered into the crib. He’d forgotten just how small newborn babies were.

“She’s a dream,” Véronique sighed happily. “I wish she’d sleep like this at night. Every two hours she wants feeding. You can set your clock by her. It’s really tiring.”

“Sweet little mite,” Johan said. “Reckon she’s gonna be a proper looker when she grows up.”

Véronique beamed with easy pride.

“I’m sure she will,” Luca said. It pained him to see the way the old man was looking at the baby; there was too much desperation there. Butterworth wanted confirmation that life carried on as normal here in this realm. It was an attitude that was growing among a lot of Cricklade’s residents, he’d noticed lately. The kids they were looking after had been receiving more sympathetic attention. His own resolve to stay at the estate and ignore the urge to find the girls was becoming harder to maintain. It was a weakness he could date back to the day Johan had collapsed, and then accelerating after the battle of Colsterworth station. Every step he took on the sandy gravel path around the manor seemed to press blister-sized lumps deep into the flesh of his soles, reminding him of how precarious his life had become.

Luca led his horse into the stable courtyard, guilty and glad to leave Johan behind. Carmitha was over by her caravan. She was folding up freshly washed clothes and packing them into a big brass-bound wooden trunk. Half a dozen of her old glass storage jars were standing on the cobbles, full

of leaves and flowers, their green tint turning the contents a peculiar grey colour.

She nodded politely at him. He watched her as he took the stallion's saddle off; she moved with a steady determination that discouraged interruption. Some thought had been finalized, he decided. The trunk was eventually filled, and the lid slammed down.

"Give you a hand with that?" he offered.

"Thanks."

They lifted the trunk in through the door at the back of the caravan. Luca whistled quietly. He'd never seen the inside so tidy before. There was no clutter, no clothes or towels slung about, all the pans she had hanging up were polished to a bright gleam, even the bed was made. Bottles were lined up on a high shelf, held in place by copper travelling rings.

She shoved the trunk into an alcove under the bed.

"You're going somewhere," he said.

"I'm ready to go somewhere."

"Where?"

"I've no idea. Might try Holbeach, see if any of the others made it to the caves."

He sat on the bed, suddenly very tired. "Why? You know how important you are to people here. God, Carmitha, you can't leave. Look, just tell me if someone's said or done something against you. I'll have their bloody nuts roasted very slowly over a furnace."

"Nobody's done anything yet."

"Then why?"

"I want to be ready in case this place falls apart. Because that's what'll happen if you leave."

"Oh Jesus." His head sank into his hands.

"Are you going to?"

"I don't know. I took a ride round the estate this morning to try and make up my mind."

"And?"

“I want to. I really do. I don’t know if it’ll make Grant back off, or if it’s going to be a complete surrender. I think the only reason I haven’t gone already is because he’s equally torn. Cricklade means an awful lot to him. He dreads the idea of it being left unsupervised for a whole winter. But his daughters mean more. I don’t suppose that leaves me with much choice.”

“Stop fishing for support. You always have choice. What you should ask yourself is, do you have the strength to make and sustain the decision.”

“I doubt it.”

“Humm.” She sat on the antique chair at the foot of the bed, looking at the despondent silhouette in front of her. There is no border any more, she decided, they’re merging. It’s not as fast as Véronique and Olive, but it’s happening. Another few weeks, a couple of months at the most, and they’ll be one. “Have you considered *you* might want to find the girls as well? That’s where your problem starts.”

He gave her a sharp look. “What do you mean?”

“All that decency Grant’s wicked little mind is eroding. You haven’t lost it yet, you’re still feeling guilty about Louise and what you tried to do to her. You’d like to know that she’s all right as well.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I can’t think straight any more. Every time I speak I have to listen hard to the words to find what’s me and what’s him. There’s still a difference. Just.”

“I’m tempted to be a fatalist. If Norfolk isn’t rescued for a few decades, you’re going to die here anyway, so why not give in and live those years in peace?”

“Because I want to live them,” he whispered fiercely. “Me!”

“That’s very greedy for someone who’ll do that living in a stolen body.”

“You always hated us, didn’t you.”

“I hate what you’ve done. I don’t hate what you are. Luca

Comar and I would have got on quite well if we'd ever met, don't you think?"

"Yeah, right."

"You can't win, Luca. As long as you're alive he'll be there with you."

"I won't surrender."

"Would Luca Comar really have killed Spanton? Grant would, without hesitating."

"You don't understand. Spanton was a savage, he was going to destroy everything we are, everything we've worked to achieve here. I saw that in his heart. You can't reason with people like that. You can't educate them."

"Why do you want to achieve anything? It is possible to live off the land here. We can, us Romanies. Even Grant would be able to show you how. Which plants to eat. Where the sheep and the cattle huddle in winter. You can become a hunter, dependant on no one."

"People are more than that. We're a social species. We gather in tribes or clans, we trade. It's the fundamental of civilization."

"But you're dead, Luca. You died hundreds of years ago. This return will only ever be temporary, however it ends: in death or in the Confederation rescuing us. Why do you want to build a cosy civilization under those circumstances? Why not live fast and stop worrying about tomorrow?"

"Because that's not what I am! I can't do that!"

"Who can't? Who are you that wants a future?"

"I don't know." He started sobbing. "I don't know who I am."

There were fewer people in Fort Forward's Ops Room these days, a barometer of the Liberation's progress and nature. The massive coordination effort required for the initial assault was long gone. After that, the busiest time had been following the disastrous attack on Ketton when they had to change the front

line assault pattern, splitting Mortonridge into confinement zones. It was a strategy which had worked well enough. There certainly hadn't been any more Kettons. The possessed had been divided up, then divided again as the confinement zones were broken down into smaller fractions.

From his office, Ralph could look out directly at the big status screen on the wall opposite. For days after Ketton he'd sat behind his desk watching the red icons of the front line change shape into a rough grid of squares stretched over Mortonridge. Each square had gone on to fission into a dozen smaller squares, which became rings and then stopped contracting. The sieges had begun, 716 of them.

It left the Ops Room with supervising the mopping-up operation across open land. The Liberation command's main activity was now managing logistics, coordinating the supply routes to each siege camp and evacuating the recovered victims. All of which were handled by different, secondary, departments.

"We're redundant," Ralph told Janne Palmer. She and Acacia had stayed behind after the early-morning senior staff meeting. They often did, having coffee together and bringing up points which didn't quite warrant the attention of a full staff meeting. "There's no fighting left," he said. "No bad decisions that I have to take the blame for. This is all about numbers now, statistics and averages. How long it takes the possessed to finish eating their supplies, balancing our medical resources and transport facilities. We should just turn it over to the accountants and leave."

"I've not known many generals to be so bitter about their victories," Janne said. "We won, Ralph, you were so successful that the Liberation has become a smooth operation where no one is shooting at us."

He gave Acacia a quizzical look. "Would you describe it as smooth?"

“Progress has been smooth, General. Individuals have of course suffered considerable hardship out on the front line.”

“And on the other side as well. Have you been monitoring the state of the possessed we’re capturing when those sieges fail?”

“I’ve seen them,” Janne said.

“The possessed don’t actually surrender, you know. They just become so weak the serjeants can walk in unopposed. We broke twenty-three sieges yesterday, that produced seventy-three dead bodies. They just won’t give themselves up. And the remainder—Christ, cancer and malnutrition is a bad combination. Once we’d put them through zero-tau, seven actually died on the emergency evac flight back to Fort Forward.”

“I believe there are now enough colonizer ships in orbit to cope with the casualty rate,” Acacia said.

“We can store them in the zero-tau berths,” Ralph said. “I’m not so sure about treating them. They may wind up waiting in stasis for quite a while until there’s a hospital place for them. And that’s even with all the help we’re getting from Edenist habitats and our allies. Dear God, can you imagine what it’ll be like if we ever manage to haul an entire planet back from wherever it is they vanish them away to?”

“I believe the Assembly President had asked the Kiint ambassador for material aid,” Acacia said. “Roulor said that his government would look favourably to helping us with any physical event which was beyond our industrial or technical ability to cope with.”

“And Ombey’s medical situation doesn’t count as a crisis?” Janne asked.

“Treating the de-possessed from Mortonridge is not beyond the Confederation’s overall medical capability. That would seem to be the criteria the Kiint have set.”

“It might be physically possible, but what government is

going to let a ship full of ex-possessed into their star system, let alone parcel them out among civilian hospitals in the cities?"

"Human politics," Ralph grunted. "The envy of the galaxy."

"That's paranoia, not politics," Janne said.

"It translates into votes, which makes it politics." The Ops Room computer datavised a stream of information into Ralph's neural nanonics. He glanced through the window to see one of the red rings up on the status screen turn a deep mauve. "Another siege over. Town called Wellow."

"Yes," Acacia said. Her eyes were shut as she eavesdropped on the serjeants actually ringing the clutter of sodden, mashed-up buildings. "The ELINT blocks monitoring its energistic field reported a massive decline. The serjeants are moving in."

Ralph checked the AI's administration procedures. Transport was being readied, with a flight of Stonys being assigned to the camp. Fort Forward medical facilities were notified. It even estimated the number of zero-tau berths they'd need on the orbiting colonizer starships, basing it on the last SD sensor satellite's infrared sweep. "I almost wish it was the same as the first day," Ralph said. "I know the possessed put up a hell of a fight, but at least they were healthy. I was ready for the horrors of war, I was even coping with sending our troops into action knowing they'd take casualties. But this isn't what I expected at all, this isn't saving them any more. It's just political expediency."

"Have you told the Princess that?" Acacia asked.

"Yes. She even agreed. But she won't allow me to stop it. We have to clear them out, that's the only consideration. The political cost outweighs the human one."

The rover reporters assigned to the Liberation were all billeted in a pair of three-storey programmable silicon barracks

on the western side of Fort Forward, near the administration and headquarters section. Nobody minded that, it placed them close to an officers' mess, which at least allowed them to get a drink in the evening. But as far as providing them with an authentic experience of troop quarters went, you could take realism too far. The ground floor was a single open space that was intended as a general recreation and assembly hall, with a total furniture complement of fifty plastic chairs, three tables, a commercial-sized induction oven and a water fountain. It did at least have a high-capacity net processor installed for them to stay in touch with their studio chiefs. Beds were upstairs, in six dormitories with a communal bathroom on each floor. For a breed used to four-star (minimum) hotels, they didn't acclimatize well.

The rain started at eight o'clock in the morning while Tim Beard was downstairs having breakfast. There were three choices for breakfast at Fort Forward: tray A, tray B, and tray C. He always tried to get down in time to grab a tray A from the pile by the door, which was the most filling, so he didn't have to eat lunch; trays D, E, and F violated all kinds of human rights declarations.

He pushed the tray into its slot in the oven and set the timer for thirty seconds. Drizzle pattered down in the big open doorway. Tim groaned in dismay. It would make the humidity hellish for the rest of the day, and if he travelled down into Mortonridge itself he'd have to use the anti-fungal gel that evening—again. Another day in the clutches of decay, watching a decaying Liberation. The oven beeped and ejected his tray. The wrapping had split, mixing his porridge with his tomatoes.

There were a couple of chairs left at one of the tables. He sat down next to Donrell, from News Galactic, nodding at Hugh Rosler, Elizabeth Mitchell, and the others.

"Anyone know where we're cleared for today?" he asked.

"Official Stonys are taking us down to Monkscliff," Hugh

said. "They want to show us some medical team just in from Jerusalem, got a new method of cramming protein back into the malnutrition cases. Direct blood supplement, slam protein back into your cells. Hundred per cent survival rate. It's going to be real useful when the last sieges end."

"I want to try and get back down to Chainbridge," Tim said. "The army set up a big field hospital there. There's been some Gimmie suicides. They couldn't handle being saved."

"Gimmie the winning side," Elizabeth muttered. "God damn typical, or what?"

"No," Donrell said complacently. He smiled round at his colleagues. "You don't want any of that, you want to visit Urswick."

Tim hated the smug tone, but Donrell was one of the best at ferreting information. A neural nanonics check told him Urswick was a siege town that had been liberated yesterday afternoon. "Any reason?"

Donrell grinned and made a show of lowering a triangle of toast into his mouth. "They ran out of food over a week ago. That means they had to eat something different to last out so long." He licked his lips.

"Oh Jesus," Tim winced. He shoved his breakfast tray away. But it would make one fantastic story.

"Who the hell told you that?" Elizabeth asked; there was a disturbing eagerness in her voice.

Tim was preparing a disapproving look for her when he saw Hugh look up suddenly.

"One of the mercs I know," Donrell said. "She had a buddy in the Urswick support troop. At the start of the siege the infrared sweep showed a hundred and five people in there. The serjeants liberated ninety-three."

Hugh was glancing round the hall, frowning, as if his name was being called.

"Could be some of your basket cases, Tim," Elizabeth suggested. "They couldn't handle the memory."

Hugh Rosler stood up and walked towards the open door. Donrell gave a rough laugh. "Hey, Hugh, you want some of my sausage? Tastes kinda strange."

Tim gave him an annoyed look, and hurried off after Hugh.

"Something I said?" Donrell shouted after them. The whole table was chuckling.

Tim caught up with Hugh just outside. He was ignoring the rain, walking purposefully across the mesh road.

"What is it?" Tim asked. "You know something, don't you? One of your local contacts datavise you?"

Hugh gave Tim a slight sideways smile. "Not quite, no."

Tim scampered along at his side. "Is it hot? Come on, Hugh! I pool, don't I? Your best sensevises are down to me."

"I think you just got your story back." Hugh slowed, then turned quickly and started jogging along the gap between a couple of barracks.

"Christ's sake," Tim muttered. He was soaking, but nothing would make him give up now. Hugh might be a provincial hick working for a nothing agency, but he was always on the level.

There was a four-lane motorway on the other side of the barracks, with a junction right in front of them. Two loops of mesh road led round to one of Fort Forward's hospitals. Hugh hurried out onto the motorway, right in front of an automated ten-tonne truck.

"Hugh!" Tim screamed.

Hugh Rosler didn't even look at the truck. He held up a hand and clicked his fingers.

The truck stopped.

Tim gaped, not believing. It didn't brake. It didn't skid to a halt. It just stopped. Dead. In the middle of the road. Fifty kilometres an hour to zero in an instant.

"Oh mother of God," Tim croaked. "You're one of them."

"No I'm not," Hugh said. "I'm the same as you, I'm a re-

porter. It's just that I've been doing it a lot longer. You pick a few useful things up."

"But . . ." Tim hung back on the edge of the motorway. All of the traffic was slowing to a halt, red hazard strobes flashing brightly.

"Come on," Hugh said cheerfully. "Trust me, you don't want to miss this. Start recording."

Tim belatedly opened a neural nanonics memory cell. He stepped out onto the motorway. "Hugh? How did you do that, Hugh?"

"Transferred the inertia through hyperspace. Don't worry about it."

"Fine." Tim froze. A glimmer of emerald light was shining in the air behind Hugh. He gurgled a warning and raised his hand to point.

Hugh turned to face the light, smiling broadly. It expanded rapidly to a pillar five metres wide, twenty tall. Raindrops sparkled as they fell around it, acquiring their own verdure corona.

"What is that?" Tim asked, too fascinated to be frightened.

"Some sort of gateway. I don't actually understand its compositional dynamic, which is pretty remarkable in itself."

Tim gathered up his reporter's discipline and focused on the cold light in front of him. There were shadows moving deep inside. They grew larger, more distinct. A serjeant stepped out onto the glistening road. Tim upped his sensorium reception, waiting in awe.

"Urgh," the puissant serjeant exclaimed in a shrill voice. "What a simply awful homecoming, darling. It's absolutely weeing down."

Ralph got out to one of the seven emerald gateways ninety minutes after they opened. The between time was a frantic rush to make sense of what was happening and respond ap-

propriately. It saw the Ops Room brought back to full strength as officers ran in from all over the building to take up their stations.

That the radiant green columns were some form of wormholes was easy enough to establish. The exact status of the people walking out of them was more problematical.

“The serjeants do not contain Edenist personalities,” Aca-cia exclaimed. “General affinity is a babble of voices, they declaim without adherence to simple convention. Clarity has become impossible.”

“Then who are they?”

“I believe they are ex-possessors.”

By then several serjeants with their original Edenist personalities had come through the gateways, helping to clarify the situation, telling every Edenist in or orbiting Ombey that they were the refugees from Ketton island. Even so, Ralph activated the incursion strategy, drawn up in the weeks preceding the liberation in case a wild foray by the possessed penetrated Fort Forward’s perimeter. All ground and air traffic across the camp was shut down, all personnel confined to barracks. Duty marines were rushed to the gateways. The one thing he had to confirm was that the possessors now in serjeant bodies hadn’t retained their energetic power. Once that was proven, he allowed the full-alert status to drop a level. Both he and Admiral Farquar agreed that the SD platforms would continue targeting the gateways. They might be benign now, but who was to say that would last.

For all its strangeness, the situation was a problem of logistics again. The humans who came staggering out of the gateways were in the same kind of physical condition as every other ex-possessed, badly in need of medical treatment and decent food. It couldn’t be coincidence that each gateway had opened just outside a hospital; but their numbers and rate of arrival were putting a severe strain on the immediate medical resources.

As to the serjeants, the one contingency Ralph and his staff had never planned for was acquiring over twelve thousand ex-possessors in non-threatening guise. Ralph initially classified them as prisoners of war, and the AI reassigned three empty blocks of barracks as their accommodation. Marines and mercenaries on leave at the camp were formed into guard squads, confining them to the buildings.

It was a stall manoeuvre; Ralph didn't know what else to do with them. They had to be guilty of more than just being in the enemy army. Other charges would have to be brought, surely? Kidnap and grievous bodily harm, at least. And yet, they were the victims of circumstance—as any lawyer would be bound to argue.

But just for once, the problem of what to do with them afterwards wouldn't be his. He didn't envy Princess Kirsten that decision.

Dean and Will reported to the Ops Room to act as Ralph's escort when he was finally ready for his inspection. The closest gateway was less than a kilometre from the headquarters building itself. Even with the marine squads orchestrated by the AI, the area around it was predictably chaotic. Huge crowds of spectators from all over the camp, including every rover reporter, milled round the gateways to snatch a byte of the action. Dean and Will had to elbow people aside to let Ralph through. At least some degree of order had been established by the time they reached the gateway. The marine captain in charge had established a hundred-metre perimeter. Inside that, marines were deployed to form two distinct passages to shepherd the returnees away. One led back to the nearby hospital entrance, the other finished up at the parking lot, where trucks waited to drive serjeants away to their detention centres. As soon as a figure walked out of the shimmering green light, an assessment team decided which passage they were destined for, a decision backed up by nervejam sticks. All protests were simply ignored.

“Even our remaining original serjeants are going to the detention barracks,” Acacia told Ralph as they shoved their way through the perimeter. “It makes things easier. We can sort them out from the ex-possessors later on.”

“Tell them, thanks. I appreciate it. We need to keep things flowing here.”

The marine captain squelched over to Ralph’s little group and saluted. Rainwater dripped steadily off his skull helmet.

“How’s it going, Captain?” Ralph asked.

“Good, sir. We’ve got a valid supervision routine up and running here now.”

“Well done. You get back, do your job. We’ll try not to get in the way.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Ralph spent a couple of minutes watching quietly as the people and serjeants came flooding out of the green light. Despite the humidity and warm rain, he felt cold trickling through his chest.

Strange, I can accept a wormhole or ZTT jump across light-years as perfectly normal, but a portal leading out of this universe is like a phobia. Is this too *divine* for me, physical proof of a realm where celestials exist? Or the opposite, proof that even the human soul and omnipotent creatures have a rational basis? I’m looking at the end of religions, the fact that we were never visited by any messenger from any creator god. A fact presented in a fashion I can never ignore. The loss of our race’s spiritual innocence.

He could see that the ex-possessed humans that came through were surprised, a dim-witted confusion present on every face as the dreary rain started to soak their clothes. The serjeants lumbered out, their bewilderment less obtrusive, but none of them seemed in full control of their moments during the initial few moments.

Several members of the science investigatory team were wandering round the gateway, waving sensor blocks at it.

Most of the army's scientific staff were down on the peninsula, trying to make sense of the energistic ability. Diana Tiernan was one of the few people content with the sieges, explaining how it gave the physicists a chance to study the power outside the laboratory. Ralph had left her back in the headquarters building, desperately trying to arrange for instruments and personnel to be flown back to Fort Forward.

"That's Sinon," Acacia exclaimed. "He's an original."

Ralph saw a serjeant who lacked the unsteadiness of the others. The assessment team of marines and medics pointed him at the passage of armoured marine troopers. "You sure?" Ralph queried.

"Yes."

Ralph hurried up to the assessment team. "Okay, we'll take this one."

The marine captain's exasperation was throttled back at the interference. "Yes sir."

A thoroughly chastised Ralph led Sinon away. They wound up standing between the gateway and the perimeter ring of marines. His own staff gathered round. "This crystal entity you encountered back there, did it tell you how we could solve the overall problem?" Ralph asked.

"I'm sorry, General. It took the same attitude as the Kiint. We must generate our own solution."

"Damnit! But it was willing to help de-possess bodies."

"Yes. It said it judged us by our own ethics, and that such a theft was wrong."

"Okay, what kind of conditions were you facing in that realm? Did you see any of the other planets?"

"The conditions were what we made of them; the reality dysfunction ability was paramount. Unfortunately, even wishes have limits. We were cast out alone on that island, without any fresh air or food. Nothing could change that. The entity implied that our planets would be considerably more fortunate, not that we saw any. That realm is too vast

for any chance encounter. The entity even hinted it may be more extensive than our own universe, though not necessarily in its physical dimensions. It is an explorer, it went there because it believed it would expand its own knowledge.”

“So it’s not paradise?”

“Definitely not. The possessed are wrong about that. It’s a refuge, that’s all. There’s nothing there which you don’t bring to it yourself.”

“So it is entirely natural?”

“I believe so, yes.”

After the burst of confusion at the start of the exodus, the marines exerted complete control over everyone who came through the gateways. They were on top of the situation, and stayed there right up until the last four serjeants came through. The marines immediately ushered them towards the trucks waiting in the parking lot as they’d done with all the others.

“No way,” Moyo said. “We’re waiting for her.”

“Who?” the marine captain asked.

“Stephanie. She must have gone back somehow.”

“Sorry, no exceptions.”

“Yo, dude,” Cochrane said. “She’s like our righteous leader; and she’s doing her last good deed. So where do you cats come off acting like colonel asswipe?”

The captain wanted to protest, but somehow the sight of a serjeant wearing slim purple sunglasses and a paisley-patterned backpack stopped the words from coming out.

“I mean, she’s like out there all alone battling the last and greatest of the hobgoblin queens, to save *your* soul. The least you can do is act thankful.”

“It’s closing,” McPhee shouted.

The gateway was contracting, shrinking back to a small sliver of emerald shimmering a metre above the surface of the road. The physicists shouted excitedly, datavising fresh

instructions to the considerable sensor array they'd assembled round the transplanetary rift.

"Stephanie!" Moyo yelled.

"Wait," Cochrane said. "It's not shutting down completely. See?"

A small remnant of green light continued to burn steadily.

"She's still there," Moyo said desperately. "She can still make it. Please!" he appealed to the marine captain. "You have to let us wait for her."

"I can't."

"Hang on in there," Cochrane said. "I maybe know someone who can help here." Ever since he'd arrived back on Ombey there had been a thousand alien voices whispering away to each other at the back of his mind. **Sinon**, he yelled at them. **Hey, big dude, you around these parts? It's me, your ol' buddy Cochrane. We like need some high-powered help right now. Stephanie's being cosmically stupid again.**

Acacia took the problem directly to Ralph. He might have been firm about it, but the Edenist mentioned Annette Ekelund.

"Let them wait," Ralph datavised to the marine captain. "We'll set up a watching brief."

An hour and twenty minutes later the gateway expanded briefly to let three humanoid figures stagger out. Stephanie and Annette, in their serjeant bodies, supported a trembling Angeline Gallagher between them. They handed her over to the small medical team, who rushed her into the hospital.

Moyo raced over and flung his arms around Stephanie, his mind leaking a torrent of distress into the general affinity band.

"I thought I'd lost you," he cried. "After all that, I couldn't stand it."

"I'm sorry," she said. A physical embrace was almost im-

possible, their hard skulls *clacked* together loudly as they attempted to kiss.

The rover reporters who'd hung on to the bitter end dodged round the marine guard to close on the strange party.

"Hi there you dudes, I'm Cochrane, one of the like superheroes who got the kids out across the firebreak. That's Cochrane. C-O-C-H . . ."

It was quiet in the detention barracks. Not that the serjeants slept, they didn't need to. They were lying on their bunks or walking round the hall downstairs, being interviewed by the rovers, catching up on AV news shows (mainly featuring themselves). Most of all, they were getting used to the fact they were back in genuine bodies, and owned them one hundred per cent. Apprehension and marvel at their latest turn in fortune had left them stupefied.

Ralph walked through one of the barracks, escorted by a watchful Dean and Will. The marine guard was allowing the serjeants to move around freely, all except one. There were five armed troopers standing outside the door to the office the bitek construct was secured in. Two stood to attention as Ralph approached, the others kept focused on their job.

"Open the door," Ralph ordered.

Dean and Will came in with him, expressions informing any serjeant they'd love it to try taking them on. It was read by the room's sole occupant, who was sitting passively behind a table. Ralph sat down opposite.

"Hello, Annette."

"Ralph Hiltch. General, sir. You are becoming a depressing recurrent feature in my life."

"Yes. And it is a life now, isn't it? How does that feel, coming back from the dead as a real person?"

"This is what I always wanted. So I can't complain. Though I expect I'll eventually become ungrateful about the lack of this body's sexuality."

“You’ll be even more unhappy if I fail, and the possessed come marching over the horizon to capture your fine new body for a lost soul to host.”

“Don’t be so modest. You won’t fail here on Ombey, Ralph. You’re too good at your job. You love it. How many sieges are left now?”

“Five hundred and thirty-two.”

“And falling, I believe. That was a good strategy, Ralph. A good response to Ketton. But I still would have loved to see your face when we took that chunk of landscape out from under your nose.”

“Where did that stunt get you? What did you achieve?”

“I got a body, didn’t I. I’m alive again.”

“Only by chance. And you didn’t help a lot from what I hear.”

“Yes yes, Saint bloody Stephanie the hero of the flying isle. Is the Pope going to give her an audience? I’d like to see that, a bitek abomination with a soul that’s escaped from purgatory having tea at the Vatican.”

“No. The Pope’s not seeing anybody anymore. Earth is falling to possession.”

“Shit! Are you serious?”

“Yes. Last I heard, there were four arcologies infested. It might even have fallen by now. So you see, I won, but you were right after all. This will never be decided here.”

The serjeant sat up straighter, its recessed eyes never moving from Ralph. “You look tired, General. This Liberation is really wearing you down, isn’t it?”

“You and I both know there is no paradise now, no immortality. The possessed can never have what they wanted. What will they do, Annette? What will happen to Earth when it arrives in that sanctuary realm and none of their food synthesis machinery works? What then?”

“They’ll die. Permanently. Their suffering will end.”

“Is that what you’d call a final settlement? Problem over.”

“No. I had that opportunity. I didn’t take it.”

“The beyond is preferable to death?”

“I’m back, aren’t I? Would you prefer me to be on my knees?”

“I’m not here to gloat, Annette.”

“Then what are you here for?”

“I am the supreme commander of the Liberation forces. For the moment that gives me an extraordinary degree of power, and not just in military terms. You tell me if there’s any point to my being here. Can this be settled on Mortonridge, or has everything we’ve both endured all been for nothing?”

“You’re in charge of a weary army facing a dying enemy, Ralph; that’s not a platform for revolution. You’re still trying to validate your glorious war by searching for a noble conclusion. There is none. We are a sideshow. An incredibly expensive, fabulously dramatic entertainment for the accessing masses. We distracted their attention while the real men and women of power decided what our fate was going to be. Political policies determine how the human race confronts this crisis. War doesn’t have that ability. War has only one outcome. War is stupid, Ralph. It is the desecration of the human spirit, martyring yourself for someone else’s dream. It is for people who do not believe in themselves. It is for you, Ralph.”

The security level one sensenviron conference room never changed. Princess Kirsten was already seated at one end of the oval table as the image of white nothingness walls formed around Ralph, seating him at the other end. Nobody else was present.

“Well, what a day,” Kirsten said. “Not only do we get all our people back safely, we wind up with fewer lost souls to plague the living.”

“I want to stop it,” Ralph said. “We’ve won. What we’re doing now has become utterly pointless.”

“There are still over quarter of a million possessed on my planet. My subjects are their victims. I don’t think it’s over.”

“We have them confined. As a threat they’ve been neutralized. Of course we’ll maintain their isolation, but I’m asking that we stop the actual conflict.”

“Ralph, this was your idea. The sieges have stopped all the shooting.”

“And replaced them with Urswick. Is that what you want, your subjects eating each other?”

The image of the Princess showed no emotional response. “The longer they remain possessed, the bigger their cancers grow. Those bodies will die unless we actively intervene and rescue them.”

“Ma’am, I am going to issue an order that food and basic medical supplies are handed over to the possessed currently under siege. I will not rescind it. If you do not want it issued, then you will have to relieve me of my duty.”

“Ralph, what the hell is this? We’re winning. Forty-three sieges collapsed today. Another ten days, a fortnight at the most, and it’ll all be over.”

“It is over here, ma’am. Persecuting the possessed that remain is . . . disgusting. You listened to me before—God, that’s how this whole thing began. Please give the same consideration to what I’m saying now.”

“You’re saying nothing, Ralph. This is a media war, a propaganda exercise, that’s what it always was. With your cooperation, I might add. We must have total victory.”

“We already have it. This is more. We found out today that it’s possible to open a gateway to the realm where the possessed flee to. Nobody understands it, the physics behind it; but we know it’s possible now. We will be able to replicate the effect ourselves some day. The possessed can’t hide away from us any more. That’s our victory. We can make

them face up to what they are, what their limits are. That way we can go on to find a solution.”

“Expand that for me.”

“We now have the power of life and death over the possessed under siege, especially now the Confederation navy is working on anti-memory. By concluding the sieges with their capitulation, we’re wasting our position, our tactical advantage. Ekelund said this crisis will never be decided here on Ombey, by us. I used to believe her. But today changed that. We are in a unique position to force the possessed to cooperate and help us find a solution. There *is* a solution—the Kiint found one, the crystal entities found one, we even think the Laymil found one—not that mass suicide would be valid for humans. So give the remaining possessed food, let them recover, and then start negotiating. We can use the Ketton island veterans to go in and open up a dialogue for us.”

“You mean the serjeants, the ex-possessors?”

“Who better. They have first-hand experience that the sanctuary realm is nothing of the sort. If anybody can convince them, those serjeants can.”

“Good God. First you want the kingdom to adopt bitek, now you’d have me allied with the lost souls themselves.”

“We know what being antagonistic to them brings us. A fifth of a continent devastated, thousands of deaths, hundreds of thousands of cancer victims. This has been suffering on a scale we’ve not had since the Garissa genocide. Make it mean something, ma’am, make some good come out of it. If it’s possible, if there is the slightest chance that this might work, you cannot ignore it.”

“Ralph, you are going to be the death of my senior advisors.”

“Then they can come back from the beyond and persecute me. Am I free to give the order?”

“If any of these possessed use this as an opportunity to try and break out, I want them in zero-tau within a day.”

“Understood.”

“Very well, General Hiltch, give your order.”

Al had moved to a suite a couple of floors up the Hilton where all the utilities still worked. The doctors needed a reliable electrical supply, fancy phone lines, clean air, that kind of crap. They'd turned the new suite's bedroom into a treatment room, raiding Monterey's hospital for equipment and medical packages. More stuff had been flown up from San Angeles. Stuff that gave Al the creeps: bits of other people, living organs and muscles and veins and skin. Emmet had run a planet-wide search for a pair of compatible eyes, eventually tracking them down to a storage vault in Sunset Island. A priority flight had brought them up to Monterey.

The doctors said it was going well. Jez was out of danger. They'd replaced her blood and grafted on skin and tissue where Kiera had burned down to the bone, implanted the new eyes. Once the operations were over, they'd covered her in medical packages. Now it was just a question of time until she healed over, they'd assured him.

They didn't like Al visiting too much. Jez looked so helpless smothered in that green plastic substance he got all worked up, which screwed up the packages. So he didn't get too near, just hung out by the door and watched over her. Like a guy should do for his dame. It gave him time to think a lot.

Mickey, Emmet, and Patricia came into the suite's lounge. Al had one of the stewards hand round drinks as they sat round the low brass and marble table, then ordered everyone else out of the room.

“Okay, Emmet, how long till they get here?”

“I figure some time in the next ten hours, Al.”

“Fair enough.” Al lit a Havana and blew a long trail of

smoke at the high ceiling. "On the level, can we fight them off?"

Emmet took a sip of the bourbon and replaced the glass on the table, studying it keenly. "No, Al, we're going to lose. Even if they only use the same level of force as they did against Arnstat, we'll lose. And they'll be carrying enough combat wasps to fire two or three times as many at us. Everything in orbit above New California will be wiped out. The ships can jump away. But they've got nowhere to go except for the last couple of planets we infiltrated. And I'm not too sure they'll even manage that. We think the Navy's void-hawks pursued a lot of our guys from Arnstat and blew them up after they'd jumped away. There weren't too many made it back here."

"Thanks, Emmet, I appreciate you being straight with me. Mickey, Patricia, what's the word among the soldiers?"

"They're getting jumpy, Al," Patricia said. "No two ways about it. There's been enough time for what that bitch Kiera said to start registering. The Organization's put us on top, but that makes us a target. We know we can't take over another planet again, New California is all we've got. A lot of them want to go down there."

"But we're holding them, Al," Mickey said. His nervous tic was palpitating away. "I don't take no shit from any of my people. They're loyal. You made us, Al, we'll stay with you."

His blind enthusiasm made Al smile faintly. "I ain't asking no one to commit suicide for me, Mickey. They wouldn't do it anyway; they all came out of the beyond, remember. They ain't gonna go back just because I ask nice. Party's over, guys. We had fun for a while, but we've reached the end of the road. I got a bum rap from history once, I ain't having that again. This time people are gonna say I did the best for everyone. They're gonna show me some genuine respect."

“How?” Patricia asked.

“Because we’re going out in style. It’s gonna be me who stops the slaughter. I’m gonna make the Navy an offer they can’t refuse.”

The *Ilex* was one of the voidhawks who had taken up an observation position two million kilometres out from New California in the wake of the mass hellhawk defection from the Organization. The Yosemite Consensus had soon found out about Almaden. Hellhawks had been delivering non-possessed survivors to the habitats, a repatriation deal for rebuilding the asteroid’s nutrient refinery, they said. Consensus hadn’t finished reviewing the implications of that yet; it seemed unlikely that they could maintain the machinery for more than a few years. However, that the hellhawks so actively sought to avoid combat was a particularly welcome development. Capone’s actual motives for allowing and even assisting such an action were highly questionable.

Whatever the true reason, it left Yosemite with an excellent opportunity to re-establish its observation of New California and the Organization fleet. *Ilex* had been assigned to review the low-orbit SD network in preparation for the arrival of Admiral Kolhammer’s attack force. They deployed their spyglobes and waited for them to complete the long fall down below geostationary orbit. There was still an hour to go before the little sensors started to return useful data when a communication beam from Monterey was aligned on them.

“I wanna talk to the captain,” Al Capone said.

Auster immediately informed the Yosemite habitats. Their Consensus came together, reviewing the situation through his eyes and ears. “This is Captain Auster. What can I do for you, Mr Capone?”

Al grinned, and turned to someone out of view. “Hey, you

got that on the dime, they're as prissy as the Limeys. Okay, Auster, we all reckon that the Navy is due here any minute now. Right?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny such an event."

"Bullshit, they're on their way."

"What do you want, Mr Capone?"

"I need to talk to the guy in charge, the admiral. And I need to do that before he starts shooting. Can you fix that for me?"

"What do you wish to talk to him about?"

"Hey, that's between me and him, pal. Now can you set that up, or do you wanna sit back and let a whole load of people get slaughtered? I thought that was against your religion or something."

"I'll see what I can do."

Illustrious emerged in the centre of the voidhawk defence sphere formation, 300,000 kilometres above New California. Admiral Kolhammer waited impatiently for the tactical display, cursing the delay while the warship's sensors deployed.

Lieutenant Commander Kynea, the voidhawk liaison staff leader, called out: "Sir, local voidhawks have received a communications request. Al Capone wants to talk to you."

It wasn't something Motela Kolhammer was expecting, but the probability was always there. Capone didn't have to be a genius to work out where the attack force was heading after Arnstat.

The tactical display was coming on line, supplemented by information from the Yosemite voidhawks. The news that the hellhawks had departed was extremely welcome. Though even without them New California had a prodigious defence network; its strength had determined the ultimate size of the attack force. So far, none of the platforms had fired.

"I'll listen to him," Kolhammer said. "But I want our deployment to continue as planned."

"Aye, sir."

The *Illustrious* aligned one of its communication dishes on Monterey.

"So you're the admiral, huh?" Al Capone asked once the link was established.

"Admiral Kolhammer, Confederation Navy. Currently commanding the attack force emerging above New California."

"I guess I must have frightened you people, huh?"

"Guess again."

"I don't think so. I got it right first time, pal. There's one fuck of a lot of you. That means you're running scared."

"Interpret our emergence how you choose. It is of no relevance to me. Did you wish to surrender?"

"Blunt son of a bitch, ain't you?"

"I've been called many things, that's one of the milder observations."

"You killed a lot of people on Arnstat, Admiral."

"No. You did. You backed us into a position where we had no alternative but to respond appropriately."

Al grinned brightly. "Like I said, I frightened you. That's a big tough decision your Assembly must have made, sacrifice an entire planet just to whack me. Taxpayers ain't gonna like that, no sir. You're supposed to be protecting them. That's your duty."

"I'm very aware of my duty to the Confederation, Mr Capone. I don't need you to tell me that."

"Have it whatever way you want. Thing is, I've got an offer for you."

"Go ahead."

"You're gonna shoot off a shitload of artillery at us, right. I mean, it's gonna be like the fucking Alamo in here."

"You'll discover my intentions soon enough."

“We’ve got over a million people up here, more if you count all us poor lost souls; but certainly a million flesh-and-blood bodies. Plenty of women and children, too. I can prove that; there’s stuff my technical guys can send you, lists and records and such. Do you really want to kill them all?”

“No, I do not wish to kill anybody.”

“That’s good, we can talk about that.”

“Talk quickly.”

“Pretty simple; I ain’t gonna jive-ass you. You’ve already decided you’ll give up New California just to get rid of me. Well, I gotta tell you, I’m real flattered. That’s one hell of a price to put on a single guy’s head, you know. So in return, I’m gonna do you a favour. I’ll send all my people down to the planet, all the possessed here in Monterey and the other asteroids, everyone in the fleet, the whole goddamn lot of them. Then when we’re all down on the ground, we’ll take the planet away. This way nobody gets hurt, and you get back all the hostages I’m keeping up here. I’ll even throw in the antimatter as well. How does that grab you, Admiral?”

“It grabs me as fundamentally unbelievable.”

“Hey shit-for-brains, you want a bloodbath that bad and maybe I’ll just give the order to butcher all the hostages right now, before your weapons ever reach us.”

“No. Please don’t. I apologise. What I should have asked was, why? Why are you making this offer?”

Al leaned in closer to the sensor transmitting his image to the *Illustrious*. “Look, I’m just trying to do what’s right here. You’re going to kill people. Maybe I pushed you into that, maybe not. But now it’s here, I’m trying to stop it, I ain’t no goddamn maniac. So I offer you a way out that leaves both of us looking good.”

“Let me get this straight, you are proposing to ferry every possessed down to the planet, disarm your fleet and hand back the asteroids?”

“Hey, slow but smart. You got it. In return for letting us keep our bodies, we leave and don’t bother you again. That’s it. End of story.”

“Moving that many people down to the planet would take some time.”

“Emmet, my guy, he says about a week.”

“I see. So while my ships sit out here doing nothing, what guarantee can you make that you’re not simply trying to pull another Trafalgar strike against us under cover of this withdrawal?”

Al gave him the *look*. “That’s fucking low, pal. What’s to stop you shooting when we’re halfway through evacuating and I got fewer ships to give my people covering fire?”

“In other words, we have to trust each other.”

“Bet your ever-loving ass.”

“Very well. My ships will not launch any offensive while your evacuation is in progress. And Mr Capone?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. You just be sure and tell everyone back home that I ain’t no cracker-barrel fishball. I got me some style.”

“Of course you have. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Al leaned back in his chair and switched off the super telephone machine. “No, guess you wouldn’t,” he said contentedly.

Jezzibella stood in the bedroom doorway. She wore a blue towelling gown loosely over her green wrappings, helping to make her look slightly more human and not so much like a plastic version of the Tin Man out of Oz.

He shot to his feet. “Hey, you shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“It doesn’t make any difference if I’m lying down or not. The packages work either way.” She walked slowly across the lounge, barely flexing her knees. Lowering herself into the chair was difficult. Al made a real effort not to go over

and help, he could see how much doing it all by herself meant. Toughest girl in the galaxy.

“So what have you been doing?” she asked. The voice was muffled through the slit in her mask package.

“Putting a stop to all this crap. My guys, they can scoot down to the planet and get home free.”

“I thought so. That’s very statesmanlike of you, baby.”

“I got a reputation to keep, you know.”

“I know. But Al, what happens when the Confederation finds out how to bring planets back? I mean, that’s what all this was about, wasn’t it? Standing up to them on their home ground.”

He reached over the table and gripped her hands. The fingers were sticking out from the end of the packages, allowing him some genuine contact with her skin. “We lost, Jez. Okay? We were so goddamn good, we lost. Go figure. We frightened them too much. I had to make a choice. The fleet can’t fight this admiral off. No way. So letting the planet go is the smart way to deal with it. The way I see it, my guys get years more living in their bodies. At least. And the Confederation longhairs ain’t gonna risk bringing them back until they’ve found a way of giving us new bodies, or something. They’d just start the whole thing over. Who knows, maybe New California can vanish from the next universe, too. There’s a lot of things can happen. This way, nobody dies, we all win.”

“You’re the best, baby. I knew it right from the start. When do we go down?”

Al squeezed her fingers a little tighter, looking into her face. He could just see her new eyes through the green package, like she was wearing swimming goggles, only they were full of liquid. “You can’t, Jez. Christ, your medical stuff only just works up here. Where New California’s headed, who knows what’s going to go bust. You’re healing up real good now, all the docs say so. But you need more

time to get perfect. I ain't gonna allow nothing to interfere with that."

"No, Al, I'm going with you."

"Wrong. I'm staying here. See, we'll still be together."

"No."

"Yeah." He sat back, and waved an arm round in a gesture that took in the whole asteroid. "Done deal, Jez. Someone's got to stay here and keep the space weapons going while the guys fly down to the planet. I don't trust that motherhumping admiral none."

"Al, you can't operate the SD platforms. For fuck's sake, you don't even know how to work the hotel air conditioner."

"Yeah. But the admiral don't know that."

"They'll catch you. They'll expel you from that body. It'll be the beyond for the rest of time. Please, Al. I'll work the SD platforms. Be safe. I can live as long as I know you're safe."

"You're forgetting something, Jez: everyone forgets, except maybe good old brown-nose Bernhard. I'm Al Capone. I ain't scared of the beyond. Never was. Never will be."

The voidhawk from New California arrived just as First Admiral Aleksandrovich's flyer touched down. It meant he could walk into the Polity Council meeting primed with some good news—always a good negotiating position to be in.

His first surprise came at the Polity Council chamber door. Jeeta Anwar was waiting outside for the navy delegation.

"The President has asked me to inform you that no aides are required for this session," she said.

Samual Aleksandrovich gave Keaton and al-Sahhaf a bemused glance. "They're not that dangerous," he said jovially.

"I'm sorry, sir," Jeeta said.

Samual considered making a fuss; he didn't like that kind of surprise being thrown at him. If nothing else, it told him the coming meeting was going to be unusual, and probably disagreeable. Having his aides with him couldn't stop that. "Very well."

The second surprise was how few ambassadors were sitting around the big circle of antique sequoia in the council chamber. Three in total, representing New Washington, Oshanko, and Mazaliv. Lord Kelman Mountjoy was also present. Samual Aleksandrovich gave him a cautious nod as he sat to the left of Olton Haaker.

"I don't believe you have a quorum here," he said mildly.

"Not of the Polity Council, no," President Haaker said.

Samual didn't like the man's stilted voice; something was making the President very nervous. "Then please tell me what this meeting is."

"We are here to formulate future policy towards the possessed situation," Kelman Mountjoy said. "It's not something the old Confederation is capable of addressing satisfactorily."

"The old Confederation?"

"Yes. We are proposing a restructuring."

Samual Aleksandrovich listened in growing dismay as the Kulu foreign minister explained the reasoning behind the core-Confederation idea. Stopping the slow spread of possession, strengthening the defences of the key star systems. Establishing a solid, economically stable society capable of finding an overall solution.

"Do you propose including the Edenists?" Samual asked when he'd finished.

"They were not receptive to the concept," Kelman said. "However, since they have a reserve position along very similar lines, their ultimate inclusion is highly probable. We would have no problem continuing to trade with them, as they

are by and large immune to the kind of infiltration that results from quarantine-busting flights.”

“And they supply every Adamist world with energy,” Samual said scathingly.

Kelman managed not to smile. “Not all,” he said softly.

Samual turned to the President. “You cannot allow this to happen, it is economic apartheid. It transgresses every ethic of equality which the Confederation represents. We must protect everybody alike.”

“The Navy isn’t even capable of doing that now,” Olton Haaker said sadly. “And you’ve seen the economic projections my office compiled. We cannot afford the current level of deployment, let alone sustain it for any reasonable length of time. Something has to give, Samual.”

“In effect, it’s already given,” Kelman said. “The attack on Arnstat and New California was an admission that we can no longer afford to indulge the current status quo. The Polity Council chose, and you agreed, that we had to lose those planets in order to help safeguard the rest. The core-Confederation is the logical conclusion of that development. It safeguards our entire race by ensuring that there will always be a part of it free from possession and able to search for a solution.”

“I find it interesting that your proposal safeguards only your part of the human race. The rich section.”

“Firstly, by ending the unrealistic level of subsidy our worlds extend to stage-two star systems, they will also contract and therefore become safer. Secondly, there is no point in the richer star systems impoverishing and weakening themselves when to do so will not result in a solution. We have to address the real facts, and do so with resolution.”

“The quarantine works. In time, and if everyone pools their intelligence data, we can end the illegal flights. There is no more Organization; Capone has surrendered New California to Admiral Kolhammer.”

“These arguments are the ebb and flow in the tide of obsolete politics,” Kelman said. “Yes, you’ve nullified Capone. But we’ve now lost Earth. Mortonridge has been effectively liberated, but at a shocking price. Zero-tau can de-possess someone, but the released body will be plagued with cancer and tie up our medical facilities for years. This has all got to stop. A line must be drawn under the past in order to free our future.”

“You approach this as if possession is the whole problem,” Samuel said. “It is not, it is a spinoff from the fact we have immortal souls and some of them are entrapped in the beyond. The answer to this—how we learn to live with such knowledge, whatever it is—must be embraced by the entire human race; from some delinquent mugger on a stage-one colony planet right up to your king. We have to face this as one. If you split us up, you cannot reach and educate the very people who are most likely to be blighted by this revelation. I cannot agree to this. I will not agree to this.”

“Samual, you have to,” the President said. “Without funding from the core-Confederation worlds, there can be no Navy.”

“Every planetary system funds the Confederation Navy.”

“Not equally, they don’t,” said Verano, the New Washington ambassador. “Between us, the worlds proposing to form the core-Confederation provide eighty per cent of your over-all funding.”

“You can’t just split . . . Ah! Now I understand.” Samuel gave Olton Haaker a contemptuous look. “Did they offer you the new presidency in exchange for pushing the transition? You might call this coalition the core-Confederation, but in effect you’d all be withdrawing from the actual Confederation. There is no continuation, certainly not in legal terms. Every one of my officers renounced their national citizenship upon joining; the Confederation Navy is responsi-

ble to the Assembly in its entirety, not special interest blocs.”

“A hell of a lot of your fleets are made up from national detachments,” Verano said hotly. “They will be taken back along with fleet bases. You’d be left with ships you couldn’t support in star systems you couldn’t defend.”

Kelman held up a hand, raising his index finger, which silenced the ambassador. “The Navy will do as you say, Samual, we all acknowledge that. As for legality and ownership, ambassador Verano has a point. We have paid for those ships.”

“And the core-Confederation would become the new law,” Samual said.

“Precisely. You want to protect humanity, then become a realist. The core-Confederation will be brought into existence. You understand politics probably better than most of us; you would never have been appointed First Admiral otherwise. We have decided this is the best way our interests are served. We are doing it so that ultimately a solution will be achieved. It’s in our own petty selfish interest to make sure a solution is found, God knows I have no wish to die now I know what awaits. If nothing else, you can trust us to put unlimited resources into the problem. Help us safeguard our boundaries, Admiral, bring the fleet over to the core-Confederation. We are the guarantee of ultimate success for our whole race. That is what you were sworn to protect, I believe.”

“I do not need reminding of my honour by you,” Samual said.

“I apologise.”

“I will need to think about this before I give you an answer.” He rose to his feet. “I will also consult my senior officers.”

Kelman bowed. “I know this is difficult. I’m sorry you were ever put in such a position.”

Samual didn't speak to his two aides until he was back on the Marine flyer and heading up to the orbiting station that was serving as his new headquarters.

"Can the remaining star systems afford to keep the Navy going by themselves?" al-Sahhaf asked.

"I doubt it," Samual said. "God damn it, they'll be left absolutely defenceless."

"A neat piece of applied logic," Keaton said. "They are going to be left defenceless anyway. If you don't bring the Navy to the core-Confederation, then you will have achieved nothing for them, and weakened the core-Confederation at the same time."

"Are you saying we should go along with this?"

"Personally sir, no I don't. But it's the oldest political squeeze manoeuvre there is. If we're left out in the cold we can achieve nothing. If we join up, then there's the opportunity to influence policy from inside, and from a considerable position of strength."

"Lord Mountjoy isn't stupid," al-Sahhaf said. "He'll be willing to negotiate with you in private. Perhaps we can maintain the CNIS throughout the class-two star systems, continue to provide the governments intelligence on possessed movements."

"Yes," Samual said. "Mountjoy would favour that, or something very similar. It's the ebb and flow of politics."

"Do you want to meet him, sir?" Keaton asked.

"That almost sounds as though you're putting temptation in my way, Captain."

"No, sir!"

"Well, I don't want to meet him. Not yet. I am not prepared to see the Navy disbanded and junked through my stubbornness. It's a powerful force to counter the possessed at a physical level, and that must not be lost to the human race. I need to talk this through with Lalwani, and see if the Edenists would consider supporting the fleet. If they can't,

then I'll meet Mountjoy and discuss handing it over to the core-Confederation. We must remember that military force ultimately exists to serve the civilian populace, even though we might despise their choice of leaders."

The intensity of the cold was astonishing. Waves of it slithered right through every part of the escape pod, washing the heat away. The temperature sink was so profound it began to alter the colour of plastic components, bleaching them like a dose of ultra violet light. Tolton's breath condensed into a layer of iron-hard frost on every surface.

They'd taken the survival clothing from the supply lockers, and he'd put on as many layers as it was physically possible to do. He looked even fatter than Dariat, his face shrouded by thick bandages of cloth he'd wound round and round to protect his ears and neck. His exposed skin had acquired its own sprinkling of frost, each eyelash resembling a miniature icicle.

The pod's power cells were draining away as fast as the heat. At first the environmental circuit had chugged away merrily, heating the air and extracting the water vapour. Then they ran a simple analysis and realized that at their current rate of use the cells would be empty in forty minutes. Dariat slowly shut down all the pod's systems, like navigation and communications, and thrusters. Then when Tolton was snug in two heated suits and all his insulated clothes, he switched off everything except the carbon dioxide scrubber and a single fan. At that consumption rate, the power cells should have lasted two days.

Tolton's heated suits went through their inventory of power cells a lot quicker than they'd expected. The last one was exhausted fifteen hours after they'd entered the mélange. After that he started drinking soup out of self-heating sachets.

"How much longer is the hull going to hold out?" he

asked between juddering sips. He was wearing so much clothing he couldn't bend his arms, so Dariat had to hold the sachet nipple to his lips.

"Not sure. My extra senses aren't up to that kind of work." Dariat beat his own arms against his chest. The cold didn't affect him as badly, but even so he'd clad himself in several woolly sweaters and some thick track suit bottoms. "The nulltherm foam has probably gone by now. The hull will just evaporate away until it's so thin the pressure from the mélange implodes us. It'll be quick."

"Pity. I could do with feeling something. Bit of pain would be a nice sensation right now."

Dariat grinned over at his friend. Tolton's lips were jet black, the skin peeling away.

"What's wrong?" Tolton croaked.

"Nothing. Just thinking, we could try firing one of the rockets. Maybe that would heat the pod up a bit."

"Yeah. It would push us out to the other side quicker, too."

"'Bout time that happened. So, if you could have anything you wanted waiting for us, what would it be?"

"Tropical island, with beaches stretching on for kilometres. Sea as warm as bathwater."

"Any women there?"

"Oh God yes." He blinked, and his lashes stuck together. "I can't see anything."

"Lucky you. Do you know what a sight you are?"

"What about you? What do you want waiting on the other side?"

"You know that: Anastasia. I lived for her. I died for her. I sacrificed my soul for her . . . well, her sister anyway. I thought she might be watching at the time. Wanted to make a good impression."

"Don't worry, you already have, man. I keep telling you,

a love like yours is going to make her giddy. The chicks really dig that kind of mad devotion crap.”

“You’re the most insensitive poet I’ve ever met.”

“Street poet. I don’t do the roses and chocolates routine, I’m too much of a realist.”

“I bet roses and chocolates pay more.” When there was no answer, Dariat took a close look at Tolton’s face. He was still breathing, but very slowly, air whistling past the fangs of ice crusting his mouth. There were no shivers any more.

Dariat rolled back onto his own acceleration couch and waited patiently. It took another twenty minutes before Tolton’s ghost rose up out of the bloated bundle of fabric. He took one astounded look at Dariat, then put his head back and laughed.

“Oh shit, will you grab a load of this. I’m the soul of a poet.” The laughter degenerated into sobbing. “The soul of a poet. Get it? You’re not laughing. You’re not laughing and it’s fucking funny. It’s the last funny thing you’ll ever know for the rest of all eternity. *Why aren’t you laughing?*”

“Shush.” Dariat’s head came up. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear them? There’s a billion trillion souls out there. Of course I can fucking hear them.”

“No. Not the souls in the *mélange*. I thought I heard someone calling. A human voice.”

28

It had been a long night for Fletcher Christian. They'd kept him chained to the altar with electricity coursing through him while the madness whirled all around. He'd seen Dexter's followers chopping up the beautifully crafted wooden model of St Paul's which Sir Christopher Wren had built to show off his dream, throwing splintered fragments into the iron braziers which now illuminated the building. The silent slaughter as people were dragged up to the altar where Dexter waited with the anti-memory weapon. Fletcher wept as their souls were destroyed in readiness for their bodies to be replenished by those from the beyond, personalities more compliant to the dark Messiah's wishes. Salty tears leaked into the runes mutilating his cheeks, stinging like acid. Courtney's crazed shrieking laugh as Dexter ravaged her until blood flowed and skin blistered.

Sacrilege. Murder. Barbarism. It never stopped. Each act pounding away at the few senses he had remaining. He recited the Lord's Prayer over and over until Dexter heard him, and the possessed closed in, screaming some obscene chant in counter. Their cruel words slipped into him with the force of daggers, their joy in evil tormenting him into si-

lence. He feared his mind would snap from the pressure of such depravity.

Throughout it all, the font of energistic power increased along with their numbers, spreading out to engulf mind and matter alike. This was not the shared longing he'd known on Norfolk, the genuine appetite to hide from emptiness. Here Dexter absorbed what strength his followers offered and forged its shape with his own damned desires.

As the sullied red light crept through the open door, mocking the night, Fletcher finally heard the cries of the fallen angels. On top of everything else, their diabolical poignancy nearly broke his resolve. Surely not even Dexter could think of letting such beasts loose upon the earth.

"No," Fletcher wailed. "You cannot bring them forth. It is madness. Madness. They will consume us all."

Dexter's face slid into view above him, coldly radiant with satisfaction. "About fucking time you understood."

Lady Macbeth emerged from her jump deep in interstellar space, one thousand nine hundred light years from the Confederation. The sensation of isolation and loneliness among those on board was nothing to how small that distance made them feel.

Star tracker sensors slid out of their recesses, gathering up the faint harvest of photons. Navigation programs correlated what was there, defining their position.

Joshua triangulated on their target, an unremarkable point of light only thirty-two light-years away now. Their next jump coordinate sprang into his mind, blinking purple at the end of a long neuroiconic tube of orange circles. The star was slightly to one side of it, a distance that represented relative delta-V. Starship and star were still moving at very different velocities as they orbited the galactic core.

"Stand by," he said. "Accelerating."

There were groans across the bridge. They dried up soon

enough as he activated the antimatter drive. Four gees pushed everyone down into their couches except for Kempster Getchell; the old astronomer had gone into a zero-tau pod after the second jump. "Too much for my bones," he'd complained gamely. "Fetch me out when we get there."

Everyone else stuck it out. Not that the crew had a choice. Seventeen jumps in twenty-three hours, each one fifteen light-years long. In itself, probably a record. Nobody was counting now; they'd devoted themselves entirely to keeping the systems functioning smoothly, a professionalism not many could match. Pride had increased to accompany an edgy anticipation as the Sleeping God star grew closer.

Joshua remained in his acceleration couch, piloting them to each coordinate with his usual sublime competence. Nothing much was said as the Orion Nebula shrank away behind them. It was smaller in every star tracker scan, dwindling down to a diminutive fuzzy patch of light the last familiar astronomical feature left in the universe. Every fusion generator was running at maximum capacity, recharging the nodes fast. That was why Joshua used high gees between coordinates, instead of the usual one tenth. Time. It had become the most precious commodity left to him.

Instinct drove him on. That enigmatic, bland star holding steady at the apex of the sensor lock was giving out the same siren song as those strikes in the Ruin Ring once had. So much had happened on this flight. So much of his own hope had been invested now. He couldn't, didn't, believe that it had all been for nothing. The Sleeping God existed. A xenoc artefact, powerful enough to interest the Kiint. They'd been right all along, the discoveries made throughout the flight continually emphasising its importance.

"Nodes charged and ready, Captain," Dahybi reported.

"Thanks," Joshua said. He automatically ran a vector check. The old girl was performing well. Three more hours, two more jumps, and they'd be there. The flight would be

over. That was the part he found hard to credit. There were so many roots elevating the *Lady Mac* to this encounter. Kelly Tirell and the mercs back on Lalonde. Jay Hilton and Haile (wherever they were now). Tranquillity escaping the Organization fleet. Further back than that, a single message being passed across 1,500 light-years of empty space, loyally relayed from star to star by a species that never should have escaped their sun's expansion in the first place. And Swantic-LI, finding the Sleeping God originally. Improbable chances in an event chain 15,000 years long linking that single unlikely meeting to the fate of an entire species.

He didn't believe in odds that long. That just left destiny, divine intervention.

Interesting, given what they were supposedly flying towards.

Louise awoke in some confusion. A young man was lying on top of her. Both of them were naked.

Andy, she remembered. It was his flat: small, grubby, cluttered, and so warm the air itself seemed to have thickened. Condensation had licked every surface to glisten in the dark-pink light of dawn that drizzled through the fogged window.

I will not regret what we did last night, she told herself firmly. I have no reason to feel guilty. I did what I wanted to. I am entitled to do that.

She tried to ease him to one side and slip out from underneath, but the bed simply wasn't big enough. He stirred, frowning as he focused on her. Then he flinched in shock.

"Louise!"

She gave him a brave smile. "At least you remembered my name."

"Louise. Oh God." He lurched back into a kneeling position. His eyes stared down greedily at her body, and his mouth twisted into a beatific smile. "Louise. You're real."

“Yes. I’m real.”

His head darted forward, and he kissed her. “I love you, Louise. Darling, my darling, I love you so much.” He lowered himself against her, kissing her face urgently; his hands cupped her breasts, fingers teasing her nipples exactly the way she’d cherished last night. “I love you, and we’re together at the end.”

“Andy.” She shifted round, wincing at how sore her breasts were. For someone so skinny, he was surprisingly strong.

“Oh God, you’re so beautiful.” His tongue was licking over her lips, desperate to be inside her mouth.

“Andy, stop.”

“I love you, Louise.”

“No!” She pushed herself up. “Listen to me. You don’t love me, Andy, and I don’t love you. It was just sex.” Her mouth parted in a small smile, softening the blow as much as she could. “All right, it was *very* good sex. But nothing else.”

“You came to me.” His pleading voice came close to cracking, there was so much hurt in the words.

Louise’s guilt was awful. “I told you that everyone else I know has either left the arcology or been captured by the possessed. That’s why I’m here. As for the rest . . . well, we both wanted that. There’s no reason not to now.”

“Don’t I mean anything to you?” he asked in desperation.

“Of course you do, Andy.” She stroked his arm, and leaned in closer, making the contact more intimate. “You don’t think I’d do that with just anyone, do you?”

“No.”

“Remember what we did?” she whispered in his ear. “How bad we were?”

Andy blushed, unable to look at her. “Yes.”

“Good.” She kissed him lightly. “This is one night we’ll keep with us forever. Nobody can ever take it away from us, no matter what happens to us now.”

"I still love you. I have ever since I saw you. That'll never change."

"Oh Andy." She cradled him against her chest, rocking gently. "I didn't want to hurt you. Believe me, please."

"You haven't hurt me. You couldn't. Not you."

Louise sighed. "Funny how different life could be, so many things that make you take one route instead of another. If only we could live them all."

"I'd live them all with you."

She hugged him tighter. "I think I'm going to envy the girl who winds up with you. She's going to be so lucky."

"Won't happen now, will it?"

"No. I suppose not." She gave the opaque window a resentful look, hating the day outside, the way time was advancing and what it would invariably bring. There was something else coming through the glass, riding the crimson light: a sense of rancour. It made her uneasy, almost fearful. And that red light was very deep for a dawn sun, it reminded her of Duchess.

She let go of Andy and padded over to the high window. Standing on one of the boxes brought her face up level with it. She smeared the condensation away.

"Oh dear Jesus."

"What's the matter?" Andy asked. He hurried across and peered over her shoulder.

It wasn't dawn shining in, that was still two hours away. A large circular swirl of red cloud hung in the centre of the Westminster dome, a few hundred yards above the ground. Its malign glow glimmered off the geodesic crystal above, turning the struts to a lattice of burnished copper. The underside shone a blood-red light down on the roofs and walls of the city, staining them all an unhealthy magenta. Its leading edge was less than a mile away from the tenement, undulating gently.

"Shit!" he hissed. "We've got to get out of here."

“There’s nowhere to go, Andy. The possessed are all around us.”

“But . . . Oh shit. Why isn’t somebody doing something? New York is still holding them off. We should organize ourselves and fight back like them.”

Louise walked back to the bed and sat down carefully. After last night, some movements were quite difficult. She used her neural nanonics to run a physiological review, making sure the baby was all right. It was, and she had nothing worse than a few tender areas. The medical nanonic package infused some biochemicals into her bloodstream which should help. “We did try to do something,” she said. “But it failed last night.”

“You did?” Andy was standing in front of her, sweat pricking his skin. He rubbed his forehead, brushing damp hair from his eyes. “You mean you’re involved in this?”

“I came to Earth to warn the authorities about a possessed called Quinn Dexter. I needn’t have bothered, they already knew. He’s the one behind all this. I was helping them to find him, because I’ve seen him before.”

“I thought the Capone Organization had infiltrated us.”

“No, that’s just what Govcentral told the media. They didn’t want anyone to know what they were actually up against.”

“Bloody hell,” he groaned, badly downcast. “Fine excuse for a net don I make. Can’t even find that out for myself.”

“Don’t worry about it. GSDI is a lot smarter than people think.” She stood up, the reminder of B7 making her restless. “I need the bathroom. You said it was at the end of the hall?”

“Yes. Er, Louise.”

“What?”

“I think you’ll need something to wear.”

She looked down at herself, and grinned. Totally unself-conscious standing naked in front of a boy, and not just any

boy, a casual sex partner. Maybe I have lost some of my Norfolk past after all. "I think you're right."

Her own clothes were in the pile where she'd thrown them, still damp and badly crumpled. Andy leant her a pair of grey jeans and a smartish navy-blue Jude's Eworld sweat-shirt, pulling them out of a box where they'd been partially protected against the humidity.

When she got back he'd just finished wiring a couple of power cells into his air conditioner. The galvanised box started shuddering as the motor spun up, then sent out a clammy stream of cold air. Louise stood in front of it trying to get her hair dry.

"I've got some food stockpiled," Andy said. "Do you want breakfast?"

"Please."

He pulled some preprepped meal trays out of a box and slid them into the oven. Louise started examining the flat in detail. He really was an electronics fanatic, just as he'd claimed at the Lake Isle restaurant. None of his wages had been spent on furnishings, or even clothes by the look of it. Gadgetry lay everywhere: ageing tools and blocks, spools of wire and fibre, microscopic components in lens cases, delicate test rigs; one wall was a rack of fleks. When she peeked into the other room, it was jumbled high with ancient domestic units. He scavenged them for components, he said. Repair work brought in some handy cash. She smiled at the familiar dinner jacket which was hanging up on the back of the door in its own plastic sheath, so obviously out of place.

The oven ejected their meal trays. Andy pushed a flat orange juice carton into the nozzle on his water dispenser; bubbles gurgled up through the big glass bottle. The carton expanded outwards as the juice constituted itself.

"Andy?" Louise stared at the conurbation of electronics,

suddenly cursing herself. "Have you got a working communications block here, something that can reach a satellite?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Louise, my God, I thought we'd lost you," Charlie datavised. "The sensor satellite says you're at a tenement on Halton Road. Ah, I see, that's Andy Behoo's address. Are you all right?"

"I survived," she datavised back. "Where are you?"

"I'm up in the Halo. It was a bit of a mad dash, but I thought it expedient after last night's debacle. Do you know if Fletcher got out?"

"I've no idea. I didn't see anyone else once I started running. What about Ivanov?"

"Sorry, Louise. He didn't make it."

"There's just me, then."

"Looks like I underestimated you again, Louise. My one consistent error."

"Charlie, there's a red cloud under the dome."

"Yes, I know. Clever move on Dexter's part. It means the SD electron beams can't strike it unless they blow the dome as well. It also means I've got virtually no sensor coverage underneath now. I tried sending my affinity-bonded birds and rats through to see if they could pinpoint him for me, but I lose contact with them every time. And we all thought their energistic power didn't affect bitek."

"Fletcher says they're aware of everything that happens under their cloud. Dexter probably kills the animals."

"Very likely. That doesn't leave us with much, does it?"

"This red cloud is different," she datavised. "I thought you should know that. It's why I called, really."

"What do you mean?"

"I was under one in Norfolk as it was gathering together, that was nothing like this. I can feel this one, it's like a really

low vibration, one that you can't quite hear. It's not just here to shut away the sky, it's really evil, Charlie."

"That'll be Dexter. He must have gathered quite a few possessed together now. Whatever he intends to do, it started with that cloud."

"I'm frightened, Charlie. He's going to win, isn't he?"

"Can you and Andy get to one of the outer domes? I have operational agents in place there. I can get you out."

"The cloud's growing, Charlie. I don't think we'll make it."

"Louise, I want you to try. Please."

"Guilty, Charlie, you?"

"Perhaps. I did get Genevieve to Tranquillity. The black-hawk captain swears he'll never accept another charter from my company."

Louise grinned. "That's my sister."

"Will you leave the tenement now?"

"I don't think so. Andy and I are happy where we are. And who knows what'll happen when Earth is taken out of the universe? It might not be so bad."

"It won't happen, Louise. That's not what Dexter's about. He wants to obliterate the universe, not leave it. And there are people on Earth who can stop him from doing anything at all."

"What do you mean? You've never been able to stop him."

"The red cloud's appearance has finally given our wondrous President some backbone. He's worried it means the possessed are ready to take Earth out of the universe. The senate have now given him approval to use SD weapons against the arcologies, and eliminate the possessed. It's the new fatalism, Louise. The Confederation abandoned Arnstat and New California so they could be rid of Capone. The President will sacrifice a minority of the republic's citizens to save the majority. Not that history will remember him kindly for it, though I expect the survivors in the other arcologies will be quietly grateful."

“You have to stop it, Charlie. There are more people in London than there are on the whole of Norfolk. You can stop it, can’t you? B7 can’t let them all die. You rule Earth. That’s what you said.”

“We can stall the order for a few hours, at most. Crash the command communication circuits, have SD officers refuse to carry out their orders. But ultimately, a direct order from the President will get through and be obeyed. The platforms will fire gamma-ray lasers into the arcologies. Every living cell inside the domes will be exterminated.”

“No. You have to stop them.”

“Louise, get yourself to one of the outer domes. You’ve got the anti-memory. You can use it against anyone who tries to stop you.”

“No!” she yelled out loud. Her hand smashed down on the table, making the meal trays and glasses bounce. “No. No. No.” She picked up the communications block and hurled it against the wall. Its casing cracked, sending plastic splinters skittling along the floor. “I won’t.”

Andy had frozen in his chair, staring at her in consternation. She whirled round to face him. “They’re going to kill everybody. The President’s going to fire SD weapons into the dome.”

He got up and put his arms round her, trying to calm her angry shaking. Even in bare feet she was half a head taller, he had to look up to see the dismay in her eyes.

“We have to stop him,” she said.

“The President?”

“No, Dexter.”

“The possessed one? The maniac?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Tell him. Warn him! Get him to dispose of the red cloud. He’ll understand that if he has no followers left alive then he’s nothing.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know!” she shouted. “But it will stop everyone from being killed, isn’t that worth something to you?”

“Yes,” he stammered.

She went over to her pile of clothes and dug out the anti-memory weapon. “Where are my shoes?”

Andy took one look at the neat black tube she was holding with such determination, and realized just how serious she was. His first thought was to lock the door, prevent her from leaving. He was too scared even to do that. “Don’t go out there.”

“I have to,” she snapped back. “None of those monsters care about people.”

Andy dropped to his knees. “Louise, I’m begging you. They’ll catch you. You’ll be tortured.”

“Not for long. After all, we’re all going to be slaughtered.” She pushed her foot into one shoe and fastened the side clips.

“Louise. Please!”

“Are you going to come with me?”

“That’s London out there,” he said, waving an arm at the window. “You’ve got a couple of hours to find one person. It’s impossible. Stay here. We’ll never know when it happens. Not an SD weapon, they’re so powerful.”

She glared down at him. “Andy, haven’t you followed any news? You have a soul. You’ll know exactly when it happens. There’s a good chance you’ll be stuck into the beyond.”

“I can’t go out there,” he moaned. “Not where *they* are. Don’t go.”

She pulled her other shoe on. “Well, I can’t stay here.”

Andy looked up at her as she stood over him, tall, beautiful, and resolute. Utterly glorious. He’d spent all night making love to her, punishing his body with a dangerous level of stimulant programs so she would be completely overwhelmed. And it meant nothing to her. She would never be

his, for she'd seen the real him. They were further apart now than they had been before he knew she lived.

His hand wiped over his nose, an attempt to cover up his sniffing. "I love you, Louise." He heard the pitiful words come out of his mouth, and despised himself for everything he was, everything he could never become.

Exasperation mingled with embarrassment. Louise didn't know if she wanted to shove him aside or kiss him. "I still enjoyed last night, Andy. I wouldn't want it any different." A pat on his bowed, trembling head would be too awful. She moved round him, and went out of the door, closing it quietly behind her.

Loud voices and banging doors woke Jay. She sat up in bed and yawned extravagantly, stretching her arms wide. It was night outside, she could just hear the gentle windrush sound of waves rolling onto the beach above the noises in the chalet. People were moving through the rooms, talking in excited tones. Footsteps trundled up the creaky wooden steps to the veranda, and the front door banged again.

She found Prince Dell and tiptoed into the short hallway. There'd never been such a commotion in the chalet before, not even when the old-timers were planning the new colony. Whatever was going on must be terribly important, which could make eavesdropping interesting.

The voices stopped.

"Come in, Jay," Tracy called from the lounge.

Jay did as she was told. It was impossible to get away with anything when Tracy was around. Seven of the ancient adults had joined Tracy, sitting and standing round the lounge. Jay kept her head down as she hurried over to the big armchair Tracy was sitting in, too shy to say anything.

"Sorry, poppet," Tracy said as Jay slithered up onto the cushions beside her. "Did this noisy rabble wake you?"

"What's the matter?" Jay asked. "Why's everyone here?"

“We’re trying to decide if we should petition Corpus for intervention,” Tracy said. “Again!”

“Something’s happening on Earth,” Arnie said. “We didn’t realize it at first, but Quinn Dexter might be about to do something extremely dangerous.”

“Corpus won’t intervene,” Galic said dejectedly. “There’s still no reason. You know the rules: only if another, unaware species is endangered. Quinn Dexter, according to the textbooks, qualifies as human. Therefore this will be self-inflicted.”

“Then the textbook should be rewritten,” Arnie grumbled. “I wouldn’t classify him as anything close to human.”

“Corpus won’t intervene because the President will use SD weapons, that barbarian.”

“Not in time to stop Dexter, he won’t,” Tracy said. “Especially if B7 intervenes and delays the fire command.”

Jay snuggled up closer to Tracy. “What’s Dexter going to do?”

“We’re not absolutely sure. It might be nothing.”

“Ha,” Arnie grunted. “Just you wait and see.”

“Are you watching it?” Jay asked, suddenly not at all sleepy.

Tracy glared at Arnie. There was a mental exchange, too. Jay could feel it even if she couldn’t make out individual words. She’d been getting good at that lately.

“Please!” Jay begged. “It’s my world.”

“All right,” Tracy said. “You can stay up and watch for a little while. But don’t think you’re getting to see any gory bits.”

Jay beamed at her.

The adults settled down on the other chairs, packing three onto the settee. Tracy’s television was switched on, showing a deserted street of ancient buildings. A tight tapestry of red clouds were glowing overhead. Jay shuddered at the sight. They were just like the ones on Lalonde.

“That’s London,” Tracy said. She handed Jay a mug of hot chocolate.

Jay propped Prince Dell up against her tummy so he’d have a good view, and took a contented sip of the creamy drink. Someone was walking down the middle of the street.

Lady Mac emerged a hundred million kilometres out from the F-class star, five degrees above the ecliptic. As it was an uncharted system, Joshua ordered the combat sensors to deploy and conduct a fast preliminary sweep. Their response time was quicker than the more comprehensive standard array, if there was anything out there on a collision course, they’d hopefully discover it soon enough to jump away.

“Clean space,” Beaulieu reported.

For the first time in thirty hours, Joshua managed to relax, sagging back into the cushioning. He hadn’t realized how tight his neck and shoulder muscles had become, they were lines of hot stone under his skin.

“We did it!” Liol whooped.

Amid the noisy round of self-congratulation, Joshua ordered the flight computer to extend the standard sensor booms. They slid out of the fuselage along with the thermo-dump panels. “Alkad,” he datavised. “Get Kempster out of zero-tau, please. Tell him we’ve arrived.”

“Yes, Captain,” she replied.

“Beaulieu, Ashly, activate the survey sensors, please. The rest of you, let’s get *Lady Mac* into standard orbital configuration. Dahybi, I still want to be able to jump, we’ll keep the nodes charged.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Fuel status?” Joshua asked.

“Sufficient,” Sarha told him. “We have forty per cent of our fusion fuel left, and fifty-five per cent of the antimatter remaining. Given we burned fifteen per cent of the antimatter to move Lalarin-MG, we’ve got enough to get us back to

the Confederation. We can even jump around this system, providing you don't want to explore every moonlet."

"Let's hope we don't have to," he said. The Swantic-LI message hadn't mentioned where in the system the Sleeping God was; in orbit around a planet or orbiting the star by itself.

The crew loosened up as *Lady Mac* changed from flight mode to her less demanding orbital status. They drifted around the bridge, used the washroom. Ashly went down to the galley and fetched a meal. Prolonged exposure to high gees was severely tiring. And eating anything substantial during the acceleration was unwise. The mass put a lot of pressure on internal organs, even with artificially strengthened membranes. They devoured the spongy pasta cakes eagerly, chasing runaway squirts of hot cheese sauce round the bridge.

"So if it sees the whole universe," Liol said, talking round a mouthful, "Do you reckon it knows we're here?"

"Every telescope sees the whole universe," Ashly said. "That doesn't necessarily mean they can all see us."

"Okay, it detected our gravitonic distortion when we jumped in," Liol said, unperturbed.

"Where's your evidence?"

"If it knows about us, it's keeping quiet," Beaulieu said. "Sensors haven't found any electromagnetic emissions out there."

"How did the Tyrathca find it then?"

"Easily, I would think," Dahybi said.

Under the direction of Kempster and Renato, Beaulieu launched their survey satellites. Sixteen of them were fired, racing away from *Lady Mac* at seven gees. They were arranged in a globular formation, keeping the starship at their centre. After two minutes their solid rockets jettisoned, leaving them flying free. The main section was an omniphase visual-spectrum sensor array, a giant technological

fly's eye, looking every way at once. Between them, they formed an ever-increasing telescope baseline, capable of huge resolution. Its only real limit was imposed by the amount of processing power available to correlate and analyse the incoming photonic data.

The sweep was conducted by registering every speck of light with a negative magnitude (in standard stellar classification the brightest visible star is labelled magnitude one, while the dimmest is a six—anything brighter than a one has to be a planet and is assigned a negative value). Their positions were then reviewed five times a second to see if they were moving.

Once the planets had been located, the telescope could be focused on them individually to see if the extensive spatial disturbance Swantic-LI had referred to was in orbit around them. They were assuming it was a visible phenomena; the Tyrathca didn't have gravitonic detector technology. If nothing was found, a more comprehensive sweep of the system would have to be conducted.

"This is most unusual," Kempster datavised after the first sweep was completed. He and Renato were using the main lounge in capsule C, along with Alkad and Peter. Their specialist electronics had been installed, transforming it into a temporary astrophysics lab.

Joshua and Liol swapped a look shading between surprise and amusement. "In what way?" Joshua asked.

"We can only detect a single negative-magnitude source orbiting this star," the astronomer said. "There's simply nothing else out there. No planets, no asteroids. *Lady Macbeth's* sensors can't even find the usual clouds of interplanetary dust. All matter has been cleared away, virtually down to a molecular level. The only normal occurrence is solar wind."

"Cleared away, or just sucked into the spatial disturbance," Sarha muttered.

"So what is the source?" Joshua datavised.

“A moon-sized object, orbiting three hundred million kilometres from the star.”

Joshua and the rest of the crew accessed the sensor array. It showed them a very bright point of light. Completely non-descript.

“We can’t get any sort of spectral reading,” Kempster said. “It’s reflecting the sun’s light at essentially a hundred per cent efficiency. It must be clad in some kind of mirror.”

“You did say: easy,” Ashly told Dahybi.

“That’s not easy,” Joshua said. “That’s obvious.” He loaded the object’s position into the flight computer and plotted a vector to a jump coordinate which would bring them out one million kilometres away from the enigmatic object. “Stand by. Accelerating in one minute.”

The impulsive anger which had pushed Louise out of Andy’s flat had faded by the time she reached Islington High Street. Walking down the empty streets had given her far too much time to think, mainly about how headstrong and stupid this idea was. At the same time that original reason held fast. Somebody had to do something, however futile. It was the getting captured and facing Dexter part that was making her legs all wobbly and recalcitrant.

Her neural nanonics crashed when she started off along St John Street. Not that she really needed her map file any more. He wouldn’t be far from the centre of the red cloud; all she had to do was walk straight down to the Thames, only a couple of miles. She knew she’d never actually get that far.

The edge of the cloud, a frayed agitated boundary, was still creeping slowly out towards the skyscrapers behind her. It had already reached Finsbury, barely a quarter of a mile ahead of her now. A gruff sonorous thunder reverberated down from its quaking underside, echoing along the deserted streets. Leaves on the tall evergreen trees trembled in disharmony as erratic gusts of warm air blew out from the

centre. Birds rode the thermals high overhead. She could see the tiny black flecks streaming together into huge flocks, all of them heading in the same direction: out.

They were smarter than people. She was amazed that she hadn't encountered anyone fleeing the cloud's advance. The inhabitants were all staying barricaded behind their doors. Was everyone paralysed by fear like Andy?

She passed under the cloud, the sleet of redness closing in on her like a perverted nightfall. It wasn't just the humid air blowing against her now: the feeling of dismay strengthened, slowing her pace. The rumbles of thunder above her thickened, never quite dying away. Forked slivers of blackness crackled between the roiling tufts: black lightning, draining photons out of the sky.

When they'd said goodbye, Genevieve had offered her Carmitha's silver pendant of earth. Louise had refused. Now she wished she hadn't. Any totem against the evil would be welcome. She decided to think about Joshua, her real talisman against the harsh truth of life beyond Norfolk. But that just made her slip into the memory of Andy. She still didn't regret that—quite. As if it mattered.

Louise had made it down Rosebery Avenue and turned into Farringdon Road when the possessed walked out into the street in front of her. There were six of them, moving with unhurried indolence, dressed in austere black suits. They lined up between the pavements and stood facing her. She walked up to the one in the middle, a tall thin man with a flop of oily brown hair.

"Girl, what the fuck are you about?" he asked.

Louise pointed the anti-memory weapon straight at him, its end barely a foot from his face. He stiffened, which meant he knew what it was. It wasn't much of a comfort to her; somebody else had one. She knew who.

"Take me to Quinn Dexter," she told him.

They all started laughing. “*To him?*” the one she was threatening said. “Girl, are you twisted, or what?”

“I’ll shoot if you don’t.” Her voice was very close to cracking. They would know that, and the reason why, them and their devilish senses. She gripped the weapon tighter to stop it shaking about.

“My pleasure,” he said.

She jabbed the weapon forward. His head recoiled in synchronization.

“Don’t push it, bitch.”

The possessed started walking down the road. Louise took a couple of hesitant paces.

“Follow us,” the tall one told her. “The Messiah is waiting for you.”

She kept the weapon up, not that it would do much good, they all had their backs to her now. “How far is it?”

“Close to the river.” He glanced back over his shoulder, lips stretched into a thin smile. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

“I know Dexter.”

“No you don’t. You wouldn’t be doing this if you did.”

The pictures transmitted from Swantic-LI had been accurate after all. From a distance of a million kilometres, the shape of the Sleeping God was quite unmistakable: two concave conical spires end to end, three and a half thousand kilometres in length. The perfectly symmetrical geometry betrayed its artificial origin. The central rim was sharp, appearing to taper down to an edge whose thickness was measured in molecules; its tips had an equally rapier-like profile. There wasn’t anyone on board *Lady Mac* who didn’t have an uncomfortable vision of the starship being impaled on one of those sleek spikes.

Beaulieu launched five astrophysics survey satellites towards it. Fusion-powered drones with multi-discipline sensor arrays, they arched away from the starship on

trajectories that would position them in a necklace around the Sleeping God.

Joshua led the whole crew down to the lounge in capsule C where Alkad, Peter, Renato, and Kempster were gathered to interpret the data from the satellites and *Lady Mac*'s own sensor suite. Samuel, Monica, and one of the serjeants had also joined them.

Studio-quality holographic screens sprouted from the consoles installed to process the astrophysical data. Each one carried a different image of the Sleeping God, they were tinted every shade in the rainbow, as well as providing graphic representations. Their main AV projector showed the raw visual-spectrum picture, materializing it in the middle of the compartment. The Sleeping God gleamed alone in space, sunlight bouncing off its silver surface in long shimmers. That was the first anomaly, though it took Renato a full minute of puzzled study to see the obvious.

"Hey," he exclaimed. "There's no darkside."

Joshua frowned at the AV projection, then accessed the console processors directly to check. The satellites confirmed it: every part of the Sleeping God was equally bright, there were no shadows. "Is it generating that light internally?"

"No," Renato said. "The spectrum matches the star. Light must be bending round it somehow. I'd say it has to be a gravitational lens, an incredibly dense mass. That ties in with the Tyrathca observation that it's a spatial disturbance."

"Alkad?" Joshua asked. "Is it made out of neutronium?" That would be the final irony if a God was made from the same substance as her weapon.

"A moment, Captain." The physicist seemed troubled. "We're getting the data from the gravitational detectors on line." Several hologram screens flurried with colourful icons. She and Peter read them in surprise. They turned in unison to stare at the central projection.

"What is it?" Joshua asked.

“I would suggest that this so-called God is actually a naked singularity.”

“No fucking way!” Kempster said indignantly. “It’s stable.”

“Look at the geometry,” Alkad said. “And we’re detecting a torrent of gravitational wave vacuum fluctuations, all of them at very small wavelengths.”

“The satellites are picking up regular patterns in the fluctuations,” Peter told her.

“What?” She studied one of the displays. “Holy Mary, that’s not possible. Vacuum fluctuations have to be random, that’s why they exist.”

“Ha,” Kempster grunted in satisfaction.

“I know what a singularity is,” Joshua said. “The point of infinite mass compression. It’s what causes a black hole.”

“It’s what causes an event horizon,” Kempster corrected. “The universe’s cosmic censor. Physics, mathematics—they all break down in the infinite, because you can’t have the infinite, it’s unobtainable in reality.”

“Except in some very specific cases,” Alkad said. “Standard gravitational collapse in stars is a spherical event. Once the core has compressed to a point where its gravity overcomes thermal expansion, everything falls into the centre from all directions at once. The collapse finishes with all the matter compressing into your infinity point, the singularity. At which time its gravity becomes so strong that nothing can escape, not even light: the event horizon. However, in theory, if you spin the star before the event, the centrifugal force will distort the shape, expanding it outward along the equator. If it’s spinning fast enough, the equatorial bulge will remain during the collapse.” Her finger indicated the projected image. “It will form this shape, in fact. And right down at the very end of the collapse timescale, when the star’s matter has all achieved singularity density, it will still be in this shape, and for an instant, before the collapse con-

tinues and pulls it into a sphere, some of that infinite mass will project up outside the event horizon.”

“For an instant,” Kempster insisted. “Not fifteen thousand years.”

“It looks as though someone has learned how to freeze that instant indefinitely.”

“You mean like the alchemist?” Joshua datavised to her.

“No,” she datavised back. “These kind of mass-densities are far outside any I achieved with the alchemist technology.”

“If its mass is infinite,” Kempster recited pedantically, “it will be cloaked in an event horizon. Light will not escape.”

“And yet it does,” Alkad said. “From every part of the surface.”

“The vacuum fluctuations must be carrying the photons out,” Renato said. “That’s what we’re seeing here. Whoever created this has learned how to control vacuum fluctuations.” He grinned in wonder. “Wow!”

“No wonder they called it a God,” Alkad said in veneration. “Regulated vacuum fluctuations. If you can do that, there’s no limit to what you can achieve.”

Peter gave her a private, amused look. “Order out of chaos.”

“Kempster?” Joshua queried.

“I don’t like the idea,” the old astronomer said with a weak grin. “But I can’t refute it. In fact, it might even explain Swantic-LI’s jump to another star. Vacuum fluctuations can have a negative energy.”

“Of course,” Renato said. He smiled eagerly at his boss, catching the idea quickly. “They’d be exotic, that’s the state which holds a wormhole open. Just like a voidhawk’s distortion field.”

Samuel had been shaking his head as the discussion ploughed onwards. “But why?” he said. “Why build something like this, what is it for?”

"It's a perpetual source of wormholes," Alkad said. "And the Tyrathca said it assists the progress of biological entities. This is the ultimate stardrive generator. You could probably use it to travel between galaxies."

"Christ, intergalactic travel," Liol said dreamily. "How about that?"

"Very nice," Monica retorted. "But it hardly helps us to deal with possession."

Liol gave her a pained glance.

"Okay," Joshua said. "If you guys are right about this being an artificially maintained naked singularity, there must be some kind of control centre for the vacuum fluctuations. Have you found that yet?"

"There's nothing out there except the singularity itself," Renato said. "Our satellites are covering all of the surface. Nothing hiding on the other side, nothing in orbit."

"There has to be something else. The Tyrathca got it to open a wormhole for them. How do we do that?"

His neural nanonics reported a new communication channel opening. "You ask," the singularity datavised.

The cloud's luminosity remained constant, but its shading had shifted a long way down the spectrum as Louise approached its epicentre. When she walked across the paved plaza outside St Paul's cathedral every surface was toned a deep crimson. Stone carvings embellishing the beautiful old building cast long black shadows down the wall, ebony jail bars gripping it tightly, squeezing away the last remnants of sanctity.

Her escort pranced around her like insane Morris dancers, inviting her onward with mocking gestures. The snarls of thunder ended as she reached the large oaken doors, leaving an onerous silence. Louise walked into the cathedral.

She took a couple of steps forward, then faltered. The doors closed behind her with a ululation of cold air. Thousands of possessed were standing waiting along the nave,

dressed in elaborate costumes from every era of human history and culture, each one completely black. They were all facing her. The organ began to play, blasting out a harsh hard-rock version of the wedding march. Louise put her hands over her ears, it was so loud. All the possessed turned to face the altar, leaving a narrow passage clear down the very centre of the nave. She began to walk down it. It wasn't a conscious thing, her limbs did as they were commanded by the massed will of the possessed. Her anti-memory weapon fell from numbed fingers after she'd taken the first few steps, clattering away over the cracked tiles.

Ghosts drifted towards her, hands held out to implore. They swept past her as she carried on walking, shaking their heads in sorrow.

The music ended when she reached the front row of the possessed. They were standing level with the cathedral's transept wings; ahead of them, the floor underneath the vaulting central dome was empty. Iron braziers with foul-smelling fires were lining the walls, their black smoke smudging the pale stonework. She couldn't actually see the apex of the dome, it was obscured by a pall of grey fug. There was a gallery high above her. Several people leaned on its rail, looking down at her with mild interest.

Her compulsion ended, and she tottered forward.

"Hello, Louise," Quinn Dexter said. He stood in front of the defiled altar, no part of him visible within the black robe.

She took a couple of unsteady steps. Fear was tightening every muscle, turning her body stiff. She wasn't even certain she could stand for much longer. "Dexter?"

"None other." He moved to one side, allowing her to see a man's body spread-eagled across the altar. "And now God's Brother has brought the three of us together again."

"Fletcher," she squeaked.

Quinn held out an arm towards her and extended a swan-

white hand. A claw finger beckoned, granting her permission to approach.

The lacerations and dried blood coating his skin made her afraid. But as she drew closer she saw his muscles were bunched and trembling. An unfamiliar face was contorted with distress, sucking down air in fast pain-filled gulps.

“Fletcher?”

Quinn waved his hand, and the electricity was turned off. The body slumped down onto the stone, panting in shock. Slowly, Fletcher’s face emerged to replace the blooded features. The chains and metal bands securing him dropped away. All of the wounds were banished from sight as his customary naval uniform materialized. He climbed down gingerly from the altar.

“My dearest lady. You should not have come.”

“I had to.”

Quinn laughed. “Your call, Fletch. You can walk out of here with her now if you make the right decision. If not, she’s all mine.”

“My lady.” Fletcher’s face was riven with anguish.

“Why can you walk out?” she asked.

“He’s just got to sign up for the army of the damned,” Quinn said. “I won’t even make him do it in blood.”

“No,” she said. “Fletcher, you mustn’t do that. I came here to warn you all. This has to stop. You have to disperse the red cloud.”

“Is that a threat, Louise?” Quinn asked.

“You’ve frightened Govcentral with the red cloud. They think you’re going to take the Earth away from the universe. The President won’t let that happen. He’s going to use Strategic Defence weapons against London. Everyone will die. Millions and millions of people.”

“I won’t,” Quinn said.

“But they will.” Louise waved an arm back at the silent ranks of his disciples. “Without them you’re nothing.”

Quinn glided up to Louise. His face slipped out of the robe's shadows to show her his furious expression. "God's Brother, I hate you!" He slammed his hand across the side of her head, using energistic power to amplify the strength of the blow.

Louise screamed at the pain, flying back to crash into the altar. She crumpled forward onto the floor, whimpering as blood pumped into her mouth.

Fletcher made a start forwards, finding the end of Quinn's anti-memory weapon pressed against his nose. "Back off, fuckhead," Quinn snarled. "Back!"

Fletcher retreated, breathing heavily.

Quinn glared down at Louise. "You came here to save people. People you've never seen. People you'll never know. Didn't you?"

Louise was sobbing from the pain, holding a hand to her face. Blood ran out of her mouth, dripping onto the floor. She looked up at him, devoid of understanding.

"Didn't you?"

"Yes," she wept.

"I hate that *decency*. This assumption you have that you can connect with me on some level, because underneath I'm human too, that I have a heart. And in the end I'm going to be reasonable. That of course I'll back down and talk things out with the supercop fucks who've been shooting at my ass ever since I got back to this stinking garbage dump of a planet. That's why I hate you, Louise. You are the end product of a religion which has systematically set about shackling the serpent beast for over two and a half thousand years. Religions, all religions, forbid our true nature to shine through, they waken us so that we'll spend our whole lives grovelling in front of the false Lord. That's the path you embrace, Louise, that's what you are: kind hearted. Just by existing you are the enemy of the Light Bringer. My enemy. I hate you so badly I'm in pain from it. And you'll pay for that. Nobody hurts me and goes off to laugh about it with their friends. I'll make you

the army's whore. I'll make every one of my followers fuck you. They'll keep on fucking you until your mind shatters and your heart bursts. Then when there's nothing left but a lump of insane meat bleeding its life away into the gutter I'll use the soul-killer to eradicate what's left of you from the universe, because there's no way I'll ever share a single night in hell with you. You're not that worthy."

Louise shrank away from him, crabbing across the floor until she was backed up against the altar. "You can do all that, you can hurt me until I denounce everything I believe in. But you will never change what I am right now. And that's all that matters. I'm true to me. I've already had my victory."

"Dumbass bitch. That's why you and your false Lord will always lose. Your victory's in your head. Mine is physical. It's as motherfucking real as you can get."

Louise looked defiantly at Quinn. "When evil rules, then it will be goodness which corrupts you."

"Total bollocks. The likes of you won't be able to corrupt the army I'm bringing onto the field. Tell her Fletcher, be *honest* with her. Is my army going to win? Is the Night coming?"

"Fletcher?" she appealed.

"My lady . . . I . . ." His head drooped in abject despair.

"No," Louise gasped. "Fletcher!"

Quinn watched her, grinning in ferocious satisfaction. "Ready to watch the bad part, now?" He reached down, and grabbed her shoulder, hauling her to her feet.

"Unhand her," Fletcher demanded. A ball of solid air slammed into his belly, its impact firing pain down every nerve in his host body. He was thrown off the ground and sent tumbling backwards. Even when he landed hard on the tiles he kept skidding as if the surface was ice. When he stopped moving and regained his wits, he found he was directly under the apex of the dome.

"Don't move," Quinn ordered.

A pentagon of tall white flames burst into existence around Fletcher to emphasise the point. He watched helplessly as Quinn dragged Louise along into the south transept. They went through a door.

There were stairs inside, spiralling upwards. Louise had to run to keep up with Quinn. The curving stairs went on and on, making her feel dangerously dizzy; and the pain from the side of her head was so intense she thought she was going to vomit.

They came out through a narrow archway onto the gallery ringing the dome. Quinn moved round it until he was facing down the nave. He thrust Louise towards a young girl in a leather waistcoat and pink jeans.

“Look after her,” he said.

At first Louise thought Courtney was a possessed; her hair was bright emerald, all of it standing on end and twirled into flame-like spikes. But there were scabs all over her cheeks and arms, unhealed and starting to fester; one eye was swollen almost shut.

Courtney giggled as she held Louise tight. “I get you first.” Her tongue licked round Louise’s ear, hands closing tight on her buttocks.

Louise moaned as her legs gave out.

“Shit.” Courtney pushed her back onto the low bench which ran around the gallery.

“We won’t live long enough for that,” Louise said harshly.

Courtney gave her a puzzled look.

Quinn put his hands on the rail and looked down on his silent obedient followers packed into the nave. Fletcher Christian stood still at the centre of the flaming pentagram, head bent back so he could observe the gallery. Quinn gestured and the prison of white flames vanished, leaving Fletcher alone on the floor.

“Before the Night dawns, there’s one person missing from our gathering,” Quinn announced. “Though I know he’s

here. You're always here, aren't you?" The silken tone of displeasure made his followers stir uneasily.

Quinn signalled the acolyte on the gallery, who led Greta round to him. She was pushed hard against the rail, almost going over. Quinn grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, tipping her head upright. Lank hair dangled down over her face as she drew a shaky breath.

"Say your name," Quinn told her.

"Greta," she mumbled.

He took the anti-memory weapon from his robe and shoved it against her eye. "Louder."

"Greta. I'm Greta Manani."

"Oh Daddy," Quinn called out. "Daddy Manani, come out, come out wherever you are."

The possessed crowded into the nave began to look round. Murmurs of confusion seeped out among them. Quinn scoured their heads for someone moving.

"Get out here, fuckhead! RIGHT NOW. Or I kill her soul. You hearing me?"

The sound of lone footsteps echoed through the cathedral. The hushed possessed parted in a smooth tide to allow Powel Manani through. The Ivet supervisor looked exactly the same as the last time Quinn had seen him back on Lalonde, a brawny man dressed in a red and green checked shirt. He walked out under the dome, put his hands on his hips and grinned up at Quinn. "I see you're still a total loser, Ivet."

"I'm not a fucking Ivet!" Quinn screamed. "I'm the Messiah of Night."

"Whatever. If you harm my daughter, Messiah of dick-heads everywhere, I'll personally finish the job Twelve-T started on Jesus."

"I have been harming her. For a long time now."

"Bet it isn't as bad as what we did to your friends Leslie and Kay, and all the other Ivets we caught."

For a second Quinn contemplated vaulting over the rail

and swooping down on the supervisor, feeding his serpent beast. The peak of rage subsided. That was what Manani probably wanted. Quinn could sense how strong the man's energistic power was. Using him as the sacrifice to the summoned dark angles was going to be much more satisfying.

"If you kill her," Powel said, "you have no protection from me. And if you blast this body to pieces, I'll just come back again like before. I'm going to keep on coming back until this is settled between us."

"I'm not going to blast you out of your body, not after the grief you've caused me. I'm not that nice, remember. Now you stay exactly where you are, or I will kill your daughter's soul."

Powel looked round the empty expanse of floor under the dome as if he was viewing an apartment. "Guess you're on his shit list too, huh," he said to Fletcher.

"I am, sir."

"Don't worry, he'll make a mistake. He's not smart enough to pull off something like this. And when it all goes pear-shaped, his balls are mine."

Quinn spread his arms wide in an open embrace to the assembled possessed below. "Now that everyone's here," he said, "we'll begin."

Joshua managed to suppresses his shock without any help from programs. He knew the importance of this moment was too great for anything other than perfect clarity. "Are you the Tyrathca's Sleeping God?" he datavised.

"You know I am, Captain Calvert," the singularity replied.

"If you know who I am, then the Tyrathca were correct saying that you see the universe."

"The universe is too large for that, of course, but to reply in context, yes, I observe as much of the universe as you are aware of, and a great deal more besides. My quantum struc-

ture enables an extensive interconnection with a large volume of space-time and other realms.”

“Not one for small talk, is it,” Liol muttered.

“Then you know my species is being possessed by the souls of our own dead?” Joshua asked.

“Yes.”

“Is there a solution to this problem?”

“There are a great many solutions. As the Kiint have hinted to you, each race comes to terms with this aspect of life in its own way.”

“Please, do you know of one that’s applicable to us?”

“Many are. I am not being deliberately obtuse. I can list them all, and I can and will assist you in applying them where relevant. What I will not do is make the decision for you.”

“Why?” Monica asked. “Why are you helping us? It’s not that I’m ungrateful. But I am curious.”

“The Tyrathca were also correct when they said I exist to assist the progress of biological entities. Though the particular circumstances humans are currently facing were not the reason I was created.”

“Then what were you made for?” Alkad asked.

“The race which created me had reached their evolutionary pinnacle; intellectually, physically, and in their technology. A fact which should be self-evident to you, Dr Mzu. My sentience resides within a self-contained pattern of vacuum fluctuations. This provides me with an extensive ability to manipulate mass and energy; for me thought is deed, the two are one and the same. I used that ability to open a gateway for my creators into a new realm. They knew little of it, other than it existed; its parameters are very different to this universe. So they chose to embark on a new phase of existence living within it. They left this universe a long time ago.”

“And you’ve been helping various species progress along evolution’s track ever since?” Joshua said. “It’s your reason for existing?”

“I do not require a continuing reason to exist, a motivation. That psychology is a descendent of a biological sentience. My origins are not biological; I exist because they created me. It’s that simple.”

“Then why do you help?”

“Again, the simple answer would be because I can. But there are other considerations. It is an amplification of the problem your species has encountered millions of times during its history, almost daily in fact. You were even subject to it at Mastrit-PJ. When and where not to intervene? Did you believe you did the right thing by giving the Mosdva ZTT technology? Your intentions were good, but ultimately they were governed by self interest.”

“Did we do the wrong thing?”

“The Mosdva certainly don’t think so. Such judgements are relative.”

“So you don’t help everybody all the time?”

“No. Such a level of intervention—shaping the nature of biological life to conform with my wishes, however benevolent—would make me your ruler. Sentient life has free will. My creators believe that is why this universe exists. I respect that, and will not interfere with its self determination.”

“Even when we make a mess of things?”

“That would be a judgement again.”

“But you are willing to help us if we ask?”

“Yes.”

Joshua looked at the projected image of the singularity, vaguely troubled. “All right, we’re definitely asking. Can we have the list of solutions?”

“You may. I would suggest they would be more useful if you understood what has happened. That way, you would be able to make a more informed decision on which one to apply.”

“Seems reasonable.”

“Wait,” Monica said. “You keep mentioning we have to make a decision. How do we do that?”

“What are you talking about?” Liol asked. “Once we’ve heard what’s on offer, we chose.”

“We do? Are we going to put it to a vote here in the ship, do we go back to the Confederation Assembly and ask them to decide? What? We need to be certain about this first.”

Liol looked round the cabin, trying to identify the mood. “No, we don’t go back,” he said. “This is what we came here for. The Jovian Consensus thought we were up to the job. So I say do it.”

“We’re deciding the future of our whole race,” she protested. “We can’t just leap into this. And . . .” she indicated Mzu. “Bloody hell, she’s hardly qualified to be passing judgement on the rest of us. That’s the way I see it. You were going to use the Alchemist against an entire planet.”

“Whereas the ESA is an organization of enviable morality,” Alkad snapped back. “How many people did you murder just tracking me down?”

“You people have got to be fucking kidding,” Liol said. “You can’t even decide how to decide? Listen to yourselves! This kind of personal stupidity is what dumps humans into the shit every time. We just discuss it and make a decision. That’s it. Finish.”

“No,” Samuel said. “The captain decides.”

“Me?” Joshua asked.

Monica stared at the Edenist in astonishment. “Him!”

“Yes, I agree,” the serjeant said. “Joshua decides.”

“He never doubted,” Samuel said. “Did you, Joshua? You’ve always known this would end in success.”

“I hoped it would, sure.”

“You doubted this flight,” Samuel told Monica. “You didn’t fully believe it would end in success. If you had, you would have been prepared to make the decision. Instead,

you have doubts, that disqualifies you. Whoever does this must have conviction.”

“Like yours, for instance,” Monica said. “A subset of your famous rationality.”

“I too find myself unqualified for this. Although Edenists think as one, to make a decision of this magnitude I find myself wanting the reassurance of the Consensus. It would seem Edenism has a flaw after all.”

Joshua gazed round at his crew. “You’ve all been very quiet.”

“That’s because we trust you, Joshua,” Sarha said simply, and smiled. “You’re our captain.”

Strange, Joshua thought, when you got right down to the naked truth, people actually had faith in him. Who he was, what he’d achieved, meant something to them. It was quite humbling, really. “All right,” he said slowly. He datavised the singularity: “Is that acceptable to you?”

“I cannot take responsibility for your decisions, collective or otherwise. My only constraints are that I will not permit you to use my abilities as a weapon. Other than that, you have free access.”

“Okay. Show me what happened.”

The possessed in the nave had dropped to their knees, concentrating hard on producing the stream of energistic power which the dark Messiah demanded from them for his summoning. Up on the gallery facing them, Quinn’s robe evaporated into pure shadow and began to flow out from his body, filling the air around him like a black spectre. At the heart, his naked body gleamed silver. He accepted the offering from his followers, and directed it as he pleased. It spilled down across the floor below the cathedral’s dome, prying at the structure of reality, weakening it.

Powel Manani and Fletcher Christian looked down at their feet in consternation as the tiles around them sprouted

a luminous purple haze. The soles of their shoes became enmeshed with the surface, making it hard to lift their feet up.

"I need to get near him," Powel said.

Fletcher glanced up at the swarthy occultation looming above. "I wish to be as far from this dread place as possible. But I will not leave without her."

Powel exerted his own energistic power to yank his feet clear of the tiles. Even then it took considerable effort to move them. He shuffled right up in front of Fletcher, the two of them almost touching. The bottom of his sweatshirt was lifted a couple of centimetres, revealing Louise's anti-memory weapon shoved into the top of his waistband.

"Very well," Fletcher said. "But it will be no easy endeavour. I hear the fallen angels approaching."

The haze was thrumming, issuing a howl of lament and greed. Below that, the fabric of the universe was thinning in accordance with Quinn's desire. They could both feel pressure being exerted from the other side, a desperate scrabbling.

"Not good," Powel said. The tiles were becoming insubstantial. He pulled his feet out again; they'd sunk several centimetres below the surface.

"I will make a stand and distract him," Fletcher said. "You may have time to reach the stairs."

"I don't think so. This stuff is getting worse than quicksand."

The purple haze vanished. Fletcher and Powel looked round wildly. A drop of ectoplasm dribbled up in a crack between two tiles, making a soft *blup*. A patch of dense white frost solidified around it.

"Now what?" Powel grunted with apprehension.

More ectoplasm was bubbling up. Sluggish rivulets began to form as it ran together. The tiles left uncovered had all turned sparkling white from frost. Fletcher could feel cold air rushing off the sludgy fluid. His breath had become hoary.

"Welcome, my brothers," Quinn's voice boomed across

the cathedral. "Welcome to the battlefield. Together we will bring down the Night of our Lord."

The entire area of floor underneath the dome had become a pool of burping and foaming ectoplasm. Fletcher and Powel were hopping from foot to foot, frantically trying to banish the excruciating cold from their legs. They suddenly stood still, tensing as a V-shaped ripple moved across the pool. Waves of hot, lustful emotion were surging up from the dimensional rift in counter to the physical cold. A curving spike lifted up out of the floor, ectoplasm flowing along its length. It was over three metres high.

Fletcher watched it rise in horrified awe. Another one was emerging at the side of it, ectoplasm gurgling loudly as it lapped against the base.

"Lord Jesus protect your servants," he whispered. He and Powel backed away from the twin spikes as a third one budded.

The ectoplasm was bubbling energetically now. Smaller tendrils were writhing up, erupting all over the pool like a fur of rapacious cilia. One started to curl round Powel's leg. With a cry he managed to stumble away from it. The tip blossomed into a snapping five-talon claw. He pointed a finger at it and flung a slim blast of white fire. The claw shuddered, and large ripples of ectoplasm surged towards it.

"Stop!" Fletcher shouted hoarsely. The ectoplasm licking its way up his legs was doing far more than freezing his flesh, he realized. His mental strength was reducing, and with it his energistic power.

The claw's talons had almost doubled in size under the impact of the white fire. Powel snatched his hand back, watching anxiously as the claw groped round blindly.

Quinn laughed in delight as he watched the desperate antics of his sacrificial victims. There were five of the huge spikes now; they started to lean over. He wondered if they were the tips of some creature's fingers.

Moans of alarm were coming from the possessed down in the nave as they realized what they were witnessing. The first signs of panic were evident as the front rank pressed back from the edge of the ectoplasm pool.

“Hold fast!” Quinn thundered at them. The opening into darkness wasn’t yet complete, it fluctuated as those below hurled themselves against it. Quinn concentrated his mind on the area where reality was distorted to breaking point.

A huge bubble of noxious fumes burst from the centre of the ectoplasm, releasing an undulating spume of smaller ones. Powel and Fletcher ducked as a spray of ectoplasm splattered outwards. Tendrils of the stuff were wriggling against their legs now. Moving had become almost impossible, the agonising cold was squeezing in against their limbs and chests.

A dark mass slowly shrugged its way out of the subsiding froth of bubbles. It was a metallic sphere with boxes and cylinders jutting out at odd angles. Streaks of molten nulltherm insulation were running down its sides, mingling with the wreath of ectoplasm that drooled away in slippery ribbons.

“What the fuck is that?” Quinn demanded.

Explosive bolts *cracked* loudly, and a circular hatch flew away from the sphere. A fat man in a grubby toga jumped down, splashing into the ectoplasm pool without any noticeable discomfort.

Dariat looked round at his surroundings with considerable interest. “Bad timing?” he asked.

Tolton walked straight through the escape pod’s walls. He stood in the ectoplasm and let out a grateful sigh. Fletcher watched in fascination as the ectoplasm flowed up him, turning the ghost solid. He seemed so much more *vital* than any of the other entities struggling to fruit from the ectoplasm.

Powel Manani’s deep laugh rocked the air. “These are your terrifying warriors?” he mocked.

Quinn yelled in fury and sent a white fireball ripping down at the derisive Ivet supervisor. A couple of centimetres

from Powel it fractured into screeching webs of energy that never quite managed to touch him. The ectoplasm heaved enthusiastically as the crackling tips plunged into it.

A long frond of the stuff leapt up to whip round Powel's chest. Thicker, blunt tendrils were embracing his legs, knitting together. They began to pull him downwards. "How do we kill this stuff?" he shouted at Dariat. It had taken a worrying amount of effort to deflect Quinn's firebolt; his strength was draining away rapidly.

"Fire," Dariat called back. "Real fire works against them."

Something was lumbering up out of the pool next to Tolton, a creature five times his size, seven limbs unfolding from its flanks. He looked at Dariat, and the two of them linked hands. They sent a single bolt of white fire streaking into the base of the escape pod. The last two solid rocket motors ignited.

The events into which Joshua plunged had a form similar to a sensewise. They were real enough as they unravelled around him, but he witnessed them all simultaneously. At the same time, he could stand back and evaluate what was happening. That wasn't an ability the human mind could perform.

"You are using my thought processing ability," the singularity informed him.

"Then I'm no longer human. It will be you who makes the decision."

"The essence of what you are remains unchanged. I have simply expanded your mental capacity. Consider this a supercompressed history didactic."

So Joshua stood at Powel Manani's side on Lalonde as Quinn Dexter performed the sacrifice and the Ly-cilph opened a gateway into the beyond, allowing the first souls to pour through. The possessed multiplied their numbers and spread down the Juliffe. He watched Warlow talking to Quinn Dexter at Durringham spaceport and accept the payment for *Lady Mac* to carry him to Norfolk.

Ralph Hiltch took flight to Ombey and unleashed the possession of Mortonridge. The liberation followed on, with Ketton island vanishing into another realm.

“Are you the instrument that transferred the crystal entities there?” Joshua asked.

“No. That was another similar to myself. I am aware of several within this universe, though all are in superclusters very distant from here.”

Valisk and its descent into the melange. Pernik. Nyvan. Koblat. Jesup. Kulu. Oshanko. Norfolk. Trafalgar. New California. André Duchamp. Meyer. Erick Thakara. Jed Hinton. Other places, worlds and asteroids and ships and people; their lives wound together into a cohesive whole. Jay Hilton’s unauthorised escape to the Kiint home system. Their remarkable arc of planets, housing the retired observers who gathered in front of Tracy’s television, dunking chocolate biscuits into their tea as they watched the human race falling apart.

“Dick Keaton,” Joshua said with mild jubilation. “I knew there was something odd about him.”

“The Kiint use many specially bred observers to gather data on different species,” the singularity said. “For all their scientific prowess, they do not have my perceptive faculty. Corpus still utilises technology to amass its information. Such methods can hardly be absolute.”

“Did they find you?”

“Yes. I could do nothing for them, and told them so. One day they will be able to build my like by themselves. Not for some time, though. There is no need. They have achieved an admirable harmony with the universe.”

“Yeah, so they keep telling us.”

“Not to taunt you. They are not a malicious species.”

“Can you show me the beyond as well?” Joshua asked. “Can you tell me how to travel through it successfully like they do?”

“It has no distance,” the singularity said. “It only has time. That is the direction in which you must travel.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This universe and all it is connected with will come to an end. Entropy carries us towards the inevitable omega point, that is why entropy exists. What is to be born next cannot be known until then. This is the time when the pattern of that which replaces it will be created, a pattern which will emerge out of mind, the collective experience of all who have lived. That is where souls go, their transcendence brings all that they are together into a single act of creation.”

“Then why do they get stuck in the beyond?”

“Because that is where they want to be; like the ghosts wedded to the place of their anguish, they refuse to discard the part of their life which is over. They are afraid, Joshua. From the beyond they can still see the universe they have left behind. All they have known, the condition that they were, everyone they have loved, is still obtainable, so very very close to them. They fear to leave that for the unknown future.”

“All of us are frightened of the future. That’s human nature.”

“But some of you venture into it with confidence. That’s why you are here today, Joshua, that’s why you found me. You believed in the future. You believed in yourself. That is the most precious possession any human can ever own.”

“That’s it? That’s all there ever was? Faith in yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Then why in God’s name didn’t the Kiint tell us that? You said they weren’t malicious. What possible reason can they have for denying us that? A few simple words.”

“Because you have to implement that knowledge as an entire species. How you do that is your own decision.”

“It’s a bloody simple decision. You just tell them.”

“Telling someone not to be afraid is one thing. To have them believe it at an instinctive level is quite another. In

order not to be afraid of the beyond you must either understand its purpose, or have the naked conviction to move on once you encounter it. How many of your race are uneducated, Joshua? I don't mean those of you alive now, I mean throughout history. How many have lived unfulfilled lives? How many have died in infancy or in profound ignorance? You don't have to tell the rich and the educated, the privileged, they are the ones who will begin the great journey through the beyond of their own accord. It is the others you must convince, the ignorant masses, yet paradoxically, they are the ones hardest for you to reach. Theirs are the minds which, thanks to circumstance, have set and hardened against new concepts and ideas from an early age."

"But they can still be taught. They can learn to believe in themselves, everyone can. It's never too late for that."

"You speak of high idealism, but still you have to implement your ideals in the real, practical world. How will you reach these people? Who will pay to provide every one of them with a personal tutor, a guru who will advance their inner spirit?"

"Jesus, I don't know. How did other races do it?"

"They developed socially."

"The Laymil didn't, they committed suicide."

"Yes, but by that time they understood the nature of the beyond. Every one of them took the leap forward knowing that they still had a future. Their suicide was not racial extermination, a method of simply thwarting their possessing souls; they carried what they are to the omega point as one. That is what their communal society permitted them to do."

"I get it. The Laymil possessing souls were from a time before they reached that communal society."

"Yes. As most of your possessed are from earlier times. But not all, not by any means. Your race has not eliminated poverty, Joshua. You have not liberated people from physical drudgery to develop their minds. If you have a flaw in your

nature, then it is that. You cling to what is comfortable, the old familiar. I suspect that is why humans have a slightly higher than average percentage of souls lingering in the beyond.”

“We’ve done pretty well in the last thousand years,” he said, irked. “The Confederation is one vast middle-class estate.”

“The parts you travel to are. And even there ‘comfortable’ does not equate to ‘satisfactory.’ You are not animals, Joshua. Yet the entire population on some of your planets perform mundane agrarian tasks.”

“It costs to build automated factories. Global economies have to develop to a level where it becomes affordable.”

“You have the technology to travel between the stars, and all you do when you get to your fresh world is start the old cycle over again. Only one new type of society has emerged in the last thousand years, the Edenists; and even they participate and perpetuate your economic structure. The nature of society is governed by economic circumstance; and for all of your vast collective wealth, for all your knowledge, you remain stagnant. Throughout your voyage here you and your crew discussed how the Tyrathca were so slow to change compared to humans. Now you have seen the Kiint home system, how far ahead of you do you think their technology lies? It is a small gap, Joshua. Molecular-level replicator technology would bring about the end of your entire economic structure. If you wanted to, how long do you think it would take the combined scientific resources of the Confederation to build a prototype replicator?”

“I don’t know. Not long.”

“No. Not long. The knowledge is there, but you lack the will. Although there is one final inhibiting factor we haven’t incorporated yet into your knowledge base. And it’s an important one.”

“I have my suspicions about you,” Joshua said. “You with your avowed non-interventionist policy.”

“Yes?”

“How did I get here?”

“By chance.”

“A very long chance. A Tyrathca arkship is damaged while entering a star system devoid of any mass. Thousands of years later during the possession crisis we hear about something which might be able to solve the crisis for us. Would you like to compute the odds of that happening?”

“There are no odds, there is only cause and effect. The Tyrathca didn’t inform you of the Sleeping God when you first encountered them, because until the human possession crisis started they had no need to pray to it. You found me because you looked, Joshua. You believed I existed. Quinn Dexter has found his army of darkness, because he too has conviction. Greater than yours, I would suggest. Was he led to them by omnipotent entities playing chess with lives?”

“All right. But you’ve got to admit, having you this close to the Confederation is a hell of a coincidence given there’s only one of you per galactic supercluster.”

“That is not a coincidence, Joshua. I am aware of everything, because I am connected to everything. When you search for me, and have sufficient faith that you will find me, then you will succeed.”

“Okay. Well, if I haven’t said it before: thank you. I’ll do my best to see your faith isn’t misplaced. Now, what was that last factor?”

The singularity showed him, delivering his awareness to the orbital tower down which he rode down to Earth, with B7, Quinn Dexter, and . . .

Joshua’s eyes flicked open. His crew broke off their conversations, looking at him in anticipation.

“Louise,” he said. And vanished.

Thick smoke and blinding yellow flame exploded out of the escape pod rocket motors. The noise was a sheer wall of energy that sent Fletcher and Powel flailing backwards. Light

punched down into Fletcher's eyes as he used the remnants of his energetic power to ward off the blast.

The escape pod wobbled upwards, gathering speed. Flame splayed out from its base, scouring the surface of the ectoplasm pool. Embryonic shapes melted away under the incendiary heat. A cloud of clammy fumes billowed out, hurtling down the nave and both transepts. Brittle, ancient stained-glass windows shattered under the tremendous pressure. Horizontal jets of smoke and ectoplasm smog roared out over the deserted plaza.

The escape pod smashed into the top of the cathedral dome and crashed through into the pre-dawn morning. Its trajectory was given a savage kick by the impact, sending it racing away in a low curve underneath the red cloud, out towards Holborn.

Down on the floor of the cathedral, it was impossible to see anything. The air was coagulated with icy particles and vile acidic smoke. Fletcher sloshed about in the raging ectoplasm pool, trying to find anything that would give him his bearings. His mind could sense the possessed in the nave: their fear-ordered discipline was starting to crumble. Apart from them, nothing was clear. Chunks of debris were whistling down from above, splattering down into the turbid fluid where they immediately cracked open from the cold.

"Anybody left standing?" Powel shouted somewhere in the murk.

A vermilion glimmer began to pervade the churning mist as the light from the red cloud shone in through the gaping windows. Folds of darkness slipped across Fletcher's vision. He stood still, not daring to move.

Powel bumped into him. Both of them jumped.

"I've got to get up to the gallery," Powel said. "This is our chance, he'll be as blind as us."

"I think the door is this way," Fletcher told him. Even

using his energetic power to bolster his legs, they moved reluctantly. He could feel nothing below his knees.

The mist began to scintillate with white light. It abruptly turned heavy, sighing as it sank to the ground. The rumpled upper surface descended around Fletcher, leaving him totally exposed. A wide beam of red light shone down through the hole in the dome, illuminating the whole ectoplasm pool. On the other side, Dariat and Tolton were caught in the act of trying to reach the north transept.

“Going somewhere?” Quinn asked. “There’s nowhere to run. The warriors of the Light Bringer are here.” With a theatrical motion, he gestured at the pool, conjuring its inhabitants up.

A vast upwelling of ectoplasm sent waves of the fluid pouring lazily down the nave and transepts. The crown of an Orgathé slipped smoothly upwards, emerging into the crimson light.

Quinn laughed uproariously as the monster rose into the universe. Possessed fled screaming through the cathedral doors. Powel and Fletcher were drowning in undead sludge that sent out eager pseudopods to smother their heads. At his feet Louise and Greta lay broken and defeated, shedding tears for the torment to come. It was Night as he’d always dreamed it would be.

Something *happened* far above him. His head jerked up. “Fuck!”

Andy Behoo had spent the whole time pressed against his window, watching the ugly red cloud creeping across London. Hot air helped to magnify the incursion with awful clarity. Above the arcology’s crystal dome, the stars shone down with cold beauty through a storm-free sky. It would have been a lovely dawn.

Now he knew he wouldn’t even see that. His neural nanonics had crashed. The front edge of the cloud was less

than a quarter of a mile away. Underneath it, the eerily pervasive red light helped to illuminate the vacant streets.

He'd clung to this window when she left, staring after her mutely; so he knew which street she'd taken. If she came back, he would be able to see her. That alone would give him the courage to leave the tenement. He would go out and fetch her home. Louise would make the end liveable.

The crimson light inside the cloud flickered and died. It was so sudden Andy thought there was something wrong with his eyes. All that remained of the frightened city were outlines so faint he could be imagining them. He scoured them for signs that the SD weapons had begun their slaughter.

Nothing moved in the dead silence. He looked up.

There were no stars anymore.

The wormhole interstice opened a million kilometres above the sun's south pole. Its edges immediately expanded. Within three seconds it was over one and a half billion kilometres in diameter, greater than Jupiter's orbit. Fifteen seconds later it reached the size Joshua had designated: twelve billion kilometres across, just wider than the entire solar system. It moved forwards, enveloping star, planets, asteroids, and comets alike.

The interstice contracted to nothing.

All that remained was a single human figure in a black robe, tumbling wildly through space.

In Tracy's lounge, Arnie got up and thumped the top of the television. The picture didn't return.

"What's happening now?" Jay asked.

"Corpus doesn't know," Tracy said. Her hands trembled at the revelation.

Over seventeen million possessing souls in various arcologies were exorcised from their captive bodies as Earth moved

into the wormhole. Joshua arranged its internal quantum structure in a fashion similar to the conditions Dariat and Rubra had used to expel the possessors from Valisk. There was one difference: they didn't become ghosts, this time they were torn cursing in anguish straight back into the beyond. From Earth, orbiting thirty thousand light-years from the centre of the galaxy, the glorious blaze of the core stars had never been visible. There was too much dark mass spread throughout the spiral arms, interstellar gas clouds and dust storms absorbing the light spun off from the densely packed supergiants. Astronomers had to turn their telescopes outwards, studying other starpools to see what such a spectacle might be like.

You had to be a lot closer in towards the centre to see the core's corona starting to expand over the shielding plane of dark matter. Even then, it would only be an exceptionally bright crescent nebula stretched across the night sky. To witness its full glory, a planet needed to be perched right at the root of the spiral arms where the core appeared as an iridescent cloak of silver-white light across half of space, outshining the local sun. Regrettably, such a place was lethal; a fierce outpouring of intense radiation from the tightly clustered stars would immediately sterilise any unprotected biological life.

No, to gain a full appreciation of the galaxy's native beauty, it had to be observed from outside. Above the spiral arms, and away from the radiation.

Joshua chose a location 20,000 light-years out from the core and 10,000 to the north of the ecliptic. The solar system emerged there to be greeted with the sight of a majestic bejewelled cyclone shining fiercely against a blackness devoid of any constellations.

The Kulu system was the next to arrive. Then Oshanko. Followed by Avon. Ombey. New California. They no longer emerged one at a time. The singularity was capable of creating wormholes simultaneously. Joshua shifted his participa-

tion to the executive, selecting what was to be taken. Gateways were opened into the realms where the possessed had fled with their planets. Lalonde, Norfolk, and all the others were returned to their stars, then moved out of the galaxy.

The Confederation soon formed its own unique, isolated stellar cluster sailing serenely through intergalactic space. Eight hundred stars orchestrated into a classic lenticular formation with Sol at the centre, and the rest never more than half a light-year from each other.

Other, more subtle, astronomical modifications were made, seeds of the changes to come.

Quinn didn't understand why he was still alive. During the cataclysm, Edmund Rigby's pitiful soul had been wrenched from the prison he'd forged at the centre of his mind. He no longer had any contact with the beyond, no interdimensional rift to bestow his fabulous energistic power. No magical sixth sense. And he was floating through empty space, with air to breathe.

"My Lord," he cried. "Why? Why did you take the victory from me? Nobody has served you better."

There was no answer.

"Let me go back. Let me prove myself. I can make Night fall. I will ride the dark angels into heaven, we will tear it down and sit You upon the throne."

A human figure appeared in front of him, bathed in gentle starlight. Quinn drew in an excited breath as he drew closer. It was spat out in disgust as he recognized the face. "You!"

"Hi, Quinn," said Joshua. "Ranting won't do you any good. I resealed the opening to the dark continuum, the fallen angels aren't coming to rescue you. Nobody is."

"God's Brother will win. Night will fall with or without me at the head of His army."

"I know."

Quinn gave him a suspicious glare.

“You were right all along, though not in a way you imagined. This universe ends in darkness.”

“You believe that? You accept the gospel of God’s Brother?”

“Your gospel is a load of shit, and you’re the only asshole to squirt it out, Quinn.”

“I will find your soul in the beyond. When I do I will crush your pride and—”

“Oh, shut up. I have an offer for you. In words you’ll understand, I want you to lead the lost souls to your Lord.”

“Why?”

“Many reasons. You deserve to be erased from time for what you did. But I can’t do that.”

Quinn started to laugh. “You’re an angel of the false Lord. That’s why you have the power to snatch me away from Earth. Yet He won’t let you kill me, will He? He is too compassionate. How you must hate that.”

“There are worse things than death and the beyond. I can deliver you to the fallen angels. Do you think they’ll be happy to see someone who failed to free them?”

“What do you want?”

A circular opening in space expanded behind Joshua. “This leads into Night, Quinn. It’s a wormhole that takes you straight to the time of God’s Brother. I’ll allow you to go through it.”

“Name your price.”

“I’ve told you, lead the damned souls out of the beyond and into your Night. Without them, the human race will stand a chance to grow. They are a terrible burden on any species who discovers the true nature of the universe. The Kiint, for instance, cloned mindless bodies to house their lost souls. It took them thousands of years, but every one was brought back, and loved, and taught to face the beyond as it should be faced. But that’s the Kiint, not us. We’re going to have a big enough task helping the living over the

next few decades. There's no way we can deal with all those billions of lost souls, not for centuries. And all that time, they'll be suffering and inhibiting our development."

"My heart bleeds."

"You don't have one." Joshua drifted to one side. There was nothing between Quinn and the opening now. "Now tell me, do you want to meet God's Brother?"

"Yes." Quinn stared greedily into the absolute blackness revealed by the opening. "Yes!"

The souls who had been cast back into the beyond brought with them a devastating tide of bitterness and fury as they raged impotently against the atrocity. Freedom existed, it was possible to regain a life. Now there was only purgatory again. No chink existed in the barrier between them and reality. They screamed their wrath, at the same time pleading with those they could dimly sense moving on the other side. Begging to be let back, for just one last taste of sensation. None of the living heard them any more.

A fissure opened. One small precious gap leaking the most gorgeous human sensations into the cursed void. They flocked around it, rejoicing in its magic. And there was enough for all to feast upon. Every lost soul knew the touch of air upon skin, saw myriad constellations shimmering against the night sky.

Quinn screamed himself raw as he was possessed by a hundred billion lost souls. Their violation was total, devouring the import of every single cell that was him.

His body soared through the opening, carrying the burden of humanity with him. The wormhole closed behind them, cutting off the sight of the stars which humans had always known as their own.

29

Though it would never be told this way, Louise actually spent most of the summoning ceremony unaware of what was happening. After Courtney shoved her down on the bench she rolled onto her side, fighting the dreadful nausea. Little of anything Quinn said registered through the pain and misery. The backlash from the energistic power marshalled by the possessed set off concussions of fright inside her skull.

Then the solid rocket motors ignited, smothering her in choking smoke. She was on the floor retching desperately as the Orgathé drew up level with the gallery.

She lay there shivering between peaks of flame and ice, crying wretchedly. Then all the external sensations began to die away, abandoning her in a stinking grainy grey smog that obscured everything save a few yards of the gallery.

Footsteps crunched on the powdery debris that'd showed down when the escape pod hit the cathedral's dome. They stopped beside her. She moaned, aware that the person was bending down. A hand stroked the side of her head, tenderly brushing the hair from her eyes.

"Hello, Louise. I said I'd come back for you."

It was the wrong voice. An impossibility. But so utterly

right. Louise blinked up, and tears flooded her eyes again. "Joshua!"

His arms went round her, and he kept saying: "Shush, it's all right, it's all right," as he rocked her shaking body against him.

"But Joshua—"

He kissed her gently, tapped his forefinger on her nose. "It's okay, it's all over. I promise."

"Quinn," she gasped. "Quinn, he's . . ."

"Gone. Over. Finished."

Her head swung from side to side, seeing the tendrils of smog slowly withdrawing from the gallery. The cathedral below was shockingly quiet.

"Here," Joshua said. "Let's get you sorted out." He pulled the wrapping off a medical nanonic package, and applied it gently to her face where Quinn had struck her.

She realized her neural nanonics were back on-line, and hurriedly put her medical monitor program into primary.

"It's all right," Joshua said softly. "Our baby's fine."

"Huh," Louise grunted. "How do you know about . . ."

He kissed her hand. "I know everything," he said with that beautifully wicked Joshua grin. The very same one which had started all this. Louise thought she might even be blushing.

"If you could hang on to the questions for a moment," he said. "There's someone you have to say goodbye to."

Louise let him help her up to her feet, glad of the assistance. Every part of her seemed to be aching and stiff. When they were standing, she just couldn't resist giving him another kiss, making sure he was real. And no way was she going to let go of his hand. Then she saw Fletcher standing behind him.

"My lady." Fletcher bowed deeply.

She drew a sharp breath. "The possessed."

"Gone," Joshua said. "Except for Fletcher. And he's not exactly possessing anybody any more; this is a simulacrum

body.” He offered his hand to the solemn naval officer. “I wanted to thank you in person for looking after Louise through all this.”

Fletcher nodded gravely. “I confess I have been curious as to what man might be worthy of Lady Louise. I see now why she speaks of no other.”

Louise knew for sure she was blushing this time.

“Am I now to return to that purgatory, sir?”

“No,” Joshua said. “That’s something else I wanted to tell you. You were there because of your own decency. Leaving your family and your country, mutinying against your king, were all terrible crimes. You convinced yourself of that, and imposed your own punishment. Purgatory was what you believed you deserved.”

Fletcher’s eyes darkened with remembered pain. “In my heart I knew what we were doing was wrong. But Bligh was cruel beyond any man’s endurance. We could withstand no more.”

“It’s over now,” Joshua said. “It’s been over for nearly a thousand years. What you have done for Louise and others this time is enough to pardon a hundred mutinies. Have courage, Fletcher, the beyond is not all there is. Sail through it. Find the shore that lies on the other side. It *is* there.”

“I could never doubt a man of your valour, sir. I will do as you say.”

Joshua stood aside.

“My lady.”

She hugged him tightly. “I don’t want you to go.”

“This is not where I belong, my dearest Louise. I am adrift here.”

“I know.”

“But still, I consider myself privileged that I have known you, however bizarre the circumstances. You will prosper, I foretell, and your child too. Your universe is a many-splendored thing. Live your life in it to the full.”

“I will. I promise.”

He kissed her on the brow, almost a blessing. “And tell the little one I shall think of her always.”

“Bon voyage, Fletcher.”

His body began to attenuate, its boundary dissolving into wisps of platinum stardust. An arm was raised in a farewell salute.

Louise stared at the empty space it left for some time. “Now what?” she asked.

“A few explanations, I think,” Joshua said. “I’d better take you over to Tranquillity for that. You need to clean up and rest. And Genevieve is doing truly awful things to the servitor housechimps.”

Louise began to groan. Her breath stalled as the lush parkland of the habitat quietly materialized around her.

Samual Aleksandrovich had spent the last ten minutes accessing the station’s external sensor suite. Even so, he had to see for himself before he could truly believe. The SD control centre had been alarmed by the number of starships which kept appearing above Avon, but swiftly discovered they were all ships who had been en route to other stars. They’d been snatched from interstellar space, emerging in the designated zones above the planet. Once the First Admiral confirmed they weren’t an attack force, he and Lalwani took a lift capsule to the observation lounge.

The big compartment was crowded with naval personnel. They parted reluctantly to allow both admirals through to the curving transparent wall. Samual looked out in trepidation at space without stars. The station’s rotation slowly brought the galaxy into view; its core shining gold and violet, embraced by the silver shimmer whorl of satellite stars.

“Is it ours?” Samual asked quietly.

“Yes sir,” Captain al-Sahhaf said. “SD command is using the sensor satellites to identify neighbouring galaxies. They

correspond to the known pattern, which puts us approximately ten thousand light-years outside.”

Samual Aleksandrovich turned to Lalwani. “Is this where the possessed come, do you think?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Ten thousand light-years. What in God’s name did this to us?”

“Joshua Calvert did, sir.”

Samual Aleksandrovich gave Richard Keaton a very suspicious look. “Would you care to qualify that remark, Lieutenant?”

“Calvert and the voidhawk *Oenone* succeeded in their mission, sir. They found the Tyrathca Sleeping God. It’s an artefact capable of generating wormholes on this scale.”

Samual and Lalwani traded a look.

“You seem remarkably well informed,” Lalwani said. “I’m not aware of any communication from *Oenone* or the *Lady Macbeth* reaching us since we arrived here.”

Keaton gave an embarrassed smile. “I apologise that you didn’t know in advance. Nonetheless, Calvert transferred every Confederation world out here.”

“Why?” Samual asked.

“Moving a possessed body through the specific class of wormhole we just came through closes the rift which allows a soul to extrude from the beyond into this universe. He simply did it en masse. The lost souls have all been returned to the beyond. He also brought back all the planets which the possessed had taken away.” Keaton gestured at the empty void outside. “The whole Confederation is here. There is no more possession crisis.”

“It’s over?”

“Yes, sir.”

Samual narrowed his eyes as he contemplated his staff captain for a long moment. “The Kiint,” he said eventually.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, I am one of their operatives.”

"I see. And what part did they play in all this?"

"None." Keaton grinned. "This surprised the hell out of them, too."

"I'm glad to hear it." Samual glanced out at the galaxy again as it began to slide from view. "Is Calvert going to take us back?"

"I don't know."

"The Kiint agreed they would help us with medical supplies if we solved this crisis. Will they honour that promise?"

"Yes sir. Ambassador Rulour will be happy to extend the Kiint government's full cooperation with the Confederation."

"Good. Now get your shabby arse out of my headquarters."

The doors parted before Joshua could datavise his arrival.

"Welcome home," Ione said. She dabbed a platonic kiss on his cheek.

He led Louise into the apartment, enjoying her little gasp of astonishment as she saw the glass wall looking out over the bottom of the circumfluous sea.

"You're the Lord of Ruin," Louise said.

"And you're Louise Kavanagh, from Norfolk. Joshua talks about you all the time."

Louise smiled as if she didn't believe. "He does?"

"Oh yes. And what he hasn't told me about you, Genevieve certainly has."

"Is she all right?"

"She's fine. I've got Horst Elwes looking after her. They're on their way. Which should just give you time to freshen up."

Louise glanced down at Andy's dilapidated clothes. "Please."

Joshua poured himself a hefty glass of Norfolk Tears while Ione was showing Louise the bathroom. "Thanks," he said when she came back.

“You did it, didn’t you? That’s why we’re here.”

Yeah. I did it. No more possessed.

A plucked eyebrow was raised delicately. **And when did you pick up this ability?**

A little gift from the Sleeping God. He let the memories flood out directly, showing her and Tranquillity what had happened.

I was right about you, all along. Her arms circled round him, and she stood on her toes to give him a kiss.

Joshua gave the door to the bathroom a guilty glance.

Ione smiled wisely. **Don’t worry. I won’t mess things up.**

“I don’t know what to do about her, Ione. Damnit, I ruled the universe, I was given the answers to everything, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t be stupid, Joshua, of course you know. You’ve always known.”

Brad Lovegrove regained control of his body as if waking from a debilitating coma. Every thought, every action, was dreadfully slow and confused. The whole period of Capone’s possession retained the constituency of a feverish dream, flashes of revolting clarity stitched together by slipstream blurs of sensation and colour.

He found he was sitting at a glass-topped table. It was in the lounge of a five-star hotel suite. A big picture window showed New California sliding past outside. There was a pot of hot coffee in front of him, cups, a plate with a pile of scrambled eggs. A thick pool of blood was spreading over the glass, flowing round the plate to reach the edge. Big scarlet drops splattered onto the carpet around his feet.

A woman in the chair opposite was crumpled over her half of the table. Three quarters of her body was covered in green medical nanonic packages; with a navy-blue towelling robe worn over them. One package from her throat had been re-

moved and placed on the table. The skin it exposed had a savagely deep cut, opening her carotid artery. There was a small fission blade knife nestling in the hand of her outstretched arm.

Brad Lovegrove fell off his chair, burbling incoherently with shock.

Joshua and Louise waited by the airlock hatch of docking bay MB 0-330. They'd both accessed the sensors around the bay, watching *Lady Macbeth* settle lightly on the cradle. Her chemical verniers puffed out fast bursts of bright yellow flame around the equator as Liol brought her in. She touched the cradle in perfect alignment, and the holding latches closed. Utility hoses and cables rose up to jack in one by one. Thermo-dump panels folded down into the hull, and the whole assembly started to sink down into the bay.

He did that well, Joshua admitted to himself. **How are you doing?** he asked Syrinx.

Almost there, she told him.

Affinity showed him the big voidhawk sticking close to the *Mindori* and *Stryla* as the blackhawks curved round the spaceport spindle to chase the habitat's docking ledge. The two blackhawks needed guiding and coaxing: their personalities were almost traumatised into catatonia by the possession. Both of them desperately wanted their lost captains. It wouldn't happen, Joshua knew, Kiera had destroyed the bodies back on Valisk, forcing the newly possessing souls into the blackhawks.

They will recover with time, *Oenone* said softly. **We will be here for them.**

I'm sure you will.

Congratulations, Joshua Calvert, the Jovian Consensus said. **And our profound thanks. Samuel has told us that it was you alone who communed with the singularity.**

I had plenty of help reaching it, he said. A smile image flashed between himself and Syrinx.

Your method of terminating the crisis was spectacular, Consensus said.

Believe me, it was one of the quiet options. Godpower is a modest understatement for the singularity's abilities.

Are you still in contact?

Yes. For the moment. There's a few loose ends I want to tie up myself. After that, it's over.

To abandon such power requires considerable strength of character. We are happy to see Samuel's faith was not misplaced.

To be honest, a life spent jumping round the Confederation righting wrongs really doesn't appeal. From now on all I carry is a message.

Joshua Calvert, missionary, Syrinx teased. Now there's a real miracle.

Will you be returning the Confederation stars to their original position? Consensus asked.

No. I want them to stay here. That also is my decision.

And one we will have to abide by. After all, it will not be easy for us to send a starship back to the Sleeping God from here.

It's not impossible. But then that's the whole point.

Would you explain?

Humans have been lucky in the past, expanding and colonising our way across the galaxy. I'm not knocking it. Things were pretty bad back there on Earth for a while. As a species we needed to get away, as the old saying goes, to put our eggs in more than one basket. But it can't go on forever. We have to face up to the future, and develop in different ways. There are eight hundred stars out here in this cluster, that's all. There can be no more physical expansion at our current social, economic, and technological level. No more run-

ning away from our problems; we're mature enough to address them now.

And our isolation will ensure that we do.

I'm hoping it will concentrate a few minds, yes.

We will live in interesting times.

All times are interesting if you know to live them properly, Joshua said. I have the new coordinates of the other stars for you. You'll have to send out voidhawks to them and spread the information, put us all back in contact.

Of course.

Joshua let the information flow out of his mind and into the Consensus.

The airlock opened, and his crew came flooding out yelling raucous greetings.

Liol hugged him first. "Fine bloody captain you make! You abandon us there to have fun all by yourself, and the next thing we know we've got Jupiter's SD command screaming at us."

"I brought you back, what more do you want?"

Sarha squealed and wrapped herself round him. "You did it!" She kissed his ear. "And what a view."

Dahybi slapped his back, laughing ecstatically. There were Ashly and Beaulieu, pushing at each other to get at him. Monica said: "Looks like you got it right," without sounding too much of a grudge. Samuel chuckled at her obstinacy. Kempster and Renato chided him for cutting off their observations so abruptly. Mzu barely thanked him before asking about the singularity's internal quantum structure.

In the end he held up his arms and shouted at them all to shut the hell up. "Party in Harkey's Bar, right now, and the drinks are on me."

Beth and Jed were pressed up against the big port in the lounge as Tranquillity expanded outside.

"It looks just like Valisk," he said excitedly.

“Let me see!” Navar demanded.

Jed grinned, and they stepped aside. The lounge was weird now. The outlines of the steamship fittings ran through the actual walls and equipment, solid ridges cutting through composite and alloy alike. Hints of the false colours and textures were still there if he squinted hard and remembered what had gone before.

They knew where they were and roughly what had happened, because *Mindori* had spoken to them a couple of times. But the blackhawk wasn't very communicative.

“I think we're landing,” Webster said.

“Sounds good,” Jed said. He got in a good kiss with Beth. Gari gave them one dismissive glance, and went back to watching the docking ledge.

“We'd better check on Gerald,” Beth said.

Jed tried to be a sport. At least the old loon would finally be out of his life after they landed.

Gerald hadn't moved from the bridge since the amazing xenoc diskcity vanished abruptly and Loren's possession had ended. For hour after hour during the stand-off he had stood at the weapons console, like some old-time mariner gripping the wheel during a storm. His vigilance never wavered the whole time. When it ended, he'd slithered down and sat there, legs splayed on the floor, back propped up against the side of the console. He stared straight ahead through hazed eyes, not saying a word.

Beth crouched down beside him and clicked her fingers in front of his face. There was no response.

“Is he dead?” Jed asked.

“Jed! No he's not. He's breathing. I think he must have some kind of exhaustion problem.”

“We'll add it to the list,” Jed muttered, *very* quietly. “Hey Gerald, mate, we've landed. The *Stryla* came down with us. That's the one with Marie in. Good, huh? You'll be seeing her soon, then. How about that?”

Gerald kept staring ahead, unmoving.

“Guess we’d better ask for a doc to see him,” Jed said.

Gerald turned his head. “Marie?” he whispered.

“That’s it, Gerald,” Beth said. She gripped his upper arm tightly. “Marie’s here. Just a few minutes now and you can see her again. Can you get up?” She tried to lift him, stir him into moving. “Jed, shift yourself.”

“I dunno. Maybe we should leave him for the doc.”

“He’s fine. Aren’t you, Gerald, mate. Just knackered, that’s what.”

“Well, okay.” Jed leant over, and tried to tug Gerald up.

Several loud clanking sounds came from the airlock.

Gari ran in. “The bus is here,” she said breathlessly.

“It’ll take us to Marie,” Beth said encouragingly. “Come on, Gerald. You can do it.”

His legs twitched feebly.

Between them, they got him standing. With one on either side, and Gerald’s arms round their shoulders, they shuffled him towards the airlock.

Marie sat hunched up on the corridor floor outside the bridge. She hadn’t stopped crying since Kiera had been exorcised. The memories of what had happened since Lalonde were vivid, deliberately so. Kiera hadn’t cared about Marie knowing what was going on, what her body was doing.

It was disgusting. Filthy.

Even though it wasn’t her performing those acts, Marie knew she would never banish what her body had done. Kiera’s soul might have gone, but her haunting would never be over.

She’d been given her life back, and couldn’t see a single reason for living it.

The airlock cycled, and the hatch whirred open.

“Marie.”

It was a frail, pained croak, but it sliced right into her

soul. "Daddy?" she moaned incredulously. When she looked up he was standing in the airlock, holding on to the rim. He looked dreadful, barely managing to stand. But his frail old face was suffused with all the joy of a father holding his infant child for the first time. She couldn't begin to imagine what he'd gone through to be here at this time. And he'd suffered it all because she was his daughter, and that alone entitled her to his love forever.

She stood and held out both hands to him. Wanting a cuddle from Daddy. Wanting him to take her home where none of this would ever happen.

Gerald smiled wondrously at his pretty little daughter. "I love you, Marie." His body gave way, pitching him face first onto the floor.

Marie screamed and ran forwards. His breath was juddering, eyes closed.

"Daddy! Daddy, no!" She pawed at him in hysterics. "Daddy, talk to me!"

The steward from the bus was shouldering her aside, waving a medical block sensor along Gerald's inert body. "Oh shit. Give me a hand," he yelled at Jed. "We've got to get him into the habitat."

Jed was staring at Marie, unable to move. "It's you," he said, enchanted.

Beth pushed past him and knelt beside the steward. A life support package had covered Gerald's face, pumping air into his lungs.

"Medical emergency," the steward datavised. "Get a crash team to the reception lounge." The medical block datavised a violent alarm as Gerald's heart stopped. He tore the wrapping from a paramedic package and slapped it across Gerald's neck. Nanonic filaments invaded his throat, seeking out the major arteries and veins, pumping in artificial blood, keeping the brain alive.

Rather sheepishly, the participants from the *Disco At The End Of The World* were wandering across the concrete yard in a hungover stupor, watching dawn break over the arcology. It wasn't something any of them had expected to see.

Andy was down there with them, datavising questor after questor into the segments of the net that were coming back on-line. Satellites were providing temporary coverage as the civil authorities began to re-establish some kind of control. Nothing he did could bring an acknowledgement from her neural nanonics. Every programming trick he knew was useless.

He started to walk towards the gate out onto the road. She was out there somewhere; if he had to search the whole arcology himself, he would find her.

"What's that?" someone asked.

People were stopping and looking up at the dome. The sun had only just risen over the eastern rim; it showed a low bank of grey cloud washing in from the north. It reached the geodesic crystal structure and flowed gently round it. Not an armada storm; in fact Andy had never seen a cloud move so slowly before. Then it became curiously hard to see out through the crystal hexagons. The reason took a very long time to register, he even checked the now-fervid news shows to be absolutely certain.

For the first time in nearly five and a half centuries, snow was falling on London.

There was no sign now that humans had ever visited or been involved with the red dwarf star named Tunja. Joshua had moved the settled Dorado asteroids to the New Washington system along with all their industrial stations; the two Edenist habitats were to be found orbiting Jupiter. Nothing remained to tell the new inhabitants of the system's infamous history.

Quantook-LOU had spent two days recovering from the effects of gravity he'd endured in Lalarin-MG. He remained

immobile in his personal space, plugged into Anthi-CL's dataweb, supervising the initial repair work. Conflicts between the diskcity dominions had ended, from surprise rather than agreement to start with. But he had mediated a new peace with the other distributors as they all examined and shared the images which came from sensors mounted on both sides of Tojolt-HI.

The bounty they revealed was almost beyond belief. Mastrit-PJ's entire population of diskcities now orbited the tiny red star, packed together in equatorial orbit. And beyond them was a supply of raw cold matter that defied logic; a vast ring of particles over two hundred million kilometres in diameter. The Mosdva were suddenly drowning in resources.

They could leave the old worn-out diskcities, building new dominions independent from each other. As far as the distributors could tell, every Tyrathca enclave had been emptied at the same time the diskcities were taken from Mastrit-PJ. The conflicts which had cursed the Mosdva since the dominions were established would be over for all time.

Quantook-LOU also had the data from the humans, telling him how to build their faster-than-light ship engines. Other distributors were already mediating for favourable alliances with Anthi-CL, wanting to share the technology. This was a new part of space, strangely empty without the nebula which had dominated half of their old orbit. Billions of stars lay open to them. It would be interesting to find the humans again, and other races of which Joshua Calvert had spoken.

The Ly-cilph's perception field expanded slowly outward as its active functions returned out of their dormancy within its macro-data lattice. At first it believed it had suffered memory loss. It was no longer in the jungle clearing where the human sacrifice was conducted, instead it appeared to be floating in clear space. The perception field could find nothing within range. No mass existed for a billion kilometres,

not even a lone electron, which was extremely improbable. The energy waves washing through the field were of a strange composition, one it had no prior record of. An analysis of this continuum's local quantum structure revealed it was no longer in the universe of its birth.

A dense mass point emerged beside it, emitting a variety of electromagnetic wave functions. It was impervious to the Ly-cilph's probing.

"We understand you are on a voyage to comprehend the full nature of reality," Tinkerbelle said. "So are we. Would you like to join us?"

Oenone's crew appeared in Harkey's Bar amid cheers and boisterous hugs, and the party looked like reaching truly epic proportions. Genevieve loved every minute of it. It was noisy, hot, and colourful; nothing like parties at Cricklade. People were nice to her, she'd managed to drink a couple of glasses of wine without Louise noticing, and cousin Gideon even partnered her on the dance floor. But nothing was funnier than watching the antics of Joshua's brother, who spent the whole time trying to avoid a very beautiful and extremely determined blonde lady.

Louise stuck by Joshua's side the whole time; smiling more from fright than delight as everyone crowded round him, wanting to hear the tale of the naked singularity from his own mouth. Eventually he led her through the door, swearing he'd be back in a second. They took a lift directly up to the lobby and walked out into the parkland.

"You looked unhappy in there," he said.

"I didn't realize you had so many friends. I never really thought about it. I only ever met you and Dahybi before."

He led her down a path lined by orange wimwillows, towards a nearby lake. "I never met half of them before today."

"It's so pretty here," Louise sighed as they reached the shore of the lake. The water-plants had balloon-like flowers

that hung an inch below the surface; green fish nibbled at the tuft of stamen coming from their crowns. "This must have been a wonderful place to grow up in."

"It was. But don't tell Ione, all I ever wanted to do was fly away."

"She's very beautiful."

He held her closer. "Not as beautiful as you."

"Don't," she said, troubled.

"I can kiss my fiancée if I want. Even Norfolk permits that."

"I'm not your fiancée, Joshua. I just kept saying that because of the baby. I was ashamed. Which is so stupid. Having a baby is a wonderful thing, the best thing any two people can do. Fancy being prejudiced against it. I'll always love my home, but so much of it is wrong."

He dropped down on one knee, and held her hand. "Marry me."

From the expression on her face she could have been in agony. "That's very kind, Joshua, and if you'd asked that day you left Cricklade I'd even have eloped with you. But, really, you don't know anything about me. It wouldn't work; you're a starship captain and unutterably famous, I'm a landowner's daughter. All we ever were was a beautiful dream I had once."

"I know everything there is to know about you. Thanks to the singularity, I've lived every second of your life. And don't you ever call yourself someone else's daughter again. You're Louise Kavanagh, nothing else. I had one exciting flight, which was the result of thousands of people backing me up behind the scenes. You walked right up to Quinn Dexter and tried to stop him. It is not possible to possess more courage than that, Louise. You were astonishing. Those drunken buffoons in Harkey's Bar look up at me. I stand in awe at what you did."

"You saw everything I did?" she enquired.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Including last night.”

“Oh.”

He gently pulled at her hand, making her kneel beside him. “I don’t think I could marry a saint, Louise. And you already know I’ve never been one.”

“Do you really want to marry me?”

“Yes.”

“But we’d never be together.”

“Starship captains are a thing of the past now, just like landowner daughters. There’s so much we have to do in our lives.”

“You don’t mind living on Norfolk?”

“We’ll change it together, Louise. You and me.”

She kissed him, then smiled demurely. “Do we have to go back to the party?” she murmured.

“No.”

Her smile widened, and she stood up. Joshua stayed on one knee.

“I haven’t had my answer yet. And this classic routine is killing my leg muscle.”

“I was taught to always keep a man waiting,” she said imperiously. “But your answer is yes.”

“Anastasia, is that really you?”

“Hello, Dariat, of course it’s me. I waited for you. I knew you’d come eventually.”

“I very nearly didn’t. There was a spot of trouble back there.”

“Lady Chi-ri has always smiled upon you, Dariat. Right from the start.”

“You know, this isn’t what I expected to find on the other side of the beyond.”

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Can we see it together?”

“I’d like that.”

It was the last time Joshua would use the ability, and strictly speaking it wasn't necessary, but there was absolutely no way he was going to miss out on seeing the Kiint home system in person just for the sake of virtue and dignified restraint. He materialized on the white-sand beach not far from Tracy's chalet. The coast was exquisite, of course. Then he looked up. Silvery planet crescents curved away through the deep-turquoise sky.

"Now I've seen it all," he said quietly.

Five white spheres erupted in the air around him. The same size as providers, but with a very different function.

Joshua held his arms up. "I am unarmed. Take me to your leader."

The spheres winked out of existence. Joshua laughed.

Jay and Haile were racing over the sands to him.

"Joshua!"

He managed to catch her as she jumped at him. Swung her round full circle.

"Joshua!" she shrieked happily. "What are you doing here?"

"Come to take you home."

"Really?" Her eyes were rounded with optimism. "Back to the Confederation?"

"Yep, go pack your bags."

Greetings, Joshua Calvert. This day is filled with much joyfulness. I am much content.

"Hi, Haile. You've grown."

And you have strengthened.

He put Jay down. "Well what do you know, there's hope for all of us."

"It's been fab here," Jay said. "The providers give you everything you want, and that includes ice cream. You don't need money."

Two adult Kiint appeared on the black teleport circle.

Tracy was coming down the steps from her chalet. Joshua eyed them all cautiously.

“And I’ve been to loads of planets in the arc. And met hundreds and hundreds of people.” Jay paused, sucking on her lower lip. “Is Mummy all right?”

“Uh, yeah. This is the hard part, Jay. She’s going to need a day or two before she can see you. Okay? So I’m going to take you back to Tranquillity, and then you can go back to Lalonde with all the others in a little while.”

She pouted. “And Father Horst?”

“And Father Horst,” he promised.

“Right. And you’re sure Mummy’s fine?”

“She is. She’s really looking forward to seeing you, too.”

Tracy stood behind Jay, and patted her on the head. “I’ve told you to wear a hat when you play out here.”

“Yes, Tracy.” The little girl pulled a face at Joshua.

He grinned back. “You go and pack. I just need to talk to Tracy for a moment. Then we’ll be off.”

“Come on, Haile.” Jay grabbed one of the Kiint’s tractamorphic limbs, and they hurried off towards the chalet.

Joshua’s grin faded when the youngsters were out of hearing. “Thanks for nothing,” he said to Tracy.

“We did what we could,” she said fiercely. “Don’t you judge us, Joshua Calvert.”

“The Corpus judges us, decides our fate.”

“None of us asked to be born. We’re more sinned against than sinners. And Richard Keaton saved your arse, as I recall.”

“So he did.”

“We would have made sure something survived. Humanity would have carried on.”

“But in whose image?”

“You’re proud of your current one, are you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

She rubbed a white hand over her forehead. “I keep run-

ning comparisons. What the human race is compared to so many others.”

“Well don’t, it’s not your concern any more. We can find our own way now.” He turned to the adult Kiint. **Hello Nang, Lieria.**

Greetings, Joshua Calvert. And congratulations.

Thank you. Though this isn’t quite how I thought I’d spend my wedding night. I’d like Corpus to remove your observers and the data acquisition systems from the Confederation, please. Our future contact should be conducted on a more honest basis.

Corpus agrees. They will be removed.

And the medical help. We need that badly, right away. Of course. It will be provided.

You could have helped us before.

Every race has the right, and obligation, to control its own destiny. The two cannot be separated.

I know, reap what you sow. We might be too aggressive, and not progress as fast as we ought, but I want Corpus to know I am immensely proud of our compassion. No matter how fabulous your technology is, what counts is how it’s used.

We acknowledge your criticism. It is one that is levelled at us constantly. Given our position it is inevitable.

He sighed and looked up at the arc again. **We’ll get here eventually.**

Of that we are sure. After all, you have already made a start.

Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, Joshua said. So I guess that means you’re not all bad after all.

Jay appeared on the chalet veranda carrying a bulging shoulder bag. She shouted and waved, then charged down the steps.

“Is her mother all right?” Tracy asked urgently.

“She’s treatable,” Joshua said. “That’s all I can say. I’ve stopped intervening now. It’s just too damn tempting. Not that the singularity would permit much more.”

“It doesn’t need any more. Corpus analysed what you’ve done. You made some smart moves. The current economic structure won’t survive.”

“I provided the opportunity for change, plus one small active measure. What happens after . . . well, let’s just say, I have faith.”

Jed and Beth stayed with Marie in the hospital waiting room. Beth wasn’t exactly overjoyed about that, she would have loved to see Tranquillity’s park. But Gari, Navar, and Webster were settled in the paediatric wing which wasn’t far away. She didn’t know what was going to happen to any of them next, but then right now that applied to a lot of the human race. There were worse places to be cast ashore.

The doctor who’d met the bus came out of the emergency treatment centre. “Marie?”

“Yes?” She looked up at him, bright with hope.

“I’m terribly sorry, there was nothing we could do.”

Marie’s mouth parted silently, she covered her face with her hands and started sobbing.

“What happened to him?” Beth said.

“There was some kind of nanonic filament web in his brain,” the doctor said. “Its molecular structure had broken down. Disintegration caused a massive amount of damage. In fact, I really don’t understand how he could have survived at all. You said he’s been with you for weeks?”

“Yes.”

“Ah well, we’ll do a postmortem, of course. But I doubt we’ll learn much. I think it’s a symptom of the times.”

“Thanks.”

The doctor smiled briskly. “The counselor will be along

in a moment. Marie will have the best help possible to overcome this. Don't you worry."

"Great." She saw the way Jed was looking at Marie, as though he wanted to be crying with her, or for her, sparing her the burden.

"Jed, we're done here," Beth said.

"What do you mean?" he asked in puzzlement.

"It's over. Are you coming?"

He looked from her to Marie. "But we can't leave her."

"Why, Jed? What is she to us?"

"She was Kiera, she was everything we dreamed of, Beth, a new start, somewhere decent."

"This is Marie Skibbow, and she'll hate Kiera for the rest of her life."

"We can't give up now. The three of us can start Dead-night again, for real this time. There were thousands of people just like us who wanted what she promised. They'll come again."

"Right." Beth turned and marched out of the waiting room, paying no heed to his braying calls behind her. She hurried for the lift, her heart lifting at the prospect of finally seeing the lush parkland with its sparkling circumfluous sea.

I'm young, I'm free, I'm in Tranquillity, and I'm definitely not going back to bloody Koblat.

It was a great beginning.

The Assembly Chamber was deathly silent as the vote was taken. The ambassadors on the floor were first to register.

From his seat at the Polity Council table, Samual Alexandrovich watched the tally rise. There were several abstentions, of course, and the names were no surprise to him: Kulu, Oshanko, New Washington, Mazaliv, several of their close allies. No more than twenty, though, which made the First Admiral smile contentedly. In diplomatic terms that

was as good as a censure motion in itself, a sharp warning to the larger powers.

The ambassadors of the Polity Council entered their vote. Samual Aleksandrovich was last, pressing the button in front of him, and seeing the last digit click over on the big board. Ridiculous anachronism, he thought, though certainly dramatic enough.

The Assembly speaker got to his feet and gave the President a nervous little bow. Olton Haaker stared straight ahead, not meeting anyone's gaze.

"The motion that this house has no confidence in the President is carried by seven hundred and ninety-eight votes, with none against."

Durringham had never recovered from the devastation wrought by Chas Paske. It was the docks and warehouse sector which had born the brunt of the water's impact. Not that they'd stopped the onrush. Debris from their disintegrating frames had formed a black speckle crest on the wave as it surged on into the town's main commercial district. The wooden buildings with their minimal foundations had crumpled instantly. Three dumpers had been knocked over and pushed along.

A kilometre inland, the resistance offered by energistically reinforced walls managed to protect the buildings, though the mud on which they lay was siphoned away, dragging them back towards the Juliffe as the waters retreated. When they'd drained away, Durringham was left with a broad semicircle of destruction eating right into the heart of the town, a swamp with a million filthy splinters sticking upwards. Bodies lay among them, caked in drying mud and slowly decomposing in the dreadful humidity. Despite this, Durringham continued to function as an urban centre all the time Lalonde was hidden away in a realm outside the universe. Like Norfolk's, its essentially low tech nature allowed

its inhabitants to carry on along virtually the same lines as before. Boats continued to sail up and down the Juliffe, crops were sown and harvested, timber cut and sawn.

Now it was back in the universe. The humidity and daily rains returned with a vengeance. And with the thick carpet of weeds chopped away from the metal grid runway, spaceplanes were arriving once again. They were complemented by Kiint craft, small blunt ovoids that flew up and down the Juliffe and its myriad tributaries collecting people from the villages and delivering them to Durringham. Over two thousand of them were performing ambulance duties, racing round at hypersonic velocity, scanning the jungle for any remaining humans.

The Kiint had set up seven fat thirty-storey towers on the edge of the city. They'd been extruded in one go from a provider, coming fully fitted with all the medical equipment necessary to treat dangerously ill humans.

Ruth Hilton had been picked up on the third day after the Return, as people were calling it. When the flyer landed in front of her, its controlling AI asking her to come inside, she seriously contemplated not bothering. The memories of possession acted like damping rods on her psyche. She certainly hadn't eaten anything since the Return.

In the end it was her hope for Jay which made her climb in. For the last few weeks, her possessor had been soaking up aspects of her personality. She'd travelled between villages, asking for news of Jay and any of the other Aberdale children who might have survived that fateful night. Nobody had heard much from that district after the bomb went off somewhere on the savannah.

For two days she'd lain in the hospital while the Kiint examined her and made her eat. The big xenocs had smeared a bluish jelly on the areas of her skin around her cancers, which sank into her flesh as if she'd suddenly become porous. They told her it would flush her tumour cells away,

a less invasive technique than human medical packages. For one and a half days she peed a very strange fluid.

By the end of the second day she was fit enough to walk around the ward. Like a lot of her fellow patients, she sat in front of the big picture window overlooking Durringham, saying very little. Civil engineering crews were arriving hourly, fat bright-yellow jeeps crawling down the muddy streets. Programmable silicon buildings were mushrooming in the ruined semicircle of mud. Power cables had been strung up; once again electric lights began to shine in several districts during the night.

As far as she was concerned it was wasted effort. There were too many memories, too many dead children out in the jungle. This could never be her home again, not any more. She kept asking the Kiint and the hospital AI if anyone had found Jay. Always the same answer.

Then on the sixth day, Horst and Jay walked into the ward, happy and healthy. She clutched Jay to her, not letting her daughter say anything for a long time while she reaffirmed her will to live by the contact.

Horst pulled a couple of chairs over, and the three of them stared down at the city with its industrious invaders.

“This is going to be a very busy place for the next century,” Horst said, his voice a mixture of surprise and admiration. “Do you remember our first night? The old transient dormitory’s gone now, but I think that’s the harbour where it was.” He pointed vaguely. The circular basins of polyp had survived.

“Will they rebuild them?” Jay asked. She thought all the activity was tremendously exciting.

“I doubt it,” Horst said. “The people who’ll be emigrating here from now on will be wanting five-star hotels.”

Ruth raised her gaze to look across the sky. The morning rainclouds had just departed eastwards, heading inland to soak the villages upriver. They’d left a patch of pristine sky above the town and its boundary of gently steaming jungle.

Five brilliant stars shone through the glaring azure atmosphere, the closest one showing a definite crescent. She thought one of them might be Earth itself.

There were forty-seven terracompatible planets sharing its orbit now. All of them stage-one colony worlds, ready to absorb the population from the arcologies.

“Are we going back to Aberdale?” Jay asked.

“No, darling.” Ruth stroked her daughter’s sun-bleached hair. “I’m afraid we lost this world. People from Earth will come here and make it very different to what it was. They don’t have the kind of past to overcome here which we do. It belongs to them now. We need to move on again.”

The bus rolled smoothly across the docking ledge, and linked its airlock with the reception lounge. Athene was waiting for the pair of them, standing proud in a silky blue ceremonial ship-tunic, the star of captaincy absent from her collar.

I came back, Sinon said. I told you I would.

I never doubted you. But I would have understood if you’d gone on with the crystal entity. It was a fabulous opportunity.

Others took that opportunity. It doesn’t cease to exist because I refuse it.

Stubborn to the very end.

One day humans, or what we become, may make a similar journey by themselves. I would like to think I played my part in the culture which will set us upon such a road.

You are different to the Sinon who left.

I have a soul of my own now. I will not return to the multiplicity; I mean to live out my life in this form.

I’m glad you have found yourself again. I need someone around the house who can keep my appalling grandchildren in line.

He laughed, a harsh brazen clacking. **Every day, all I**

wished for was to return. I was afraid you didn't want me to.

I would never think that thought. Not of you, no matter what you'd done.

I have brought someone with me who suffers far more than either of us.

So I see. She moved forward and gave a slight bow. "Welcome to Romulus, General Hiltch."

It was the moment Ralph had dreaded most of all, passing over the threshold. If there was no forgiveness here he would never find any within this universe. He couldn't even bring himself to smile at the stately old woman whose face contained so much genuine concern. "I have no army to command any more, Athene. I resigned my commission."

"Tell me why you have come, Ralph."

"I came out of guilt. I ordered so many Edenists to their death. The Liberation ruined what it was supposed to save. It existed for vanity and pride, not honour. And it was all my idea. I need to say I'm sorry."

"We'd like to hear you, Ralph. Take as long as you want."

"Will you accept me as one of you?"

She gave him a compassionate smile. "You wish to become an Edenist?"

"Yes, though it's a selfish wish. I was told an Edenist can relieve his burden by sharing it with every other Edenist. My guilt has turned to pure grief."

"That's not selfish, Ralph. You're offering to share yourself, to contribute."

"Will it end? Will I be able to live with what I've done?"

"I've brought up a great many Edenist children in my house, Ralph." She put her arm in his, and started walking him towards the exit. "And I've never had a serpent yet."

It took several weeks for all the mundane functions of government to return to normal after the Confederation was trans-

ferred out of the galaxy. People realized that their circumstances would change, in many ways quite profoundly. Religions strove to incorporate or explain away the singularity's gospel of the universe. Joshua didn't mind that: as he told Louise, conviction in one's God nearly always equated to a conviction in self. Time might well see an end to the undue influence religion had on the way people approached life. Then again, knowing the perversity of humans, maybe not.

Starflight was also altering. Travel between stars never more than half a light-year apart was incredibly quick, and cheap.

Every reporter who interviewed Joshua asked why he hadn't taken the Confederation stars back again. Quite infuriatingly, he just smiled and said he liked the view from out here.

Governments weren't so fond of it. There could never be any outward expansion again, unless new propulsion methods were developed. Funds for wormhole research were quietly increased.

There would be no more antimatter to terrorise planetary populations. The stars where the production stations orbited were all left behind in the galaxy (though Joshua had teleported their crews out). Politicians turned their eyes to the defence budget, seeing how funds could be shifted towards more voter-friendly spending sprees.

The Kiint provider technology was regarded with fascination by the general public as it worked its miracles on the Returned worlds. Everybody wanted one of those for Christmas.

Earth's population was almost schizophrenic over the new stage-one planets available. On the one hand, their own climate had been reset to normal, making the arcology domes redundant. But Earth's surface would take a generation to restore. And if it was restored with forests, meadows, jungles, and prairies, there would be a diaspora from the arcologies which would ruin everything. However, if the population

was spread around the new planets (less than a billion each), all of them would have a natural environment, allowing them to keep their present level of consumerist industrialisation and not totally screw up the atmospheres with waste heat. Assuming that many people could be moved economically—say if you used those nifty little Kiint craft, or something came out of all that new superdrive research.

Small, subtle changes were manifesting in all aspects of Confederation life. They would merge and build on each other. And eventually, Joshua hoped, transformation would become irresistible.

But in the meantime, the methods of governance remained the same. Income had to be earned. Taxes still had to be paid. And laws had to be enforced. Backlogs of court cases worked through.

Traslov was one world where changes would be a long time coming. A terracompatible planet in the last stages of an ice age, it was one of five Confederation penal colonies. Joshua had included them, too. Much to the relief of various governments, Avon included. Traslov was where the criminals which the Confederation Navy brought in were sent.

Prison ship flights resumed after three weeks.

André Duchamp was led into the drop capsule by one of the guards, who fastened him in one of the eight acceleration couches. Once the straps were in place, holding André's arms and legs against the thin padding, his restraint collar was taken off.

"Behave yourself," the guard said curtly, and air swam out through the hatch to fetch the next prisoner.

With supreme self control, André sat quiet. His flesh was still slightly tender where the medical nanonics had been removed. And he was sure those bastard *anglo* quack doctors hadn't fully cured his intestinal tract; he kept getting raging indigestion after meals. If you could call what he'd been fed meals. But his indigestion was nothing to the suffering in-

flicted by the awesome injustice brought down upon his poor head. The Navy blamed him for the antimatter attack against Trafalgar. Him! An innocent, persecuted blackmail victim. It was diabolical.

“Hello there.”

André glared at the badly overweight, balding, middle-aged man in the couch next to him.

“Guess we ought to introduce ourselves, seeing as how we’re going to spend the rest of our lives together. I’m Mixi Penrice, and this is my wife, Imelda.”

André’s face cracked in mortification as a timid woman, also fat and middle aged, waved at him hopefully from the couch beside her husband.

“So pleased to meet you,” she said.

“Guard!” André yelled frantically. “*Guard.*”

There was never any contact between the Confederation at large and Traslov, in that every flight was strictly one way: down. The theory was simple enough. Prisoners, voluntarily accompanied by their family, were shot down into the equatorial band of continent not covered by glaciers. Sociologists, hired by participating governments to reassure civil rights organizations, claimed that if enough people were brought together then they’d inevitably form a stable community. After a hundred years, or a million people, whichever came first, the flights would be stopped. The communities would expand in the wake of the retreating glaciers. And in another hundred years a self-sustaining agrarian civilization would emerge with a modest industrial capacity, at which point they’d be allowed to join the Confederation and develop like a normal colony. As yet, no one had found out if an ex-penal colony would want to join a society which had exiled every one of their ancestors.

André’s drop capsule fired down through the atmosphere, hitting seven gees at the top of its deceleration peak. It plummeted through the low cloud layer and deployed its

parachute five hundred metres from the ground. Two metres from the ground, retrorockets fired in a half-second burst, killing the capsule's final velocity as the chute jettisoned.

The capsule crashed into the scorched earth with a bone-numbing impact. André gasped in shock at the pain transmitted along his spine. Even so, he was the first to recover, and flipped his strap catches open. The hatch was a crude affair, like everything else in the capsule. A wonder they ever got down alive. He pulled the release handle.

They'd landed in a broad valley with gently sloping sides and a fast stone-bed stream running along the bottom. The local grass-analogue was an insipid grey green, its monotony broken by a few wizened dwarf bushes. A cold wind blew against the capsule, carrying tiny grains of white ice. André shivered violently; the chill factor took it well below freezing. He had thought to simply collect his share of the survival equipment from the baggage lockers ringing the base of the capsule and hike away from his fellow exiles. That action would have to be reconsidered now.

When he looked along the other end of the valley, he was amazed to see the distinct globular shape of starship life support capsules embedded in the soil. He could see at least forty of them. A definitive count would have shown André that a total of sixteen starships had been involved in the incident which had seen them cast away here.

A lone figure was striding vigorously over the frozen ground towards the drop capsule: a young man in a black fur coat, with a crossbow slung over his shoulder. He stopped just below the hatch and put his hands on his hips to grin up at André.

"And a very good morning to you, sir; Charles Montgomery David Filton-Asquith at your service," he said. "Welcome to Happy Valley."

The bath water was imbued with the scent of tangerines; bubbles covered its surface to a thickness of ten centimetres. Ione sank into the blood-warm water with a contented moan, sliding down the marble until only her head was visible.

Ooh, that feels good.

You should relax more, Tranquillity said. I am capable of supervising most activities.

I know, but everyone wants the personal touch; I'm starting to feel like a nursemaid rather than a dictator. And I still haven't decided what to do about the Laymil project centre.

Most of its staff are on sabbatical from their university. Downsizing will be a simple matter.

Yes. But I feel we should make more use of its resources, turn it to something new. After all, you and I are technically out of a job these days.

A curious viewpoint.

Face it, we've got to find something else to do. I really don't want to stay here. She allowed the images from the shell's external sensitive cells shimmer up into her mind. Jupiter orbit was alive with starship flights, both Adamist and voidhawk. Two large industrial stations specialising in organic synthesis were being manoeuvred over to Aethra, where they could start repairing the damage to the young habitat's shell. Joshua had transferred all forty-odd young habitats from the stage-one systems into orbit above the glorious orange gas-giant.

This star system is going to be the heart of the revolution, Tranquillity said.

All the more reason we should go somewhere else. What's our status right now? Her consciousness drifted through the habitat, perceiving the state of the induction cables, the parkland, the light-tube, the vast ring of energy patterning cells. Fusion generators out on the docking ledge

were still supplying seventy per cent of Tranquillity's power.

How do you feel about making another jump?

Where to? Tranquillity asked.

I think it's time you and I went home.

Home?

Kulu.

Is this some obscure bid to succeed the throne? Your royal cousins will have a collective heart attack.

But they can hardly refuse me, not after our contribution to the Liberation. Technically, we are a dukedom of the Kulu Kingdom. And there's a lot of He₃ mining activity around Tarron, I'm sure the cloudscoop crews would prefer to be billeted here. And we are an extremely valuable economic asset to any star system.

Why?

Carrying the revolution forwards. We are bitek, they are one of the most anti-bitek cultures in the Confederation. Yet they employed bitek at the first sign of trouble. That's a chink, one we can prize open with our presence. This ridiculous technological segregation has to stop. It helps no one. This is the chance for that new beginning I spoke of. Another little change to add to the momentum for overall cultural reform.

It will not be easy.

I know that. But you have to admit, it's been awfully quiet around here since Joshua left.

I still find that hardest to believe. Handing over the *Lady Macbeth* to his brother and giving up flying. Will he be happy living on Norfolk? It's very peaceful there.

Ione laughed, and reached for a cut-crystal glass of Norfolk Tears. She eyed the fabulous drink as if it was the last drop left in the universe. **I think it's about to become a whole lot noisier.**

Syrinx and Ruben stood patiently in the hospital waiting room as the psychology team assembled. Some of them she knew from her own therapy sessions, and exchanged warm greetings.

This is exciting, *Oenone* said. The last act we will perform in this saga.

You just want to go fly, she teased.

Of course. With the Confederation stars so close, there will be many more flights now.

I wonder what sort of flights, though. Now we've glimpsed Kiint technology, I doubt He₃ fusion will last much longer. Perhaps we'll go into the pleasure cruise business.

I will still love you.

She laughed. **And I you, my love.** Her hand closed a little tighter around Ruben's. **I think I might start having children now. We've faced the worst danger there is, flown to the other side of the nebula, and now life is changing. I want to be a part of it, to embrace what's happening in the most human way possible.**

I like you being truly happy. You are complete.

Only when we're together.

The chief psychologist beckoned. **We're ready for you.**

Syrinx walked over to the zero-tau pod in the middle of the room, standing by its head. The black field vanished, and the lid swung open. She smiled down. "Hello, Erick."

It took only a day for the Kiint to cure Grant of his tumours. He submitted to the treatment of blue jelly with passive grace, meekly doing all that was requested of him. The massive xenocs were so *overwhelming*. Any sort of protest seemed appallingly churlish. They were only here to help, coming to Norfolk's aid out of the kindness of their mighty hearts.

An enormous hospital had been built just outside Colsterworth. In less than an hour, according to those who saw it

extruded. Little flying craft zipped across the wolds, stopping next to anyone they found and asking politely if they needed assistance, then conveying them back to the hospital for the ubiquitous treatment. Apparently Colsterworth's hospital was the one dealing with all the cases on this half of Kesteven island. Another had been built at Boston to handle the city's casualties.

Grant returned to Cricklade once his tumours had been flushed away, wandering round the big manor in a daze. The staff trickled back as they were discharged by the Kiint, looking to him to tell them what to do. That part of his reclaimed existence was easy; he knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing.

It was the reason for them doing it which had left him. He'd got his body back, not his life.

Marjorie returned on the second day, and they clung to each other in miserable desperation. There was still no sign of the girls.

Flying craft started to deliver the men from the militia who had remained in Boston after their possession, dropping down out of the sky at individual cottages and farm houses. The weeping and fragile laughter which came from each reunion was everywhere Grant went.

He and Marjorie drove back to Colsterworth to ask if the Kiint had found the girls. The computer at the hospital said no, but that they were still cataloguing Norfolk's surviving residents. Tens of thousands were being added every hour, it told him, and he would be notified immediately (the Kiint had already repaired the entire planet's telephone network). When he asked for a flying craft to take him to Norwich the computer apologised, saying they couldn't accommodate private flights, all the craft were needed for patients.

They went back to the farm rover, debating what to do next. A Kiint was walking sedately down the broad cobbled street outside, crazily incongruous amid the stone-walled

cottages with their slate roofs and climbing roses. A gang of laughing children were running round it, totally unafraid. It kept holding thin tentacles of tractamorphic flesh just above their heads, flicking them away when the children jumped to catch one. Playing with them.

"It's over, isn't it?" Grant said. "We can't go back to how it was, not now."

"That's not like you," Marjorie said. "The man I married would never allow our way of life to be cast aside."

"The man you married hadn't been possessed. Damn that Luca to hell."

"They'll always be with us, just as we were always with them."

Provider globes were drifting round the manor, ejecting replacements for items which had never been repaired or replaced. The staff followed them, fitting lengths of guttering, hammering new trellis sections onto the walls, mending fence posts, plumbing in sections of central heating pipe. Grant felt like shouting at the globes to go away, but Cricklade needed fixing up: for all Luca's attention its overall maintenance had been pretty shabby during the possession. And providers were doing the same thing for every household in Stoke County. People were entitled to some charity and good fortune after what they'd been through.

He examined that thought, wondering who it had come from. Was it too kind for Grant, not liberal enough for Luca? In the end it didn't matter, because it was right.

When he walked into the courtyard, another provider was repairing the burnt-out stable all by itself. Its purple surface flowed through buckled soot-clad walls and blackened timbers, leaving a broad line of clean straight stone and tiled roof in its wake. The process was like a brush painting detail over a preliminary sketch.

"Now that's what I call a corrupting influence," Carmitha said. "No one's going to forget just how green the grass is on

the other side of the technological divide. Did you know they can make food as well?"

"No," Grant said.

"I've been working my way down an impressive little menu. Very tasty. You should try it."

"Why are you still here?"

"Are you asking me to leave?"

"No. Of course not."

"They'll come back, Grant. You might have loosened up, but you still don't give your own daughters the credit they deserve."

He shook his head and walked away.

Lady Macbeth's brand new ion field flyer landed on the greensward in front of the manor the next day. Its bubble of golden haze evaporated and the hatch opened. Genevieve ran down the airstairs as they slid out, jumping the last couple of feet to the ground.

Grant and Marjorie were already coming down the portico's broad stone steps to find out what the flyer was doing. They both froze when they saw the familiar little figure emerge. Then Genevieve streaked over and cannoned into her mother so hard she nearly knocked both of them over.

Marjorie wouldn't let go of her daughter. She had trouble speaking, her throat was so choked up with crying. "Did . . . did it happen to you?" she asked in trepidation.

"Oh no," Genevieve said breezily. "Louise got us off the planet. I've been to Mars, and Earth, and Tranquillity. I was scared a lot, but it was really exciting."

Louise put her arms around both her parents and kissed them.

"You're all right," Grant said.

"Yes, Daddy, I'm just fine."

He stepped back to look at her, so wonderfully self-confident and poised in her smart-cut travel suit with a skirt that finished well above her knees. This little Louise would

never meekly do as she was told, no matter how much he shouted.

Bloody good thing too, as Luca might have said.

Louise gave both her parents an impish grin and took a deep breath. Genevieve started giggling wildly.

"I'm sure you both remember my husband," Louise said in a rush.

Grant stared at Joshua with complete disbelief.

"I was bridesmaid!" Genevieve shouted.

Joshua put his hand out.

"Daddy," Louise scolded firmly.

Grant did as he was told, and shook Joshua's hand.

"You're married?" Marjorie said faintly.

"Yes." Joshua gave her a level stare, and planted a small kiss on her cheek. "Two days ago."

Louise held up her hand, showing off the ring.

"Oh look," Genevieve said. "Our stuff. I've got so much to show you." Beaulieu, Liol, and Dahybi were struggling down the flyer's airstairs, laden with cases and department-store boxes. Genevieve gallivanted back to help them, her duster bracelet spilling a shiny cometary tail through the air behind her.

"Bloody hell," Grant murmured. He smiled, knowing resistance was useless and being rather glad of it, too. "Ah well, congratulations, my boy. Make damn sure you look after my daughter properly, she means everything to us."

"Thank you, sir." Joshua grinned his grin. "I'll do my best."

Space was different now. A hint at what was to befall in a few billion years.

Galactic superclusters no longer expanded away from each other; they were returning, drifting back to their place of origin. The quantum structure of space-time altered as the

dimensional realms began to press in, flowing back towards the centre of the universe.

The wormhole terminus opened, and Quinn Dexter emerged to look out upon the multitude of forces gathering at the end of time. His body dissolved painlessly, freeing his possessors. They fled away from him, free to move as they chose amid the dense energy strands flooding the cosmos. Life pervaded space all around them, the aether ringing with the song of mind. Liberated, they joined the throng, sailing in towards the omega point.

Quinn watched galaxies being torn apart a million light-years ahead of him, their arms streaming out behind the core as they accelerated into the irresistible black mass. Star clusters flared white, then purple, as they sank below the event horizon, vanishing forever into this universe's final Night.

His serpent beast howled for joy as he saw his Lord's expansion into the dying universe, absorbing every atom, every thought. Triumphant at the very end, the Light Bringer was growing at the heart of darkness, ensuring all which was to follow would be different to everything that had gone before.

EPILOGUE

*Jay Hilton
Gatekeeper's Cottage
Cricklade Estate
Stoke County
Kesteven Island
Norfolk*

My Dearest Haile,

Mother is making me write this with a pen which is a real bore. She says I have to practice my formal writing skills. As soon as I get neural nanonics I'm never going to touch a pen again.

I hope you're well. Don't forget to thank Richard Keaton for bringing you this letter.

The cottage we're renting is really pretty, far better than anything I ever saw on Lalonde. It's got thick stone walls and a thatch roof, and there's a real fireplace that burns logs. The snow is up to the ground floor windows. It's great stuff, you'd

love it. Snowmen are much more fun than sandcastles. I can't get out much, but that's okay. There's lots of interactives to play with, and Genevieve is teaching me how to ski. We're good friends now.

We all stayed up last night to see New California appear. It was due a couple of hours after Duke set, and happened really quickly. It's very bright in the sky, and you can just see it during Duchess-night if you know where to look. That makes five stars visible now. Can you believe that in another fifteen years I'll be able to see all the stars of the Confederation cluster? Isn't that just fab?

Mother is working at the school in Colsterworth, introducing didactic memories. Kesteven council voted to allow them. Joshua Calvert proposed it. He was elected to the council two months ago, and is already the deputy chairman. People here are really proud that he has chosen to come and live at Cricklade when he could have gone anywhere in the Confederation. He has lots of plans for things he wants to see happen, which the council are drawing up. Everyone's really excited about them. Marjorie Kavanagh says it won't last, and he'll be lynched before spring.

Louise had their baby last month. It was a boy, and they're calling him Fletcher. Father Horst is rushing round to get the family chapel ready for the Christening.

I hope you'll visit soon (hint!). Genevieve says the butterflies here are quite wonderful in the summer.

Love and hugs,

Jay

TIMELINE

- 2020** . . . Cavius base established. Mining of Lunar sub-crustal resources starts.
- 2037** . . . Beginning of large-scale geneering on humans; improvement to immunology system, eradication of appendix, organ efficiency increased.
- 2041** . . . First deuterium-fuelled fusion stations built; inefficient and expensive.
- 2044** . . . Christian reunification.
- 2047** . . . First asteroid capture mission. Beginning of Earth's O'Neill Halo.
- 2049** . . . Quasi-sentient bitek animals employed as servitors.
- 2055** . . . Jupiter mission.
- 2055** . . . Lunar cities granted independence from founding companies.
- 2057** . . . Ceres asteroid settlement founded.
- 2058** . . . Affinity symbiont neurons developed by Wing-Tsit Chong, providing control over animals and bitek constructs.
- 2064** . . . Multinational industrial consortium (Jovian Sky Power Corporation) begins mining Jupiter's atmosphere for He₃ using aerostat factories.

- 2064** . . . Islamic secular unification.
- 2067** . . . Fusian stations begin to use He₃ as fuel.
- 2069** . . . Affinity bond gene spliced into human DNA.
- 2075** . . . JSKP germinates Eden, a bitek habitat in orbit around Jupiter, with UN Protectorate status.
- 2077** . . . New Kong asteroid begins FTL stardrive research project.
- 2085** . . . Eden opened for habitation.
- 2086** . . . Habitat Pallas germinated in Jupiter orbit.
- 2090** . . . Wing-Tsit Chong dies, and transfers memories to Eden's neural strata. Start of Edenist culture. Eden and Pallas declare independence from UN. Launch buyout of JSKP shares. Pope Eleanor excommunicates all Christians with affinity gene. Exodus of affinity capable humans to Eden. Effective end of bitek industry on Earth.
- 2091** . . . Lunar referendum to terraform Mars.
- 2094** . . . Edenists begin exowomb breeding programme coupled with extensive geneering improvement to embryos, tripling their population over a decade.
- 2103** . . . Earth's national governments consolidate into Govcentral.
- 2103** . . . Thoth base established on Mars.
- 2107** . . . Govcentral jurisdiction extended to cover O'Neill Halo.
- 2115** . . . First instantaneous translation by New Kong spaceship, Earth to Mars.
- 2118** . . . Mission to Proxima Centauri.
- 2123** . . . Terracompatible planet found at Ross 154.
- 2125** . . . Ross 154 planet named Felicity, first multiethnic colonists arrive.
- 2125–2130** . . . Four new terracompatible planets discovered. Multiethnic colonies founded.
- 2131** . . . Edenists germinate Perseus in orbit around Ross 154 gas giant, begin He₃ mining.
- 2131–2205** . . . One hundred and thirty terracompatible planets discovered. Massive starship building pro-

gramme initiated in O'Neill Halo. Govcentral begins large-scale enforced outshippment of surplus population, rising to 2 million a week in 2160: Great Dispersal. Civil conflict on some early multiethnic colonies. Individual Govcentral states sponsor ethnic-streaming colonies. Edenists expand their He₃ mining enterprise to every inhabited star system with a gas giant.

2139 . . . Asteroid Braun impacts on Mars.

2180 . . . First orbital tower built on Earth.

2205 . . . Antimatter production station built in orbit around sun by Govcentral in an attempt to break the Edenist energy monopoly.

2208 . . . First antimatter-drive starships operational.

2210 . . . Richard Saldana transports all of New Kong's industrial facilities from the O'Neill Halo to an asteroid orbiting Kulu. He claims independence for the Kulu star system, founds Christian-only colony, and begins to mine He₃ from the system's gas giant.

2218 . . . First voidhawk gestated, a bitek starship designed by Edenists.

2225 . . . Establishment of a hundred voidhawk families. Habitats Romulus and Remus germinated in Saturn orbit to serve as voidhawk bases.

2232 . . . Conflict at Jupiter's trailing Trojan asteroid cluster between belt alliance ships and an O'Neill Halo company hydrocarbon refinery. Antimatter used as a weapon; twenty-seven thousand people killed.

2238 . . . Treaty of Deimos; outlaws production and use of antimatter in the Sol system; signed by Govcentral, Lunar nation, asteroid alliance, and Edenists. Antimatter stations abandoned and dismantled.

2240 . . . Coronation of Gerrald Saldana as King of Kulu. Foundation of Saldana dynasty.

2267–2270 . . . Eight separate skirmishes involving use of antimatter among colony worlds. Thirteen million killed.

- 2271** . . . Avon summit between all planetary leaders. Treaty of Avon, banning the manufacture and use of antimatter throughout inhabited space. Formation of Human Confederation to police agreement. Construction of Confederation Navy begins.
- 2300** . . . Confederation expanded to include Edenists.
- 2301** . . . First Contact. Jiciro race discovered, a pre-technology civilization. System quarantined by Confederation to avoid cultural contamination.
- 2310** . . . First ice asteroid impact on Mars.
- 2330** . . . First blackhawks gestated at Valisk, independent habitat.
- 2350** . . . War between Novska and Hilversum. Novska bombed with antimatter. Confederation Navy prevents retaliatory strike against Hilversum.
- 2356** . . . Kiint homeworld discovered.
- 2357** . . . Kiint join Confederation as “observers.”
- 2360** . . . A voidhawk scout discovers Atlantis.
- 2371** . . . Edenists colonize Atlantis.
- 2395** . . . Tyrathca colony world discovered.
- 2402** . . . Tyrathca join Confederation.
- 2420** . . . Kulu scoutship discovers Ruin Ring.
- 2428** . . . Bitek habitat Tranquillity germinated by Crown Prince Michael Saldana, orbiting above Ruin Ring.
- 2432** . . . Prince Michael’s son, Maurice, geneered with affinity. Kulu abdication crisis. Coronation of Lukas Saldana. Prince Michael exiled.
- 2550** . . . Mars declared habitable by Terraforming office.
- 2580** . . . Dorado asteroids discovered around Tunja, claimed by both Garissa and Omuta.
- 2581** . . . Omuta mercenary fleet drops twelve antimatter planet-busters on Garissa, planet rendered uninhabitable. Confederation imposes thirty-year sanction against Omuta, prohibiting any interstellar trade or transport. Blockade enforced by Confederation Navy.
- 2582** . . . Colony established on Lalonde.