

Hidden Empire

The Saga of Seven Suns - Book 01

Kevin J. Anderson

In our galaxy's far future, humans are one of three known intelligent races. We are the "new kids on the block," having had star travel for only a few centuries. The other races consist of the Ildirans, ruled by their Mage-Imperator, and the Klikiss, which seem to have vanished, but left behind worlds full of artifacts and fabulous technology that humans are now beginning to find and exploit.

One such piece of technology is a device that can turn a useless gas supergiant planet into a small sun, thereby creating new living space for humans. But when the device is tried for the first time, it awakens the ire of a hitherto unsuspected fourth race, the Hydrogues-and a galaxy-spanning war that threatens all life.

Set against this background are multiple subplots involving a large cast of fascinating characters: a married couple whose archaeological discoveries can save humanity; a young man kidnapped to take over the kingship of the vast Trade Federation; travelling communities of gypsy-like Roamers, one of whom becomes humanity's champion against the Hydrogues; and many more.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To IGOR KORDEY,

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TIMELINE

GLOSSARY OF CHARACTERS AND TERMINOLOGY



MARGARET COLICOS

Safe in orbit high above the gas giant, Margaret looked through the observation port at continent-sized hurricanes and clouds far below. She wondered how long it would take for the entire planet to catch fire, once the experiment began.

Oncier was a pastel globe of hydrogen and mixed gases five times the size of Jupiter. Moons surrounded the gas giant like a litter of pups jostling against their mother. The four of greatest interest were large bodies of ice and rock named Jack, Ben, George, and Christopher, after the first four Great Kings of the Terran Hanseatic League. If today's test proved a success, those moons could eventually be terraformed into Earth-like colonies.

If the Klikiss Torch failed, the respected career of Margaret Colicos would fizzle along with it. But she would survive. As xeno-archaeologists, she and her husband Louis were accustomed to working in blissful obscurity.

In preparation for the experiment, the technical observation platform bustled with scientists, engineers, and political observers. Though Margaret had nothing to do with the actual test, her presence was still required here. A celebrity. She had to make a good show of it. After all, she had discovered the alien device among the ruins.

Tucking gray-streaked brown hair behind her ear, she looked across the deck and saw Louis grinning like a boy. They had been married for decades and had never worked without each other. It had been years since she'd seen him in a dashing, formal suit. Margaret could tell how much he reveled in the excitement, and she smiled for his sake.

She preferred to watch people rather than interact with them. Louis once joked that his wife had become fascinated with archaeology on alien planets because there was no chance she might have to

strike up a conversation with one of her subjects.

With plenty of dirt under their fingernails and ground-breaking discoveries on their résumés, Margaret and Louis Colicos had already sifted through numerous worlds abandoned by the insectlike Klikiss race, searching for clues to explain what had happened to their vanished civilization. The alien empire had left only ghost cities and occasional tall beetlelike robots that bore no helpful memories of their progenitors. In the eerie ruins on Corribus, the Colicos team had discovered and deciphered the remarkable planet-igniting technology they had called the "Klikiss Torch."

Now excitement thrummed in the filtered air of the observation platform. Invited functionaries crowded around the observation windows, talking with each other. Never before had humans attempted to create their own sun. The consequences and the commercial possibilities were far-reaching.

Chairman Basil Wenceslas noticed Margaret standing alone. When a small-statured server compy came by bearing a tray filled with expensive champagne, the powerful Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League snagged two extruded-polymer glasses and walked over to her, proud and beaming. "Less than an hour to go."

She dutifully accepted the glass and indulged him by taking a drink. Since the reprocessed air of the observation platform affected the senses of smell and taste, a cheaper champagne would probably have tasted as good. "I'll be glad when it's over, Mr. Chairman. I prefer to spend my time on empty worlds, listening for the whispers of a long-dead civilization. Here, there are too many people for me."

Across the deck she saw a green priest sitting silent and alone. The emerald-skinned man was there to provide instantaneous telepathic communication in case of emergency. Outside the observation platform hung a ceremonial fleet of alien warliners, seven spectacular ships from the Solar Navy of the Ildirans, the benevolent humanoid race that had helped mankind spread across the stars. The beautifully decorated Ildiran ships had taken up positions where they could observe the spectacular test.

"I understand perfectly," the Chairman said. "I try to stay out of the limelight myself." Wenceslas was a distinguished man, one of those people who grew more attractive and sophisticated with each passing year, as if he learned how to be suave rather than forgot how to be physically fit. He sipped his champagne, but so slightly that it barely seemed to wet his lips. "Waiting is always so hard, isn't it? You are not accustomed to working with such a rigid time clock."

She answered him with a polite laugh. "Archaeology is not meant to be rushed-unlike business." Margaret just wished she could get back to work.

The Chairman touched his champagne glass against Margaret's like a kiss of crystal. "You and your husband are an investment that has certainly paid off for the Hanseatic League." The xeno-archaeologists had long been sponsored by the Hansa, but the star-igniting technology she and Louis had discovered would be worth more than all the archaeology budgets combined.

Working in the cool emptiness of Corribus, sifting through the ideographs painted on the walls of Klikiss ruins, Margaret had been able to match up the precise coordinates of neutron stars and pulsars scattered around the Spiral Arm, comparing them with maps developed by the Hansa.

This single correlation caused an avalanche of subsequent breakthroughs: By comparing the coordinates of neutron stars from the Klikiss drawings with known stellar drift, she had been able to back-calculate how old the maps were. Thus, she determined that the Klikiss race had disappeared five thousand years ago. Using the coordinates and diagrams as a key, as well as all the other information compiled on



numerous digs, Louis, with his engineering bent, had deciphered Klikiss mathematical notations, thereby allowing him to figure out the basic functioning of the Torch.

The Chairman's gray eyes became harder, all business now. "I promise you this, Margaret: If the Klikiss Torch does function as expected, choose any site you wish, any planet you've wanted to explore, and I will personally see that you have all the funding you require."

Margaret clinked her glass against his in a return toast. "I'll take advantage of that offer, Mr. Chairman. In fact, Louis and I have a likely site already picked out."

The previously untouched ghost world of Rheindic Co, full of mysteries, pristine territory, uncataloged ruins . . . But first they had to do their duty dance here and endure the public accolades after they ignited the gas world below.

Margaret went to stand beside Louis. She slipped her arm through his as he struck up a conversation with the patient green priest who waited beside his potted worldtree sapling. She could hardly wait for the experiment to be finished. To her, an empty ancient city was far more exciting than setting a whole planet ablaze.



BASIL WENCESLAS

Quiet and unassuming, Basil Wenceslas moved through social circles. He smiled when he was supposed to, bantered when expected, and filed the details in his mind. To an outsider, he never showed more than a fraction of his deepest thoughts and intricate plans. The Terran Hanseatic League depended on it.

A well-preserved older man whose age was difficult to determine even with close study, he had access to vigorous antiaging treatments and availed himself of cellular chelation techniques that kept him limber and healthy. Dapper and distinguished, he wore impeccable suits that cost more than some families earned in a year, but Basil was not a vain man. Though everyone on the observation platform knew he was in charge, he maintained a low profile.

When an overeager mahogany-skinned media charmer asked him for an interview about the Klikiss Torch, he diverted the woman and her recording crew to the chief scientist of the project, then melted into the small crowd. Watching. Observing. Thinking.

He looked out at the great ball of ochre clouds that made Oncier look like a poorly stirred confection. This system had no habitable planets, and Oncier's gas mix was not particularly appropriate for harvesting ekti, the exotic allotrope of hydrogen used in Ildiran stardrives. This out-of-the-way gas giant was an excellent test subject for the unproven Klikiss Torch.

Chief scientist Gerald Serizawa talked smoothly and passionately about the upcoming test, and the media crew pressed forward. Beside him, technicians manned banks of equipment. Basil scanned the control panels, assessing the readings for himself. Everything was on schedule.

Dr. Serizawa was completely hairless, though whether because of a cosmetic choice, a genetic predisposition, or an exotic disease, Basil did not know. Lean and energetic, Serizawa spoke with his hands as much as his voice, gesturing broadly. Every few minutes, like clockwork, he grew self-conscious and clasped his hands to keep them motionless in front of him.

"Gas giants, such as Jupiter in our own home solar system, are on the edge of a gravitational slope that could send them into stellar collapse. Anyplanetary body between thirteen and a hundred times Jupiter's mass will burn deuterium at its core and begin to shine."

Serizawa jabbed an insistent finger at the media charmer who had approached Basil earlier. "With this rediscovered technology, we can push a gas giant such as Oncier over the mass limit so that its core will ignite nuclear fires and turn this big ball of fuel into a brand-new sun-

The woman broke in. "Please tell our audience where the increase in mass comes from."

Serizawa smiled, delighted to explain further. Basil crooked his mouth in a faint expression of amusement. He thanked his luck that the bald doctor was such an enthusiastic spokesman.

"You see, the Klikiss Torch anchors two ends of a wormhole, a tunnel *ten kilometers wide*. "It was clear his listeners knew little about wormhole mechanics and the difficulty of creating such a huge space-time gap. "We open one terminus near a superdense neutron star, then target the other end at the core of Oncier. In the blink of an eye, the neutron star is transported into the planetary heart. With so much added mass, the gas giant will collapse, ignite, and begin to shine. This light and heat, you see, will make the largest moons habitable."

One of the media recorders pointed an imager at the white glints orbiting the pastel gas planet as Serizawa continued. "Alas, the new sun will burn for only a hundred thousand years, but that's still plenty of time for us to make the four moons into productive Hansa colonies. Practically an eternity, as far as we're concerned."

Basil nodded unobtrusively to himself. Typical short-term thinking, but useful. Now that Earth was part of a much larger galactic network, though, true visionaries would have to operate on a completely different time scale. Human history was only one small part of the canvas.

"Therefore, the Klikiss Torch opens up many new opportunities for the Hansa to create habitats that meet the needs of our growing human population."

Basil wondered how many swallowed that explanation. It was part of the answer, of course, but he also noted the huge, gaudy Ildiran warliners standing watch, reminding him of the real reasons for this extravagant demonstration.

The Klikiss Torch must be tested not because there was a desperate need for extra living space-there were many more acceptable colony worlds than humans could ever settle. No, this was a move of political hubris. The Hansa needed to prove that humans could actually *do* this thing, a grand and extravagant gesture.

One hundred and eighty-three years ago, the Ildiran Empire had rescued the first Terran generation ships from their aimless journeys through space. The Ildirans had offered humans their fast stardrive and adopted Earth into the sprawling galactic community. Humans viewed the Ildiran Empire as a benevolent ally, but Basil had been watching the aliens for some time.

The ancient civilization was stagnant, full of ritual and history but very few fresh ideas. Humans had been the ones to innovate the Ildiran stardrive technology. Eager colonists and entrepreneurs-even the space gypsy riffraff of the Roamer clans-had rapidly filled the old Ildiran social and commercial niches, so that humans gained a substantial foothold in just a few generations.

The Hansa was growing by leaps and bounds, while their stodgy alien benefactors were fading. Basil was confident humans would soon subsume the ailing Empire. After the Klikiss Torch demonstration, the Ildirans would remain impressed by Terran abilities-and deterred from any temptation to test human mettle. Thus far, the alien empire had shown no sign of aggression, but Basil didn't entirely believe the altruistic motives of the cozy Ildiran neighbors. It was best to maintain a prominent reminder of human technological abilities, and better still to be subtle about it.

While the test countdown proceeded toward zero, Basil went to get another glass of champagne.



3 ADAR KORIN'H

From the command nucleus of his prime warliner, Adar Kori'nh, supreme admiral of the Ildiran Solar Navy, contemplated the humans' folly.

Though the outcome of this preposterous test would have a significant bearing on future relations between the Ildiran Empire and the Terran Hanseatic League, the Adar had brought only a septa, a group of sevenwarliners. The Mage-Imperator had instructed him not to display too much interest in the event. No Ildiran should be too impressed by any action from these upstarts.

Even so, Kori'nh had refitted his battleships as a matter of pride, painting sigils on their hulls and adding dazzling illumination strips as primary markings. His warliners looked like ornate deep-sea creatures preparing for an outrageous mating display. The Solar Navy understood pageantry and military spectacles far better than the humans did.

The Hansa Chairman had invited Kori'nh to come aboard the observation platform where he could watch the artificial ignition of the gas giant. Instead, the Adar had chosen to remain here, aloof, inside the command nucleus. For now. Once the actual test began, he would arrive with politically acceptable tardiness.

Kori'nh was a lean-faced half-breed between noble and soldier kith, like all important officers in the Solar Navy. His face was smooth, with humanlike features, because the higher kiths resembled the single breed of human. Despite their physical similarities, though, Ildirans were fundamentally different from Terrans, especially in their hearts and minds.

Kori'nh's skin had a grayish tone; his head was smooth except for the lush topknot folded back across his crown, a symbol of his rank. The Adar's single-piece uniform was a long tunic made from layered gray-and-blue scales, belted about his waist.

To emphasize the low importance of this mission, he had refused to pin on his numerous military decorations, but the humans would never notice the subtlety when he met them face-to-face. He watched the bustling scientific activities with a mixture of condescending amusement and concern.

Though the Ildirans had assisted the fledgling race many times in the past two centuries, they still considered humans to be impatient and ill-behaved. Cultural children, adoptive wards. Perhaps their race needed a godlike, all-powerful leader such as the Mage-Imperator. The golden age of the Ildiran Empire had already lasted for millennia. Humans could learn much from the elder race if they bothered to pay attention, rather than insisting on making their own mistakes.

Kori'nh could not comprehend why the brash and overly ambitious race was so eager to create more

worlds to terraform and settle. Why go to all the trouble of creating a new sun out of a gas planet? Why make a few rugged moons habitable when there were so many acceptable worlds that were, by any civilized standard, nowhere near crowded enough? Humans seemed intent on spreading everywhere.

The Adar sighed as he stared out the front viewing screen of his lead warliner. Disposable planets and disposable suns . . . how very Terran.

But he would not have missed this event for all the commendations the Mage-Imperator had left to give. In ancient times the Solar Navy had fought against the terrible and mysterious Shana Rei, and the military force had been required to fight against other deluded Ildirans in a heart-rending civil war two thousand years ago, but since that time, the fleet had been mainly for show, used for occasional rescue or civil missions.

With no enemies and no interplanetary strife in the Ildiran Empire, Kori'nh had spent his career in the Solar Navy managing ornate ceremony-driven groupings. He had little experience in the area of battle or tactics, except to read about them in the *Saga*. But it wasn't the same.

The Mage-Imperator had dispatched him to Oncier as the Empire's official representative, and he had obeyed his god and leader's commands. Through his faint telepathic link with all of his subjects, the Mage-Imperator would watch through Kori'nh's eyes.

No matter what he thought of it, though, this bold human attempt would make an interesting addition to the Ildiran historical epic, *The Saga of Seven Suns*. This day, and probably even Kori'nh's name, would become part of both history and legend. No Ildiran could aspire to more than that.



4 OLD KINGFREDERICK

Surrounded by the opulence of the Whisper Palace on Earth, Old King Frederick played his part. Basil Wenceslas had given him orders, and the great monarch of the Hansa knew his place. Frederick did exactly as he was told.

Around him, court functionaries kept busy writing documents, recording decrees, distributing royal orders and benevolences. The Whisper Palace must be seen as a constant flurry of important matters, conducted in a professional and orderly fashion.

Wearing heavy formal robes and a lightweight crown adorned with holographic prisms, Frederick awaited word from Oncier in the Throne Hall. He was bathed and perfumed, the many rings on his fingers polished to a dazzle. His skin had been massaged with lotions and oils. His hair was perfect; not a single strand could be seen out of place.

Though he had originally been chosen for his looks, charisma, and public-speaking abilities, Frederick knew the foundation of his monarchy better than the most attentive student of civics. Because any real-time political hold over such a vast galactic territory would be tenuous at best, the Hansa depended on a visible figurehead to speak decrees and issue laws. The populace needed a concrete person in whom to invest their loyalty, since no one would fight to the death or swear blood oaths for a vague corporate ideal. Long ago, a royal court and a well-groomed King had been manufactured to give the commercial government a face and a heart.

As with his five predecessors, King Frederick existed to be seen and revered. His court was filled with

gorgeous clothing, polished stone, rich fabrics, tapestries, artworks, jewels, and sculptures. He awarded medals, threw celebrations, and kept the people happy with a benevolent sharing of the Hansa's wealth. Frederick had everything he could ever need or want . . . except independence and freedom.

Basil had once told him, "Humans have a tendency to abdicate their decision-making to charismatic figures. That way they force others to take responsibility, and they can blame their problems upward in a hierarchy." He had pointed to the King, who was so weighed down with finery that he could barely walk. "If you follow that to its logical conclusion, any society will end up with a monarchy, given enough time and choice."

After forty-six years on the throne, Frederick could barely remember his younger life or his original name. He had seen significant changes in the Hanseatic League during his reign, but little of it had been his own doing. Now he felt the burden of his years.

The King could hear the rush of fountains, the hum of dirigibles, the roar of the ever-swelling crowds in the royal plaza below waiting for him to address them from his favorite speaking balcony. The Archfather of Unison was already leading them in familiar scripted prayers, but even as the crowds followed along, eager citizens pressed forward, hoping for a glimpse of their splendid monarch. Frederick wanted to remain inside as long as possible.

After its construction in the early days of Terran expansion, the gigantic ceremonial residence had rendered visitors speechless with awe-hence, its name: the Whisper Palace . Always-lit cupolas and domes were made of glass panels crisscrossed with gilded titanium support braces. The site had been chosen in the sunny, perfect weather of the North American west coast, in what had once been southern California . The Palace was larger than any other building on Earth, vast enough to swallow ten cities the size of Versailles . Later, after the Hansa had encountered the jaw-dropping architecture in the Ildiran Empire, the Whisper Palace had been expanded further, just to keep up.

At the moment, though, the beauty around him could not keep Frederick 's mind occupied as he impatiently waited to hear from Basil at distant Oncier. "Momentous events do not happen in an instant," he said, as if convincing himself. "Today we mean to set the course of history."

A court chamberlain rang an Ildiran crystal-alloy gong. Instantly, in response to the sound, the King donned an eager but paternal smile, a practiced kindly expression that exuded warm confidence.

With the fading musical vibrations, he strode down the royal promenade toward his expansive speaking balcony. Out of habit, the King looked at an ultraclear crystalline mirror mounted in an alcove. He caught his expression, the not-quite-hidden weariness in his eyes, a few new wrinkles that only he could see. How much longer would Basil let him play this role, before he passed beyond "paternal" and into "doddering"? Maybe the Hansa would let him retire soon.

The great solar doors spread open, and the King paused to take a deep breath, squaring his shoulders.

Ambassador Otema, the ancient green priest from the forested planet of Theroc, stood beside her shoulder-high worldtree sapling in its ornate planter. Through the sentient worldforest network, Otema could establish an instant communication link with the far-off technical observation platform.

He gave one brisk clap of his hands. "It is time. We must transmit a message that I, King Frederick, grant my permission for this wondrous test to begin. Tell them to proceed with my blessing."

Otema gave a formal bow. The stern ambassador had so many status tattoos on her face and her skin

was such a weathered green that she looked like a gnarled piece of vegetation herself. She and Basil Wenceslas had butted heads many times, but King Frederick had kept out of the disputes.

Otema wrapped her callused fingers around the scaly bark of the worldtree and closed her eyes so that she could send her thoughts via telink through the trees to her counterpart at Oncier.



BENETO THERON

At Oncier, a hush fell over the observers and guests as Beneto released his grip on the small worldtree. He stroked the treeling, both giving and drawing comfort. "King Frederick sends his blessing. We may proceed," he announced to the crowd.

Applause pattered like raindrops. Media troops turned imagers down to the gas giant, as if expecting something to happen immediately on the King's command.

Dr. Serizawa hurried over to his technician. At his signal, the terminus anchors were launched from orbit. Bright lights shot into the planetary body, tunneling deep to where they would paint a wormhole target far below. The torpedo probes, developed from ancient Klikiss designs, vanished into the cloud decks, leaving not even a ripple.

Beneto watched, marking every detail, which he would pass on through prayer to the eager and curious worldforest. Though he was the second son of the Theron ruling family, he served little purpose here at Oncier other than to send instantaneous news of the ambitious test via the worldtrees, much faster than any standard electromagnetic communication, which even at the speed of light would have taken months or perhaps years to reach the nearest Hansa outpost.

Using the interconnected trees, any green priest could communicate with any of his counterparts, regardless of location. Any single tree was a manifestation of the whole worldforest, identical quantum images of each other. What one treeling knew, they all knew, and green priests could tap into that information reservoir whenever they chose. They could use it to send messages.

Now, while the spectators watched the wormhole anchors disappearing into the Oncier clouds, Beneto touched the treeling again. He let his mind melt through the trunk until his thoughts emerged in other parts of the worldforest back home. When his eyes focused and he returned to the observation platform, he looked up to see Chairman Wenceslas looking at him expectantly.

Beneto kept his face calm and dignified. His tattooed features were handsome and noble. His eyes had the vestiges of epicanthic folds, giving them a rounded almond appearance. "My Father Idriss and Mother Alexa offer the prayers of all the Theron people for the success of this test."

"I always appreciate kind words from your parents," Basil said, "though I would prefer Theroc had more formalized business dealings with the Hansa."

Beneto kept his voice neutral. "The worldforest's plans and wishes do not always match the needs of the Hansa, Chairman. However, you would do better to discuss such matters with my elder brother Reynald, or my sister Sarein. They are both more inclined to business than I." He touched the feathery leaves of the treeling, as if to emphasize his priestly status. "As the second son, my destiny has always been to serve the worldforest."

"And you do your job admirably. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable."

"With the support and the benevolence of the worldtrees, I am rarely uncomfortable."

The young man could imagine no other calling. Because of his highborn position, Beneto was expected to participate in showy events, such as this spectacle. He did not want to perform his priestly duties merely for *show*, however. Given the choice, he would rather have helped to spread the worldforest across the Spiral Arm, so the treelings could thrive on other planets.

Green priests were few, and their vital telink skills were in such demand that some missionary priests lived in opulent mansions, subsidized by the Hansa or colony governments, well paid to send and receive instantaneous messages. Other priests, however, lived a more austere life and spent their time simply planting and tending treelings. That was what Beneto would have preferred to do.

The Hansa had begged to hire as many green priests as Theroc would provide, but the merchants and politicians were constantly frustrated. Although Hanseatic envoys insisted that priests must serve the needs of humanity, Father Idriss and Mother Alexa had no interest in expanding their personal power. Instead, they allowed the priests to choose their postings for themselves.

Carefully selecting healthy specimens from the sentient forest on Theroc, the priests distributed treelings on scattered colony worlds or carried them aboard mercantile ships. More than sunlight and fertilization, the worldforest hungered for new information, data to store in its sprawling, interconnected web of half-sentience. The mission of the green priests was to spread the worldforest as far and wide as possible-not to serve the Earth-based trading conglomerate.

For generations, Hansa researchers had tried to understand instantaneous quantum communication through the interlinked trees, but they had made no progress. Only the worldtrees could provide telink, and only green priests could communicate through the forest network. The insurmountable problem drove the scientists into a frenzy of frustration.

Despite all the technology and manpower the Hansa had poured into the Klikiss Torch test, none of it could begin without a single mystic priest and his tree. . . .

Now, aboard the technical observation platform, Chairman Wenceslas clasped his well-manicured hands in front of him. "Very well, Beneto, contact your counterpart at the neutron star. Tell them to open the wormhole."

Beneto touched the tree again.



Halfway across the Spiral Arm, another green priest waited with six Hansa technicians in a small scout ship in a stable spot beyond the gravitational pull of the neutron star.

The superdense stellar remnant was all that remained of a collapsed red giant that had run out of momentum and mass before it could become a black hole. Curling space with its powerful gravity, the neutron star rotated like a searchlight, jets of high-energy particles spraying from its poles like water from a fire hose. Such a tiny ball, less than ten kilometers across, yet with a celestial powerhouse of energy.

Crowded in the ship, the six techs were nervous and sweating. The tethered torpedo device had been deployed outside the ship, just waiting to drop into the crushed star's gravitational mouth. The techs stared at Arcas, as if the green priest could ease their fears or offer them some sort of shortcut.

"Time?" one asked, as if pleading.

The treeling beside him had not yet spoken. Arcas sighed. "I will tell you as soon as I hear."

Before long, he would return to Theroc, where the priests would give him some other duty to serve the worldforest. It was all the same to Arcas, though he had chosen this assignment—far away, and involving relatively few people. As a green priest, he could do nothing else. He was a loner, but he was also a green priest, linked with the forest. If only he could trade with someone who felt more devotion for the task.

He clenched the treeling's rough bark, but felt no incoming telink message. Nothing. More waiting. "Not yet."

Aboard the cold scout ship, the spaces were too confined, the walls too bare. The stored air tasted of processing filters, with none of the moist richness he was accustomed to breathing in the dense forests. Yet, even on Theroc Arcas felt none of the passion that most green priests did. He might have chosen another life entirely, but now his skin bore the green tinge of symbiosis, a subcutaneous algae that allowed him to photosynthesize bright light. The process was irreversible, and he would always remain linked to the worldforest, even if being a green priest was not what he truly wanted.

Arcas had become an acolyte to honor a deathbed promise to his father, rather than out of his own interests. Green priests were in such demand that even a mediocre one such as Arcas could choose from innumerable offers of employment. On Theroc, the elder green priests helped to make such decisions, and Father Idriss and Mother Alexa interacted with the Hansa. But each green priest—even Arcas—could tap into the overall forest mind and make his or her own choices. Among the numerous offers, opulent positions, important diplomatic and liaison posts, Arcas most wanted to be away from all the bustle. He had chosen to be here in this isolated station.

"Time?" another tech said, sounding even more anxious. "Why are they waiting so long?"

After communing through telink, Arcas refocused on the eager technicians. "They say they are ready at Oncier. You may launch the probe now."

Working with machinery incomprehensible to the green priest, the Hansa techs scrambled to release the tether and activate the Klikiss wormhole-generating device. The probe separated from the scout ship and accelerated toward the neutron star, picking up speed as it coasted down the steep space-time slope.

The technicians cheered when the anchor point was established close to the beacon of the neutron star. They read off results in a breathless hurry because they didn't know how long the torpedo device could remain in position against the furious gravitational tug-of-war.

Arcas watched, filing away images to transmit back to the worldtrees and all the other green priests. The trees were more interested than he was.

"Activate!" said the head technician.

The torpedo device used ancient Klikiss technology to distort, ripple, and then tear a yawning hole in the



fabric of space. The maw of the wormhole tunnel was wide enough to engulf the superdense star.

Arcas muttered to the treeling, describing every step of the process-until even he became speechless as the new wormhole literally swallowed the blazing neutron star, like a pebble falling down a drain.

The torpedo generator gave out, its energy exhausted, and the wormhole slammed shut, sealing space-time without leaving a mark in the emptiness that had held the exotic celestial object.

"There. It is done." Arcas looked to the technicians, who began to cheer wildly.

The gauzy remains of the gaseous accretion cloud drifted away like wispy scarves, no longer held in place by chains of gravity.

Like a bomb of unimaginable magnitude, the neutron star hurtled toward Oncier.



MARGARET COLICOS

Louis adeptly jostled the other observers so he and Margaret could get a ringside seat for the planetary implosion. Basil Wenceslas stood beside them. "We'll know within moments," he said. "The green priest says the wormhole has opened on the other side. The neutron star is on its way."

Dr. Serizawa, his bald head slick with perspiration, looked from the observation window to the recorders and interviewers. "The receiving end of the wormhole is anchored at the gas giant's core. When the superdense star hits Oncier, it'll be the most titanic burst of energy mankind has ever unleashed." Then he added quickly, gesturing again, "But don't worry, it'll take hours for the shock wave to travel through the layers of the atmosphere. We're far enough from Oncier that we'll suffer no effects."

The incredible mass of the neutron star arrived at the gas giant's metallic core like a cannonball, adding enough mass and energy for ignition. Serizawa saw the readings and cheered. Sunken probe buoys sent pressure, temperature, and photonic readings, displayed as violently jumping patterns on the screens. His technicians waved their hands in triumph. Though Oncier's outer skin remained as calm and placid as before, titanic changes were convulsing through the innermost layers. Basil Wenceslas applauded, and the dignitaries followed suit.

"The neutron star is much tinier, but vastly denser, like a diamond inside a marshmallow. Even now, Oncier's material is falling inward." Serizawa looked at his readings, then at his chronometer. "Within an hour at most, it will achieve the density necessary to begin hydrogen fusion, the energy-transport process used in any normal star."

Margaret squinted at the spherical fingerpainting that was a soon-to-be sun, yet Oncier was so huge that although the neutron star had slammed into the core, she could see no immediate change. Markers and detectors had been deployed at various cloud layers, where they would sense the shockwave of outrushing radiation.

Margaret leaned forward to kiss Louis's weathered cheek. "We did it, old man." The two archaeologists had done their work at the beginning; now they could sit back and watch the end results. Cosmic chaos was even now occurring in the depths.

"So, Doctor, just adding all that weight is enough to start the planet burning?" asked a media rep

standing behind her.

Serizawa replied, "Actually, it's mass, not weight. But no matter. You see, the sudden transfer of the neutron star to the planetary interior gives it an immediate negative energy-potential energy, actually. To obey conservation laws, a huge influx of kinetic energy is required, which appears through wormhole thermodynamics as heat. *That* touches off the reactions to inflate the gas giant into a burning star. It will happen in a snap." His eyes flickered. "Well, within a few days, but you have to put everything in perspective."

Normally, heat transport in a star was incredibly slow. Photons took a thousand years to radiate in a drunkard's walk outward from the core to the surface, impacting with gas molecules along the way, being absorbed and then re-emitted to collide with another gas atom.

"Oh, just watch," Serizawa said, "and you'll see what I mean."

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The fascination of the news media waned within a few hours. The changes were slow, although the gigantic ball was indeed imploding. Detectors deep within the atmosphere showed the nuclear fires spreading outward like a tidal wave. When the wave reached the planetary surface, Oncier would begin to shine like a lightbulb.

The first flickers of lightning and fire began to show through gaps in storm systems. Pastel discolorations swirled about, displaying titanic upheavals deep below. Margaret's translation of Klikiss records had led to this spectacular event, but she didn't know whether to be proud or horrified at what she saw.

The Ildiran septa acknowledged the success of the Klikiss Torch. Dressed in formal uniform, the alien Adar Kori'nh shuttled over to the observation platform to watch the continuing stellar collapse. Margaret met the Adar with curiosity and trepidation, having never before spoken to an Ildiran.

"Your command of English is excellent, Adar. I wish I had such proficiency in languages," Margaret said.

"All Ildirans are bound by a common speech, but those of us likely to encounter humans have learned your common trade language. The Mage-Imperator requests it of us."

Taking advantage of the listener, Louis talked at great length with Kori'nh, describing their work on the Klikiss planets. "The Ildiran Empire has been in existence far longer than humans have explored space, Adar. Why is it then that your people have not sent prospectors or archaeologists to learn of this vanished race? Are you not curious?"

Kori'nh looked at him as if the question were disconcertingly strange. "Ildirans do not send out solo explorers. When we dispatch a colony of settlers, called a 'splinter,' it is a group large enough to continue our society. Solitude is a human trait that we find difficult to comprehend. I would never choose to be so far from other members of my race."

"My wife likes to be alone so much she often prefers to be in a different section of a dig even from myself." Louis smiled over at Margaret.

Embarrassed, she gave him a slight nod. "I believe, Louis, that Ildirans all share a faint telepathic link that binds them together. Not as a hive mind, but as a support system. Isn't that true, General?"

"We call it *thism*," Kori'nh said, "and it radiates from our Mage-Imperator. He is the knot that binds the threads of our race. If any individual strays too far from the others, that thread might snap. Perhaps humans see traveling alone as an advantage. Conversely, I pity your race for not living within the safety net of *thethism*." Kori'nh bowed, his expression unreadable.

A scattered murmur of surprised conversation drew them back to the window. A bright plume bubbled up from Oncier like a geyser of superheated gas. The event was unusual, though as it faded, so did the audience's interest. Within an hour, Margaret was the only one watching through the broad window. She found the roiling fury of Oncier hypnotic. The planet glowed now, spreading photons around the still-imploding world.

She stared at the planet's bright limb, a hazy curve against the backdrop of space opposite from the Ildiran warliners and the observation platform. Suddenly, several incredibly fast spherical objects streaked out like shotgun pellets. They emerged from deep within Oncier's clouds and soared off into open space. Within seconds, the dwindling dots disappeared into the distance.

Margaret gasped, but no one near her had seen the apparition. It couldn't possibly be a natural phenomenon . . . but how could it be anything else?

She turned, alarmed and confused. Louis was still involved in conversation with Adar Kori'nh and Basil Wenceslas, discussing details of their upcoming expedition to Rheindic Co, the numerous Klikiss mysteries, the strange robots who still functioned but claimed no knowledge of their creators. Dr. Serizawa stood by his technicians, monitoring endless images of the burning planet. From their expressions, they had obviously seen the apparition, too.

She went over to them. "What was that, Dr. Serizawa? Did you see-"

The man looked at her with a distracted smile. "It will require detailed analysis, naturally, but do not be alarmed. The secondary and tertiary effects of the Klikiss Torch are not at all understood. Remember, in the extreme high-pressure cores of a gas supergiant, common gases can be compressed into metals, carbon is smashed into diamond."

He looked back down at the monitors, where the observation platform's imagers replayed the fuzzy recordings. Unfortunately, the strange objects had emerged from the opposite side of blazing Oncier. "I would not be surprised if we saw some sort of deep-core metallic nodules, exotic debris ejected in the turmoil after stellar ignition. I would not be overly concerned, Ms. Colicos. The performance of your Klikiss Torch has met or exceeded all expectations."

Margaret frowned. "They looked like ships to me, artificial constructions."

Now Serizawa's expression became somewhat condescending. "That would be highly unlikely. After all, what sort of life form could possibly survive within the high-pressure depths of a gas-giant planet?"



8: RAYMOND AGUERRA

In the Palace District, crowds gathered and cheered, vendors hawked souvenirs, and food preparers sold extravagantly priced treats. A profusion of festival bouquets filled the air with heady perfume, though troops of maintenance workers and gardeners would be sure to remove the flowers before their color and freshness began to fade.

Raymond Aguerra glided deftly through a forest of elbows and arms. The young man didn't worry about pickpockets because he could sense any dipper, outwit him, and dodge away before the guy could make a grab. Besides, his pockets were empty. Raymond just wanted to see the sights.

He was an intelligent and embarrassingly handsome fourteen-year-old with dark hair, a thin build, and a bright smile. Raymond had few friends and even fewer advantages, except for the ones he found for himself. A hard life had made him as muscular as a greyhound, which often surprised people who challenged him, though he preferred to talk fast and turn the tables rather than get into a brawl.

He ducked and slipped forward so smoothly the front-row spectators didn't even notice a new wide-eyed person standing among them. Because every day was a struggle just to provide for himself, his mother, and his brothers, he paid little attention to politics. But he liked to watch the shows. Overhead, dirigibles, gliders, and balloons carried aloft those who could afford an expensive bird's-eye view of the Palace grounds. Gongs were rung, even more deafening than the cheers of the audience.

He watched a flurry of bright court uniforms-royal guards and ministers setting up a speaking stage on the grand balcony of the Whisper Palace. As a Unison deacon read a familiar invocation and prayer, salutes unfurled the brilliant banner of the Terran Hanseatic League, an icon of Earth at the heart of three concentric circles.

Looking no more impressive than the court functionaries except for his too-extravagant robes, an old man stepped ponderously onto the balcony, as if he had taken the time to rehearse every footstep. When the King raised his hands high, the billowing sleeves of his lush garment drooped to his elbows. Flashes of sunlight glittered from the rings on his fingers and the cut flatgems in his crown.

"Today I speak to you of a great victory for human ingenuity and drive." King Frederick's amplified words boomed from speakers all across the plaza. He had the rich baritone voice of a deity, deep and resonating. "In the Oncier system, we have caused the birth of a new star, which will shine its life-giving warmth and light upon four pristine worlds for the settling of humankind."

The people cheered again after listening in an awed hush. Raymond smiled at their feigned surprise; everyone already knew the announced purpose of the gathering.

"The time has come to light four more torches in the Palace District!" As the echoes of his voice faded, the King made an extravagant gesture, his hand barely visible even to Raymond's sharp eyesight.

On most of the high points, pillars, and domes, crackling eternal flames already rose to the sky, as they did from the firefly chains of lampposts on the grounds. Each torch supposedly symbolized a Terran colony world that had signed the Hansa charter and therefore swore fealty to the Old King.

"I give you these four new moons, which are named after my illustrious predecessors, the first four Great Kings of the Terran Hanseatic League: *Ben!*" With a boom, a blazing pillar of fire erupted from the point of a soaring tower on the walking bridge that spanned the Royal Canal. "George! Christopher! And Jack!" As he said each name, a new torch bloomed on the top of an unlit tower on the great bridge span.

The ice hadn't even melted yet on the four moons, and the first terraforming teams wouldn't be landed until the tectonic upheavals stabilized. Still, Raymond delighted along with the audience, watching the King claim a quartet of new worlds. What a grand show!

Bands began to play, and mirrorized ribbon chaff twinkled like dandelion fluff through the air, dispersed

by drifting zeppelins. King Frederick announced a day of raucous celebration. The population applauded any excuse for reveling. Maybe that was why they all loved their King so much.

Frederick hurried back into the quiet comfort of the Whisper Palace, and Raymond noted a bit of concern. The King seemed lonely, perhaps even unhappy, as if tired of living in front of so many eyes all his life. In a way, Raymond could sympathize with the monarch, though he himself spent every day completely invisible to the world at large.

He wandered among the stalls and souvenir vendors. On the facades of the Whisper Palace, broad friezes showed historical events: the launching of the eleven massive generation ships; the first contact with the Ildirans, who offered their stardrive and their galactic civilization. At specific times every hour, the holographic friezes moved, dramatizing the scenes like a glockenspiel. Statues around the fountain parks became animated: Stone angels flapped their wings, historical generals rode horses that reared up on cue.

A flow of pedestrians streamed across the bridge, entering the Palace grounds. Raymond stared at it all, eyes sparkling. He felt the threat half a second too late.

Someone grabbed him by the back of his neck, viselike fingers squeezing. "So, he's here to steal things when the crowd's not watching, but he runs out on us when we have a more sophisticated job to do."

Raymond squirmed enough to be able to see the speaker: An older boy with the unfortunate name of Malph scowled, while his stronger friend Burl clamped the grip even tighter on Raymond's neck. The fourteen-year-old twisted himself free of Burl's hold, but he didn't run. Not yet. "Sorry, but I didn't put stealing on my list of things to do."

"Stealing's beneath his delicate sensibilities!" Burl said with a snort.

"Nah, it's too easy," Raymond retorted. "Working hard for a living-now *that's* a challenge. You should try it sometime."

Around them, the oblivious spectators danced, some kissed, many queued up in front of food stands. Malph kept his voice low, but he could have screamed and few people would have paid attention. "Raymond, Raymond, why don't you just become a deacon if you've got such morality problems? And why couldn't you have just said no, rather than turning us in?"

"Crimson rain, I did say no, Malph. Sixteen times, if I remember right. But you wouldn't listen. Breaking into a man's business and stealing his cash stash is not my idea of a career. You do it once, then it becomes easier to do it again."

"I'm all for making it easier," Burl said with a bitter laugh. "It took quite some running to get away from the enforcers after you triggered that alarm."

"And if you two were as good as you say, the enforcers would never have gotten close." Raymond wagged his finger at them. "See, I counted on your skill, Malph, and now you're telling me it was all an exaggeration." He drew a deep breath, all of his muscles tensed, ready to sprint off or stay and fight. "I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said it was an accident?"

Burl clenched his fists and seemed to swell in physical size. "After we beat the crap out of you, maybe you can tell your mommy that was an accident, too."

"Leave my mother out of this." With tears in her eyes and gushing with worry for her oldest son, Rita Aguerra would make him feel far worse than any bruises.

Like a shark scenting blood in the water, Malph moved around, ready to grab Raymond, expecting him to run. Instead, Raymond did the unanticipated. He launched himself toward the larger Burl in a flurry of fists, hard knuckles, and sharp elbows. He fought without finesse, but he used every hard part of his body, from the tips of his boots to the top of his skull, and soon he had knocked a disbelieving Burl down to the flagstones. A whirl and a kick caught Malph in the stomach as the other bully charged toward his intended victim.

Enough to stall them, not hurt them. Enough to get away.

Raymond dissolved into the crowd before Malph and Burl could recover themselves. He had made his point. Either the two would leave him alone or they'd come back with reinforcements the next time. Sadly, it would probably be the latter.

Chuckling to himself, he sprinted across the bridge, crossing the Royal Canal. He brushed off his drab clothes, relieved to see that he had sustained not a single rip. His knuckles were skinned and his dark hair tousled, but at least he'd gotten out of the tussle without a black eye or any other noticeable injuries. Good enough to convince his mother that nothing serious had happened. She had enough other burdens to bear, and he did not want to add to them.

Raymond was the oldest of four boys and the man of the house, since his father had skipped town and signed aboard a colony ship when Raymond was eight years old. Esteban Aguerra had filed colony papers and a one-sided divorce decree at the same time, so that his wife received the paperwork only after the ship had departed. Raymond's father had gone off to the new colony world of Ramah, not because it was a particularly attractive place, but because it had been the first site available. Raymond bade him good riddance.

It was time to go home and help his mother with the meals and put his younger brothers to bed. On his way through the Palace District, he paused and looked at the lush floral bouquets displayed everywhere. Some had tipped over in the jostle of the crowd, others would remain standing in their glory for a day or two, until the petals began to wilt. Then they'd all be discarded.

Despite his compunctions against stealing, Raymond's love for his mother outweighed any qualms about tucking one of the beautiful bouquets under his arm. He hurried home with the extravagant flowers, beaming with pride at how much his mother would enjoy them.

The young man did not see the Hansa operatives hired by Basil Wenceslas. They had been watching Raymond Aguerra all day long.

The unobtrusive men took numerous surveillance images of the lone boy and added them to their already detailed files.

9:  ESTARRA

Though she was a daughter of the rulers of Theroc, Estarra did not know what she was destined to do with her life, even at the age of twelve.

Her three older siblings had known from youth that they were expected to learn leadership, enter the green priesthood, train as a commercial ambassador. A fourth child, though, had no set role. So Estarra mostly did as she pleased.

Full of energy, she ran barefoot into the forest, flitting through the undergrowth beneath the canopy of the always-whispering worldtrees. The ceiling of interlocked palmlike fronds did not so much block sunlight as filter it, dappling the forest floor in yellows and greens. Leaves and grasses caressed her golden-brown skin, tickling but not scratching. Her large eyes were always eager to make new discoveries and spot unusual objects.

Estarra had already explored every nearby path, amazed by the world around her. The spunky girl's actions occasionally earned her frowns from her older sister Sarein, who was enamored of the world of business, politics, and commerce. Estarra didn't want to grow up quite so quickly as her sister, though.

Reynald, her eldest brother, was already twenty-five and well on his way to becoming the next Father of Theroc. Handsome and patient, Reynald studied politics and leadership; by tradition, he had always known he would become the next spokesman for the forest world. In preparation for assuming his impending mantle, Reynald had recently departed on an exciting peregrination to distant and exotic worlds, meeting the major planetary leaders, both human and Ildiran, before his duties chained him to Theroc.

Estarra's parents had never gone to the Ildirans' fabulous capital city of Mijistra under the Seven Suns, though their daughter Sarein—four years younger than Reynald—had spent several years being schooled on Earth and forging alliances with the Hansa.

Estarra's brother Beneto had always been destined to "take the green" and become a priest of the worldforest. She looked forward to his return from Oncier, where he had watched the creation of the new sun.

Father Idriss and Mother Alexa had indulged her, perhaps too much, letting her find her own interests and get into all kinds of trouble. Her little sister Celli, the baby of the family, preferred to spend time with her incessantly chattering friends. Estarra was much more independent.

She ducked beneath sweet-smelling ferns and felt the tingle of wild perfume against her bronze skin. Estarra's hair was bunched in a chaos of braids and twists. She preferred this unfashionable style because it left few loose strands to catch on branches and twigs.

She trotted along, memorizing the way back home to the towering fungus-reef city where she lived. Estarra stood under the skyscraper-tall worldtrees, scaly-barked plants that throbbed with energy, stretching toward the sky as if planted in some giant's garden. Through cracks of the overlapping bark armor, treeling sprouts protruded like loose hairs.

The worldtree roots, trunks, and rudimentary *mind* were all connected. The feathery fronds reached hundreds of feet high, drooping to form an umbrellalike awning, each tree touching the next, to make the sky a tapestry of foliage. The fronds waved like eyelashes stroking each other. In addition to the humming insect sounds and calls of wild animals, a constant blanket of white noise settled over the forest, a rustling sound as soothing as a lullaby.

Worldtrees had spread across all the Theron land masses, and now ambitious green priests carried treelings to other planets so that the interlinked forest sentience could grow and learn. They prayed to it, a throbbing "earth spirit" in a literal sense, and helped the forest sentience grow stronger.

Long ago-183 years-an Ildiran Solar Navy patrol had encountered Earth's first slow-moving generation ship, the *Caillié*, and brought it to this untouched planet. All eleven of the old generation ships had been named for famous explorers. The *Caillié* had taken its designation from René Caillié, a French explorer of darkest Africa, who had disguised himself as a native in order to enter the mysterious continent. He had become the first white man to look upon the fabled city of Timbuktu.

Burton, Peary, Marco Polo, Balboa, Kanaka. . . those generation-ship names had an exotic resonance for Estarra, but even tales of Earth's uncivilized days could not match the wonders the widespread colonists had found as they settled other worlds across the Spiral Arm. *Clark, Vichy, Amundsen, Abel-Wexler, Stroganov*. All of them had found homes with the help of the Ildirans, except for the *Burton*, which remained lost among the stars.

The inhabitants of the rescued *Caillié* had rejoiced upon seeing Theroc's verdant landscape, the sheer potential of this untamed world. This new home was more welcoming than any they had imagined during their generations of blind flight in search of any habitable star system. They had lived for centuries confined aboard a large, sterile starship, and during all that aimless time the colonists and their descendants had little to do but look at images of forests and mountains. And Theroc was everything they had prayed for. The colonists had immediately suspected something unusual about these trees.

The *Caillié* had carried everything necessary to settle even the most hostile world, but Theroc proved to be fully cooperative. After the Ildirans deposited them here, the colonists set up prefabricated structures as an immediate and temporary settlement while biologists, botanists, chemists, and mineral engineers set out to assess what this remarkable world had to offer.

Luckily, the biochemistry of the Theron ecosystem was mostly compatible with human genetics, and the settlers were able to eat a great variety of native food. They were not required to engage in massive labors of clearing and fertilizing land. The *Caillié* settlers found ways to work with the forest, discovering natural homes rather than erecting metal and polymer structures.

Decades later, by the time the Ildirans had established diplomatic relations with Earth, the Theron settlers had developed their own culture and established a firm foothold. Although Hansa representatives finally came to reunite them with the greater network of humanity, the Theron were perfectly happy to remain unaligned. When their ancestors had set out on the generation ship, they had never expected to go back, never dreamed of restored contact with Earth. They were a seed cast on the wind, hoping to take root somewhere. They did not intend to be uprooted. . . .

As she paused in her explorations, Estarra ate messy handfuls of splurtberries and wiped the juice from her mouth and hands. Exuberant, she looked up at the nearest worldtree, where she saw handholds and markings of frequent ascents by acolyte reading teams. The bark offered enough bumpy hand- and footholds that Estarra could scale it like a ladder, providing she didn't look down or think too hard about what she was doing. Up there, the green priests walked their highways across the resilient treetops and interlinked branches.

Estarra wore few clothes, for the forest was warm; her feet were callused enough that she needed no shoes. She ascended one handhold at a time, moving upward, always upward. Exhausted but exhilarated, she finally broke through the brushing worldtree leaves. Estarra stared out, blinking into the unobscured sunlight, blue sky, and the endless treescape.

Even from up here, she could not tell where one individual tree ended and another began. Around her, she heard voices and songs, groaning chants and hesitant reading voices, a mixture of high-pitched and



deep tones.

Balanced against the fronds, Estarra looked out at the gathered priests, tanned and healthy acolytes who had not yet taken the green, older emerald-skinned priests who had already formed a symbiosis with the worldforest. The acolytes sat on platforms or balanced on branches, reading aloud from scrolls or electronic plaques. Some played music. Others simply rattled off tedious streams of data, reciting meaningless numbers from tables. It was a dizzying hubbub of activity, with the priests entirely focused on increasing the knowledge and data held within the worldforest—a way to show reverence for and help their vibrant verdant spirit at the same time. Hundreds of separate voices spoke to the interconnected forest, and the worldtrees listened and learned.

So much to see and experience, and the green priests did it all by staying here, drawing blessings from the mind of the worldforest. Estarra wished she could comprehend everything the forest knew. The priests sang out poems or read stories, even discussed philosophical topics, delivering information in all forms. The worldtrees absorbed every scrap of data, and still the living network hungered for more.

10:  PRIME DESIGNATE JORA'H

At the fringe of the sparkling Horizon Cluster, Ildira basked under the varying light of seven suns. The Empire's home planet circled a warm orange K1 star that was situated near a close binary pair—the Qronha system—composed of a red giant and a smaller yellow companion. More distant, but still dazzling in the Ildiran sky, hung the amazing trinary of Durris, a closely tied white star and yellow star with a red dwarf orbiting the common center of mass. Finally, also distant, the blue-supergiant Daym shone like an intense diamond.

Night never fell on Ildira.

Mijistra, capital city and jewel of the ancient empire, glittered under brassy skies. Its spires and domes were made of crystal and colored glass, freeform architecture fashioned out of ultrastrong transparent polymers.

Prime Designate Jora'h, eldest son and heir to the Mage-Imperator, drew a deep breath of air perfumed with mists from the upward-tumbling waterfalls that climbed to the Prism Palace.

As was his duty, the Prime Designate waited to meet the human representative from Theroc. The young man, Reynald, was Jora'h's ostensible counterpart, but in a much-diminished capacity. The human prince would become the ruling Father of a single wilderness planet, whereas the Prime Designate would eventually control the vast Ildiran Empire.

Jora'h raised both hands to greet the smiling man. "Prince Reynald, I bid you heartfelt welcome to Mijistra."

The broad-shouldered prince climbed the wide steps toward the receiving platform, flanked by burly members of the Ildiran soldier kith. A minimal escort of humans accompanied Reynald, including one of his personal green priests.

The Theron man had black hair, divided into braids that were gathered at the back of his neck. He left his well-muscled arms bare under a padded tunic made from an interesting pearly fabric that glistened in the light of multiple suns. He had a squarish face, flat cheeks beneath wide-set dark eyes. He wore a set

of filter lenses to block Ildira's excess sunlight; the receiving committee had also given the visitors creams and screening lotions.

"Prime Designate, I've been looking forward to seeing Ildira for many years." Reynald boldly reached out to clasp Jora'h's hand, as if they were equals. He had a warm and open manner about him, an attitude that melted the icy walls of formal ceremony.

Jora'h broke into a smile. He liked this young man almost instantly. "Both of our cultures have much to learn from each other."

Reynald looked at the shimmering curtains of water that leaped from the foamy pools at the canal edges and climbed invisible suspensor ladders into the domes and connected tubes. He laughed with childish delight. "You have already impressed me, Prime Designate-though I could find a few impressive jungle oddities on Theroc, if you ever visited us."

The Prism Palace stood atop an ellipsoidal hill that raised the Mage-Imperator's residence above the shining parapets, museum domes, and greenhouses of Mijistra. Seven rivers-long ago tamed by Ildiran engineers-flowed in perfectly straight lines toward the nexus of the Empire. Magnetic levitation fields and gravity-assist platforms nudged the current along, lifting the sparkling water uphill against gravity.

Reynald followed Jora'h into the entry gallery where blazers augmented the sunlight to banish every possible shadow. "This is one of the last stops on my peregrination. I decided that I must understand other cultures and worlds in order to serve my people. Much like Tsar Peter the Great, one of our ancient leaders from a large country known as Russia. Peter traveled and learned from other cultures and took the best parts back home with him. I intend to do the same."

The human's exuberance was infectious. "An admirable goal, Reynald. Perhaps I should leave Mijistra more often myself." It wasn't necessary for a Prime Designate to see other parts of the Ildiran Empire-but it might actually be fascinating. His own son and heir, Thor'h, had spent years fostered on the comfortable Ildiran pleasure world of Hyrillka.

"I have already been to Earth, where I met with Old King Frederick," Reynald continued with an abashed smile, "though he didn't quite know what to do with me. I also met with Chairman Wenceslas, who was very polite-mainly because he wants me to give him more green priests when I become Father of Theroc."

"And now you have come here," Jora'h said, gesturing forward. "We will fill your eyes to bursting!" Laughing, he led Reynald and his entourage toward the nearest shimmering wing of the Prism Palace.

As the Prime Designate, Jora'h was endowed with a charisma and animal magnetism that made him extremely attractive. His lean face radiated charm. His eyes were smoky topaz, gleaming with starry highlights and reflections. Long hair, a sign of male virility among Ildirans, wreathed his head in a mane made up of thousands of thin golden cornrows, braids like delicate chains that were alive and faintly mobile. They writhed with an unusual energy.

Human merchants, visiting dignitaries, scholars, even well-to-do tourists came to visit the fabled seven suns of Ildira. Since the Ildiran Empire had provided the Hansa with a fast stardrive, many humans revered them as benevolent patrons, paternal figures. While accepting the human race as part of the galactic story told in the *Saga of Seven Suns*, many Ildirans had trouble understanding human impulsiveness and drive.

But Jora'h found this one quite likable. He and Reynald walked shoulder-to-shoulder into the promenade hall of arched ceilings and stained-glass mosaics. Rich colors vibrated around them, intense light shining through the primary filters of the stained-glass windows.

Reynald even spotted a single black Klikiss robot moving down a corridor on flexible legs, looking like a hulking mechanical beetle-the first one he had ever seen. None of the Ildirans paid it much attention.

At court, noble-kith women, as well as courtesans, artists, and singers, wore flowing diaphanous gowns with diagonal sashes across their breasts and shoulders. Striped sleeves extended down to the courtesans' knuckles, though they could be retracted into the curving shoulder pads.

Reynald smiled as they entered a large greenhouse banquet hall. "Will I be able to meet the Mage-Imperator?"

The golden chains of Jora'h's hair fluttered of their own accord. He sighed apologetically. "The Mage-Imperator of the Ildiran Empire cannot meet with representatives from every human-settled planet. There are so many of them! He is reluctant to give Theroc a greater status than other colonies in the Terran Hanseatic League."

Reynald responded stiffly. "Prime Designate, sovereign Theroc is an independent planet, not part of the Hansa." Then he smiled. "On the other hand, I think I'd enjoy your company more than your father's anyway."

Jora'h's star-sapphire eyes twinkled. "And the best part has not yet begun. I have sent for our greatest living historian."

Inside one of the Palace's many gemlike domes, Jora'h gestured to a long table set with a thousand exotic dishes. Courtesans and servers flocked around them as they took their seats.

The courtesan females were smooth-skinned, hairless, with lovely patterns painted on their faces and long, delicate necks-swirling curves that swept past the alluring eyes to the tops of their heads like flowing waves of water or licking tongues of fire. As the courtesans walked, the fabric of their garments changed color like living rainbows.

The women smiled politely at him, but beamed seductively at Jora'h. The Prime Designate had their full attention, as if he walked within a fog of pheromones.

"You are not married yet, Prince Reynald? Marriage is the accepted human custom, I believe, especially for royal families?"

"It is-and no, I have not yet chosen a woman to become Theron Mother beside me. There are political considerations as well as . . . romantic ones. On this peregrination I have received several offers of marriage from leaders of some of the Hansa colonies. All respectable, but I prefer to consider a variety of possibilities, since this is such an important decision."

"I find it incomprehensible to spend so much time choosing a single mate." Jora'h selected a plate of jellied fruit, tasted a bite, then offered it to Reynald, who happily sampled it himself. He raised his gaze to the hovering courtesans. "It is my duty to have as many lovers as possible and father numerous children who carry the Mage-Imperator's bloodline. Committees and assistants aid me in choosing among the thousands of candidates and verify their state of fertility when I mate with them."

"Sounds exhausting," Reynald said. "And not terribly erotic."

"A Prime Designate has his duties to suffer." Jora'h chose a bowl of his favorite sliced fruits in steaming syrup. "The Ildiran people consider it a great honor to breed with me, and I have more volunteers than I can possibly service in my lifetime. Everything will change for me when I succeed my father and become Mage-Imperator."

"That must be exciting," Reynald said.

Jora'h wore a contemplative expression. "At that time I must undergo a ritual castration ceremony." Reynald looked shocked, as the Prime Designate knew he would. "Only in that way can I become the focus for the *this* mand see through the eyes of my race. I will give up my manhood and become a demigod, all-seeing and all-knowing. A fair enough exchange, I suppose."

Reynald dabbed his lips with a formal napkin. "I, uh, think I will endure my own problems of selecting a wife. I don't envy yours." Servants whisked away the myriad untouched dishes when it was clear the two men were sated.

Jora'h clapped his hands. "It is time for our rememberer."

A small, older-looking Ildiran entered the room, wearing loose robes. He wore no gems, no facial adornment, no jewelry on his fingers or wrists. His face looked more alien than most of the Ildiran kiths, with fleshy lobes growing around his brow and cheeks, sweeping back along his hairless head.

"Rememberer Vao'sh is a historian in the Ildiran court," Jora'h said. "He has entertained me many times." Vao'sh bowed, and Reynald nodded a welcome, not sure how to receive a rememberer, whether with an outthrust hand or with applause. Jora'h continued, "Our rememberers excel in performing portions of our *Saga of Seven Suns*."

"Yes, I've heard of your race's legends," Reynald said.

Vao'sh spread his arms so that the sleeves of his robe flowed. "Far more than just a set of scriptures and stories, the *Saga* is the grand epic of the Ildiran people. It is the framework by which we fit into the universe. Ildiran history is not just a sequence of events, but a genuine story, and we are all part of its intricate plot." He swept an outstretched hand toward Reynald. "Even a human prince such as you is included. Every person has a role to play, whether as a minor character or a great hero. Each of us hopes to live a life so significant that it will be remembered in the ever-growing saga."

Jora'h leaned back in his chair. "Entertain us, Vao'sh. What story will you tell today?"

"The tale of our discovery of the humans is most appropriate," Vao'sh said, widening his expressive eyes. He proceeded to speak in a captivating voice, in a rhythm that was more than poetry yet less than song.

Vao'sh summarized the familiar events of how the deteriorating Earth civilization had sent out eleven enormous generation ships that flew blindly toward nearby stars, each vessel filled with pioneers. Reynald was amazed at the tone of the historian's voice and at how his lobes flushed and changed color to display a palette of emotions.

"Such glorious desperation! Such hope, optimism-or foolishness. Yet the Ildiran Solar Navy found you." Vao'sh folded his hands.

When Vao'sh finished the tale of the humans' rescue, Reynald applauded loudly. Jora'h, delighting in the strange custom, clapped his hands as well. Soon all of the courtesans and functionaries in the banquet hall slapped their hands together, making a deafening noise. Vao'sh's face colored, as if he didn't know how to react.

"I told you he was a Master Rememberer," the Prime Designate said.

Reynald gave a wry smile. "How ironic that Ildiran rememberers are the best ones to tell our story."

11  ADAR KORIN'H

Though he commanded all the ships in the Ildiran Solar Navy, Adar Kori'nh still felt his chest grow cold with awe whenever he stepped into the presence of Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h. The deified ruler saw everything, knew everything, touching each Ildiran through his tendrils of telepathic*thism*.

And still he wanted to see Adar Kori'nh.

The ceremonial septa of warliners had returned from Oncier after having observed the astonishing Klikiss Torch. He had already transmitted images and reports, but now the Mage-Imperator wanted the words directly from his lips. Kori'nh could not refuse the command.

Bron'n, the Mage-Imperator's hulking personal bodyguard, moved behind the Adar. Since he was a member of the warrior kith, Bron'n's features were more bestial than those of other Ildirans. His hands sported claws, his mouth showed long, sharp teeth, and his large eyes could detect any movement, any threat to his revered leader. Adar Kori'nh, of course, posed no threat, but the chief bodyguard was incapable of lowering his state of alert.

The Mage-Imperator's private antechamber was hidden behind opaque walls at the rear of the skysphere, the nucleus for the Prism Palace's many spires, domes, and spheres. Kori'nh stepped into the lambent illumination of blazers where the enormous Mage-Imperator waited for him, reclined in his chrysalis chair. Bron'n sealed the doors. Despite his impressive rank, the Adar had rarely spoken alone to the Mage-Imperator without an audience of advisers, attenders, bodyguards, and nobles.

Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h was like a male queen bee, a single being who could direct and experience his whole civilization from within the Prism Palace. He was the focal point and recipient of the *thism*, which made him the heart and soul of all Ildirans. But often, as now, the leader needed more precise details and eyewitness analyses.

Kori'nh clasped his hands in front of his heart in prayer and supplication. "Your summons honors me, Liege."

"And your service honors all Ildirans, Adar." The Mage-Imperator had already shooed away the constant diminutive attenders who pampered him, oiled his skin, massaged his feet. His eyes were hard and impenetrable, his voice edged like a razor. "Now we must talk."

Nestled in his bedlike chair, covered in draping robes, the leader was large and soft. His fleshy skin hung in pale folds, his hands and legs weakened from lack of use. After his ritual castration many decades earlier, Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h looked vastly different from his handsome eldest son, Prime Designate

Jora'h. By tradition, his feet never touched the floor.

Before renouncing the calls of the flesh, Cyroc'h had sired many children. As the paternal figure of the Ildiran race, he maintained an extraordinarily long braid, the cultural symbol of virility. The braid hung down from his head, across his shoulder and chest, draped like a thick hemp rope that twitched and flickered with faint nerve impulses of its own.

A Mage-Imperator could live for two centuries after he became the nexus of the *thism* and the repository of Ildiran knowledge. Cyroc'h had not deigned to walk for decades, allowing the rest of the Ildiran race to be his eyes and hands and legs. He had too much self-importance to be bothered by such things.

Resting in his enormous cradle-chair, he directed his attention toward the Adar. Kori'nh adjusted his uniform again, glad that he had taken the time to apply all the medals and ribbons, though very little could impress the great leader.

"Tell me what you witnessed at Oncier. I am already aware that the Terrans have ignited the planet, but I require your objective assessment. How much of a threat does this Klikiss Torch pose to the Ildiran Empire? Do you believe the Hanseatic League means to use it as a weapon against us?"

A thrill went through Kori'nh. "A war against the Ildiran Empire? I don't believe the humans are such fools, Liege. Consider the sheer size and power of our Solar Navy."

The Mage-Imperator's eyes gleamed. "Nevertheless, we must not ignore their ambitions. Tell me about Oncier."

The Adar spoke in gruff sentences, giving clear facts with occasional opinions or interpretations. Kori'nh had been bred to become a military officer, but he was not a rememberer, and his stories were simply recountings of what had happened, not entertaining legends to amuse great men.

The Mage-Imperator lounged on his platform, listening. His intelligent face was doughy, his cheeks round, his chin little more than a button swallowed in soft skin. His expression was beatific enough that some humans had compared it to the face of Buddha. He wore a timeless look of peace, confidence, and benevolence, but the Adar sensed a hardness of necessary cruelty hiding beneath the surface. "So the event went precisely as the humans anticipated?"

"Except for one mystery." Kori'nh hesitated. "I must show you some images we acquired, Liege." He removed a recording chit from his uniform belt and inserted it into a portable displayer that he held in both palms. "While feigning minimal interest, our warliners imaged every moment of the planetary collapse. Then, as Oncier was engulfed in stellar flames, we saw *this*."

Emerging from the deep cloud decks and racing away from the newborn sun, strange spherical objects glittered as if their skins were made of diamond. The transparent globes streaked away from the flaming clouds, moving faster than even an Ildiran stardrive could propel them.

The Mage-Imperator recoiled, his face expressing astonishment, even a glint of fear. "Show it to me again." His dark eyes were intent, hungry.

"These objects came from *within* the gas planet, Liege. They are unlike any phenomenon ever encountered in my experience, certainly not any sort of spacecraft. I have read pertinent sections of the *Saga of Seven Suns* and scoured through other relevant records, but I have learned nothing. Do you know what this could mean, Liege?"

"I know nothing whatsoever about it." The Mage-Imperator seemed angry, on the verge of an explosion, but he said nothing more.

Kori'nh had seen shock and recognition on the Mage-Imperator's face, and he wondered why the great leader would hide such information. But he also knew with utter certainty that no Mage-Imperator would ever lie to his subjects, so he dismissed his doubts as a simple misinterpretation.

He bowed. "That is my full report, Liege. Shall I distribute images of these strange objects to my other officers, so that we may better keep watch?"

"No. There is no need." The Mage-Imperator's voice left no room for discussion. "We must not overreact to a minor mystery." The leader stroked his long, twitching braid where it lay across his belly. He propped himself up so that he could look directly into Kori'nh's face, as if he had suddenly come to a decision. His tone became less intense, more conversational as he changed the subject. "For now, I have another important mission for you—one that cannot wait."

Kori'nh clasped his hands in front of his chest again. "As you command, Liege."

"You and the Solar Navy must rescue our splinter colony on Crenna. Bring them home to Ildira."

Surprised, Kori'nh straightened again. "What has happened?" He could not keep the hopeful sound out of his voice. "Is this to be a military operation?" He had read many stories in the *Saga* and wanted to have his own part, however small, in an epic conflict.

"Crenna was barely large enough to be a true splinter, and now they are suffering from a terrible plague, which has already killed a substantial portion of the colonists, including my Crenna Designate. Through *the* *th* *ism*, I have felt their suffering—the sickness first blinds its victims, then kills them."

"K'llar bekh!" Adar Kori'nh felt cold. "That is terrible, Liege."

The braid twitched again. "Since the colony has dropped below the critical population density *for* *th* *is* *m* *t* *o* function, I have decided to abandon it. Rather than assigning more and more colonists to this hazardous place, we will remove our people."

"It shall be done, Liege," Kori'nh said. "Rapidly and efficiently. I hope we can act quickly enough to prevent further loss of life. Are we to recover our equipment and buildings?"

"No, they are tainted with the disease. Also, the Terran Hanseatic League has bargained hard and negotiated well, and they have . . . acquired Crenna and all its resources from us. Their preliminary tests have made them confident they are not susceptible to this plague. Humans will move into the empty settlement as soon as our people have been evacuated."

Kori'nh was aghast, especially after having seen the outrageous experiment at Oncier that would provide them with four new moons to inhabit. "What could the humans possibly need with a new planet? They have already spread like a disease across so many worlds."

"It is all part of my plan, Adar. Better to let them have our leavings than to let them grow too ambitious on their own."

Adar Kori'nh nodded. "It is as I have warned for decades, Liege. We must never let down our guard. I

suggest we maintain a careful vigilance."

"I always do, my Adar," said the Mage-Imperator. "I always do."

12:  RLINDA KETT

As a successful merchant with five ships, Rlinda Kett was not accustomed to biting her nails and waiting in meek silence. Especially during an ambush. She stood next to General Kurt Lanyan on the bridge deck of the Juggernaut-class battleship, the most heavily armed vessel in the Earth Defense Forces.

While lurking in the empty silence of space, Lanyan had ordered the Juggernaut to shut down all its running lights and dampen their electromagnetic signature. The EDF battleship's dark hull plates of stealth material would keep them invisible, just a gravitational anomaly floating among the rocks at the outskirts of the Yreka system.

Waiting. They had already set their trap.

"How long have we been in position?" Rlinda said in a quiet voice.

"No need to whisper, madam," the General answered. His cheeks and chin were so smooth and clean that the skin looked slippery. When he focused his attention, his close-set icy-blue eyes seemed to drink in light and then reflect it back twofold. Lanyan indicated the tracker screen that showed the blip of Rlinda's cargo ship, the *Voracious Curiosity*, as it proceeded along the commercial flight path toward Yreka's inhabited planets. "We can't hurry this. That bastard Sorengaard has to make the next move."

"You'd best be certain to respond the moment he does, General." Now that she no longer bothered to whisper, her booming voice carried an intimidating quality. "That's my personal ship out there, and it's being piloted by my favorite ex-husband."

"Your favorite one, madam? How many of them do you have?"

"Ships or ex-husbands?"

"Ex-husbands," the General growled as if she should have known his intent. "I am already aware of how many ships you run."

"Five ex-husbands, and BeBob is the best of the bunch, the only one who still works for me." She still got along with Captain Branson "BeBob" Roberts, personally and sexually. Besides, he was a damned good captain.

Space corsairs led by the outlaw Rand Sorengaard had recently captured one of Rlinda's merchant ships on the Yreka run, killing the crew and taking all of her supplies. Settled by one of the original generation ships, the *Abel-Wexler*, Yreka was near the edge of territory claimed by the Ildiran Empire, far from the core of the Terran Hanseatic League, which meant that neither race provided much surveillance or protection. But when Sorengaard's corsairs had taken to running down cargo ships, the Earth Defense Forces had vowed to root out and crush such flagrant lawlessness, even if it meant using Rlinda's ship and her favorite ex-husband as bait.

Rlinda was a black woman with an ample body, a big appetite, and a hearty laugh. She allowed people



to draw their own stereotypes, which often led them to underestimate her; Rlinda was not quite as soft and roly-poly as she appeared. A shrewd businesswoman, she understood her markets and knew a thousand special niches. Other traders wasted their time looking for big strikes and monopolies on rare alien goods, but she preferred to make herself rich one small step at a time. Many merchants failed to pay off their vessels, but Rlinda had five ships-four, now that Sorengaard's asshole pirates had captured the *Great Expectations*.

The Yreka run had been one of her company's most lucrative routes, since the outlying colonists needed many essentials that Rlinda could provide at low cost. Now, though, with Sorengaard preying upon helpless vessels, few traders would venture into the area. Rlinda could have gouged even higher prices from the needy colonists; instead she preferred to take this risk, allowing General Lanyan to use her *Voracious Curiosity* as a bit of provocation.

She wanted to make a profit, certainly, but she also wanted business to run smoothly. Most of all, she intended to see justice done for her lost captain, Gabriel Mesta, and his crew.

Sitting in command aboard the giant Juggernaut, General Lanyan didn't have such high-minded ideals or moral reasons. He just wanted to kick some butt and teach these pirates a lesson.

Run by the Hansa, the EDF served as a combination police/security force, as well as a standing interstellar military. Unlike the Ildiran Solar Navy, whose large and ornate ships were mainly for show, blustering about and doing humanitarian deeds, Lanyan's EDF was more realistic in its purpose. They knew there would always be plenty of trouble among the Hansa colonies. Humans had never ceased to fight one another, finding religious or political reasons to squabble; when that justification failed, they simply grabbed one another's possessions or resources.

Stopping a rebel like Sorengaard, a man who had connections with the gypsylike Roamers-now *that* was a perfect mission for the EDF. Sorengaard's pirates were also said to be Roamer exiles, all of which added to the Hansa's already prevalent suspicion against the gypsy people. Though the unruly nomads supplied most of the stardrive fuel used in commerce, the Roamers obeyed no law but their own and generally avoided participating in the political or social activities of other civilized humans.

"Picking up energy signatures, General," said a tactical lieutenant at her station. "A dozen of them. Small ships, apparently . . . but they seem to be carrying heavy weapons."

"Battlestations," Lanyan said. "And keep running silent until I give the order."

Soldiers scrambled about and pilots raced to the launch decks to board their fast-attack Remoras. Rlinda clenched her fists and drew deep breaths, thinking of BeBob. Her captain would be flying down toward Yreka, hoping to flush out the corsairs so the EDF could stop the pirates' depredations. Rlinda wanted to open a channel and shout a warning, but that would ruin the ambush. She prayed BeBob would be safe.

She watched as the unsuspecting corsairs ignited their engines and moved in toward their prey. Smiling, Lanyan opened the intercom channel to give orders to his soldiers. The General was too damned cocksure.

After the corsairs closed in on the *Voracious Curiosity* BeBob did his best to fly evasive maneuvers toward the safety net of Yreka stations, but the overloaded cargo ship was full of material to make up for what had not been delivered during the last scheduled run. BeBob's moves were sluggish.

Rlinda knew her captain must even now be panicked, sweating and swearing. Branson Roberts was not simply acting as bait; he was genuinely trying to escape, but he had no chance against the corsairs. Her heart went out to him. "You'd better not blow this, General, or I'll have your balls."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, madam," he said, then shouted into the intercom, "All Remoras, launch! Manta cruisers, proceed forward. Engage the enemy."

Even as the greedy corsairs surrounded the single merchant ship, the EDF battlefleet pounced upon them. The squadron of fast-attack Remoras lunged in, targeting the pirates' unshielded engines. The corsairs were brave enough to face the minimal defensive capabilities of merchant ships, but they had no way of resisting the battle-ready Terran military force.

One of the small corsair ships broke away and tried to flee, accelerating so hard its white-hot engine cowlings began to vaporize into plasma, causing the pirate to veer off in an unstable flight path. With several jazer blasts, two Remoras destroyed the fleeing corsair before he could slip out of detector range.

Lanyan shouted into the ship-to-ship comm, "I want some alive. Don't fry them unless you have no choice."

A chorus of acknowledgments came over the speakers, and then the mid-sized Manta cruisers joined the fray. Flying fast, the Remoras opened fire with concentrated jazer pulses, and all hell broke loose.

Fed up with standing on the sidelines, Rlinda ran to the communications console and with one big shoulder knocked Lanyan out of the way. She adjusted the frequency to the *Voracious Curiosity's* private channel. "BeBob, get your ass out of there! If I don't see you moving out of the firing zone in five seconds, I'm going to come over there and do it myself."

"Don't need to tell me twice, Rlinda," BeBob's surprisingly firm voice answered, but she knew he was just putting on a brave mask. Branson Roberts could be cool in a crisis, but he was not a boulder-headed hero-in-training.

The *Voracious Curiosity* changed course to head down the Z-axis below Yreka's ecliptic and away from the battle zone. Not a scratch from a stray blast or a ricochet. Rlinda breathed a sigh of relief, but told herself it was only because she wanted the *Curiosity* to be clean and undamaged for her upcoming trip to Theroc.

The Mantas crippled the pirate ships, and Remoras rounded up the vessels in short order. One EDF pilot scorched his hand when a control panel sparked out due to a malfunction that had been missed during the recent inspection overhaul. That man became Lanyan's sole casualty.

The corsairs' hodge-podge of ships hung corralled within the surrounding barricade of EDF vessels. The spacecraft looked old and patched, strange designs assembled from mismatched components and mixed-up blueprints. Their hulls were scarred, their engines damaged in the recent fight.

"I want all prisoners shuttled over to my Juggernaut," Lanyan said. "Bring them to the cargo bay. Make sure you put neural clamps on their wrists and strip them of all weapons."

Next, EDF soldiers began the most dangerous part of the operation, boarding the nine remaining corsair vessels and taking prisoners. While they removed the pirate crews, leaving the ragtag vessels guarded by designated troops, one corsair captain initiated a critical overload, attempting to blow up his vessel and vaporize any EDF forces within range. But the botched self-destruct routine succeeded only in melting

down the engine core, burning through the hull, and shooting out a narrow jet of fire. The unexpected venting made the corsair ship careen out of control like a whirligig, until it finally sputtered out and drifted in space, dark and ruined, not even worth the salvage.

Rlinda accompanied General Lanyan to the Juggernaut's cargo bay, where thirty-one prisoners were brought forward. The men stood helpless with angry eyes and tattered shirts, hands bound, rich in dignity but poor in common sense.

"Which one is Rand Sorengaard?" Lanyan swept his ice-blue eyes across them, working his jaw to contain his indignation. "And don't play any stupid tricks. You'll all face the same punishment anyway."

The men glanced at each other, trying to look haughty, jaws clenched, eyes blazing. Several of the pirates appeared ready to step forward in a foolish attempt at bravery, but a tall, lantern-jawed man volunteered first. He looked at the others with the sure, confident gaze of a leader. "You men stand down. I'll face my own crimes." He turned to Lanyan. "I'm Rand Sorengaard. I don't recognize your authority to arrest me."

"Aww, are you trying to hurt my feelings? Maybe you'd better make your excuses to this lady here." The General put a hand on Rlinda's shoulders. "You stole one of her ships and killed her crew. Did you ask those people if they recognized *your* authority?"

"We were acquiring needed resources," Sorengaard said. "You call us pirates, and yet the Big Hansa Goose has imposed tariffs and trade restrictions on anything the Roamers import and export. You people simply wrap your thievery in political nicety."

Lanyan's lips formed a grim line. "Then let's put an end to any further nicety." Out here on the fringes of the Hansa, the General had the authority to use whatever methods he deemed necessary. "Some of your corsairs saw fit to take their own lives during capture. I can't argue with that. Now I will pronounce my own sentence upon the rest of you. First, you have been caught red-handed in the act of piracy. Moreover, the evidence clearly shows you are guilty of murdering the captain and crew of the *Great Expectations*, and probably other ships as well."

He gestured toward the access airlock hatches at the far end of the cargo bay. Those chambers were used for space combat troops, after suiting up and engaging their personnel weapons, to exit from the battleship and proceed to zero-G combat exercises. "Your punishment is death, swift and sure, with no malice and as painless as I can reasonably make it."

Though the sentence made her heart heavy, Rlinda was not surprised. The corsairs didn't even argue, simply glared at General Lanyan.

"Because the rest of you have made the mistake of following Rand Sorengaard, he will be the one to dispense your sentence. Each of you, one by one, into the airlock. Sorengaard, you will eject them into space."

"I will *not*." The pirate leader raised his lantern jaw. "Torture me as much as you will, but I refuse to be your pawn."

One of the corsairs spoke up. "Do it, Rand. I'd rather have you push the button than one of these filthy Eddies." The other pirates muttered agreement. Three spat on the deck, trying to hit Lanyan but missing by at least a foot.

One man broke away from the line and moved toward the airlock hatches. "Don't let them gloat,Rand . This is the only choice they'll let us have."

The pirate leader looked at his captured crewmen and seemed to see what he expected to find in their expressions. Then he turned back to the General. "This is no victory for you."

The first man went to the hatch, but Rlinda couldn't decide whether he was the bravest of them all, or if he felt it might be worse watching the others die before him. A uniformed soldier opened the airlock hatch, gesturing inside as if he were a formal maître d'.

"We could do two or three at once, General," said a lieutenant.

"No," both Lanyan and Rand Sorengaard answered in unison.

"Flung out into space . . .," the first man muttered, but his voice did not quiver with fear. "I guess that's the closest a Roamer will get to going home."

"Go find your Guiding Star," Sorengaard said.

The soldier sealed the hatch shut and Rlinda turned away, not wanting to look through the windowplate. Though she hated what these pirates had done to her ship, her innocent crew, she could not watch the air being drained away. Explosive decompression would cause the man's soft tissues to burst before his lungs and his blood began to boil and freeze at the same time.

Rand Sorengaard muttered a prayer or a farewell under his breath and then hammered the release button without hesitating. The first of the captured corsairs was gone.

Cold and horrified at the brutal justice, Rlinda spoke quietly to Lanyan, who stood at attention as if he did not want to be disturbed. "You've made your point, General. Is that not sufficient?"

"No, it is not, madam. The sentence is just, and you know it." He watched as the second pirate was manhandled into the airlock and the hatch sealed behind him. "Space is vast, and lawlessness can grow unmanageable if left unchecked. My mission is to respond with sufficient vehemence to provide a credible deterrent."

He looked at the colorful, exotic clothing the corsairs wore and stared out at the viewscreens. In space, the mismatched and weirdly modified pirate ships hung together, manufactured to the Roamers' own strange specifications. His teeth pressed together, as if he didn't want the insulting words to come out of his mouth. "Damned Roachers!"

After all the corsairs had been similarly executed, General Lanyan himself ejected Rand Sorengaard from an airlock hatch, then turned to his Remora pilots standing in the Juggernaut launching bays.

"One more step to go, men. Scout the vicinity and gather all the frozen bodies. Bring them back inside so we can incinerate them properly." He looked over at Rlinda Kett. "We're in close proximity to a shipping lane here. No sense in leaving navigation hazards."



Riding the lemony-tan clouds of Golgen, the Roamer skymine left a wide wake as it scooped up misty resources. The harvester complex—a sprawling cluster of reactor chambers, gathering funnels, storage tanks, and separable living quarters—was similar to hundreds of other skymines run by the nomadic Roamers above gas-giant planets across the Spiral Arm.

The extended clans operated on the fringe of the Hanseatic League, aloof and independent. Families captained their own skymines or operated resource stations in the detritus of planets no one else wanted.

Roamer skymines harvested vast amounts of hydrogen from gas planets, giant reservoirs of resources accessible for the taking. They ran millions of gaseous tons through *ekti* reactors using an old Ildiran process. Through catalysts and convoluted magnetic fields, the reactors converted ultrapure hydrogen into an exotic allotrope of hydrogen. *Ekti*.

Ildiran stardrives, the only known means of faster-than-light travel, depended on *ekti* as their power source. Huge amounts of hydrogen were needed to create even minimal quantities of the elusive substance. Because of their close family ties and their willingness to operate on the edge, Roamers were able to provide *ekti* more cheaply and reliably than any other source. The dispersed clans had successfully exploited the commercial niche.

More successfully, in fact, than anyone in the Hansa realized.

After Jess Tamblyn's cargo escort docked with the Blue Sky Mine, the hatches were locked down, airlocks connected, bolts secured. The cargo escort was little more than a spiderlike frame of engines and a captain's bubble; when the framework was fastened to the skymine's storage tanks, Jess could pilot containers of condensed *ekti* to distribution centers. Even performing a trivial job like this, he always did his best, going beyond what was expected of him, setting a good example.

When all the indicator lights glowed green, he formally requested permission to come aboard his brother's skymine. The Roamer workers teased Jess until he entered a set of override commands and stepped aboard anyway. He shrugged back his hood, patted down his many pockets, then gave a shake of his shaggy brown hair. "So, if you recognized me, where's the red carpet?"

One of the production engineers, a gruff middle-aged man from the Burr family, gave a good-natured curse. "Shizz, you've been promoted to cargo driver, I see! Does that mean you've had a fight with your father?"

Jess flashed a rakish smile. "I can't let my brother get into all the disagreements with my family." He was handsome, blue-eyed, with a vibrant personality that made him appear energetic and relaxed at the same time. "Besides, somebody competent has to take the load to the distribution ships. Can you think of a better pilot?"

The Burr engineer waved a dismissive hand. "You're just shuttling *ekti* to the Big Goose. They wouldn't know a good pilot from a blind farmer."

The deprecating reference to the Hansa came from the original albatrosslike configuration of the early Terran trading ships—meant to look like eagles, but shaped more like fat geese. The name of the Hansa Chairman who had tried to make the gypsy colonists sign the Hansa Charter, Bertram Goswell, had added further inspiration. Roamers found the term to be suitably insulting.

Jess shrugged. "No matter. I like to find excuses to see my brother, make sure he's not making too many mistakes." He didn't say out loud that he also seized upon any legitimate reason to escape the stern

scrutiny of his father. Old Bram Tamblyn layered heavy pressures and responsibilities upon Jess, now that his older brother was no longer welcome as a member of the clan. The young man held on to those expectations as an anchor and never put his own wishes forward, even if old Bram rarely noticed.

As the cumbersome facility cruised along through Golgen's clouds, workers tended the ekti reactor controls, checked the distribution pipes, and lubricated mechanical systems that needed constant maintenance. Jess walked through the cargo bay, listening to the comforting hisses and hums, the industrial music made by all skymines. He loved being here. Blue Sky always seemed to be cleaner and more polished than any other skymine. Jess's brother, Ross, was immensely proud of what he had accomplished here.

Jess trudged down the corridor, needing no help in finding the captain's deck. Even on the workshift, Roamers wore colorful, many-layered outfits composed of scarves, billowing sleeves, hoods, and hats. Every tunic, vest, and set of trousers was adorned with frills of pockets and pouches, clips, chains, and hooks for storing a thousand gadgets, testing devices, or hand weapons. The clips kept tools in place and readily at hand, even in the low-gravity environments where Roamers spent a great deal of their time.

"How long you staying, Jess?" asked a shift supervisor who came forward through the bulkhead from his office chamber.

"Less than a day. We've got a supply run and a quota to meet. Obligations, you know."

The supervisor nodded. "We'll tune up your cargo escort and link all the struts to the ekti tank."

"Is Ross outside on the deck sightseeing again?"

"No. I think the chief's in the navigation bubble."

"What's he worried about hitting in this big open sky?" Shaking his head, Jess scrambled up the interdeck ladder until he found the navigation bubble. Though Ross had forever turned his back on the family water industry on Plumas, Jess always felt welcome here on his older brother's facility.

Placing his hands on his hips, he stared at the back of Ross's head. His brother was intent on the controls, peering into the clouds of the planet's incomprehensibly vast and open sky. Vaporous convection currents rose up and tumbled down as the skymine continued along its random path. An asterisk symbol had been painted above the navigation panel. It was the Guiding Star, which the Roamers believed directed the paths of their lives.

"Afraid of crashing into an angry concentration of nitrogen? Or do you just like sitting in the captain's chair and driving this big hulk nowhere?"

Ross spun, and his face lit up in a smile. "Jess! I wasn't expecting you."

"Decided to save you the wages of a cargo hauler." He came forward to embrace Ross. "Help you pay off that big debt-just another part of my responsibility as your little brother."

Ross indicated the sensor panels. "For your information, there's an art and a skill to piloting a skymine. I still have to adjust course, raise or lower the ship. A good captain always watches for dense concentrations of gases."

The skymine trailed a squidlike network of probes; the kilometers-long threads drifted in the clouds,

picking up data and helping Ross decide where to go. Golgen's atmospheric gases were rich with just the right mix of elements and catalysts for the Ildiran reactors to produce ekti. Also, the gas giant was close to star-trading lanes, which allowed for easy distribution of the fuel. After years of hard work, Ross was close to making a profit from his operation, despite their father's constant pessimism.

"I presume you've brought gossip?" Ross paused and added ironically, "And of course, a sincere apology from Dad begging me to come home?"

Jess laughed. "If I'd brought that, I'd be here with a full Roamer celebration fleet such as the Spiral Arm has never seen."

Ross gave him a bittersweet laugh. "One of us is still off course from the Guiding Star. Let's go up on deck. I want to be out in the fresh air."

They climbed through hatches, took a lift, and finally passed through a set of wind doors to a broad observation deck. The deck could be surrounded by an atmosphere field, but for now it was open to the sky itself. Ross frequently took the Blue Sky Mine down to an equilibrium level where the clouds were thick enough to be breathable and Golgen's atmosphere was warmed by internal thermal sources.

Jess drew a deep breath of the alien air. "This isn't something I get to do every day."

"I do," Ross said.

The Blue Sky Mine, like all Roamer-designed factories, was composed of three main segments: the intake/feed tanks, the processing reactors and exhaust funnels, and the ekti storage spheres. As the skymine plowed through the atmosphere, open nozzles sucked in raw gases and delivered them through processing machinery. After passing through the catalytic reactors, the rare hydrogen allotrope was siphoned off, while the waste gases spilled back out from the hot stacks.

Ekti was the only known allotrope of hydrogen, though other elements had varying molecular forms. Carbon manifested itself as powdery graphite, crystalline diamond, or exotic polymer spheres of buckminsterfullerene. Long ago, the Ildirans had discovered how to reconfigure hydrogen into a fuel that allowed their stardrives to function.

Before ambitious Roamers took over the ekti-harvesting industry, old Ildiran-model cloud trawlers had been much larger, hosting a minimal splinter community of sixty to ninety family units and requiring a gigantic infrastructure. Therefore, harvesting ekti had cost the gregarious Ildirans a great deal.

Independent Roamers, on the other hand, could operate skymines with a small support staff, which also allowed them to sell stardrive fuel at lower cost. The Ildirans had gladly surrendered their monopoly on ekti production, glad to leave the "desert islands in space" and let humans have the misery to themselves.

The rest of the Hansa considered the Roamers to be little more than gypsy space trash, disorganized and disreputable. No one had an inkling of how much the clans actually had and how many taxes they avoided, since they kept such information hidden from outsiders.

A flutter of white wings went past Jess's face, startling him. He looked up to see a dozen doves flapping around the deck, swirling out into the sky and circling back to their perches and feed bins. "I'd forgotten about the birds."

"This is a perfect place for them. Look how far they can fly."

"Yes, but where do they land?"

Ross rapped his knuckles on one of the railings. "Back here." Clouds extended for a thousand miles below them, but neither Ross nor Jess felt dizzy. "They have nowhere else to go, so they always return. The best sort of cage."

Fastening his insulated jacket against the chill, Ross gazed across the infinite distance like a feudal lord surveying his domain. Jess pulled up his hood against the breeze. Behind them, exhaust plumes boiled upward like thunderheads that rapidly dispersed into the cloud decks of Golgen. The two brothers stood side by side in comfortable silence.

During the lull in conversation, Jess sensed it was time for his gifts. He opened one of the pocket pouches on his right thigh and withdrew a thick golden disk engraved with symbols that matched the Tamblyn clan markings embroidered on Jess's and Ross's clothing. "Tasia made this for you."

Ross took it, looking with wonder at the beautiful device his younger sister had created. "As usual, I'm impressed by her engineering skills . . . but I'll need to know what it is before I can use it."

Jess pointed to the dial and the numbers. "It's a compass. It can be normalized to any planet's magnetic field so you can always find your way. See, there's the Guiding Star."

"Is my little sister implying that I'm lost?"

"It's just her way of showing that she misses you, Ross, though you'd never get through her tough-girl act long enough for her to admit it."

Ross's grin grew. "Yeah, I miss her, too."

Jess reached into a second pocket and pulled out a small bound book with yellowed pages, most of which were blank, though some were covered with faded handwriting. "An old-fashioned logbook used by sea captains to keep track of their journeys. It's from Dad."

Ross slid the compass into one of his pockets and held the red leather-bound book with a combination of awe and skepticism. "This is from *Dad*?" He flipped through the pages, looking at the handwritten words, then raised his gaze to meet Jess's. "Somehow I don't believe that. He wouldn't give this to me. In fact, all the gifts you've brought over the past several years are just family treasures you smuggled out from Plumas, aren't they?"

Jess could not maintain an innocent expression. "Would you have it any other way?" Ross held the logbook, pretending not to care, but Jess could see that the gift meant a great deal to him, even if it came from his brother rather than his father.

They both knew Bram Tamblyn very well. He was a stern and inflexible family leader, and for all his life he'd insisted on having everything precisely his own way. That attitude worked well enough with his employees in the water-mining operation under the ice sheets of Plumas. However, Bram Tamblyn's firstborn son had turned out to be just as stubborn as his father. The two had gotten into frequent shouting matches for years, until finally, after he reached the age of twenty-two, Ross had had enough.

Old Bram had threatened to disown his son if he didn't bow to his wishes, and the young man astonished his father by calling his bluff. Tempers were high. Outraged, Bram vowed he would excise Ross from



their clan, so Ross offered to save him the embarrassment. He requested the portion of the family inheritance that was due him and swore he would make his own success.

Jess had been there, along with Tasia. Though they intervened, trying to make peace between the two, the old man would have none of it. Bram had gotten a calculating look in his eye-his clan's fortunes were increasing year by year, and if Ross took his inheritance now and quit his claim to all future income, he would surely come out the loser. So Bram tallied up his son's share and gave it to him, telling Ross never to ask for another penny.

And Ross had not. He had invested his inheritance wisely, taking over the operation of the Blue Sky Mine, which he ran with such grace and skill that it had nearly climbed out of debt by the time Ross turned twenty-eight. Old Bram pretended anger and chagrin but was secretly proud.

When Jess came to visit the skymining station, there was never any animosity between the brothers. On the other hand, thanks to Ross's stubbornness, Jess would someday become the official head of the Tambyln clan and inherit the lucrative Plumas water mines, becoming a powerful man in his own right. He didn't want it, but he would not let anyone down.

Ahead of the Blue Sky Mine, an anvil of grayish rust cloud rose from the lower layers. Ross went to a set of controls and diverted the exhaust plumes, using them like attitude-control jets. The huge cloud trawler shifted its course and banked northward so that they passed a yawning maelstrom of angry clouds.

"That hurricane could swallow a whole planet," Ross said. Distressed, the pet doves fluttered behind the skymine, following their only roost.

"Just as long as it doesn't swallow this skymine," Jess said. "Any danger?"

"Not with me at the helm. When the winds get rough, I can always climb to a different layer." He waited and then finally turned expectant eyes on his younger brother. "So . . . did you bring anything from Cesca?"

Jess forced a light tone into his voice. This was the hardest part of everything he was expected to do. "You think you need more than her love?"

"No, I suppose I don't."

Jess wanted to change the subject, unable to shake the image of the beautiful Francesca Peroni, to whom Ross had been betrothed for years. "Jhy Okiah has just filed a formal petition that legally names Cesca her heir as Speaker for the Roamers."

"No surprise at all." Ross looked proud, but his voice was businesslike. "She's a very talented woman."

"Yes, she is." Jess closed his mouth to keep himself from saying more. It wasn't his place. Sadly, for more than a year Jess himself had been deeply in love with Cesca, and he knew the feeling was very mutual. Her betrothal to Ross had occurred long before she and Jess had met, and Roamer honor and politics would never allow her to break the engagement. Neither would Jess's sense of duty to his brother.

Besides, Ross had worked so hard to meet the difficult conditions he and Cesca had agreed on for their wedding. Jess would never do anything to hurt or embarrass his brother, and neither would Cesca. Both

were loyal to Ross, and all of them were bound by the complex social restrictions of the Roamer culture. Jess had resigned himself to an unrequited love. He would stand strong and live without her, though Cesca would always be in his heart.

Ross had no inkling of his brother's attraction for his fiancée, and Jess had privately sworn never to let him discover that fact. The cost to all of them would be far too great.

After sharing a meal and playing a few rounds of stargames with three crew workers, Jess slept in a guest bunk. He left the Blue Sky Mine early the following morning, when Golgen's sun was just creeping above the fuzzy horizon.

Bidding Ross farewell, Jess detached the valuable load of stardrive fuel and began to pilot the cargo escort away from the Golgen system to a Roamer transport station, where it would be offloaded to Goose distribution ships.

He also carried gifts and letters from Ross, because after completing his delivery, Jess intended to make his way to the central Roamer complex of Rendezvous. With an ache in his heart but a neutral expression on his face, he would dutifully deliver his brother's romantic presents to Cesca Peroni.

14  CESCA PERONI

The Roamer yacht maintained its position at the arranged meeting point in empty space. The private yacht bore no markings to indicate that it carried the important Speaker for all Roamer clans, along with her protégée. Playing their political cards close to the chest, Roamers rarely resorted to emblems or trappings of power.

Cesca Peroni sat in the copilot's seat, monitoring the emptiness, keeping watch on her sensors. Distant stars glowed all around them, partially muffled by thin wisps of nebular gas. "No sign of the other ship yet." With large eyes, dusky skin, and a sense of humor matched only by her sense of duty, Cesca always kept both her mind and her eyes open.

Beside her the sinewy old woman, Jhy Okiah, stared through the windowport, as if she found every single star worth looking at. "Patience, patience." The ancient Speaker had vast reserves of inner calm and an intelligence that she never flaunted when speaking to others.

A light blinked on Cesca's control panel. "Ah, here he comes."

Jhy Okiah pursed her lips as she studied the starscape to pick out the tiny dot that heralded the diplomatic transport ship bearing the Theron heir, Reynald. For months, the son of Mother Alexa and Father Idriss had worked through intermediaries and scattered messages to arrange this meeting with representatives of the Roamers. His persistence had been admirable.

"He's finally getting what he requested," Jhy Okiah said in her raspy voice. "I can't help but chuckle at how astonished Chairman Wenceslas would be if he knew Reynald had gone to so much trouble just to see a few Roamers."

Cesca looked at the Speaker. "Perhaps this young man understands more about us than other human governments do." Both women knew about Reynald's peregrination, and they respected the young man's interest in all significant societies of the Spiral Arm, including the oft-dismissed space gypsies.

Jhy Okiah frowned. "Or perhaps we haven't been keeping our secrets as well as we think." Though their nomadic society had many ships and a great deal of wealth, the clans kept their operations thoroughly confidential and avoided drawing attention to themselves.

The old woman's limbs were thin and her bones as brittle as dry bamboo, which required her to spend most of her time at the Roamer asteroid conglomeration of Rendezvous. Jhy Okiah had been married four times and had outlived every one of her husbands. She'd borne several children from each mate, so that she had a total of fourteen sons and daughters, fifty-three grandchildren, and an ever-increasing number of great-grandchildren. The old Speaker didn't bother keeping track anymore.

Finally, the Theron diplomatic transport pulled alongside the Roamer yacht, deftly maneuvering with jets and aligning the two vessels. After the airlock connections were attached, Reynald stepped across into the yacht's receiving area.

The Theron prince's dark hair was bunched together in a mass of braids. Tattoos stood out at his collar and along his neck. His handsome face broke into a polite smile before he bowed to the two women, eyes flashing at Cesca in obvious admiration. She fought back a flush from his open scrutiny.

"I apologize that we can't welcome you with more ceremony," Jhy Okiah said, gesturing him into their small common chamber, which held refreshments, a table large enough to seat a few people, and little else. "You must be accustomed to everything on a grander scale, coming from Theroc."

Reynald spread his hands. "At times I prefer a more intimate setting. Besides"-he looked at Jhy Okiah, then gave Cesca a longer, more intense smile-"I wish to speak with you two, not a thousand others in an audience."

After they exchanged sips of pepperflower tea and a few token gifts, Jhy Okiah took a seat and regarded him. "You have whetted our curiosity, young man. Tell me, what have the Roamers done to arouse the interest of a prince of Theroc?"

Reynald leaned across the table, clasping his hands and seeming to exude an earnestness that Cesca didn't believe was an act. "It's occurred to me that Roamers and Therons have much in common. We've both dodged the net of the Hansa. Theroc alone among the colony worlds remains independent. All others have signed the Hansa Charter. Roamers also live their own lives and govern themselves without Terran restrictions."

Cesca said, "That is because we both provide vital services-you with your green priests, and us with our ekti."

Reynald raised a finger. "But still, the trap is always there. Now, I'm not advocating any drastic change, because if we were to rouse the ire of the Hansa, there's no telling what desperate actions they might take. However, we could arrange a few minor alliances between our peoples, reciprocal concessions to strengthen our respective foundations."

Cesca looked at Jhy Okiah, but the old woman maintained her focus on Reynald. "I would not argue against having more security from the whims of Earth. You've obviously thought about this a great deal, young man."

"As heir to the throne, I've had years to think about what I might do. Now I'm exploring some of my ideas."

"And what are they?" Cesca asked.

Reynald frankly addressed their several joint concerns. "Let me start from your perspective. Roamer skymines produce most of the ekti used in the Spiral Arm. Cargo escorts deliver ekti from skymines to transport stations, where it is distributed solely by the Terran Hanseatic League. Theroc and other human settlements have no other place to purchase ekti because of the Hansa's 'benevolent monopoly.' Why should they have such a stranglehold on ekti distribution?"

"Are you suggesting the Hansa is engaging in unfair trade practices?"

Reynald took a sip of his spicy tea. "It is no secret that they recently imposed severe tariff increases and changed their policies, which was detrimental to Roamer business. Isn't that why Rand Sorengaard began preying on Hansa merchant ships?"

Cesca frowned. "He is an internal problem among the Roamers. We have many clans and many strong-willed people. Occasionally, some of our people become . . . unruly. Unfortunately, even the Speaker can't keep control of them all."

"And how would you change these trade practices, young man?" Jhy Okiah said, returning the conversation to the business at hand.

"Well, Theroc does not have a large space fleet. Most of us prefer to remain in the worldforest without ever venturing elsewhere in the Spiral Arm. However, like every civilized world, we do engage in interstellar travel, and our green priests take treelings to other planets to spread the forest as widely as possible. Therefore we require ekti. At present, we are beholden to the Hansa for this vital resource." He smiled again. "I would like to explore the possibility that Roamers and Therons could arrange for a more direct supply agreement."

Cesca gave a wicked grin. "Oh, the Goose wouldn't like that at all."

"Not at all." Jhy Okiah looked at her student and nodded. "But I don't believe any legal restrictions prevent it."

Reynald's suggestion surprised Cesca, since few outsiders took the Roamers seriously, seeing them as ragtag groups that happened to provide a useful product. The Hansa had never bothered to keep track of how many skymines the Roamers operated or what gas planets they harvested. The Spiral Arm had so many uninhabited systems, so many gas giants, who could possibly monitor them all? How could a Hansa spy ship spot even a huge floating factory against the backdrop of a planet larger than Jupiter?

With apparent innocence, Reynald asked probing questions about Roamer bases and facilities, but Jhy Okiah skillfully dodged them all, giving the young man no useful information. "I must discuss this with the other clans, Reynald. However, I welcome the opening of relations between Therons and Roamers. What is it you are offering for your own part?"

Reynald could not stop grinning. "Perhaps the Therons could provide the services of a few green priests? With all of your far-flung clans, I'm sure the Roamers could make use of instantaneous communication."

"True, we are a widely dispersed people, and news travels slowly," the old woman said, "but we have learned to live with our own methods. We follow the Guiding Star."

"Still, sometimes you may wish to learn of significant events more quickly." Reynald's eyes were bright. He leaned across the small table in the yacht's galley, ready to tell a secret. "For instance, our green priests have just passed along a report from General Lanyan-that Rand Sorengaard was recently apprehended and executed near Yreka. The EDF set up an ambush for him and captured all of his crew. They were all sent out the airlock."

Cesca and Jhy Okiah met each other's gaze. Cesca swallowed hard. "Damned Eddies. That's bad news indeed."

Reynald seemed surprised. "Did you actually support Sorengaard's activities? He seemed more of a revolutionary than a pirate-"

"We understand his motivations, young man, for Roamers have been unfairly treated by the Hansa. Violence, however, only brings about further violence, rather than any acceptable resolution. As spokesperson for the Roamers, I can never condone his methods."

The old Speaker turned back to business. "Nevertheless, Prince Reynald, we must respectfully decline your most generous offer."

Cesca regarded the brawny, handsome young man. "I have to agree. Allowing green priests to live among the Roamers is simply impossible." The idea of having a stranger view their most carefully hidden installations sent a chill down her spine. While the telink process provided instant communication, such information became available to all green priests, everywhere. The Roamers would never open themselves that much.

Reynald took the rejection with good grace and a wry smile. "Basil Wenceslas would fall all over himself to have more priests, but we have turned him down. Your reaction is quite different from my experience with the Terran Hanseatic League."

"Roamer society is very different from that of other humans."

Reynald slid a glance over at the beautiful Cesca, obviously flirting. "We might consider a different sort of alliance then, a marriage perhaps-"

But Cesca raised her hand, looking first at her delicate fingers and then meeting his eyes. "Such a joining would indeed be a valuable political alliance. But I must inform you that I am already betrothed to the chief of a large and profitable skymine." *And I am in love with his brother.*

Reynald looked away with an embarrassed expression that made him seem much younger. "Then he is a very lucky man."

Cesca felt sorry for him, even mildly attracted to him, but her impending marriage with Ross Tamblyn was unbreakable, despite her secret feelings for Jess. Adding Reynald to the equation would make the already complicated situation intolerable.

Still, though nothing had been resolved, Reynald seemed generally happy with the discussions. He bowed again. "Before I return to Theroc after this long peregrination, allow me to extend a most heartfelt invitation to you, or any other Roamer you choose as your representative, to visit our spectacular worldforest. Sooner or later, you must get tired of empty space."

"Space is never empty, if you know what you are looking for." Cesca clasped his hand warmly. "Still, I

look forward to seeing it someday."

15  NIRA KHALI

Perched at the top of the world, Nira Khali curled her toes around the frond and stood balanced, without a care and unafraid, even so high up in the sky. She had not yet taken the green, had not felt the worldtree song pulsing through her blood or seen the green tinge darken in her skin. Nevertheless, she trusted the worldforest with all her soul.

Her skin was dusky brown, but soon she would bear the photosynthetic pigmentation that would show everyone that she had been accepted by the magnificent trees. An acolyte for most of her young life, she understood the way of the forest, communed with the enigmatic interconnected mind even though the trees couldn't hear her directly. Not yet.

For her day's assignment, Nira read aloud in a rich, dramatic voice, engrossed in the stories from ancient literature that the *Caillié* colonists had brought with them. She sensed that the trees liked these stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. She had read several different versions of *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, as well as myriad retellings by Howard Pyle, John Steinbeck, and a succession of others. There were many inconsistencies among the legends, but Nira didn't think the trees were confused. The forest mind actually enjoyed contradictions and discrepancies, and occupied a portion of its slow semiwaking consciousness pondering the implications.

Nira served the worldforest by reading to the trees, but she also delighted in the opportunity to learn for herself. From childhood, she had spent years keeping records of where missionary green priests were distributed around the Spiral Arm, bearing treeplings, spreading the forest.

Young acolytes were taught to tend the forest. They nurtured the smallest potted treeplings prepared for transportation off-world; they cared for the largest ancient sentinels, plucking off old fronds and picking bark clean of parasites. Nira preferred reading aloud, and she thought the trees enjoyed it as well. When she talked to the trees, even while she was doing menial tasks, Nira always kept her mind open and her ears cocked, listening for an answer. One day, when she was a green priest, she would hear the voice.

Barefoot and bare-chested, acolytes wore only loincloths, exposing as much skin as possible to the trees. Human skin was a sensitive receptor, an interface with the worldtrees. Whenever Nira climbed to the canopy for her daily work, she stroked the fronds, pressed her chest against the trunk. She had shorn her dark hair close to the scalp, as most acolytes did, leaving only a fuzz on the crown of her head. All her hair would fall out as soon as she took the green.

Since childhood, she had recognized her destiny to become part of the ecological web of the worldforest, which grew year after year. Before the *Caillié* had been brought here long ago, the worldforest had been only an isolated group of semi-intelligent trees on a single planet. There, because it had no way to grow intellectually, or experience new things, the worldforest had languished in isolation for thousands of years.

However, when the settlers came, a girl named Thara Wen had learned to commune with the forest, and she taught other sensitive individuals. These early "priests" had discovered how to tap into the ponderous memory that was capable of storing and recalling vast amounts of information. The worldtrees were a living database, hampered only by a lack of experiences and outside knowledge. Thara Wen and her followers had taken care of that problem.

As the worldforest began to learn from its human companions, the relationship blossomed into a beneficial symbiosis. Green priests explained mathematics and science, history and folklore. Once its appetite was whetted, the worldforest wanted to absorb all human knowledge, from the dullest facts to the most sweeping legends. The arboreal computer could assimilate and assess a thousand tangential pieces of information and make brilliant and accurate projections, almost like prophecies from a benevolent earth spirit.

Around her, other acolytes read dull-sounding data, reciting records of weather patterns on planets she'd never even heard of; Nira was quite happy to be ensconced in the boughs with Malory's epic chronicle. Priests played musical instruments or activated recordings of symphonies created by human composers; to the worldforest, music was as much a language as words.

Alone under the sky, Nira read for hours, not even shifting her position, completely focused on the story and on the listening trees. The trees could receive information in other ways, through direct telepathic link with functional green priests, but Nira did not have that option. Besides, she preferred to read aloud—it was the way stories were meant to be told, and the worldforest seemed to grasp that. Somehow, even without the symbiosis established, these magnificent plants understood that Nira would become part of their overall network soon. Very soon, she hoped.

As the afternoon waned toward twilight, Nira's voice grew scratchy and she realized that she hadn't taken a drink from her water flask in hours. She looked up to see older priests descending from their platforms, finished with the day's activities. She gulped from her flask, swallowing the stimulating clee-pure water mixed with ground seeds from the worldtrees. She felt awake, eager to read another hundred pages, but it was time to attend to her other duties.

As she climbed down to the juncture of the largest fronds, she met a tall middle-aged priest named Yarrod, the younger brother of Mother Alexa. The many tattoos on his green face bore witness to the different subjects he had studied and abilities he had acquired in the name of the worldforest. Though the green priests had a very loose and generous hierarchy, Yarrod was one of the senior members, though his position had little to do with his relation to the leader. "Nira Khali, I have come to escort you. Our council has met, and the trees have approved."

"Approved?" Nira's heart leaped. "Approved of what?" Possibilities ran through her mind, and she couldn't decide which she hoped for most.

Anchoring his feet against the branches, Yarrod removed a vial from the rope at his waist. "The priests offer you our congratulations." Smiling, he unstopped the tiny vial and let a dark liquid drop onto his fingertip. "You have completed the training necessary to receive your second reader's mark."

He extended his fingertip, and Nira felt a rush, pleased to have achieved a new rank so quickly. She already bore the mark of an acolyte on her forehead, and two arcs at the corners of her mouth and eyes that showed she had observed the necessary subjects to become a first-rank reader.

Yarrod's fingertip paused, and then he laughed. "Nira, I cannot put the marks around your mouth if you are grinning so much."

She tried to form her face into a stoic, calm expression. He deftly smeared dark juice in a perfect curve along each side of her mouth, broader in radius than the first set of arcs. The juice stung as it soaked into her skin, where it would alter the chemistry of her tissues, leaving a permanent mark. It would burn for a day before she was allowed to wash it off, but the mark would be there for all to see that she had

achieved another level.

"Thank you, Yarrod. I am pleased to serve the worldforest in any capacity. Such recognition encourages me to work harder for the next level."

Yarrod continued to smile. "I am not finished yet, Nira. That was merely an introduction." Nira's heart thumped again in her chest.

"The priests have discussed the current acolytes and studied their dedication and drive." He looked at her with bright eyes. Nira held her breath, but he could see right through her thoughts. "We have decided that you have earned more than just another tattoo of learning. Your acolyte service to the worldforest has been exemplary. It could only improve if you were to become a full-fledged green priest."

Nira felt the trees singing around her, laughing or congratulating her, she couldn't tell which-but soon she would. She gripped the electronic book-plaque in her hand so hard she was afraid it might slip from between her sweaty fingertips and tumble to the distant forest floor. She dared not let that happen.

Nira raised her chin and blinked back the tears in her eyes, looking proudly at Yarrod. Her only regret was that she had been unable to finish reading the tale of King Arthur and his knights. That would probably be for another acolyte to do.

16 RLINDA KETT

Rlinda Kett was delighted to be back aboard the *Voracious Curiosity*. Her merchant ship was fully repaired, cleaned, and even upgraded after having been used as bait against Rand Sorengaard's corsairs. Now she relaxed in her custom-widened captain's chair as the ship approached Theroc.

She came at the surprising invitation of Sarein Theron herself, the third child of Father Idriss and Mother Alexa. The daughter had more business sense than anyone in the family, as far as Rlinda was concerned. Sarein was only twenty-one, a beautiful and savvy woman who had already made connections with the Hansa, extending her network of favors.

Rlinda couldn't help but respect Sarein. Certainly, it would have been politically unwise to turn down the offer to come to Theroc to discuss "matters of interest to people such as ourselves." From her time spent studying on Earth, Sarein had a less provincial mind-set than either of her parents or any of her siblings.

The Therons were insular in their trade practices, keeping a tight hold on the green priests and not inclined to develop new customers for their myriad forest products. As a trader, Rlinda had often looked with interest at Theroc, but considered the cultural restrictions too severe for much of a trade relationship.

Sarein, though, seemed to be changing all that with her overt offer.

The Theron colony was self-sufficient and aloof from the Hanseatic League. The EDF and the Hansa had never pressed the issue, keeping the forest inhabitants happy because they were the only source of green priests, but the Therons refused to be exploited.

Rlinda Kett did not have exploitation in mind at all, though, only mutual benefit. She always dealt fairly with her customers and her suppliers. That was how interstellar trade should work. Still, she kept an eye open for new trade opportunities. She would certainly listen to Sarein's offer.



Despite her five marriages, Rlinda had no children. Instead, she operated four merchant ships, including the *Voracious Curiosity*, which was her baby. More than just the owner of her own shipping company, Rlinda was one of the best captains as well.

Each of her other captains went out to secure cargoes independently, taking risks and reaping rewards. She hadn't yet decided if she would try to find a replacement for the *Great Expectations* and Captain Gabriel Mesta. Though they had to buy into her franchise and pay a large fee, the captains were allowed to keep 75 percent of the profits they brought in. If a captain suffered three losses in a row, however, Rlinda's shipping company ousted him and opened the position for a new captain willing to sign on. She'd needed to do that only once, and the man hadn't even been married to her. . . .

Descending through Theroc's misty atmosphere, Rlinda followed the tracker beacons down into a clearing in the densely wooded terrain, where she expertly landed the ship among the tall trees.

With a delighted smile on her broad dark face, she climbed out. Around her, the clustered worldtrees spread out in an undulating ocean of foliage as far as the eye could see. After days aboard the merchant ship, she relished the moist, perfumed atmosphere. She drew another breath to purge the residue of spaceship air from her lungs.

Caught in her smiling reverie, Rlinda turned and was surprised to see a slender young woman waiting. Sarein's eyes were large and dark, her skin a deep bronze. Her hips were narrow, her breasts small, and her dark hair cut in a short, serviceable style. Sarein's garments were an unusual mixture of home-dyed cocoon-fiber fabrics, natural products from Theroc, highlighted with processed polymers and glittering jewelry from Earth.

"Rlinda Kett, thank you for coming here. Your journey was long, but I promise you the rewards will be worth the trouble."

"No trouble," the merchant said, patting the hull of her ship. "Glad to have the opportunity to see this place with my own eyes. I've heard many intriguing things about Theroc."

Sarein gave a brief surprised frown, which she covered with a welcoming smile. "Intriguing, truly? Maybe I've missed something."

Sarein led her toward the fungus-reef city where hundreds of families lived. The massive communal dwelling was a whitish gray growth fossilized in the junctures of several large worldtrees. The fungus reef was a giant swelling built up from thousands of generations of hard, shelflike mushrooms. The huge fungus continued to spread as it sprayed layers of spores on top of itself, hardening as it grew older like a fungal coral reef.

"It looks like bubbly whipped cream," Rlinda said.

Sarein smiled at the reference. "I loved whipped cream when I was on Earth. But this is hard and filled with gaps and holes-enough to build an entire city."

Sarein escorted her through the marvelous organic monument. "The first colonists from the *Caillié* abandoned their prefabricated shelters early on and moved into these fungus reefs." She rapped her knuckles on the spongy yet sturdy wall. "Then they augmented, decorated, and added to the city. Plumbing, lighting strips, coolant systems, power conduits, and communication nodes."

"It's not exactly primitive." Rlinda's eyes brightened. "Still, seems to me there could be a market here for a few new amenities." Sarein flashed a glance at the large merchant woman, smiling in agreement, though she didn't say it out loud.

"Tell me, though," Rlinda said. "How is it that I'm the one who came to your attention? The Hansa has hundreds of merchants who would love to make their pitch."

"I thought of *you*, Rlinda Kett, because you applied for licenses to explore the marketability of certain food items and jungle fabrics. Everyone else who pokes around on Theroc is only interested in the green priests. You seem different." She lowered her voice. "A few test cargoes may well be the wedge that we need with my parents. You could be our first intermediary."

Rlinda was barely able to believe her good fortune. "If that's my duty, I'm happy to serve."

Sarein wore a dreamy look. "Chairman Wenceslas is also very supportive of any venture that brings my world into the larger fold of galactic commerce. He told me so himself."

They entered a large chamber that opened to a breathtaking view of the tree-strewn forest levels. Sarein gestured for Rlinda to sit at a long table of iron-hard wood spread with a hundred colorful delicacies. Rlinda gaped hungrily at the selection of trays and goblets, decanters of juices and fermented drinks, steaming hot beverages and chilled ices swirled with colored sugars and glistening edible seeds.

"Before we can properly discuss the market potential of Theron products, I've arranged for you to sample our best. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all! A merchant is required to personally vouch for the quality and desirability of all food products." Rlinda patted her large stomach and wide thighs. "As you can see, I enjoy my work a great deal."

Sarein began sliding platters toward her, rattling off the names and derivations of each dish. She pointed to one after another after another. "Rindberries, splurts, puckers. . . hmmm, seedberries-you have to be *very* hungry or very patient to put up with these things." She pushed the plate aside without even letting Rlinda taste one.

"Jigglefruit, sweet and gelatinous, but it makes a big mess. Dangoes. Napples-very crunchy, but you might get sleepy if you eat too many. These white things are pair-pears, because they grow double on the branches. We've also got eight kinds of our best nectar, and urns of pollen used for spices, spreads, even as candy."

The plump merchant valiantly tried to keep up with tasting each item Sarein offered, bowl after bowl of varieties of nuts. "Perrin seeds, saltnuts, crackles. Here, these spreadnuts have a very creamy interior. The *Caillié* colonists named everything in a rush during their first years of sampling the foods on Theroc. Later on, they figured out the detailed scientific taxonomy . . . but who really needs it?"

Since Theroc had no native mammals, the people ate caterpillar fillets, insect steaks, lightly browned and covered with a tart sauce made from fermented fruits. Rlinda hesitated at the thought of eating insects, then shrugged and fell to her meal with gusto. One delicacy, equivalent to the richest veal, was sliced cutlets from a pupating condorfly larva.

"I'm glad you've done all the experimentation for me already." Rlinda smacked her lips and closed her eyes to savor the taste as she chewed.

She removed an electronic pad and began to detail her favorite selections, itemizing the fruits, nuts, and spiced beverages according to her estimation of potential markets. The cloths and meats, mushrooms, scented oils and botanical perfumes would find customers. In her own mind, since she was such a well-versed gourmand herself, she imagined how some of these exotic flavors would combine with other cuisines and ingredients from far-flung planets on her trade route.

Finally, Rlinda sat back, enormously satisfied. The drowsy effect of the food was counteracted by the stimulants she had consumed. Dizzy with the possibilities, she heaved a long sigh and reached a beefy hand to pat Sarein's wrist.

"I can't wait to meet with Father Idriss and Mother Alexa so we can discuss trade. I think Theroc has a lot to offer Hansa customers."

Content but ambitious herself, Sarein nodded. "Chairman Wenceslas and I understand each other very well. I'm certain I can make the necessary arrangements, for both of us. Just leave everything to me."

17  BASIL WENCESLAS

When Chairman Wenceslas met with representatives of a dozen colony planets in the Terran Hanseatic League, he eschewed boardrooms and formal reception chambers. More often than not, he brought the representatives to his private suite that covered the top floor of the Hansa headquarters building, where he could better conduct business.

An enormous trapezoidal pyramid, the headquarters was filled with thousands of offices staffed with important delegates, bureaucrats, and clerks. Angled planes of polished windows made the commercial building look like a Maya artifact. The architecture had been chosen to suggest permanence, playing upon deep memories of mighty empires from Earth's past.

Serviceable rather than opulent, the headquarters sat back from the magnificence of the Whisper Palace, separated by a lush arboretum. Given tall enough trees, complex topiaries, and lovely statue gardens, ground-level spectators paid little attention to the squared-off business building in the background. The Palace dominated the skyline, but Hansa headquarters exerted the real power.

Basil contemplated his agenda for the discussion, avoiding the trivial premeeting chitchat. As the twelve well-dressed planetary envoys took their seats in comfortable lounges or at crystalline tables where they could take notes, silent assistants walked among them to distribute beverages and light snacks. They offered the envoys nothing too extravagant—certainly no mind-altering substances. Basil insisted that all of his envoys keep their thoughts clear when decisions needed to be made.

One of the Chairman's predecessors, Miguel Byron, had imitated the hedonism of ancient Rome here in the administrative levels. Chairman Byron had chosen attractive young men and women as servants, dressing them in scanty togas to wait upon the planetary representatives. Byron's "staff meetings" had been legendary, often conducted in steam baths.

Basil, on the other hand, had no patience for distractions when work needed to be done. And there was always work to be done. Back on their respective worlds, his envoys were powerful enough to have all the sex, drugs, or gourmet foods they might like. But not during one of his meetings.

He did make concessions to comfort, though, holding his discussions in a loose, relaxed setting. He hated tightly scheduled, stiffly formal groups; they reminded him of classes conducted by an unimaginative schoolteacher. Such situations resulted in little innovation, usually serving to reaffirm conservative nonprogress. He wanted to make the most of each person's input.

Basil stood with his back to the balcony, looking into the meeting room so that he was silhouetted by the bright afternoon. Seeing everyone settled, he said, "Before I get to more frustrating business matters, let me congratulate everyone involved in the test of the Klikiss Torch. The new Oncier sun appears to be a resounding success. Dr. Serizawa has remained there with his observation team, and the first crew of terraforming engineers will be arriving within weeks to assess the geological state of the four moons."

Admiral Lev Stromo, a line officer who served as the EDF political liaison, smiled with pride, as if he were personally responsible for the success. "We now have the ability to create suns wherever we wish."

"How often will we do this, Mr. Chairman?" asked the languid envoy from Relleker, a pleasant planet that had begun to show promise as a resort world, given its comfortable climate and numerous hot springs. The man had black hair oiled into showy curls against his head.

"That will be up to us," Basil said. "Most important is the knowledge that *wecan*. We may even have impressed the Mage-Imperator."

"Who can tell when Ildirans are impressed? We still know so little about them," said the Dremen envoy, a milk-pale man whose dim and cloudy world had left him unaccustomed to the sunlight of Earth. "What if they take the demonstration as a threat?"

"We've stated no aggressive intentions whatsoever," Basil said, "but the Klikiss Torch is like a big 'Beware of Dog' sign in our yard. Let them draw their own conclusions."

Admiral Stromo added some new business to the discussion. "We've received a field report from my superior, General Lanyan, informing us that the criminal pirate Rand Sorengaard has been neutralized near the Yreka system. He and all his Roamer corsairs were captured and executed."

The redheaded Yreka representative sitting next to Stromo sighed in relief. "Now we can get back to normal trade relations," she said. "I'll instruct the grand governor to end rationing and enforce price controls to avoid economic chaos."

"There's bad news for every good news," Basil said. He liked to keep his meetings balanced so they didn't degenerate into a succession of complaints or rousing self-congratulations. "Despite my best efforts, I have made no progress with the Theron rulers. They are maddeningly aloof and don't care a whit for the needs of interstellar commerce and government. We'll have to make do with however many green priests they send us at their whim."

The oblivious Theron leaders had no comprehension of the size of the galaxy. A normal electromagnetic transmission-radio waves traveling at the speed of light-took decades, sometimes even a century, to go from place to place. It was an intolerable hindrance to running large-scale military operations, providing planetary defenses, or even engaging in regular commerce.

With an Ildiran stardrive, ships could travel several times faster than light. Many of them served as couriers, delivering news and important diplomatic communiqués, but even using the fastest vessels such messages required days or weeks to arrive at their destination.

A green priest's telink, though, was *instantaneous*, regardless of the distance, so long as a worldtree and a priest were at each station. Such communication was not a luxury-not a frivolous *convenience*-but an absolute necessity in order for the Hansa to keep growing and thriving.

Unfortunately, green priests were people, not machines, and using telink required their cooperation. The Hansa could not force their hand, and the Therons certainly weren't volunteering.

"We don't dare turn them against us by being too overt, Mr. Chairman," said the Yreka representative, still uneasy because of her planet's recent troubles with the pirates.

"I wish we could just force Theroc to sign the Hansa Charter," said the pale Dremen envoy.

"Not feasible unless we want to declare war," Basil said.

"We would win," Admiral Stromo pointed out.

"As always, I value your input, Admiral, but zealous actions are often ill-advised actions. I will not be seen as the Chairman whose brash decrees tumbled us into a galactic recession."

Stromo continued to press. "There have been other upstart worlds, repressive regimes or religious fanatics that have tried to turn their backs on the Hansa." He glanced quickly at the Ramah representative.

The man regarded him coolly. "Devotion and tradition do not make one a 'fanatic,' Admiral. We simply find the Terran Archfather and the broad official compromises of Unison to be bland and generic. We prefer to return to the basic teachings of the *Koran*."

"I'm sure the Admiral did not mean to cast any aspersions on Ramah," Basil said, "but there have been more extreme circumstances."

Stromo focused on the Chairman instead. "Yes, and with the simple application of sanctions, cutting off all interplanetary commerce, every one of those colonies came crawling back, or they perished."

"Be careful where you push," said the Ramah envoy. A henna tattoo marked a starburst beside his dark left eye. "All Charter signatories retain the right to determine their own government, religion, and culture. We can maintain our own local language, rather than Trade Standard. I will vote against any attempts to use strong-arm tactics simply because one planet happens to be rich in a resource the Hansa needs. Any one of us could find ourselves in that situation."

Basil gave him a condescending frown. "Rules often change when one party has riches that another does not. Look at your history."

Although the Ildiran stardrive allowed fast travel, strict government across such a large canvas was all but impossible. The Ildirans managed it only because the Mage-Imperator and his planetary Designates could think with one mind through the telepathic connection of *thism*. Human colonies, however, were too separated for a single Terran leader to make sensible decisions on a local level on some distant world. Hardy colonists were not likely to listen to dictates issued from far-off Earth by a man who had never visited their colony. On the other hand, the business of shuttling goods and services from world to world in a burgeoning economy provided a framework for a common set of rules. The Terran Hanseatic League had been modeled after the confederation of commercial cities and the various guilds that had operated in medieval Europe with such success.

The Ramah envoy rested his chin on his knuckles. Then he grudgingly said, "If my people must bow to certain necessities, the Therons certainly can."

"Therons may be a thorn in our side, but they are so . . . endearing it's difficult to be angry with them," the Yreka envoy mused.

"I believe a solution is at hand," Basil said with confidence. "The old Theron ambassador has just departed for home, and I have made arrangements that she be asked to retire. 'Iron Lady' Otema's successor will be far more sympathetic to our cause and more ambitious in changing things for the better."

"Oh, good. One big happy family." The sarcastic Relleker envoy sipped at his juice, frowning as if he had expected it to be wine.

From a silver pot on a warming stand, Basil poured himself a steaming cup of cardamom-laced coffee. He turned to gaze across the arboretum toward the Whisper Palace. "The Hansa will survive and grow, as it always has."

Cradling his cup, Basil walked around the chairs, pondering his next words. Knowing enough not to engage in idle chatter, his listeners waited for him to get to his next point. Unlike history's more brutal powermongers, he did not want his underlings to fear him but to respect him.

"The Spiral Arm is open for business, and the Hansa has generated enormous income. We've drawn great wealth from the Ildiran Empire, we've built solid infrastructures, and we've seeded new and efficient industries on burgeoning colony planets." He gestured out the window wall toward the spectacular Whisper Palace. "All of us here know the human race is currently in its golden age. But only wise decisions and a strong leader can continue the economic boom and renaissance."

Basil finally got to the primary point of the meeting. "Unfortunately, my friends, our most effective tool-old King Frederick is long past his prime. You've all watched him deliver his speeches. He's showing his age, he's tired, and though the people seem to love him, he no longer inspires much fervor."

He looked at them one at a time, holding their gazes. The envoys dreaded the issue he meant to raise. "King Frederick is no longer the proud hero the Hansa needs as our figurehead. His popularity ratings are dropping and, frankly, he's grown too complacent in his position."

Admiral Stromo looked at Basil in horror, as if the Chairman had spoken treason. "What about all of the King's duties? We can't afford a drastic transition. Think of the social upheaval."

"I prefer to think it would energize the population. Old Frederick is our mouthpiece, nothing more. He performs few important functions. In fact, Admiral," Basil said pointedly, "our King is little more than a living flag to salute."

The Yreka representative seemed quite nervous. A glint of sweat appeared around the line of her red hair. "I've been dreading this day."

Basil went to a cabinet next to the wet bar and removed a stack of thin filmscreens, each one surrounded by a red security border. A thumbpad displayed information only to the person to whom the screen had been coded.

"The Hansa needs a striking young ruler to replace the old King, someone the people can rally around."

Basil lowered his voice. "And we all know that none of the King's actual children by his courtesans is appropriate for our purposes."

Like the ancient monarchs of Morocco or the emperors of China, Frederick's family and his personal life were kept carefully hidden within his wondrous Palace. The truth was that the King had no legitimate heirs. But the Hansa could rewrite history any time they wished.

"This has happened five times before, though not for decades. It is perhaps our most important task." He distributed the filmscreens, and each envoy activated the thumbpad. A sequence of images appeared, showing young men taken in candid poses. Obviously, the subjects had not known they were under surveillance.

"These are complete dossiers of our candidates. They contain spy footage, photographs, and informational summaries of each young man compiled over the years. Our operatives are constantly on the lookout for eligible trainees for the job of Prince. These are the candidates Mr. Pellidor has selected, the best young men to help us fulfill the Hansa's destiny."

Basil summoned the envoys to the largest crystal table, and they spread their filmscreens on the tabletop so they could compare notes and discuss the possibilities. For hours they studied the records and photos, arguing about options, comparing impressions. It took less time than Basil had feared, and by the blaze of a coppery sunset, he himself cast the deciding vote.

He touched his finger to the image of a dark-haired young man. His intelligence was high, his personality was soft and likable, his voice was charismatic-and, Basil hoped, the candidate's character could be made malleable.

"This one has the most potential," he said. "Given his background and social status, he'll never be missed. And most important, he even vaguely resembles King Frederick."

18:  RAYMOND AGUERRA

Far from the private meeting chambers in Hansa headquarters, Raymond Aguerra scrounged for dinner in a small apartment on the eighteenth floor of a mass dwelling complex.

Trying to be optimistic, he scratched his dark hair and stared at the supplies in their cupboards and the cold preservation unit. He would have to scrape the bottom of his imagination to make these ingredients resemble a satisfying and nutritious meal for himself and his family.

The counters were cluttered with small boxes, toys, secondhand electronic gadgets, hand-made potholders and keepsake printouts. No amount of care or housekeeping could make the cramped apartment look more organized. Raymond's two youngest brothers, nine-year-old Carlos and six-year-old Michael, chased each other pretending to be monsters, then fell into a laughing heap, wrestling on the kitchen floor.

Raymond playfully nudged them out of the way with his foot. "If you make me spill your food, you'll have to eat it off the floor."

"Might taste better that way." Carlos giggled as he tried to dodge Raymond's swift kick, which landed on the boy's bony rear end.

Their mother, Rita, rested in her chair in the main room, half watching an entertainment program but deriving little enjoyment from it. Years of practice allowed her to ignore the roughhousing. Next to her, ten-year-old Rory complained about being forced to do his homework while his younger brothers were able to play.

Raymond felt guilty about sending the rowdy boys into the other room, where they might bother their mother. Rita Aguerra had already worked a long day and would get up well before dawn to get to her second job. She didn't so much sit in her comfortable chair as collapse into it, sagging within the seat's broad contours. Raymond didn't doubt she would be asleep by the time he finished making dinner, unless she'd drunk too many cups of sour black coffee before returning home.

Over the main door frame hung a crucifix and some old dry palm fronds from the previous year's Palm Sunday. She dutifully attended Mass each week, though occasionally she watched broadcasts of official Unison Church services, which seemed bland and passionless to her. The Archfather, with his beard and fancy robes, was supposed to be the impartial spokesman for all faiths, as determined by the united representatives of the world's major beliefs, but to Rita, the old Catholic Church seemed much more religious.

Whenever he looked at his mother, Raymond's heart ached. Rita Aguerra's long dark hair was now streaked with gray. In her younger days, she had spent hours brushing it, keeping the raven locks shiny, but now she usually just pulled her hair back in a ponytail or twisted it into a bun. She'd been a beauty once-Raymond could still see it in the softening shape of her face-though now she had no time to maintain her looks and no hope of finding renewed romance. Hard work and too many responsibilities had turned her into a stocky, muscular matron.

Rita worked as a clerk for an off-world merchandising organization by day and as a waitress by night. A steady diet of coffee and cigarettes gave her the false energy to get through the day and the jitters that kept her awake during the few hours she should have been able to rest at night.

Every time she came home, though, Rita still managed to engulf each of her four boys in a heavy-armed hug, smothering them with her rose-scented perfume. The strong woman held her family together by the thinnest of threads, and now Raymond was old enough that she could lay some of the burden on his shoulders. He took it from her without complaint.

One night a month earlier, the two of them had sat up alone at the wobbly dining table. Rory, Carlos, and Michael had been hustled off to bed and tucked in, where they would continue to goof off for half an hour before finally dozing. Looking across at Raymond, Rita had lit another cigarette, something she rarely did when the younger boys were awake. The fact that his mother did so made Raymond realize that she considered him an adult, the man of her house since Esteban Aguerra had run off.

She had told him about it, giving details he had always wondered about but had been too afraid to ask. "I might not be the easiest person to get along with, especially for a happy-go-lucky man like your father, but I've always tried to live up to my responsibilities and do the best I can. You boys are my treasures, and your father might have been a diamond in the rough . . . but it was very much in the rough. The night he left, we had a shouting match, one of our worst arguments ever. I can't even remember why it was important . . . I had bought him a new pair of shoes, or something."

One hand held the cigarette, but the other clenched into a fist. "I gave him one, maybe two, black eyes before he ran off. That's when he signed up for the colony ship and went off to Ramah."



"Do you ever wonder if he regretted leaving us, Mama?"

Rita had shrugged. "He regretted leaving his sons, maybe, because he was such a proud man. But I doubt he's ever thought about me again."

Since their discussion that night, Raymond had always wondered . . .

Now, he dished up a concoction of macaroni, soup-pax, and some minced-up bits of salami that looked as if it wouldn't last much longer in the preserving unit. He took a whiff, frowned, then added some powdery cheese and pronounced the dish finished. "Come and eat. If it gets cold, I'll have to serve it as leftovers tomorrow."

"I thought it was leftovers tonight," Carlos said.

"I can still send you to bed without supper."

The boys gathered around to grab plates of scooped casserole. Rita took her own small share, hiding a chuckle at his culinary audacity, and settled down to eat. She insisted it was one of the best meals she'd ever eaten.

Later, after Rita had crawled back to her chair to rest, and perhaps to sleep, Raymond put his little brothers to bed by himself. He made sure they took baths and brushed their teeth, ignoring their complaints and rambunctious misbehavior; he was immune to it by now. By the time he returned to the main room, his mother had indeed drifted off into a light slumber.

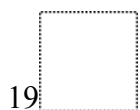
Smiling, he rearranged the bouquet of flowers he had snatched during King Frederick's celebration for the new sun at Oncier. After bringing the blooms home, he had found an empty food package and converted it into a makeshift vase. Rita insisted that flowers were a waste of money, but her glowing expression made Raymond want to find a way to obtain a bouquet at least once a week, no matter what the cost.

He thought about rousing his mother so that he could help her to bed, but decided to let her sleep where she was. He didn't want her to miss a moment of rest. Now, with their apartment quiet, Raymond quickly changed clothes, knowing he had only a few hours before he needed to be back to help his mother get off to work and his little brothers prepare for school.

He would run the streets, check out a few all-night factories, maybe a craft shop. He could usually find a few hours' work-performing odd jobs or dirty labor that no one else wanted to do-in return for cash or sometimes even fresh food. His late-night errands were all that allowed them the discretionary money for clothing or occasional treats.

While his mother slept, Raymond slipped out of the apartment, careful to lock up behind him. His head ached and his eyes were scratchy with weariness, but he would catch a nap later. They would get by-provided he didn't stop working. He took the elevator down eighteen floors to street level and ventured out into the city.

It was the last time he ever saw his family.



Awhiplash of flares licked out from the roiling ocean of the hot star, slow-moving, beautiful . . . and deadly.

"Get closer," the eager engineer said to Jess Tamblyn, unable to tear his eyes from the spectacle. "We've got to get a lot closer."

Though he was sweating, Jess trusted the other man's intuition. "If that's what we have to do." He sent a brief, silent prayer to the Guiding Star, then did as the other man asked.

Kotto Okiah had no more than a theoretical conception of genuine dangers, but he did understand tolerances and risks better than any other Roamer. Kotto had already designed and established four successful extreme-environment settlements. If the Speaker's youngest son hadn't known what he was doing, tens of thousands of Roamers would already have died.

As the shielded vessel gingerly approached the solar storm, Kotto alternated his attention between the filtered window and the specific-band scanners. With short, spiky brown hair and eyes like bright gray-blue buttons, the engineer looked like a child inundated with remarkable presents. "There! You can see the planet . . . not as bad as I'd feared."

Jess noted the sparkle of rocky Isperos orbiting close to the turbulent star, embedded in the densest part of the corona. "*Not bad?* Kotto, it looks like an ember in a blast furnace."

Distracted by his readings, the engineer said, "In some ways that's an advantage."

An advantage. No one had ever accused Kotto Okiah of being a pessimist.

After leaving Ross at the Golgen skymine, Jess had taken his ekti cargo escort to a Hansa distribution complex, then made his way to the asteroid cluster of Rendezvous. He had duties to perform for his family's water-mining operations, clan obligations, business contacts and meetings with other clan leaders . . . and his brother's gifts to deliver to Cesca Peroni.

But Cesca had not yet returned from her mission with Speaker Okiah. While Jess could easily have arranged for someone else to present Ross's tokens to his fiancée, he did not want to waste a legitimate excuse to spend a few private moments with her, even if the choice went against his better judgment. He knew he shouldn't feel this way, after he had denied himself so much. . . .

Jess had lingered at the Rendezvous complex for several days, waiting for Cesca. But once it began to grow obvious to others that he was stalling, he couldn't let anyone suspect his feelings. He had no choice but to schedule his return to Plumas. When Kotto Okiah had asked for a willing pilot to take him to Isperos on a survey mission, Jess had leaped at the opportunity . . . not that any other Roamer was the least bit interested in volunteering.

Now, the reconnaissance ship circled the hot planet, fighting the sun's massive gravity before it passed into the blessed cone of shadow behind Isperos. Jess looked down at the baked and glassy surface, seeing fissures caused by heat stresses. Lava seas spilled across the continents, smoothing the scars of impact craters, then hardened into a skin of rock during the cold months of darkness.

"Kotto, you are insane to want to build a Roamer colony here."

The young engineer stared avidly at the blistered world. "Look at the metals, though. You don't find

resources like that just anywhere. Lighter-element impurities are all boiled away. Solar-wind bombardment has created plenty of new isotopes for the taking." He tapped his chin with a finger. "If we used fiber insulation, double-walled containment, vacuum honeycombed structural support, we could easily keep colony integrity. . . ." His voice trailed off as he considered the possibilities.

From an early age, the youngest of Jhy Okiah's sons had demonstrated his imaginative and quirky understanding of low-gravity construction. He loved to push the envelope with solutions to difficult survival problems. Kotto had spent more than a decade working in Del Kellum's hidden shipyards within the rings of Osquivel and had twice developed improved ekti reactors for skymines. Despite his successes, and occasional failures, Kotto was not arrogant or stubborn. He was filled with an insatiable curiosity.

As a boy, Kotto had proven quite a challenge for the Governess compyUR , who raised many Roamer children at Rendezvous. The curious boy had caused the maternal robot much grief, not because he misbehaved, but because he constantly asked questions and poked and prodded and dismantled things-which he only rarely managed to reassemble. As an adult, though, Kotto had repeatedly proved his genius, to the benefit of many clans.

Jess took the vessel low over the melted and rehardened ground. Seeing the utter confidence on the engineer's face, he began to believe in the potential here. After all, Roamers had disproved the impossible time and again.

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"Roamers have this belief they can do anything," Cesca had once said to Jess, "given the resources and time."

"An unconventional people do not need conventional wisdom," he said.

He and Cesca had been alone in her rock-walled office chamber in the Rendezvous cluster. It was an innocent meeting to discuss water and oxygen supplies clan Tamblyn would deliver from Plumas. They had kept their distance from each other, though their eyes remained locked. It seemed as if they were separated by an elastic barrier that both forced them apart and pulled them together.

"Even so, time can't solve all problems," Jess said. He had taken half a step forward, disguising his movement with a hand gesture, as if to emphasize what he was saying. Then he froze, remembering all the expectations that weighed him down.

Cesca understood what he was implying. Years before, she had betrothed herself to Ross Tamblyn, a long engagement that they had taken on faith. Ross diligently worked to meet the conditions he and Cesca had agreed upon. Everything had seemed acceptable in the joining of two strong clans, even if Ross was something of a black sheep. Most Roamers enthusiastically endorsed the union. The Blue Sky Mine would be a strong foundation for an expanding family, even without old Bram Tamblyn's support.

But that was before she had gotten to know Jess, and the spark between them went far beyond straightforward political and economic considerations. It wasn't something they could explain to anyone else, or even to themselves.

"If we follow the Guiding Star, some problems should never arise in the first place," Cesca said.

"Nevertheless"-Jess boldly took the last step to her, closing the distance, refusing to think about what he

was doing-"it happens."

He kissed her then, surprising her, pleasing her . . . and terrifying them both. Cesca responded for just an instant, clinging to him as if they were teetering on the precarious edge of a precipice. Then, in unison, they broke away and took an awkward step apart.

"Jess, we shouldn't even-"

"I'm sorry." He blushed furiously, stumbling backward, gathering his notes and recordings. Jess shook his head, immensely ashamed and baffled by his own actions. He felt like a traitor to his brother. "What was I doing?" He could only picture Ross, an innocent bystander in their mutual attraction.

"Jess, we don't dare even think about this." Though deeply unsettled, Cesca wasn't angry with him. "It never happened."

He readily agreed. "We'll forget about it. That's what we should do."

But the memories only burned brighter for both of them, month after month. How could anyone ever forget?

As Jess's ship swept out of the planet's shadow and into the full blazing day of the roaring sun, the sudden glare and buffeting heat rocked them from side to side.

"We'll need to map out a recommended safe approach," Kotto said, noting Jess's difficulty piloting in the solar storm as if it were a mere detail to add to his proposal. "We can take advantage of the planet's shadow for bringing in most of the big supply haulers."

Jess increased the filter density on their viewing windows. "Your bigger problem is going to be shipping off the processed metals. They'll need to be taken far from here before we can market whatever we don't use for ourselves."

"Oh, of course," Kotto said. "The Big Goose would never even come within sensor range of the planet. They might get a blister on their delicate skin."

Though the Hansa would not look twice at a rough, hot world like Isperos, such places were acceptable enough to the Roamers, who had already established themselves in many remarkable habitats, such as Rendezvous itself.

The seed of their society had been started by the generation ship *Kanaka*, named after the brilliant explorer of Vallis Marineris on Mars. The *Kanaka* crew and passengers had boarded the eleventh and last vessel to leave Earth, fleeing hard times. By that point, funding for the brave and optimistic colonization project was nearly gone, and equipment and supplies were sparse. Still, this group had envisioned themselves as tougher than the others, true survivalists.

What the *Kanaka* passengers lacked in raw materials they made up for by bringing eccentric and innovative geniuses who could create habitable environments in the harshest of places. Before setting out from Earth, these people had lived in arctic wastelands and set up mining stations on the moons of Jupiter. They operated under the assumption that if a standard method did not work, they would find another alternative, or simply invent one.

During decades of travel, while the *Kanaka* searched for a planet to colonize, the passengers had built a

self-contained society. At one point, their resources stretched and dwindling, they had stopped off in a rubble-strewn debris cloud around the red-dwarf Meyer to scavenge water ices, minerals, and metals from the asteroids, enough supplies to last them for another few decades.

There, some of the innovative colonists ran calculations, floated designs, and convinced themselves they could use the large-scale construction and mining equipment carried aboard the *Kanakato* build and survive in an artificial substation among the rocks, close to the weak crimson radiation of the tiny star. The Meyer belt offered enough raw materials to give the small group a fighting chance, and decreasing the population aboard the generation ship would help all the other passengers.

The *Kanakato* remained around the red dwarf for a decade, making sure that the hardy Meyer volunteers would find the means to grow food in underground asteroid chambers and gather power from the dim light of the sun. Though to any other settlers it might have seemed hopeless—a fledgling colony on a desert island in space, doomed to dwindle and die—yet this place they named "Rendezvous" was their choice, and the volunteer families gambled on this small chance.

That colony had survived, and thrived, eventually forming the foundation of Roamer culture. Who was Jess to say that these resilient people could not be just as successful on a hellish world like Isperos? Especially with Kotto Okiah running the show.

Trapped in an electromagnetic loop, gouts of stellar material rushed upward like an incandescent locomotive, spewing hard radiation more insidious and more destructive than the heat itself. Cancerous sunspots looked like black oases on the star's surface, but they were just as dangerous as the hotter chromosphere, anchor points for the violent eruptions.

Jess fought with the ship, not wanting to think of the hull damage they were incurring. "Kotto—"

"I've got the data I need." The engineer sounded pleased with himself. "We should return to Rendezvous now, so I can put together my analyses."

Jess looked down at the stress readings edging toward overload. "Yes, that would be a good idea."

Streaking away from the churning sun and its blistering planet, Jess thought of Cesca again, hoping she would be back at the asteroid cluster by now. Even as they fled the solar storms and entered the cold of space, Jess found that he was sweating more than ever.



20 CESCA PERONI

Ever cautious, Cesca Peroni piloted the space yacht on a leisurely course through several star systems en route to Rendezvous. She doubted Reynald, the future heir of Theroc, would follow her, or that any Goose security ships had placed spy tracers on their path, but Roamers covered their tracks out of habit.

For a century and a half, they had kept their hideouts from the prying eyes of other humans. All the clans remained concerned by the power exerted by the Terran Hanseatic League. Lately, the machinations of Chairman Wenceslas to tighten control on ekti processing had forced the Roamers to grow even more suspicious.

"How will the clans react to Reynald's ideas?" she asked, glancing away from the yacht's control panels to look at the lean face of her mentor.

"Long ago, the Ildirans gladly turned over the operation of their skymines to us Roamers, but we ourselves have always been too insular to trust anyone." The old woman stared at the starfields that changed subtly and slowly as the yacht covered vast distances. "On the other hand, it never hurts to consider possible allies."

Cesca nodded. "Reynald made a good case."

"For marriage?" Jhy Okiah raised her eyebrows.

Cesca recognized the old woman's teasing tone, but she still blushed. "I meant his business suggestion. The Therons have kept their independence and held their green priests outside of Goose control."

"We have much in common." Jhy Okiah pursed her wrinkled lips, and her voice grew more serious. "Unfortunately, we simply do not need anything the Therons have to offer."

Cesca recalled the numerous feuds and disagreements Jhy Okiah had resolved during her time as Speaker. Not long ago, the angry Rand Sorengaard had pulled away from Roamer restrictions in retaliation for new Hansa tariffs. "What is to stop us from taking what we deserve? The Goose is as lawless as we are!" But Rand had garnered little support beyond a handful of restless bullies more interested in adventure than justice.

Sorengaard had been a second cousin to the Peroni clan, though Cesca did not like to speak of that connection, because the pirate was such an embarrassment. Jhy Okiah had often said it was only a matter of time before the EDF dealt with him. And, according to the news delivered by Reynald, she had been right. "Even though Rand has been brought to justice, the Goose won't let their punishment stop there. All Roamers will end up paying more than the tariffs that were imposed."

"And we'll find ways to improve our situation and come through stronger than before," Cesca responded with sincere pride. "If we have to."

After extreme measures, hard conservation, and many gambles, the Roamers were mostly self-sufficient, though they still required certain vital supplies from the outside-supplies on which the Hansa had now placed heavy taxes: foodstuffs, medicines, special equipment and instruments, as well as numerous convenience and luxury items.

Jhy Okiah viewed the expected lean times as an incentive for the Roamers to find other ways to become autonomous. During the clan gathering, her voice was dry and raspy, yet it contained an emotional power that she had developed over many years.

"If the Hansa can hurt us by cutting off the supply of a material, then they have too much power over us . . . and we are too dependent on that thing. Either we must give up our dependence, or find a new supply. We are Roamers. Have we not the ability to discover alternatives? We can build our own equipment, manufacture our own circuitry webs, and learn to do without comforts and conveniences. Let the Roamers have the last laugh by proving we don't need to buy from their merchants. We'll cut off that income stream, and the Big Goose will be weaker."

With those words, she had managed to stem the tide of other dissenters after Rand Sorengaard had stormed off. An open rebellion against the Hanseatic League would bring about severe reprisals. The Speaker considered Sorengaard's raids to be a crime. Worse, she feared his activities would draw too much outside attention to the Roamers. The Roamers were accustomed to living in harsh environments,

but not as hunted renegades.

Now, sitting beside Cesca in the space yacht, Jhy Okiah said, "We dare not let the Goose snoop around for fugitives, or they might discover some of the shipyards, colonies, and facilities that our clans would rather keep hidden."

More than two centuries earlier, after leaving behind the tiny fledgling colony in the rubble belt around the red star Meyer, the generation ship *Kanaka* had continued on its way in search of a home, passing through nebular clouds and scooping up gases, which the people used for fuel and filtered for other resources. Brilliant scavengers, not only did the explorers make do, they also made progress.

The *Kanaka* was the last of the generation ships to be retrieved by Ildiran search teams 180 years ago. Instead of remaining on a single vector as the other large ships had done, the *Kanaka* had wandered, pausing in several places, straying far from the original plan.

The benevolent Ildirans had taken the *Kanaka* to a hospitable planet named Iawa, a world ripe for colonization and not needed by the Ildiran Empire. Settling on a terrestrial planet was quite a change for the colonists aboard the *Kanaka*. Iawa's open skies and broad continents seemed like a paradise, with all the land the settlers could imagine after living for generations within cramped, limited quarters aboard an old ship.

At first, taming an amenable planet seemed a simple matter, but some colonists were concerned that all of their innovation and survival skills were being lost in only a few years. Iawa was such a drastic change that they thought they might have been better off self-sufficient and roaming among the stars.

Within five years, though, just as agriculture began to take off on Iawa, as towns were built and crops were planted on cleared lands, the planet turned against them. In a single season, a horrible native blight attacked all terrestrial plant organisms, wiping out the grains and vegetables and trees they had planted. The Iawan Scourge fed on Earth-based plant matter, developing an appetite for all transplanted species. Suddenly, the isolated colonists had only meager stores of food and little hope that the situation would improve, because this blight was endemic to the native biosphere.

Starvation loomed, but the people had remembered the austerity measures practical aboard a crowded generation ship and had set enough aside to survive. The Iawan settlers finally returned to the derelict *Kanaka*, the huge empty vessel they had left in orbit. They pulled up stakes and went back to the way that had been successful for them, roaming among the stars in search of other niches and new homes. "We are not a planet-bound people," had been the chant.

Taking the proud name of "Roamers," they negotiated with their Ildiran benefactors for stardrive technology, in exchange for which some of them agreed to operate three large Ildiran ekti-processing plants on the gas-giant Daym. Ildirans hated the skymining industry and were glad to find willing workers. The Roamers set themselves to the task with great gusto, and soon began to carve a niche for themselves and expand their capabilities.

No one else—not the Terran Hanseatic League, the Therons, or the Ildiran Empire—realized just how much the Roamers had profited from their innovations. As the next chosen Speaker, Cesca Peroni promised herself she would continue that strategy. . . .

After its long journey, the space yacht arrowed closer to garnet-colored Meyer. Seen from afar, the red dwarf was unremarkable, not to be noticed on any starchart. But as she and Jhy Okiah approached the out-of-the-way settlement of Rendezvous, Cesca greatly looked forward to getting home.

Even at night, the Theron forests remained mysterious and inviting. Without fear, Estarra crept to her curved window in the fungus-reef city and peered out, catching shuttered glimpses of stars through the canopy.

Dawn already warmed the treetops, spreading like a colorful yawn through the interconnected worldforest. Enough light for her to explore. Calcified footholds let her clamber down several levels to reach the ladders and pulley-lifts. On the soft forest floor, scuttling beetles the size of hamsters dug beneath dried leaves. She smelled a lingering cool mist of compost and a sweet hint of fertile decay. She sprinted off into the dimness.

Her parents would not notice that Estarra had gone off by herself. Because they had raised their three older children to positions of importance, Mother Alexa and Father Idriss spoiled her, as if they had run out of energy for making her learn things the hard way. "Don't worry about it, child," her mother often said.

Estarra could have wallowed in her pampered existence, but instead she promised herself to achieve more. When she had tried to talk to her father about her future, he had simply smiled through his black beard. "Whatever you want to do, dear." He had promised full support but offered no suggestions or practical advice.

Only her brother Beneto took time to tell her things. She envied the green priest his passion for serving the worldforest, but she didn't want to follow his path. Praying to trees was not for her.

Lights burned in adjoining dwellings, smaller fungus reefs that grew on separated trees. Green priests-most of them married couples venturing out this early-climbed the trees to greet the dawn. All day long they would read to the half-sleeping mind of the worldforest. Today, though, the priests seemed hushed and troubled about something they had sensed from the trees. Maybe Beneto would tell her about it later. . . .

Curious, she explored for more than an hour. Finally, as a wash of daylight spilled across the forest and ground mist rose like praying hands, Estarra came upon a thicket of high trees. Hanging like a bulbous papier-mâché lump on the nearest trunk, a huge misshapen mass pulsed as crowded creatures stirred inside, nearly roused from their sleep.

Hive worms made their sealed structures from chewed vegetable matter, mud, resin, and extruded web fibers. The enormous colonies were both nests and cocoons, hundreds of meters in diameter. In the center a grublike queen gave birth to larvae that became large worms anchored to the colony's heart. The worms extended their segmented stalks outward with heads like huge petals surrounding a voracious mouth.

Normally, the worms extended from their nest to capture any prey that ventured within reach. After digesting animals and insects, they fed the nutrients back to the queen in the center of the nest. At night the sleeping worms drew their facepetals together like a flower returning to a bud.

When this phase of growth was complete, the larval worms pulled back into the nest, sealed the openings, and converted the hive into an armored fortress. Her work done, the queen died, and the



sleeping worms digested her body while they gestated. It was incredibly rare to discover a pupating hive, especially one ready to hatch. . . .

She had to find Beneto. Estarra hurried back, knowing her brother would be planting new treelings in one of the sun-dappled clearings. She found him working in the shade, surrounded by pots into which he packed fertile soil.

Beneto looked up at his sister with a smile that always warmed her heart. The marks of his accomplishments, tattoos and designs of the green priesthood, gave his features a totemic appearance. She thought her brother was very handsome and suspected that he would soon choose a mate-probably from among the green priests, though that was not required for marriage.

Beneto knelt, intent on his young trees. Gently, he stroked the tiny fronds as if to apologize for cutting them loose of the parent tree. "These four are scheduled for Dremen, where it's cool and moist but without muchsun," he said to Estarra. "Though there's no green priest assigned to the planet, we will still plant a grove for telink access."

Beneto pointed to other strong treelings. "These two will be potted and carried aboard merchant vessels, though eventually they'll grow large enough that they'll need to be planted in soil again. At that time, we'll ask the trees where they want to go." Then Beneto noticed her breathless excitement. "All right, what have you brought for me this day, little sister? A new insect? An untasted berry? Or a flower with a perfume that will make me sneeze?"

"It's too big to carry, Beneto." Catching her breath, she told him about the sleeping worm hive. "It's big enough for a dozen families at least! We've needed new quarters for over a year."

"Indeed we have," Beneto said. "A remarkable discovery, and a very good omen. I'm sure Mother and Father will pat you on the head." Estarra scowled, and he laughed at her predictable reaction. "It's a valuable find, Estarra. When do you predict it will hatch?"

"Two weeks, I think. Three at the most. Probably about the time Reynald returns from his peregrination."

"You love to explore and find the forest's secrets, don't you? Make sure you mark its location and keep an eye on its progress." Beneto placed a warm hand on her shoulder. "In the coming days, the worldforest may have many important tasks for us green priests, but I promise I will be there so we can watch it hatch together."



22 MARGARET COLICOS

Rheindic Co called out to Margaret like an ancient book filled with secrets, a book that waited to be opened. The desert was raw and rich with muted colors, browns and ochres, tans and rusts. So much to see and explore, but so much work to do setting up camp before they could get started.

She looked out upon the mysterious wasteland. They had chosen a sitenear the most obvious Klikiss ghost city, though the slot canyons and banded cliff sides might hold innumerable other settlements.

Beside her, Louis wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, scattering perspiration. He leaned over to give her a polite kiss on the cheek. "We've been to worse planets, dear."

Chairman Wenceslas had given the Colicoses their pick of any world to investigate, and they had chosen this abandoned planet. Rocky bluffs extended like mysterious monuments under a burnt-orange sky. Lava protrusions broke the monotony of dry alkaline lakebeds that gleamed like mirage mirrors. Arroyos cracked the landscape where only a memory of rushing water remained.

"It's here, old man," Margaret said in a breathy voice. "I can sense it. I know we'll find something. Even the Klikiss robots seem to think so."

"I'm not one to argue." Louis had a boyish grin on his weather-lined face. "After all these years, you've said 'I told you so' enough times that I'll trust your instincts." He looked appraisingly at his wife. "We'll never know until we get our hands dirty, dear."

A metal clanging shattered the still air as the green priest Arcas worked with a simple hydraulic assembly. The standard-issue drill pump chewed its armored bit into the ground, questing for a buried aquifer to provide fresh water. Next, he angled the solar panels that would provide energy for the camp lights, cookstoves, and comm systems, as well as their modular analysis lab and computers.

The newly purchased compy servant DD assisted him ably, though the green priest seemed somewhat nonplussed at being next to the small Friendly-model android. Margaret didn't think the reticent Arcas actually resented the chest-high companion, but he seemed to prefer his own company.

The Colicos team worked without extravagance. Margaret and Louis laid out the plan for their base camp and erected portable aluminum-roofed sheds and polymer-walled tent structures. The litany of tedious tasks was welcome work to Margaret. She was glad to be back on a dig.

After the success of the Klikiss Torch, she and Louis had attended many celebrity functions and served as guest speakers at numerous gatherings. Hating the limelight, she had pulled every string with the Hansa to get to Rheindic Co as quickly as possible. Sarcastically, she had once muttered, "Maybe the Klikiss race really disappeared just to hide from persistent alien paparazzi."

As contract Hansa employees, Margaret and Louis surrendered all commercial rights to any useful discoveries, though they did receive substantial bonuses. Margaret didn't much care about the income stream, since she enjoyed doing what she loved, and Louis was happy as long as he had full freedom to publish all the scholarly papers he wished.

She and Louis had been married for thirty-seven years, and this would be their fourth Klikiss dig. They had investigated archaeological mysteries on Earth and Mars, but the ancient insectoid race fascinated them most of all. What had happened to this civilization? Why had the Klikiss left, and where had they gone? And why had they left behind their hulking armored robots, ten feet tall and sentient, looking like burly upright insects?

Although the Ildirans had frequently encountered remnants of the lost civilization, they had left the abandoned sites alone. "Why should we delve into the story of a vanished race?" Adar Kori'nh had asked Margaret aboard the observation platform at Oncier. "We have the *Saga*, which tells all the history we could possibly want to know."

Indeed, the epic poem mentioned the Klikiss race numerous times, but only in passing, giving no details about the culture of the vanished civilization. Margaret's scholar son Anton, studying ancient records at a university on Earth, had told her that it wasn't clear whether the Ildirans had encountered the living Klikiss, or only their remnants. Their lack of interest in the topic struck her as incurious to the point of

narrow-mindedness.

In the early years of Terran and Ildiran cooperation, human "colony prospectors" had scouted the unclaimed habitable worlds listed in Solar Navy records. One team, a woman named Madeleine Robinson and her two sons, had gone to Llaro, where they were astonished to find ruined cities and numerous dormant Klikiss robots, which they had accidentally reawakened. Since then, dozens of other Klikiss sites had been surveyed, and many more of the black beetlelike machines had turned up. The Ildirans, though, had known about them for centuries.

Now, the three ancient Klikiss robots who had surprisingly requested to join the Rheindic Co expedition used their massive mechanical strength to erect a weather tower at the camp perimeter. Finished with that task, the three big machines moved with a weird gait on flexible fingerlike legs toward marker stakes in the dry ground, where they began to raise the walls of a heavy storage shed.

Margaret looked at her hastily sketched site diagram and hurried over to the nearest alien robot. "Not there. You're five meters off position."

"It belongs here," the robot said in a thin, humming voice.

"Which one are you? Sirix? Or Dekyk?" The trio looked identical to her.

"I am Ilkot. That is Dekyk." The beetlelike robot gestured with two segmented worker arms that extended from his ellipsoidal torso. "Sirix instructed us to place the structure here."

Frowning, Margaret allowed that the position of the shed made no real difference, though she didn't understand the Klikiss robots or their occasional incomprehensible stubbornness. It was another example of how different these machines were from a "Competent Computerized Companion" like DD, who followed orders like a faithful servant.

She and Louis had been thrilled when three of the sentient Klikiss machines had volunteered to join them at Rheindic Co. The harmless Klikiss robots, though oblivious to human orders or plans, occasionally offered assistance in construction or exploration projects that interested them. These three wanted to participate in investigating their lost civilization, professing equal curiosity to solve the mystery of their vanished creators.

And to learn why they could remember nothing.

Only a few thousand of the machines remained, scattered and shut down during the last days of the vanished civilization and now awakened from their slumber. Unfortunately, every one of their memory cores had been wiped clean of all data that could provide clues to the fate of the alien race.

Beside her, Louis made an approving sound as the robots assembled the shed in record time. With glowing red optical sensors mounted at various places in their geometrically shaped headplates and numerous segmented limbs that sprouted from their armored carbon-fiber shells, the Klikiss robots were proficient laborers-powerful, yet capable of delicate manipulations.

Beneath the robots' main body core, a spherical abdomen was mounted like a trackball at the waist, from which sprouted eight flexible legs like bent millipedes, four on each side. The strange method of locomotion allowed the robots to scuttle over any kind of terrain.

Sirix, the ostensible leader, moved forward. "The assigned labor has been finished, Margaret Colicos.

Your camp is prepared." Sirix drew his six main manipulator limbs back into his body core and closed the openings with protective plates.

Over by the drilling apparatus, Arcas let out a shout as a geyser of cool, clear water sprayed upward. The shower ran over DD's silvery metal skin.

The priest came to stand near Margaret, his smooth green skin glistening from the spray. "Chemical analysis shows it's pure drinking water." He licked his lips. "And it tastes delicious." Margaret was glad to see the quietman so excited. Thus far, Arcas had not seemed enthusiastic about being here with two archaeologists, but he had volunteered for the job. "Now that I have water, I can plant my twenty treelings. Enough to make a respectable grove here on this desert world."

"Go ahead and plant them," Louis said. They would eventually need the telink ability to send regular reports back to the Hansa.

"DD, would you help him, please?" Margaret said. She had hoped DD would be able to interact with the Klikiss robots, but so far the little compy seemed intimidated by the giant ancient machines. She decided not to rush things.

The compy hurried over like an eager child. "I have never planted treelings before, but I am glad I can assist. Arcas and I are sure to become great friends." The green priest looked a bit uncertain about the idea, but accepted the offer of help with good grace.

"He's a Friendly model," Louis said. "Don't let his enthusiasm bother you. It's just his way."

As Arcas and DD dug holes for the potted treelings behind the green priest's tent, the three Klikiss robots stood motionless, like mechanical statues, staring at the orange-colored sky as it faded into dusk.

In the canyons and in the shade of the mountains, night shadows fell like guillotine blades as the sun passed over the horizon. Initial surveys had found that temperatures could drop by as much as forty degrees within an hour, but the archaeological team had brought batteries, warm clothes, heated shelters, and exothermic blankets. The archaeologists would be comfortable here in camp, though they would have difficulty sleeping on the first night for entirely different reasons.

They were both eager for the great adventure ahead of them. Why had the Klikiss abandoned this and so many of their worlds? A mass migration? A war? A terrible plague?

Tomorrow, Margaret and Louis would get to work.

23  ADAR KORINH

From space, the Ildiran splinter world of Crenna looked beautiful and green, dotted with lakes, inland seas, and fertile land. But Adar Kori'nh knew that the settlement festered with a terrible disease that first blinded its victims, then killed them. The entire colony must be abandoned, and perhaps burned, before the plague could spread farther.

Let the humans deal with the aftermath, if they wanted the cursed place.

The magnificent cohort of the Solar Navy-seven full maniples, or 343 ships-approached with great

fanfare. The bright vessels resembled disklike fish cruising in a precise formation that had been practiced and tested in numerous military parades.

Due to politics and the structure of the Solar Navy, Adar Kori'nh was ensconced in the command nucleus of the ornate lead warliner. He made few decisions, allowing the aged cohort leader, Tal Aro'nh, to maneuver his ships as he saw fit. This mission would require little risk or innovation, and the stodgy Tal would follow each step precisely according to protocol. Kori'nh had accompanied the evacuation mission only because the Mage-Imperator had commanded it.

During the journey to Crenna, the Solar Navy's best tacticians and troop-movement specialists had developed the evacuation plan. Once Tal Aro'nh assured himself that every step had been specified and written down, he relaxed. The dutiful subcommander would follow the plan without deviation. Aro'nh was a perfect example of the Ildiran Solar Navy, wearing the correct plumage of rank, never expecting his place in the universe to change.

The seven maniples took up varying orbital positions around Crenna in preparation for launching their rescue operation. Cutters would scout the landscape, assess the extent to which the terrible plague had spread, and estimate how many inhabitants required evacuation to the warliners. Adar Kori'nh frowned impatiently as he watched the activity and waited for reports.

The communications officer continued to send messages down to the Crenna colony town. Frustrated, the officer looked over at Kori'nh, who nodded pointedly toward Tal Aro'nh, indicating that the subcommander should receive the report first. "After continued attempts, Tal, we are unable to reach the Crenna Designate."

"The Crenna Designate has perished from the plague," Kori'nh said. The Mage-Imperator had already sensed the death of his son. "We will have to manage this operation based on our own plan."

"And we do indeed have a plan," said Tal Aro'nh, as if reassuring himself.

The first sleek cutters dropped toward Crenna's single city, where the splinter colony had been established. Gregarious Ildirans preferred to live in close quarters, unwilling to spread out on open land. Groups of settlers worked the fields, raising food for their colony, but each evening all the people returned to the fold, where they could take comfort in the combined *thism*. Now, though, so many Crenna inhabitants had died that the *thism* was frayed and broken, without sufficient population density to maintain a true link. The survivors felt bereft, isolated . . . terrified.

Kori'nh felt a tightness in his chest, a backwash of fear projected from the colony survivors. "We must hurry, Tal Aro'nh," he said from the command nucleus. "Those people are alive . . . and alone."

The surveillance cutters returned, transmitting images so that the large escorts and bulky troop carriers would know where to land. Personnel-transport vessels had been stripped down and modified to accommodate quarantine conditions and sterilization procedures.

Kori'nh studied the images of the colony town, where many buildings had already been abandoned or burned. The plague survivors that remained free of the scourge huddled together in boarded-up buildings—a perfect recipe for spreading contagion. As the disease spread, the victims first lost their eyesight, dying in terrible darkness—which was anathema to the Ildirans, whose race had evolved under the perpetual daylight of seven suns. Even the burly soldier kith looked uneasy at the prospect of facing the disease. Death was one thing, but darkness, *blindness*, was altogether more frightening.

"Take no time to salvage any material objects," he suggested to the Tal. "We must abandon and shut down Crenna. The Mage-Imperator already considers the entire settlement a loss. Evacuate the survivors as soon as possible, before any more fall to the plague."

Accepting the Adar's suggestion as a direct order, Tal Aro'nh relayed the words throughout the cohort.

From his comfortable command nucleus, Adar Kori'nh considered how this event might be dramatized in later versions of the ever-growing *Saga of Seven Suns*. How would his own role be recorded? He didn't want to sit safely here, watching from high above. Abruptly, he stood from his command chair. "Tal Aro'nh, I will personally accompany one of the groups down to the surface."

Alarmed, the old subcommander turned to him. "That . . . is not part of the plan, Adar-nor is it wise. The soldiers are already at risk."

"If we have not taken sufficient precautions, then we should not be sending our soldiers there." Kori'nh strode toward the hatch. "And if the situation is safe enough for our soldiers, I consider it safe enough for me. I will see Crenna for myself, since the Mage-Imperator will want a firsthand report." And only with active participation would he be remembered as more than just a man who watched in comfort while nameless soldiers performed the dangerous work.

Kori'nh found a seat on the twenty-sixth troop carrier. The low-ranking soldiers were impressed that the prestigious Adar would join them, though some appeared intimidated that he had stepped outside the boundaries of his normal role.

The Ildiran rescuers suited up in anticontamination films, tough membranes that covered their muscular bodies to protect against disease organisms. Adar Kori'nh peeled on a thin suit of his own, tugging the membrane into place and snugging it against his skin. The polymer film made a slurping sound as he adjusted it, and then he breathed sterilized air through the permeable layer. He flexed his arms and stood at the troop carrier's hatch, ready to march out with his soldiers into the wounded colony.

As the dozens of rescue ships landed in the main square of the Crenna city, haunted-looking survivors stared in amazement and relief. For Kori'nh, their ache, their terror, was palpable in the air. Once their Designate had succumbed, they had lost all direct telepathic contact with the Mage-Imperator. The Crenna colony was like an amputated limb, slowly twitching and bleeding to death.

Now the stricken settlers came forward, hesitant. The soldiers could feel them exuding pain and fear. Some evacuation personnel were stunned into confusion, while others worked doubly hard to hurry these poor people away.

Earlier, the Crenna colonists had gathered their dead and cremated them in huge bonfires in the open streets, as if hoping the hot flames would whisk their souls from the darkness of death to a brighter place. Kori'nh could see the sooty stains of ashes and blistered bones. Some of the colony structures that had been used as hospitals, and then death wards, had also been burned to the ground with all the bodies inside.

"Leave everything!" he shouted through the protective membrane. "No keepsake or piece of furniture is worth the risk of bringing this infection back to Ildira. Take only your lives and count yourselves lucky."

Personally, he would have liked to vaporize every vestige of the colony town. The Mage-Imperator had already negotiated with the Terran Hanseatic League for ownership of this planet, and Kori'nh wanted to leave nothing for the parasites. Since human physiology was different from Ildiran biochemistry, the

disease organism was not likely to infect them in the way it struck down Ildirans-or so the Terrans hoped. Human medical researchers and scientists were waiting to continue their investigations, eager to move to an already-tamed planet. Such blatant Terran opportunism in the face of Ildiran tragedy made the Adar uneasy.

Kori'nh remained on Crenna for the rest of that day as thousands of colonists crowded aboard troop carriers and were taken to specified hospital warliners. The refugees would remain in isolation behind decontamination fields. Though separated by bulkheads and sterile barriers, the survivors would be able to feel the comforting presence of other Ildirans. The thickness of hollow walls could not block *thetism*.

As he sat back aboard the final troop carrier while the pilot returned them to orbit, Kori'nh looked down at the empty colony. He and his troops had performed an efficient and commendable operation, and he would derive a great deal of acclaim from this accomplishment.

While the warliners assembled in orbit, Kori'nh saw other ships already approaching Crenna, Terran research vessels that carried their eager scouts, ready to grab the abandoned colony from the very moment it became available.

He scowled, as always failing to understand why humans were in such a hurry, why they needed to acquire so much land and wealth simply for the sake of possessing it.

With a muttered lukewarm blessing, the Adar let them have this place of death, loneliness, and misery.

24  BASIL WENCESLAS

In Old King Frederick's ring-studded hand, the Medal of Glorious Commendation glittered like a star ready to go nova.

Basil Wenceslas watched the ceremony from behind the scenes, as usual. He paced the floor in his dedicated office suite, observing through close-up media cameras that showed him everything from the King to the milling crowd in the presentation square. Here, in peaceful solitude, Basil could make mental notes. He had given Frederick's handlers sufficiently detailed instructions that he expected the event to take place without a hitch.

Under the lights of the presentation square, General Kurt Lanyan of the Earth Defense Forces stood precisely on his mark on the long red carpet. In his full dress uniform he looked both impressive and uncomfortable. Unlike Basil, the EDF commander had no choice but to be a public figure at times such as this.

After the latest round of cheers faded, Frederick held high the outrageously gaudy Medal of Glorious Commendation like ancient King Arthur about to dub a devoted knight. Imagers captured every moment from every angle. The records would be distributed across the Hansa colonies by fast stardrive ships, showing off the pomp and ceremony that was a daily routine at the Whisper Palace.

Robes covered the old King with a cocoon of color, but the broad sleeves drooped, exposing his sticklike upraised arms. Frederick's face was gaunt, and on the screens Basil could see that the attendants had applied too much makeup, giving the King a powdery, surreal appearance. Basil frowned, hoping no one else would notice.

Lanyan stood at attention, his head formally bowed with the reverence and solemnity of the occasion.

Frederick boomed, "General Kurt Lanson, I have summoned you here to receive this honor." Basil winced at the obvious error in pronunciation. *Lanson?* Couldn't the King at least memorize his own general's name?

A twitter passed through the crowd like a breeze ruffling a smooth surface of water. Basil gritted his teeth, hoping the slip would not attract too much attention. The people loved their King, but Basil hated for the man to show such obvious signs of age. Charming befuddlement was only a small step away from senility. No one in the Hansa-settled worlds should ever suspect that their King might not be competent to rule.

Frederick didn't even notice his gaffe. "You have halted the depredations of the vile space pirates led by the Roamer Rand Sorengaard. You have succeeded where others have failed." On cue, for Basil had stationed numerous agents throughout the crowd, cheers erupted in a deafening howl that cut off the King's sentence and seemed to disorient him.

Victorious, General Lanyan had returned to Earth bringing the battered corsair ships they had impounded after capturing Sorengaard's pirates. Though the vessels looked dirty and poorly used, Hansa engineers had discovered startling ship modifications. Sorengaard's stardrives had been improved to an efficiency that no Hansa ship exhibited. What were the Roamers doing out there in secret?

Basil quietly instructed that the breakthroughs be analyzed, copied, and incorporated into EDF ships. After the military vessels were upgraded, the technology could be sold to merchant ships at a great premium. Basil would even claim that Hansa engineers had developed the innovations on their own.

King Frederick droned on, reading scripted words projected onto his retinas. "The Earth Defense Forces have a charter to crush lawlessness in the Spiral Arm. Without the obeying of laws, we have no civilization, merely anarchy. And under my rule there will be no anarchy!" More cheers. Basil sank into a comfortable chair, relieved. The King was doing better.

On the screens surrounding him, Basil watched as Frederick lowered the heavy medal on its colorful ribbon to drape it over General Lanyan's neck. The EDF commander had received numerous accolades before, and each one made him a more prominent hero in the eyes of the public. Ceremonies such as this helped to increase the standing of the military forces.

Basil Wenceslas partook in almost no hedonistic pleasures, though he had tried them all when he was younger. Long ago, he'd given up drinking and drugs and smoking, finding that he acquired a greater sense of euphoria from his *accomplishments*. An only child and an overachiever, Basil had learned from his parents, both their successes and their mistakes.

His mother and father were important executives in a large commercial corporation, merchants who distributed much-needed wares among the human-settled planets. His father had worked to make huge amounts of money so he could buy villas and vacation spas and beautiful things for himself, his friends, and his wife. Basil's mother, on the other hand, was a more intense person than her husband. She never enjoyed her wealth or power, but instead seemed afraid she might lose her status at any moment. She had never allowed herself to relax, while Basil's father squandered much of what he had achieved.

Observing the two of them, Basil had combined the best of both traits. As Hansa Chairman, he had supreme self-confidence and knew how to achieve grand things. But he did not waste his fortunes on mansions and jewelry; he devoted his energies to other things.



Now, Basil paced his quarters high up in the Hansa pyramid, looking through glass walls to the filtered sunlight that reflected from the torch-capped domes and cupolas of the Whisper Palace. On the display screens, King Frederick clasped General Lanyan's shoulders and turned the uniformed man around to present him to the cheering audience. The loud applause prevented many from hearing the King's words, but Basil spotted the repeated mistake right away.

"I give you General Kurt Lanson! The greatest of my generals and a man whom I consider to be a personal friend." The people cheered, and Basil seethed, embarrassed. The General bowed his head and pretended not to notice, taking the Old King's error with good grace.

"Enough is enough," Basil muttered. "Things must change." He sent a signal, calling for his expediter, Franz Pellidor, and his group of hand-picked operatives.

When the men arrived in the upper headquarters level, blond Pellidor squared his shoulders and stood in front of his team, looking expectantly at the Chairman.

Basil ran a well-manicured finger over his lower lip, pondering the best way to implement his ideas. Finally, he issued quiet orders for the operatives to begin their work. "You will take whatever action is necessary. We must get the newly chosen Prince in training immediately. I hope we haven't waited too long already."

"We understand, sir," said Mr. Pellidor. The expediter didn't flinch or flush. Basil would not have expected otherwise.

He thought of the previous heir-candidate, Prince Adam, who had proven too unruly and disrespectful of the careful house of political cards built by the Hansa. Basil had been forced to eliminate young Adam before ever letting the public know of his existence.

He lowered his voice, speaking mostly to himself as the operatives turned to depart. "Let's pray that this new candidate proves more tractable, or we will be in deep trouble indeed."

25  RAYMOND AGUERRA

Raymond made his way back toward the apartment complex with a jaunty step, pleased at how much he had accomplished during the dark and quiet hours.

In the early dawn, the air smelled damp but fresh as the city awakened. His muscles were tired from heaving crates at a distribution center's loading dock, and his sweaty clothes smelled of oily smoke from a poorly tuned lifter engine that had filled the hangar bay with noxious fumes. But he had made a good haul and had used his meager under-the-table wages to acquire some packaged food, a new shirt, and even an electronic puzzle for his little brother Michael.

Now Raymond was anxious to get back to his apartment and clean up. He didn't usually come home this late. He hoped to have an hour or so to nap, or at least get breakfast before he went to school. His mother would already be up, and he liked to be there to help her with the boys, but he had earned enough last night to make up for a bit of tardiness. He clutched the satchel to his side, happy.

He came upon a scene of complete disaster.

When he turned the corner into the residential district, the unfolding scene of chaos, flames, and emergency vehicles brought him up short. His curiosity gave way to dread as he began to run down the street. Flames curled into the sky. A pillar of black smoke rose upward like a burned fist.

With every block as he closed the distance, the certainty became a grenade in the pit of his stomach. Using his shoulder, he crashed against jostling bystanders. "Let me through!" He swung his satchel of belongings to knock people out of his way, then finally dropped the food and shirt and the electronic puzzle, not caring.

His whole street was an inferno. Emergency vehicles raced overhead, rescue copters circling but unable to approach the raging fire or even attempt a rescue. At last Raymond reached the front lines to look up into the poisonous smoke and the crackling sky. From behind a hastily erected barricade, he saw the holocaust that remained of his apartment building.

In the hot air and crowded closeness of simmering violence, spectators stared with mixtures of fascination and horror. Raymond found himself speechless and sobbing, his face red, tears streaking the dust on his cheeks. He tried to duck under the barricade but ran into the padded uniforms of crowd-control officers. "Stay back," a gruff man said. "You can't go closer."

"That's my home, my family!"

"It's your death if you go closer. Keep back!"

The ground beneath the structure had become a smoldering crater, and the rest of the apartment had collapsed inside it, as if some volcano had erupted beneath the city streets. Wreckage lay scattered up and down the block. Black smears of soot from the explosion blistered the walls of nearby buildings.

A tall man in a formal business suit looked down at Raymond. He was the kind of person the young man would expect to see behind a boardroom table sipping coffee and filling out ledgers. The businessman explained with apparent glee, "Building owners were illicitly storing contaminated stardrive fuel in underground storage vaults. Nice hiding place, right under an innocent-looking dwelling complex." He shook his head as if in disbelief at the stupidity.

Raymond could barely find words, simply staring into the stinging fumes and furious heat. "Spaceship fuel . . . under our apartment building?"

"It must have been siphoned off, treated, and sold on the black market. But the vaults were poorly insulated, no protective systems. Everything by the seat of the pants. What a bunch of idiots. A disaster waiting to happen-and it happened."

It sounded improbable-ridiculous, even. But he knew that before dawn most of the families would have been home asleep. He couldn't believe it. Raymond's knees went weak and watery, but as he swayed, the press of the crowd held him upright. Oddly, he even saw a large black Klikiss robot, one of the few that had chosen to come to Earth, staring at the fire with red optical sensors, as if fascinated.

A group of men in flame-resistant environment outfits marched out of the blasted front door of the complex. Two of them carried bodies, possibly still alive. But only two bodies . . . of all the people inside the building. Raymond couldn't dare hope that one of those might be his mother or a brother.

"Can't get up past floor seventeen." One of the men spoke through a suit-transmitter so that his voice

came out loud but filtered. "Walls are collapsed, and the doors are fused shut."

"What do you mean fused?" asked the rescue commander.

"Welded closed, barricaded from inside, I don't know. There wasn't time to stand around and make a full analysis. Are the suppressant ships coming in?"

The rescue commander directed the team to a staging area. Up in the sky five cargo copters closed in on the swirling blaze. They flew like bumblebees, heavily laden with chemicals. Through amplified loudspeakers, the rescue commander bellowed to the crowd. "Everyone stand back. Stay clear of the fire suppressant activities."

Before the lumbering mass of curiosity seekers could shift position, the cargo copters opened their belly-hatches and spewed copious amounts of greenish-white foam onto the inferno. Thermal updrafts and furious breezes trapped among the tall buildings flurried the descending foam, splattering globules in a broad radius. Splashed spectators backed up to get away from the mess, but the watchers were too crowded, and little more than a shock wave of disturbance rippled through the mob.

In spite of the suppressant foam, the apartment building continued to blaze white-hot, engulfed in flames so intense that fire-fighting crews couldn't begin to battle the disaster from ground level. Another three fire-fighting copters bombarded the building with extinguishing foam, and Raymond realized their main goal was simply to stop the fire from spreading to other buildings, not to save any of the people inside.

Frantic to do something, he pushed against the barricades once more. "I have to get in there. My brothers, my mother." Greenish white foam made him slip as he smeared his way forward.

But again, crowd-control officers blocked him. "Won't do any good, kid. There's nothing left inside but ashes and dental work."

Before Raymond could cause more of a scene, the crowd jostled him again. One of the suppressant choppers overshot its target and dumped half a load of foam over the officers and the front ranks of people. The crowd backed away, cursing. Raymond found himself swept up in the amoebalike motion.

From behind, a man grabbed his arms and pulled him away. Raymond tried to struggle, then felt an iron grip on his other arm, though it was slick with spilled extinguishant. His voice was lost in the hubbub of the crowd.

Three large, nondescript men unobtrusively steered him through the masses toward a side street where the crowd had thinned. Raymond did not recognize these men, saw no expressions on their faces beyond a grim set to their jaws and a complete focus on what they were doing.

"Let me go!" He lashed out with his feet, trying to kick. His toe connected with one man's shin, but the man didn't even flinch, as if he had armor hidden beneath his gray slacks.

Raymond saw a sealed vehicle waiting, parked against the side of a building, its engine running. Dread closed around his heart. This was too much to bear after seeing the fire at his home, knowing that his entire family had been lost in the intense explosion beneath his apartment complex.

He struggled more wildly and managed to get his foam-slick arm free. He swung a fist, connecting with one man's ribs, but it hurt his own knuckles more than it hurt his would-be kidnapper. The door of the vehicle opened like a giant black mouth waiting to gobble him up.

"Who are you? Leave me alone!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Help!" He knew it would do no good. The holocaust and emergency operations were far too noisy.

A blond-haired man with ice-pale blue eyes stepped out of the vehicle, a broad-muzzled energy pulser in one hand. He said in a calm, almost conversational tone, "This stunner won't leave any marks, young man. I have permission to use it if I have to."

Raymond thrashed more vigorously. In the end, the blond kidnapper had to be true to his threat.

Stunned unconscious, Raymond Aguerra was shouldered into the vehicle. The door slid shut, and the men whisked him away.

26  CESCO PERONI

No matter how much outside people and events pummeled them, Roamers always fought back and remained strong. Inspired by rigorous circumstances, Roamer culture blossomed with ideas, some of which were impractical or eccentric in the extreme; other schemes were innovative enough to let the fiercely independent clans thrive in places where most humans would find existence impossible.

Within the rubble belt around a dwarf star, the Roamers had expanded from the first tiny foothold left behind by the *Kanaka*. Rendezvous was a wonderful medley of space habitats and hollow asteroid living quarters, a scattered rocky archipelago around a bloodred sun.

The asteroids were detritus from the collapsing protostar, insufficient material to coalesce into a planet. Rendezvous was designed with numerous places to dock spacecraft, ships both large and small, as well as camouflaged depots for storing ekti.

Roamers were comfortable with low-gravity environments, suiting up and bounding from one rock to another using jetpacks. Some of the cluster's inner asteroids were strung together with cables that flexed and extended and retracted, like cablecar strands. Dim sunlight shone upon reactive films and solar-wind collectors that provided enough power for the settlement.

Cesca Peroni had lived here much of her life. She considered Rendezvous not at all strange.

She and Jhy Okiah sat inside the Speaker's office chamber hollowed out from the largest rock of Rendezvous. While much of the Speaker's business involved mitigating clan squabbles, accounting for profits, and studying resource distribution among the widespread settlements, she also heard proposals and assessed the merits of ambitious new ventures.

These meetings with engineers and clan speculators were the most enjoyable of Cesca's duties. All Roamers were encouraged to develop new concepts and consider different techniques for exploiting resources, however unlikely they might seem. Inventors modified standard equipment and vessels already in use, improving them to incredible efficiency, far beyond anything the Hansa had achieved. Nor would the Big Goose ever know.

The curly-haired engineer Eldon Clarin sat in a low-gravity seat, controlling his enthusiasm as Jhy Okiah and Cesca stared at his beautifully drawn plans for two new spacecraft designs. Clarin and his team of specialists had done their work admirably well, and he waited for the old Speaker to either make

suggestions or grant him approval to pursue his new concepts.

Jhy Okiah looked over at Cesca, waiting to see her protégée's assessment. The young woman bit her lower lip, putting her mind into sharp focus. "As clearly as I can understand it, your modification increases thrust efficiency, minimizes ekti consumption-"

Eldon Clarin interrupted. "Yes, yes, and still we retain navigational accuracy. That has been a problem in the past." He sat back and looked at the two women, hoping for their acceptance. He scratched his curly hair, which hovered like a corona around his head.

Because Roamer society had been built on interconnected families, strong women often dominated their politics. Throughout human history, politics had usually been based on warfare, strength, and blustering testosterone. Roamers, however, found that female politicians were much better in the peaceful resolution of disputes. Women could talk through problems, get to the root of a conflict and ferret out the real cause for disagreement, which was often an illogical emotionally based slight. Maternal leaders were better at exchanging subtle favors that kept the society running smoothly.

Long ago, Jhy Okiah had been chosen as an acceptable mixture of bloodlines, a compromise from dozens of different clans who would thus be able to make decisions without playing favorites. Cesca, on the other hand, had been selected as the Speaker's successor because she came from a particularly strong family. She was the only daughter of a merchant and distributor, Denn Peroni, who had accomplished great things for the Roamers.

Seeing the faintest curve of a smile on Jhy Okiah's lips, Cesca realized that the old woman had already made up her mind about Clarin's proposal and was merely drawing out the suspense. The Speaker always advised against making snap judgments, because the parties in question might not believe due consideration had been given to a matter, even when the answer was obvious.

So Cesca waited as Jhy Okiah pretended to ponder the plans again. Finally, she asked for Cesca's assessment. Cesca covered her own smile, knowing the answer she was expected to give. "I believe Engineer Clarin's proposal would make a good addition to our capabilities. In fact, I would advocate that his modifications be implemented in all new vessels constructed at our Osquivel shipyards."

"Agreed. Once we know a more efficient way to do things, there's no point in continuing to use the old method." Then Jhy Okiah cautioned the elated Clarin, along with the grinning and excited team of engineers who waited behind him. "Remember that no Hansa representative should ever suspect the existence of such modifications. We must maintain our edge."

The engineer nodded so deeply Cesca thought his chin would leave a dent in his chest. Before he could pack up his plans and rush off, the Speaker held up one bony finger. "Wait a moment. Would it be possible to adapt your intake modifications and power-conversion manifolds to skymines?"

"Skymines?" The engineer scratched his curly head, as if he had never considered the possibility.

She pointed to the plans. "A skymine does not travel far or fast like our space vessels. However, the concepts should be similar and transferable."

Eldon Clarin glanced at his team members, all of whom nodded quickly, though Cesca believed they would have agreed to anything in their thrill at receiving the Speaker's approval.

"Good, then I want these modifications to be included in the new skymine that will soon be put into

service at Erphano. The facility is undergoing its final construction stages right now, so you'd better hurry." Clarin's engineers looked alarmed, then drew deep breaths, accepting the challenge.

The Speaker looked at Cesca. "My grandson Berndt will be managing that skymine. Why not have him start with an efficient facility?"

"No point in wasting time." Cesca smiled, seeing the old woman's plan all along. "To make certain that the modifications run smoothly, perhaps Engineer Clarin should serve aboard the Erphano skymine for a month or two, as a shakedown?"

"Cesca, you never fail to demonstrate my wisdom in choosing you as my successor."

"We will do as you ask, Speaker Okiah. Thank you for your approval!" Clarin bustled out of the office chamber, his motions exaggerated in the low gravity.

Next to enter was Kotto Okiah, the Speaker's youngest son by her fourth and last husband. She raised herself off her sling chair and kissed him on each unshaven cheek. She looked without surprise at the scattered plans and notes he had brought with him.

Some Roamers chose to use computer design systems and thin display screens to show their work, but Kotto Okiah preferred to work manually, calculating with his own brain power and scribbling on valuable pieces of paper, which he always recycled if his ideas proved fruitless. Many of his concepts fizzled into dead-ends, but the young man's sheer imagination had also led to numerous breakthroughs.

Kotto bowed to Cesca, but his full attention, as always, was on his ancient mother. Jhy Okiah insisted that she never gave her family special treatment, but all Roamers had clan ties and obligations.

Kotto was diligent enough to have other engineers check and double-check his work to ensure appropriate safety levels. Still, even when accidents happened, the optimistic Kotto never appeared shamed, only contemplative. "Innovative developments are not always perfect," he said. "We must expect some to fail."

"Please make it as few as possible," his old mother had said.

Now the young man spread out his display, including starcharts, surveillance photographs, and rapidly sketched plans for a strange settlement on a bleak, hot world. "I don't know if you'll like this idea, Mother. It is very dangerous, but could be highly profitable."

"I'm listening. You'll have to convince me, as always."

Cesca leaned forward to participate in the discussion as Kotto began to talk with exuberance. "I've been studying the hot world of Isperos, very much like the planet Mercury in the Earth system. The challenge is large, but the resources are remarkable. Look at all these metals, and the rare isotopes readily available on surface scrapings! I think it would be worth the effort."

With deft fingers he pointed to several different designs he had sketched. He explained how Jess Tamblyn had flown him on a reconnaissance mission to the planet, mapping out the details.

"That sounds like Jess," Cesca said with a smile. "Is . . . is he still here?"

Kotto looked confused, trying to deal with a question he had not thought about answering. "No . . . no,

he left three days ago. Had to go back to Plumas. I think he'll be returning within a few weeks, though. I offered to take a packet from him, but he said he'd bring it back."

He absently tapped his chin and returned his attention to the designs of a self-contained hot-world settlement. "These new techniques could open many formerly uninhabitable terrestrial worlds for Roamer settlement. Heavy elements and pure ores will be very useful in our industries. With proper care and diligence, Isperos could be a gold mine for us . . . well, gold and other metals."

"And the beauty of it is that no other humans would ever want those worlds," Jhy Okiah pointed out, eyes bright. The Speaker watched the doubt play across Cesca's olive-skinned face. "Perhaps I am not objective where my youngest son is concerned. What is your opinion on the project, Cesca?"

Cesca studied Kotto's boyish face. "One has to admit the risks, but also recognize the rewards. Could Isperos be much more of a challenge than anyplace else we have settled?" She shrugged. "As long as the rest of Roamer society is prepared to help shoulder the burden of this new colony while engineers and a few brave settlers take their first uncertain steps, then we should make the attempt."

Jhy Okiah looked up at the stone ceiling of the asteroid chamber, as if imagining the Rendezvous complex all around them. "By the Guiding Star, if Roamers never tried to do the impossible, we would never have accomplished anything."

27  BERNDT OKIAH

Only a practiced eye could see the beauty of the skymine under construction at the slapdash facilities in the broken moons of Erphano.

Burly Berndt Okiah stood within the transparent bubble-dome installed on the pockmarked moon. With the industrial station's low gravity and the enormous olive-and-tan gas giant filling the sky, Berndt experienced an odd shift in perspective: The immense planet seemed *below* him, and he felt as if he were falling headfirst into the clouds.

Teams of Roamer constructors had descended upon the system's rubble, analyzed the geological composition, then brought in mobile factories to begin work. Automated smelters and ore-crunchers had devoured entire moonlets, processing rocks to leach out necessary elements, extruding plates and casting components. Later, an army of construction workers removed the designated components and assembled the giant industrial puzzle.

Occasionally, at construction sites within the boundaries of Hansa territory, some of the still-functional Klikiss robots volunteered to perform hazardous space construction. They worked hard, asked no questions and took no payment, but operated on their own schedules. Most Roamers, though, didn't trust the mysterious ancient machines and preferred to do their own labor.

Since this was Berndt Okiah's pet project, a skymine that he would own and manage, he had been here from the beginning, more than a year. He had lived in austere encampments of underground chambers drilled into the small moons and then coated with polymer walls. As the resources were chewed up, shipyards had grown like a forest. Tall girders, support derricks, and tether cables held the skeleton of the Erphano skymine as Roamers added the metal flesh.

Though Berndt had confidence in his workers, he was still blustery and intrusive, watching over their

shoulders as they assembled the ekti reactors. His grandmother's pet engineer, Eldon Clarin, had recently arrived with new plans and bold suggestions to improve the systems. At first, Berndt had been put out by the sudden change in plans, until he realized the modifications would require no more than a week and, if successful, make his new skymine more productive and therefore more profitable.

Berndt had promised himself and the Roamer clans that he would make a success of this operation. His grandmother had given him an exceptional opportunity-though some claimed he did not deserve yet another chance-and he would not waste it. Berndt had many things to prove to himself and to his people.

As he sat in the observation blister watching the final preparations, Engineer Clarin entered through the access tube. "I've checked all the systems, Chief. The skymine is nearly ready for launch."

The burly man nodded, scratching his square chin. "Still operating at ninety-seven percent of projected norms?"

The engineer looked surprised. "How did you know?"

"Because I checked them myself an hour ago. It's my business to understand things aboard my new skymine." Berndt's physical size and his reputation as a gruff bully clearly intimidated Eldon Clarin, but the engineer's ease with mathematics and science, his sheer intelligence, intimidated Berndt in turn. "Once the facility enters the Erphano cloud decks, we'll have plenty of time to do our shakedown. You will be staying here to verify all systems. Please?"

Clarin drew his brows together as if surprised at the big man's demeanor. "Speaker Okiah requested that I stay for at least two months."

Berndt focused his gaze on the huge planet below so he could avoid looking at the man as he spoke, his normally gruff voice sounding a bit nervous. "Engineer Clarin, I'd like to request a favor. While we are here, I would ask . . . if you might provide me with some instruction?" For years, he had blustered and shouted to get his way; now it felt very strange to be making such a request.

The engineer seemed surprised. "What is it you would like to know?"

"I want a stronger background in the functioning of the skymine, from ekti processing to the Ildiran stardrives. It's my business now."

The engineer looked at his hands. "This seems rather . . . unusual. Berndt Okiah is not known for his scholarly pursuits."

Berndt flushed. "That was in the past. I'm the chief of a new skymine. I should broaden my horizons."

Outside, suited workers crawled over the hull of the factory suspended in the emptiness. He ran his eyes over the enormous collector tanks for raw hydrogen and the geometrical reactors that processed and siphoned off the ekti allotrope. The big skymine also had an upper habitation and support deck containing crew quarters, leisure chambers, and command centers.

After being constructed in place around gas giants, skymines were maneuvered to the clouds with powerful in-system engines. The skymines themselves would never leave their gas-giant homes, relying on cargo escorts to take away storage tanks of ekti.

The Ildiran propulsion system was based on direct physical movement, without resorting to exotic



anomalies such as wormholes or dimensional jumps. But the stardrive did produce a space-time ripple effect that, as far as Berndt understood it, relativistically slowed time for the ship. Somehow, the stardrive maintained a "continuum memory" that allowed vessels to return to real space very close to the proper frame of timeline reference. The effective result was to travel great distances in a short time span. To the unschooled outsider it looked simple, though the actual mechanics were very complex. During their next two months together, Clarin would attempt to teach Berndt the detailed systems.

Long ago, when the Ildirans had offered them the opportunity, Roamers had jumped at the chance to work the ekti-processing stations. Ambitious clans had secured loans from the Ildiran Empire to lease their first skymining stations. Despite an initial disaster on Daym, the Roamers turned the cloud-processing facilities into profitable operations. Roamers had copied the skymining technology, then improved it and set about building other stations. They continued to expand as their ekti profits increased.

Now Berndt led Eldon Clarin through the tube to the suit-up chambers. "Time for us to launch the new skymine. I want you with me."

Clarin looked surprised. "Me? But you're the chief-"

"It'll look good on your résumé when you get back to Rendezvous."

An hour later, the two men stood on a launching platform above the mineral-stripped excavation sites. Overhead, more rubble and exhaust debris spread outward, devoid of useful metals. The navigation hazard would also serve as a smoke screen to hide the activities on Erphano.

Work crews waited inside modular off-shift sheds while others floated outside with their heads pointed down toward the olive-and-tan planet. Anchor cables kept the gigantic skymine from drifting away.

Berndt operated his suit radio. "Prime the maneuvering engines."

Captains aboard the skymine worked controls on the upper deck. Berndt could see tiny figures behind the glowing bridge. Suited workers stood on the observation platform high above the first reactor. Cowlings brightened as the drive reactors heated up and the engines exhaled a hotbreath of exhaust. A restless behemoth, the newborn skymine pulled against its tethers.

Berndt felt a thrill of pride as he gazed at the magnificent structure that would be his to command. He had never been present at a skymine launch, though he had supervised an older facility for several years. His first skymine command had been on Glyx, a facility that was already up and running with a veteran crew when he'd become chief. He had been more of a baby-sitter and manager, not much of a leader. The Erphano facility, though, was both a big promotion and a big chance for him.

Some of the clans grumbled that Berndt Okiah had by now received all the chances a man could deserve. He had squandered them in his youth, when he'd been overbearing, too full of himself. He understood his folly now. He couldn't wait to bring his wife, Marta, and twelve-year-old daughter, Junna, to work with him here.

Though he'd once harbored grandiose dreams of becoming the next Speaker, Berndt now realized he was simply not able to lead all of his people or command so many resources. When younger, he had swelled his chest and demanded an important role in government, though he'd never proven himself worthy of respect or responsibility. Such greatness was not possible for him, and that epiphany had brought about a change in him.

At first, he'd been jealous of Cesca Peroni and her relationship to Jhy Okiah, but now he saw that she would be a more talented Speaker than he ever could. Berndt regretted his brash actions and poorly thought-out plans, but after years of exemplary service on the Glyx skymine and now with this new vessel under his command, he would become the best chief of any ekti-processing facility.

With the engineer holding the support railings, Berndt disengaged the mobile platform and activated the putter engines that lifted them to the towering skymine. Berndt cradled a valuable thin-walled container of pseudo-champagne, a traditional icon the Roamers continued to use for the baptism of a new ship.

The mobile platform carried them up past the curved storage chambers and the broad, gaping mouth of the gaseous intake chute. Clarin peered through his faceplate, amazed at the immensity of the vessel up close. Once the Erphano skymine dropped into the clouds, few people would ever see its lower hull again.

He hovered beside the front ekti storage tank and, smiling, grasped the neck of the pseudo-champagne bottle. Weightless, he knew that when the bottle struck the metal wall, he would recoil in the opposite direction, so Berndt gripped the support railing.

He had carefully considered his words. "With great pride, I launch this skymine: pride not in myself but in the capabilities of the Roamer construction teams that have built this marvel. And pride in my dedicated crew who will run the operations and bring about a profitable status. Most of all, though, I launch this skymine with pride for what it symbolizes to the Roamers and our ability to prosper where no one else would dare to venture. Let the Guiding Star take us to our destiny."

He swung the champagne bottle. As it struck the hull, the glass shattered, and the pseudo-champagne exploded into the vacuum of space. Thin glass fragments and boiling, fizzing, freezing clouds of carbonated liquid foamed outward, volatilizing like a comet's tail.

As applause and cheers echoed through the comm systems, Berndt Okiah took the mobile platform up to the command deck. He and the engineer cycled through the airlocks and stripped out of their suits as the bridge crew hurried to congratulate them.

"Disengage tethers," Berndt said, his first command issued aboard his new factory. The skymine lurched as the metal cables detached from their anchor points. "Increase thrust to engines."

The skymine eased away from the rubble, moving toward the clouds of Erphano. Berndt glanced back at the scarred construction facility behind them, then turned forward, looking at the eye of the gas giant. The resource-rich clouds beckoned him, and he decided that he would not look back ever again, only forward.

28:  RLINDA KETT

Rlinda Kett awoke satisfied from a comfortable night's sleep beneath the whispering worldtrees. After devouring an extravagant breakfast of fruits and nuts accompanied by clee-a steamy, potent beverage made from ground worldtree seeds-she felt ready to tackle any decision.

"If I stay here on Theroc much longer, I'll gain a dozen kilos," Rlinda said to Sarein. "That would both endanger my health and decrease the mass cargo I can carry on the *Voracious Curiosity*."

Sarein had added metal combs to her hair and wore a traditional Theron gown, looped with court finery, beautiful scarves and shawls made from ephemeral cocoon fibers. Rlinda wanted her own wardrobe of the cloth-to demonstrate its beauty to new customers, but also so she could preen in front of the mirror. Although she had no intention of attracting yet another husband, she saw no harm in looking pretty.

"My parents would like to speak with you," Sarein said with a confident smile. "We must make a good impression."

"Leave it to me, Sarein. I can make a good case." Rlinda brushed herself off and stood, looking longingly at the various dishes she had not yet found time to sample.

Inside the largest chamber of the fungus-reef city, Father Idriss and Mother Alexa held court. Airy gaps to the outside were covered with prismatic condorfly wings that served as stained-glass windows. The two leaders sat side by side, statuesque and handsome, dark-haired and bronze-tanned.

Rlinda stepped forward, her steps surprisingly delicate and careful for a woman of her size. She bowed deeply, with all the grace she could manage. "I am most pleased for the opportunity to speak to you, Father Idriss and Mother Alexa."

Idriss leaned forward on his large chair. He had a squared-off black beard and wore a headdress of feathers and beetle carapaces that gave him an imposing and magisterial presence. "Our daughter Sarein speaks well of you. I think she considers you a friend. How could we not meet with you, when our eldest daughter requests it?"

Beside him, Mother Alexa wore a dazzling gown with impressive shoulder apparatus that stood tall like the plumage of a peacock. Part of the queen's costume had been assembled from the whole wings of condorflies, color-coordinated with the clothes she wore. Her glossy raven hair fell to her waist.

Rlinda straightened. "I hope Sarein hasn't exaggerated my importance. I am not a particularly prominent person in the Hanseatic League, and this is a great honor for me." Sarein stood off to one side, attentive, but the merchant woman kept her focus on the two rulers. "The forests of Theroc appear to be rich with possibilities. Sarein showed me many of your native products, and I believe there are countless trade opportunities we could explore. Frankly, I'm surprised that armies of merchants haven't already attempted to forge alliances with you."

"Few people see beyond our green priests," said Alexa. "That is all the Hansa seems to want."

Idriss added, "And we aren't overly eager to complicate our lives. We speak for the green priests, but the worldforest helps them to make all their decisions. In truth, we have little to do with their choices. Here, the Therons have everything we need. We are content, with no large-scale causes of human conflict."

Sarein touched Rlinda's broad shoulder in a companionly gesture. "Some even claim that the benevolent presence of the worldforest suppresses the natural human penchant for violence and conflict."

"Then I applaud your efforts to spread treelings to other planets." Rlinda smiled wryly. "I can name plenty of places that would benefit from it."

"Our priests are doing all they can." Mother Alexa nodded to her husband.

Idriss and Alexa took care of local disputes, occasional personal squabbles, marital troubles or civil

cases, but their most important purpose was to act as an interface with the outside. The Mothers and Fathers of Theroc had always calmly made decisions based not on greed and wealth, but on their genuine beliefs for the good of their culture.

Rlinda glanced at Sarein for encouragement. "Well, your daughter has made my head dizzy with all the things I've seen and tasted here. I can name hundreds of possible markets for your exotic fruits, berries, nuts, and unusual fabrics." Her stomach growled, as if to emphasize her opinion.

Sarein stepped forward, breathless. Her eyes were intense. "Think of all the doors it could open for us, Father. Mother? We could become a powerful trade presence without giving up our independence."

"We have talked about this before, Sarein," Idriss said.

Seeing the leaders' closed expressions, Rlinda felt a sinking sensation. She began to suspect that she had been brought in as Sarein's cat's-paw in an old argument between complacent parents and their ambitious daughter.

"Rlinda is willing to accept sample loads of our products to prove their commercial viability, but she is also taking a risk by investing her own resources." Sarein's face hardened, then she astonished Rlinda by suddenly adding new terms. "Therefore, she has also requested several green priests—five would be a good number—in order to give her a bit of insurance. I feel that's only fair. Don't you?"

She looked at Rlinda, who tried to cover her shock. They had never discussed this, but it seemed to have been Sarein's secret intention all along. Rlinda now feared the delicate negotiations might crumble.

"She would also carry treelings to help expedite the spread of the worldforest," Sarein continued in a rush. "You see? Everyone benefits."

Father Idriss looked disturbed, though not quite angry with his daughter. "We do not command the green priests where and when they must go, Sarein. The worldforest operates outside our political leadership. The priests defer to the wishes of the trees, and Mother Alexa and I must defer to the priests."

"It was merely a suggestion, sir," Rlinda said quickly. "Theroc has so many things to offer. Let's not become focused on one sticking point—"

"But it's an unreasonable sticking point, if only you would open your eyes," Sarein said, openly defiant. Rlinda wanted to call a recess before an argument ensued that would end negotiations entirely.

Mother Alexa said, "We maintain careful records and control over the distribution of the treelings. Regardless of your interest in our fruits and berries, Rlinda Kett, we understand that our telink communication ability is the strongest coin Theroc has to offer."

Idriss continued, "It would not be wise for us to establish a precedent by allowing you to take our priests along with our forest products."

Flustered, Rlinda looked at Sarein, wishing the young daughter had said nothing. "Please don't be hasty. I sincerely apologize if an ill-spoken comment gave you a bad impression of me. Could we discuss the matter further tomorrow? I'll give you specific examples of items I'd like to carry aboard my merchant ship." She backed away, trying to dismiss herself before Father Idriss denied her completely.

Alexa answered with a condescending, though beautiful, smile. "We will listen, because that is the basis of communication. But we will not be swayed. Green priests are valuable to us."

"I agree fully, as you will see," Rlinda said, with a final deep bow. She wished Sarein had never made the suggestion; it had never crossed Rlinda's mind. "I look forward to another discussion at a later time."

With Sarein frowning about the meeting, Rlinda walked with her out of the meeting chamber. She had to rethink her approach and make a different sales pitch. Next time, perhaps, without Sarein's "help."

29  ARCAS

The deserts of Rheindic Co filled his eyes with a geography unlike anything he had ever seen on Theroc. Typically, a green priest would find such bleakness disturbing, but Arcas felt the desert calling to him. He had never expected to feel so alive. The quality of light, the sharp shadows, the dry air . . . and the *silence*. It awakened an unexpected delight in his heart. He reveled in the warm sunlight on the rocks, the layered strata of red iron ore, green copper oxide, white bands of limestone. At last, a task he could enjoy.

While Margaret and Louis Colicos began their work in the main Klikiss city, the compy DD maintained the camp with meticulous care. When Arcas had finished his early-morning tending of the treelings, he longed to follow his heart and explore places that interested him.

He went to the larger tent where the two xeno-archaeologists lived. The old man had already gone with the three Klikiss robots to the cliffside ruins, and Margaret was packing up her notes for the morning. She looked up expectantly. "Yes, Arcas? Do you intend to go with us to the ruins today, or will you stay in camp with your treelings?"

"Actually, neither," he said, embarrassed. "I'd like to explore the nearby canyons. The geology is very interesting to me." Arcas did not need her permission, because green priests followed no leader except the worldforest. In fact, Margaret never seemed to know what to do with him.

"Take whatever equipment you require. Do you need DD along?"

The suggestion startled him. "No . . . I would rather be by myself."

Margaret was intent on hurrying to follow her husband out to the excavation. "See if you can make measurements and record your data. We are on a scientific mission, and geological analyses can be useful, too."

"I'll do what I can." Arcas had hoped just to take a walk, to enjoy the scenery and drink in the details, which he would then repeat to the treelings for dissemination through the worldforest. The sentient trees were not accustomed to desert landscapes, and he would at last feel that he had served a useful role as a green priest. Nevertheless, he gathered imagers and data-collection devices from the camp supply shed and placed them in a pack.

Margaret took one of their short-range vehicles, accompanied by DD, and headed off to the cliff city. Standing in the empty camp, Arcas took a glance at the twenty thin treelings planted in rows behind his tent. They now stood chest-high, waving as if basking in the sunlight. "So you like the desert too?" he said. If he touched the treelings, they would answer him.

With no specific destination, Arcas drew a deep breath, tasted the dry and dusty air. Trudging into the wrinkled landscape, he headed toward a gorge that had been cut by ancient waters. Unfiltered sunlight tingled his green skin.

Arcas had never really wanted to be a green priest, yet once a person bonded with the worldforest, the symbiosis could not be reversed. He could leave the trees, never engage telink again, but he would always remain green-skinned and part of the network.

His mother had died while he was young, and Arcas had always had a very close relationship with his father. The older man, Bioth, had longed to become a green priest, but had been caught in a different career. Bioth would sit with him under the canopy, looking up at the whispering fronds and talking about his dreams, about how much he wanted his son to serve the worldforest.

Arcas had never been enthusiastic at the prospect. "Father, we all serve the worldforest, no matter what we do." He had been more interested in history and geology, but Bioth already had his mind made up and never noticed his son's reluctance.

When Arcas was fifteen, Bioth had fallen out of a high tree while harvesting epiphyte juices. The older man had landed in a tangle of vines that acted like a net. Unfortunately, when the vines broke his fall, they also snapped his neck. Young Arcas had rushed to his father's side as the workers lowered him to the ground. With his last choked words, Bioth begged his son to make him proud, to become a green priest. With everyone listening, Arcas could not deny his father's final wish. Once the tragic story became known among the Therons, Arcas was easily admitted into the priesthood.

So, he had done his duties without any particular passion or inspiration. He had never wanted an impressive or pampered assignment in an opulent colony government house, because then people would be bothering him all the time. He found tolerable assignments by choosing history tracts and geology texts to read to the trees. But here, on Rheindic Co, the desert serenity called to him.

Now as Arcas walked away from the camp, looking at the wrinkle-backed mountains, he followed a line of boulders up an alluvial fan that narrowed into a canyon. As the rough walls rose above him, he saw the gnarled striations of geological layers that reminded him of the growth rings in a cut tree.

Arcas crunched along the loose riverbed. The echoes reflected eerily from the narrow walls. He looked around, keeping his eyes open for any discovery that might help the Colicoses' work. When he'd joined this mission, Arcas had offered more than just his services as a green priest. His passing knowledge of archaeology and geology made him a potential assistant.

As he proceeded deeper into the canyon, he realized he had never in his life been so far from the comforting touch of plants and trees. Or crowds of people. The ruddy sun angled into the canyon, and he looked up at a smooth, white section where a slab of limestone had sheared off in large, cream-colored lumps. With awe, he saw shapes and designs molded into the limestone: fossilized remains of alien creatures that had lived uncounted millennia ago, a bent frond of what looked like a fern, a bony sea creature with large jaws and sharp fins.

He removed his rock hammer and chipped away the most remarkable fossils, storing them in a pouch at his waist. Then he imaged others that were too large to excavate. These specimens had lived millions of years before the Klikiss ever set foot on Rheindic Co. As Margaret Colicos had reminded him, this was a scientific expedition, and Arcas could make discoveries of his own.

He hiked back toward the encampment, stepping over tumbled boulders that lay strewn like giant marbles. Even if the canyon had not provided such a precise route, Arcas could have opened his mind and let the treelings call him back to the camp. With worldtrees around, a green priest could never get lost.

He looked down the gentle slope of the alluvial fan. Far to the south, he saw a smear of bruised darkness across the sky where their survey satellites had shown distant volcanoes spewing ash and soot. Each day, he loved the blazing watercolor sunsets most of all.

He adored this desert world, though such feeling gave him a twinge of guilt, because it seemed like a denial of the worldtrees. But he made up for it by hurrying to the little grove, kneeling beside the treelings, and touching their trunks. Closing his eyes, he recalled the palette of his memory and described all the beautiful things he had seen.

The trees responded with wordless delight.

30  SAREIN

As the humid forest settled for the night, Sarein made sure her little sister Celli went to bed. Idriss and Alexa were not rigid parents, but Sarein insisted on following a schedule. Though the ten-year-old always tried to wheedle another hour or so of playtime, Sarein insisted that Celli abide by the rules.

"Tie down your pet condorfly," she said. "And wash up."

"He needs me to watch over him," said Celli with a pout. The colorful creature rattled its emerald-green wings inside the chamber, then clacked its long thin beak as if in search of flower petals to devour.

"He can take care of himself. He is a wild creature, you know." Sarein stood in the low doorway, brooking no argument. She knew it would be only a matter of moments before her sister heaved a sigh and did as she was told.

"He's my pet." Celli had captured this one just as it emerged from its chrysalis, still moist and weak. She kept a thin chain cuffed to one of its eight segmented legs so that it could flap and drift above her shoulder like a living kite. Sarein had always thought condorflies had about as many brain cells as a kite.

"Yes, and he wants you to go to bed as much as I do. Now don't make this as difficult as you did yesterday." Grudgingly, the little girl complied.

At night, still tethered to its stand, the condorfly would crawl through the window and fly as far as the leash would allow it. In the morning, Celli would reel it in. Luckily, condorflies had relatively short life spans, so her sister's dependence upon this mindless pet would last no more than a month or two.

All day long, the little girl was a bundle of energy, running and leaping, chattering with friends, playing various games. She had more foolish courage than common sense. By the age of ten, Celli had had her share of broken bones from various falls and scrapes. Her tomboy body was an ever-changing pattern of scabs and skinned knees, scratches, bruises, and scrapes.

Sarein often grew impatient with her, but then told herself that Celli would grow up. Eventually. Estarra, two years older, seemed well on her way to making proper decisions. Sarein's greatest hope was that

she and hersiblings, in one generation, could change Theroc and bring these backwater people out of their prehistoric naïveté and into the thriving community of the Spiral Arm.

Finally, after a perfunctory hug and kiss, Sarein closed the door and walked through glow-lit corridors. Reynald was due to return soon from his peregrination, and Sarein hoped he had made inroads with powerful figures. She couldn't wait to hear her brother's description of the Ildiran court and wondered what he might have accomplished on Earth by meeting with Basil.

Mother Alexa and Father Idriss had gone to the higher levels of the city, where they would watch a festive performance of talented gymnastic treedancers. Sarein had been invited to see the skilled leaping and tumbling among the springy interlocked fronds, but she had no interest. Estarra had been forced to go to the festival, but she would probably slip off by herself to climb the rugged layers of the fungus reef. Sarein sighed at her family's aloofness. They had so many resources and opportunities-yet they seemed not to care. They simply lived from day to day, oblivious to the rest of human civilization, satisfied with what they had.

She entered her quarters, increased the illumination, and sat at her polymer-fabricated desk imported from Earth. She had many official records and contracts to study. It discouraged her that Idriss and Alexa insisted on ignoring the Hansa's greater commercial possibilities. Perhaps she could find loopholes in old agreements, as Basil had taught her to do.

She ran a hand over her short dark hair, combed and cut in a popular Earth style. In her wardrobe, she kept many traditional Theron gowns and scarves, adorned with broken bits of condorfly wings and polished insect shells, but Sarein preferred the comfortable clothing she had brought from her year of study on Earth. Theron trappings were too provincial for her tastes.

The first documents before her were Rlinda Kett's revised proposal for trading Theron products. Sarein scowled, reminded again of her parents' stubborn refusal to grasp an obvious opportunity. The merchant had made excellent arguments, and Sarein had continued to press Idriss and Alexa in their private chambers. But she could not convince the two that Theroc should join the Hansa, regardless of how many doors it would open for them.

Bearded Idriss had looked at his daughter as if she were a child. "Giving up independence is not a thing one should do lightly. What have we to gain compared with all that we can lose?"

Sarein felt as if she were speaking to an incomprehensible alien. *No, she thought, even Ildirans would be more sensible in this matter.*

She tapped her stylus on the electronic document, pondering the future of her world and dismayed at how difficult this supposedly simple task was going to be. She might need help.

Sarein thought wistfully of dashing Basil Wenceslas and all she had learned under the suave Chairman's gentle guidance. Basil was much older than she, but incredibly cultured and handsome, healthy, and with an animal magnetism that made him captivating to her, even more so because of the power he wielded in the Terran Hanseatic League.

On wondrous Earth, Sarein had been fed the best meals and given the finest wines. Basil had courted her, knowing that this young daughter might be a key to opening Theroc, and Sarein, realizing what he was doing, had willingly let herself be lured. She had as much to gain as did the Chairman.

She had allowed Basil to seduce her, and they became lovers for several months before her schedule



forced her to return home. He had been a considerate partner, patient yet energetic, and Sarein had come to care for him beyond her initial attraction to his knowledge and power. She loved his élan, and she recognized how much he desired everything that Sarein represented. To him, she was possible leverage to receiving more green priests.

Weary of her work now, Sarein dimmed the glow lights, stripped off her clothes, and slid naked between the slick woven sheets of her bed. She felt dizzy and restless, her mind yammering with possibilities, contract language, numbers. As she drifted off to sleep, she smiled, letting herself dwell on actual memories mixed with fantasies of Basil.

Sarein began to wonder *who* had actually seduced whom.

31  AMBASSADOR OTEMA

As soon as the old woman returned to Theroc, the weariness of so many years of service lifted from her shoulders like condorflies taking wing. A devoted green priest, Otema relished being back home among the worldtrees.

On Earth she'd had lush quarters in the diplomatic section of the Whisper Palace, and the King's gardens held many worldtrees. Still, Otema longed to touch the soil of Theroc with her bare feet, to scale the broad trunks and feel the feather touch of interlocking fronds.

At the age of 137, she was the oldest of the green priests. After so many years of symbiosis, her skin had darkened to deepest green. Otema had maintained her health through her link with the forest and her dedication to her duties, but now she was glad to come back to rest, to study, and to pray.

The worldforest seemed uneasy, as if pondering a deep secret or gradually becoming aware of a hidden concern. None of the green priests understood it completely, but they trusted the judgment of the trees and remained on guard.

As the Theron ambassador to Earth, Otema had done her work for the trees, butting heads with the ambitious Hansa. Stern and inflexible, the old woman had earned herself the nickname "Iron Lady" by resisting Chairman Wenceslas's methods of persuasion, and stonewalling the Hanseatic League's strident demands for more green priests. Otema did not yet know who would be chosen as her successor, but she did not envy that person the job that lay ahead.

As Otema disembarked from the shuttle in the landing clearing, she moved slowly but precisely, not because she was frail but because her every movement was careful. She stood under the sunlight of Theroc, looking up to the turgid sea of treetops. She spread her green-skinned arms wide, closed her eyes, and drew a deep breath to inhale the song of the worldtrees.

Even through the undertone of hidden fear, from the forest's drowsy mind she felt a flurry of welcome, a vibration of acceptance and happiness. She heard the greetings of fellow green priests who remained here, as well as a fainter echo of the others with their own treelings scattered across the Spiral Arm.

"Ah, thank you," Otema said aloud, knowing the trees would hear, as would all the other priests. She felt revitalized, a dozen years younger.

Long before many green priests reached her age, they grew so weary of life that they allowed

themselves to rejoin the forest-not dying in the usual sense, but letting themselves be absorbed into the database of trees so that their cells were incorporated in the ever-growing biological network. But Otema did not feel her work was finished yet.

Yarrood, a prominent green priest, met her at the shuttle. "We are glad to have you back with us, Otema. Father Idriss and Mother Alexa have also requested to see you, as soon as you feel refreshed."

"I feel refreshed just by being back among the worldtrees, Yarrood. There is no sense waiting." She turned and led the way, and the male priest hurried after her.

In the throne chamber, Idriss and Alexa wore formal garments of office and tall headdresses as they sat in their ornate chairs. Idriss beamed when he saw Otema, and Alexa stood up. "We are so glad you have returned, Ambassador, from your long and arduous service." Alexa gave a soft smile. "The many years on Earth have drained you. You must be pleased to commune with the trees again, here on your home soil."

Otema straightened her ambassadorial robes, which were dyed with various jungle symbols and thought patterns of the worldtrees. She bowed, her limbs flexible despite her extreme age. "Nevertheless, if the forest should ask me to continue in my capacity as ambassador, I would be glad to serve."

Father Idriss raised a large dark-skinned hand. "Have no worry about that, Otema. Your duties are in the best of hands, and our relations with Earth will build upon what you have already accomplished."

From a side alcove, their daughter Sarein emerged, wearing a traditional shawl of cocoon fiber over a stylish indigo outfit of the type that was fashionable on Earth. Looking at the young woman, Otema saw pride and ambition in Sarein's eyes. She felt a barb of uneasiness in her skin.

Mother Alexa said, "After much discussion, we have decided to appoint our daughter Sarein as the new ambassador to Earth. She has studied with the Hansa and is familiar with many powerful people on that planet, including Chairman Wenceslas. There is no one more qualified for the job."

Otema did not let her disappointment show. She narrowed her hard eyes and looked at Sarein, who seemed pleased with her appointment. "Your daughter is a very intelligent and capable young woman, but she is not a green priest. Is that not a necessary criterion for serving the worldforest and speaking for Theroc?"

Idriss made a dismissive gesture. "Not so. Do not speak for Theroc? Besides, she will have access to green priests in the Whisper Palace, should she need to consult with us through telink."

"That is not entirely the concern," Otema said. "It is a matter of . . . understanding nuances."

Sarein stepped forward, keeping a quiet face that belied her obvious undercurrent of annoyance. "On the contrary, Lady Ambassador, as the daughter of Father Idriss and Mother Alexa, I can provide a unique perspective and understanding of the worldforest and Theron ways. Unlike the green priests, however, I also have a grasp of new and changing commercial practices within the Terran Hanseatic League." She raised her eyebrows in an aloof expression. "Such matters may not be clear to someone who is immersed in a one-sided view of interstellar commerce."

Startled, Otema stood straight, realizing that she had been outmaneuvered. Disturbed by the eagerness and drive that was so apparent in Sarein's manner-yet somehow invisible to her dotting parents-Otema bowed in acquiescence. "I will do my duty." Formally, she unfastened the clasp of her ambassadorial

cloak and removed the ornate fabric, holding it out like a matador's cape. "Sarein, I present you with this emblem of your new office. Take these robes and serve the worldforest well."

Somewhat uncomfortably, Sarein accepted the cloak, but draped it over her arm rather than wrapping it around her shoulders.

Now barely clad, her skin such a dark green it was almost black, Otema excused herself from the throne chamber. She sketched a final bow to the two rulers and walked toward the exit arch. "If you need me for further consultation, I will be communing with the worldforest."

32  NIRA

Nervous yet eager, with a thrill unmatched by anything she'd ever experienced, Nira Khali went deep into the forest. Alone. There, she would survive through the grace and protection of the worldtrees.

As an acolyte, she had spent her life waiting for this moment. She had devoted every waking hour to praying and studying how to serve the sentient forest, how to become an integral part in Theroc's overall ecosystem.

With a smiling Yarrod and other proud green priests watching her, the young woman ran off, barefoot and bright-eyed. Wearing no more than a loincloth, Nira spared only a moment to wave farewell before she dashed through the low foliage and vanished into the thickening worldforest, far from the settlements.

She swallowed with uncertain nervousness at how greatly her life would soon change. Then she drew a deep breath of the spicy foliage, heard the rustle of dry leaves against her feet, and took strength in the reassuring closeness of the awesome worldtrees.

She belonged here.

After this day, Nira would no longer be alone, as a completely separate individual. Soon, if the forest accepted her, she would become a part of something much more. Joy and anticipation made her footsteps light.

"I am coming." Her voice was quiet, but spoken to the millions of sentient trees across Theroc and in satellite groves on other planets.

Yarrod had not instructed her where to go, but Nira instinctively ran away from paths where humans usually wandered. Around her and high above, the broad palmate leaves brushed together, making a sound like encouraging whispers. She followed her instincts, and the forest guided her.

She descended gentle hills and made her way into moist lowlands, where weeds grew at the confluence of tiny streams. She splashed through the bog, long blades of grass brushing her calves. The mud grew softer. She had never been here before, but some part of her recognized this place.

Creeks eddied into stagnant marshes, where the clear water became choked with tiny floating plants, creating a slurry of sludgelike vegetation. Nira looked around, seeing sunlight dapple patterns across the marsh. A person could easily get lost here, step into a deep pool of living quicksand.

But Nira allowed herself no doubts. She ran ahead without slowing, letting the forest guide her. She

knew where to find stepping-stones and fallen logs, even if they were hidden beneath the surface. She'd never heard the worldforest so clearly in her mind before.

Around her she saw ominous movement, ferocious reptiles that cruised through the weed-laden water-scuttling predators with scaled hides and long fangs. Today, Nira accepted them without fear. Muscular and fast, they glided through the soupy undergrowth, watching her every step, waiting for her to trip. But Nira hopped from one moss-slick stone to another, never losing her balance. She skipped across a slimed tree trunk and raced to the other side of the bog, leaving the sleek predators to watch her with yellow slitted eyes. Nira ran on.

Any time she could not clearly decide which direction to go, she simply flung her arms around the trunk of the nearest worldtree and pressed her naked chest against the scaled bark. When her skin touched the tree, the guiding thoughts sharpened inside her and she ran off again, energized. Nira paid no heed to the passing hours or the burbling wilderness.

Finally, the forest grew dark and thick with green shadows like smoky glass. The darkness was comforting, womblike, not ominous. Nira parted branches, tall stalks of grasses and weeds, working her way deeper into a network of vines . . . until the forest swallowed her up entirely.

She could not move. Her shoulders pressed against firm branches that tangled tighter. Insistent vines wrapped around her legs. Leaves brushed her face, her nose, her lips. Nira closed her eyes and let the forest touch her.

She felt as if she were falling, though her body remained propped up. She could barely twitch her fingers as the jungle clasped her, embraced her . . . absorbed her.

There, deep in the thickest worldforest, Nira passed uncounted hours in a mystical experience. She saw through eyes in the leaves, looking through a million faceted lenses at all perspectives of the worldforest. Information and impressions roared around her in a rushing torrent.

As if through distorted windows, she glimpsed other planets, other worldtree groves that had been planted and fostered by green priest missionaries. She'd never imagined anything so vast, so complex-yet, even with the assistance and encouragement of the worldtrees around her now, she was seeing only the tiniest glimpse of the forest's potential.

It was breathtaking.

Then the heart of the worldforest spoke to her more clearly, more terribly. She felt a distant, unformed fear of an ancient enemy. *Fire.*

Destruction.

The death of worlds.

Groves of treelings withered, whole civilizations died, and only a tiny vestige of a galaxy-spanning worldforest had survived here, isolated on Theroc.

Nira couldn't cry out, could not decide whether these terrible images and fears were history, or prophecy. Then she saw giant spherical ships, like spiked globes made of ice, a hidden empire engaged in a titanic war. *They were coming.*

Shaken by the vision, but giddy with her new connection to the world trees, Nira finally emerged from the smothering, nurturing hold of the sentient forest. Her heart hammered, and the prophecy weighed heavy in her mind and heart. This wasn't what she had expected at all.

Nira walked along as if in a daze, stepping through the bog without even looking at the ground. The feline reptiles moved away from her as if they could sense that she now wore the forest's protection. As the sunlight splashed her arms and thighs, Nira noticed without surprise that her flesh had turned a pale green. Now her epidermis was impregnated with symbiotic algae, a verdant tone that would supplement her body's strength through photosynthesis. As she aged, the green would darken.

Nira touched her close-cropped hair, and the stubby fuzz fell out like grains of pollen. Even her eyebrows and eyelashes dropped away.

In her mind now, she could hear the trees like constant companions, an organic database and a half-sleeping mind all around her. It would always be there for her. She would never experience utter silence and aloneness again. The knowledge felt glorious, the infinite thoughts and memories . . . along with the terrible fear of an impending disaster. How was she to deal with it all?

With rapid footsteps and a determined expression on her face, Nira raced back to the settlement where she could at last join the other green priests as a full member of their order. And she had to warn them of the danger the world forest had shown her.

When Nira breathlessly described her awesome vision to Yarrod, though, the green priests around him simply nodded. Their faces showed bleak foreboding.

"We already know," Yarrod said.



33 GENERAL KURT LANYAN

Because he was the commander of the Earth Defense Forces, General Kurt Lanyan could use the full facilities of the war simulations room any time he wished. Filled with computers, holographic projectors, interactive systems, and detailed navigational charts, the sealed chamber was the most sophisticated and expensive room on the entire Mars EDF base for Grid 1.

In here, with all the resources and intelligence data compiled over nearly two centuries of interaction with the Ildiran Empire, Lanyan could get his answers . . . or at least make reasonable guesses. Many questions remained about the culture, habits, reactions, and secrets of the alien civilization, and the General wanted to be prepared for any possibility.

During early Terran expansion into the solar system, before humans had access to the Ildiran stardrive, the EDF had taken possession of Mars as its sole property. The lifeless red planet had become a training base and military headquarters, operated as an outpost and staging area. The rugged Martian landscape provided any number of obstacle courses and survival scenarios. The thin atmosphere allowed Remoras to simulate aerial maneuvers with an easy switch over to space combat in the vacuum above. Lanyan loved it here.

After giving orders that he was not to be disturbed, the General had sealed himself into the war simulations room. He called up the complex virtual systems he had developed from years of testing, toying with possibilities, modifying results with every scrap of data he could acquire about the aliens. He

wished Basil Wenceslas would send out more spies, but Lanyan would make do with the available intelligence. It was enough to run plenty of scenarios.

Now he stood in the center of the room, speaking to the voice-activated control boards. The curved matte walls and floor dimmed, becoming black and star-studded. He felt as if he floated in the center of a spherical three-dimensional planetarium; it reminded him of when he was just a space soldier, training for zero-G combat, floating all alone in the vacuum, ready to shoot mirrorized drone targets.

"Display typical Ildiran Solar Navy." He put his hands on his hips and turned around. "One entire maniple. Let's make it a vigorous engagement."

Images appeared, fuzzy shapes that sharpened into accurate representations of forty-nine Ildiran warliners and cutters. Lanyan paced around the images like a shark cruising through a school of fish. The gaudy warliners were large disks tilted on their sides with streaming heat-radiator fins that made them look like deep-sea predators. Knowing what he did about the aliens, Lanyan suspected that the gaudy extensions and strange shapes were ceremonial or decorative. Peacock feathers, with no military purpose whatsoever.

The Ildirans were a stagnant race. In centuries, they had made no improvements in their technology-nor had they needed to, because their empire lived in a brain-dead sort of peace, all the aliens connected by the vague, controlling *thism* that dampened their individuality. No one would rebel against their revered Mage-Imperator, nor would the splinter colonies ever squabble with each other. He couldn't comprehend how the Ildirans justified using so much funding and resources to maintain the massive Solar Navy if they had no enemies. It made no military sense . . . unless their Mage-Imperator had other plans. General Lanyan didn't trust him.

He had even considered the unusual possibility of recruiting a few of the massive and mysterious Klikiss robots as fighters. The ancient machines worked on hazardous construction sites and seemed willing to contribute to Hansa activities, but only if it served their unspoken purposes. For the moment, though, Lanyan had tabled the idea; he didn't like to count on a "weapon" that was fundamentally incomprehensible. Rather, he would rely on his own military equipment.

Now, preparing for the virtual combat exercise inside the projection room, Lanyan walked around the holographic displays, reaching out to touch the hull of one Ildiran cutter. "Enlarge."

The image grew before the General's eyes so he could study details. The EDF had not been able to determine the specific internal layout of Ildiran warships, but these simulations were derived from actual reconnaissance images obtained during spectacular Solar Navy fleet displays. As far as Lanyan could determine, the Ildiran ceremonial maneuvers served no purpose other than to show off their military's skill in parades. Pointless showmanship.

He stepped back, assessing how the alien ships clustered in multiples of seven, moving together with a unified precision that made them both fearsome and vulnerable in their predictability.

"Now display an equivalent number of EDF vessels," he said. "Juggernaut-class battleships, Manta cruisers, Thunderhead weapons platforms, and Remora fast-attack fighters."

The air in the simulation chamber sparkled, suddenly crowded with a new set of images, familiar Terran ship designs. Lanyan had trained on all of these military vessels during his climb up the service and promotion ladder. He knew the precise fighting capabilities, weapons complements, and troop numbers of each one. The computer had put together a magnificent Terran battle group, a worthy opponent to the

Ildiran Solar Navy.

Now for the fun.

He felt like a child with a plethora of toy soldiers just spoiling for a fight. With the intelligence data stored in the EDF systems, he could stage mock combats pitting his best battleships against the Ildiran defenses.

The supposedly benevolent alien empire had never made provocative moves against Earth, nor had it threatened the EDF or any Hansa colonies. Even so, Lanyan wanted to keep himself sharp. Perhaps he would never actually face off in a military conflict against the Solar Navy, but by running simulations such as this, he could assess mistakes and make contingency plans.

As he tried to concentrate, he could feel a distracting vibration through the floor of the Mars base. Outside, troops suited in breather uniforms were running out to perform infantry maneuvers in the rusty canyons. Hybrid airships cruised through the thin atmosphere, painting targets and dropping simulated munitions.

Even after almost two centuries of peaceful relations with the Ildiran Empire, General Lanyan demanded that his troops remain well-tuned. His predecessors had grown somewhat complacent, but he was a more rigorous commander. Now, he personally studied ship simulations along with best estimates of Ildiran firepower. For the first time in history, the Earth Defense Forces were more evenly matched with the Ildiran Solar Navy than perhaps even the Mage-Imperator suspected.

"Interplanetary battle scenario," he said. "Run space-time topography of-" He paused, trying to think. "Use the Yreka system in Grid 7," he said, since he had just run an operation there. The fringe Hansa colony was near the boundaries of settled space in the Ildiran Empire, and therefore a likely battleground. Who knew what flare-ups might occur between two different species?

Lanyan pointed to empty spots in the air. "Place the planets here, here-and here." The worlds of the Yreka system materialized in the air, and a blazing sun filled the center of the room. EDF spaceships hovered in random patterns.

"Move the Solar Navy vessels into anticipated maniple configuration." The Ildiran vessels folded together into compact septas, groups of seven that coalesced into larger conglomerates of forty-nine ships.

"Now deploy EDF troops in engagement configuration delta." He backed toward the wall as the holograms took up their positions, ready for an order of battle.

Lanyan tried to imagine some provocative act that would bring the two spacefleets to such an impasse. He always chose to run his simulations privately, telling no one his intent. What he was doing could create political dangers for his career, since the Ildirans were supposedly humanity's allies and benefactors. One did not practice warfare against a friend . . . but only a fool wouldn't prepare for a worst-case scenario.

The human race was not well-versed in large-scale interplanetary warfare, considering the slow time frames and the vast distances involved. All his career, the General had felt a nagging internal clock telling him to get his forces in shape, to be prepared for any crisis, though he despaired of cutting through the politics and bureaucracy in time.

Many of the EDF's most powerful commanding officers had squabbled over the military's purpose in the Hansa worlds. They even quarreled over the appropriate names for ranks. Lanyan had been bombarded with tedious memos and arguments debating whether his title as commander-in-chief should be "Admiral"

or "General"-a ridiculous waste of time. Lanyan had finally ejected the proponents of each question, docked them pay, and reduced their ranks by a notch. If necessary, he would send them back to combat school as cadets to refresh their memory about the true purpose of the Earth Defense Forces. He called himself a General, and named his subcommanders-each one in charge of a separate grid-Admirals.

During his administration, Lanyan had enhanced EDF capabilities, and he always remained aware of the dispersal of his fleet. He spent evenings in his private quarters keeping track of his firepower distribution. The EDF had smothered brushfire rebellions and intimidated pirates such as Rand Sorengaard, but he knew that he must remain ever vigilant.

He considered the frozen battle engagement in space, scrutinizing the numerous ships ready to fall upon each other like two packs of wolves. "Engage forces. No handicap to either side."

Lanyan stood against the wall and watched the sparks fly.

The Ildiran warliners opened fire, raking swaths of damage through the EDF troops. The Terran Remoras scattered and let loose with a chaotic jazer attack from all sides. The Solar Navy inflicted many casualties by remaining in rigid phalanxes like Roman soldiers, but the EDF fought back using individual and unpredictable tactics.

As ship after ship was destroyed, wreckage scattered through space, forming navigational hazards, which the battle simulation added to the fray. The gravity wells of Yreka's planets offered complications of their own, and the battle raged on.

"Increase simulation speed. Multiply by three."

The conflict turned into a flurry of hornets, ships roaring past and destroying each other. The specific action was too fast for him to follow, but he got the general drift.

Finally, all the fires died. The space battlefield became nothing more than a graveyard of ruined vessels and smoldering hulls that drifted about like man-made meteoroids. The General scanned the wreckage, pondering which portions of the conflict to replay and analyze.

Ruefully, he saw that all of the forces on both sides had been destroyed. It was a complete massacre of Ildiran and Terran troops. "At least we didn't lose," he said aloud, and blanked the simulation.

It was his duty to look at all alternatives and to be ready with answers, should he ever be called upon. No matter what diplomats and politicians might say, Lanyan was convinced the Ildiran Empire would someday be humanity's greatest antagonist.

After all, no Earth explorer had ever encountered any other alien threat.

34

ROSS TAMBLYN

Skimming the night-side clouds of Golgen, Ross Tamblyn found the Blue Sky Mine too quiet for sleep. He paced the decks, eyes open, keeping a paternal watch on all systems. His life was invested here, his reputation and the inheritance he'd scraped together before his father had disowned him.

Before going out into the biting open wind, Ross dressed in warm garments, wrapping a clan scarf



around his neck, shrugging a many-pocketed jacket over his shoulders. He pulled the hood over his ragged-cut dark hair, adjusted the insulated gloves, and stepped out for a breath of fresh air a thousand miles above the unseen surface of the gas giant.

Ross cycled through the wind door onto his private observation deck. He loved to steal time to stare out at the milky ocean of thunderheads and cirrus veils, feeling the raw wind on his face.

Most of the white doves had settled into their roosts for the night. They cooed, sounding like bubbles under water. A few of the pet birds spread their wings and flew out in long gentle courses, riding the high breezes. Instinct drove them to search for insects, but on sterile Golgen the doves would find no food other than what Ross Tamblyn put out for them.

The chill night bore a taint of sulfurous fumes, rising chemicals and gases belched from internal weather patterns. Ross gripped the railing with his gloves, felt the breeze stir his hair and flap his hood. The atmosphere yawned beneath him through uncharted cloud layers. With increasing depth, the air grew thicker and hotter until it terminated at the planet's super-high-density metallic core, where nothing could survive.

As he peered into the silvery cloud deck, Ross noticed deep lightning storms that hid under layers of multicolored mist. The disturbance was far beneath the tentacle-strung weather probes that dangled from the skymine's belly. He could hear no thunder in the vastness of Golgen's sky, only a gentle cooing of doves.

As he watched, though, the lightning storms appeared to climb higher, a turbulence approaching the habitable atmospheric levels. The white birds stirred in their roosts, as if they could sense something ominous. It was an uneasy night.

But Ross would not have chosen to be anywhere else. The Blue Sky Mine was his home and his dream.

At the age of twenty-seven, shortly after he'd invested in this wild venture, Ross had been brash and bold-and why not, since he was already attempting to do an impossible thing? With a smile, he recalled the day he had approached Cesca Peroni, a woman he'd long admired but did not know very well. He met her in an empty tunnel in the clustered asteroids of Rendezvous. Willing to take a gamble and ready to accept failure, Ross had walked right up to her and asked her to marry him.

Cesca had raised her eyebrows and assessed the broad-shouldered young man, the outcast son of a powerful clan determined to make his own success. When she smiled at Ross, his heart had melted and he knew he'd made the correct choice.

Cesca was taken with him, though hesitant. After being trained by Speaker Jhy Okiah, the young woman was politically savvy enough to know that Ross could be "trouble." She had touched a fingertip to her full lower lip. "I admit your Blue Sky Mine is a viable commercial opportunity. But if you don't succeed and I'm already betrothed to you, then I'll have thrown away my chance to make a good marriage alliance." He couldn't tell if she was teasing him.

"I realize you might be wary of me, Cesca," he had said. "I've already been ostracized by my father, but I swear I'll make my own way. I know I can pay off the Golgen facility. My dream is to become independent and strong, and I know exactly how to accomplish it."

She shrugged. "And what would my family say? The Peronis are a powerful clan in their own right. Since I'm his only daughter, my father expects great things from me."

Ross had clasped his hands in front of him. "And well he should. But you are clearly being groomed to become the next Speaker. Surely that's enough for his pride?"

He was glad they had a chance to talk frankly, but he couldn't decide if she was playing with him, or genuinely considering her options. Though the two felt warm toward each other, their decision would be based on a reasonable analysis of consequences, rather than frivolous romantic giddiness. A true Roamer match.

"I can offer you this, Ross Tamblyn," Cesca finally said, crossing her slender arms over her chest and trying to hold a cool mask over what seemed to be an amused smile. "I will agree to wed you if you're able to pay off the Blue Sky Mine and make a profit."

He had laughed. "Easily done . . . though it might take a few years. Are you willing to wait? Give me four years."

"I'm in no hurry. Four years, then. I think I can manage to remain unmarried in the meantime."

And so, for the past three years, Ross had tended his Blue Sky Mine, never leaving, never giving up hope, never interested in reconciling with his old father. He had worked diligently in the Golgen clouds, where the harvesting grounds were a particularly rich source of stardrive fuel.

Now, at the age of thirty, he was clearly on the road to paying off the enormous industrial structure. It was a matter of pride for him, and it would allow him to prove himself in front of his father. This year, he would finally meet his goal; their marriage date had already been set.

Now, with a gust of cool wind, the huge skymine shuddered in the air. The white doves fluttered from their roosts, and four more took wing. Ross looked over the deck rail and watched the angry knot of flashing fireballs, deep lightning storms like a boiling electrical sea. Coming closer.

The intercom startled Ross as the captain on watch located him. "Big disturbance below, Chief. Something large, unlike anything we've seen before." The watch captain had spent his entire life on Roamer skymines; Ross thought the man had seen every possible atmospheric phenomenon by now.

He raised his voice as the biting wind grew louder, whistling around his hood. "Do you think we should move the skymine?"

The captain responded immediately. "The disturbance is moving too fast, Ross. We couldn't maneuver around it, even if we tried."

Then the thick cloud decks split open like a blister, and Ross strained his eyes to see, to believe. An awesome crystal shape emerged from the silent depths, a shimmering diamond globe that rose higher . . . growing larger.

"Shizz! Do you see-" The speaker crackled with static, as if the local intercom transmission had been disrupted.

Ross stared, and finally, with even greater amazement, realized what he was seeing. *A ship.*

The alien vessel was a huge sphere studded with triangular protrusions, like intersecting pyramids half caught within a glass bubble. Blue lightning crackled from the points of the pyramids, connecting them

with an electrical spiderweb, arcs jumping from tip to tip. A weapon of some kind, a bizarre structure from the deepest strata of the gas world. He couldn't imagine what sort of mind might have built it-or what it wanted.

Ross staggered backward, releasing his hold on the support rail. "Take us up!" he shouted, but he didn't know if the watch captain could hear him. "Give me another kilometer of altitude-hell, make it ten!"

Still the alien ship kept coming, silent and ominous. By comparison, the skymine looked like a gnat in the air.

Ross had a sudden vision of a sea monster on old Earth rising to devour a sailing ship. His mind couldn't even grasp the curvature of the diamond hull that reflected the clawlike lightning. "By the Guiding Star!" He had heard old Roamer tales about mysterious sightings on gas planets, a crazy survivor of the long-ago disaster on Daym-but no one had ever dreamed that such deep-core dwellers might actually exist.

All the doves scattered now, winging away from the skymine. The crystalline sphere heaved itself into the open air, growing larger and larger.

"What are you? What do you want?" His words could never be picked up through the storm and wind, nor would they be comprehended by whatever might exist within that strange vessel. He shouted as loud as he could, "We mean you no harm!"

As the enormous construction loomed over the skymine, it sent low-frequency pulses through the air, like basso words in a voice that might have been spoken by a whale in the depths of an Earth ocean. The vibrations blasted Ross, pounding his skin and making his skull shudder.

The watch captain had already sounded alarms throughout the facility, rousing all the workers from their sleep shifts. But the skymine had no weapons, no defenses.

The serpentine energy bolts reached a brilliant intensity, sparking from point to point on the sharp protrusions, then leaped outward. Ross shouted, covering his eyes.

Electrical lances tore open the skymine complex, slicing apart the ekti reactors, chopping through the storage tanks, detonating the exhaust nozzles. Another explosion shook the decks.

The Blue Sky Mine lurched, tilted . . . then began to plummet.

Exposed on the deck, Ross could barely hang on. The white doves, shrieking, flew farther away into the sky, though with the skymine gone, they would never find another place to land. The doves would fly without food or rest until they died from sheer exhaustion.

A second blast from the spike-studded alien globe split the Blue Sky Mine down its structural spine. The components broke apart, and flaming wreckage tumbled like meteors into the bottomless sky.

Ross could hear the screams of his crew. He felt his heart ready to explode with helplessness. He could not even answer the strange, vibrating words the exotic alien had spoken. The lurch of another explosion hurled him from the observation platform out into the open air with the rest of the debris.

High above, the destructive alien ship observed what it had done and sent no further signal.

Ross plummeted, arms outstretched, his clothes flapping around him. He stared in horrified disbelief at the complete ruin of everything he valued . . . before the thickening clouds swallowed him up.

He still had more than a thousand miles to fall.

35 ESTARRA

In the quiet depths of the worldforest, the time had come for the worm hive to hatch. Exuberant, Estarra dragged her brother Beneto through the forest. They hurried in the brightening dawn out to the dense thicket far from the fungus-reef village.

Beneath the embrace of the whispering canopy, the jungle stirred around them. Beneto kept his hands outstretched, so that he remained in contact with and attuned to the overall forest, brushing his fingertips against the armored trunks.

"It's just up here," she said. "You've never seen a worm hive so large!"

Beneto smiled at her. His eyes were half closed, but he walked without a single misstep, without tangling himself in the undergrowth. "You're absolutely right, little sister-the trees have told me the hive will hatch within an hour."

She ran ahead, and though Beneto didn't seem to increase his pace, he kept up with her, not even breaking into a sweat.

From the best viewing spot, Estarra looked up to stare at the papery structure. Beneto leaned against a worldtree so he could watch through his own eyes as well as the senses of the forest. Small butterfly-things twirled in the air. Estarra waved her hands to brush them away, but none of them bothered Beneto.

Suspended on the worldtree trunk, the grayish white hive pulsed like the disembodied heart of a huge organism. The pupating worms had finished their hibernation and were ready to emerge to the next phase of their lives.

She heard a clicking, chewing sound and knew the giant worms were stirring through the tangled passages of the nest, questing for an exit after digesting the body of their now-useless queen. "Beneto, do the trees hate these worms because they're parasites that cause damage?"

With a calm smile, her brother rested a palm against a scaled trunk. He sent the question into the intricate mind of the forest, though he already knew the answer. "The trees say no, little sister. Hive worms are part of the natural order of things. These parasites are no more malicious than most-and they are useful in their own way."

"You mean by leaving their empty hives for us to live in?" The papery wall bulged outward as the shadowy tubular forms of worms prepared to break out.

"More than that. You will see in a moment." Beneto ran his fingers along the tree bark, continuing his telink. "Ah, here. It is time."

The hive wall split open, and a mouth ringed with teeth probed into the air. More heads broke free,

writhing like snakes in a disturbed nest. The hive worms spilled outward, their segmented bodies plated with a thick purple armor. Dropping to the ground like eels in flight, they plunged headfirst into the soil, chewing into the forest loam like carrion eaters burrowing into rotten flesh.

Estarra was amazed at the frenzy of activity. Beneto put out a green-skinned hand to hold her back. "Not too close. At this stage, they are ravenous, and anything that gets in their way is considered food."

Estarra did not need to be warned twice, but she marveled at the infestation. "So what happens to the worms after they go into the ground?"

Beneto smiled. "The trees keep watch, just as they watch everything. It is part of the cycle. Now they will tunnel deep under the ground and aerate the soil. They will establish underground colonies until mature worms emerge again, slither up the trunks of the trees, and build new hives."

Soon, all the worms were gone, leaving the abandoned hive like a tattered haunted house up on the tree. The papery walls had been broken open, but the tunnels inside remained intact. "Now the hard work begins," Estarra said, but she didn't look at all disappointed.

The chambers would need to be cleaned, some structural walls shored up, new windows cut and doorways placed in more convenient locations. But the worm hive was the ready-made framework for a new Theron village, into which the crowded fungus-reef settlement could expand. Estarra would be celebrated for her prowess in finding this new conglomerate dwelling.

Beneto received a message from the nearest tree and smiled at his little sister. "Now we must hurry back to see Mother and Father. We will want to be there when the shuttle lands."

"What shuttle?" Estarra said.

Beneto beamed at her. "Reynald has just returned."

Estarra pressed forward with her family members to greet her older brother as soon as he emerged from the craft in the clearing. During the months he'd been gone on his peregrination, Reynald had changed. His eyes were full of wonder and deeper understanding. He had visited many exotic places, witnessed events, and learned about a great many topics. He seemed overwhelmed by the sheer number of people coming to embrace him.

Sarein was full of questions, but little Celli dominated the scene by jabbering nonstop, as if her brother was interested in every single thing she had done during his absence. Promising his youngest sister a long chat later, Reynald accepted the smothering attention with good grace, smiling and making comments at appropriate points while his attention was more focused on Father Idriss and Mother Alexa. Their faces were filled with love and relief that he had come home.

"Now do you feel more prepared to be a leader, my son?" Idriss smiled through his black beard.

The young man gave himself a deprecating smile. "I have experienced plenty, that is true, but now I feel that I know less than ever before."

Alexa kissed him on the cheek. "Then Reynald, my dear, you are indeed more prepared to be a leader."

That night, Father Idriss called a family banquet, insisting that Reynald would have enough time to speak with other representatives later. Alexa and Idriss and all their children wanted to hear him tell his stories

first.

This diminished the impact of Estarra's news about the worm hive. Beneto gentled her, knowing there would be time enough for that announcement.

During courses of larva steaks, yeasty bread smeared with spreadnuts, and a messy dessert of his favorite candied splurts, Reynald spoke, and everyone else listened. Sarein did her best to keep Celli shushed and attentive, though the girl still asked far too many questions.

Reynald's eyes sparkled as he told his news. "Best of all, I got along very well with the Ildiran Prime Designate Jora'h." He turned, grinning, toward his brother Beneto. "And he granted me permission to send two green priest representatives to Mijistra. Oh, it's a wonderful place!"

"And what will these green priests do there?" Beneto asked, intrigued.

"They will have access to the *Saga of Seven Suns*-the complete Ildiran epic, not just the edited versions the Terran scholars have been allowed to read." Reynald smiled, knowing what a stir his news would cause among the green priests. "Other than a racial reverence for their Mage-Imperator, this precise oral history is the closest thing to a religion the Ildirans seem to have. They believe they are all part of a grand plan, a cosmic story line that must work its way to the end, like a plot concocted by an omnipotent audience."

Reynald leaned closer to his brother. "Jora'h will let you study their billion-line poem, all the history and legends of the Ildiran Empire. It's said that no human can read the entire document, even if he devotes a lifetime to the study."

Beneto seemed dazzled, knowing how much the worldforest would enjoy the input. The prospect of a marvelous new story seemed to bring him hope to mitigate the trees' recent uneasiness. "This will be a time of great rejoicing for the worldforest. It is not every day that the trees get access to such a wealth of information."

Estarra stared through the fungus-reef chambers to the shadowy greenness of the jungle, as if expecting to see the worldtrees dancing for joy. Even without such a miracle, though, the delight on Beneto's face seemed reward enough.

"How were the Roamers?" Idriss asked. "We know so little about their culture."

"I doubt you accomplished much with them," Sarein said sourly. "They probably tried to entangle you in a marriage alliance."

Reynald smiled at his sister. "Don't underestimate the Roamers, Sarein. In fact, that may have been our largest mistake of all. They seem very open to closer ties with us. One of their leaders, Cesca Peroni, is quite captivating."

"They want our green priests, I bet," Sarein said.

"Actually, they refused my offer." He enjoyed his sister's surprise. "The Roamers prefer to keep their secrets and don't really want any green priests."

"That's a switch from what we usually hear," Idriss said under his breath.

"I suggested we might arrange for direct deliveries of ekti to Theroc, without going through approved Hansa intermediaries. Think of the cost we'll save."

"Think of how upset the Hansa will be," Sarein said, alarmed. "Do we want to invite so much trouble and ill will, considering that we don't use much ekti for ourselves anyway?"

"Still," Mother Alexa said, plucking a slice of pair-pear from a tray, "every step of independence benefits us in the long run."

36  RAYMOND AGUERRA

When the nauseating effects of the stunner wore off, the pounding in Raymond's head masked the fact that he was lying on a plush, warm bed. He slowly returned to consciousness and noticed that he seemed to be floating. His body was surrounded by slick sheets, lying on a comfortable gelatin-filled mattress. His fingers twitched, his thighs clenched.

Raymond opened his eyes, and the flood of light sent sledgehammers of pain into his skull. He groaned deep in his throat, but it came out only as a faint sound. The last thing he remembered was the blond-haired man threatening him with the stunner, his professional-looking companions hustling Raymond toward the unmarked vehicle. *Kidnapping him!*

He sat up and forced himself to endure the wash of nausea. Someone had taken him here. Was it a group of perverts out to snatch any young man—or had they been after *him* in particular? Why would anyone be interested in a poor kid with no prospects and a family that could barely make ends meet?

His family! Now he remembered the flaming wreckage of his apartment complex, the barricade lines and security troops, the fire-suppression engineers and their copters dumping extinguishant foam all over the smoldering remains.

There's nothing left inside but ashes and dental work.

When the orchestra of ragged nerve endings quieted to a mild clamor, he opened his eyes again and looked around him. He lay in a small chamber without windows. The walls held fine tapestries; delicate vases stood on pedestals in the corners. A basin filled with trickling water made quiet music.

He needed to know what had happened to his mother and brothers!

He smelled faint perfumes and noticed several stubby candles—real candles—set into small alcoves. He eased himself from the sloshing bed, which tried to wrap itself around him. The light seemed to come from everywhere, a muted illumination from the fabric of the wall itself. He couldn't understand where he was.

A door opened from a corridor outside the room. Standing on the threshold was a lean, suave-looking man with hair the color of new steel. His active gray eyes and smooth skin challenged any estimate of his age. Beside him stood an old-style Teacher-model compy with a dull body casing.

The man studied Raymond with a calculating smile, but the compy spoke first. "My estimate of the duration of the stun pulse was accurate to within ten minutes, Chairman Wenceslas."

"Excellent, OX, considering you had to guess so many important parameters."

Recognizing the man's name, Raymond clamped his mouth shut to prevent himself from making indignant demands. Such protestations would make him look foolish and helpless, and these people would tell him whatever they wished, whenever they wished. Warily, he bided his time, meeting the Chairman's intent gaze.

Wenceslas gave Raymond a thin-lipped smile. "Very good, Peter. You're exercising some restraint already, even without training." He turned to the compy. "OX, you will have a very good student here."

Raymond's head still pounded. "Who's Peter? My name's Raymond Aguerra. I live-"

Wenceslas held up a well-manicured hand. "*Peteris* the name we have chosen for you. It's best if you get used to it from the start."

The old Teacher compy came forward with heavy but precise steps. "I am aware, Peter, that the aftereffects of a stunner are physically unpleasant. I have an analgesic injection, or if you prefer, a sweet-flavored syrup containing the same medication. I would not want discomfort to distract you from the important business Chairman Wenceslas wishes to discuss with you."

Raymond recoiled at receiving medication from these people. He still didn't know why they had brought him here or why they were interested in him. But again, he bit back an outcry, thinking his situation through. He had been here helpless in this chamber, stunned unconscious. They could have poisoned him or drugged him at any point. Why would they wait for him to wake up and then drug him again? Who would benefit, if he insisted on remaining miserable?

After a careful pause, he said, "Which one acts faster? I need to get rid of this headache."

OX came to the side of the bed. "The injection should take effect almost immediately. I will try to make it as painless as possible." The small compy reached forward with a metal hand. Before Raymond could even look down, a tiny needle danced out of the fingertip and into his arm. Raymond was more startled than hurt by the act. He rubbed his arm, but could feel no residual sting. As the Teacher compy had promised, the pain began to diminish within seconds.

"My name is Raymond," he said again, drawing a deep breath. "Why have you brought me here? What do you want?"

"We want you to reach your potential, young man," Wenceslas said. He came forward to sit on the end of Raymond's bed, folding his hands in his lap in an oddly paternal mannerism. "We have a great opportunity in store for you, something that will benefit you in ways that you've never imagined, and it will also give the Terran Hanseatic League a solid future."

Raymond turned away, glad to feel the aches and the muscle spasms receding. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Do we have any word about my mother, my brothers? I saw the fire."

"There were no survivors, young man. The apartment complex was a complete loss."

OX said, "Allow me to offer my sincere condolences, young Peter."

"My name is Raymond."



"Your name is Peter," said Basil. "Now please listen while I explain. The first thing you must accept is that you are not who you were."

OX walked over to a bureau in the corner of the room and returned with an ornate, gold-framed looking glass. With a steady metal hand the Teacher compy held the reflective surface in front of Raymond so that he could stare in shock at his appearance. His hair was now completely *blond*, a straw-colored yellow that extended all the way to the roots. His eyebrows had a different tint, above eyes that were a startling greenish blue instead of the deep brown he had been born with. He saw no evidence of contact lenses or implants. His eyes had been *changed*, and he was willing to bet that his hair and eyes had been genetically altered, not just colored. He was at a loss for words.

"It's really quite a remarkable resemblance to our King Frederick, don't you think?" Wenceslas said. Raymond had never actually studied the King's facial features other than stylized likenesses on posters, placards, and a few old-fashioned currency notes.

OX withdrew the looking glass and bustled back to the bureau. Raymond glanced around the chamber again, just to avoid looking at the Chairman or the compy. He noted two shadowy figures outside the door. Guards, probably. His room had an overstuffed sitting chair, a tray with luscious-looking tarts, and a decanter of juice. His stomach growled.

Wenceslas gave a signal to OX. The Teacher compy brought over the refreshments.

"You are being held in a hidden chamber beneath the Whisper Palace," the Chairman said. "Soon, you will have access to everything you could possibly want. OX will help you learn history, philosophy, politics, as well as the subtle nuances of court etiquette and your eventual responsibilities."

"What responsibilities?" Raymond sipped the tart red juice, then gobbled a honey-soaked wafer, perhaps the most delicious pastry he had ever eaten.

"Prince Peter, you are the son and heir of King Frederick. Obviously, the public will notice the family resemblance. When you are ready, we will introduce you into the public eye. The populace will accept you."

"Prince?" Raymond nearly spilled his remaining juice on the coverlet. "Crimson rain, I'm not a Prince! I've never even met King Frederick. I-"

Wenceslas smiled strangely. "We create our own truth around here, young Peter. Don't worry about that."

"But what happened to the real royal family? I've never even heard of Prince Peter before now."

"That is because he didn't exist before now." The Chairman folded his hands, interlocking his fingers. "We have always kept the royal family a private matter in order to give the Hansa room to do as we like. We have plenty of flexibility."

The man poured himself a glass of juice. "King Frederick's real wife died more than two decades ago. Over the years, he's had numerous concubines and a few bastard children, but none of them has the potential we need. Certainly no true leadership qualities."

Raymond looked at the Chairman, disbelief growing as the realization sank in. "You want *me* to replace the King?"

"After you have been properly trained," OX said.

"We selected you from among hundreds of potential candidates, Peter. The Hansa is convinced that you are someone the public can cheer and love."

"But it's . . . it's not right!" Raymond insisted.

Wenceslas looked at him calmly. "That's exactly how King Frederick took the throne many years ago, and King Bartholomew before him, and King Jack before him." Raymond reeled, and the Chairman continued. "We have been watching you for years and selected you from many candidates. Honest, young man, we believe you are our best hope." His expression became sadder. "Unfortunately, the terrible fire that destroyed your home has forced us to move now. We would have preferred a more comfortable and orderly introduction."

Raymond had trouble accepting the massive shift to his understanding of the world. "But . . . what will happen to Frederick?"

"After the efficient transfer of leadership, the old man will have his features altered and we'll send him into a comfortable retirement on Relleker. King Frederick has served quite well for almost half a century, but his mind isn't as sharp as it was. Truly, I think his heart is no longer in it. We need someone vibrant and viable to bring energy back to the Hansa."

"I can't believe this." Raymond stared at the metal mask of the Teacher compy. "Someone will know. You'll be caught."

Basil Wenceslas smiled. "Who could possibly know? Forgive me, young man, but Raymond Aguerra was a nobody. With your features altered like this, who would even dream of making the connection? After the terrible apartment fire, everyone will believe you died in the disaster, just like the other unfortunate victims."

Raymond blinked back tears, and his throat trembled as the ache in his heart began to turn numb. His mother would have said that this sudden opportunity (and, yes, he always looked for opportunities) was his reward in the face of such incredible sadness. She would probably have read him a printed Unison pamphlet with similar platitudes. He would have given almost anything to have his family back, but he could not spurn this chance. Never in his life had such a tremendous possibility presented itself to him.

The Chairman's winning smile showed dazzling teeth. "Look at this as a way to bring a silver lining to this dark cloud of tragedy. We've already rewritten the past, and we need you, young Peter, to help us write the future."

37  JESS TAMBLYN

Returning to his clan holdings under the ice sheath of Plumas, Jess Tamblyn found his old father as stern and crotchety as ever. It gave him all the more reason to look for any excuse to return to Rendezvous as soon as possible. He still hadn't been able to see Cesca.

Bram Tamblyn had dark, eager eyes that flashed as Jess talked about Ross's activities on Golgen, but after a moment the old clan leader held up a calloused hand. "Enough. We won't waste time spreading

gossip about a man who is no longer part of our family." This stubborn game had gone on for years, and Jess doubted anything would change.

Living close to his father was stifling. Within a week Jess had concocted urgent duties that required him to fly back to Rendezvous. His younger sister Tasia had begged to come along, and Jess took pity on her. "She'll be fine, Dad," he said, "and who knows, this time we may even track down the *Burton*."

Bram gave a snort. "Our clan is making enough money in the solid-water business. No need for you to shirk your duties and go chasing myths."

"I would never shirk my duties, Dad-you know that. But the *Burton* exists. It's still out there, somewhere." The large, slow-moving vessel was the only one of the original eleven generation ships that had never been found.

"Even if you recovered it, it would be an old wreck by now, worth nothing."

"Worth a place in history, Dad," Tasia said brightly.

Bram covered his indulgent smile with a sour look, and Jess hurried to his personal spacecraft with his young sister in tow. Tasia's personal compy EA started to follow them, but the girl quickly thought of several busywork tasks and sent the compy away.

By the time they reached the cracked frozen surface of the moon, he and Tasia were already chuckling with each other. They flew away from the water-pumping stations that penetrated the miles-thick icecap where hydrostatic pressure squeezed liquid water up to supply posts on the surface.

"Can I fly?" Tasia sat beside him, eager to take the spaceship controls.

He shot his sister an appraising look. She was young and spunky, just turning sixteen, and glad to be anywhere but Plumas. She had a button nose, blue eyes, and ragged brown hair that she cut herself whenever it grew too long and annoying. Her snappy wit made her delightful as a traveling companion but wicked as a verbal opponent if anyone tried to insult her.

"Will the ship take that kind of abuse?" he asked.

"I'd call it exercise."

"Later," he said. "Right now I'm only interested in getting out of here. I'll let you dock at Rendezvous."

As Plumas dwindled behind them and Jess set course, Tasia called up his past expedition logs. "Are we really going to look for the *Burton* again? Found any new clues?"

"No, that was just an excuse to bring you along before Dad could find a way to keep you occupied." He stared into the streaming stars. "I don't think the *Burton* will ever be found, given the time and distance and the hazards of space. Losing only one out of eleven generation ships seems an acceptable percentage to me, considering their old-fashioned technology."

Tasia gave him a quirky smile. "Probably a better chance of finding the *Burton* than of re-establishing peace between Dad and Ross."

Jess sighed. "Still, it's our responsibility to work hard to soften the old man's heart. Ross is getting

married to Cesca in a year or so, and we can use that as an excuse to tie our family together."

Tasia, too warm after living under the ice sheet, adjusted the temperature inside the ship. "He'll come around, Jess. Dad is too smart a businessman to keep up a feud with the husband of the new Speaker."

"You may be right." Jess let her take the controls and went to make them some pepperflower tea, hoping to avoid further discussion of the subject of marriage. Every time he thought of the upcoming wedding, his heart felt heavy and he was afraid his love for Cesca Peroni would show on his face.

Tasia was always delighted to see the glittering asteroids and artificial structures of Rendezvous, and Jess was likewise delighted to see the joy on his sister's face.

Clan representatives came forward to greet them in a flurry of layered cloaks and jerkins, all embroidered with family markings and beautiful designs. Already considering her own marriage prospects, Tasia flirted with the young men, though she would no doubt be even pickier than her father.

Rendezvous was a place where all Roamers could speak their minds, make business deals, leave messages for extended groupings, interact with cousins and distant family members. Because the clan units were small, exchanging unmarried men and women was vital to keeping their culture and their people strong.

Tasia dashed off to speak with friends her own age. Adaptable to the asteroids' low gravity, she scuttled through the tunnel complexes, running toward the domed greenhouses. She hadn't bothered to retrieve her spacesuit from Jess's ship, but if she wanted to venture outside, there would be plenty of skinsuits for her to borrow. She could always rig something up.

With a mixture of dread and eagerness, Jess crossed a transparent connectube to the central asteroid, where he would at last deliver formal greetings to Cesca from Ross. Ancient Jhy Okiah clasped his hand in a sinewy grip, then flipped a glance at her protégée, who couldn't tear her eyes off of him.

Self-consciously, the Speaker found urgent business. "If you two will excuse me, I have an appointment with the mother of Rand Sorengaard. Her clan wishes to submit formal apologies for her son's actions."

He and Cesca looked at each other in silence. Jess could barely cover his grin of admiration for her. Cesca's olive skin and dark hair drew him like a magnet. She smiled with her generous mouth. "It's good to see you again, Jess," she said, a bit too formally.

He was forced to respond with a stiff bow, sweeping his cape to one side. "When last I was at Golgen, my brother charged me with delivering you a set of greetings. He expects the Blue Sky Mine to turn a profit this year at last."

Jess opened a voluminous pocket in his embroidered vest. He withdrew a strand of metallic black spheres, a necklace of ebony skypearls. He held it up in the artificial light. Cesca's dark eyes looked more beautiful to him than the midnight sheen of the valuable gems.

"I don't think I've ever seen skypearls before," Cesca said. "And I certainly don't own any. I don't know what to say, except for you to pass along my thanks to him."

The tiny spherical nodules were formed inside ekti reactor chambers, concentrated impurities taken from the atmospheric samples during harvesting. Skypearls clung to the walls of the reactors and were occasionally found during routine cleaning. Ross had been saving them for years, one or two at a time.

He had given his fiancée a string of twenty-five, worth a fabulous fortune.

Jess dropped them into the soft palm of her hand, letting his fingers brush hers so he could feel an instant of her touch. His skin prickled with a flush of sweat. This encounter was sweet agony.

Jess tried to think of something to say in the uncomfortable lull in their conversation, because he did not dare voice the words he longed to speak. Cesca withdrew to a too-careful distance, and her lips parted as if ready to whisper something.

Then, bounding through the low-gravity tunnels, pushing off with boots and hauling along with strong fingers, a broad-shouldered man burst into the Speaker's chambers. "I need to see Jhy Okiah right away." He looked around, taking in the two young lovers but dismissing them. Then suddenly he recognized Jess. "Shizz! This concerns clan Tamblyn! Oh, but I have terrible news. Where's the Speaker?"

Jess recognized Del Kellum, a clan leader and manager of the massive hidden shipyards in the rings of Osquivel. Sometimes, Kellum served as a cargo driver, just moving with restless feet among the other Roamer settlements and facilities. He was a middle-aged man, hale and gregarious, but now he looked terror stricken.

"What is it?" Jess asked. "Weren't you supposed to make the most recent run from the Blue Sky Mine?"

Cesca stepped forward. "I am the Speaker's representative. You may deliver your news to me. What's happened?"

"Blue Sky Mine is gone!" Kellum said. "Destroyed! I was inbound to Golgen when we heard an emergency message. They said they were under attack by some strange kind of spacecraft that came up from deep in the clouds. Said they'd never seen anything like it before."

He gulped air, and his breath hitched. "But when I got there, I found only a few floating pieces of wreckage blasted into high orbit, and a faint residue of contaminants and smoke in the cloud layer that Ross liked to mine."

Despite the low gravity of Rendezvous, Jess slumped backward, unable to keep his balance. He reached out, and Cesca instinctively grasped his hand in disbelief. "What about the escape pods?" Jess said. "The flight deck. Ross should've been able to get his crew away."

"Nothing," said Del Kellum. "It's all gone. Somebody, something, struck without warning and killed every living soul on the Blue Sky Mine."

38: 

REMEMBERER VAO'SH

With heroism, passion, and romance, the saga of the Ildiran Empire continued to unfold. As senior rememberer at the court of the Mage-Imperator Cyroc'h, Vao'sh kept alive the legends and history of his people for the next generation of fascinated listeners.

He remained attuned to any reports of dramatic incidents across the Spiral Arm. Though peaceful times were more pleasant for a population to live in, they made for poor storytelling. Until now, the splinter colony on Crenna had had no standing in the *Saga of Seven Suns*, appearing merely as a footnote, more

for bookkeeping purposes than dramatic ones. It was only a fledgling settlement, the birthplace of no great heroes. Unremarkable.

Following the blindness plague, however, the tragedy of Crenna would comprise many dark stanzas. It was a rememberer's job to make certain it would never be lost.

After enduring a lengthy quarantine aboard Adar Kori'nh's warliners, the evacuated survivors were welcomed back to Mijistra, shaken but relieved. The colonists looked weak and damaged, but under the never-waning light of Ildira's seven suns, the survivors felt through *thethism* the healing presence of their godlike Mage-Imperator. Here, they would recover . . . but they would never forget.

Vao'sh needed to hear and then compile the true story of what had happened. The *Sagah* had to be accurate, as well as compelling.

Taking meticulous care with his toilette, Vao'sh oiled the expressive lobes on his lumpy face. His flush colors would be prominent and bright as he spoke the story aloud to all enraptured listeners, once he had taken it into his heart and learned it in detail.

To protect his throat and his voice, Vao'sh drank his daily mixture of warm syrups, then sang wordless notes to keep his lucent voice in its proper range. Then he went to his first meeting with Dio'sh, the only surviving rememberer from Crenna.

Vao'sh met his younger kithman on a sun-soaked deck of the Prism Palace. Dio'sh had closed his eyes and placed his hands palms up on a polished tabletop, as if the brilliant sunlight could purge him of the taint of nightmares. Dio'sh retained a perfect, horrific recollection of everything he had experienced.

Seeing his expected visitor, Dio'sh turned his expressive eyes toward the master historian. The younger rememberer's sense of relief was apparent as his fleshy lobes colored with appreciation and respect. "I am honored that you've come to speak to me, Rememberer Vao'sh. I am eager to share what I know, though I am afraid to relive it."

"Rememberers do not create stories," Vao'sh reminded him, "we merely tell them. And we must tell them accurately and well."

Dio'sh bowed his head. "I will do my best, Rememberer."

Vao'sh waited, saw his comrade summoning a host of terrifying thoughts. The coloration of his skin began to turn grayish, as if he faced an insurmountable fear. Dio'sh flinched.

"Crenna," Vao'sh nudged. "You were there. You were witness to the courage, the tragedy, the unstoppable events." He reached out to touch the historian's trembling hand. "If you do not pass on your impressions, then all the tragedy that occurred will be for naught. The victims and the heroes must be remembered. You are a rememberer, Dio'sh."

The younger man took a deep breath and opened his eyes, still looking haunted but now more determined. "Ildiran splinter colonies have endured sickness before," Dio'sh began. "We remember the losses of children and families who succumbed to fevers, toxins, or genetic diseases. But this . . ." He looked up sharply, his lobes flushing scarlet. "What sort of vindictive plague would first steal our *sight*, take from us the comfort of blessed light-and then make us die alone in quarantine, isolated from other Ildirans, lest we continue to spread this terrible disease?"

Dio'sh clenched his fist and held it out in front of him. Vao'sh could feel a deep horror growing within him. Raised under constant sunlight, surrounded always by comforting crowds, the Ildiran people had two primal phobias: fear of darkness, and fear of isolation.

Dio'sh continued, seeing nothing but his memories. "Crenna has a large moon, so that even during the night hours enough light shines down upon the landscape. We lit every home, every street, so that our central town was filled with illumination. We managed to drive back the shadows-but what good are all the torches in the Empire, once a disease robs you of sight? After the plague struck him blind, the Crenna Designate stood in the square and stared directly at the sun, but still he saw only blackness."

Purple and green patterns of dismay and horror rippled across his lobed features. Vao'sh shuddered but made no comment, filing away every word. He could picture the Mage-Imperator's son, the Crenna Designate, sightless, staring up into the blazing sun. That would make good drama. This section of history would be recounted and modified until the final, permanent words were chosen and entered into the *Saga of Seven Suns*.

"We do not know how the sickness began. On Crenna our scientist kithmen were mainly agricultural specialists, not bacteriological researchers. Within days of the first recorded case, a dozen more people fell sick-and then all those who tended the victims also succumbed. We have never known a plague so virulent, so contagious, and so deadly.

"Through *thethism*, every person in the town could feel the victims' growing terror as the retinal damage progressed and the first sufferers fell blind. We knew that we should quarantine the colonists-but how could we look at a sick child, *a blind child*, and tell him we must leave him alone, isolated from the comfort and support of our people? That seemed worse than the disease itself. After the blindness, the nerve damage spread to other parts of the body until finally the lungs could no longer breathe, the heart could no longer beat."

Dio'sh drew a shuddering breath. "Then the Crenna Designate died, cutting off our direct link with the Mage-Imperator. Even the small comfort of *thethism* was then weakened. How could we endure? With each death, panic increased, our numbers dwindled, *thethism* frayed further. Soon, we were well below the critical number for a splinter.

"Those of us who were healthy locked ourselves in the few remaining homes, but even then we made mistakes, and the plague got inside. We burned the victims, hoping that the fire would at least symbolically return the light."

He looked directly at Vao'sh, as if begging the master historian to rewrite the tale. "We didn't know what to do! We were paralyzed, and the plague continued to spread."

Vao'sh touched his comrade's wrist. "That is enough for now, Dio'sh."

He swallowed hard, his thoughts spinning. He knew the Crenna plague and the abandonment of an entire colony must become a vital part of the *Saga*, yet Vao'sh hesitated to include too many horrific details, fearing that it might cause a panic.

"Perhaps you should accompany me in a little while," he suggested. "We will tell a happy story, the Tale of Bobri's and the Silver Ball. The children enjoy that one, and I love to entertain children. You will find it refreshing, as well."

Dio'sh looked hesitant, intimidated. "I prefer to be quiet, close to people, but not interacting with them. I

would not be a good entertainer now. Perhaps I can serve a better purpose as a scholar."

Vao'sh frowned, and his disapproval cast stern colorings on his fleshy flaps. "Other kiths cannot recall every detail as we do. The *Sagais* written down, but as rememberers, Dio'sh, our true purpose is to spin tales and to educate. To bring the legends and history alive. Do not forget it. All Ildirans can hear the songs and imagine the tales, but *w*e must be the presenters. It is who we are."

Dio'sh's shoulders slumped. "It is who we are, though sometimes it is a difficult thing."

39:  DAVLIN LOTZE

The Ildirans had turned tail and fled from Crenna, leaving their colony up for grabs. The Hansa had paid a substantial fee to the Mage-Imperator for clear title and the unchallenged right to settle there, within the accepted boundaries of the Ildiran Empire. The Hanseatic League considered the already tamed planet a remarkable prize; the Mage-Imperator considered the unexpectedly large payment a boon.

Clearly, neither race understood the other.

After medical researchers and microbiologists had tested the Ildiran blindness plague and declared that humans were immune to the scourge, Terran transport ships landed on the world. Volunteers had filled out their applications long ago, prepared to dash off to a new home as soon as another planet became available.

Official Hansa policy encouraged expansion by securing a foothold on numerous worlds and fostering population increases on already settled colonies. Suddenly, for the first time in civilized human history, people had all the room to expand and all the resources they could possibly need. And, being humans, they did their best to make use of what was available. Every scrap of it.

After the first transport ships disgorged the wide-eyed settlers, Davlin Lotze maintained a quiet though interested scrutiny of everything around him. He joined the first group of eager colonists in the ghost town of Crenna, acting like all the others, though he had a special mission of his own.

The gaudy Ildiran warliners had hastily evacuated the Crenna system, crowded full of frantic survivors. When rushed and frightened, people made mistakes. They accidentally left important things behind. Chairman Basil Wenceslas, working through his operative Davlin Lotze, was counting on that.

A second team of medical specialists had already gone into the evacuated town, analyzing the groundwater, studying local microorganisms, and making certain there was no other local threat to the new colonists. Some studies had suggested that humans and some Ildiran kiths could actually interbreed, in defiance of commonsense genetic rules; therefore, it was an ironic twist of fortune that the blindness plague organism could not cross species lines.

Though uneasy with microbiological superstition, the new batch of settlers was perfectly safe. Davlin Lotze did not doubt it for a moment, but chose not to reassure the others, preferring instead to watch their reactions. Interesting sociology. He already knew a great many things that he would keep to himself, until Chairman Basil Wenceslas debriefed him.

The Chairman had assigned him to Crenna, providing forged papers that identified him as a simple colonist. According to the dossier available to his fellow settlers, Davlin was competent in small-scale



agriculture and had a handful of useful skills such as woodworking, plumbing, and engine repair. The colonists happily accepted him as one of their group, drawn together by an ambition to make a new home for themselves.

Aboard the transport ship, Davlin had made several acquaintances and would continue to develop those relationships, though he would never allow any person close enough to call him a friend. He didn't know how long his assignment would require him to remain on Crenna. He supposed he would stay here until he found worthwhile material about the Ildirans.

Davlin Lotze was the Chairman's handpicked "observer," and he enjoyed the job. He knew what he was, though he chose not to use the term "spy." His experience as an exosociologist was not marked in his travel papers or résumés, but he had a special ability to look at an alien culture, fathom its mysteries, and make sense of the exotic nuances.

The rushed evacuation of this colony provided Chairman Wenceslas with an opportunity to learn facts that the Mage-Imperator might prefer to keep hidden. Davlin would compile reports to be returned to Earth with the frequent supply runs that would be necessary during the colony's first transition year.

A flotilla of laden ships finally landed in the rich but empty farmland outside the main Ildiran city. Personnel carriers came down first, disgorging anxious pioneers who had sat still for too long during the passage. Next came ship after ship of cargo transports containing equipment, supplies, and prepackaged housing units. It was a standard-issue "new-colony" drop, though the previous inhabitants had done some of the initial groundwork for them.

During their journey to Crenna, the colonists had studied maps and analyzed satellite images. In open-deck meetings, they had sketched boundaries and divided the arable land according to lots drawn by the settler families. When the vessels landed, though, the people crowded out, rushing to see the town that the aliens had left for them. Many settlers grumbled to see how much of the settlement had been burned in the Ildirans' desperate attempts to stop the spreading plague. The new settlers had hoped to use more of the existing infrastructure.

As the frenzied activity progressed, Davlin went to the equipment transport and powered up a heavy crawler. He knew how to drive the burly machine, designed to haul crates and equipment into position for distribution among the colonists.

Three of the men he had met onboard were blustering and arguing with each other, pointing fingers and engaging in red-faced shouting. It was no surprise. A system of dominance had to be established on Crenna just as much as systems for streets, water, and food distribution. Though it did not show on his official record, Davlin was more educated than any of them, and he could have been a primary leader. But his job was to stay in the background and learn what he could.

A tall man with large hands and narrow shoulders-though not enough muscles to make him intimidating-Davlin's skin was deepest brown, almost a true ebony, and smooth. He had high cheekbones and narrow eyes, and kept his hair trimmed very short. Two pale, parallel slashes on his left cheek gave some people the impression that he wore the scars as tribal marks; in actuality, he had suffered a bad cut from an exploding glass bottle in a friend's abortive attempt at home-brewing beer.

Working with the heavy crawler, silent and competent, he drove crates into the middle of the Ildiran settlement. The new colonists ran about like children exploring an unfamiliar vacation home. They looked at the unusual architecture and poked through all the items the aliens had left behind, seeking hidden treasure. Davlin would have to keep careful track and confiscate any technological items that might prove

enlightening.

After he finished unloading the cargo transport, he parked the crawler in the town square and tried to blend in with the eager explorers. With a hidden imager, he moved from building to building, studying what remained, photographing the architecture from all angles. Visitors to the Ildiran Empire had already seen the basics of the alien buildings, but Davlin was most interested in the private details.

He moved inside the communal dwellings that had not been burned to the ground. He opened storage racks and studied what the aliens considered necessary for their daily lives.

The apparently guileless Ildirans did not seem to be hiding information from the Hanseatic League. In fact, they presented themselves as allies and friends. But Davlin suspected otherwise—as did Basil Wenceslas. Their openness might be merely a cover to hide information they did not wish the human race to discover.

Chairman Wenceslas had once told him during his infiltration briefing, "Know your enemy." Here on Crenna, Davlin Lotze intended to take advantage of the Ildiran tragedy. If this abandoned place held any secrets, Davlin would be the one to uncover them.

40  MARGARET COLICOS

The diurnal cycle on Rheindic Co was twenty-eight hours long, but even with the extra four hours Margaret and Louis Colicos never felt as if they had enough time out in the Klikiss ruins.

In a sheer box canyon near their encampment, the two xeno-archaeologists climbed into a section of abandoned buildings, curved structures and freeform facades set back beneath a cliff overhang. Tunnels at the rear of the empty dwellings continued deep into the mountain.

Either the canyon itself had been cut deeper in the millennia since the Klikiss disappearance, or the aliens' ramps or footholds on the cliff wall had eroded away. DD and the three black Klikiss robots had assisted in erecting ladders and temporary sectional staircases, taking advantage of ledges and dodging cliff bands so the team could have easier access to the lost city. They went to work every day in the first light of desert dawn.

Neither she nor Louis had been able to find any shafts, pulleys, ladders, or more sophisticated transportation systems for access from ground level. Louis was certain that the high strategic position of their dwellings had something to do with a defensive arrangement. "Or, maybe the Klikiss were just incredibly tall," he suggested facetiously. "We've never seen what they looked like."

The large black robots standing in the dry wash at the bottom of the canyon could offer no suggestions. "We remember nothing," Sirix said.

Louis grinned in response, as if the alien robot could understand a human expression. "We'll do our best to find out, then. For you and for us."

Arcas did not participate in the daily routine as much as they had hoped, often spending his time exploring the landscape by himself. In spite of his background in geology, Margaret did not count on him for anything but necessary communication. The Klikiss robots were providing more outright help to the project.

The most overwhelming job, even after a month of survey, was simply to explore and map out the possibilities. The ruined alien city was so large that merely forming a research plan was a daunting task. Louis wandered through the tunnels and the off-kilter buildings with his recorder, imaging the walls and structures, the pipes, tubing, and long-quiet corroded machinery the Klikiss had left behind.

Early in her studies, Margaret had visited the Anasazi ruins at Mesa Verde in the North American Southwest on Earth, a fabulous mud-brick metropolis that had survived for many centuries. Rheindic Co's isolated Klikiss city reminded her of those Native American cliff dwellings. Yet it was also incomprehensibly alien, with architecture based on different aesthetics, walls at the wrong angles, trapezoidal doorways that were not necessarily at floor level.

Now she took scrapings from a wall, finding a corner remarkably free of the numerous markings and ideographs with which the Klikiss covered most surfaces. She wondered if the insectoid race shunned the use of paper or textural recording methods, preferring instead to write their history and mathematics on the permanent walls of their cities.

She'd already run a chemical analysis of samples they had obtained from Klikiss architecture on Corribus and Llaro and Pym, the other Klikiss worlds they had investigated, and she knew the results would be the same here: The aliens created an organic mineral mixture similar to mud, tree pulp, and silica combined with a resinous juice-saliva?-that bound together to form a substance harder and more resilient than steel or concrete, yet absorbent and permanent enough to retain the scribed pictograms, written letters, and mathematical equations.

In camp, Margaret would have all night to ponder the prior records they had compiled. But it was a different experience to be here smelling the dry and dusty air, surrounded by the shadows, and perhaps ghosts, of a long-lost race.

A year ago, in the scarred ruins on Corribus, Margaret had stared at the recorded symbols for days without result. Yet when she'd spent a night inside an empty chamber looking at moonlight shining on the scrawled markings, she finally experienced her breakthrough, recognizing starmap coordinates that correlated with rare neutron stars. The flood of connections from that one realization had led to the Klikiss Torch. Now she needed further insights to achieve another flurry of translations.

She and Louis had begun to work in Egypt, using a set of sophisticated new sonic mappers developed by the Ildirans. By applying the alien technology to map deeply buried relics underneath the Sahara, the Colicoses had found an entire Egyptian city that had been smothered by the dunes. The astonishing find had established them as important archaeologists.

From there, at the request of the Earth Defense Forces, Margaret and Louis had spent six months on Mars far from the military base. Working in a deadly hostile environment was far different from the mere sand and insufferable heat of the Sahara. Stiffly suited, they had analyzed the fabled geometric pyramids found in Labyrinthus Noctis to determine the origin of the fabulous and intriguing formations. But after intensive study, the Colicoses reached the unpopular conclusion, shored up with many fragments of detailed data, that the famed pyramids were not relics of an extraterrestrial civilization, but *natural* artifacts, outgrowths caused by the unusual crystalline structure of minerals in the soil, exposed to weather conditions in the low gravity over thousands of years.

As xeno-archaeologists, they had few extravagant desires, only common goals and fascinations. The two were content to live their rugged lives, each filling their niche in the marriage. Margaret and Louis often completed each other's sentences and sat together engrossed in thought, doing their own work, making

only brief half comments to each other. Yet afterward, if asked, they would claim they had carried on a long and fascinating conversation.

Now, on Rheindic Co, Louis returned to Margaret from some of his explorations, holding the imager in one hand and a glowpanel in the other. "All finished mapping another section, dear."

She didn't look up from where she sat staring at the wall markings. "Make a-"

"I did," he said, popping out the backup datawafer.

"You know where to put it," she said, and he stored it in one of the Klikiss cubbyholes. Louis often forgot to take the necessary precautions, but Margaret had learned her lesson. Many times during their previous digs they had lost data due to electrical storms, dust blows, or flash floods.

Both went back to work in self-absorbed silence, but experiencing close companionship. Margaret and Louis had formed their relationship as an intellectually based alliance, since they spent so much time together far from civilization. They had finally given in to common sense and married each other, as if it were a business venture, bypassing the silly giddiness of juvenile romance.

Louis left her to continue his investigations in one of the chambers that contained the most Klikiss machinery. He insisted that some of the mothballed alien devices still had functional power sources, air exchangers, pumps, and hydraulics. He believed the city was still alive, but sleeping, and he was sure he could reawaken it with the proper intuition and persistence.

Before he went out of earshot, she thought of something they needed to do. "Tonight, Louis-remember Anton's birthday."

"Yes, dear. We'll ask Arcas to send a message. Otherwise he'll think we forgot about him."

Margaret knew, though, that their only son would be wrapped up in his university studies, translating old Earth scrolls and reinterpreting Terran myths and legends. Anton Colicos had established himself as a scholar just as obsessive as his parents. He had given his mother a little antique music box, which she carried with her to every dig. Anton knew his parents were proud of him, though they were often too preoccupied to remind him.

After Louis had gone into the other chamber, Margaret could hear him tinkering and banging on the apparatus. Letting her thoughts wander, she walked down the dry hallways, through chambers filled with reams of untranslated data, literature, or scientific discoveries. Maybe it was nothing more than obscene insect graffiti. . . .

Did the Klikiss tell stories aloud like humans and Idirans, or were they a purely rational race? And why had they gone extinct? The questions weighed on her like ticking time bombs, making her feel that if she didn't unlock the answers soon, it might be too late.

After another day of fruitful yet unremarkable research, Margaret was interrupted by the soft metal footfalls of their loyal compy DD. "Hello? Hello? Margaret and Louis? You asked me to come get you at dusk. I have already prepared a nice meal for us all. I am certain you will enjoy the recipe I have developed. Would this be a good time to finish your activities for the day?"

Margaret turned to look at the compy, rubbing her stiff neck. "It's never a good time to stop, DD, but we won't get any more finished today. Go rouse Louis. He's probably got his head in an alien generator."

She pointed down a corridor, and the Friendly compy hurried off, calling Louis's name.

Together, the three climbed down the long set of metal stairs. DD led, holding a glowpanel and walking backward to illuminate their way. Thecompy didn't miss a step, but he frequently warned them of bumps in the path and rough edges to the scaffolding. "Careful. Careful." Soon he would probably remind them that he had access to a first-aid data module that they could upload into his limited memory if they required his services as an emergency surgeon.

After she reached the base of the cliff, Margaret's legs ached from the long descent. Louis put an arm around her shoulder. "Would you like me to help you, dear?"

"You're just as frail as I am, old man," she said. "But I'm sure we'll be much revitalized after we eat the gourmet meal DD has prepared for us."

"I hope it's not 'camp-food tartare' again," Louis said.

"I will file your culinary preferences, Louis."

As they walked down the rocky canyon that had been scoured clean by forgotten flash floods, Margaret turned back to look up at the high cliffs, the cities so high and out of reach. "I wonder if the Klikiss ever got arthritis?" she asked aloud. "And if so, how did they ever get back home? I certainly wouldn't want to climb stairs like that every day."

"Especially if they had multiple legs, which seems likely," Louis said. "Maybe once they got up to the cities, they just stayed inside."

Margaret stared up as the canyon shadows deepened, considering the inconvenient placement of the city. "It seems to be typical, though. Remember the tall turrets on Llaro?"

The structures on that dry and grassy planet had been like high termite castles, extruded pillars made of the same mud-and-silica composite, built with interconnected tunnels inside them that did not look like main thoroughfares. Some tunnels led to ground level, but these didn't look any wider than the higher passages, thus suggesting no greater traffic density. The turret windows had been wide and dangerously open to the long drop.

Suddenly, Margaret began to laugh.

Louis looked at her. DD, following his Friendly programming, understood that it was polite to laugh along with his human masters, so he simulated a chuckle, though he had no idea what the joke was.

"It's so simple, old man," Margaret said. "And obvious. Why didn't we see it before?"

He smiled at his wife. When she claimed a breakthrough realization, she was almost always right. "Well, dear, are you going to tell me or let me die of suspense . . . or old age?"

Margaret gestured up to the cliff face and indicated the sheer rock, the inaccessible climb, and the broad overhang wide open to the air. "Theycouldfly, of course." She grinned at him, knowing this realization would make them reassess their basic comprehension of the alien biology. "The Klikiss couldfly!"

Before she went off to Earth, Sarein made plans for how she could become the perfect Theron ambassador, fulfilling all the political needs and becoming a well-mannered hostess. Her work would be for the good of the forest world, as well as for the Hansa. Basil Wenceslas had shown her how both peoples shared common needs and goals, deep at the core.

Yes, Sarein had her differences with conservative old Otema, who had unreasonably kept her people from advancing into Hansa society. Still, the ancient woman was Sarein's predecessor and well-revered on Theroc. It would help Sarein if she could get the withered green priest's blessing.

Inside her personal chamber, Sarein brewed a pot of potent clee. Her room was high in the fungus reef, where the mushroom flesh was young and the walls remained soft. She liked this chamber because it received more sun than other levels farther down in the reef encrustation. On a low table Sarein set out one cup of the stimulating beverage for herself and another for Otema.

As she waited for her visitor, Sarein checked her appearance and practiced her smile. She adjusted the ambassadorial robe Otema had presented to her, then rubbed the Terran bracelets Basil had given her as a token of his esteem for the Theron people, and as a lover's parting gift.

On schedule, Otema entered, moving with silent footsteps, and Sarein rose to greet her. The woman looked so old! Her skin was a deep green like night at the bottom of the forest, and it had a dry hardness about it, like wood. She wore only the most minimal garb of a green priest and no ornamentation.

Noting the ambassadorial robe Sarein wore, Otema appeared troubled. The status lines and achievement marks stained into her face furrowed, likedotted lines indicating where wrinkles would go. Sarein wondered if the former ambassador already missed the amenities and culture on Earth.

Sarein pretended not to notice her predecessor's pensive mood. "You have been gone for so many years, Otema, that we never got to know each other well." She poured clee for the old woman, who accepted the cup. "Before I depart for my new duties on Earth, I thought we should have a brief talk." Sarein smiled, not meaning her words but required to say them nevertheless. "With all your experience, you must have much advice for me in dealing with the Hansa?"

"I will share my thoughts with you," Otema said stiffly and slowly, "though I am not convinced you are willing to hear."

Sarein tried not to frown at the rebuff, drinking her hot beverage. "Surely you are not disappointed to return to the worldforest, Otema? You have earned it after your years of service."

"The worldforest is always a balm to human weariness, regardless of what brewing troubles the trees may see that we do not. No, I am not disappointed to be back on Theroc. I am disappointed in *you*, Ambassador Sarein." She used the title like an insult, and finally sat down with great reluctance. "And I am afraid of what damage you will cause."

Sarein chuckled lightly, treating it as a joke. "You should give me a chance to prove myself, Otema. I have studied on Earth, and I am familiar with their cultures and practices. In fact, I probably understand the politics and commerce of the Hansa as well as you." *If not better*, she thought to herself.

Otema scowled. "You are an intelligent girl, Sarein, and I would never doubt your ability to understand." She took a long sip of her drink and paused, eyes closed, visibly absorbing the energy the ground worldtree seeds gave her. The green in her skin seemed to grow more vibrant.

"However, I hope your understanding extends to the delicacy of the Theron position. It is easy to be contemptuous or forgetful of where you have spent your life. An impatient child might consider our ways uninteresting or dull, but do not let the lure of gaudy treasures distract you from what is truly important. Such flowers are bright and colorful, but they bloom only briefly. Roots, on the other hand, go deep and provide stability for a long time."

Sarein wanted to make a rude noise, but restrained herself. Instead, she nodded sagely. "A very important point, Otema. I thank you for your insight."

Basil had talked with her about how frustrating Otema could be. Without emotion or rancor, the old ambassador had deflected all Hansa attempts to achieve even the slightest control over the green priests. Basil knew not to cross the "Iron Lady," because Otema would not budge.

Under Sarein, though, many things would change.

Outside in the jungle, two mating birds flew about squawking, rustling the leaves and disturbing a cloud of jewel-shelled insects. Otema seemed distracted, as if worried about deeper problems than an ambitious young ambassador to Earth. "The trees have much knowledge-and some of it they do not share, even with us."

Sarein steeled herself, tried a different tack. "Since I am not a green priest, I realize that my understanding of the worldforest is not as deep as yours. However, I will strive to do my best, and I will always have access to other members of the priesthood for their advice and communication abilities. The worldforest will know everything I do."

"I doubt, young woman, that you intend to let any green priest sit in on your . . . shall we say *private* consultations with Chairman Wenceslas." Her suggestiveness so shocked Sarein that the young woman could barely cover her reaction. "You believe that your intimate connection with the Chairman grants you some sort of power over him, but I warn you that Basil Wenceslas is not so easily manipulated. He runs far deeper than a simple girl can comprehend."

Sarein's face darkened. "Now that you have been stripped of your ambassadorial cloak, Otema, you have forgotten tact and diplomacy."

"I have not forgotten the truth, Sarein," she said. "One doesn't need a link with the worldtrees to see something so obvious." Leaving her beverage unfinished, the ancient woman stood and gave a formal bow. "I believe that is more advice than you truly wanted to hear, so I will take my leave." She backed toward the arched door in the soft-walled room.

"Play your games, Sarein, but never forget who you are and where you were born. The trees sense a tremendously difficult time ahead, though they will not tell even green priests what is in store. A day will come when you will be glad of your allies on Theroc."

Oncier blazed brightly, an infant sun engulfed by the nuclear fires of its newly dense core. Though much smaller than the system's primary star, this burning gas giant melted the hearts of the formerly frozen moons.

Media reports of the successful Klikiss Torch continued to spread throughout the Hanseatic colony worlds and into the Ildiran Empire, delivered by fast vessels on trade routes. Serizawa's recorded interviews had intrigued listeners on a hundred worlds. He'd had his glory and his fame-enough of it, in fact. Now the real work began.

Though the newborn star was small and relatively cool, Serizawa could not look at the roiling plasma without filters across the viewing windows. Projection screens on the consoles displayed magnetic maps viewed through specific portions of the spectrum. It was a marvel and an oddity.

He had studied the strange ephemeral images taken shortly after the gas planet's ignition-crystalline ejecta shaped like perfect spheres, glittering globes that seemed to fly away from the flaming new sun. Margaret Colicos had seen the same thing. Serizawa had tried to explain it simply and easily; with so many media scanners around, he did not want to alarm anyone, or make it appear that *he* didn't know what was going on. Still, the unusual phenomenon had defied explanation, even after repeated analysis.

He was thankful that the incident had not occurred again.

Running a palm across his perfectly smooth scalp, Serizawa shivered. He felt perpetually cold aboard the metal-walled observation platform. Though he stared at the glowing ember of the tiny star, none of the warmth penetrated his pale skin to his bones. He always walked around the station with goose bumps on his arms, no matter how he adjusted the environmental controls.

Because the density gradient was so steep, the nuclear combustion zone in Oncier's core was only a thin shell, but sufficient to light the hydrogen fuel. The small sun was a hurricane still settling down, but nothing much had changed in weeks.

There were dramatic shifts, however, on the four moons.

A week from now, the first Hansa ships would arrive bearing planetary engineers, terraforming specialists, and geologists. With special shelters and massive equipment, they would drop down to the warming moons and begin long-term plans for converting them into habitable worlds. Exciting times lay ahead.

Serizawa's thin lips curled in a smile. "Hmm, what do you suppose the colonists will call themselves?" He often pondered inane questions and struck up conversations with his technicians. The largest moon, Jack, orbited closest to the ignited planet and would likely be the first moon suitable for colonization. "Do you think they'll call themselves Jackians? Or Jackites?"

One of the techs enjoyed the game. "Jacklings sounds more appropriate."

Serizawa looked at screens showing the restless surfaces of the other moons, George, Ben, and Christopher. Pockets of thawed gases spewed like cometary tails, the noisy and messy birth of an atmosphere from volatilizing ice. The initial gases would boil off into space, too light to be held by the moons' gravity. Eventually, after the frozen lakes sublimated and glaciers crumbled into either liquid water or gaseous carbon dioxide, there should be enough air to maintain a blanket around the moons. Eventually.



The names of these moons-in honor of the first four Great Kings of the Terran Hanseatic League-gave Serizawa a sense of history. But humans looked upon a few centuries as a great span of time, while to the Ildirans and especially their Mage-Imperator, so many years was barely a moment. During most of Earth's civilization, people had failed to participate in long-term planning, neglecting to look farther than their own life spans.

Serizawa went to the station's thermostat and raised the internal temperature. Heat would radiate upward from the decks and warm them all. Rubbing his hands briskly together, he returned to the monitoring screens.

He toggled between close-up images of Ben and Christopher orbiting near each other and those of George and Jack on the other side of Oncier. He played time-lapse images of the cratered landscapes as they smoothed out and cracked in the throes of rapid thawing. Because the topology of each moon changed daily, it was still far too early to assess any permanent land features.

"Large tectonic upheaval on Christopher," said one of the techs, switching an image of the mist-enshrouded moon to the large display screen. Clouds of newly released gases roared upward like geysers. "Look, a crevasse is opening up, a large piece of the ice sheet shifting."

Serizawa hurried over to observe, still rubbing his arms to get warm. "The geology is still so unstable that maybe the arrival of the terraforming crews is a bit premature. We wouldn't want an exploration team going through a quake like that."

"The terraformers are bringing in large-scale machinery, Dr. Serizawa. Designed to withstand the end of the world."

"Or the beginning of one." The ten technicians and astrophysicists gathered around the high-resolution viewers, riveted to the tectonic event.

Serizawa looked up just in time to see a cluster of bright, glittering globes streak into the system and converge upon the restless new sun from high above the orbital plane. "Look at that!"

They were just like the ones he had seen on the images of the Klikiss Torch experiment, apparitions he had dismissed as irrelevant anomalies. Margaret Colicos, though, had been absolutely correct in her first assessment.

Ships. He suddenly experienced a deeper chill than any he had felt aboard the station.

The fleet of bristling diamond-hulled spheres approached with dizzying speed, like moths drawn to Oncier's new flame. Fourteen glassy spheres the size of asteroids dropped toward the former gas giant and its thawing moons. They looked like transparent planets, perfectly round but studded with sharp protrusions; the clear hulls showed murky mists inside, hinted at complex geometrical machinery. Like hungry insects the alien globes surrounded the smallest moon, Ben.

All of his crew rushed to the observation windows. Dazzling light from nearby Oncier reflected from the crystal-curved balls. Triangular pyramids like perfect mountains thrust through the bubble-skin; their pointed tips crackled with blue lightning.

"Are we getting all this on permanent record?" Serizawa said. "This is amazing! What are they?"

"They seem to be interested in Ben. Maybe they're scanning-"

The alien ships opened fire on the moon.

Blue lightning from the pyramidal protrusions of all fourteen alien ships converged, then shot downward in a single beam, slamming into Ben's already unstable surface. Heat glowed, land masses vibrated as acoustic waves transmitted powerful energy throughout the rocky body.

Serizawa shouted into the communications systems, as if the aliens might understand his outcry or even respond to him. "What are you doing? Please stop! This is human territory. This is-" He looked at his companions, but no one offered any suggestions.

The weapons fire continued. Gases erupted from the moon, the rocky continent broke apart, and orange heat boiled upward from the now-exposed core. Ben began to shudder, splitting under the onslaught.

It took the silent aliens twenty minutes to demolish the moon and break it into glowing coals that drifted apart in space.

"My God! Why?" The techs and astrophysicists were wild-eyed.

The crystalline globes moved smoothly away from the hot rubble of Ben and headed straight for George. Serizawa's face glistened with sweat. Though his skin seemed as cold as ice, he felt as though he were burning with anger.

The fourteen diamond spheres hovered over the second moon. Analyzing? Mapping continental flaws, fractures in the core structure? Then the lightning hammers blazed downward again.

Serizawa's anger turned to terror. "Transmit these images! Call for help, a general distress in all directions." He cursed the fact that their poorly staffed observation platform had no green priest aboard to provide instant telink communication.

"Dr. Serizawa, it'll take weeks before anyone receives these transmissions."

Serizawa knew that full well. He spread his palms, panicked and helpless. A man dying of a medical emergency does not write a letter to summon an ambulance-but that was all he could do now. "Somebody's got to know."

The technician sent the distress call, without further argument. "Like a message in a damned bottle," he grumbled. The transmission went out in all directions, hoping to find someone who could hear.

The other team members used the resources aboard the observation station to record and study the moon-crushing blasts, to image the complete destruction of the rocky satellites. "They could have become lovely terraformed worlds," Serizawa said.

Aboard the station, they had no way to defend themselves, could only gather information, collect data . . . and hope the destructive spheres did not notice them.

After the silent and ominous alien warglobes had obliterated the moon George, they moved on to Christopher.

And finally Jack. All four moons vaporized.

Serizawa was weeping now. He stood in front of the observation window, staring at the perfect spheres, and the destruction of everything he had created at Oncier. "Why are you doing this? What have we done to you?"

The aliens had transmitted no messages, no ultimatums, no warnings or explanations. Hovering in their parking orbit far from blazing Oncier, Serizawa and his team could not move or flee. Worst of all, they could not understand.

The fourteen monstrous ships left the destroyed satellites and paused above the funeral pyre of what had been the gas giant Oncier. Then like a swarm of angry wasps the globes moved to surround the observation platform.

The technicians scrambled backward, away from the windows, as if they would be safer within the fragile platform. Serizawa did not even bother to move. In the last moment, he closed his eyes.

The awesome blue lightning crackled again.

While it had taken the crystal globes some time to obliterate the four rocky moons, the total annihilation of the space platform required only seconds.



KING FREDERICK

Behind closed doors, the mood around the Whisper Palace was shocked and genuinely frightened. King Frederick didn't know what to do.

The planetary engineers and terraformers had returned to Earth at the stardrive's maximum speed-wasting huge amounts of ekti to deliver the terrible news. The crew had arrived on schedule at Oncier, only to find the moons blasted into rubble, the observation platform completely vaporized. There were no survivors of Dr. Serizawa's research and observation team. Someone, some force, had destroyed everything.

All citizens looked to their brave and powerful King for answers, for consolation . . . and the old man could do nothing.

When the panicked Oncier terraformers had returned, they broadcast their news over a thousand bands, squawking like startled chickens rushing back to their coop. The Hansa could never control or spin the news now.

In the waiting room behind the Throne Hall, Basil Wenceslas grumbled, frightening the King with his naked anger. "Damn! I would have preferred to keep this matter classified for a while. We don't know how to assess what's happened. We don't have any answers. Everything was destroyed-but why? Was it an outside attack, or some sort of . . . cosmic event, like an aftershock of the Klikiss Torch?"

"You can bet it was an attack," said General Lanyan, who stood stiffly at attention while Basil paced the floor. He had been recalled from the EDF base on Mars to discuss the crisis.

Frederick brushed at a speck of lint on his robes and looked around for a goblet of sweet wine. He had offered Basil a strong drink, but the Chairman shook his head, refusing to let anything cloud his thoughts. In contrast, King Frederick very much wanted to numb the dread he felt. "Basil, I can make an

announcement that we're investigating, but we still have no answers. Will that put them at ease?"

Basil slammed a flat palm against a fluted Corinthian column and said sarcastically, "Good idea. Let's tell every person in the Hansa that we're helpless and ignorant."

"But we really *don't* know what happened," Frederick said.

"And neither do they," Basil retorted. "A King must never let anyone see that he's in the dark."

Frederick took a gulp of his sweet wine and didn't answer. He looked at the uniformed military man-*Lanyan*, not Lanson, he chided himself-and tried to shore up his confidence that the Earth Defense Forces would respond to this disaster. The General wanted to retaliate and crush the mysterious aggressors so that peace could return to the human colony worlds.

"I may be stating the obvious, Chairman Wenceslas," Lanyan said, "but it might have been the Ildirans. Their Solar Navy was present at Oncier, watching our test. Maybe they felt threatened because we have such powerful technology. Who else could it have been?"

"It's a big universe, General, filled with many things we don't understand," the King said. "We've explored only a portion of one spiral arm in our galaxy-"

"Frederick," Basil interrupted, sounding exasperated, "even the Ildirans with all their history have never encountered another alien race. I don't want to muddy the issue by making up bogeymen. The threat of war with the Ildirans is frightening enough. On the other hand, General, I am also highly skeptical that the Solar Navy has weaponry approaching the power necessary for such destruction."

"True. This has got to be something new, and the Ildirans have been stagnant for centuries." Lanyan walked to one of the triangular windows that looked out upon the Moon Statue Garden. Topiary shrubs and ornate sculptures spread across hundreds of acres on the Whisper Palace grounds. "And it wasn't a ragtag group of pirates like Rand Sorengaard. The Roamers might want revenge against us, but they certainly don't have the technology to destroy whole moons."

After Basil's scolding, Frederick kept his thoughts to himself. Since the geology was so unstable during the rapid warming of the moons, perhaps the satellites had simply broken apart by themselves. Plenty of tidal forces, tectonic heat expansion, explosive gas volatilization . . . but it was ridiculous to think that Jack, George, Ben, and Christopher would all self-destruct at once, and that the flying rubble could have coincidentally destroyed the distant observation platform.

"We must find out what provoked this, and who did it," Basil said. "We haven't heard of any other attacks, have we?"

The General shook his head. "But then, without widespread telink, it takes months for news to trickle around the Hansa colonies, and even longer to get verifiable reports from within the Ildiran Empire."

Basil's face darkened at the reminder. "If we had more green priests at regular checkpoints around the Spiral Arm, we wouldn't have this communications problem."

The King decided it was time to act regal. "By my scepter and sword, Basil, no need to complicate the issue with old sore spots. The people are clamoring for answers. How shall I respond right now? I value your advice."

Basil frowned at him. "You listen to my orders."

The King tried not to look stung by the rebuff. "Then give me orders, Basil. Tell me what to do."

At night, as seen from above by dignitaries in observation zeppelins, the Whisper Palace looked like a celebration of candles. Eternal torches burned from every spire and cupola, every lantern post and bridge pillar. The crowds in the square, people streaming across the bridge over the Royal Canal, and those holding special invitations to wait on the Palace grounds proper—all held candles or lights of their own.

Led by a procession of his advisers, accompanied by one of the green priests stationed on Earth, and followed by numerous uniformed envoys from important Hansa colony worlds, Old King Frederick marched along a promenade to the bridge. Royal guards opened a path for him. Crowds raised their candles and illumination globes high.

Out in the press of people, surrounded by an uneasy space, a single Klikiss robot stood, just watching. It made Frederick uneasy, and he frowned.

King Frederick's advisers had robed him in the muted blacks and purples of mourning. He walked with a ponderous step, as if he carried a great weight on his mantled shoulders. The processional music was deep and slow, like a dirge. The Archfather of Unison had already led the audience in prayer, issuing consoling words. The Archfather's main purpose was to keep them soothed—not much different from the King's task.

The crowds simmered into a restless quiet as Frederick finally reached the end of the suspension bridge spanning the Royal Canal, where four iron lampposts stood like sentinels, their flames hissing and burning skyward.

Basil would be watching from a high balcony inside the Whisper Palace's main cupola. He had directed the technicians, so they knew what to do. Timing would be important.

Frederick had made mistakes lately, he knew, but this time he called upon his best powers of oratory, summoning raw emotion and speaking with all the grief he could put into his face and his thoughts. Real tears glistened at the corners of his eyes, and one tracked down his cheek. The close-up cameras would catch that.

The King's voice boomed out, rich and paternal. "For many years, the Terran Hanseatic League has helped humanity to expand across the Spiral Arm. We have established footholds on many new worlds, carrying our civilization to the galactic community. But even in the face of such glorious progress and accomplishments, we unfortunately falter." He paused, as if drawing strength.

"Not long ago I announced our creation of a new sun through human drive and ingenuity. Its family of moons were to be developed into new colonies."

Frederick hung his head. "But now, sadly, I feel like a parent who has lost his children. In an unprovoked attack, an unknown aggressor has snuffed out our hope for these vital new worlds, which were named in honor of my predecessors. We must understand why this has happened. And then we must avenge."

He lifted his head to study the burning flames that sparkled from the bridge pillars. "But first we must mourn."

Frederick approached four bridge pillars that symbolized the four destroyed moons. He reached out to the first towering post. "These flames were meant to be eternal, glowing in recognition of human-settled worlds. Now, alas, these four must be extinguished."

He touched the metal base of the nearest pillar. Inside the Palace, Basil's technicians shut off the flame, symbolically extinguishing the glowing fire.

When all four bridge pillars were dark, the King stepped back and raised his hands to the crowds. "This is the first time in all Terran history that a King has been forced to do this."

The crowd seemed stricken. The dismay and uneasiness would spread across the Hansa worlds.

"Let us pray it will be the last."

44  ESTARRA

Theron work crews converted the empty worm hive into a new dwelling complex while Estarra spent time with Beneto and his treelings. She knelt beside him, and he guided her with sure fingers, showing where to soften the dirt, how much water to add.

With a rustle of underbrush and quiet sniffing sobs, Celli rushed into the clearing, her face streaked with tears. "Beneto, something's happened to my condorfly. Please look. You'll know what's wrong with him." In her arms she carried her dog-sized pet condorfly. Its wings were spread like drooping sails.

Sarein would have scolded Celli for childish infatuation with a brainless insect, but Beneto gave the girl a look of deepest sympathy. "Come with me. Your condorfly will like the open meadows, where it naturally wants to be." He stroked the condorfly's elongated glossy head. The eight segmented legs twitched and skittered as if it were climbing a giant flower in its dreams.

He led his sisters through tall weeds and rustling grasses, around the massive trunks of worldtrees to a meadow full of lilies the size of juice vats. Other condorflies flew in the meadow. Celli's pet seemed to perk up in the new environment, its wings vibrating, trembling.

"Look at the ground, Celli." Beneto gestured to condorfly wings scattered like colored glass all around the meadow. The bodies of the dead insects were quickly consumed by natural decomposition, but the tough, translucent wings remained, artifacts of their brief but dazzlingly colorful existences.

"We each have our lives, little sister. What matters is not how long those lives last, but what *wed* with them. I have my work with the worldforest. Reynald will be the Theron Father someday. Sarein is going to be the next ambassador to Earth. You and Estarra have to decide for yourselves what you will accomplish." Beneto reached out to stroke the condorfly's sleek body. "Your pet has his own life as well. What do you think he wants to accomplish?"

Celli said, "He keeps me company." The condorfly flapped its wings again, straining on the leash to join the other insects around the flower-filled meadow.

"And has he accomplished that in his life?" Beneto asked.

"He's my pet. I love him." Then Celli seemed to sense what Beneto was implying as he gazed at the

flurry of other condorflies. "Oh. Maybe he's not sick, just lonely."

"Give him a few days to fly around in the meadow and feed from the flowers, Celli," Estarra said. "He knows the way back to your room if he ever wants to visit."

Reluctant, the little girl loosed the bindings of the leash. The condorfly rose up, flapping gracefully. It seemed to gain energy immediately, swirling around on updrafts; then it flew to the bright flowers, touching other insects, communicating with pheromones or subsonic signals.

For a long time, they watched it dance and dodge in the air, and finally the three all returned to the fungus-reef city, walking close together, though a tearful Celli continued to look over her shoulder into the meadow. . . .

That night, after Celli was asleep on her pallet with the window open to the jungle, the condorfly drifted back in. It landed on her sleeping form, spreading its wings like a coverlet. The little girl stirred and mumbled, but did not wake as the beautiful insect twitched its wings one last time, then died atop her blankets.

With her long hair twists tied out of her way, Estarra joined the conversion team in the empty worm hive, cleaning debris the giant invertebrates had left in their nest. Scrubbing hard, she smoothed wall barriers and marked places for furniture or doors to be cut. Other Theron workers shored up arches, blocked off dead-end tubes to be used as storage chambers, and tore down thin walls to expand living quarters. It had taken them some time to map the convoluted passages of the hive, but the new dwelling complex had begun to take shape.

Since the worms did not follow a blueprint based on human convenience, the Therons had to make do with the basic structure and passageways. Some of the worm tunnels were large enough for a man to walk upright, but others required crawling from chamber to chamber. The people would learn their way around the maze, enlarge some of the tunnels, and soon this place would be a bustling complex. Many families had already applied to Father Idriss and Mother Alexa for new quarters here.

Outside, two daredevil young men chased each other in glider contraptions made from discarded condorfly wings and a few scrap pieces of equipment still functional from the old *Caillié*. Estarra longed to be out playing with them, but she had responsibilities now. This worm hive was her discovery, and she wanted to leave her mark. At first, the reconstruction engineers had looked patronizingly at Estarra, expecting that she would get in the way. But she had been just as diligent and dedicated as the rest of the crew.

Now, working against the hive's outer wall, Estarra used a hot cutting tool to slice through the papery material. She broke through to the outside air and opened a flap that would form an important primary window. It would also be decorative and colorful . . . and a fine way to memorialize Celli's pet.

After she cut the opening, Estarra lifted the first of the large wings from the dead condorfly. It looked like a triangular section of stained glass. All around the outer walls, detached condorfly wings had been added to portholes and illumination squares, drenching the rooms in rainbows. After Estarra applied the four wings, this chamber would look like an ancient cathedral.

Using a pot of sap cement, Estarra brushed the edges of the window hole. The adhesive would dry as hard as iron and hold the multicolored wing in place. Finally, she stepped back to admire her work. It was a glorious addition to the new dwelling complex where all could see it. Estarra thought her little sister would like that.

As a green priest, she had new and important duties, but Nira still enjoyed her old activities. At least once a week she swapped tasks so that she could climb to the treetops and read aloud to the fascinated worldforest. She could think of nothing nobler than telling stories.

Balanced on a thick bough, Nira read in a voice inflected with emotion as the tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight rolled off her tongue. She herself didn't know how the adventure would end. It was all new to her, and she knew the forest was as eager as she was. Through her bare skin, Nira could feel the trees responding like an audience.

As she finished reading the story, Nira caressed the scaly bark. Practicing her new abilities, she forged a connection with the tree, dipping a thread of telink into the overall forest. She could access any part of the ever-growing database of information, but the trees were more than an encyclopedia. She could consult with them, learn what the forest had synthesized from all the information it had gathered. But the worldtrees still kept their secrets, even from important green priests like Yarrod.

For her enjoyment, Nira queried the worldforest and received a flood of stories. Suddenly the reservoir in her mind was filled with more tales than she could imagine. It would take her many restless nights of vivid dreams to digest all the things she now knew. With a sigh of gratitude, she broke the telink.

Nira felt the tree fronds vibrate around her and recognized the approach of another priest. She didn't need to look, because the worldtrees identified her visitor as old Otema, who had served for so many years as ambassador to Earth. Nira turned, surprised and intimidated. Surely, the stern but knowledgeable old priest was not looking for her.

Though the woman was ancient beyond Nira's comprehension, Otema climbed with the rapid grace of a tree lizard. She joined Nira on the wide palmate branch, gazing into the forest. "I remember how excited I was when I first took the green, how many things I needed to learn." She turned her attention to Nira; her dark-eyed gaze seemed distant . . . even wistful. "After more than a century, the wonder and majesty of the great worldforest neverwaned. The trees feel as entralling to me now as they did when I was your age."

Nira didn't know what to say. "I . . . thank you for your insight, Ambassador Otema."

"Just call me Otema, child. The green priests have no use for those titles."

"Yes . . . Otema." Gathering her courage, Nira said, "I'm surprised to see you here. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes, and I've found her." It seemed an awkward tableau, the two women standing on a narrow branch in the treetops. "Yarrod said I might find you up here, though it wasn't your assigned day to read to the trees."

Clutching the datapad defensively in her hand, Nira said, "We each serve according to our abilities and our interests." She touched the dark lines around her mouth. "I am an accomplished reader, and I like being up here."



"You enjoy history, then? Adventures, legends, and myths?" Nira tried to detect criticism in the old woman's voice, but found none. She simply nodded.

"Interesting," Otema said. "I have studied your family, and I wonder where you discovered your interest in legends. Did your mother tell you stories when you were a little girl?"

"Not at all. In fact, that is one of the reasons I was glad to be joined with the worldforest, because it opened a new universe for me, one that I never could have found at home."

The eldest of eight children, Nira Khali had come from a relatively poor family that lived in one of the oldest worm-hive dwellings. A set of chambers that had once been quite comfortable for her parents became a crowded encampment for their growing family. When Nira had entered the priesthood as an acolyte, her family had been sad to see her go, but they had also appreciated the extra breathing space.

Nira had always been a thinker and a reader, while her parents and siblings were content to work in the gardens or fruit orchards. Her parents spent their free time on amusements and games, joining in festivals and talking with friends. Nira, though, would rather be reading.

"I am looking for someone who enjoys stories," Otema said. "Such a person would be of great benefit to my next assignment." Nira's heart jumped, curious about what the ambassador had in mind.

Nira remembered many times when she had read to herself, crouched against a curved wall of the worm hive for a few moments of solitude. Though Nira loved her family, they did not understand her. She wondered if she was like a cuckoo that had hatched in the wrong nest. Nira wanted to ask a thousand questions, but she held her silence, politely waiting, though her eyes shone with fire and curiosity.

Otema continued, "Reynald has returned from his peregrination. He has seen many worlds, talked with great leaders, and observed unusual cultures."

"I've listened to all his reports with great eagerness," Nira said. Did Otema want her to speak with Reynald, to act as some kind of historian and compile his experiences to be stored in the worldforest database?

"When Reynald spoke with the Ildiran Prime Designate Jora'h, he requested a remarkable boon. You have heard of the *Saga of Seven Suns*?"

"Of course," Nira said. "It's supposed to be the longest epic ever recorded. It would take years and years just to read it."

"Years and years would not allow you to absorb even a fraction of it," Otema said. "Reynald received permission for two green priests to study the *Saga*. We can read it, document it, tell the stories to the treelings we bring along with us. The *Sagas* are far too long for any person to absorb in a single lifetime."

Nira gasped and then covered her mouth. Her throat went dry.

"Since my duties on Earth were completed, Father Idriss and Mother Alexa have searched for a task to keep me busy. I've been away from the worldforest for too long, and I don't intend just to sit and water treelings."

Nira jumped ahead. "Are you traveling to Ildira?"

"Not alone, child. It is an enormous task, and Reynald was granted permission to send *two* green priests." Otema's face brightened. "Nira, I would like to request you as my personal assistant, companion, and apprentice. We will journey together to Ildira under the light of seven suns."

Nira's family could barely believe their daughter's good fortune, though it took some time for her news to sink in. Her parents, Garris and Meena Khali, had never thought much about other worlds; the thick forest on Theroc already extended farther than their imaginations did.

Nira had trouble comprehending that she would cross the Spiral Arm to the capital of an immense alien empire. She would be gone from Theroc for years, away from the forests, away from other green priests, away from her family. But she had been practicing her telink abilities: As long as she could touch a tree, she could remain in contact with the entirety of the worldforest. She had no reason to be afraid, only excited.

Nira shared a meal with her family in their cramped living quarters. Garris wanted to call all the neighbors inside the crowded worm-hive rooms so they could wish Nira farewell. It would be a great celebration, a happy opportunity for socializing. But Nira, panicked at the prospect of having to face such a gathering, pleaded that she had too much business to take care of before her departure. The merchant ship would be arriving within a day to take them to Ildira.

Grinning, she looked from the worn and tired face of her mother to the broad, jowly smile of her father. "However, I did request one favor for you. I have a surprise before I go."

With the flush of new importance she'd achieved by being chosen to accompany Otema, Nira had sent a message to Father Idriss and Mother Alexa. The old ambassador had added her approval. Nira had received word back today that her application had been heartily approved.

"Father, I've managed to get our family prime quarters in the new worm hive discovered by Estarra." She smiled as her parents gasped in disbelief. "You'll have your choice of the largest chambers, as soon as you're ready to move in."

Astounded at their good fortune, Garris came forward to give his daughter an awkward hug. Her mother couldn't believe what she had heard. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Embarrassed by their gratitude, her newly green skin flushed dark. Nira said, "I'm glad I could do one last thing for my family before I embark on my great adventure."