

# CRUX

Albert E. Cowdrey

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New author Albert E. Cowdrey quit a government job to try his hand at writing. So far, he's appeared almost exclusively in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, where he's published a handful of well-received stories over the last couple of years, most of them supernatural horror. In 2000, he took a sudden unexpected turn away from horror and into science fiction, producing two of the year's best science fiction novellas, "Mosh", the sequel to "Crux", and "Crux" itself, the story you're about to read, which takes us deep into a future world as dark, complex, richly layered and fascinating as any ever produced in the genre, for an intricate and hard-edged story of plot and counterplot, intrigue and betrayal, and the dynamics of history, all seasoned with a bit of time travel.

One suspects—in fact, one rather hopes—that a novel based on the "Crux" stories is imminent. Cowdrey lives in New Orleans, where many of his expertly crafted super-natural horror stories have been set.

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DYEVA WATCHED THE EARTH revolve beneath her, vanish into banks of icy cirrus, then emerge as a patchwork of blue sea and immobile, shining cumuli.

Bits of continents poked through the gaps as the airpacket swung out on a hyperbolic curve. She had a glimpse of North America, with the Appalachian Islands trailing into the Atlantic and the Inland Sea glimmering under the hot March sun. Then the sixty-one passengers were shrouded in the lower cloud layer and reading lights winked briefly on before they emerged again to flit like the shadow of a storm over the broad Pacific.

A light meal was served, and during dessert the glint of Fujiyama Island on the right with its attendant green islets announced that they were nearing the Worldcity. They flashed into the dark red sun and the vast forest of China leaped out of the glittering wavelets of the Yellow Sea. Fifty-five hundred clicks was now too fast and one, two, three times the airpacket quivered as the retros slowed it to a sedate thousand.

They were speeding over the green savannahs of the Gobi, famous for its herds of wild animals. Of course they were too high and moving too fast to see the herds, but a mashina in the forward wall of the cabin darkened, glittered briefly with pinpoints of light, and filled with solid-seeming images of wapiti, elephants, haknim,

sfosura—animals native and imported from other worlds—shambling over pool-dotted green plains where the immortal Khan once ruled.

Dyeva's pale, high-cheekboned face concentrated and her unblinking dark eyes glinted with reflected images. Nine-tenths of the Earth—humanity's first home—was now a world of beasts. The ultimate achievement of the man called Minister Destruction. Was it for this that twelve billion people had died?

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In the sunset glow of Ulanor the Worldcity, Stef sprawled on his balcony wearing a spotty robe and listening to the cries of vendors and the creak of wheels in Golden Horde Street. He loved to loll here smoking kif in the last light during all seasons except the brief, nasty Siberian winter.

A commotion in the street made him swing his bony legs off the battered lounge chair. He tucked the mouthpiece of his pipe into a loop of hose from the censer and shuffled in broken-strap sandals to the railing.

Down below, vendors' carts had pulled against the walls and a long line of prisoners (blue pyjamas, short hair, wrists and necks imprisoned in black plastic kang) shuffled past like a column of ants. Guards in wide-brimmed duroplast helmets strode along the line at intervals, swinging short whips against the legs of laggards to hurry them on. The prisoners groaned and somebody started to sing a prison song in Alspeke, the only language that all humans knew: *Smerta, stnerta mi kalld/Ya nur trubna hafsyegdd...*

Death, death, call me, I have nothing but trouble always. Picking up the rhythm, even the laggards began moving so quickly that the guards no longer had an excuse to strike.

A good song, thought Stef, lying down again, because it goes in two opposite directions, endurance and despair. Those are the poles of life, right? Of his life, anyway. Except for kif, which was close to being his religion, filling him during these evening hours with a distant cool melancholy, with what the Old Believers called Holy Indifference—meaning that what happened happened and you didn't try to fuck with God. And, of course, there was Dzhun. She meant a little more than lust, a good deal less than love. He whispered her name, which meant summertime in Alspeke, with its original English intonation and meaning: June.

Then frowned. He was, as usual, out of cash. Kif cost money. Then how was he supposed to afford Dzhun? He brooded, puffing slowly, letting the aromatic smoke leak from his nose and mouth. He needed a case. He needed a job. He needed money to fall on him out of the sky.

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Even blasé passengers who had seen Ulanor many times, perhaps even had grown up there, joined the newcomers in staring through the ports at the capital of the human race.

More than a million people! Dyeva thought. Who could believe a city so vast? Of course, compared to the world-cities of the twenty-first century, Ulanor was hardly a suburb. But this could at least give her a glimmering of the wonders that had been lost—a revelation of the once (and future?) world before the Time of Troubles had changed everything.

The shuttle was drifting along now, joining the traffic at the fifth level on the outermost ring, swinging around so that the city with its spoked avenues and glittering squares seemed to be turning. The co-pilot (a black box, of course) began speaking in a firm atonal voice, pointing out such wonders as Genghis Khan Allee, Yellow Emperor Place where the various sector controllers had their palaces, and Government of the Universe Place, where the President's Palace faced the Senate of the Worlds.

"And then the Clouds and Rain District," said a man's voice, and the native Earthlings all broke into guffaws.

The black box paused politely while the disturbance quieted, then resumed its spiel. Dyeva had turned a delicate pink. The brothel district (named for a poetic Chinese description of intercourse, the "play of clouds and rain") had been denounced in Old Believer churches ever since she could remember. And while she no longer was a believer herself, she retained a lively sense of the degradation endured by the women and men (and even children) who worked there.

She reflected that such exploitation formed the dark reverse of the civilization she loved and hoped to restore. Perhaps after all there was something to be said for the near-empty Earth of today. Then, impatiently, Dyeva shook the thought out of her head. This was no time for doubt. Not now. Not *now*.

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Stef was still frowning, with the mouthpiece between his lips, when his mashina chimed inside the apartment. Irritated because somebody was calling during his relaxing hour, he padded inside, evading the shadows of junk furniture, stepping over piles of unwashed clothing. He told the mashina, "Say," and it flickered into life. Inside the box hovered the glowing head of Colonel Yamashita of the Security Forces. "*Hai, Komi Yama.*"

"I need something private done. Come see me now, Gate 43." No waste words there. The image expired into a glowing dot. Sighing, Stef dropped his robe among the other castoffs on the floor and ploughed into a musty closet, looking for something clean.

On the roof of the old building a hovercab with the usual black box for a driver nosed up when Stef pushed a call button. He climbed in and gave orders for the Lion House; Gate 43.

"*Gratizor*," said the black box. Thank you, sir. Why were black boxes always more polite than people?

As they zipped down Genghis Khan Allee, Stef viewed the flood-lit facades of Government of the Universe Place without much interest. He had long ago realized that they were a stage set and that all the action was behind the scenes. Bronze statues honoured the Yellow Emperor, Augustus Caesar, Jesus, Buddha, Alexander the Great, and of course the ubiquitous Genghis Khan. All of them Great Unifiers of Humankind. Forerunners of the Worldcity and its denizens.

Genghis even had a pompous tomb set amid the floodlights—not that his bones were in it; nobody had ever found them. But yokels from the off-worlds visited Ulanor specifically to gaze upon the grave of this greatest (and bloodiest) Unifier of them all.

Near the tomb foreshortened vendors were selling roasted nuts, noodles wrapped in paper, tiny bundles of kif, seaweed, bowls of miso and kimshi, and babaku chicken with texasauce. The scene was orderly; people strolled and ate at all hours and never feared crime. Breaking the law led to the Palace of Justice off Government of the Universe Place and the warren of tiled cells beneath that were called collectively the White Chamber. The formidable Kathmann, head of Earth Security, ruled the White Chamber, and his reputation alone was enough to keep Ulanor law-abiding.

The cab turned off the main drag, zipped down back alleys at a level twenty metres above the street, and drew up at a deep niche in a blank white slab of a building. Stef flashed his ID at the black box and a flicker of light acknowledged payment. He stepped into the foyer and a bored guard in a kiosk looked up.

"*Hai?*"

"*Hai. Ya Steffens Aleksandr Korul Yamashita ha'kalld.*"

His voice activated a monitor. The guard stared at the resulting picture, then searched Stef's face as if another, unauthorized face might be concealed beneath it. Finally he spoke to the security system, which silently opened a bronze-plated steel door.

In the public areas of the Lion House multicoloured marble and crimson carved shishi were everywhere, but here where the action was the hallways were blank, slapped together out of semiplast and floored with dusty grey mats. Light panels glowed in the ceiling, doors were blank, to confuse intruders. Stef, who knew the corridor well, counted nineteen doors and knocked.

He gasped as a stench that would have done honour to a real lion house hit him in the face. The door had been opened by a Darksider, and its furry mandrill face gazed at him with black cat pupils set in huge round eyes the colour of ripe raspberries. The creature had two big arms mid two little ones; one big arm held the door, one rested on its gunbelt, and the two little ones scratched the thick fur on its chest.

"*Korul Yamashita mi zhdad,*" Stef managed to say without choking. Colonel Yama awaits me. The Darksider moved aside and he made his way through the dim guardroom followed by an unblinking red/black stare. He knocked again, and at last entered Yamashita's office.

"*Hai,*" said Stef, but Yama wasted no time.

"Stef, I got a problem," he began. Everything in the office was made of black or white duroplast, as if to withstand an earthquake or a revolution. Stef slipped into a black chair that apparently had been consciously shaped to cause discomfort.

"Why the animal outside? Can't you afford a human guard?" asked Stef, looking around for a kif pipe and seeing none.

"Everybody important has a Darksider now. More reliable, even if they do stink. Now listen. This information is absolutely a beheader, so I hope your neck tingles if you ever feel an urge to divulge it. For months I've been getting vague reports from the Lion Sector about terrorists who are interested in time travel. Now something's happened here on Earth. Somebody's pirated a wormholer from the University."

"Oh, shit." Since Stef hadn't even known that a real wormholer existed, his surprise was genuine.

"The people who were responsible for the machine are now with Kathmann in the White Chamber and I assure you that if it was an inside job the Security Forces will soon know."

"I bet they will."

"I don't have to spell out for you the danger if some *glupetz* gets at the past. Ever since the technology came along, assholes have been wanting to go back and change this, change that. They don't understand the chaotic effect of such changes. They don't see how things can spin out of control."

Yamashita sat brooding, a man who had devoted his life to control.

"They think they can manage the time process. They don't see how some little thing, some insignificant thing, can send history spinning off in some direction they haven't foreseen, nobody's foreseen."

Stef nodded. He was thinking about someone monkeying with the past, suddenly causing himself, or Dzhun, or the genius who had synthesized kif to wink out of existence. It was hard to maintain Holy Indifference in the face of possibilities like that.

"What can I do?"

But Yama hadn't finished complaining.

"Why don't these *svini* do something useful?" he fretted. *Svini* meant swine. "Why don't they try to change the future instead of the past, try to make it better?"

"Possibly because you'd execute them if they did."

Suddenly Yama grinned. He and Stef went back a long way; the academy, service on Io, on Luna. They had been rivals once but no longer. Yama headed the Security Service at the Lion House, a fat job; the Lion Sector which it administered was a huge volume of space with hundreds of inhabited worlds stretching up the spiral arm towards the dense stars of the galactic centre.

Meanwhile Stef was out on his ass, picking up small assignments to solve problems Yama didn't want to go public with. Like the present one: Yama had no authority on Earth, but suspected a connection between a local happening and one in Far Space. As an agent, Stef had two great advantages—he was reliable and deniable.

"It's true," Yama went on, "I like things as they are. Humanity's been through a lot of crap to get where it is. We need to conserve what we've got."

"Absolutely."

Yama looked suspiciously at Stef's bland face. He didn't like Stef to say things that might be either sincere or ironic, or might wag like a dog's tail, back and forth.

Stef grinned just a little. "Yama, I really do agree with you. Against all logic I'm happy, and happy people don't want change. Now, how can I find this wormholer thief?"

Yama was instantly all business again. "I'll tell you everything you need to know," he said.

"And not a bit more."

"Absolutely," said Yama, who really did have a sense of humour, colonel of security or not. He began by transferring one hundred khans to Stef's meagre bank account, knowing that Stef would promptly spend it and need more, and his need would keep him working.

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As Yama talked, across the city in his big, heavily mortgaged house Professor Yang Li-Qutsai was in his study, lecturing to his mashina under staring vapour lamps.

His famous course at the University of the Universe, *Origina Nash Mir* (Origin of Our World), drew a thousand students every time he gave it. The reason was not profound scholarship—Yang plagiarized almost everything he said—but his brilliance as a speaker. At times he seemed to be a failed actor rather than a successful academic. His image included a long grey beard, a large polished skull, a frightening array of fingernails, and a deep, sonorous voice that made everything he said seem important, whether it was or not. A memory cube recorded his lecture for resale to the off-worlds where dismal little academies under strange suns would thrill to the echoes of his wisdom.

Even as he spoke, lucidly, stabbing the air with a long thin index finger that ended in nine centimetres of nail, Yang was calculating what resale and residual rights on the lecture might bring him. Enough to purchase a villa at the fashionable south end of Lake Bai? Peace at home, among his four wives? At least an expensive whore?

On the whole, he thought, I'd better settle for the whore. Half of his two-track mind dreamed of girls even while the other half was retelling the most calamitous event in the brief, horrid history of civilized man. The first lecture of his course was always on the Time of Troubles.

"Considering that the Troubles created our world," he declared, "it is shocking—yes, shocking—that we know so little about how the disaster began. In two brief years (2091-2093) twelve billion people died, with all their memories. Seven hundred vast cities were obliterated, with all their records; three hundred-odd governments vanished, with all their archives of hardcopy, records, discs, tapes and the first crude memory cubes. No wonder we know so little!

"Where and why did the fighting start? The Nine Plagues—when did they break out? Blue Nile haemorrhagic fever and multiple-drug-resistant blackpox were raging in Africa as early as the 2070s. Annual worldwide outbreaks of lethal influenza had become the rule by 2080. It seems that the Time of Troubles was well under way even before the outbreak of war."

Introductions were always troublesome: students, realizing they were in for a long hour, began to sink into a trancelike state accompanied by fluttering eyelids and restless movements of the pelvis. A warning light on the box glowed green and Yang headed at once into the horror stories that gave the course much of its appeal.

"But the war of 2091 produced the most spectacular effects: the destruction of the cities, the Two Year Winter and the Great Famine. Let us take as an example the great city of Moscow, where robot excavators have recently given us an in-depth picture—if I may be pardoned a little joke — of the horrors that attended its

destruction. A city of thirty million in 2090..."

Detail after horrendous detail followed: the skeleton-choked subway with its still beautiful mosaics recording the reign of Tsar Stalin the Good; the dry trench of the Moskva River whose waters had been vaporized in one glowing instant and blocked by rubble so that the present river flowed fifteen clicks away; the great Kremlin Shield of fused silicon stretching over the onetime city centre, with its radioactive core that would glow faintly for at least 50,000 years.

Observing with satisfaction that his indicator light was turning from unlucky green to lucky red, Professor Yang moved onto the horrors of London, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing and New York. Then he spoke briefly about the closed zones that still surrounded the lost cities, of irradiated wildlife undergoing rapid evolutionary change in bizarre and clamorous Edens where the capitals of great empires had stood, only three hundred years ago . . .

The interest indicator glowed like a Darksider's eye. Professor Yang strode up and down, his voice deepening, his grey beard swishing in the wind, his long fingers clawing at the air.

"Precisely how did it happen—this great calamity?" he demanded. "How much we know, and how little! Will it remain for the scholars of your generation to solve these riddles finally? I confess that mine has shed only a little light around the edges of the forbidding darkness that we call—the Time of Troubles!"

As usual, his lecture lasted exactly the time allotted, a one-hundred-minute hour. As usual, it ended with a key phrase, reminding the drowsy student of what he had been hearing at the rim of his clouded consciousness.

The power light in the mashina winked off, and Professor Yang shouted: "Tea!"

A door flew open and a scurrying domestic wheeled in the tea caddy, the cup, the *molko*, the tins of oolong and Earl Grey.

"Sometimes," muttered Yang, "I think I'll die of boredom if I ever have to talk about the Troubles again."

"One lump or two?" asked the domestic, and Yang, who drank tea after the ancient English fashion, turned anxious attention to the small, ridiculously expensive lumps of natural brown sugar.

"Two, I think," he said.

If residuals from the lecture didn't buy him a girl, at least they would, he hoped, keep him supplied with sugar for some time to come.

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The clocks of the Worldcity were nearing 21 when Yamashita, dining comfortably at home with his wife Hariko, heard his security-coded mashina chime and hastened into his den to receive a secret report from Earth Security. Somebody had cracked under interrogation. Yama listened to the report with growing dismay.

"Shit, piss and corruption," he growled. "Secretary!"

"Sir?" murmured the box in a soft atonal voice.

"Contact Steffens Aleksandr. If he's not at home—and of course he won't be—start calling the houses in the Clouds and Rain District. Make it absolutely clear that this is a security matter and that we expect cooperation in finding him."

"Yes, sir. His home is not answering."

"Try Brother and Sister House. Try Delights of Spring House. Try Radiant Love House. Then try all the others."

"And when I find Steffens Aleksandr?"

"Tell him to wipe his cock and get to my office soonest."

"Is that message to be conveyed literally?"

"Yes!"

Back at the table, he had barely had time to fold his legs under him when Hariko told him to stop using bad language in the house where the children might hear him.

"Yes, little wife," said the man of power meekly.

"I suppose you have to go to the office again."

"Yes, little wife. An emergency—"

"Always your emergencies," said Hariko. "Why do I waste hours making you good food to eat if you're never here to eat it? And why do you employ that awful Steffens person? He's a disgrace, a man his age who lives like a tomcat. Not everyone can be as happy as we are, but everybody can have a decent, conventional life."

Yama ate quietly, occasionally agreeing with her until she ran out of words. Then he went upstairs, removed his comfortable kimono, and put on again the sour uniform he'd worn all day.

On the way down, pinching his thick neck as he tried to close the collar, he stopped in the children's bedrooms to make sure they were all asleep. The boys in their bunk beds slept the extravagant sleep of childhood. Looking at them, gently patting their

cheeks, Yama reflected that adults and animals always slept as if they half expected to be awakened—children never.

Then to the girls' room, where his daughter Kazi slumbered in the embrace of a stuffed haknim. Yama smiled at her but lingered longest at the bedside of his smallest daughter. Rika was like a doll dreaming, with a tiny bubble forming on her half-parted pink lips. He was thinking: if someone changes the past, she may vanish, never have a chance to live at all. To prevent that, he resolved to destroy without mercy every member of the time-travel conspiracy.

At the front door Hariko tied a scarf around his neck and gave him a hug; she was too modest to kiss her husband in the open doorway, even though they were twenty metres above the street. He patted her and stepped into the official hovercar that had nosed up to his porch.

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"Lion House, Gate 43," he told the black box, and sank back against the cushions.

At Radiant Love House, Professor Yang relaxed from his scholarly labours on one side of a double divan in the midprice parlour and viewed 3-D images of young women to the ancient strains of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*.

"Do you see anything that pleases you?" asked the box that was projecting the images.

"Truly, it is a Waltz of the Flowers," replied Yang sentimentally. The smell of kif wafted through the room, presumably from a hidden censer.

"The dark beauty of Miss Luvblum contrasts so markedly with the rare—indeed, unique—blondness of Miss Sekzkitti," murmured the box, going through its recorded spiel. "The almond eyes of Miss Ming remind us of the splendour of the dynasty from which she takes her *nom l'amour*. Every young lady is mediscanned on a daily basis to ensure her absolute purity and freedom from disease. Miss Gandhi is skilled in all the acts of the famous *Kama Sutra*. For a small additional fee, an electronic room may be rented in which the most modern appliances are available to heighten the timeless joys of love."

Professor Yang had already halfway made his selection—the most expensive of the "stable". Miss Selassie was a tall, slender woman of Ethiopian descent who had been genetically altered into an albino. The box referred to her as "the White Tiger of the Nile", and bald, bearded, long-nailed Yang, at ninety-nine reaching the extreme limits of middle age, found his thoughts turning more and more to her astounding beauty. Her body is like a living Aphrodite of ancient Greece, he thought, while her face is like a living spirit mask of ancient Africa.

"Miss Selassie, how much is she?"

"One hundred khans an hour."

"Oh, dear. And how much for an electronic room?"

Professor Yang rightly believed that all the appliances known to modern science would be needed if he was to spend his expensive hour doing anything more than enjoying Miss Selassie's company.

"Fifty khans an hour. However," said the box seductively, "for such a man as yourself, Honoured Professor, the house gladly makes a special price: Miss Selassie *and* an electronic room for an hour for the sum total of—"

A brief pause, during which Yang felt himself growing anxious.

"One hundred and thirty-five khans, a ten per cent reduction."

"Agreed," breathed Yang, giving himself no time to think. There was a brief flutter in the box as his bank checked his voice-print and transferred another K135 from his already deflated account to one of the bulging accounts of Radiant Love House.

"You should've asked for twenty per cent off," said a voice, making Yang jump.

A long, stringy, bony man holding a kif pipe rose from the other side of the double divan and stretched and yawned.

"I hope you haven't been eavesdropping," snapped Yang.

"No more than I had to," said Stef in a bored voice. "I've made my selection, but the selectee is popular and she's busy. I'm just telling you, if you've got the balls to bargain you can get them down twenty per cent, sometimes more if it's a slow night. The ten per cent reduction they offer you is just merchandizing."

Resentment at the stranger's intrusion struggled with economic interest in Professor Yang's breast. The latter won.

"Really?" he said.

"Sure. I do it all the time. You could've got the whole works for one-twenty."

"Indeed. And the electronic room—is it really worth it?"

"It is if you have to have it."

Yang was just beginning to get angry when the door opened and a very tall naked woman entered. Her hair was in a thousand white braids and her eyes were oval rubies. The aureoles of her taut, almost conical breasts were much the same colour as her eyes. A faint scent of faux ambergris wafted into the waiting room and

mingled with the fumes of kif. Yang sat hypnotized.

"You the customer?" she asked Stef with some interest.

"No, I'm waiting for Dzhun. This guy's your customer."

"Figures," she sighed, and taking Professor Yang's thin and trembling hand in her own, the White Tiger led him away.

A few minutes later the box made two announcements: Dzhun was ready, and Stef was to wipe his cock and get to Yama's office soonest. Stef promptly did what he almost never did—lost it completely.

"FUCK THE FUCKING UNIVERSE!" he roared in English. The divan weighed a hundred kilos but he tossed it end over end. At the crash the door flew open and a guard entered, pulling an impact pistol half as long as her arm. Stef calmed down instantly.

"*Ya bi sort*. My deepest and humblest apologies," he said, clapping his hands together and bowing. "I don't know what came over me."

Stef had seen a number of bodies killed by impact weapons. A body shot usually left very little except the head, arms and legs, plus assorted fragments.

"Straighten out the goddamn sofa," said the guard, watching him narrowly. She was Mongol and looked tough. Stef did as he was told.

"Incidentally," he said as he was leaving, "I'll need a raincheque on Dzhun. I already paid my khans."

"Talk to the front desk," growled the guard.

Outside, Stef took a deep breath and ordered a hovercab. He felt that he now had a personal score to settle with the *svini* who had not only stolen a wormholer but forestalled his session with Dzhun. Since the *svini* were the only reason he currently had money enough to buy her time, that was unreasonable. But Stef wanted to be unreasonable. That was how he felt.

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"So the theft was an inside job," he muttered, trying without success to get comfortable in one of Yama's black chairs.

"Yes. A trusted scientist turns out to belong to a terrorist group that calls itself Crux. He's been checked a hundred times. Living quietly, no extra money, no nothing. During lie-detection tests, brain chemicals always indicated he was telling the truth. Trouble was, the wrong questions got asked. Are you loyal? To what? He answers

yes, meaning loyal to humanity as he understands it. Are you a member of any subversive group? Subversive in what sense? To the existing order, or to humanity? He gets by with a false answer again."

"What exactly do these Crux fuckers believe in?"

"Life. The absolute value of human life. The wormholer opens the way to reverse the worst calamity in human history, the Time of Troubles. Trillions of lives are hanging on the issue—not only the lives that were lost in the famines and plagues and wars but all their descen-dants to the tenth generation."

Stef growled, scratched himself, longing for kif, for Dzhun. "Bunch of fucking idealists."

"Exactly. People with a vision, willing to destroy the real world for the sake of an idea. We've gotta kill them all."

Yama jumped up—a springy man, muscular, bandy-legged. He was fifty and nearing middle age, but a lifetime of the martial arts enabled him to bounce around like a ball of elastoplast.

"Kill them!" he roared, chopping at the air.

Watching him tired Stef.

"And this was what you called me back for?"

"No. Or not only." Yama fell back into the desk chair. "The group that has this grand vision is, of course, organized in cells that have to be cracked one by one. But the guy who talked in the White Chamber knew one name outside his cell, the name of a woman, an offworlder. She's called Dyeva. She's one of the founders of the movement, and she was supposed to contact him."

Stef sighed. "Anything from IC on her?"

"No," admitted Yama. "No report yet from Infocentre."

"Call me when one comes in," said Stef, rising. "I'm extremely grateful for the way you took me away from my pleasures to give me information that, as yet, has no practical significance. Please don't do it again."

Yama saw him to the door, nodding to the Darksider who approached smelling like the shit of lions, owls and cormorants mixed together. Stef pinched his nostrils and spoke like a duck.

"I love coming to your office, Yama. The place has a certain air about it."

Half an hour later, Stef was again sprawled in the middling expensive parlour at

Radiant Love House, waiting. Another customer had taken Dzhun while he was away. Stef spent the time smoking kif and thinking about shooting Dyeva, whoever she was, with an impact pistol.

"*Phut*," he said, imitating the uninspiring sound of the weapon. He made his long hands into a ball and drew them rapidly apart, imitating the explosion inside the target. Stef had studied wound ballistics and he knew that impact ammo vaporized in the body and formed a rapidly expanding sphere of superheated gas and destructive particles. *Dyeva v'atomi sa dizolva*, he thought. The *svini* flies apart, turns to molecules, atoms, protons and quarks.

"How happy I am," murmured the box, "to inform you, Sir, that the person of your choice is ready to receive you."

Instantly Stef was up and moving, his bloody thoughts forgotten. At heart he was a lover, not a killer.

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In the blue peace of the electronic room, Professor Yang lay huddled under a sheet of faux silk.

Beside him, her hand still languidly resting on a gadget called an erector-injector, lay a statue of living ivory. At least he now knew the White Tiger's given name. Even if it was only a prost's working name, a *nom d'amour*, for Yang it was what the old French phrase meant—a name of love.

"Selina," he murmured, and she turned her head and smiled at him.

"I'm afraid your time is up," she whispered. "But perhaps you'll come again, my dear. You were special."

"Selina," he said again. Around him monitors winked and a low electromagnetic hum soothed with a white sound. Yang was all too conscious of the birth of a new obsession, one even less affordable than four wives and natural sugar.

"I *must* see you again," he said.

Detecting the urgent note in his voice, Selina smiled. Ah, that enigmatic whore's smile! thought Yang with pain in his heart. What did it mean? Pleasure in you, pleasure in your money, no pleasure at all but mere professionalism? Who could tell?

Wasn't this how he had happened to marry the most obnoxious of his four wives?

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Dyeva sat quietly in the front room of a small but elegant suburban villa.

The windows were open and the morning sun entered through a gentle screen of glossy leaves thrown out by a lemon tree. The room held all the necessities of rustic living, bare beams across the ceiling, lounges covered with faux linen, a glass table bearing apples and oranges and kuvisu fruit, and a mashina half the length of the wall to entertain the owner, a Professor of Rhetoric whose hobby was playing at revolution.

Relaxing on the lounges were the other members of the cell: two students and a dark and tensely attractive woman of middle age who bore a painted mark on her forehead. The students were still talking about Professor Yang's lecture of last evening, tailor-made as it seemed for the members of Crux.

"Lord Buddha, but he makes you see it," said the boy, fingering a string of beads restlessly. He was an Old Believer. Dyeva had noticed years ago that such people were represented in Crux far beyond their numbers in the general population.

The girl was lovely: bronzed, yellow-haired, sloe-eyed, the perfect Eurasian. She called herself Dian and spoke in a throaty whisper that someone had told her was mysterious.

"Actually, he's a horrible old man. But it's as Kuli says, he has the gift of making the past live."

"We expect to do more along that line," said the owner of the villa in a deep, resonant voice, and the two young people laughed happily. All three of them loved the taste of conspiracy; the older man, whose codename was Zet, earnestly hoped to seduce Dian. Supposedly nobody in the group knew anybody else's real name. They had a vast and fundamentally childish panoply of measures to preserve secrecy—passwords, hand signals, ways of passing information in complicated and difficult ways. Because cyberspace was a favourite hunting ground for the super-mashini of the Security Forces, they avoided electronic contact whenever possible. Instead, they had oaths, secret meetings, symbols. Their key symbol was the looped cross of ancient Egypt, the *crux ansata*—the sign of life.

Kuli wore a crux on a cord around his neck; at meetings he took it out for all to see. The girl, Dyeva noted with amazement, had the symbol tattooed on the palm of one slender hand. Why didn't the senior members of the cell force her to have it removed?

People had often told Dyeva that she had icewater in her veins. That wasn't true: her emotions were intense, only deeply buried. Right now anger and alarm were stirring deep beneath her masklike face. Did her life, to say nothing of the lives of trillions of human beings, depend on these amateurs, children?

The dark woman, who called herself Lata, brushed a hand across her brow and said, "The essential thing is to speed our visitor safely on her way. And I must tell all of

you something I learned last night. The theft of the wormholer has been discovered and there have been arrests."

"Arrests?" demanded Dian, in a scandalized tone. "Of someone I *know*?"

She seemed to think that the polizi had no right to arrest members of a secret organization merely because it was bent on annihilating the existing world.

"No," sighed Lata. "Fortunately for you. That beast Kathmann and the polizi drugged and tortured both the guards and the people who were responsible for technical maintenance of the wormholer. Thus they learned that one of the scientists had been involved in the theft. Thank God, the device had already been turned over to another cell, and the poor man who talked didn't know their names or where it is at present."

The two young people seemed paralyzed. Zet was turning his head from side to side, looking at the furniture, the fresh fruit. Dyeva had no trouble reading his mind: the *glupetz* had suddenly realized that he could lose all this by playing at conspiracy. Someday, she thought, if he thinks about it long enough, he will realize that he may lose much more.

"I will go with you," said Dyeva, rising and pointing at Lata, apparently the only one of the gathering with any sense. "You will conduct me. I must not stay here longer and endanger these heroes of humanity."

Zet looked relieved at the news she'd soon be gone; Kuli and Dian were still absorbing the news of the arrests. He was stunned, she indignant.

"Oh, but the people who were tortured—they're martyrs!" she exclaimed suddenly and burst into tears.

"Yes," said Dyeva, "and by this time they are also corpses. Death is the reward the technicians of the Chamber hold out to their victims. I will be packed and gone in five minutes if you will lead me," she said to Lata.

"Of course," said the dark woman, and Dyeva hastened to the room where she had slept to gather her kit.

Later, in Lata's hovercar, Dyeva asked her how she had come to join the movement.

"I despise this world," Lata said quietly. "It's a gutter of injustice and pain. Nothing will be lost if this world suddenly vanishes at the word of Lord Krishna. Of course, if we manage to undo the Troubles, success will cost us our own lives. That is the splendour of Crux. If our movement did not demand the ultimate sacrifice I would not have joined it."

Another Old Believer, though Dyeva, only this time of the Hindu type. And I was



brought up a Christ-worshipper, and the boy Kuli is a Buddhist. Are we all remnants and leftovers of a dead world? Is that why we wish to restore it?

"What are you thinking?" asked Lata.

"Wondering why the movement contains so many Old Believers."

"Oh, I think I know. It's because we want to undo the death of our faiths. So many people simply stopped believing after the Troubles. They said to themselves, There is no God. Or, if there is and he allows this to happen, I do not care about him."

Dyeva glanced at her curiously. They were entering the air-space above Ulanor and Lata paid frowning attention to the traffic until a beam picked up her car's black box. For an instant Dyeva had a powerful urge to continue this conversation, to talk about things that had real meaning. Then she remembered that the less Lata knew about her, and she about Lata, the better for both of them.

"We all come to it for different reasons," she said guardedly, and silence followed. The little car revolved above the Worldcity, bearing two women who hoped to change it into a phantasm that never had existed at all.

\* \* \* \*

Stef and Dzhun were having breakfast in a teashop deep in the Clouds and Rain District. Half the customers seemed to recognize Dzhun, and she waved and blew kisses to them. She had scrubbed off her white working makeup and with it had gone her nighttime pretence of lotus delicacy and passivity. She looked and was a tough young woman to whom life had not been kind.

"Wild turnover last night," she said to a red-haired eunuch who had stopped by the table to shriek and fondle her. "I did ten guys."

"Oh my dear," said the sisi, "I do ten on my way to work."

"Seems you've got some catching up to do," Stef told Dzhun when the sisi had moved on.

"Oh, he's such a bragger. And old, too. When I'm his age I'll have my own house and instead of bragging about doing ten guys I'll be doing one—the one I choose."

"And that one will be me."

"Only if you get rich," said Dzhun candidly, buttering a bun. "I'm tired of being a *robotchi*, a working stiff. I've got a senator on the string now, Stef, did I tell you? Soon you won't be able to afford me at all."

She dimpled as she always did when saying unpalatable things.

"Is that why I'm buying you breakfast?"

"Oh, Stef, I'm just needling you. I love my poor friends, too. Look, why don't you take me to Lake Bai for a week or two? Get a cabin. I won't demand a villa. Not yet."

"Unfortunately, I'm on a big case right now. One that might even save your life."

Dzhun stopped eating and stared at him. "You're telling the truth?"

"Believe it. When the payoff comes, it'll be as big as the case. Then we'll go to Bai. Get a villa, not a cabin."

Stef spoke with the calm assurance he employed when he was in a state of total uncertainty. The investigation was dead in the water. The arrests had not led to the wormholer. IC still hadn't come up with a make on Dyeva. Mashini were combing passenger lists of recent arrivals from the off-worlds—voiceprints, retinographs, DNA samples—turning up nobody with a record, nobody who fit the profiles. Stef's local contacts had nothing to offer.

"What's it all about, Stef?" asked Dzhun.

"Never mind. The case is a beheader. It's nothing you want to know about, so don't ask. It's a security matter and it'd be a hell of a shame if the Darksiders came and carted off a butt like yours to the White Chamber."

Their voices had fallen to whispers. Dzhun's face was so close that Stef's breath moved her long eyelashes. A delicate scent clung to her kimono, some nameless offworld flower, and the drooping faux silk disclosed the roundness of her little breasts like pomegranates. Stef could have eaten her with a spoon.

"I won't say anything," she promised. "If anybody asks what you're doing, I'll say that you never tell me anything."

Stef leaned back and sipped the bitter green tea he used to clear his head in the morning. Effortlessly, Dzhun put her whore's persona on again, screaming and waving at a friend who had just entered the teashop. Towering over the crowd, the White Tiger of the Nile headed for their table.

She and Dzhun kissed and Selina sat down, nodding at Stef.

"Hell of a night," she said to them and the world in general. "I did a dozen guys."

"Oh, Selina," said Dzhun. "Honey, I do a dozen on my way to work."

\* \* \* \*

Yamashita clapped his hands and bowed to announce himself to the *fromazbi*—the big cheeses. It was the morning meeting of the Secret Emergency Committee that had been formed to deal with the wormholer theft.

Yama's boss, Oleary, Deputy Controller of the Lion Sector, grunted a welcome, adding, "You know these people, I'm sure."

Considering that he was talking about the Solar System Controller, her deputy the Earth Controller, her Chief of Security, and Admiral Hrka of the Far Space Service, that was inadequate to say the least.

The SSC was Xian Xi-Qing, a small woman with a parchment face, tiny hands and dull gold and jade rings stacked two and three to a finger. She was famous for many things, her three husbands, her stable of male concubines, the ruthlessness and cleverness that had kept her alive and in power for decades.

She glared at Yama and demanded abruptly, "We've heard from Kathmann. At least he's caught somebody. What are you doing about this wormholer business? I've heard rumours the conspiracy originated in your sector."

Yama took his time seating himself on a backless chair known as the *shozit*, or hot seat. The grandees faced him behind a Martian gilt table surrounded by an invisible atmosphere of power. Admiral Hrka, Yama noted, wasn't even wearing his nine stars. That was the ultimate sign of status. Nobody needed to see his rating.

Among the bureaucrats, the admiral looked and probably felt out of place. Hrka usually dealt with the arcane business of moving in Far Space—using inertial compensators and particle beam trans-light-speed accelerators, navigating by mag space forcelines and staging chronometric re-entries where an error of a microsecond could put him deep inside the glowing core of a planet. He was accustomed to using atomlasers that could melt steel at half a million clicks, launching supertorps at near-light velocities and converting the enemies of his species into plasma thinner than the solar wind.

Now he found himself face to face with a threat that might enable one fragile human to undo his world and render all his knowledge and bravery pointless. He looked as if he longed to be in Far Space now, where even if he was a thousand light years from any place he knew where he was.

Seated to one side was Kathmann, Yama's opposite number in Earth Security. He resembled a files technician, with his pointed head and fat neck. He wore replacement eyes and the plastic corneas glittered blankly.

Quietly Yama laid out the steps taken so far to locate members of Crux. The notion that the conspiracy had grown up in the Lion Sector remained unproven, yet diligent enquiries were under way on all the Sector's two hundred and thirty-six inhabited worlds. All available mag space transponder circuits had been cleared for this one

task. Enough energy to light Ulanor for six weeks had already been poured into the message traffic. The whole business was necessarily slow; even at maximum power, a message routed through mag space from the farthest planets of the Sector took more than seventy standard hours to reach Earth.

And so on. Actually he had nothing to report and his aim was to make nothing sound like something. When he was done the *fromazbi*, who knew bureaucratic boilerplate when they heard it, just sat there looking bored. Only Kathmann spoke up.

"All your enquiries are on off-worlds?"

"Certainly. That's where our authority begins and ends."

"You're not invading my territory, using unofficial agents here on Earth?"

Yama was shocked.

"*Onor kolleg, eto ne'legalni!* he exclaimed. "Honoured colleague, that's illegal!"

Kathmann raised one fat fist and stared at Yama with eyes like worn silver half-khan pieces.

"Remember, Colonel, this hand holds the keys to the White Chamber!"

Yama raised his own much older fist.

"And this one, Colonel Kathmann, has killed a thousand enemies of the State!"

The spat had Admiral Hrka grinning.

"Simmer down, boys," he said, while the Earth Controller, a man named Ugaitish, muttered into his beard, "*Spokai, spokai*. Take it easy."

"What I want to know," said Oleary in a fretful tone, "is why anybody built this goddamn gadget in the first place. If it didn't exist it couldn't be stolen."

"It was some idiots at the University," said Ugaitish. "They just had to see if the theory worked. They applied for a permit, all very legal, and some minor official gave them an *oké* for the materials, which are pretty exotic. There's no use putting them in the White Chamber," he added, waving a hand to shut Kathmann up.

Xian agreed. "Typical academics. All they know is what they know. Not an atom of common sense."

"Besides," Ugaitish added, "the academics were the ones who reported the theft. Except for that, nobody would know anything about it."

"They should be beheaded anyway," Kathmann growled, "to get rid of the dangerous knowledge in their brains. A laser can do it in five seconds, and there you are."

Yama's sharp eyes intercepted the glance that passed among the *frotnazhi*. Kathmann made them uneasy — a man who knew too much and executed too readily. Yama filed away this insight for future reference.

"At this point, beheading is not the issue," declared Hrka. "Let me sum up. A woman, name unknown, took a commercial ship, probably somewhere in the Lion Sector—now there's a big volume of space to cover—and travelled to Earth, where she has, perhaps, contacted a group of terrorists who intend to obliterate our world by changing the past. The group has a functional wormholer, calls itself Crux, and in the most overpoliced human society since the fall of the Imperial Chinese People's Republic nobody knows who they are or where they are. Have I stated the situation clearly?"

Xian glared first at him, then at the two cops in turn.

"You better find them," she said, "or I'll put you *both* in the White Chamber."

She let that sink in, then said more formally: "Honoured security chiefs, we permit you to go."

When they were gone, Xian told the others, "We need information now. Ugaitish is putting out a public call for help. We don't have to tell everything, just that a gang of terrorists called Crux is on the loose, planning to kill many innocent people."

"Is that wise?" worried Oleary. "Informing the masses seems like an extreme step to me."

"If we don't, the politicians will. I have to brief the President and the Senate today, and what do you think will happen then?"

"Much smoke, much heat, no light," said Hrka fatalistically. "Well, we'd better catch these bastards. The whole world order as we know it exists only because of the Time of Troubles. Without that, everything would be different."

The *fromazbi* stared at each other. "Great Tao," said Ugaitish, "if these scoundrels succeed—even if we continue to exist at all, we might be anything. Coolies, prisoners, offworld scum!"

"Ask for help," Oleary told Xian. "If necessary, beg."

\* \* \* \*

After his night in the District, Stef needed sleep. Yet he spent a couple of hours at

his mashina, checking his regular contacts for hints of terrorist groups. He heard gossip about lunatics who wanted to blow up Genghis' tomb, but nothing of interest to him. So he went to bed.

The daytime noises rising from Golden Horde Street had no power to keep him awake. He had slept away too many days, sunk in the half light admitted from the roofed balcony, embracing rumpled bedcovers in the brown shadows of afternoon. In a few minutes he drifted off, but not for long.

He woke suddenly thinking he must have shit on himself. He reached for his pistol just as a crushing furry weight fell on him.

The ceiling light went on and the Darksider rolled Stef over and sat on his back. For an agonized few moments he couldn't breathe at all, while the creature, aided by a human Stef never saw clearly, thrust his hands into a kang and locked the wrists. Then the Darksider rose, bent down over its gasping victim and lifted him so that the kang could be clamped on his neck as well. A four-fingered, two-thumbed hand gripped his hair and pulled him to a sitting position.

Spots drifted before his eyes in a red torrent that slowly cleared. Stef was sitting naked on the bed with a black plastic kang clamped on his wrists and neck. His faint hope that this might be a nightmare died. The Darksider was standing bowlegged by the bed and scratching its chest.

The human seemed to be wearing a polizi uniform; he kept to the shadows just beyond the limits of Stef's vision. Head immobilized, Stef tried to twist his body to get a view of his captor, but without success.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Your guide, Mr Steffens. I'm here to show you something you never saw before."

"What?"

"The inside of the White Chamber."

At a gesture, the Darksider tossed a sack over Stef's head and pulled a cord tight around his neck. A hypodermic gun spat at his shoulder and he had a horrifying sense that his whole body was melting into a cold and lifeless fluid before darkness descended.

He would have preferred not to wake up, but wake he did. Still in the kang, still with the sack over his head. Of course you're not comfortable, he told himself. You're not supposed to be comfortable. He had no idea how long he'd been here, except that he was thirsty and hungry. No idea where "here" was, except somewhere in the warrens of the White Chamber.

He had urinated at some point and was sitting in the wet. The cell was so small that his knees were folded up against his chest. His icy toes pressed against metal that was probably the door. The cell was narrower than the kang, and Stef had to sit with his body twisted. There was no way to move, no way to rest. As the hours passed, agonizing pains began to shoot through his back and side. Breathing became difficult. He began suffering waves of panic at the thought that the polizi would leave him here until he slowly suffocated. The panic made things worse; he started to hyperventilate, and every breath stabbed him like a knife. He tried to calm himself, counting slow shallow breaths that didn't hurt so much.

Then voices approached along a corridor outside the cell. Faint hope was followed by stomach-knotting fear. They might let me go; it was all a mistake; Yama will get me out. No, Yama doesn't know anything and anyway he doesn't control the polizi. They're coming to torture me.

The voices came close. Two techs were discussing a "client", as they called their victims. Voices neutral, atonal like the voices of two black boxes.

"Maybe twenty cc of gnosine would do it."

"I dunno. This client is a tough case."

"Maybe needles in the spinal marrow"

They were gone. A faint noise in the distance remained unidentifiable until a door in the corridor slid open. Then Stef heard a whimpering, sobbing sound that made all the hairs rise on the back of his neck. Extreme agony, he thought—beyond screaming.

The door slid shut again and the sound became a low meaningless murmur. Human footsteps approached again. Two voices.

"Just wonderful, Doctor. I never thought she'd break."

"Sometimes a combination of therapies is essential."

They too were gone. Doctors. Technicians. Therapies. Clients. The language of the Chamber. We are not sadists, we are scientists performing a distasteful but necessary function in the cause of justice. Try the gnosine, try the needles, try everything in combination. Promise the clients life; after you've worked on them for a while, promise them death.

When the polizi came at last, they came in silence. Without the slightest warning the door clanged open. Somebody yelled, "Get the scum! Get the piece of shit!"

A Darksider grabbed Stef's legs and dragged him into the hall and the wrench on his cramped limbs made him scream. Then the animal was dragging him down the hall

by the heels while boots kicked at Stef's ribs and head.

The kang knocked against the walls and floor. A human hand grabbed his testicles and twisted and he screamed again, louder than before. Then somebody, a crowd of them, human and inhuman, seized the ends of the kang and dragged him to his feet.

"Walk! Walk, you piece of shit! Walk!"

He couldn't and fell and somebody kicked him hard in the groin and this time he did no screaming. He was unconscious.

He woke with intense light in his eyes. He was sitting in a hard duroplast chair and the sack was off his head. His eyes burned; agony rose in waves from his groin. Somebody in hard boots stamped on the bare toes of his left foot.

Stef wasn't thinking any longer, he was living in nothing but the conviction that every second some new pain would strike. What next, what next? Hands seized the kang and pulled it back. Other hands, some human, some inhuman, grabbed his ankles and stretched out his legs. In the blazing light he was half blind, absolutely helpless. Somebody touched his breastbone and he moaned and his stomach knotted, expecting the blow.

Nothing happened. The light dimmed. Gradually his eyes cleared. A man with a pointed head was standing before him. The man had plastic eyes that went blank when he moved his head. There was no crowd of tormentors, only two thuggi from Earth Central and one Darksider. One of the thuggi gave the other a piece of candy and they stood there, chewing. The Darksider scratched its furry backside against a wall.

"Mr Steffens."

"Yes," whispered Stef.

"I'm sending you home now. For the future, will you remember one thing?"

"Yes."

"From now on, Yamashita will continue to pay you, but in spite of that you'll be working for me as well as for him, and I'll expect to know everything you do and everything you discover about Crux."

Kathmann leaned forward and once again tapped Stef's breastbone.

"If you hide anything from me, I'll know it, and I'll bring you back here. Do you understand?"

"Yes."



"Next time you'll get standard treatment," added Kathmann, straightening up. "Not the grandmotherly kindness you received this time."

To the thuggi he said, "Give him one more."

He left the room and a door closed. Behind the light the room flickered and a second Darksider Stef hadn't seen before approached him, holding a spiked club in its paws. But that'll kill me, he thought, and his eyes clamped shut on a final vision of the new Darksider raising the club for a smashing blow to his gut.

He sat there blind, waiting. Then he heard them laughing at him. He opened his eyes as one of the thuggi unlocked the kang. The other was grinning. The Darksider with the club flickered, evaporated. A three-dimensional laser image, created, Stef now saw, by projectors mounted high up on the walls.

"The boss likes to have his little joke," the thug explained with a wink. The real Darksider was still scratching its butt. Insofar as an animal could, it looked absolutely bored.

Outside was deep night or earliest morning. Wrapped in a blanket and shivering uncontrollably, Stef rode home in a polizi hovercar. Before dawn he was in his own bed, wracked by pain from toes to scalp. Yet he slept, and by noon was able to creep to the balcony, dragging one foot behind him. He walked bowlegged, because his scrotum was the size of a grapefruit.

Slowly, very slowly, he prepared kif and lay down. He was starving but wouldn't have dreamed of getting up to look for food.

He smoked and the drug dulled everything, pain and hunger alike, and let him sleep. In all the world only kif was merciful. No wonder it was his religion.

By nightfall Stef was minimally better. He slept long, despite nightmares that left him drenched with sweat. By morning he was functional enough to bathe (he smelled worse than a Darksider by then) and dress. Then he called Yama on his mashina, hoping the polizi would monitor his call—he wanted to remind them that he had powerful friends.

"Stef. What's up?"

"I just wanted you to know that your pal Kathmann had me in the White Chamber. I'm working for him now, too."

"That son of a bitch. He hurt you much?"

"It wasn't a picnic. But I've been through worse."

"Yeah, I know you're a survivor. Well, I guess we got to share anything we find out with Earth Central. But I'm going to see Kathmann and tell him if he grabs you again,

I'll send O'Leary to see Xian herself. You got anything broken, like bones?"

"No."

"Well, at least the miserable bastard went light on you."

Stef next called a neighbourhood babaku shop and ordered food. Then he found his pistol, made sure it was loaded, and returned to his kif pipe.

On the balcony he smoked and thought about ways to kill Kathmann. He had two people on his list now: Dyeva, because she wanted to destroy his world, Kathmann because he had—well, not tortured Stef; what had happened was too trivial to be called torture. No, Kathmann had simply been getting his attention in the inimitable polizi way.

This wasn't the first time in his life that Stef had been completely abased and humiliated. But he decided now that it was to be the last. He pointed his pistol at the wall and said, "*Phut.*"

After Dyeva, Kathmann was next.

\* \* \* \*

That evening Professor Yang again stood before his mashina, which was set to Transmit and Record. A memory cube nestled in the queue. Lights arranged by his servant illuminated Yang against a background of ancient books that had been imprinted on the wall by a digital image-transfer process. (Real books were too expensive for a scholar to afford.)

Watching the interest indicator with a sharp eye, Yang launched into the second lecture of his course, Origin of Our World. His subject today was the response to the Troubles: the slow repopulation of the Earth by humans and the reintroduction of hundreds of extinct animal species whose DNA had fortunately been preserved for low-gravity study on Luna.

He spoke of the first halting steps towards Far Space and of the gradual emergence of humanity from the cocoon of the Solar System during three hundred years of experiment and daring colonization. He spoke of the new morality that emerged from the Time of Troubles, the ecolaws that limited the size of families and prescribed a human density of no more than one person per thousand hectares of land surface on any inhabited planet. (Great populations tend to produce political instability, to say nothing of epidemics.)

He spoke of the Great Diaspora, the scattering of humankind among the stars to ensure that what had almost happened in the past could never happen again. He spoke of a species obsessed with security and order, and pointed out what a good thing it was that people had, for once, learned from the past, so that they would

never have to repeat it. He spoke about the liquidation of democracy and explained the strange term as a Greek word meaning "mob rule". He ended with a kindly word or two about the friendly aliens like the Darksidiers who had now become part of humanity's march towards ever greater heights of stability and glory.

All across the city, students were recording the lecture. So were people who were not students but had a hunger for learning. In his apartment, Stef listened because he was still recovering from his night in the Chamber and had nothing else to do. His chief reaction to Yang's version of history was sardonic amusement.

"Pompous old glupetz," he muttered.

In another shabby apartment, this one opening on a rundown warren of buildings near the university called Jesus and Buddha Court, Kuli—whose real name was Ananda—and the beautiful Dian—whose real name was Iris—also listened to Yang. Their reactions tended less to laughter and more to scorn.

"I liked the bit about the Darksidiers," said Ananda, fingering his rosary. "A bunch of smelly barbarians our lords and masters use as mercenaries to suppress human freedom."

"You're so right," said Iris, shutting off the box. "How I hate that man."

"Oh well, he's just a professor," said Ananda tolerantly. "What can you expect. Look, is there a Crux meeting this week?"

"I don't know. Lata will have to message us, won't she? Nobody we know has been arrested. Maybe the excitement's over," she added optimistically.

"I thought Zet was getting spooked."

"Well, he's old. Old people get scared so easily."

She smiled and sat down on the arm of his chair. Ananda used his free hand to rub her smooth back. Not for the first time in history, conspiracy had led to romance. The relationship had begun with talk and more talk; change the past, restore life to the victims of the Troubles and at the same time erase this world of cruelty and injustice. Neither Ananda nor Iris could imagine that they might cease to exist if the past were changed; they thought that somehow they would continue just about as they were. Maybe better.

Growing intimate, they had told each other their real names; that had been a crucial step, filled with daring trust and a quiver of fear—somewhat like their first time getting naked together. The fact that Ananda in the past had told other girls his name and had tried to recruit them for Crux was something that Iris didn't know.

Indeed, Ananda had forgotten the others too, for he was floating in his new love like

a fly in honey. In the middle of the dishevelled apartment, surrounded by discarded hardcopy, rumped bedding, a few stray cats for whom Ananda felt a brotherly concern, Iris of haunting beauty bent and touched her lips to those of the ugly young man with the rosary at his belt.

"I'd better go," she murmured. "I've got a lab." Her tone said to him, Make me stay.

"In a minute," said Ananda, tightening his grip. "You can go in just a minute."

\* \* \* \*

A few streets away, in a less shabby student apartment occupied by four young women, the mashina was still playing after Yang's lecture, only now switched to a commercial programme.

One of the women was insisting that she needed to make a call, but the other three were watching a story of sex among the stars called *The Far Side of the Sky* and voted her down.

"You can wait, Taka," they said firmly. Taka, who was twenty, had begun to argue when a news bulletin suddenly interrupted the transmission.

"Suppose I make my call now—" she started to say, when something about the bulletin caught her attention.

"Hush up," she told the others, who were bitterly complaining about the interruption of the story just as the hero had embraced the heroine deep in mag space.

"I want to hear this," said Taka.

After the bulletin the story quickly resumed. Taka thoughtfully retired to her bedroom and sat down on the floor, folded her slim legs gracefully under her, and reached for her compwrite. The compwrite transmitted through the mashina in the other room but gave her privacy to work.

"A letter," she said, "to—"

Who? She wondered. Daddy had always told her to obey the law but have nothing to do with the polizi, who were, he said, scum, *gryaz*, filth. How then to get her information to them without using the boxcode that had appeared on the screen during the newsflash?

"To Professor Yang, History Faculty," she began, rattling off the university address code from memory. "Send this with no return address, *oké?*"

"I am waiting, O woman of transcendent beauty," said the compwrite. Taka herself had taught it to say that and was now trying to make it learn how to giggle.

"Honoured Professor, I am sending this to you as a person I honour and trust and admire," she began, laying it on thick.

"I have always been a law-abiding person and there was a news bulletin just now where the polizi were asking for information about a terrorist group called the Crooks. Well, a student named Ananda, when he was trying to climb aboard—scratch that, make love to me a couple of months ago, stated that he belonged to this group and tried to make it seem incredibly important, though I had never heard of it myself up to that time. In any case my native dialect is English and I happen to know what Crooks means and I was angry that somebody would try to involve me in something criminal.

"Hoping that you will convey this info to the proper authorities, I remain one of your students choosing to remain anonymous."

She viewed this missive on the screen and then added, "PS, this Ananda is an ugly guy with a rosary of some kind he wears on his belt. I think he's an O.B. He is skinny and wears a funny kind of cross under his jacket. He says it is a symbol of something—I forget what."

She added, "Send," and headed back into the front room, where the current chapter of *The Far Side of the Sky* had expired in a shudder of Far Space orgasms.

"Well, I suppose I can make my call now," she said, and did-so, setting up an appointment for tomorrow with the mashina of a depilator who had promised to leave her arms and legs as smooth as baby flesh, which she thought would look very nice.

\* \* \* \*

Professor Yang's infatuation with Selina was leading him deeper and deeper into debt. He tried to stay away from Radiant Love House, but instead found himself dreaming of the White Tiger all day and heading for the District by hovercab at least three times a week.

He told himself all the usual things—that this was ridiculous in a man his age, that he would lose face if his frequent visits became known, that he couldn't afford this new extravagance. No argument could sway him; he wanted his woman of ivory in the blue peace of the electronic room where for an hour at least he feasted on the illu-sion of youth regained.

He was again in the middling expensive parlour waiting for the White Tiger when Stef lounged in and collapsed on the double divan.

Ordinarily, Yang would have ignored the fellow, but when Stef said, "How are you, Honoured Professor?" he felt he had to say something in return.

"Quite well." Brief, cool.

"I watched your last lecture," said Stef, who was inclined to chat, knowing that as usual he had time to kill before Dzhun could receive him.

"Really," said Yang, thawing slightly. He was paid .10 khan for every box that tuned in to his lectures. It wasn't much, but he needed every tenth he could get.

"Yeah. I'm not a student, but I am ill-educated and I occasionally try to improve my mind, such as it is."

Stef pulled over a wheeled censer, dumped a little kif into it from a pouch he carried, and turned on the heating element.

"Inhale?" he asked, unwinding two hoses and handing one to Yang.

"The waiting is tiresome," Yang allowed, and took an experimental puff. Finding the quality acceptable (local kif, not Martian, but pretty good) he took another.

"May I ask your profession?"

"Investigative agent. I'm also a licensed member of the Middlemen and Fixers' Guild."

"Ah." Yang looked at Stef sharply. "Are you good at what you do?"

"Well, I live by it and have for years. Why? Need something looked into?"

"Actually," said Yang slowly, "I received an anonymous letter a few days ago and I've been wondering how to handle it. It claims to place in my hands certain information that I, ah, feel somebody in authority ought to know. Yet I have no way of checking it or naming the sender, who claims to be a student of mine. It may be worthless; on the other hand, if it's useful, well—"

"You'd like to be paid for it," said Stef promptly. "I can handle that. Insulate you from the polizi. There are ways to handle it confidentially and at the same time claim a reasonable reward if the information's good. What's it all about?"

Yang thought for a moment and then said, "It concerns something called Crux."

All of Stef's long training was just barely sufficient to enable him to keep a *marmolitz*—a marble face.

"Ah," he said, clearing his throat, "the thing that was on the box a few nights ago?"

"Yes."

Briefly he told Stef about the letter, withholding, however, the name Ananda and his

description.

"What do you think it might be worth?"

"How happy I am," interrupted the box in the corner, "to inform you, honoured guest, that Dzhun is now ready to receive you."

"Tell her to wait," said Stef.

To Yang he said, "Let me try to find out if the matter's really important. If so, I wouldn't hesitate to ask ten thousand khans in return for such information."

"Ten *thousand!*"

The kif pipe fell out of his mouth.

"It must be something major," Stef pointed out, "or it wouldn't have been put on the air. At the same time, I would recommend caution. This is clearly a security matter, and you certainly wouldn't want to expose yourself to the suspicion of knowing more than you actually do. That's a short path to the White Chamber. Luckily, I have a friend on the inside who's not polizi and can make enquiries."

"And your, ah, fee?" asked Yang.

"A flat ten per cent of the award. I'm an ethical investigator."

"Good heavens," said Yang, who was perfectly indifferent to Stef's professional ethics but whose mind was engaged in dividing K9,000 by 120 to reach the astounding figure of seventy-five hour-long sessions with the White Tiger in the electronic room.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"Your chop on my standard contract, one sheet of hardcopy with the message and about two days."

"You shall, my friend," said Professor Yang rather grandly, "have all three."

\* \* \* \*

Yama and Stef sat at the duroplast desk in the Lion House staring at the hardcopy.

"One name. And what a crappy description. Maybe I should turn Yang over to Kathmann just to see if he knows anything more."

"An honoured professor? Come on, Yama. Stop thinking like a security gorilla for once. Yang doesn't know a damn thing except that he needs money to rent his albino. What we need is to find this Ananda."

"How? Call in the polizi?"

"Hell, no. Get the credit yourself. First of all, access the university records. Tell your mashina to search for Ananda as both a family name and a given name. Let's say for the last two years. Do you have access to the polizi and city records?"

"That's Earth Central stuff," said Yama with a cunning look. "It's off limits to us. Of *course* I've got access."

"When you get some names from the university, have the box start calling their numbers and checking the faces of these Anandas. That'll eliminate some—they can't all be skinny, ugly guys—and meanwhile you can be having the names checked against the polizi records for arrests and against the city records for everything else—property ownership, energy payments, tax payments, everything. Then there's the Old Believer angle—"

Yama was already talking to his box. "I want confidential access to university records. Now."

He turned back to Stef. "By the way, how much is this costing me, assuming it leads to anything?"

"If it leads to Crux, I promised Yang fifteen thousand."

"Petty cash," said Yama. "*If* it leads to Crux."

The box chimed. "Sir, I have accessed the university central administrative files."

"Search admission, registration and expulsion records for the name Ananda," said Yama promptly, "especially expulsion." He added to Stef, "Terrorists are often students, but very few of them are good students."

Dreaming of the money, Stef paced the room impatiently. The university records were voluminous and ill-kept. There was no Ananda as a family name. Searching given names was just getting under way—"This baby does it in nanoseconds," promised Yama—when the whole university system went down. And stayed down.

After more than an hour of waiting and pacing and dreaming of kif, Stef lounged out, holding his nose until he was past the Darksider, and took a hovercab home. There he called Earth Central and reported to one of Kathmann's aides that he and Yama were following down an anonymous tip that a student was a member of Crux.

Then he called Yang and told him that the money was practically in hand. Yang was ecstatic.

"You don't know what this means to me, honoured investigative agent," he bubbled. "I've had so many calls on my purse lately."



"I know what you mean."

"What do you think this Crux organization might be?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," Stef lied. "In English the word means, uh, the essential thing. Like the crux of an argument."

"Of course there's also the Latin meaning."

"What's Latin?"

"It's a dead language. The original source of the word. In Latin it means cross. Hence the crossroads, the critical point."

"Ananda wears a funny kind of cross," said Stef slowly.

"Yes. My informant thought he was an Old Believer."

"I wonder—"

Stef's box chimed. He quickly made arrangements to bring Yang his payoff and cut the circuit.

"Say," he told the box.

"Stef, I got the names," said Yama, abrupt as usual. "Got your recorder on? Here they are. Last year, Govind Ananda, withdrawn. This year, Patal Ananda, Nish Ananda, Sivastheni Ananda. That's all."

"Boxcodes?"

"Got 'em all except Govind. Like so many of those damn students, he may have a pirated mashina. I'm having the box call the ones we've got, and at the same time start running through the city records. Got any more bright ideas?"

"No," said Stef, "except I want a vacation when this is over. And my pay."

"Stop kidding me, I know you'll take your pay out of old Yang's reward money. Don't try to ... wait a minute. Box reports Patal and Sivas—whatever don't resemble the description. Nish is away from home. Wait a minute again. Govind Ananda paid the energy bill on No. 71, Jesus and Buddha Court. Didn't the letter say something about a rosary? And about him being an O.B.?"

"Keep trying Nish, Yama, but send three or four of your thuggi to meet me at J and B Court. I'm going to try Govind. I like the smell of that address. It's near the University and the names would echo for an Old Believer."

"You got 'em. Plus a Darksider in case things get rough."

"And a gas mask."

Stef rang off, plunged into a battered Korean-style chest on his balcony and brought out his one-centimetre impact pistol. He touched the clip control and chambered one of the fat, black-headed rounds.

Action elated him, freed him from his memories of being beaten, his sense of uselessness. Suddenly he felt wonderful, better than when he was on kif, better than when he was drunk, almost better than when he was about to make love. A flutter of fear in his belly was part of the frisson. So was the taste of iron filings beginning to fill his mouth.

He rummaged through his closet, dragged out his most ample jacket, tore the right-hand pocket to give him access to the space between cloth and lining. Hand in pocket, he pressed the gun against his ribs to hide any bulge and slipped through the door, listening to it click behind him, wondering if he would ever unlatch it again. He whispered a goodbye to Dzhun. On the roof he signalled for a hovercab.

"Jesus and Buddha Court," he said, when one drew up.

The cab's black box said, "Gratizor."

\* \* \* \*

On Lake Bai in the evening the tinkle of samisen music mixed with the thrumming of a Spanish guitar, the notes falling like lemon and oleander flowers into the dark, cold water.

Half a click down in the huge lake—really a freshwater inland sea—glacial ice still lingered, surviving into the heat of an earth warmer than it had been since the noontime of the dinosaurs. Shrieking happily, goosepimpled swimmers were leaping into the water from the floating docks of lakeside villas. Further on, strings of Japanese lanterns illuminated teahouses and casinos and slider rinks where the children of grandees cavorted on expensive cushions of air.

Back in the hills, spotlights illuminated palaces. Bijou villas lined the shores, and on the veranda of one of the smaller ones Stef and Dzhun idled, wearing light evening robes and not much else. Dzhun kept returning to Stef's account of the raid, trying to get the story straight.

"So these terrorists—did you shoot them?"

"Didn't have to. I've seldom felt like such a fool in my life."

Stef gestured lazily, and Dzhun disturbed herself long enough to pour champagne.

The grapes of Siberia were justly famous, the flavour supposedly improved by the low background radiation.

"The terrorists weren't dangerous?"

"Pair of dumb kids. The boy wearing his funny cross and the girl with the same symbol tattooed on her hand, if you can believe that. The Darksider smashed the door in and let out a roar and they both fainted dead away. Then I jumped in yelling and the thuggi followed, and suddenly the four of us were standing around waving weapons at two unconscious children. Ridiculous scene.

"I almost puked when I had to hand them over to the polizi. Not that there was anything else I could do, with the thuggi and the Darksider there. I was sure Kathmann would tear them limb from limb, but Yama says they woke up spilling their guts. The polizi have got 'em locked up, of course, but Security got everything they wanted in the first three minutes."

"Dyeva."

"Absolutely. Iris and Ananda said she'd come in by the Luna shuttle on such and such a day. That was enough. Kathmann called Yama. Yama has shuttle data at his fingertips, there were only four females of the right age on that one, and they all checked out except Akhmatova Maria from a planet called Ganesh, which is, just like it was supposed to be, in the Lion Sector. She stepped off the shuttle and vanished.

"So now they got her hologram, plus retinographs, voiceprints, DNA, all that stuff they take when you get a passport. The kids have positively identified her. Dyeva's been made, for whatever good it may do us.

"It was an eventful day. The kids had met Dyeva at a villa outside town, so the polizi descended on that and bagged the owner. He went straight to the Chamber and promptly gave them the name of another member of the cell, a woman who has so far evaded capture. A demand for information went out to Ganesh at maximum power and with the most awful threats that Yama could think of on the spur of the moment.

"He'd just laid all this information on Oleary's desk when another call comes in from Earth Central. Kathmann's got the wormholer. Gadget takes a hell of a lot of juice, so his mashini were watching the Ulanor power grid for unusual current surges. Well, a surge of the right size occurred, and Kathmann arrived at the metre with half a dozen Darksidiers to find the wormholer standing all by itself in a deserted warehouse in the northwest quadrant."

Dzhun was frowning. "Then that means—"

"You and I may vanish at any moment," Stef grinned. "Dyeva's presumably in the twenty-first century trying to prevent the Time of Troubles. I wish her luck. How's

she going to do it?"

"And we're here."

"And we're here, relaxing, courtesy of the payoff to Yang. My success in cracking Crux convinced Yama that I'm the guy to stop Dyeva. He offered me a hundred thousand to go after her. I laughed in his face."

"Then who'll do the job?"

"Some thuggi from Earth Central who're under military discipline and can't say no."

"And What'll happen to her?"

"In the twenty-first century? Probably get killed by the surface traffic. Or catch a fatal disease. Or get lost in the crowds. I wouldn't trust Kathmann's idiots to find their peckers when they need to piss. Dyeva's safe enough from them."

Later, he and Dzhun wandered up the shingled beach to a waterside inn that served caviar and Peking duck and other edibles. People of the upper and underworld were crowded together at small tables, eating and drinking. Blue clouds of kif drifted from open censers over the crowd, relaxing everybody.

Dzhun, who had an indelicate appetite, was just piling into her dessert when the haunting notes of a synthesizer drifted like pollen across vast, cool Lake Bai. A band floated up in an open hovercar, and a *sisi* with a piercingly sweet voice performed a popular air, "This Dewdrop World", whose simple theme was eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die. The crowd loved it; silver half-khans and even a few gold khans showered the car. Whenever a coin fell in the water, a musician would jump in after it like a frog and have to be fished out by his friends.

It was a fine end to the evening. When Stef and Dzhun left the restaurant the air had the lingering chill of spring and the scent of lemon groves that were blossoming in the hills. Dzhun pulled Stef's arm like a scarf around her neck and started to sing the song again. He leaned over her, hugged her close. It was at moments like this that he almost envied people who were foolish enough to fall in love.

"I love that song," she said. "It's so nice to be sad. Sadness goes with joy like plums with duck."

Didn't statements like that mean that she was, after all, a bit more than just a whore? Stef hugged her tighter, breathing in her offworld perfume with the chilly scent of the lemon groves.

They had an amorous night and spent next morning lolling on the deck with their usual strong green tea. They were supposed to start back to the city today and Dzhun was looking abstracted.

"Can't wait to get back and go to work?" Stef smiled.

"Stef... there's something I have to tell you."

"What?"

"My senator wants to set me up in a little house in Karakorum. He's jealous, and it'll be the end for you and me."

That produced silence. Stef cleared his throat, drank tea.

"Ah. So this trip was a kiss off."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Meaning?"

Dzhun said, eyes cast down, "I'd rather live with you. We don't have to marry."

"No," said Stef.

Dzhun sat down, still not looking at him.

"I thought you'd say that. I've never bothered you with my life story because I thought you'd get bored and angry. But let me tell you just a little. My family needed money, so they sold me into the District when I was nine. The owner rented me to one of his customers. The night he raped me, I almost bled to death.

"By the time I was twelve I was a registered whore, a member of the guild. It took me three more years to pay off my debts because in the District the houses charge you for everything, heat, water, towels, medi-scanning, almost for the air you breathe. But I was beautiful and earning good money and I was out of debt by the time I was sixteen. Now I'm almost eighteen and I'm sick of it all. I don't want to be a *robotchi* any more.

"I hear people talk about going to the stars and I've never been out of Ulanor. I can barely read and write and if Selina hadn't taught me some arithmetic so they couldn't cheat me, I wouldn't be able to add two and two. I don't know anything, all I do is live from night to night—up at sixteen, to bed at eight. I've had dozens of diseases—sida six times — and the last time it took me a whole month to recover. The house doctor says my immune system's collapsing, whatever that means.

"I've got to get out of the life, Stef. I want to live with you, but if you don't want me I'm going with my senator. He has some funny tastes and three wives and he's old, but he's also kind-hearted and rich, and that's enough."

She stopped, still looking down at the floor. Stef was staring at Dzhun and clenching his fists. He felt as if a favourite dog had just bitten him. Twice, in fact—once by

threatening to leave him, and once by demanding a commitment from him.

"I don't want anything fancy," Dzhun went on. "I want to live in a house with a garden. I want to get up in the morning and go to bed at night. I want to go to school before I'm too old and learn something about the world. I can see you're angry with me. Well, so be it. If you're too angry to pay my way back to the city, well screw you. I'll get the shuttle by myself."

She stood up and walked somewhat unsteadily into the house, taking by habit the little mincing steps they taught the girls—and the boys as well—in Radiant Love House.

Half an hour later she came back out, dressed for the road. Stef was leaning on the railing, looking down into deep and black Lake Bai.

Stef said, "I'm poor. I'm a loner. I'm a kif head."

"So you can't afford me, don't want me, and don't need me because kif's better. Right? So, goodbye."

"Can you fend off your senator for a while?"

"Not forever. He can buy what he wants, and I don't want to lose him."

"I guess I could set up housekeeping with a hundred thousand," Stef muttered. "But maybe I can bargain for more."

Dzhun collapsed rather than sat down and drew the longest breath of her life. She put her hands over her face as if she was weeping, though in fact she had stopped crying many years before and her face was hot and dry. Her mind was running on many things, but chiefly on her friend Selina's brainstorm, the wonderful invention of the senator, who, of course, did not really exist.

\* \* \* \*

"So you'll do it," said Yama.

"For a million khans. Paid in advance. I want something to leave to my heirs in the event I don't come back."

"That's a bunch of fucking money."

"There's one more thing I want. Get those two kids I captured turned loose. Otherwise Kathmann will sooner or later cut their heads off on general principles."

Yama frowned. "He'll never turn them loose. They're young and the girl's beautiful, so he'll want to mutilate them. In my opinion, he's saving them for something special. That's the way Kathmann is—he's a fucking sadist, as you of all people ought to

know."

"Try anyway."

"It's hopeless. But if I can save them I will."

When Stef had gone, Yama set out to sell his prize agent to the *fromazbi*. He expected trouble with Kathmann but none developed, the chief of Earth Security was assembling an assassination team to kill Dyeva and viewed Stef's mission as a chance to test the wormholer. Ugaitish, Admiral Hrka and Xian were ready to try anything and put their chops on the proposal without a murmur. It was Yama's own boss, Oleary, who objected because of the cost.

"Why don't you go yourself?" he demanded. "It'd be cheaper."

"Sir, I'll go if you say to. But I got a wife and four kids."

"That's two more than the ecolaws allow."

"I got an exemption."

Oleary stared at Stef's file, frowning.

"What's wrong with this guy? I don't trust him. Why did he have to leave the service in the first place?"

"Sir, he's a great agent. Brave, quick, adaptable. But he's got a soft spot in his head. He's sentimental. You can't be a cop and be senti-mental. A long time ago he helped a woman thief who was headed for the White Chamber to escape. Well, I found out about it, so I did my duty and turned Steffens in."

Oleary kept on frowning.

"If he's sentimental about women, what about when he has to kill, what's her name, Dyeva?"

"Sir, she's different. She's threatening his whole world, including this little tart he seems to be in love with."

"Oh, well," said Oleary, shrugging. "Send him, I guess. Can't hurt. But take the money back if he doesn't succeed. How could I justify a budget item like that for a failure?"

\* \* \* \*

"You go tomorrow," said Yama. "Here's some stuff to study tonight."

Stef took the packet of copy, caught an official hovercar, and flew straight to

Radiant Love House. The long farewell that followed left Stef weeping, and Dzhun—once the door had closed behind him—smiling at prospects that seemed equally bright whether he survived his mission or not.

Back home, he settled down on the balcony to study the three items that Yama had provided him: a hologram of Dyeva, a summary of her life on Ganesh and a map of ancient Moscow. The map got little more than a glance; he needed to be in situ to use it. Dyeva's hologram was another matter. Stef studied it as closely as if she and not Dzhun was his lover, imprinting on his mind Dyeva's round Tartar face, high cheek-bones and unreadable eyes.

Then he read her biography. To his surprise, the hardcopy with its STATE SECRET/BEHEADER stamp had been written by Professor Yang. Liking the taste of polizi money, he'd gone to work for Yama as a volunteer agent, and his first task had been writing up and annotating Dyeva's life story.

Settlers of the Shiva system had been led by a devout Hindu who had hoped to establish a refuge for members of all the old faiths—Muslims, Christians, Jews and Buddhists as well as his own people—where, far from corruption and unbelief, peace and justice and the worship of God could reign for all time.

"The actual results of this noble experiment," wrote Yang, "were not without irony." In the process of settling the system, three intelligent species had been destroyed, and among the humans religious wars and bitter sectarian disputes had constituted much of the system's subsequent history.

Akhmatova Maria was born to a devout family on the third planet, Ganesh. They maintained Christian belief according to the Russian Orthodox rite and hated both their neighbours of other faiths and the depraved and godless civilization of other planets. In time she lost her own faith in God but adopted in its place the religion of humanity. Her private life remained austere; she had neither male nor female lovers, and the name she took in the movement which she helped to found, Dyeva, meant virgin in Russian, her native dialect.

She was attending the local academy when news of the technical advances which allowed invention of the wormholer gave her the great project of her life. She was one of a group of people loosely connected with the academy who formed a scheme to undo the Time of Troubles by returning to the past. Some members of her group transferred to the University of the Universe in Ulanor, where they made converts to their views and laid plans to build—later on, learning that one had already been built, to steal—a wormholer.

Then came a part of the account that Yama had marked in red. Dyeva's theory that the Troubles could be prevented rested upon a verbal tradition among the Russian Christians of Ganesh: that a man named Razruzhenye, the defence minister of ancient Russia when the troubles began, ordered the first thermo/bio strike upon China and that this attack launched the Time of Troubles. Killing this one individual might well



prevent the war and undo the whole course of disasters that followed.

"So," muttered Stef. It seemed a little strange to him that Dyeva, who believed in the absolute value of life, was returning to the past to kill someone. But Yang in a footnote pointed out that such things had happened many times in the past: people who believed in freedom imprisoned freedom's enemies; those who believed in life murdered anybody who seemed to threaten it.

His study finished, Stef ate a little, then fell into bed. He woke when his mashina chimed and managed to stumble through a bath. Then he confronted a large box of ridiculous clothing that had been prepared according to Professor Yang's designs, based on what men wore in the mosaics of the Moscow subway.

At seven-seventy-five a government hovercar picked Stef off the roof and flew him to a neighborhood that he knew only too well, a cluster of huge anonymous buildings with vaguely menacing forms. They descended past the ziggurat Palace of Justice and the Central Lockup in whose subterranean rooms he had tasted the joys of interrogation.

This time, however, the huge pentagonal block of Earth Central was the goal. The hovercar descended through a well in the central courtyard that wits called the Navel of the Earth. Yama met Stef as he emerged in a sunless court of black hexagonal stone blocks and led him down one narrow blank corridor after another, past huge stinking Darksiders armed with impact weapons, into a vaulted underground room with a gleaming contraption standing in the centre of the floor among a jungle of thick grey cables.

"So that's it," said Stef, interested by his own lack of interest. At the centre of the wormholer was a two-metre cube with a round opening in one side, whose purpose he could easily guess.

Blue-coated techs helped him into a heavy coat with wide lapels and big pockets, slipped an impact pistol into the right-hand coat pocket, and slid a black powerpack with a small control box into the left. Somebody stuck a chilly metal button into his left ear.

"Pay attention to the control," said Yama. "Take it in your hand. Now. Red button: job's done, bring me home. *oké?* White button: I need help, send backup now. Black button: hold onto your ass, Dyeva's succeeded and your world is finished. The powerpack feeds a little tiny built-in mag space transponder that emits a kind of cosmic squeak for one microsecond. The signal crosses time exactly the way it crosses space, don't ask me why. That's what we'll be listening for. Then we have to pull you back, send help, or—"

"Grab your butts. I see. But that also means you could just cut me off, leave me there, save yourselves a million."

"Yeah, we could, but we won't. Hell with that, I really mean *I* won't. Not," he smiled, "for a measly million that isn't even my money."

They stared at each other until Stef managed a weak grin.

"That's good enough. Any problems?"

"Yes," said Stef, "lots. I don't speak Russian. I've got no goddamn idea how to find Dyeva even if I land in Moscow at the right time. I—"

Yama took Stef's arm and began to walk him toward the wormholer.

"Don't worry about the language. That thing in your ear will translate for you. And don't worry about the time. A register inside the machine recorded the day Dyeva chose, the 331st day of 2091. So we're sending you to that same date in hopes she's close to the point of exit. If she's not, you'll have to find her."

"How?"

"Come on, Stef. I sold the others on you because of your adaptability. This whole world you're going into vanished in a cloud of dust. How much can anybody know about it? There's just no way to be systematic."

They stopped beside the huge glittering gadget.

"I really envy you," said Yama in a choked voice. "This is the most crucial moment in human history. You're the plumed knight of our world, like Yoshitsune, like Saladin, like Richard the Lion-Hearted."

Yama embraced him. "Take care, my old friend, and kill that fucking virgin."

An instant later the techs had helped Stef into the wormholer and closed the heavy door, which looked like a nine-petal steel chrysanthemum. Yama stepped back, wiping his eyes. Kathmann had now arrived to observe the action and Yama joined him.

"Well, that's one less friend I got," said Yama. "This job of mine is hell. How are the preparations going for your assassination team?"

"As fast as possible. Of course they're the ones who'll really do the job."

"There's a chance that Steffens might pull it off alone."

"Yeah," said Kathmann, "and there's a chance I might be the next Solar System Controller. *Svidanye*," he added, "see you later. Some more members of Crux have been arrested and I got work to do in the Chamber."

\* \* \* \*

In the Wormholer, seated as he had been instructed, knees drawn up, chin down, arms around his shins, sweltering in the heavy coat, feeling the pistol grate against his ribs, Stef tried to imagine Dzhun's face, but found that it, like everything else, was inadequate to explain to him why he was where he was. The excitement he'd felt earlier was gone, replaced by mere dread. He could only suppose that his entire life had been leading up to one moment of supreme folly, and this was it.

Then a great violet-white light flashed through him, he felt an instant of supernatural cold, and he was sitting on a gritty sidewalk against a damp stuccoed wall.

He raised his face. The day was overcast, and a restless throng of thick-bodied people wrapped up against the autumn chill hurried past, not one of them paying him the slightest heed.

He looked higher. Behind the solid walls of elderly, three-storey buildings with flaking plaster and paint he saw high polished towers of what looked like mirror duroplast. Immense crimson letters hovered just below the lowest layer of murk.

Since *Alspeke* was written mostly in Cyrillic letters, he had no trouble reading *Moskovskaya a Fondovaya Birzha*, and when he murmured it aloud a soft atonal voice in his ear translated: Moscow Stock Exchange. Below the Stock Exchange sign was a huge blue banner saying "1991-2091".

Slowly he got to his feet, staggered, caught himself against the wall. A pretty young woman paused, stared at him, then drew a pale furry hood around her face and hurried on.

A couple of teenagers stopped also, looked at him and grinned. They squawked to each other in seabirds' voices.

"What's this asshole dressed up for?"

"Must think he's Stalin or something. Hey, asshole—where'd you get that coat?"

A stout woman stopped suddenly and shook her fist at the kids.

"You leave that man alone! Can't you see he's crazy? He's got troubles enough without you hooligans pestering him."

A little man in a chequered coat stopped and joined her.

"Show some respect!" he shouted at the kids.

"What, for a guy dressed up like Stalin, for Christ's sake? Hey you," said a teenager to Stef. "You going to a party?"

Unfortunately, the translator didn't answer questions, and Stef just stared at him.

"My God, he's deaf and dumb, and you're harassing him," said the woman in scandalized tones.

By now a little crowd had gathered. Everybody had an opinion. It was the adults against the teenagers.

"You little bastards got no respect for anybody!"

"Not for you, Granddaddy."

"Call me Granddaddy? Yes, I've got grandchildren, but thank God they're nothing like you, you little pimp."

In the confusion, Stef managed to slip away, leaving them arguing behind him. In an alleyway he unbuttoned the coat and stared down at the tunic and coarse trousers jammed into boots. The clothes were *nothing* like what people were wearing on the street. Already the stiff, knee-high boots of faux leather were beginning to chafe his toes, and he hadn't walked more than a hundred metres.

Cursing Yang, he tried to decide what to do. While he pondered, he worked his way from alleyway to alleyway until he suddenly spotted, among the hundreds of small shops lining the street—Boris Yeltsin Street—a shop with a sign that said *Kostyumi*. He didn't need the translator for that.

Thirty minutes later, Stef emerged from the costume shop wearing acceptable clothes, short soft boots, baggy trousers, a faux astrakhan hat, a long warm padded jacket. In his pockets were thirty ten-ruble notes, the difference between the value of the handsome and practically new theatrical garb he'd sold the shop's owner and that of the secondhand, ill-fitting stuff he'd bought from him.

He slipped into the crowd, which was denser than the centre of Ulanor on Great Genghis Day. The street traffic was noisy and thick, everybody driving headlong as if their odd, smelly cars were assaulting a position. Above, the air traffic was thin, almost absent—a few primitive rotary-wing machines with shapes so bizarre that Stef thought at first that they were some sort of giant insect life. Jet trails streaked far above, making him wonder if airpackets already flew from Luna.

Between street and sky, strung on cables, hundreds of blue banners fluttered, all saying 1991-2091, and sometimes "100 Years of the Democratic Republic", whatever that meant. He could see no mention of Tsar Stalin the Good.

His next stop was in front of a huge window filled with flickering mashini. Stef was surprised to see that the images made by the boxes were three-dimensional—he had expected something less advanced—though the technology was crude, merely a rough illusion created on a flat screen. His eyes roved past a ballet and half a dozen

sports programmes. Russian *futbol* teams had dominated world play in the season just past, but what would the hockey season bring forth? Young people dashed around on grass or ice while the announcer talked.

Nobody at all seemed to be thinking about the danger of universal destruction. Stef shook his head, amazed at the ordinariness of this world, so close to its end. He moved along, jostling against these people who would soon be dust and ashes, astonished at their solidity and their obvious confidence that they would exist for a long time to come.

A single screen was tuned to a news programme called *Vremya* and he stopped to watch it. A young woman wearing a fantastic pile of yellow hair spoke of the Russian-led international team now hard at work establishing the Martian colony and the problems it was facing. People on Mars, needing to communicate despite a babel of tongues, were developing a jargon all their own; the American members of the colony called it All-Speak. It was mostly Russian and English, with a flavouring of words from twenty other languages.

Meanwhile a new condominium development on Luna marked the transformation of that spartan base, barely seventy years old, into a genuine city, the first on another world. Space had never looked better; Russia's own programme, after a long eclipse, again led the world. Here on Earth things were not so encouraging. There were new outbreaks of Blue Nile haemorrhagic fever. The Nine-Years' War continued in the Rocky Mountains; the weak US central government seemed unable to conquer the rebels, and United Nations peacekeepers had again been massacred in Montana.

But the big worry was that border tensions continued to mount in Mongolia, where Chinese forces had occupied Ulan Bator. The name caused Stef to press his nose against the glass. He had heard enough of Yang's lecture to know that Ulan Bator was the origin of the name Ulanor, even though the city the announcer was talking about was now—now?—nothing more than a mound on the green forested banks of the River Tuul.

According to Yang, a few survivors of the Troubles had trekked northward, bringing the name with them and applying it to a cluster of yurts in an endless snowstorm. Later, because it had low background radiation, the place had become the site of the Worldcity—a strange fate for a Mongol encampment that had survived the Two Year Winter for no better reason than the sheer unkillable toughness of its people and an endless supply of frozen yak meat, which they had softened by sleeping on it and eaten raw for lack of firewood.

Another name caught Stef's attention. "Defence Minister Razumovsky has declared that Russia, together with its European and American allies, will stand firm against further aggression by the Imperial People's Republic of China."

Defence Minister Razumovsky? That wasn't the word he had learned, the name of

the man Dyeva was supposed to kill. It was another Raz word, Raz, raz—*Razruzhenye*.

He must have said the word aloud without meaning to, for his translator murmured, "Destruction."

Stef nodded. Sure. In the folk memory, Minister Razumovsky became Minister Razruzhenye, Minister Destruction. The name was wrong, but the tradition might still be correct.

Razumovsky suddenly appeared in a clip. He had a wide, flat face like a frog someone had stepped on. He seemed to talk with his right fist as much as his mouth, pounding on a podium while he spoke of Russia's sacred borders and of China's presumption, now that it had conquered Korea and Japan, that all East Asia belonged to the Dragon Republic.

"They'll find out different if they mess with us!" Razumovsky bawled, and loud cheering broke out among a crowd seated in something called the Duma. "They think they can threaten us with their rockets, but our Automated Space Defence System is the most advanced in the world. I spit upon their threats!" More cheering.

Then a weighty, white-maned man came on, identified as President Rostoff. His message was of conciliation and peace. "As the leader of the Western Alliance, Russia bears a grave responsibility to act with all due caution. Our guard is up, but we extend as well the hand of friendship to our Chinese brothers and sisters."

Stef smiled; across the centuries, he recognized without difficulty the ancient game of good cop-bad cop. He moved on, meditating on a final line from the announcer: that the debate on the Mongolian situation would continue in the Duma tonight, and that the President and the cabinet would again be present. Was that why Dyeva had picked this particular day to return to the past?

He walked down a gentle declivity where the street widened into an avenue called Great Polyanka and rose to the marble pylons of a new gleaming bridge. Beyond a small river he saw red walls, gold onion domes, palaces of white stone—the Kremlin.

Pleasure boats with glass roofs slid lazily along the river, which was divided here by a long island. In the boats Stef could see brightly dressed people dancing. Then the crowd swept him onto the other bank, past the Aleksandrovsky Gardens and up a gentle rise. Here the throng divided; most people passed on, but some joined a long queue that had formed at a brick gatehouse.

Stef continued with the majority along the autumnal garden and the crenellated wall into Red Square. He stared like any tourist at a cathedral like a kif-head's dream and then, feeling tired and hungry, crossed the square and drifted into the archways of a huge building that tilled the far side, a market of some sort crowded with shops and

loudly bargaining people. At a stall that sold writing paper, Stef bought a small notebook, an envelope and an object he had never seen before—a pen that emitted ink.

The building held eating places, too. Hungrily, Stef found himself a place at a small table in one of them and ordered *shcbi* without knowing what cabbage was. Soon a bowl of hot greenish soup lay steaming before him, along with a sliced onion and a chunk of dense and delicious brown bread and sweet butter. It was the first time he'd ever tasted butter from a cow, since all the Earth's cattle had died in the Troubles. It had a subtle, complex flavour and an unctuous texture quite different from the manufactured stuff he knew.

He devoured it all, licked his fingers as the other diners were doing, and paid with a few of his rubles. Then, still sitting at the table, he laboriously wrote a few lines, tore out the page, and sealed it in an envelope which he addressed to Xian in care of Yama. He left the eating place smiling grimly; in case something went wrong, this note was another legacy he hoped to leave behind him.

He returned to Red Square to find that in his absence it had become almost unbearably beautiful. A light autumn snow had begun to fall, streetlights were coming on, and the bizarre cathedral of St Basil floated in its own illumination, more than ever a dream.

Shadows, light and snow turned everything to magic. Strolling past were young people with faces as white and pink as dawn clouds, and among them stout men in astrakhans and elegant women in faux ermine. Old women were selling apples that could have been plucked from their own cheeks.

A little band began to play somewhere as Stef slowly retraced his steps, out of the square and up to a floodlit gate in the Kremlin wall. People were streaming in, all talking excitedly, and Stef followed.

Inside, he moved with difficulty through the throng gathering at a big, anonymous new building with the words DUMA OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE in gold letters above the doors. Guards in hats of faux fur were trying to keep a roadway open here, pushing people back but, to Stef's surprise, using no whips. Considering what he had always heard about the Tsars, the mildness of this government was astonishing. He circled the crowd, his mind now centred on Dyeva's hologram, searching faces of which there seemed no end, countless faces, all different, none hers.

Away from the Duma the Kremlin grounds were more open. In the last light, huge rooks wearing grey patches on their wings like shawls flew from one bare tree to another, cawing their complaints about the human invasion. Stef wandered into a small church like a glittering lacquered box. Gold-haloed saints ascended every wall and hung suspended in the red depths of the ceiling; ghostly notes of song showered down, although he could see nobody singing.

People knelt, prayed or simply stood and looked on. An old woman rose, crossed herself, and jostled Stef on her way out. Another and younger woman wearing a fur hat and a long coat rose and turned to go. Either Dyeva or her twin sister passed so close to Stef that he could have touched her.

\* \* \* \*

After a stunned instant of surprise he followed, out into the dry fresh-falling snow, the lights and shadows of dusk. The rooks had settled into their nests. She didn't walk, she strode, eyes straight ahead. He followed her along a winding path, keeping one or two people between them. He was looking for a place to kill her, a dark corner, a moment of privacy.

Then he realized that he didn't need privacy. Left hand on the red button of the transponder, he gripped his weapon with his right, raising the barrel a little in his coat pocket. He would kill her in the open and escape where nobody could follow. He only had to make absolutely sure that this was his quarry. He stepped off the path, the dry snow crunched under his boots, he hastened, he was directly behind her.

She had stopped to watch a wedding party ending a day's celebration here in the Kremlin at dusk. Holding wine glasses were a pretty girl in voluminous white, her new husband in an uncomfortable-looking suit of black, and half a dozen friends. One of the friends stepped forward with a bottle of bubbling wine and filled their glasses. Everyone was laughing. They had picked up a street musician some place, an old man with a primitive instrument of some sort that he crushed and stretched between his hands. He played wheezy music and the young people toasted the couple while onlookers clapped, laughed and wept.

"Dyeva," said Stef and she turned her head and looked at him.

Unquestionably it was the Tartar face he knew so well, with the high cheekbones and the angled eyes. Her face didn't change, yet she knew instantly why he had come. Instead of pleading for her life, she said in Alspeke, in a low, urgent voice:

"Look at them! Look at them! Look at this world. Can you really let it destroy itself to save what we have—tyrants, fools, Darksidars, the White Chamber? These people are alive, they're free, they deserve to have a future. Whoever you are, take just one second before you kill me. Think about it!"

And for a lengthening instant Stef did. In fact, he had been thinking about it secretly for hours. To be here, now, seeing these people, this world — it wasn't theory any more. Uncounted millions lived and breathed and wanted to keep on doing so. His own world seemed remote and for the moment unbelievable—the broken drains and babaku smells of Golden Horde Street, his dirty apartment and the kif pipe, Yama and his stinking guardian, his long day in the White Chamber, Lake Bai and the singsongers on the boat, the synthesizer and the *sisi* warbling the melody "This



Dewdrop World".

For that instant he could have joined Crux himself. Then he thought of Dzhun and he was paralyzed by indecision. As he hesitated, Dyeva turned to face him squarely and he heard the soft sound *Phut!* as she shot him through her coat.

He felt—not pain, but an incredible, crushing pressure in his midsection. His upper body flew backward, almost separated from the rest of him and the back of his head struck the cold hard snowy ground. A last mechanical contraction of his right hand fired his pistol, sent the bullet up, up into the darkening overcast like a tiny missile. His left squeezed the red button, meaning: my job is finished, I have succeeded. Bring me home.

Dyeva turned and hastened away, boots squeaking in the fresh snow. People were gawking at the wedding party and almost a minute passed before she heard, by now far behind her, a single scream. She would never know that the reason was not only the sight of a dead man lying horribly mutilated in the snow, but the fact that, even as someone spotted him, he disappeared, evaporated into the gathering darkness. Yama had kept his word.

She plunged into the crowd before the Duma building, her mind running now on the scheduled arrival of the President and his cabinet for a debate on the Mongolian situation. Running also on the fact that such schedules were almost never kept. Running on the fact that she still had fifteen bullets, and that any one would be enough. Running on the importance of stopping this Minister Destruction that she had been hearing people on Ganesh curse since her childhood—the man who had given the order that ended their world.

No, she didn't believe in God any longer. But she had had to try once more to recapture her faith in the Cathedral of the Annunciation. Who could have imagined that she'd ever have a chance to pray there, in a building long since vaporized and its atoms embedded deep in the Kremlin Shield?

Well, the experiment had failed; she could not recapture her own faith, but she would ensure that other people kept theirs. She would sacrifice herself as Christ had for the sins of the world. There was no heaven at the end of it, but this was how she wanted to die.

She squeezed herself through the crowd, murmuring apologies in her strangely accented Russian, a kind of Russian that wouldn't be invented, ever, if she could manage it. She wondered if her parents would still be born and meet and have a child and call it Maria. No, too unlikely; if they lived at all, they would meet other people and marry them. Everything would be different. She felt a strange, dark satisfaction in thinking that she would not merely die here in the Kremlin; in some sense, she would never have existed at all.

She had reached the front of the crowd, and stood pressed behind a bulky

policeman. Fortunately, when the first gleaming limousine turned in through the Gate of the Saviour and slid to a stop before the Duma, the policeman moved a little to get a good view of the notables. On the far side of the car, President Rostoff emerged and turned to wave at the crowd. On this side, a young and apparently nervous security man emerged and glanced briefly at Dyeva's face. Other security men appeared too, jumping from cars, stepping briskly through the snow.

Rostoff, instead of going inside, crossed behind his own car and came to the crowd, reaching out to shake hands. People were cheering, arms reaching out and waving like limbs at the edge of a forest in a windstorm. From a second limousine, Razumovsky approached, also smiling, but keeping a few steps back to avoid upstaging the President. Dyeva shifted the pistol in the deep pocket of her coat and prepared to fire.

Then a gaggle of odd-looking people ran up, carrying primitive cameras of some sort. A sudden spotlight flashed on the crowd and Dyeva was blinded by the light. The long barrel of the impact pistol slipped through the hole in her coat made by her last shot. Shielding her eyes, she aimed as well as she could at Razumovsky. The little sound *Phut!* vanished in the roar of the crowd.

But the young security man had spotted the gleam of metal, and without the slightest hesitation he shoved the President the wrong way, into the path of the exploding bullet. Suddenly half of Rostoff's large body was gone, shredded.

Unaware of the disaster, the security man raised his own right hand, which was holding the newest M91K police automatic, 7.8mm and loaded with superteflon hollowpoints. The first of six bullets hit Dyeva. They were not impact ammo, but they were sufficient.

She toppled backwards, firing a last round that skated upwards and blew a metre-wide hole in the marble facing of the new Duma building. The chips were still flying as she hit the snow, feeling nothing but a strange lightness as if she had become a woman of air that would shortly disperse. She looked up into the faces of the security man and Minister Razumovsky as the two bent over her.

But you're supposed to be dead, she thought. And died.

Razumovsky glared down at her Tartar face.

"The goddamn Chinese did this!" he roared, and turned away.

Half a dozen people in the crowd were down, bleeding and crying for help, because the young security man and the others who had rushed to help him had managed to hit not only Dyeva but everyone near her as well. Razumovsky ignored all that, the screams, the confusion. Roughly he shook off the hands trying to drag him this way or that way to safety. Alone of them all, he knew exactly what he wanted to do.

He plunged into the President's armoured limousine and shouted to the driver, "Get me out of here!"

While the driver, weeping and blinded by tears and lights, tried to find the gate, tried to force a way through the crowd without killing anybody else, Razumovsky took a key from around his neck and drove it into a lock in the back of the front seat. A small steel door fell open and he pulled out a red telephone.

"Razumovsky here!" he roared. "Chinese agents have wounded the President! I relay to you his exact words: 'We are at war! You will launch now!' Codeword: Ivan the Terrible."

He sank back on the upholstery and passed a shaking hand over his squashed-frog face. At least in dying the *glupetz* Rostoff had inadvertently chosen the right policy — for a change. Had he lived, who could tell what might have happened?

\* \* \* \*

"Goddamn," said Oleary. "I still can't believe he managed it, all alone like that."

The Secret Committee had assembled to hear Yama's final report on Stef's mission to the past. Xian, Ugaitish, Hrka, Oleary—they were all there but Kathmann. Except for Xian — who already knew the story—the fromazbi were leaning breathlessly over the gilt Martian table, listening to the story of how their world had been saved.

"Well, here's the evidence," said Yama. "First, we recover Stef's body, dead, obviously shot by a modern weapon, *oke?* His own gun has been fired once. The world we live in does not vanish, but on the contrary looks as solid as ever, at least to me. Just to eliminate any doubts about what happened, we use the wormholer one more time. We pull back from Moscow, 360th day of 2091, an air sample which is full of intensely radioactive dust and ice particles.

"Now I ask you, Honoured Grandees. What can we conclude, except that Stef and Dyeva killed each other, that with his last gasp, so to speak, he signalled us to recover him because his job was done, and that the Time of Troubles proceeded to happen on schedule?"

Xian turned to Yang, standing in the shadows, deference in every line of his big, weak body. "What do you think, Honoured Professor?"

"I agree. The evidence is absolutely irrefutable, and I have spent my whole life evaluating evidence."

"Well, I guess we have to accept it," fretted Oleary. He still hoped to take back Stef's million, but he could see that it would be difficult now.

"I am obliged to add," Yama continued, "that a sealed envelope was found on

Steffen's body containing a note to Solar System Controller Xian."

He glanced at her and she nodded.

"It reads as follows," said Yama, spreading a copy on the arm of the *shozit*.

*Facing death, Dyeva states that Kathmann cooperated in the theft of the wormholer. He expected to win promotion by crushing the conspiracy afterwards, but Crux was too clever for him. Ever since, he has been desperately trying to wipe out those few who know of his treason.*

*Steffens Aleksandr*

The fromazbi drew a deep collective breath.

"Is it possible?" demanded Ugaitish. "The head of Earth Security? What could he hope to gain from assisting a conspiracy, then destroying it?"

"He told me once," said Yama, who had been waiting for this moment for many years, "that he dreamed of being Solar System Controller."

"Honoured grandees," said Xian, "you must know that at first I, too, found this accusation hard to believe. But the evidence is great. The paper, ink and handwriting prove that Steffens wrote this note. In his own defence, Kathmann made the claim that Steffens was seeking revenge because he had been tortured. But Kathmann's own record of Steffens's interrogation certifies that the questioning was 'exceptionally gentle'. This was a troubling contradiction.

"We all know that Kathmann, in spite of his many virtues, was too zealous, too ambitious. I ordered him to bring me the scientist who stole the wormholer for questioning. The man had been beheaded. That seemed an extremely suspicious circumstance to me. Was Kathmann trying to ensure his silence? All the builders of the wormholer were also dead. I questioned the only two Crux prisoners who were still alive, but they were mere children and knew nothing—which was probably why they had kept their heads.

"In the end, to resolve the matter I ordered Kathmann into the White Chamber. With the needles in his spine, he made a full confession. Every statement made by Steffens in this note is true. Kathmann knew too many state secrets to be permitted to live, and so I had him beheaded."

She looked around at the others, as if waiting for a challenge. Yama smiled a little. Admiral Hrka remarked that he had never liked the fellow. Aside from that, Kathmann's harsh fate produced no comment whatever.

"Is there any other business, then?" asked Xian, preparing to end the meeting.

Yang had been waiting for this moment to step forward from the shadows. "Now that Crux is finished, Honoured Grandees," he said smoothly, "I would suggest going public with the story and making Steffens a hero.

"The heroes we honour all lived a long time ago; they are almost mythic figures—indeed, some of them, like the Yellow Emperor, are entirely myths. But here we have a hero of today, one that people can identify with, one who brings the glory and splendour of the present world order home to the common man. It's true, of course," he added, "that certain aspects of Steffens's life will have to be edited for public consumption. But the same could be said of any other hero of history."

"Superb," cried Xian at once, ending any argument before it began. Raising a tiny, thin hand that looked with its many rings like a jewelled spider, she declared: "Steffens will be buried with full honours. Someone with talent will write his biography and Yang will sign it. Scenes from his life will be enacted on every mashina. A great tomb will be built—"

"Honoured Solar System Controller," muttered Yama, "we've already cremated the body and disposed of the ashes."

"What difference does that make? Do you suppose Genghis Khan sleeps in what we call his grave? Now, *bistra, bistra!* — quick, quick! Get a move on. Remember that heroes are made, not born."

Professor Yang, smiling over the adoption of his idea, left the cabinet room with Yama.

"In some ways," he remarked, "the most intriguing supposition is that the world we live in has *always* been the consequence of the Crux conspiracy and its outcome. Wouldn't it be interesting, Honoured Colonel, if time is, so to speak, absolutely relative—if this episode has been embedded in the past ever since 2091, and all our world is the longterm result of what, from our point of view, has only just happened?"

Yama, hurrying to carry out Xian's order, paused long enough to stare at Yang.

"What complete nonsense," he growled.

Pending appointment of a replacement for Kathmann, Yama was combining Earth Central duties with his own. Most of his day was taken up with Stef in one way or another. Yama launched the process of glorification, then carried out a more personal duty: as he'd once promised Stef, he ordered the release of Iris and Ananda from the White Chamber. He did not see the young people, and so never knew that their brief stay beneath the Palace of Justice had turned their hair the same colour as the tiled walls of their cells.

Weary and ready to go home, Yama was thinking of Hariko and his children when a

piece of copy containing two lines of script was hand-delivered to his desk. Thus he learned that the woman Lata, last survivor of Crux on earth, had been tracked down at a village near Karakorum. She had committed suicide before the polizi and the Darksiders arrived and had left this note.

"It is all over," she wrote, "and I know it. This world endures as if protected by a god. But what sort of god would protect *this* world?"

Yama slid the paper into a port of his mashina.

"Copy, file, destroy," he said.

\* \* \* \*

On the next Great Genghis Day, Government of the Universe Place was crowded with people. From every flagpole hung nine white faux yaktails in honour of the famous Unifier of Humankind. But the event of the day was not honouring Genghis—though President Mobutu burned incense on his grave—but the dedication of Stef's memorial. As the veil over the statue fell, Dzhun and Selina stood together looking at an idealized Stef striding ever forward, holding an impact pistol in one hand and a globe symbolizing the world order in the other.

Since Dzhun was only semiliterate, Selina read the epitaph that Yang had composed: "Like the Great Khan in Courage and Like Jesus in Self-Sacrifice."

"Yang's been made a grandee, you know," Dzhun said. "They needed somebody to purge subversives from the University, and he just dropped into the slot. We're lucky to have him for a customer."

She had used the million Stef had left her, not to buy a cottage or get an education, but to open her own brothel. She called it House of Timeless Love. With clever Selina to manage it—and to serve a few select customers, such as the now famous, rich and powerful Yang—it had rapidly become the most popular of the newer houses, with capacity crowds every night.

Selina smiled down at her friend and employer.

"Anyway, the statue's nice. Of course he never walked stiff-legged like that. Stef just lounged around."

"I think I preferred him as he was," mused Dzhun. "Alive."

"You loved him, didn't you?"

"I guess so. I really don't know much about love. I know that I love you."

She and Selina had been sleeping together for years. Sometimes they made love, but

sex wasn't really the point. After the night's work was done and all the customers were gone, they lay together for comfort, holding each other close.

"Can I ask you something, Dzhun?"

"Anything. Almost anything."

"How'd you get Stef to leave you all that money? Was it just telling him that you had a senator on the string?"

"That was part of it. But also I made up a sad story about myself and fed it to him. You know, in spite of everything he was sentimental. That's why he was thrown out of the Security Forces. I was working for the polizi then, keeping them informed about my customers. When I reported that Stef was working on an important secret project, I got a bonus. Kathmann himself told me about Stef's weakness," said Dzhun proudly. "Even way back then I had powerful friends, Selina."

*"Tu nespravimy, Dzhun,"* said her friend, smiling and shaking her head. "You're incorrigible."

"What's that word mean?"

Selina told her. Dzhun smiled; she liked the sound of it.

"Well, honey, if you ask me, we live in an incorrigible world."

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